

TIMES PAST

WOUNDED
U.S. soldiers
in the jungle
near Saigon,
1965

VIETNAM

The War That

More than three decades after the last soldiers came home, the longest war in American history still casts a long shadow

BY PETER EDIDIN

Is the U.S. headed for “another Vietnam” in Iraq? It’s a question posed often in the media, and it’s just one example of the hold that the Vietnam War still exerts on the U.S. more than 30 years after it ended.

The longest war in American history, Vietnam divided the nation like nothing since the Civil War. More than 58,000 American soldiers died and more than 300,000 were wounded in the war, which split families, turned the old against the young, and drove a wedge of mistrust between many Americans and their leaders.

“Vietnam is still with us,” according to Henry Kissinger, who was Presi-

dent Richard M. Nixon’s Secretary of State and National Security Adviser in the late 1960s and early ’70s. “It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power—not only at home, but throughout the world.”

Unlike most wars, the war in Vietnam didn’t begin with an “opening shot.” Instead, the U.S. became involved gradually, beginning in 1954, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent military advisers to train and arm the South Vietnamese Army in its fight against Communist North Vietnam. (Vietnam had been partitioned earlier that year into North and South after the French were defeated in their effort to hold on to their century-old colonies in Indochina.)

Ho Chi Minh, the Communist and nationalist leader of the Vietminh independence movement, whose forces had defeated the French, wanted to turn all of Vietnam into a Communist state.

THE COLD WAR

That raised alarms in Washington at a time when the Cold War between the U.S., the Soviet Union, and their allies was heating up in Asia: In 1949, Communists led by Mao Zedong had taken power in China. A year later, the Korean War began when Communist North Korea, with Soviet and Chinese support, invaded South Korea. Three years and nearly 37,000 American lives later, that war ended in a stalemate.

American officials feared that the

AT KENT STATE
University in
Ohio in 1970,
four students
died when
National Guard
troops fired on a
protest against
the spread of the
war to Cambodia.

BURNING a draft
card at an anti-war
demonstration outside
the Pentagon in 1967

**STUDENTS STEP UP
PROTESTS ON WAR**
Marches and Strikes Held
Amid Some Violence—
200 Colleges Closed

ROBERT...
college s...
intense...
move...
s marches and rallies,
widened school strikes
scattered incident

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s Still With Us

rest of Asia could also fall. "You have a row of dominoes set up; you knock over the first one," Eisenhower said in 1954, "and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly." This "domino theory" was essentially the foundation of American policy in Vietnam for the next two decades.

When President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, he, too, saw Vietnam as a place to demonstrate America's anti-Communist resolve. "Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place," he said in a speech that year.

By the time Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, the number of U.S. military advisers in Vietnam had risen from under 700 to roughly 16,000, and fighting between South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese troops, aided

by Communist guerrillas in the South known as the Vietcong, had intensified.

In 1964, after a murky episode in which two North Vietnamese boats were said to have attacked an American destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson asked Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. It gave the President authority to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

In practice, the resolution gave the President the power to wage a war without declaring one, which would have required congressional approval.

Full-scale military intervention began in March 1965 with the arrival in Da



Nang of the first U.S. combat troops. Johnson's war policy initially enjoyed overwhelming popular support, and by the end of the year, there were more than 200,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam—a number that would rise by the end of the decade to more than half a million.

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LEFT TO RIGHT: AP IMAGES; JOHN FLORETT/IMAGES; WALLY MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES



DAN RATHER (above), reporting from Vietnam in 1966. TV coverage turned many Americans against the war;

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (below) in March 1968, announcing he wouldn't run for re-election.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN take cover from Vietcong attacks near Saigon in 1966.

From the start, the administration presented the conflict's progress in relentlessly optimistic terms: The war was going well and heading toward victory. As Walt Rostow, Johnson's National Security Adviser, put it in 1967: "I see the light at the end of the tunnel."

LOSING A WAR ON TV

But Vietnam was the first war in which television gave Americans regular access to relatively uncensored images of battle—G.I.s making their way through jungles and rice paddies, villagers huddled in fear outside their huts, bombs raining down from B-52 warplanes, and gory pictures of the dead and wounded of both sides. The good news from officials in Washington and U.S. commanders in Saigon seemed at odds with what people were seeing on their TVs.

"Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America," the media scholar

Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1975, "not on the battlefields of Vietnam."

As more young men were drafted to fight in a war they didn't support or understand, an antiwar movement of a sort the country had never seen began to take shape. In 1965, the first mass demonstration, with 20,000 people, took place in Washington, and the protests grew in size and militancy.

The antiwar movement dovetailed with the civil rights movement and a youth movement—sometimes called the counterculture—that emphasized experimentation and rebellion against authority. ("Don't trust anyone over 30" was a popular phrase.)

In January 1968, North Vietnam and the Vietcong launched the Tet Offensive, a series of attacks on the South during Tet, the lunar New Year. Militarily, the attack was a terrible defeat for the Communists, but grisly TV images—and just

the idea that the enemy could mount such massive attacks after years of war—shook America's confidence. (It was during Tet that American troops killed hundreds of Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai, which became public the following year and sparked worldwide outrage.)

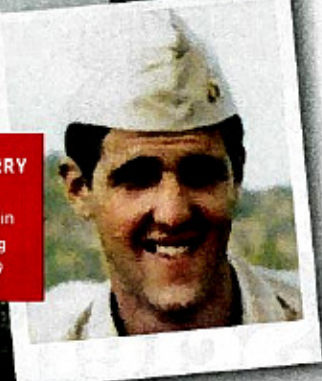
In March, with support for the war and his popularity plummeting, Johnson announced the start of peace talks in Paris, and declared that he would not run for a second term.

Faced with mounting turmoil over the war, Nixon, who succeeded Johnson in 1969, decided to extricate the U.S. from Vietnam. In the fall of 1969, he and Kissinger began the process of "Vietnamization": turning the fighting over to Vietnamese troops, while withdrawing U.S. forces, whose number fell to 220,000 by the end of 1970. (Nixon also widened the war in 1970

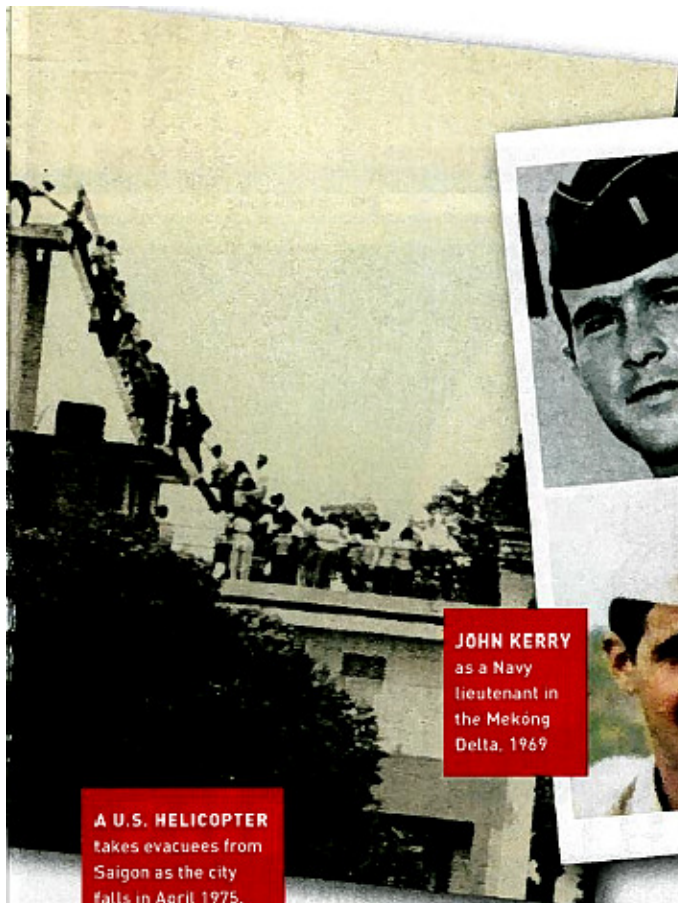
GEORGE W. BUSH as a member of the Texas Air National Guard, in an undated photo



JOHN KERRY as a Navy lieutenant in the Mekong Delta, 1969



A U.S. HELICOPTER takes evacuees from Saigon as the city falls in April 1975.



President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo in 1993, foreign investors have poured into Vietnam and the economy has boomed. But, like China, Vietnam remains a one-party Communist state, with political dissent forbidden.

STILL MORE QUESTIONS

In the U.S., the war refuses to fade away. When he ran for President in 1992 and 1996, Clinton was hounded by accusations about not serving in Vietnam. In 2004, both candidates faced questions about their wartime actions. The Democratic nominee, Sen. John Kerry, fended off accusations that he had exaggerated his heroism as a Navy swift-boat commander in Vietnam, while President Bush denied receiving preferential treatment in joining the Texas Air National Guard as a way to stay out of Vietnam.

And the war could be a factor in the 2008 election. Sen. John McCain of Arizona, a leading contender for the Republican nomination, was a Navy pilot who spent five years as a prisoner of war in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton," where he and other P.O.W.s were tortured by their North Vietnamese captors.

The most poignant reminder of the war today may be the somber granite wall of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, into which the names of more than 58,000 service men and women killed in the war have been inscribed.

For those who fought in Vietnam, the memorial has become a pilgrimage site; and as historian David McCullough has written, for all Americans it is a reminder of the war's cost.

"The toll in suffering, sorrow, in rancorous national turmoil can never be tabulated," he wrote. "No one wants ever to see America so divided again. And for many of the more than two million American veterans of the war, the wounds of Vietnam will never heal." **Q**

by invading Cambodia to attack Communist bases and supply lines.)

In October 1972, with U.S. troop levels in Vietnam down to about 70,000, and Nixon on his way to re-election the next month, Kissinger announced that "Peace is at hand." The Paris Peace Accords of January 1973 called for an end to the fighting and for all foreign troops to be withdrawn from Vietnam.

THE FALL OF SAIGON

All U.S. forces came home by the end of the year, but fighting resumed in 1974. The end came in 1975: The North's forces overran the South, with Saigon falling in April, forcing the hurried evacuation of the remaining Americans and a fraction of the Vietnamese who wanted to get out.

The cost of the war to the Vietnamese was staggering, with at least 3 million people killed. More than a mil-

lion fled after the war, most to the U.S., as the government sent hundreds of thousands of those left behind to "re-education camps."

After civil wars of their own, Cambodia and Laos also fell to the Communists. In Cambodia, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge initiated a campaign of genocide in which up to 3 million people may have been killed.

The U.S. imposed a trade embargo on Vietnam, vast swaths of which had been destroyed by bombing and chemical defoliation. Dependent on aid from the Soviet Union, the government tried to create a Soviet-style state-run economy, which led to widespread poverty and hunger. In 1986, party leaders followed China's lead with a program of free-market economic reform, known as *doi moi*, with less state control of the economy and more private enterprise.

Since the 1990s, and especially after