The Vietnam War was not only America's longest conflict but, excluding the Civil War, its most divisive. Beginning in the aftermath of World War II and lasting into the 1970s, U.S. involvement in Vietnam, indeed throughout Southeast Asia, grew progressively from an advisory effort into a major war. Eventually, over fifty thousand Americans and millions of Asians were killed, and the United States spent hundreds of billions of dollars in a failed effort to prevent a victory by Nationalist-Communist forces in Vietnam. Domestically, the war opened deep civil wounds as millions of Americans opposed U.S. intervention in Vietnam and created one of the largest mass protest movements in American history. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, as veterans and draft resisters from the Vietnam era took public roles and large numbers of immigrants from Southeast Asia came to reside in the United States, the legacy of the war still remained strong.

The United States initially became involved in Vietnam around 1950 to maintain the French empire in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) and to prevent the Nationalist-Communist forces of the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, from gaining control there. By 1954, despite sizable American aid, the Viet Minh gained victory at the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu and, it seemed, independence and national sovereignty. The United States, however, would not tolerate a Nationalist-Communist government in Vietnam, so it divided the country in half (at the seventeenth parallel) at an international conference in Geneva in 1954 and created in the southern half the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), an artificial country that Americans would defend for the next two decades.

By 1960, as a result both of internal repression in the RVN caused by the U.S.-sponsored regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and of ongoing Communist pressure, remnants of the Viet Minh, now called the Viet Cong (VC), and other antigovernment groups formed the National Liberation Front (NLF), a coalition committed to overthrowing Diem and unifying the country. In the United States, however, President John F. Kennedy was equally dedicated to preserving the RVN and he significantly increased the American presence in Indochina, sending in sixteen thousand "advisers" and billions of dollars as well as armor, defoliants, and other materials. By 1963 the United States was deeply involved in Vietnam and by that November, when both Diem and Kennedy were assassinated, it was on the verge of a major commitment.

Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency dedicated to continuing Kennedy's policies in Vietnam and defending the RVN from all "enemies," internal and external. Consequently, in mid-1964, after alleged attacks on U.S. ships by northern Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson received authority from Congress to take "all necessary measures" to preserve the RVN. Within a short time American soldiers, including combat troops, began to pour into Vietnam, and the United States unleashed Operation Rolling Thunder, the largest sustained bombing campaign in the history of warfare, ultimately dropping more bombs in Vietnam than the combined total of all sides in World War II. American forces additionally unleashed artillery attacks on Vietnamese villages, conducted "search and destroy" operations throughout the countryside, established "free fire zones" in which virtually any
Vietnamese—whether friend or VC—was a potential target, and helped prop up a series of authoritarian governments, over a dozen between the Diem assassination and the introduction of U.S. ground troops in March 1965 alone.

Still, the war did not go well for the United States. The absence of a stable government in the RVN, combined with the regimentation and dedication of the VC, made success elusive. While U.S. forces waged a conventional war of attrition, the VC focused on guerrilla tactics and political warfare. American troops, not as well versed in counterinsurgency warfare and perceived by many, probably most, Vietnamese as foreign intruders, like the French, were able to kill large numbers of enemy soldiers and to destroy villages but not to substantially alter the balance of power in Vietnam between the RVN and the NLF.

By 1968 the shortcomings in American efforts were exposed during the decisive Tet Offensive, when enemy forces unleashed a massive attack against virtually the entire RVN. Although the uprising failed to bring down the government in the south, it did expose reports that the war was going well—that there was “light at the end of the tunnel”—as either misguided optimism or lies. After Tet the United States began to look for ways to de-escalate its war in Vietnam. But Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, took an anomalous approach to the war. On one hand Nixon began a process of “Vietnamization,” in which American soldiers would be withdrawn and Vietnamese soldiers would bear the brunt of fighting. On the other hand, Nixon widened the war by invading the neighboring nations of Laos and Cambodia and by conducting a series of intensive bombing campaigns over all three countries of Indochina.

Meanwhile, the enemy, although badly bloodied by a series of offensives in 1968 and by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-sponsored assassination program called Operation Phoenix, began to recover in the early 1970s and by the 1972 Easter Offensive had shifted from a primarily guerrilla war to more conventional tactics. By late 1972, despite Nixon's “Christmas Bombings,” the United States had neither the military capability nor political will to continue the war and so, in January 1973, finally ended its intervention in Vietnam with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. The RVN, with American aid, held on for two more years, but in a swift offensive in 1975 the Northern Vietnamese and NLF cruised through the RVN and unified Vietnam. Thirty years after declaring independence from the French and over twenty years after victory at Dien Bien Phu, the Vietnamese Nationalist-Communists had achieved national liberation.

The war, obviously catastrophic in Vietnam, was divisive in America as well. Beginning in 1965 a sizable number of U.S. citizens began to oppose the war. At first the movement against the intervention in Vietnam was centered on university campuses, where a series of “teach-ins” about Vietnam began in 1965 and helped create an antiwar consciousness among American youth. At the same time the Students for a Democratic Society held the first of many antiwar rallies in Washington, D.C. Within a few years the movement against the war broadened to include not just the young but ministers, businesspeople, politicians, homemakers, and millions of other Americans. Notable figures, including Senator J. William Fulbright, scholar Noam Chomsky, and, most important, Martin Luther King, Jr., all publicly attacked the war, in turn causing more Americans and media to question the U.S. role in Vietnam. By 1969, when the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam and the moratorium against the war took place, well over a million Americans, in big cities and rural towns alike, actively and publicly protested continued U.S. involvement in Indochina. In 1970, after Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, thousands of campuses erupted into antiwar protests, none more tragically than Kent State in Ohio and

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Jackson State in Mississippi, where students were killed by national guardsmen. In 1971, in one of the moving protests against the war, many thousands of Vietnam Veterans against the War demonstrated in Washington, D.C., with many soldiers tossing away medals they had earned in Vietnam. The movement against the war, from 1965 to 1972, was perhaps the greatest mass protest in U.S. history and included Americans from all walks of life, all classes, all areas, all professions.

Although the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, the legacy of the war has remained strong since then. The “lessons” of Vietnam have been invoked frequently by advocates of both nonintervention and military action during foreign policy crises in North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, the Balkans, and elsewhere, to show either the peril of U.S. involvement abroad or the need to take decisive action, as they allege was not done in Vietnam. Vietnam remains a strong political symbol as well. Candidates for public office such as Dan Quayle, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have had to offer explanations for using connections to avoid serving in a war in which poor whites and minorities constituted the majority of combatants.

For the Vietnamese the legacy of the war is even stronger. In Indochina the destruction wrought by the war is still visible and the tasks of reconstruction have been difficult and slow. The typical Vietnamese remains poor, either landless or working for a foreign corporation for low wages. At the same time millions have fled their homeland, either as refugees during the war or as emigrants afterward. In the United States, especially in Los Angeles and Houston, tens of thousands of Vietnamese have resettled and assumed new lives and careers, both importing and developing their own business communities and cultural practices along the way.

Ironically, although the United States failed to prevent a Nationalist-Communist victory after two decades of fighting in Vietnam, the Vietnamese embarked on an American model of development. After many years of antagonism and difference over the plight of Americans who were allegedly “missing in action” in Vietnam, the Clinton administration formally recognized Vietnam in 1995. American corporations entered the Vietnamese market on a large scale, while government leaders in Hanoi increasingly adopted capitalist models of development. The Vietnamese revolution, organized along Communist lines with a goal of national liberation, succeeded in 1975 but in subsequent decades took on a character much like that of the forces that opposed it in the 1960s and 1970s. In the aftermath of World War II, Ho Chi Minh had made overtures to the United States for recognition and support but was rebuffed because of his Communist ideology. In the 1990s the United States developed a relationship much like that Ho had offered a half-century earlier, but, tragically, only after a quarter-decade of warfare, millions of deaths, and untold destruction throughout Indochina. Perhaps that is the most unfortunate legacy of the war.


Bodies of Viet Cong soldiers. 1968. National Archives and Records Administration.

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