

## VIETNAM: THE TIPPING POINT

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States became involved in Vietnam during the late 1940s, as part of an effort to reign-in communism throughout the world. Members of the Truman administration believed that the way to limit communism and stabilize the region was to help the French reclaim their old colony in Indochina (which the Japanese had seized during World War II), in exchange for a pledge by the French government to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When the French were soundly defeated in the mid-1950s by a Vietnamese army, the American commitment to controlling Southeast Asia only increased. Rather than see Vietnam "fall" to the communists, the Eisenhower administration scuttled free elections and supported the unpopular, anticommunist regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, which controlled the southern half of the country.

When he took office in 1961, President John Kennedy continued the Cold War policies and strategies of Truman and Eisenhower. He even increased American military involvement in Vietnam, slowly raising troops levels there from 1,000 in January 1961 to 16,000 by November 1963. Vietnam, his policy makers insisted, was the key to all of Southeast Asia. If it "fell," Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand would follow, threatening Japan and Australia. It would be like a line of dominoes: topple the first and the rest would also go down. Keep in mind how powerful Cold War logic had become. China's communist revolution triumphed by 1950, sweeping the world's most populous nation into the "Soviet orbit." The American led war to turn back Communist North Korea's invasion of the south ended in a stalemate in 1953. Communism was indeed a powerful presence in Vietnam. But American foreign policy since Truman tended to see every issue through that lens. At least equally powerful in Vietnam was a nationalist impulse, anti-Chinese, anti-French, and now anti-American, a desire for Vietnamese nationhood, communist or not.

Lyndon Johnson continued the logic inherited from Kennedy: He would not be the first American president to lose a war nor would he preside over a communist victory. Despite the South Vietnamese government's corruption and incompetence; despite his own pledges during the 1964 election not to involve America in a land war in Asia; and despite the lack of international support for the war, he increased American troop levels: 25,000 at the end of 1964; nearly 200,000 one year later, which doubled after another year; 500,000 by the

beginning of 1968; and 550,000 before the end of the year. Moreover, these soldiers were no longer "advisers" to South Vietnam, as they had been termed in the Eisenhower-Kennedy years. Now they were initiating combat, while the U.S. Air Force dropped unprecedented numbers of bombs, and the Navy shelled coastal cities. The American military also used new substances such as chemical defoliants to clear away the jungle, and napalm, a flammable jelly that was dropped burning from airplanes and clung to everything it hit. Still, the war was a stalemate. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and tens of thousands of Americans died, farms and jungles became moonscapes, and many American citizens, sensing a gap between official pronouncements and reality-on-the-ground, could not abide what we were doing there. Protests—on college campuses, in churches, on the streets—grew in size and strength during the late 1960s.

No event more clearly showed the difference between official and unofficial versions of the war than the January 31, 1968, Tet Offensive—a massive, coordinated North Vietnamese and Vietcong assault against major cities and towns in South Vietnam (keep in mind that after the French left, Vietnam was divided in two with a North Vietnamese army aided by allies in the south called the Vietcong, opposing the Americans, and an anti-communist South Vietnamese army). The Tet Offensive began shortly after army General William Westmoreland's much-publicized visit to Washington, D.C. An end to the war, Westmoreland had told Johnson and the American people, was in sight; the Vietcong had been overwhelmed, and North Vietnam was suffering terribly. But the Tet Offensive seemed to belie Westmoreland's rosy optimism. And although American forces turned back the offensive, many American civilians no longer fully believed the pronouncements of their leaders. President Johnson realized as much. After Tet, he stopped talking about winning the war; rather he simply wanted it ended.

Two months after the Tet Offensive, on March 16, 1968 in an area designated "Pinkville," units of the U.S. Army's Americal Division assaulted a strip of Quang Ngai province along the South China Sea. Press releases and combat action reports filed in the days after the assault described the confrontation between the U.S. and Vietcong forces as a resounding American victory. Sergeant Jay Roberts, a reporter who covered the assault for the Army's Public Information Department, noted that Americans killed 128 enemy troops and captured enemy weapons and documents. "The combat assault went like clockwork," Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, the commander of the task force that conducted the maneuver, told Roberts.

Barker said as much to his superiors in his combat action report, noting that the "operation was well planned, well executed and successful." To be sure, a few civilians in the hamlet of My Lai were caught in the cross fire of the opposing forces, but "the infantry unit on the ground and helicopters were able to assist civilians in leaving the area and in caring for and/or evacuating the wounded."

Newspapers picked up on Roberts's and Barker's comments and printed them in small stories, while General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, issued an official congratulatory message to Barker. In truth, what had happened in "Pinkville" that March day created hardly any interest. It seemed just the slightest ripple in

a very large sea, a minor assault on a minor hamlet far from the center of the action—really nothing important enough to occupy anyone's thoughts.

But the men who took part in the assault stored memories very different from the official one. Some had recorded their thoughts in journal entries and letters. Thomas R. Partsch scribbled in his journal during a water break:

Mar. 16 Sat. got up at 5:30 left at 7:15 we had 9 choppers. 2 lifts first landed had mortar team with us. We started to move slowly through the village shooting everything in sight children men and women and animals. Some was sickening. The[ir] legs were shot off and they were still moving it was just hanging there. I think the[ir] bodies were made of rubber. I didn't fire a round yet and I didn't kill anybody not even a chicken I couldn't.

That evening, Captain Brian Livingston, a helicopter commander, wrote his wife and expressed his disgust with the operation:

Well its been a long day, saw some nasty sights. I saw the insertion of infantrymen and were they animals. . . . I've never seen so many people dead in one spot. Ninety-five percent were women and kids. We told the grunts [American soldiers] on the ground of some injured kids. They helped them alright. A captain walked up to this little girl, he turned away took five steps, and fired a volley of shots into her. . . . I'll tell you something it sure makes you wonder why we are here.

Others told friends what they had seen. A month after the attack, Private Charles "Butch" Gruver gave his version of that day to an army buddy named Ronald Ridenhour. Seated in a bar, relaxing with a few bottles of beer, Gruver asked Ridenhour, "Did you hear about Pinkville?" When Ridenhour answered that he had not, Gruver commented, "We went in there and killed everybody." As they drank, more details emerged. Gruver's Charlie Company had gone into My Lai expecting a real fight, but they encountered no hostile Vietcong, only a village full of frightened women, old men, and children, many of whom they herded into small groups for security reasons. But then orders were given to kill the civilians, and some soldiers went on a rampage. There were mass murders, rapes, and torture. It was horrible. Ridenhour could not believe what he was hearing, but Gruver swore it was all true. In the next few months, Ridenhour met and quizzed other soldiers who had been at My Lai. Each confirmed Gruver's tale, adding more details about the terrible day.

So we have two very different versions of the same event, one official, the other unofficial. In an odd way, that had always been the American story in Vietnam. From the start, there had been a confusion between what the American people back home heard about the conflict and what the American soldiers knew was the nasty reality of this war.

My Lai occurred less than two months after the start of the Tet Offensive, and in retrospect, it was a turning point. It took place during a period of low morale and high frustration, a time when many soldiers had lost faith in their mission and questioned why they were fighting and dying. My Lai underscored some of the grim facts of Vietnam, including the nature of the warfare, American attitudes toward the Vietnamese people, the gap between the official pronouncements about the war and the realities on the ground, and the psychological impact of battle. In the following documents, consider these issues and ask

yourself about the American aims and actions in Vietnam, and the effect of the war at home. This chapter focuses on the war at this intense moment, from late 1968 through the middle of 1969, when the frustration of battle, and the increasing opposition to the war forced Johnson to reassess not just his policies, but his own position as president.

### INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 1, 2, AND 3

The following documents reveal a range of opinions about the Vietnam War as of early 1968, from strong support to all-out opposition. In Document 1, beloved American writer John Steinbeck conveys his thoughts directly to President Johnson. Both of Steinbeck's sons served in Vietnam, and the author of *Grapes of Wrath* wrote dispatches from the war for *Newsday* from December 1966 to early 1967. By this point, however, increasing numbers of Americans considered Vietnam a mistake. Because of his support for the war, some of Steinbeck's fans believed he had betrayed his reputation as a writer of the American common experience. In Document 2, famed African American athlete Jackie Robinson, whose letters to presidents appear in chapters 11 and 13, again writes to Johnson to explain the important relationship between the struggle in Vietnam and the ongoing fight for Civil Rights at home. It was an agonizing decision for many Civil Rights leaders to oppose Johnson on Vietnam since he had done so much for the Freedom Struggle. Finally, Document 3 is one of many printed anti-draft statements that proliferated in 1967 and 1968, often distributed at recruitment centers to convince young men to reconsider their decision.

## 1. LETTER FROM JOHN STEINBECK TO PRESIDENT JOHNSON

May 28, 1966

Dear Mr. President:

I am grateful to you for receiving my son and me. It meant a great deal to both of us and I am sure that seeing you reassured him that responsibility is behind him and backing him. He had never been to Washington before. From the plane I took him first to the Lincoln Memorial. He stood for a long time looking up at that huge and quiet figure and then said, "Oh! Lord! We had better be great."

You will understand that I am pleased with this boy and proud. He knows what he wants and must do. He is thoroughly trained to do it. He is proud of his uniform and proud of his country. He goes very

soon now, and as you must know, my heart goes with him. And I will ask you, sir, to remember your promise to pray for him.

I know that you must be disturbed by the demonstrations against policy in Vietnam. But please remember that there have always been people who insisted on their right to choose the war in which they would fight to defend their country. There were many who would have no part of Mr. Adams' and George Washington's war. We call them Tories. There were many also who called General Jackson a butcher. . . . Then there were the very many who denounced and even impeded Mr. Lincoln's war. We call them copperheads. . . . I

remind you of these things, Mr. President, because sometimes, the shrill squeaking of people who simply do not wish to be disturbed, must be saddening to you. I assure you that only mediocrity escapes criticism.

Again my thanks to you, sir. You gave my boy a pediment of pride, and that a good soldier must have.

As always, faithfully,  
John Steinbeck<sup>1</sup>

## 2. LETTER FROM JACKIE ROBINSON TO PRESIDENT JOHNSON

April 18, 1967

Dear Mr. President:

First, let me thank you for pursuing a course towards Civil Rights that no President in our history has pursued. I am confident your dedication will not only continue, but will be accelerated dependent on the needs of all Americans.

While I am certain your faith has been shaken by demonstrations against the Viet Nam war, I hope the actions of any one individual does not make you feel as Vice President Humphrey does, that Dr. King's stand will hurt the Civil Rights movement. It would not be fair to the thousands of our Negro fighting men who are giving their lives because they believe, in most instances, that our Viet Nam stand is just. There are hundreds of thousands of us at home who are not certain why we are in the war. We feel, however, that you and your staff know what is best and we are willing to support your efforts for a honorable solution to the war.

I do feel you must make it infinitely clear, that regardless of who demonstrates, that your position will not change toward the rights of all people; that you will continue to press for justice for all Americans and that a strong stand now will have great effect upon young Negro Americans who could resort to violence unless they are reassured. . . .

I appreciate the difficult role any President has. I believe, also, yours is perhaps the most difficult any President has had. I hope God gives you the wisdom and strength to come through this crisis at home, and that an end to the war in Viet Nam is achieved very soon.

Again Sir, let me thank you for your domestic stand on Civil Rights. We need an even firmer stand as the issues become more personal and the gap between black and white Americans get wider.

Sincerely yours,  
Jackie Robinson<sup>2</sup>

## 3. DRAFT RESISTANCE LEAFLET (MARCH 28, 1968)

**KEEP THIS LEAFLET.**

**THE PEOPLE INSIDE CAN NOT MAKE YOU  
THROW THIS AWAY OR KEEP YOU FROM  
READING IT**

What's in the Army for you? What? Not one thing!  
It's just a way for you to get your ass shot off for the

fat bankers and businessmen who run this country. They're the ones this war is being fought for. They want control of Vietnam so they can use its natural resources and cheap labor to make more money. Are you going to get killed so Lockheed can make more money? Money off your blood?

**WHEN YOU'RE IN THE ARMY, ASK QUESTIONS AT THE ORIENTATION SESSIONS:**

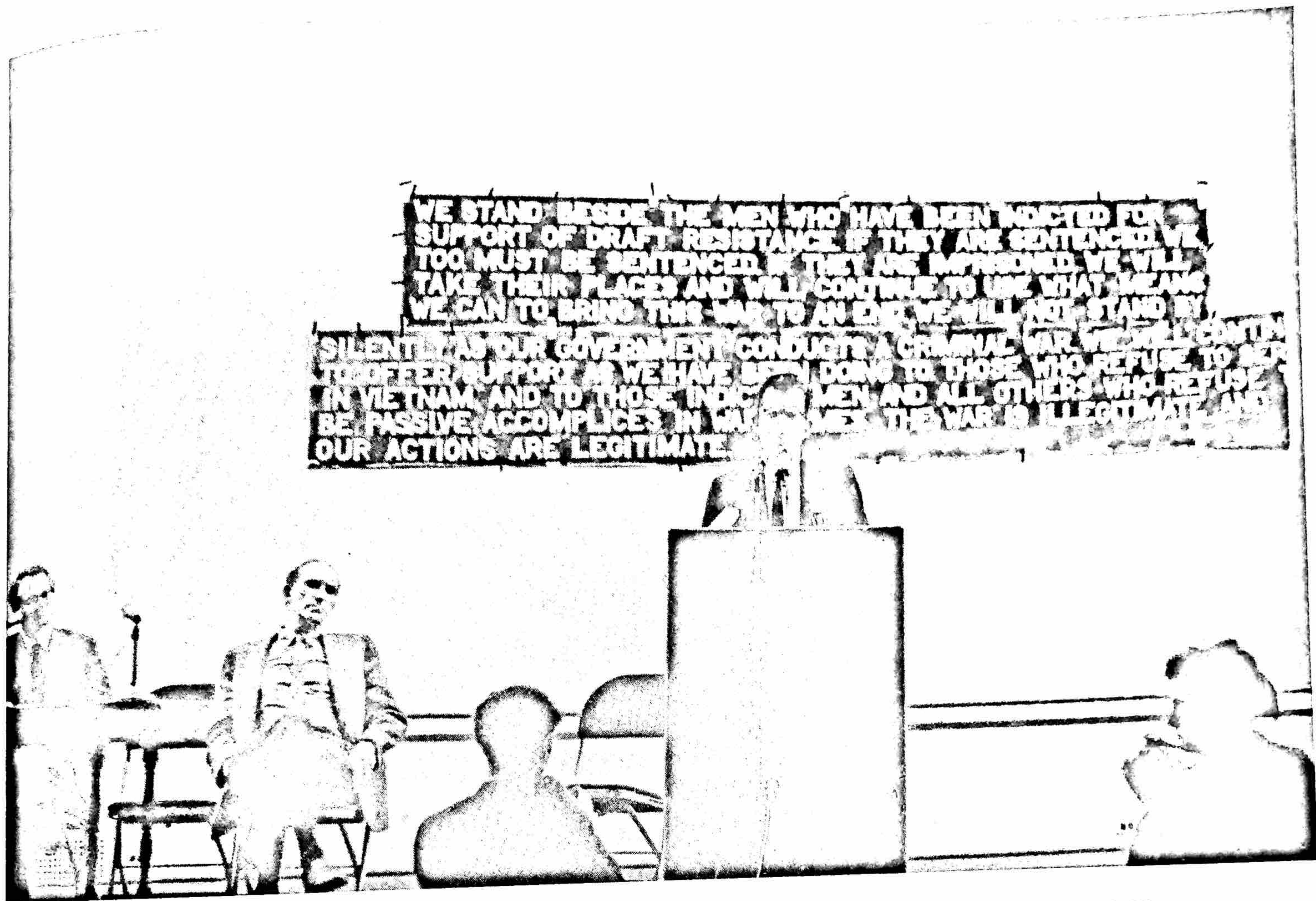


Image 14.1 Noam Chomsky speaking at the New York Town Hall anti-Vietnam draft rally, January 14, 1968  
 Just days before the Tet Offensive, antiwar activist Noam Chomsky joined others in New York to protest the draft. What does the statement behind Chomsky mean?

Source: Records of U.S. Attorneys, Record Group 118, National Archives, Identifier 7419597.

—If the U.S. is defending freedom in Vietnam, why is it backing Marshall Ky—a corrupt dictator who says his only hero is Adolph Hitler?

—When the Vietnamese were fighting to throw out the French colonialists in 1954, why did the U.S. back the French? Why did the U.S. pay 80 percent of the French war costs?

—Why did the U.S. bring back the rich Vietnamese landlords that the Vietnamese people had thrown out? The big land owners, who don't do any work, force the small farmers to hand over 50% of their crop as rent every year.

—If the Vietnamese people want us in their country, why must we burn their villages and herd

them into “pacification” camps (read: concentration camps).

The government is lying to us. It's time to wise up to what kind of war this is. . . .

. . . If we want to put an end to this, *we've all got to stick together* and demand “No Draft for Anyone for Unjust Wars” and “U.S. Get Out of Vietnam Now!” That's why we refused our student deferments. We think 2-S is a class privilege that the government uses to buy off students and divide them from guys who work.

TALK IT OVER WITH YOUR BUDDIES . . . WHY SHOULD FREE SPEECH AND DEMOCRACY END

WHEN YOU GO INTO THE ARMY? WHY ARE MORE BLACK G.I.'S SENT TO THE FRONT LINES THAN WHITE G.I.'S? WHY DO KIDS FROM RICH FAMILIES GET OUT OF THE DRAFT?

... If you get sent over, remember: don't volunteer for anything, keep your head down, don't

fight too hard, and talk to your buddies about the war.

Good luck.  
THREE OF YOUR FELLOW INDUCTEES<sup>3</sup>

## INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 4 AND 5

In late January, a series of coordinated attacks by the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong surprised the Americans. Though the Tet Offensive failed to achieve a military victory, it did succeed in eroding American morale even further, both among soldiers on the ground and citizens at home. Just days after Tet ended, President Johnson held a news conference to address the attack, which is excerpted in Document 4. Document 5 is from a telephone conversation between President Johnson and his newly appointed Defense Secretary Clark Clifford in mid-March 1968. Note the degree to which the war was being waged not just in Vietnam, but also against the backdrop of an election year where Johnson himself was challenged by two Democratic rivals, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, both of whom opposed the war.

## 4. PRESIDENTIAL NEWS CONFERENCE

LYNDON JOHNSON

FEBRUARY 2, 1968

THE PRESIDENT: We have known for several months, now, that the Communists planned a massive winter-spring offensive. We have detailed information on Ho Chi Minh's order giving that offensive. . . . We know the object was to overthrow the constitutional government in Saigon and to create a situation in which we and the Vietnamese would be willing to accept the Communist-dominated coalition government.

Another part of that offensive was planned as a massive attack across the frontiers of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese units. We have already seen the general uprising. General Westmoreland's headquarters report the Communists appear to have lost over 10,000 men killed and some 2,300 detained. The United States has lost 249 men killed. The Vietnamese, who had to carry the brunt of the fighting in the cities, lost 553 killed as of my most recent report from the Westmoreland headquarters. . . .

The stated purposes of the general uprising have failed. Communist leaders counted on popular support in the cities for their effort. They found little or none. . . .

QUESTION. Mr. President, does this present rampage in South Vietnam give you any reason to change any assessment that you have made previously about the situation in South Vietnam?

THE PRESIDENT. I am sure that we will make adjustments to what we are doing there. So far as changing our basic strategy, the answer would be no. . . .

Q. Mr. President, one of the problems people seem to be having in making up their minds on the psychological importance of this goes back to our reports that the Vietcong were really way down in morale, that they were a shattered force.

Now people ask: Well, how, then, can they find the people who are so well-motivated to run these suicide attacks in so many places in such good coordination?

Some people say: Well, that proves they know they are licked and this is their dying gasp. And some people say: Well, it proves that we underestimated their morale. How do you feel, sir?

THE PRESIDENT. I haven't read those reports about underestimating all their morale, and their being out of it, and no more problems, and so forth. . . .

We do think that we have made good progress there. We are for that. We don't want to overplay it or play it in high key. We just want to state it because we believe it is true.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN PRESIDENT JOHNSON AND SECRETARY OF DEFENSE CLIFFORD (MARCH 20, 1968)

CLIFFORD: One very quick item. I had a telephone call from Mac Bundy [former National Security Advisor and speech writer for Kennedy and Johnson] yesterday late in the afternoon. I thought he seemed exceedingly friendly and cooperative. Had no sympathy whatsoever for Bobby [Kennedy's] entry into the race. We had a little talk about the problems of Vietnam. He said he knew we were going through quite a difficult and critical period and made the offer if he could be of any help at all, you only had to let him know and he would be glad to come down and help. Now, I pass it on to you because I thought you might want to consider the advisability—if you thought well of it—of calling him and perhaps asking him to come down. This is a very important speech that has to be written. I spent a couple of hours with Harry McPherson yesterday

afternoon and I had the feeling that maybe Mac could be quite useful during this particular period.

PRESIDENT: Yes, I think it would be very good.

I think what we've got to do, too, is to get out of the posture of just being the war candidate that McCarthy has put us in and Bobby is putting us in, the kids [protesters] are putting us in and the papers are putting us in. [New York City mayor John] Lindsay is out advocating rebellions this morning and not responding to the draft and things of that kind. The Mayor urges youth to aid war resistance, and they've got 4-column front-page pictures. Now when the head of the biggest city goes to doing things of that kind, you've got to really look at the picture. . . . Our right hand is going after their jaw with an offense on the war front, but we ought to have a peace front too

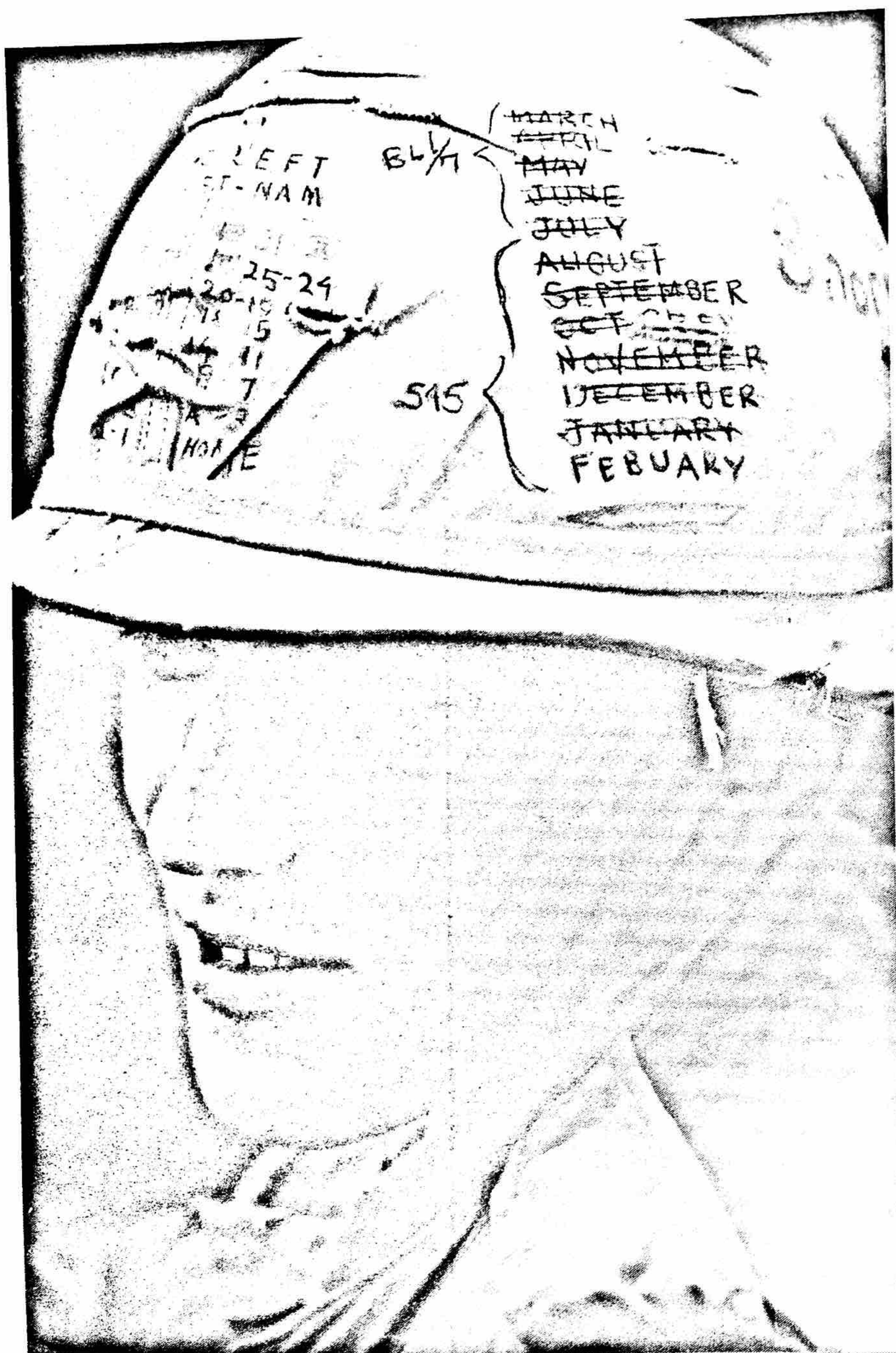


Image 14.2 Soldier in Vietnam, 1968.

A sky trooper for the First Cavalry Division keeps track of the days left on his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Source: Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, Record Group 111, National Archives, Identifier 531453.

simultaneously and use both fists—not just one, not fight with one hand behind us, so that we can say we are the peace candidate—but we are the true peace candidate. We're not the Chamberlain peace—we're the Churchill peace. We are not the guy that is going to throw in the towel and let them take Athens. We are the Truman who stands up and finally saves Greece and Turkey from the Communists. And that, of course, there is a temporary peace, and if we surrendered, you would have peace until they got their government

installed and then by God you'd have a bigger war than ever. . . .

CLIFFORD: . . . Our slogan could very well be—win the peace with honor—and I think we have got to get that thought over. Now I have been giving consideration to offers of de-escalation. I don't know whether they have anything, but if we could begin to start a negotiation toward de-escalation, something to the effect that, now if we could have an agreement with the North Vietnamese, that we would let Hanoi alone if

they would let Saigon alone. I don't know that it is very practical, but considering something of that kind, we can't stop, but if there is some program of a gradual de-escalation that the parties could get into, we could then get in a better posture.

... We have a posture now in which Kennedy and McCarthy are the peace candidates and President Johnson is the war candidate. Now we must veer away from that and we can do it. What we need is a policy now that is a consistent far-ranging policy, but which we don't have. I think

we need a policy of the kind that—say a five-step policy, Mr. President, that we will continue to exert the military pressure. . . . So, as you say, with our right hand we continue to exert the military pressure, then I think we have to have a well thought-out program that we try with our left hand. . . . I think we have to keep in mind that before the [Democratic Party National] Convention, then if not before the Convention, before the election, I think we have to work out some kind of arrangement where we start some kind of negotiation.<sup>5</sup>

## INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 6 AND 7

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Events were moving quickly now and mid-March was a pivotal moment for President Johnson. For years he had been advised to enlarge America's military presence in Vietnam. He did so, but more slowly than some critics liked, and they blamed Johnson's cautiousness for the lack of progress in the war. Meanwhile, half a million American troops on the ground and bombing campaigns as intense as any of World War II seemed only to intensify the growing opposition to the war. The Tet Offensive raised the stakes at home, fueling even more protests and dissent. Document 6 is a reflection by Defense Secretary Clifford, who recounts the dilemmas posed by the war and the limitations of American policy. Document 7 is from a televised address Johnson gave to the American people. Faced with antiwar challenges within his own party for the Democratic presidential nomination, Johnson outlined his military strategy and then shocked the nation. What was at stake at this stage in the war? Why did Clifford think the war was hopeless, and why did Johnson make the decision he did?

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## 6. CLARK CLIFFORD ASSESSES HIS EARLY MONTHS AS DEFENSE SECRETARY (MARCH 1968)

In mid-January 1968, President Johnson asked me to serve as Secretary of Defense, succeeding Secretary McNamara, who was leaving to become President of the World Bank. . . .

I took office on March 1, 1968. The enemy's Tet offensive of late January and early February had been beaten back at great cost. The confidence of the

American people had been badly shaken. The ability of the South Vietnamese Government to restore order and morale in the populace, and discipline and esprit in the armed forces, was being questioned. At the President's direction, General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had flown to Viet Nam in late February for an on-the-spot conference with

General Westmoreland. He had just returned and presented the military's request that over 200,000 troops be prepared for deployment to Viet Nam. These troops would be in addition to the 525,000 previously authorized. I was directed, as my first assignment, to chair a task force named by the President to determine how this new requirement could be met. We were not instructed to assess the need for substantial increases in men and materiel; we were to devise the means by which they could be provided.

My work was cut out. The task force included Secretary Rusk, Secretary Henry Fowler, . . . and other skilled and highly capable officials. All of them had had long and direct experience with Vietnamese problems. I had not. I had attended various meetings in the past several years and I had been to Viet Nam three times, but it was quickly apparent to me how little one knows if he has been on the periphery of a problem and not truly in it. Until the day-long sessions of early March, I had never had the opportunity of intensive analysis and fact-finding. Now I was thrust into a vigorous, ruthlessly frank assessment of our situation by the men who knew the most about it. Try though we would to stay with the assignment of devising means to meet the military's requests, fundamental questions began to recur over and over.

It is, of course, not possible to recall all the questions that were asked nor all of the answers that were given. . . . here are some of the principal issues raised and some of the answers as I understood them:

"Will 200,000 more men do the job?" I found no assurance that they would.

"If not, how many more might be needed—and when?" There was no way of knowing.

"What would be involved in committing 200,000 more men to Viet Nam?" A reserve call-up of approximately 280,000, an increased draft call and an extension of tours of duty of most men then in service.

"Can the enemy respond with a build-up of his own?" He could and he probably would.

"What are the estimated costs of the latest requests?" First calculations were on the order of \$2 billion for the remaining four months of that fiscal year, and an increase of \$10 to \$12 billion for the year beginning July 1, 1968.

"What will be the impact on the economy?" So great that we would face the possibility of credit restrictions, a tax increase and even wage and price controls. The balance of payments would be worsened by at least half a billion dollars a year.

"Can bombing stop the war?" Never by itself. It was inflicting heavy personnel and materiel losses, but bombing by itself would not stop the war.

"Will stepping up the bombing decrease American casualties?" Very little, if at all. Our casualties were due to the intensity of the ground fighting in the South. We had already dropped a heavier tonnage of bombs than in all the theaters of World War II. During 1967, an estimated 90,000 North Vietnamese had infiltrated into South Viet Nam. In the opening weeks of 1968, infiltrators were coming in at three to four times the rate of a year earlier, despite the ferocity and intensity of our campaign of aerial interdiction.

"How long must we keep on sending our men and carrying the main burden of combat?" The South Vietnamese were doing better, but they were not ready yet to replace our troops and we did not know when they would be.

When I asked for a presentation of the military plan for attaining victory in Viet Nam, I was told that there was no plan for victory in the historic American sense. Why not? Because our forces were operating under three major political restrictions: The President had forbidden the invasion of North Viet Nam because this could trigger the mutual assistance pact between North Viet Nam and China; the President had forbidden the mining of the harbor at Haiphong, the principal port through which the North received military supplies, because a Soviet vessel might be sunk; the President had forbidden our forces to pursue the enemy into Laos and Cambodia, for to do so would spread the war, politically and geographically, with no discernible advantage. . . .

"Given these circumstances, how can we win?" We would, I was told, continue to evidence our superiority over the enemy; we would continue to attack in the belief that he would reach the stage where he would find it inadvisable to go on with the war. He could not afford the attrition we were inflicting on him. And we were improving our posture all the time.

I then asked, "What is the best estimate as to how long this course of action will take? Six months? One year? Two years?" There was no agreement on an answer. Not only was there no agreement, I could find no one willing to express any confidence in his guesses. Certainly, none of us was willing to assert that he could see "light at the end of the tunnel" or that American troops would be coming home by the end of the year. . . .

I was more conscious each day of domestic unrest in our own country. Draft card burnings, marches in the streets, problems on school campuses, bitterness and divisiveness were rampant. Just as disturbing to me were the economic implications of a struggle to be indefinitely continued at ever-increasing cost. . . .

I was also conscious of our obligations and involvements elsewhere in the world. There were certain hopeful signs in our relations with the Soviet Union, but both nations were hampered in moving toward vitally important talks on the limitations of strategic weapons so long as the United States was committed to a military solution in Viet Nam. . . .

Also, I could not free myself from the continuing nagging doubt . . . that if the nations living in the

shadow of Viet Nam were not now persuaded by the domino theory, perhaps it was time for us to take another look. Our efforts had given the nations in that area a number of years following independence to organize and build their security. I could see no reason at this time for us to continue to add to our commitment. Finally, there was no assurance that a 40 percent increase in American troops would place us within the next few weeks, months or even years in any substantially better military position than we were in then. All that could be predicted accurately was that more troops would raise the level of combat and automatically raise the level of casualties on both sides.

And so, after these exhausting days, I was convinced that the military course we were pursuing was not only endless, but hopeless. . . . Henceforth, I was also convinced, our primary goal should be to level off our involvement, and to work toward gradual disengagement.

. . . Finally, the President, in the closing hours of March, made his decisions and reported them to the people on the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup>.<sup>6</sup>

## 7. PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS (MARCH 31, 1968)

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Good evening, my fellow Americans:

Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

No other question so preoccupies our people. No other dream so absorbs the 250 million human beings who live in that part of the world. No other goal motivates American policy in Southeast Asia.

. . . Tonight, I renew the offer I made last August—to stop the bombardment of North Vietnam. We ask that talks begin promptly, that they be serious talks on the substance of peace. We assume that during those talks Hanoi will not take advantage of our restraint. . . .

So, tonight, in the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to deescalate the conflict. We are reducing—substantially reducing—the present level of hostilities.

And we are doing so unilaterally, and at once.

Tonight, I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens allied forward positions and where the movements of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat. . . .

I call upon President Ho Chi Minh to respond positively, and favorably, to this new step toward peace. . . .



Image 14.3 Lyndon Johnson speaks to the nation, March 31, 1968

Confronted with a deepening war, and challenges within his own party, President Johnson outlines a strategy of gradual de-escalation and his decision not to run for re-election.

Source: Yoichi Okamoto, LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, Texas. Photo C9284-35.

... We and the other allied nations are contributing 600,000 fighting men to assist 700,000 South Vietnamese troops in defending their little country.

Our presence there has always rested on this basic belief: The main burden of preserving their freedom must be carried out by them—by the South Vietnamese themselves.

... In order that these forces may reach maximum combat effectiveness, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have recommended to me that we should prepare to send—during the next 5 months—support troops totaling approximately 13,500 men.

A portion of these men will be made available from our active forces. The balance will come from reserve component units which will be called up for service. ...

We have no intention of widening this war.

But the United States will never accept a fake solution to this long and arduous struggle and call it peace.

No one can foretell the precise terms of an eventual settlement.

Our objective in South Vietnam has never been the annihilation of the enemy. It has been to bring about a recognition in Hanoi that its objective—taking over the South by force—could not be achieved.

... I reaffirm the pledge... that we are prepared to withdraw our forces from South Vietnam as the other side withdraws its forces to the north, stops the infiltration, and the level of violence thus subsides. ...

One day, my fellow citizens, there will be peace in Southeast Asia.

It will come because the people of Southeast Asia want it—those whose armies are at war tonight, and those who, though threatened, have thus far been spared.

Peace will come because Asians were willing to work for it—and to sacrifice for it—and to die by the thousands for it.

But let it never be forgotten: Peace will come also because American sent her sons to help secure it. . . .

With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should

devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country.

Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.

But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace—and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause—whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice that duty may require. . . .<sup>7</sup>

## INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 8 AND 9

At just the time that Johnson was negotiating the stakes of the war at home, the terrible My Lai massacre occurred abroad. The next two documents present the official versions of the My Lai assault. Sergeant Jay A. Roberts's press release is a sanitized version of what happened. Next, Colonel Oran K. Henderson reports to his superiors on the investigation he conducted concerning an alleged massacre at My Lai. Together they illustrate what was officially reported about the event.

## 8. PRESS RELEASE (MARCH 17, 1968)

SERGEANT JAY A. ROBERTS

CHU LAI, VIETNAM—For the third time in recent weeks, the Americal Division's 11th Brigade infantrymen from Task Force Barker raided a Viet Cong stronghold known as "Pinkville" six miles northeast of Quang Ngai, killing 128 enemy in a running battle.

The action occurred in the coastal town of My Lai where, three weeks earlier, another company of the brigade's Task Force Barker fought its way out of a VC ambush, leaving 80 enemy dead.

The action began as units of the task force conducted a combat assault into a known Viet Cong stronghold. "Shark" gunships of the 174th Aviation Company escorted the troops into the area and killed four enemy during the assault. Other choppers from the 123d Aviation Battalion killed two enemy.

"The combat assault went like clockwork," commented LTC Frank Barker, New Haven, Conn., the task force commander. "We had two entire companies on the ground in less than an hour."

A company led by [Captain] Ernest Medina, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, killed 14 [Viet Cong] minutes after landing. They recovered two M1

rifles, a carbine, a short-wave radio and enemy documents.

## 9. REPORT OF INVESTIGATION (APRIL 24, 1968)

COLONEL ORAN K. HENDERSON

1. An investigation has been conducted of the allegations cited in Inclosure 1. The following are the results of this investigation. . . .
2. This area has long been an enemy strong hold, and Task Force Barker had met heavy enemy opposition in this area on 12 and 23 February 1968. All persons living in this area are considered to be VC or VC sympathizers by the District Chief. Artillery and gunship preparatory fires were placed on the landing zones used by the two companies. Upon landing and during their advance on the enemy positions, the attacking forces were supported by gunships. By 1500 hours all enemy resistance had ceased and the remaining enemy forces had withdrawn. The results of this operation were 128 VC soldiers KIA. During preparatory fires and the ground action by the attacking companies 20 noncombatants caught in the battle area were killed. Interviews revealed that at no time were any civilians gathered together and killed by US soldiers. The civilian habitants of the area began withdrawing to the southwest as soon as the operation began and within the first hour and a half all visible civilians had cleared the area of operations.
3. The Son Tinh District Chief does not give the allegations any importance and he pointed out that the two hamlets where the incidents is alleged to have happened are in an area controlled by the VC since 1964. [He] reported that the making of such allegations against US Forces is a common technique of the VC propaganda machine.
4. It is concluded that 20 non-combatants were inadvertently killed when caught in the area of preparatory fires and in the cross fires of the US and VC forces on 16 March 1968. It is further concluded that no civilians were gathered together and shot by US soldiers. The allegation that US Forces shot and killed 450-500 civilians is obviously a Viet Cong propaganda move to discredit the United States in the eyes of the Vietnamese people in general and the ARVN soldier in particular.
5. It is recommended that a counter-propaganda campaign be waged against the VC in eastern Son Tinh District.

### INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 10-13

Documents 10 to 13 detail the events on and just before March 16, 1968. In Document 10, Gregory Olson, a member of the platoon that assaulted My Lai, discusses the orders that Charlie Company, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, was given the day before the My Lai assault. Documents 11 and 12 describe the day of the massacre, illuminating what individual

soldiers did and thought. In Document 13, Nguyen Hieu, tells the story from the perspective of a Vietnamese villager who survived the attack. All these documents are from the *Peers Report*—an investigation that collected oral testimony—except for the Calley interview, which is taken from his court martial trial.

## 10. TESTIMONY OF GREGORY T. OLSEN (1970)

Q: Prior to the assault on My Lai did the Company receive a briefing?

A: Yes the company did. The briefing was given by CPT Medina and I attended the briefing. At the time everybody was down in the dumps, because just previous due to various operations in the past few weeks we had lost about 25 men. Seven of them had been killed and the rest wounded. The briefing was given at LZ Dottie, where CPT Medina, drew a map on the ground and explained the entire procedures. We had instructions to shoot on sight any military age male, running from us, or shooting at us. We were then told, that we are to clear all the people out of the village. He (CPT Medina) did not say anything about the disposition of the people that we had or would clear out of the village. We were told, to destroy all the food supplies and the animals in the area. I do not remember if in the initial briefing we were told to burn all the huts. CPT Medina made the statement that we owed the enemy something. The troops had a feeling that they should revenge their fallen comrades.

Q: Did CPT Medina ever order during the aforementioned briefing to kill all the inhabitants of the village? With all the inhabitants I mean also women and children.

A: Negative. He did not. CPT Medina, was in my opinion an outstanding Commander. He was always concerned with the welfare of his men. Sometimes we did things the hard way, but in the end it was always the best for us. CPT Medina would never have given an order to kill women and children.

Q: Was LT Calley present during the briefing?

A: I assume he was.

Q: Did you attend a briefing on the operation My Lai by LT Calley?

A: I only remember that he told us on which helicopters we were supposed to go on. I do not remember LT Calley giving us a specific briefing on My Lai after CPT Medina had briefed us. I do not remember who my squadleader was during the Pinkville Operation. It is quite a long time ago.

## 11. TESTIMONY OF HERBERT L. CARTER (1970)

We were picked up by helicopters at LZ Dottie early in the morning and we were flown to My Lai. We landed outside the village in a dry rice paddy.

There was no resistance from the village. There was no armed enemy in the village. We formed a line outside the village.

The first killing was an old man in a field outside the village who said some kind of greeting in Vietnamese and waved his arms at us. Someone—either Medina or Calley—said to kill him and a big heavy-set white fellow killed the man. I do not know the name of the man who shot this Vietnamese. This was the first murder.

Just after the man killed the Vietnamese, a woman came out of the village and someone knocked her down and Medina shot her with his M16 rifle. I was 50 or 60 feet from him and saw this. There was no reason to shoot this girl. Mitchell, Conti, Meadlo, Stanley, and the rest of the squad and the command group must have seen this. It was a pure out and out murder.

Then our squad started into the village. We were making sure no one escaped from the village. Seventy-five or a hundred yards inside the village we came to where the soldiers had collected 15 or more Vietnamese men, women, and children in a group. Medina said, "Kill everybody, leave no one standing." Wood was there with an M-60 machine gun and, at Medina's orders, he fired into the people. Sgt Mitchell was there at this time and fired into the people with his M16 rifle, also. Widmer was there and fired into the group, and after they were down on the ground, Widmer passed among them and finished them off with his M16 rifle. Medina, himself, did not fire into this group.

Just after this shooting, Medina stopped a 17 or 18 year old man with a water buffalo. Medina said for the boy to make a run for it—he tried to get him to run—but the boy wouldn't run, so Medina shot him with his M16 rifle and killed him. The command group was there. I was 75 or 80 feet away at the time and saw it plainly. There were some demolition men there, too, and they would be able to testify about this. I don't know any other witnesses to this murder. Medina killed the buffalo, too.

Q: I want to warn you that these are very serious charges you are making. I want you to be very sure that you tell only the truth and that everything you say is the truth?

A: What I have said is the truth and I will face Medina in court and swear to it. This is the truth: this is what happened.

Q: What happened then?

A: We went on through the village. Meadlo shot a Vietnamese and asked me to help him throw the man in the well. I refused and Meadlo had Carney help him throw the man in the well. I saw this murder with my own eyes and know that there was no reason to shoot the man. I also know from the wounds that the man was dead.

Also in the village the soldiers had rounded up a group of people. Meadlo was guarding them. There were some other soldiers with Meadlo. Calley came up and said that he wanted them all killed. I was right there within a few feet when he said this. There were about 25 people in this group. Calley said when I walk away, I want them all killed. Meadlo and Widmer fired into this group with his M16 on automatic fire. Cowan was there and fired into the people too, but I don't think he wanted to do it. There were others firing into this group, but I don't remember who. Calley had two Vietnamese with him at this time and he killed them, too, by shooting them with his M16 rifle on automatic fire. I didn't want to get involved and I walked away. There was no reason for this killing. These were mainly women and children and a few old men. They weren't trying to escape or attack or anything. It was murder.

A woman came out of a hut with a baby in her arms and she was crying. She was crying because her little boy had been in front of her hut and between the well and the hut and someone had killed the child by shooting it. She came out of the hut with her baby and Widmer shot her with an M16 and she fell. When she fell, she dropped the baby and then Widmer opened up on the baby with his M16 and killed the baby, too.

I also saw another woman come out of a hut and Calley grabbed her by the hair and shot her with a caliber 45 pistol. He held her by the hair for a minute and then let go and she fell to the ground. Some enlisted man standing there said, "Well, she'll be in the big rice paddy in the sky."

Q Do you know any witnesses to these incidents?  
A Stanley might have [seen] the one Calley killed. There were a lot of people around when Widmer shot the woman with the baby. I can't definitely state any one person was there, but there were a lot of people around.

I also saw a Vietnamese boy about 8 years old who had been wounded, I think in the leg. One of the photographers attached to the company patted the kid on the head and then Mitchell shot the kid right in front of the photographer and me. I am sure the boy died from the fire of Mitchell.

About that time I sat down by a stack of dying people and Widmer asked me if he

could borrow my caliber .45 pistol and finish off the people. I gave him my pistol and he walked in among the people and would stand there and when one would move, he would shoot that person in the head with the pistol. He used three magazines of caliber .45 ammunition on these people. These were men, children, women, and babies. They had been shot by machinegunners and riflemen from Company C, 1/20th Infantry. This was at a T-junction of two trails on the outskirts of the village. I got my pistol back from Widmer and holstered it again.



Image 14.4 John Kerry addresses an antiwar rally, 1971

John Kerry was one of many servicemen who joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Speaking here in 1971, Kerry later became a U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, ran for president, then served as Secretary of State Under Barack Obama.

Source: Courtesy Warren K. Leffler, U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

Q: How many people do you figure Widmer finished off when he used your pistol?

A: I know he shot some twice, so I figure he shot fifteen or so with my pistol. I know he shot one guy in the head and I imagine that was where he was shooting them all.

Q: What happened then?

A: We went on through the village and there was killing and more killing. I was with Stanley, mainly. I sat down with Stanley and Widmer came up again and asked to borrow my pistol again. I gave it to him. I saw a little boy there—wounded, I believe in the arm—and Widmer walked up close to the kid and shot him with my pistol. Widmer said something like, "Did you see me shoot that son of a bitch," and Stanley said something about how it was wrong. My gun had jammed when Widmer shot the kid. As far as I could tell, the kid died as a result of this gunshot. Then

Widmer gave me my pistol back and walked off. I was trying to clean it when it accident[all]ly went off and I was shot in the left foot. Stanley gave me medical aid and then the medics came. Medina and some of the command group came up and then I was flown out in a helicopter. The next day the medics brought Meadlo into the hospital. He had stepped on a booby-trap and had lost his foot. He said he thought God might be punishing him for what he had done in My Lai. . . .

Q: Did you murder anyone in Vietnam?

A: The only people I killed in Vietnam I killed in combat. I didn't kill any women or kids or unarmed persons at all, ever.

Q: How many people do you think were killed in My Lai?

A: There were more than 100, but I couldn't tell you accurately how many people were killed. I don't believe there were any people left alive.

## 12. TESTIMONY OF WILLIAM L. CALLEY (1970)

Q: There has been some information disclosed that you heard before the court that you stood there at the ditch for a considerable period of time, that you waited and had your troops organize groups of Vietnamese, throw them in the ditch or knock them in the ditch or pushed them in the ditch, and that you fired there for approximately an hour and a half as those groups were marched up. Did you participate in any such a shooting or any such an event?

A: No, sir, I did not.

Q: Did you at any time direct anybody to push people in the ditch?

A: Like I said, sir, I gave the order to take those people through the ditch and had also told Meadlo if he couldn't move them to "waste them" and I directly—other than that—it was only that one incident. I never stood up there for

any period of time. My main mission was to get my men on the other side of that ditch and get in that defensive position and that's what I did, sir.

Q: Now why did you give Meadlo a message or the order that if he couldn't get rid of them to "waste them"?

A: Because that was my order. That was the order of the day, sir.

Q: Who gave you that order?

A: My commanding officer, sir, Captain Medina, sir.

Q: And stated in that posture, in substantially those words, how many times did you receive such an order from Captain Medina?

A: The night before in the company briefing, the platoon leaders' briefing, the following morning before we lifted off, and twice there in the village, sir. . . .

## 13. TESTIMONY OF NGUYEN HIEU

- Q: What is your name?  
A: Nguyen Hieu.
- Q: How old are you?  
A: Twenty-five years old.
- Q: Are you native of Tu Cung?  
A: Yes. . . .
- Q: . . . Were you in your house on the morning of 16 March 1968 when the Americans came?  
A: Yes, I lived there in 1968.
- Q: Were you there on the morning of 16 March 1968 when the Americans came?  
A: Yes, I was there that morning.
- Q: How many other members of your family were there with you in the house that morning?  
A: Five.
- Q: What did you do when you heard the artillery fire?  
A: For the first time early in the morning I heard artillery come in here (indicating) and American helicopters come into here (indicating) on the west side of the village. They came here and they took us from the bunker.
- Q: Was the bunker near your house?  
A: Yes, right here (indicating).
- Q: Did all the members of your family go in the bunker?  
A: My mother stayed in the house. I and the children went to the bunker.
- Q: How long did you stay in the bunker?  
A: About 2 hours.
- Q: Did the Americans come near the bunker?  
A: Yes, they came into the bunker.
- Q: They came into the bunker?  
A: Yes.
- Q: And did they make you come out of the bunker?  
A: When the Americans came to the house my mother came out of house, and the Americans then raped my mother and they shot her.
- Q: They shot and raped your mother?  
A: Yes, shot and raped my mother. My sister ran out of the bunker and they shot my sister and two children. . . .
- Q: How many Americans were there?  
A: Two Americans.
- Q: Were they Caucasians or Negroes?  
A: I saw only one black and one yellow.
- Q: One black and one yellow. No white?  
A: I saw one black, one yellow, and another I don't know exactly.
- Q: Which one raped your mother?  
A: The black soldier. . . .
- Q: What did the white soldier do while the Negro soldier was raping your mother?  
A: After they shot my mother, the white soldier checked the house to see that everybody was dead and then he went out. . . .  
And later, a second group of Americans came in to burn the house.
- Q: Were you the only one that stayed in the bunker?  
A: Yes, I stayed alone.
- Q: And your sister went out of the bunker and was shot?  
A: My sister went out to help my mother and was shot.
- Q: Were they all shot right around your house or did they take them some place else and shoot them?  
A: They were all shot in the house.
- Q: After the soldiers that shot the people left, how long were you in the bunker before the other soldiers came that burned the house?  
A: About 40 minutes.
- Q: About 40 minutes?  
A: Yes.
- Q: Did you see the soldiers that burned the house?  
A: No, I did not see the Americans that burned the house.
- Q: Did they shoot any livestock? Any animals, chickens, pigs?  
A: They killed two buffalo.

Q: What did you do after the soldiers left?  
 A: After the Americans left I buried my mother and sister.

Q: I am sorry that your family was killed like this. Thank you for coming here today to help us.<sup>8</sup>

### POSTSCRIPT

Three years after the My Lai massacre, a young war hero gave testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Massachusetts native John Kerry served on a gunboat in the Mekong Delta, and he received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts for valor. But by 1971, after he left the navy, he was a leader of the antiwar group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He told the committee that too many people wanted to avoid the truth: "We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum." (Kerry later served as a senator from Massachusetts, then as Secretary of State under President Barack Obama.)

My Lai eventually became shorthand for the hell of war, but it almost escaped the notice of the American people. Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson—who literally put himself between American troops and the Vietnamese and then flew wounded civilians out of the combat zone—kept the case alive by filing a complaint. The military brass, however, preferred to treat My Lai as an unfortunate but inadvertent killing of a dozen or two-dozen civilians. Only when soldier Ronald Ridenour investigated the story then spread the word did others begin to pay attention. In March 1969, Ridenour wrote to President Nixon, the joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, and several congressmen—among whom was Representative Morris Udall, an Arizona Democrat, who pushed for a full investigation.

The case was finally turned over to the Army's inspector general, and as witnesses were interviewed, the enormity of the crime became apparent. By the end of the year, My Lai made the cover of both *Time* and *Newsweek*, and graphic photographs of the massacre filled the pages of *Life Magazine*. The Pentagon appointed a commission headed by three-star General William Peers for a closed-door investigation. The commission interviewed nearly 400 witnesses and produced 20,000 pages of testimony. The Peers Commission recommended action against dozens of soldiers for rape and murder and also singled out several officers for covering up crimes.

Twenty-five men initially were prosecuted, but due to a combination of circumstances, only a few were charged and one tried. The case against Lieutenant William Calley was overwhelming—too many eyewitnesses identified him mowing down dozens of unarmed civilians. Upwards of 500 people died at My Lai. Calley's defense attorney argued that the lieutenant was being made a scapegoat for higher-ups like Captain Ernest Medina. Medina, it was alleged, gave the orders to leave no one alive. But on March 29, 1971, the military tribunal, after deliberating thirteen days, found Calley—and Calley alone—guilty of twenty-two counts of premeditated murder and sentenced him to be confined to prison for life.

Opinion polls indicated that the American public strongly disapproved of the verdict. Many citizens agreed with Calley's attorney that the lieutenant had been made a scapegoat. Days after Calley's sentencing, President Nixon, pending appeals, ordered Calley taken out of confinement and moved to house arrest. Calley's prosecutor, Aubrey Daniel, crusaded against what he considered the political expediency that prevented those who murdered innocent civilians from receiving justice. Nonetheless, William Calley, the only man who served any time at all for the massacre, ended up spending four months in the brig at Fort Benning before he was paroled at the end of 1974.

Calley settled quietly into civilian life in Columbus, Georgia. In 2009, he broke his silence and apologized for the events at My Lai. "There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened," he told the Kiwanis Club in Columbus. "I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, and for the American soldiers involved and their families. I am very sorry." Calley had always maintained that he was just following orders, though the courts did not find Captain Medina or others guilty of issuing such orders. Besides, as one soldier observed at Calley's 2009 press conference, obeying unlawful orders is itself an unlawful act.

As historian Gary Kulik points out, soldiers have not just the right but a duty to disobey such commands. Kulik argues against seeing Calley as a scapegoat, as so many Americans did back in the 1970s. Events like My Lai happen not just because someone gives orders but because everyone else abdicates their legal and moral responsibilities to disobey. "What would it have taken to stop the massacre?" Kulik asks. "There is a simple answer. A morally competent officer willing to tell his superiors that army intelligence was wrong again, there were no armed Viet Cong there, and willing to order a cease fire." Kulik agrees that higher-ups were guilty too, but the principles established after World War II at the Nuremberg Trials affirmed that following orders brought no exoneration for war crimes. Kulik concludes, "It was an atrocity-producing war, that is the way we fought the war, body counts, every dead Vietnamese is a dead Vietcong. There is an ugly underlying truth here, but it is not the whole truth, and even if it were, it would not be exculpatory." War might be hell, but individual soldiers still had moral responsibilities.

Some have complained that the "Vietnam syndrome" makes America skittish about using military force; others think that reluctance to wage war is healthy. Either way, Vietnam is still with us. Forty years after My Lai, for example, at the end of 2009, upon ordering 30,000 fresh troops into Afghanistan, President Obama felt it necessary to explain to the American people in a nationally televised speech his belief that the analogy was not accurate, that the war he inherited in Afghanistan was not like Vietnam. American troops are still there almost a decade later.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why did the Vietnam War prove so divisive and controversial on the home front?
2. How were American interests in Vietnam framed by Jackie Robinson, John Steinbeck, and the draft resistance leaflet? Do you see similarities in these assessments?
3. What does the conversation between Defense Secretary Clifford and President Johnson—as well as Clifford's subsequent recollection—tell us about the administration's understanding of Vietnam in 1968?
4. What does the My Lai massacre reveal about the nature of warfare in Vietnam? Do you think My Lai was an isolated case or part of a larger problem?
5. What were President Johnson's aims in the war? Why do you think he failed to persuade a majority of Americans to support his goals?
6. How did the official version of the My Lai assault differ from the soldiers' testimonies? Why were they so different from each other?

## ADDITIONAL READING

The literature on the war in Vietnam is extensive, but anyone interested in the nature of the combat and the experiences of the soldiers should read Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (1988); Christian Appy, *Working-Class War* (1993); Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977); Mark Baker, *Nam* (1982); Stewart O'Nan, *The Vietnam Reader* (1998); and Davis Maraniss, *They Marched into Sunlight* (2003).

Stanley Karrow, *Vietnam: A History* (1999) remains a useful introduction. For the war in a larger historical and diplomatic context, see James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945–1995* (2008). For the experience of a combat veteran, see Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in the Combat Zone* (1988), and *The Things They Carried* (1990). For a more extended collection of sources related to the massacre, see James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, editors, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (1998). Two fine books on the massacre are Seymour Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (1970), and Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (1992). On the antiwar movement at home, see Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (1997); Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1969); and Sherry Gershon Gottlieb, *Hell No, We Won't Go: Resisting the Draft during the Vietnam War* (1991). For a particular individual's role, see Howard L. Bingham and Max Wallace, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. The United States of America* (2000). Gary Kulik's comments can be found at the History News Network's Web site for September 28, 2009, at <http://hnn.us/articles/117472.html>. Films on the war include Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (1986); Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (1979); and WBGH Boston's documentary *Vietnam: A Television History* (1983).

#### ENDNOTES

1. White House Central Files, National Archives, Identifier 6207609.
2. White House Central Files, National Archives, Identifier 7329806.
3. Records of the U.S. Attorneys, Record Group 118, National Archives, Identifier 7419639.
4. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-1969* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1970).
5. Document 146, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume VI, Vietnam, January–August 1968*.
6. Clark Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal: the Personal History of One Man's View and How It Evolved," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1969).
7. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69*. Vol. 1, pp. 469–476. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970.
8. Documents 8 through 12 are excerpted from James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, ed., *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford St. Martins, 1998). Testimony from Olsen, Carter, and Nguyen Hieu originally appeared in William Peers, *Report of the Department of the Army, Review of the Preliminary Investigation to the My Lai Incident* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970).