The Nightmare of Vietnam

GEORGE C. HERRING

The Vietnam War was one of the most controversial episodes in United States history. American involvement in that conflict began with Truman and persisted through Democratic and Republican administrations alike, although the largest escalation took place under Lyndon Johnson — the subject of this selection.

To place George Herring’s account in proper context, let us review what had gone on in Vietnam before the Johnson escalation. For more than twenty years, war had racked that distant Asian land. Initially, Communist and nationalist forces under Ho Chi Minh had battled to liberate their homeland from French colonial rule. The United States was suspicious of Ho, who was an avowed Communist trained in Moscow. But Ho was also an intense nationalist: he was determined to create a united and independent Vietnam and never wavered from that goal. Suspicious of Ho because of his Communist connections, the United States sided with the French against Ho and the Vietnamese; by 1954, when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, the United States was footing 70 percent of the French cost of prosecuting a war that was highly unpopular in France. When Vietnamese forces surrounded and besieged twelve thousand French troops in Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower’s closest personal advisers urged armed American intervention to save the French position. Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, even recommended dropping the atomic bomb on the Vietnamese. As Stephen Ambrose points out in selection 23, Eisenhower would have none of it.

The Eisenhower administration, however, continued using American aid and influence to combat communism in Indochina. In 1955, after suffering a humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French withdrew from Vietnam, whereupon the United States acted to prevent Ho Chi Minh from gaining complete control there. Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, ignored an international agreement in Geneva that
called for free elections and helped install a repressive, anti-Communist regime in South
Vietnam, supplying it with money, weapons, and military advisers. From the outset,
American policymakers viewed Ho Chi Minh’s government in North Vietnam as part
of a world Communist conspiracy directed by Moscow and Beijing. If communism was
not halted in Vietnam, they feared, then all Asia would ultimately succumb. Eisen-
hower himself repeated the analogy that it would be like a row of falling dominoes.

American intervention aroused Ho Chi Minh, who rushed help to nationalist guerril-
as in South Vietnam and set out to unite all of Vietnam under his leadership. With
civil war raging across South Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration stepped up the
flow of American military aid to the government there, situated in the capital city of
Saigon. Under President John F. Kennedy, an enthusiast for counterinsurgency (or
counterguerrilla warfare), the number of American advisers rose from 650 to 23,000.
But Kennedy became disillusioned with American involvement in Vietnam and devised
a disengagement plan before he was assassinated in November 1963. Whether he would
have implemented the plan cannot be stated with certainty. When Vice President John-
son succeeded Kennedy, he nullified the disengagement plan and (with the encour-
gement of Kennedy’s own advisers) continued American assistance to South Vietnam.
Then, in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, Congress empowered the
president to use armed force against “Communist aggression” in Vietnam. But Johnson
repeatedly vowed, “We are not going to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles
away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.”

Over the next winter, however, all that changed. In November and December 1964,
South Vietnamese guerrillas of the National Liberation Front (or Vietcong) killed seven
United States advisers and wounded more than a hundred others in mortar and bomb
attacks. Johnson’s blood was up: he wasn’t going to let them “shoot our boys” out there,
fire on “our flag.” He talked obsessively about Communist “aggression” in Vietnam,
about Munich and the lesson of appeasement, about how his enemies would call him “a
coward,” “an unmanly man,” if he let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon.
He couldn’t depend on the United Nations to act — “It couldn’t pour piss out of a boot
if the instructions were printed on the heel.” In February 1965, the administration be-
came convinced that the coup-plagued Saigon government was about to collapse and that
the United States had to do something drastic or South Vietnam would be lost and
American international prestige and influence severely damaged. Accordingly, Johnson
and his advisers moved to Americanize the war, sending waves of United States war-
planes roaring over North Vietnam and 3,200 marines into the South.

The Americanization of the war took place with such stealth that people at home were
hardly aware of the change. As reporter David Halberstam later wrote, United States
decision makers “inched across the Rubicon without even admitting it,” and the task of
their press secretaries was “to misinform the public.” The biggest misinformers were
Johnson and his spokesmen, who lied about costs (which were staggering), casualties, victories, and build-ups. By June, more than 75,000 American soldiers were in Vietnam, and combat troops were fighting Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars in an Asian land war that Johnson had sworn to avoid. Soon troops were pouring in, and the war reeled out of control as each American escalation stiffened Vietcong and North Vietnamese resistance, which in turn led to more American escalation. By 1968, more than 500,000 American troops were fighting in that fire-scarred land. In the eyes of the administration and the Pentagon, it was unthinkable that America’s awesome military power could fail to crush tiny North Vietnam and the Vietcong.

This sets the background for “The Nightmare of Vietnam,” the story of the Americanization of the war under Lyndon Johnson. Herring not only offers trenchant insight into that powerful and pungent man but also captures the inconsistencies, frustration, and horror of America’s longest and costliest war. Because of the similarities between the Vietnam War and the Philippine insurrection of 1898–1902, readers might want to review Kohler and Wensyel’s “America’s First Southeast Asian War” (selection 9), which draws important parallels between the two conflicts. Why do you think that Johnson and his advisors did not draw on the lessons learned in the Philippine war?

GLOSSARY

ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (ARVN) The South Vietnamese army.

BALL, GEORGE Undersecretary of state and one of a handful of dissenters within the Johnson administration, Ball opposed the bombing of North Vietnam and Johnson’s entire policy of escalation and Americanization of the war.

DOVES Those who opposed the war in Vietnam.

HAWKS Those who supported the war in Vietnam.

HO CHI MINH TRAIL Communist supply route from North Vietnam to Vietcong hideouts in South Vietnam.

McNAMARA, ROBERT Johnson’s secretary of defense who was so closely associated with escalation that the Vietnam conflict became known as “McNamara’s war”; by 1967, however, he had changed his mind about escalation and now pressed for a basic change in policy, even for some face-saving way out of Vietnam; he resigned when Johnson lost confidence in him.

NEW LEFT Radical, upper-middle-class college students who opposed the war and saw it as a means to overthrow American capitalism itself.

OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER The American bombing campaign against North Vietnam that began early in 1965 and was expanded during the next two years in a vain attempt to check North Vietnamese aid to the Vietcong and force Ho Chi Minh to negotiate for peace; the bombing would continue until 1972.

VIETCONG (NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT) Communist guerrillas of South Vietnam who fought with the North Vietnamese regular army to unify the country.

WESTMORELAND, GENERAL WILLIAM C. United States commander in Vietnam who employed an aggressive strategy of attrition against the Vietcong and North Vietnamese.
While visiting the aircraft carrier Ranger off the coast of Vietnam in 1965, Robert Shaplen overheard a fellow journalist remark: “They just ought to show this ship to the Vietcong—that would make them give up.” From Lyndon Johnson in the White House to the GI in the field, the United States went to war in 1965 in much this frame of mind. The President had staked everything on the casual assumption that the enemy could be quickly brought to bay by the application of American military might. The first combat troops to enter Vietnam shared similar views. When “we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon,” Marine Lieutenant Philip Caputo later wrote, “we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit conviction that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten.” Although by no means unique to the Vietnam War, this optimism does much to explain the form taken by American participation in that struggle. The United States never developed a strategy appropriate for the war it was fighting, in part because it was assumed that the mere application of its vast military power would be sufficient. The failure of one level of force led quickly to the next and then the next, until the war attained a degree of destructiveness no one would have thought possible in 1965. Most important, the optimism with which the nation went to war more than anything else accounts for the great frustration that subsequently developed in and out of government. Failure never comes easily, but it comes especially hard when success is anticipated at little cost.

Within two years, the optimism of 1965 had given way to deep and painful frustration. By 1967, the United States had nearly a half million combat troops in Vietnam. It had dropped more bombs than in all theaters in World War II and was spending more than $2 billion per month on the war. Some American officials persuaded themselves that progress had been made, but the undeniable fact was that the war continued. Lyndon Johnson thus faced an agonizing dilemma. Unable to end the war by military means and unwilling to make the concessions necessary to secure a negotiated settlement, he discovered belatedly what George Ball had warned in 1964: “once on the tiger’s back we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.”

American strategy in Vietnam was improvised rather than carefully designed and contained numerous inconsistencies. The United States went to war in 1965 to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam, but it was never able to relate its tremendous military power to the fundamental task of establishing a viable government in Saigon. The administration insisted that the war must be kept limited—the Soviet Union and China must not be provoked to intervene—but the President counted on a quick and relatively painless victory to avert unrest at home. That these goals might not be compatible apparently never occurred to Johnson and his civilian advisers. The United States injected its military power directly into the struggle to cripple the Vietcong and persuade North Vietnam to stop its “aggression.” The administration vastly underestimated the enemy’s capacity to resist, however, and did not confront the crucial question of what would be required to achieve its goals until it was bogged down in a bloody stalemate.

While the President and his civilian advisers set limits on the conduct of the war, they did not provide firm strategic guidelines for the use of American power. Left on its own to frame a strategy, the military fought the conventional war for which it was prepared without reference to the peculiar conditions in Vietnam.

The United States relied heavily on airpower. Military doctrine taught that bombing could destroy an enemy’s warmaking capacity, thereby forcing him to come to terms. The limited success of airpower as applied on a large scale in World War II and on a more restricted scale in Korea raised serious
questions about the validity of this assumption, and
the conditions prevailing in Vietnam, a primitive
country with few crucial targets, might have sug-
gested even more. The Air Force and Navy ad-
vanced unrealistic expectations about what airpower
might accomplish, however, and clung to them long
after experience had proven them unjustified. The
civilian leadership accepted the military’s arguments,
at least to a point, because the bombing was cheaper
in lives lost and therefore more palatable at home,
and because it seemed to offer a quick and compara-
tively easy solution to a complex problem. Initiated
in early 1965 as much from the lack of alternatives as
anything else, the bombing of North Vietnam was
expanded over the next two years in the vain hope
that it would check infiltration into the south and
force North Vietnam to the conference table.

The air war gradually assumed massive propor-
tions. The President firmly resisted the Joint Chiefs’
proposal for a knockout blow, but as each phase of
the bombing failed to produce results, he expanded
the list of targets and the number of strikes. Sorties
against North Vietnam increased from 25,000 in
1965 to 79,000 in 1966 and 108,000 in 1967; the
tonnage of bombs dropped increased from 63,000 to
136,000 to 226,000. Throughout 1965, [Operation]
ROLLING THUNDER concentrated on military
bases, supply depots, and infiltration routes in the
southern part of the country. From early 1966 on,
air strikes were increasingly directed against the
North Vietnamese industrial and transportation sys-
tem and moved steadily northward. In the summer
of 1966, Johnson authorized massive strikes against
petroleum storage facilities and transportation net-
works. A year later, he permitted attacks on steel fac-
tories, power plants, and other approved targets
around Hanoi and Haiphong, as well as on previ-
ously restricted areas along the Chinese border.

The bombing inflicted an estimated $600 million
damage on a nation still struggling to develop a vi-
able, modern economy. The air attacks crippled
North Vietnam’s industrial productivity and dis-
rupted its agriculture. Some cities were virtually lev-
eled, others severely damaged. Giant B-52s, carrying
payloads of 58,000 pounds, relentlessly attacked the
areas leading to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, leaving the
countryside scarred with huge craters and littered
with debris. The bombing was not directed against
the civilian population, and the administration
publicly maintained that civilian casualties were min-
imal. But the CIA estimated that in 1967 total casu-
alties ran as high as 2,800 per month and admitted
that these figures were heavily weighted with civil-
ians; [Secretary of Defense Robert] McNamara pri-
vately conceded that civilian casualties were as high
as 1,000 per month during periods of intensive
bombing.

The manner in which airpower was used in Viet-
nam virtually ensured that it would not achieve its
objectives, however. Whether, as the Joint Chiefs
argued, a massive, unrestricted air war would have
worked remains much in doubt. In fact, the United
States had destroyed many major targets by 1967
with no demonstrable effect on the war. Neverthe-
less, the administration’s gradualist approach gave
Hanoi time to construct an air defense system, pro-
protect its vital resources, and develop alternative modes
of transportation. Gradualism probably encouraged
the North Vietnamese to persist despite the damage
inflicted upon them.

North Vietnam demonstrated great ingenuity and
dogged perseverance in coping with the bombing.
Civilians were evacuated from the cities and dis-
persed across the countryside; industries and storage
facilities were scattered and in many cases concealed
in caves and under the ground. The government
claimed to have dug over 30,000 miles of tunnels,
and in heavily bombed areas the people spent much
of their lives underground. An estimated 90,000
North Vietnamese, many of them women and chil-
dren, worked full-time keeping transportation routes
open, and piles of gravel were kept along the major
roadways, enabling “Youth Shock Brigades” to fill
craters within hours after the bombs fell. Concrete
and steel bridges were replaced by ferries and pontoon bridges made of bamboo stalks which were sunk during the day to avoid detection. Truck drivers covered their vehicles with palm fronds and banana leaves and traveled at night, without headlights, guided only by white markers along the roads. B-52s devastated the narrow roads through the Mu Gia Pass leading to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but, to the amazement of the Americans, trucks moved back through the pass within several days. “Caucasians cannot really imagine what ant labor can do,” one American remarked with a mixture of frustration and admiration.

Losses in military equipment, raw materials, and vehicles were more than offset by increased aid from the Soviet Union and China. Until 1965, Russia had remained detached from the conflict, but the new leaders who succeeded Khrushchev in October 1964 took much greater interest in the Vietnam conflict, and U.S. escalation presented opportunities and challenges they could not pass up. The bombing created a need for sophisticated military equipment only the Soviet Union could provide, giving Moscow a chance to wean North Vietnam away from China. At a time when the Chinese were loudly proclaiming Soviet indifference to the fate of revolutions across the world, the direct threat to a Communist state posed by the air strikes required the Russians to prove their credibility. American escalation did not force the two Communist rivals back together, as George Ball had predicted. Fearful of Soviet intrusion in Vietnam, the Chinese angrily rejected Moscow’s call for “united action” (a phrase borrowed, perhaps consciously, from Dulles) and even obstructed Russian aid to North Vietnam. The increasingly heated Sino-Soviet rivalry over Vietnam did, however, enable Hanoi to play off one power against the other to get increased aid and prevent either from securing predominant influence. The Chinese continued to supply large quantities of rice, small arms and ammunition, and vehicles. Soviet aid increased dramatically after 1965, and included such modern weaponry as fighter planes, surface-to-air missiles, and tanks. Total assistance from Russia and China has been estimated in excess of $2 billion between 1965 and 1968.

By 1967, the United States was paying a heavy price for no more than marginal gains. The cost of a B-52 mission ran to $30,000 per sortie in bombs. The direct cost of the air war, including operation of the aircraft, munitions, and replacement of planes lost, was estimated at more than $1.7 billion during 1965 and 1966, a period when aircraft losses exceeded 500. Overall, the United States between 1965 and 1968 lost 950 aircraft costing roughly $6 billion. According to one estimate, for each $1 of damage inflicted on North Vietnam, the United States spent $9.60. The costs cannot be measured in dollars alone, however. Captured American airmen gave Hanoi hostages which would assume increasing importance in the stalemated war. The continued pounding of a small, backward country by the world’s wealthiest and most advanced nation gave the North Vietnamese a propaganda advantage they exploited quite effectively. Opposition to the war at home increasingly focused on the bombing, which, in the eyes of many critics was at best inefficient, at worst immoral.

American ground operations in the south also escalated dramatically between 1965 and 1967. Even before he had significant numbers of combat forces at his disposal, [United States commander William C.] Westmoreland had formulated the strategy he would employ until early 1968. It was a strategy of attrition, the major objective of which was to locate and eliminate the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regular units. Westmoreland has vigorously denied that he was motivated by any “Napoleonic impulse to maneuver units and hark to the sound of cannon,” but “search and destroy,” as it came to be called, did reflect traditional U.S. Army doctrines of warfare. In Westmoreland’s view, North Vietnam’s decision to commit large units to the war left him no choice but to proceed along these lines. He did not
have sufficient forces to police the entire country, nor was it enough simply to contain the enemy’s main units. “They had to be pounded with artillery and bombs and eventually brought to battle on the ground if they were not forever to remain a threat.” Once the enemy’s regulars had been destroyed, Westmoreland reasoned, the South Vietnamese government would be able to stabilize its position and pacify the countryside, and the adversary would have no choice but to negotiate on terms acceptable to the United States.

Westmoreland’s aggressive strategy required steadily increasing commitments of American manpower. Even before the 1965 buildup had been completed, the General requested sufficient additional forces to bring the total to 450,000 by the end of 1966. In contrast to the air war, over which it retained tight control, the administration gave Westmoreland broad discretion in developing and executing the ground strategy, and it saw no choice but to give him most of the troops he asked for. In June 1966, the President approved a force level of 431,000 to be reached by mid-1967. While these deployments were being approved, Westmoreland was developing requests for an increase to 542,000 troops by the end of 1967.

Furnished thousands of fresh American troops and a massive arsenal of modern weaponry, Westmoreland took the war to the enemy. He accomplished what has properly been called a “logistical miracle,” constructing virtually overnight the facilities to handle huge numbers of U.S. troops and enormous volumes of equipment. The Americans who fought in Vietnam were the best fed, best clothed, and best equipped army the nation had ever sent to war. In what Westmoreland described as the “most sophisticated war in history,” the United States attempted to exploit its technological superiority to cope with the peculiar problems of a guerrilla war. To locate an ever elusive enemy, the military used small, portable radar units and “people sniffers” which picked up the odor of human urine. IBM 1430 computers were programmed to predict likely times and places of enemy attacks. Herbicides were used on a wide scale and with devastating ecological consequences to deprive the Vietcong of natural cover. C-123 “RANCHHAND” crews, with the sardonic motto “Only You Can Prevent Forests,” sprayed more than 100 million pounds of chemicals such as Agent Orange over millions of acres of forests, destroying an estimated one-half of South Vietnam’s timberlands and leaving human costs yet to be determined. . . .

In a war without front lines and territorial objectives, where “attriting the enemy” was the major goal, the “body count” became the index of progress. Most authorities agree that the figures were notoriously unreliable. The sheer destructiveness of combat made it difficult to produce an accurate count of enemy killed in action. It was impossible to distinguish between Vietcong and noncombatants, and in the heat of battle American “statisticians” made little effort. “If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC, was a rule of thumb in the bush,” Philip Caputo has recalled. 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. Even with an inflated body count — and estimates of padding range as high as 30 percent — it is clear that the United States inflicted huge losses on the enemy. Official estimates placed the number as high as 220,000 by late 1967. Largely on the basis of these figures, the American military command insisted that the United States was “winning” the war.

As with the air war, the strategy of attrition had serious flaws. It assumed that the United States could inflict intolerable losses on the enemy while keeping its own losses within acceptable bounds, an assumption that flew in the face of past experience with land wars on the Asian continent and the realities in Vietnam. An estimated 200,000 North Vietnamese reached draft age each year, and Hanoi was able to replace its losses and match each American escala-
tion. Moreover, the conditions under which the war was fought permitted the enemy to control its losses. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong remained extraordinarily elusive and were generally able to avoid contact when it suited them. They fought at times and places of their own choosing and on ground favorable to them. If losses reached unacceptable levels, they could simply melt away into the jungle or retreat into sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Thus, the United States could gain no more than a stalemate. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong had been hurt, in some cases badly, but their main forces had not been destroyed. They retained the strategic initiative, and could strike sharply and quickly when and where they chose. Westmoreland did not have sufficient forces to wage war against the enemy’s regulars and control the countryside. The Vietcong political structure thus remained largely untouched, and even in areas such as the Iron Triangle, when American forces moved on to fight elsewhere, the Vietcong quietly slipped back in. It all added up to a “state of irresolution,” Robert Shaplen observed in 1967...
Thus, despite the impressive body count figures, it was clear to many observers by mid-1967 that the hopes of a quick and relatively inexpensive military victory had been misplaced. Each American blow “was like a sledgehammer on a floating cork,” the journalist Malcolm Browne observed. “Somehow the cork refused to stay down.”

Americanization of the war created new and equally formidable problems. Among these, the most serious—and most tragic—was that of the refugees. The expansion of American and enemy military operations drove an estimated four million South Vietnamese, roughly 25 percent of the population, from their native villages. Some drifted into the already teeming cities; others were herded into shabby refugee camps. The United States furnished the government some $30 million a year for the care of the refugees, but much of the money never reached them. Resettlement programs were initiated from time to time, but the problem was so complex that it would have taxed the ingenuity of the most imaginative officials. In any event, nothing could have compensated the refugees for the loss of their homes and lands. A large portion of South Vietnam’s population was left rootless and hostile, and the refugee camps became fertile breeding grounds for Vietcong fifth columns.

The sudden infusion of half a million American troops, hundreds of civilian advisers, and billions of dollars had a profoundly disruptive effect on a weak and divided nation. The buildup was so rapid and so vast that it threatened to overwhelm South Vietnam. Saigon’s ports were congested with ships and goods, and vessels awaiting unloading were backed up far out to sea. The city itself became a “thorough-going boom town,” Shaplen remarked, its streets clogged with traffic, its restaurants “bursting with boisterous soldiers,” its bars “as crowded as New York subway cars in the rush hour.” Signs of the American presence appeared everywhere. Long strips of seedy bars and brothels sprang up overnight around base areas. In a remote village near Danang, Caputo encountered houses made of discarded beer cans: “red and white Budweiser, gold Miller, cream and brown Schlitz, blue and gold Hamm’s from the land of sky-blue waters.”

American spending had a devastating effect on the vulnerable South Vietnamese economy. Prices increased by as much as 170 percent during the first two years of the buildup. The United States eventually controlled the rate of inflation by paying its own soldiers in scrip and by flooding the country with consumer goods, but the corrective measures themselves had harmful side effects. Instead of using American aid to promote economic development, South Vietnamese importers bought watches, transistor radios, and Hondas to sell to people employed by the United States. The vast influx of American goods destroyed South Vietnam’s few native industries and made the economy even more dependent on continued outside aid. By 1967, much of the urban population was employed providing services to the Americans.

In the bonanza atmosphere, crime and corruption flourished. Corruption was not new to South Vietnam or unusual in a nation at war, but by 1966 it operated on an incredible scale. Government officials rented land to the United States at inflated prices, required bribes for driver’s licenses, passports, visas, and work permits, extorted kickbacks for contracts to build and service facilities, and took part in the illicit importation of opium. The black market in scrip, dollars, and stolen American goods became a major enterprise. On Saigon’s PX Alley, an open-air market covering two city blocks and comprised of more than 100 stalls, purchasers could buy everything from hand grenades to scotch whiskey at markups as high as 300 percent. Americans and Vietnamese reaped handsome profits from the illegal exchange of currencies. International swindlers and “monetary camp followers” quickly got into the act, and the currency-manipulation racket developed into a “massive financial international network” extending from Saigon to Wall Street with connections.
to Swiss banks and Arab sheikdoms. The pervasive corruption undermined the U.S. aid program and severely handicapped American efforts to stabilize the economy of South Vietnam.

American officials perceived the problem, but they could not find solutions. [Prime Minister Nguyen Cao] Ky candidly admitted that “most of the generals are corrupt. Most of the senior officials in the provinces are corrupt.” But, he would add calmly, “corruption exists everywhere, and people can live with some of it. You live with it in Chicago and New York.” The Embassy pressed the government to remove officials known to be corrupt, but with little result. “You fight like hell to get someone removed and most times you fail and you just make it worse,” a frustrated American explained to David Halberstam. “And then on occasions you win, why hell, they give you someone just as bad.” The United States found to its chagrin that as its commitment increased, its leverage diminished. Concern with corruption and inefficiency was always balanced by fear that tough action might alienate the government or bring about its collapse.

Tensions between Americans and South Vietnamese increased as the American presence grew. Because of chronic security leaks, the United States kept Vietnamese off its major bases, and Vietcong infiltration of the ARVN’s top ranks compelled U.S. officers to keep from their Vietnamese counterparts the details of major military operations. The seeming indifference of many Vietnamese, while Americans were dying in the field, provoked growing resentment and hatred. The unerring ability of the villagers to avoid mines and booby traps that killed and maimed GIs led to charges of collusion with the enemy.

The Vietnamese attitude toward the foreigner was at best ambivalent. The Vietnamese undoubtedly appreciated American generosity, but they came to resent American ways of doing things. They complained that American soldiers “acted despicably” toward the villagers, tearing up roads and endangering the lives of noncombatants by reckless handling of vehicles and firearms. An ARVN major protested that Americans trusted only those Vietnamese who accepted without question their way of doing things and that they doled out their aid “in the same way as that given to beggars.” The Vietnamese recognized their need for U.S. help, and some were probably quite content to let the United States assume complete responsibility for the war. On the other hand, many Vietnamese resented the domineering manner of the Americans and came to consider the U.S. “occupation” a “demoralizing scourge.” Thoughtful Vietnamese recognized that Americans were not “colonialists,” Shaplen observed. But, he added, “there has evolved here a colonial ambiance that can sometimes be worse than colonialism itself.”

The steady expansion of the war spurred strong international and domestic pressures for negotiations, but the military stalemate produced an equally firm diplomatic impasse. American officials later tallied as many as 2,000 attempts to initiate peace talks between 1965 and 1967. Neither side could afford to appear indifferent to such efforts, but neither was willing to make the concessions necessary to make negotiations a reality. Although the North Vietnamese attempted to exploit the various peace initiatives for propaganda advantage, they counted on the American people to tire of the war and they remained certain that they could achieve their goals if they persisted. Hanoi adamantly refused to negotiate without first securing major concessions from the United States. Johnson and his advisers could not ignore the various proposals for negotiations, but they doubted that anything would come of them and suspected, not without reason, that Hanoi was expressing interest merely to get the bombing stopped. Despite any firm evidence of results, the President remained confident at least until 1967 that North Vietnam would eventually bend to American pressure, and he feared that if he were too conciliatory it would undercut his strategy. To defuse international
and domestic criticism, Johnson repeatedly insisted that he was ready to negotiate, but he refused to make the concessions Hanoi demanded. As each side invested more in the struggle, the likelihood of serious negotiations diminished.

The positions of the two sides left little room for compromise. The North Vietnamese denounced American involvement in Vietnam as a blatant violation of the Geneva Accords, and as a precondition to negotiations, insisted that the United States withdraw its troops, dismantle its bases, and stop all acts of war against their country. Hanoi stressed that the internal affairs of South Vietnam must be resolved by the South Vietnamese themselves “in accordance with the program of the National Liberation Front.” North Vietnam was apparently flexible in regard to the timing and mechanism for political change in the south, but on the fundamental issues it was adamant. The “puppet” Saigon regime must be replaced by a government representative of the “people” in which the front would play a prominent role. Hanoi made clear, moreover, that the “unity of our country is no more a matter for negotiations than our independence.”

By mid-1967, Johnson was snared in a trap he had unknowingly set for himself. His hopes of a quick and relatively painless victory had been frustrated. He was desperately anxious to end the war, but he had been unable to do so by force, and in the absence of a clearcut military advantage, or a stronger political position in South Vietnam, he could not do so by negotiations. As the conflict increased in cost, moreover, he found himself caught in the midst of an increasingly angry and divisive debate at home, a debate which by 1967 seemed capable of wrecking his presidency and tearing the country apart.

At one extreme were the “hawks,” largely right-wing Republicans and conservative Democrats, who viewed the conflict in Vietnam as an essential element in the global struggle with Communism. Should the United States not hold the line, they argued, the Communists would be encouraged to further aggression, allies and neutrals would succumb to Communist pressures, and the United States would be left alone to face a powerful and merciless enemy. Strong nationalists, certain of America’s invincibility, and deeply frustrated by the stalemate in Vietnam, the hawks bitterly protested the restraints imposed on the military and demanded that the administration do whatever was necessary to attain victory.

At the other extreme were the “doves,” a vast, sprawling, extremely heterogeneous and fractious group, which opposed the war with increasing bitterness and force. The antiwar movement grew almost in proportion to the escalation of the conflict. It included such diverse individuals as the pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, actress Jane Fonda, and author Norman Mailer, old-line pacifists such as A. J. Muste and new radicals such as Tom Hayden, the black civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright. The doves comprised only a small percentage of the population, but they were an unusually visible and articulate group. Their attack on American foreign policy was vicious and unrelenting. In time, their movement became inextricably linked with the cultural revolution that swept the United States in the late 1960s and challenged the most basic of American values and institutions.

Although it defies precise categorization, the anti-war movement tended to group along three principal lines. For pacifists such as Muste, who opposed all wars as immoral, Vietnam was but another phase of a lifelong crusade. For the burgeoning radical movement of the 1960s, opposition to the war extended beyond questions of morality. Spawned by the civil rights movement, drawing its largest following among upper-middle-class youths on college campuses, the “New Left” joined older leftist organizations in viewing the war as a classic example of the way the American ruling class exploited helpless people to sustain a decadent capitalist system. Anti-
war liberals far exceeded in numbers the pacifists and radicals. Although they did not generally question “the system,” they increasingly questioned the war on both moral and practical grounds. Many liberal internationalists who had supported World War II, Korea, and the Cold War found Vietnam morally repugnant. By backing a corrupt, authoritarian government, they contended, the United States was betraying its own principles. In the absence of any direct threat to American security, the devastation wreaked on North and South Vietnam was indefensible. Many more liberals questioned the war on practical grounds. It was essentially an internal struggle, they argued, whose connection with the Cold War was at best indirect. Liberals questioned the validity of the domino theory. . . . They agreed that Vietnam was of no more than marginal significance to the security of the United States. Indeed they insisted that the huge investment there was diverting attention from more urgent problems at home and abroad, damaging America’s relations with its allies, and inhibiting the development of a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union. The liberal critique quickly broadened into an indictment of American “globalism.” The United States had fallen victim to the “arrogance of power,” Fulbright claimed, and was showing “signs of that fatal presumption, that over-extension of power and mission, which brought ruin to ancient Athens, to Napoleonic France and to Nazi Germany.

... Most liberals stopped short of advocating withdrawal from Vietnam, much less domestic revolution, proposing merely an end to the bombing, gradual deescalation, and negotiations. Disagreement on methods was even sharper. Liberals generally preferred nonviolent protest and political action within the system and sought to exclude the Communists from demonstrations. Radicals and some pacifists increasingly pressed for a shift from protest to resistance, and some openly advocated the use of violence to bring down a system that was itself violent. Oppostion to the war took many different forms. Fulbright conducted a series of nationally televised hearings, bringing before the viewing public critics of administration policies. There were hundreds of acts of individual defiance. The folk singer Joan Baez refused to pay that portion of her income tax that went to the defense budget. Muhammad Ali declared himself a conscientious objector and refused induction orders. Three army enlisted men — the Fort Hood Three — challenged the constitutionality of the conflict by refusing to fight in what they labeled an “unjust, immoral, and illegal war.” Army Captain Howard Levy used the doctrine of individual responsibility set forth in the Nuremberg war crimes trials to justify his refusal to train combat teams for action in Vietnam. Thousands of young Americans exploited legal loopholes, even mutilated themselves, to evade the draft; others fled to Canada or served jail sentences rather than go to Vietnam. A handful of Americans adopted the method of protest of South Vietnam’s Buddhists, publicly immolating themselves. Antiwar rallies and demonstrations drew larger crowds in 1966 and 1967, and the participants became more outspoken in their opposition. Protesters marched daily around the White House chanting “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?” and “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is going to win.” Antiwar forces attempted “lie-ins” in front of troop trains, collected blood for the Vietcong, and tried to disrupt the work of draft boards, Army recruiters, and the Dow Chemical Company, one of the makers of the napalm used in Vietnam. The most dramatic single act of protest came on October 21, 1967, when as many as 100,000 foes of the war gathered in Washington and an estimated 35,000 demonstrated at the entrance to the Pentagon, the “nerve center of American militarism.”

The impact of the antiwar protests remains one of the most controversial issues raised by the war. The obvious manifestations of dissent in the United States probably encouraged Hanoi’s will to hold out for victory, although there is nothing to suggest that the
North Vietnamese would have been more compromising in the absence of the movement. Antiwar protest did not turn the American people against the war, as some critics have argued. The effectiveness of the movement was limited by the divisions within its own ranks. Public opinion polls make abundantly clear, moreover, that a majority of Americans found the antiwar movement, particularly its radical and “hippie” elements, more obnoxious than the war itself. In a perverse sort of way, the protest may even have strengthened support for a war that was not in itself popular. The impact of the movement was much more limited and subtle. It forced Vietnam onto the public consciousness and challenged the rationale of the war and indeed of a generation of Cold War foreign policies. It limited Johnson’s military options and may have headed off any tendency toward more drastic escalation. Perhaps most important, the disturbances and divisions set off by the antiwar movement caused fatigue and anxiety among the policymakers and the public, and thus eventually encouraged efforts to find a way out of the war.

The majority of Americans appear to have rejected both the hawk and dove positions, but as the war dragged on and the debate became more divisive, public concern increased significantly. Expansion of the war in 1965 had been followed by a surge of popular support—the usual rally-round-the-flag phenomenon. But the failure of escalation to produce any discernible result and indications that more troops and higher taxes would be required to sustain a prolonged and perhaps inconclusive war combined to produce growing frustration and impatience. If any bird symbolized the growing public disenchantment with Vietnam, opinion analyst Samuel Lubell observed, it was the albatross, with many Americans sharing a “fervent desire to shake free of an unwanted burden.” The public mood was probably best expressed by a housewife who told Lubell: “I want to get out but I don’t want to give up.”

Support for the war dropped sharply during 1967. By the summer of that year, draft calls exceeded 30,000 per month, and more than 13,000 Americans had died in Vietnam. In early August, the President recommended a 10 percent surtax to cover the steadily increasing costs of the war. Polls taken shortly after indicated that for the first time a majority of Americans felt that the United States had been mistaken in intervening in Vietnam, and a substantial majority concluded that despite a growing investment, the United States was not “doing any better.” Public approval of Johnson’s handling of the war plummeted to 28 percent by October. Waning public confidence was mirrored in the press and in Congress. A number of major metropolitan dailies shifted from support of the war to opposition in 1967, and the influential *Time-Life* publications, fervently hawkish at the outset, began to raise serious questions about the administration’s policies. Members of Congress found it impossible to vote against funds for American forces in the field and hesitated to challenge the President directly, but many who had firmly backed him at first came out openly against him. Admitting that he had once been an “all-out hawk,” Republican Senator Thruston B. Morton of Kentucky spoke for the converts when he complained that the United States had been “planted into a corner out there” and insisted that there would “have to be a change.” White House aides nervously warned of further defections in Congress and major electoral setbacks in 1968 in the absence of dramatic changes in the war.

By late 1967, for many observers the war had become the most visible symbol of a malaise that had afflicted all of American society. Not all would have agreed with Fulbright’s assertion that the Great Society was a “sick society,” but many did feel that the United States was going through a kind of national nervous breakdown. The “credibility gap”—the difference between what the administration said and what it did—had produced a pervasive distrust of government. Rioting in the cities, a spiraling crime rate, and noisy demonstrations in the streets suggested that violence abroad had produced violence at home.
Increasingly divided against itself, the nation appeared on the verge of an internal crisis as severe as the Great Depression of the 1930s. Anxiety about the war had not translated into a firm consensus for either escalation or withdrawal, but the public mood — tired, angry, and frustrated — perhaps posed a more serious threat to the administration than the anti-war movement.

The public debate on Vietnam was paralleled by increasingly sharp divisions within the government. . . . The major proponent of change by the spring of 1967 was, ironically, the Secretary of Defense, a man who had been so closely associated with escalation that the war had for a time been called “McNamara’s war.” As early as the summer of 1966, McNamara began to fear that the vast expansion of the war was endangering the global security position he had labored so diligently to construct since taking office in 1961. He was troubled by the destructiveness of the war, particularly the civilian casualties, and by the growing domestic opposition, brought home to him time and again in public appearances when he had to shove his way through and shout down protesters. McNamara’s reputation as a businessman and public servant had been based on his ability to attain maximum results at minimal cost. By early 1967, however, he was forced to admit that escalation of the war had not produced results in the major “end products — broken enemy morale and political effectiveness.” The South Vietnamese government seemed no more stable than before; pacification had “if anything, gone backward.” The air war had brought heavy costs but no results. “Ho Chi Minh is a tough old S.O.B,” McNamara conceded to his staff. “And he won’t quit no matter how much bombing we do.” Moreover, the Secretary of Defense admitted that the bombing had cost the United States heavily in terms of domestic and world opinion. “The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one,” he advised Johnson in early 1967. McNamara and his advisers were also disillusioned with the ground war in South Vietnam. Increases in U.S. troops had not produced correspondingly large enemy losses, and there was nothing to indicate that further expansion of the war would place any real strains on North Vietnamese manpower.

Throughout 1967, McNamara quietly and somewhat hesitantly pressed for basic changes in policy. Arguing that the major military targets in North Vietnam had already been destroyed, he proposed either an unconditional bombing halt or the restriction of the bombing to the area south of the twentieth parallel. Such a move, he added, would help to appease critics of the war at home and might lead to serious negotiations. The Secretary of Defense also advocated placing a ceiling on American troop levels, and shifting from search and destroy to a more limited ground strategy based on providing security for the population of South Vietnam. In somewhat ambiguous terms, he further proposed a scaling down of American political objectives. Inasmuch as the United States had gone to war to contain China, he argued, it had succeeded: the Communist defeat in Indonesia, as well as rampant political turmoil within China itself, suggested that trends in Asia were now running against China and in favor of the United States. The administration might therefore adopt a more flexible bargaining position. It could still hope for an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, but it should not obligate itself to “guarantee and insist upon these conditions.” Obliquely at least, McNamara appears to have been suggesting that the United States modify its military strategy and diplomatic stance in order to find a face-saving way out of its dilemma in Vietnam.

By the summer of 1967, Lyndon Johnson was a deeply troubled man, physically and emotionally exhausted, frustrated by his lack of success, torn between his advisers, uncertain which way to turn. He seems to have shared many of McNamara’s
reservations, and he flatly rejected the view of the military that the solution was expansion of the war. He was disenchanted by the Joint Chiefs. “Bomb, bomb, bomb, that’s all you know,” he is said to have complained on several occasions. He was worried by the implications of Westmoreland’s ground strategy and his request for more troops. “When we add divisions, can’t the enemy add divisions?” he asked the General pointedly in April. “If so, where does it all end?” He remained firmly opposed to mobilizing the reserves and expanding the war. Such measures would heighten the domestic opposition. They would not satisfy the military but would only lead to pressures for further escalation, perhaps even for the use of nuclear weapons. He continued to fear a confrontation with the Soviet Union or China. “I am not going to spit in China’s face,” he insisted.

Johnson could not accept McNamara’s recommendations, however. He had gradually lost confidence in his Secretary of Defense, whose dovishness he incorrectly attributed to the pernicious influence of his arch-rival Robert Kennedy. The relationship between Johnson and McNamara had so soured by late 1967 that the Secretary gladly accepted an appointment to head the World Bank. Westmoreland continued to report steady progress, moreover, and the President was not ready to concede defeat. He would not consider a return to the enclave strategy—“We can’t hunker down like a jackass in a hailstorm,” he said—or even a ceiling on the troop level. Although he seems to have agreed that the bombing had accomplished nothing, he was not prepared to stop or even limit it. Denouncing McNamara’s proposals as an “aerial Dienbienphu,” the Joint Chiefs had threatened to resign en masse if Johnson approved them, and the hawkish Mississippi Senator John Stennis was planning an investigation into the conduct of the air war. The President was not prepared to risk a major confrontation with the hawks or a potentially explosive public debate on the bombing.

[By the end of 1967, Vietnam was destroying Johnson’s presidency.] The consensus which Johnson had so carefully woven in 1964 was in tatters, the nation more divided than at any time since the Civil War. Opposition in Congress, as well as inattention and mismanagement resulting at least partially from the administration’s preoccupation with Vietnam, had brought his cherished Great Society programs to a standstill. The President himself was a man under siege in the White House, his popularity steadily waning, the target of vicious personal attacks. His top aides had to be brought surreptitiously into public forums to deliver speeches.

Johnson was alarmed by the position he found himself in, stung by his critics, and deeply hurt by the desertion of trusted aides such as McNamara. He angrily dismissed much of the criticism as unfair, and he repeatedly emphasized that his critics offered no alternatives. He had accomplished great things at home, he insisted. But the press could only whine “Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam,” he would add, savagely mimicking a baby crying. The harsher the criticism became, the more Johnson chose to disregard it by discrediting the source. Fulbright was a “frustrated old woman” because he had never been appointed Secretary of State. The dissent of the young sprang from ignorance. They had not lived through World War II. They would not “know a Communist if they tripped over one.”

... Johnson did not reevaluate his essential goals in Vietnam. To take such a step would have been difficult for anyone as long as there was hope of eventual success. It would have been especially difficult for Lyndon Johnson. Enormously ambitious, he had set high goals for his presidency, and he was unwilling to abandon them even in the face of frustration and massive unrest at home. It was not a matter of courage, for by persisting in the face of declining popularity Johnson displayed courage as well as stubbornness. It was primarily a matter of pride. The President had not wanted the war in Vietnam, but once committed to it he had invested his personal prestige to a degree that made it impossible for him
to back off. He chose to stay the course in 1967 for the same reasons he had gone to war in the first place—because he saw no alternative that did not require him to admit failure or defeat.

While quietly contemplating a change in strategy, the President publicly made clear his determination to see the war through to a successful conclusion. “We are not going to yield,” he stated repeatedly. “We are not going to shimmy. We are going to wind up with a peace with honor which all Americans seek.” At a White House dinner for the Prime Minister of Singapore, the President expressed his commitment in different terms. “Mr. Prime Minister,” he said, “you have a phrase in your part of the world that puts our determination very well. You call it ‘riding the tiger.’ You rode the tiger. We shall!”

Although Johnson continued to boast that “the enemy had been defeated in battle after battle” and that America was winning the war, the Vietcong on the last day of January 1968 launched the massive Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, attacking thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, sixty-four district towns and countless villages, twelve United States bases, and even the American embassy in Saigon. This seemed undeniable proof that Johnson’s military solution was a failure and that the claims of the President and his generals could not be believed.

In 1968, the war drove Johnson from office—he refused to seek another term—and helped bring Richard Nixon to the White House, because he promised to end the conflict. Yet Nixon seemed to take up where Johnson left off. Like his predecessors, Nixon worried about “American credibility,” about what would happen to American prestige if the United States sold out its South Vietnamese ally, and in 1970 he sent American troops into contiguous Cambodia to exterminate Communist hideouts there. The Cambodian invasion brought antirwar protest to a tragic climax, as Ohio national guards troops opened fire on protesting students at Kent State University and killed four of them. With the campuses in turmoil and the country divided and adrift, Nixon gradually disengaged American ground troops in Vietnam and sought détente with both Russia and China.

Although the Nixon administration continued to speak of “peace with honor” in Indochina, and although it continued to bomb Hanoi, it was clear nevertheless that American involvement in the Vietnamese civil war was a tragic and costly mistake. Indeed, the signs were unmistakable that the original premise for American intervention in Indochina was erroneous. The domino theory, based as it was on the assumption of a worldwide monolithic Communist conspiracy directed by Moscow, appeared more and more implausible. For one thing, China and Russia developed an intense and bitter ideological feud that sharply divided the Communist world, and they almost went to war over their disputed boundary. The Sino-Soviet split exploded the notion of a Communist monolith out for world domination, and so did the fierce independence of North Vietnam itself. Although Hanoi continued to receive aid from both Russia and China, North Vietnam apparently never asked China to intervene in the struggle (and apparently China never offered to do so). The truth was that North Vietnam was fighting to unite the country under Hanoi’s leadership rather than under Beijing’s or Moscow’s.

At last, in top-secret negotiations in Paris, United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam’s Le Duc Tho worked out a peace agreement. Eventually, the United States removed its combat forces, and in 1975 South Vietnam’s regime fell to the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front. After almost two decades of bitter civil war and the loss of more than 1 million lives, Vietnam was united under Hanoi’s Communist government, something that would probably have happened without further violence had general elections been held in 1956, according to the Geneva agreements of two years before.

Questions to Consider

1. According to Herring, what were the major problems with American military strategy in Vietnam? Why were conditions in Vietnam unsuited for conventional warfare?
FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TO VIETNAM

2 What important social and economic consequences did Americanization of the war have for South Vietnam?

3 What repercussions did the war in Vietnam have in American society? Would you agree with Senator William Fulbright’s assertion that the Great Society was a sick society?

4 Compare the prowar and antiwar arguments of American hawks and doves. How much influence did the antiwar movement have in shaping public attitudes?

5 What trait in Lyndon Johnson’s personality and character made him unable to alter his course of action in Vietnam?