

1. Why did President Johnson escalate the war in Vietnam?
2. How did campus protests shape national political debate?
3. What were the goals of Johnson's Great Society?
4. What divided the Democratic Party in 1968?
5. How did Richard Nixon win the presidential election in 1968?
6. What is meant by the "politics of identity"?

FOCUS Questions

1965–1974

and political leaders were struck down by assassins' bullets. New protest groups—Black Power, Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, as well as Chicano, Native American, and Asian—were taking out a highly charged "politics of identity."



Political conservatives managed to triumph in the election of Richard Nixon, who went on to disgrace the office. Meanwhile, the United States continued to fight—and eventually lost—the longest war in its history.

AMERICAN
Communities

The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War had its roots in the Truman Doctrine and its goal of containing communism (see Chapter 26). In 1954, after the Communist forces of Ho Chi Minh defeated the French colonialists and created a new government in the north, Vietnam emerged as a major zone of Cold War contention. President John Kennedy called it "the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike," a barrier to the spread of communism throughout the region and perhaps the world. President Lyndon Johnson took office sounding a similar note, sharpened by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's warning that failure in Vietnam would result in "a complete shift of world power," with the "prestige and integrity" of the United States severely damaged. With the stakes so high, Johnson concluded that Americans had little choice but to fight for "the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania."

Vietnam was not Valley Forge, however, and the United States ultimately paid a huge price for its determination to turn back communism in Indochina. More

than 58,000 Americans died in an  Watch the Video
unwinnable overseas war that only  Vietnam War at
deepened divisions at home. www.myhistorylab.com

Johnson's War

Although President Kennedy had greatly increased the number of military advisers and Special Forces in South Vietnam (see Chapter 27), it was his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who made the decision to engage the United States in a major war there. At first, Johnson simply hoped to stay the course. Facing election in November 1964, he knew that a major military setback would cripple his campaign. But he was equally determined to avoid the fate of President Truman, who had been damaged politically after "losing" China to communism and producing a stalemate in Korea.

Throughout the winter and spring of 1964, as conditions worsened in South Vietnam, Johnson's advisers quietly laid the groundwork for a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam. In early August, they found a pretext to set this plan in motion. The National Security Agency—decades later admitting to faulty

intelligence—reported two attacks against U.S. destroyers by North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. Although the second alleged attack never took place, the report prompted Johnson to order retaliatory air strikes against bases in North Vietnam.

Johnson appealed to Congress to give him the authority “to take all necessary measures” and “all necessary steps” to defend U.S. armed forces and “to prevent further aggression.” The Gulf of Tonkin resolution moved unanimously through the House and passed the Senate on August 7 with only two dissenting votes. Wayne Morse, the Republican senator from Oregon, had denounced the resolution as a “pre-dated declaration of war.”

Ironically, Johnson continued his presidential campaign in 1964 with a call for restraint in Vietnam. He assured voters that “we are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” This strategy helped him win a landslide victory over conservative Republican Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who had advocated systematic bombing of North Vietnam as a prelude to invasion.

With the election behind him, Johnson faced a hard decision. U.S. forces failed to slow the Communist insurgency into South Vietnam. Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed government in Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam, appeared near collapse. His advisors pressed him hard to chart a new course if he hoped to avoid, as National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy put it, a “disastrous defeat.”

Deeper into the Quagmire

In early February 1965, the Johnson Administration found a rationale to escalate the war. The Vietcong had dispatched a suicide bomb squad to the U.S. military base at Pleiku in the central highlands of Vietnam, killing seven and wounding more than 100 Americans. Waving the list of casualties, the president rushed into an emergency meeting of the National Security Council to announce that the time had passed for keeping “our guns over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard.” He ordered immediate reprisal bombing and one week later, on February 13, authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, a campaign of gradually intensifying air attacks against North Vietnam.

Once Rolling Thunder began, President Johnson hesitated to speak frankly with the American public about his plan to widen the war by sending in more ground troops. Initially, he announced that only two battalions of Marines were being assigned to Danang to defend the airfields where bombing runs began. But six weeks later, 50,000 U.S. combat troops were in Vietnam. By November 1965, the total topped 165,000, and more troops were on the way.

The strategy pursued by the Johnson administration and implemented by General William Westmoreland—a war of attrition—was based on the premise that continuous



The massive bombing and ground combat created huge numbers of civilian casualties in Vietnam. The majority killed were women and children.

use of heavy artillery and air power would eventually exhaust North Vietnam's resources. Meanwhile, U.S. ground forces would defeat the Vietcong in South Vietnam and

thereby restore political stability to South Vietnam's pro-Western government. As Johnson once boasted, the strongest military power in the world surely could crush a Communist rebellion in a “pissant” country of peasants.

In practice, the United States wreaked havoc in South Vietnam, tearing apart its society and bringing ecological devastation to its land. Intending to eradicate the support network of the Vietcong, U.S. ground troops conducted search-and-destroy missions throughout the countryside. They attacked villagers and their homes. Seeking to ferret out Vietcong sympathizers, U.S. troops turned at any one time as many as 4 million people—approximately one-quarter of the population of South Vietnam—into refugees. By late 1968, the United States had dropped more than 3 million tons of bombs on Vietnam and eventually delivered more than three times the tonnage dropped by the Allies on all fronts during World War II.

Read the Document
Johnson's Defense of the U.S. Presence in Vietnam (1965) at www.myhistorylab.com

See the Map
The Vietnam War at www.myhistorylab.com

Using herbicides such as Agent Orange to defoliate forests, the United States also conducted the most destructive chemical warfare in history.

Several advisers urged the president to keep the American people informed about his decisions in Vietnam, even to declare a state of national emergency. But Johnson feared he would lose momentum on domestic reform if he drew attention to foreign policy. Seeking to avoid "undue excitement in the Congress and in domestic public opinion," he held to a course of intentional deceit.

The Credibility Gap

Johnson's popularity had surged at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, but it waned rapidly. To stem the tide, Johnson worked hard to control the news media. Despite his efforts, he found himself accused of lying to the American public.

During the early 1960s, network news had either ignored Vietnam or unquestioningly supported U.S. policy. Beginning with a CBS News report by Morley Safer in August 1965, however, the tenor changed. Although government officials described the U.S. operation in the South Vietnamese village Cam Ne as an attack on "fortified Vietcong bunkers," the *CBS Evening News* showed Marines setting fire to the thatched homes of civilians. President Johnson's sharp complaint to CBS did little to staunch the unfavorable news commentary that soon followed. By 1967, according to a noted media observer, "every subject tended to become Vietnam."

Scenes of human suffering and devastation, now broadcast daily, ultimately weakened the administration's moral justification of U.S. involvement as a defense of freedom and democracy in South Vietnam. Reporters described the varieties of American cluster bombs, which released up to 180,000 fiberglass shards, and showed photographs and film clips of the nightmarish effects of the defoliants used on South Vietnam's forests to uncover enemy strongholds. And every night, network television news tallied the soaring American body count, from 26 per week in 1965 to 180 in 1967.

Skeptics stepped forward in the U.S. Congress. Democratic Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and who had personally speeded the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, became the most vocal critic of Johnson's war policy. A strong supporter of the Cold War, Fulbright had nevertheless concluded that the war in Vietnam was both unwinnable and destructive to domestic reform. In 1967, in his best-selling *Arrogance of Power*, he proposed a negotiated withdrawal from a neutralized Southeast Asia. He also persuaded prominent Democrats to put aside their personal loyalty to Johnson and push through Congress a nonbinding resolution appealing to the United Nations to help negotiate an end to hostilities.

Meanwhile, some of the nation's most trusted European allies called for restraint in Vietnam.

The impact of the war, which cost Americans \$21 billion per year, was also felt by Americans at home. Johnson convinced Congress to levy a 10 percent surcharge on individual and corporate taxes. Later adjustments tapped the Social Security fund, heretofore safe from interference. Inflation raced upward, fed by spending on the war. Johnson promised that the end of the war was in sight and replaced advisers who questioned his policy. As casualties multiplied, however, more and more Americans began to question his credibility and to mistrust his handling of the war.

A Generation in Conflict

As the Vietnam war escalated, Americans from all walks of life began to doubt the wisdom of the administration's leadership. Between 1965 and 1971, much of this skepticism took on a distinctly generational character. At the forefront were the baby boomers just coming of age who broadened the definition of politics to encompass not only U.S. foreign policy but also everyday life.

This so-called sixties generation, the largest in American history, began to combine protest against the war in Vietnam with a broader, penetrating critique of American society. Through music, dress, and even hairstyle, they expressed a deep estrangement from the values and aspirations of their parents' generation. As early as 1967, when opposition to the war began to swell, "flower children" were putting daisies in the rifle barrels of troops sent to quash antiwar protests, providing a seemingly innocent counterpoint to the grim news of slaughter abroad. Meanwhile, campus organizations such as SDS called upon college students to demand an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

"The Times They Are A-Changin'"

The free speech movement at the University of California at Berkeley marked the beginning of a new kind of protest movement. In the fall of 1964, civil rights activists returned from Freedom Summer in Mississippi to the 27,000-student campus and decided to picket Bay Area stores that practiced discrimination in hiring. When the university administration tried to stop them from setting up information booths on campus, eighteen student groups objected, including the archconservative Students for Goldwater, claiming that their right to free speech had been abridged. The administration sent police to break up the protest rally and arrest participants. After university president Clark Kerr, under pressure from conservative regents, announced his intention to press charges against the free speech movement's leaders, a huge crowd gathered. Joining folk singer Joan Baez in singing "We Shall Overcome," nearly 1,000 people marched toward the university's administration building, where they planned