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VIETNAM AT 50

The Vietnam experience

In today's edition

A 16-page special section about the war's lasting effects on America.

Online

Even more Vietnam coverage, including photo galleries, video and interactive features.

stripes.com/vietnam50

Above:

Helicopters stream in to take soldiers from the 27th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division on an "Eagle Mission" to investigate suspicious activity and to round up Viet Cong suspects in Hau Nghia province, South Vietnam, in April 1967.

Stars and Stripes

Analysts: US policy on N. Korea not working

By Wyatt Olson
Stars and Stripes

North Korea's development of missile technology and the production of plutonium and uranium used for nuclear weapons have advanced unabated under President Barack Obama's policy of "strategic patience," analysts say.

"If you straight-line into the future, the threat is going to get worse," said Joel S. Wit, a former State Department official who manages the 38 North website run by Johns Hopkins University's US-Korea Institute in Washington, where he is a visiting scholar.

"It's gotten worse since 2009, when the Obama administration took office, and it's going to keep getting worse and worse and worse."

He ticked off a list of recent developments by North Korea: a series of rocket engine tests for intercontinental missiles, a doubling of the size of a uranium enrichment facility, the restarting of a plutonium production reactor and the construction of another reactor that appears to be aimed for civilian use but could have military applications as well.

During a Pentagon news conference on Oct. 24, Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti — head of U.S. Forces Korea — said he personally believed North Korea possesses a functioning, miniaturized, nuclear warhead that could be launched on an intercontinental missile to reach the United States.

Although most analysts say North Korea still has a lot of work ahead to be able to launch a nuclear weapon with any accuracy and the ability to survive reentry, Scaparrotti said he has to plan for worst-case scenarios.

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Obama tempers expectations of thawed relations
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Rodgers' record-tying 6 TDs in first half among Week 10 takeaways
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Iraqi officials say Islamic State chief wounded in airstrike
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Ramstein aircrew exempt from DOD's strict Ebola protocol
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World: Suicide bomb attack kills 48 students in Nigeria » Page 12

STARS AND STRIPES

VIETNAM AT 50

WAR IS HELL

A 16-page special section

By the numbers

1,728,344
Men drafted during the Vietnam War era. The last man drafted was on June 30, 1973.

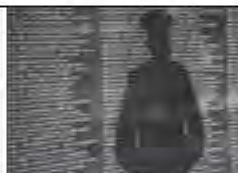
125,000
Anti-war demonstrators showed up in New York. Signs in Central Park read: "Draft beer, not boys" and "I don't give a damn for Uncle Sam."

1,641
U.S. servicemembers unaccounted for as POW/MIA.

1,500
Square miles that make up the Mekong Delta, considered ideal guerrilla terrain and a Viet Cong stronghold.

46,852
Australians served in Vietnam from July 1962-December 1972. Officially, 496 died.

700
Steel balls inside a Claymore Mine, which was lethal up to 50 yards. Embossed on the outside of the mine: "Front Towards Enemy."



667
Servicemembers on the Vietnam Wall named "Smith," the most common surname there.

31
Sets of dead brothers named on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. There are three sets of fathers and sons.

951
Green Berets arrived in Vietnam in 1964.

5
Weeks that "The Ballad of the Green Berets" stayed at the top of the charts in 1966. The songwriter, Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler, was one himself.

35
Died in Watts riots in August 1965. More than 900 were hurt and there was $46 million in damage.

54
Students from Thomas Edison High School in Philadelphia died — the most from any U.S. high school.

9.68
Pounds, the weight of the M63 Stoner, made by the man who designed the M16. It was a weapon of choice for Navy SEALS.

$850
A month, made by prostitutes in Saigon, known as Sin City. Vietnamese police made $25 a month.

17
Minutes, the shortest mission on record for an F-4 pilot, who launched, flew the pattern, dropped his bombs and landed.

15
Age of the youngest person killed in action in Vietnam. Legal age of enlistment was 18.

77
Days, the length of the siege of Khe Sahn, which began Jan. 21, 1968. It was one of the longest and bloodiest battles in Vietnam.

66
Percent of Vietnam vets say they would serve again if called upon.

Follow us

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On the cover:

An unidentified U.S. servicemember wears a hand-lettered "War Is Hell" slogan on his helmet on June 18, 1965, during the Vietnam War. He was with the 173rd Airborne Brigade Battalion on defense duty at Phouc Vinh airstrip in South Vietnam. The photo, taken by Associated Press photographer Horst Faas, won a Pulitzer Prize.

The first sergeant of A Company, 101st Airborne Division, guides a medevac helicopter through the jungle foliage to pick up casualties.

Art Greenspon/AP

The loss of American innocence?

By Terry Leonard • Stars and Stripes

When Neil Armstrong took his small step for man in the lunar dust in July 1969, Americans saw it as proof there were no earthly limits. Nothing then seemed beyond the reach of American power, prestige and know-how. It took Vietnam to expose the hubris in that sentiment.

The American Century was at its zenith. Unrivaled U.S. wealth and prosperity, predictable fruits of the postwar Pax Americana, lifted national influence to new heights globally. Hollywood, rock music, blue jeans and hamburgers carried American culture, taste and values to the far corners of the world.

Yet with images of Apollo 11 fresh on the mind, Vietnam forced Americans to accept limits to U.S. power and to acknowledge their reach had exceeded their grasp. With apologies to Robert Browning, that troublesome realization was not what they believed a heaven was for.

Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library

President Lyndon B. Johnson presents Spc. Dwight Johnson with the Medal of Honor on Nov. 19, 1968.

Fifty years later, the Vietnam War remains an enigma. Its legacy distorted by folklore, myth, political spin, cloudy memories and the perverted history of feature films and popular fiction. Yet it remains clear the war changed America in profound ways still not understood.

It changed who we are and how we see ourselves. It fundamentally revised our view of the world and the world's view of us. It reshaped our institutions, particularly the military. It altered not only how we fight wars, but when and why we choose to fight.

Stars and Stripes will commemorate the Vietnam War at 50 annually with a series of stories and special projects intended to add context and understanding to the history of that war and to the changes it wrought. It will examine the fighting abroad and the protests, politics and turmoil at home. It will include the voices of veterans who fought and those of others who marched at home for peace.

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FROM PAGE 19

More than 58,000 Americans and at least 1.5 million Vietnamese died in the war that divided the country as nothing else had done since the Civil War.

"No event in American history is more misunderstood than Vietnam. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now," former President Richard Nixon wrote in his 1985 book "No More Vietnams," a selective history and apologia for his role in the tragic war.

> "Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America — not on the battlefields of Vietnam."
>
> **Marshall McLuhan**
> Canadian philosopher of communication theory in 1975

Americans fought fiercely and gallantly in Vietnam. The Medal of Honor was awarded to more than 250 individuals. U.S. troops won nearly every significant battle. Yet it was all in vain. Many fighting men would feel betrayed by political leaders and people at home who turned against the war.

At home, the war taught a generation of young people not to trust their government. In an astonishingly short period of time they taught their parents and even some political leaders.

"The biggest lesson I learned from Vietnam is not to trust our own government statements. I had no idea until then that you could not rely on them," former Sen. J. William Fulbright told the New York Times in 1985, a decade after the war ended.

The government also didn't trust its people. Security agencies spying on civil rights leaders and political dissidents added people who spoke out against the war to their surveillance lists. Later Senate investigations detailed widespread illegal intelligence gathering on U.S. citizens.

Anti-war and civil rights protesters were also portrayed in government-run campaigns of character assassination as anti-American or communist sympathizers, sometimes with violent consequences. At the 1968 Democratic National Convention, Chicago police savagely attacked and beat anti-war protesters. A federal investigation later would term it a police riot.

In May of 1970, National Guardsmen opened fire on anti-war protesters at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four and wounding nine. Just 10 days later, police killed two and wounded 12 when they fired on African-American students protesting the war at Jackson State College in Mississippi.

Kent State triggered a nationwide student strike that closed hundreds of colleges and universities and became a symbol of how the war

Stars and Stripes

South Vietnam, February 1967: Pfc. James Beideck emerges from a tunnel found at a Viet Cong regimental base camp that was overrun by 26th Infantry soldiers during Operation Junction City.

divided the country. In a Newsweek poll three weeks after the shootings, 11 percent of the respondents blamed the National Guard and 58 percent the students. The shootings at predominately African-American Jackson state were largely ignored.

When the war began in the Sixties many had already begun to question a U.S. international policy shaped by the cold war narrative of the Red Menace and the Domino Theory. Domestically, American society was under pressure from many sides to become more inclusive and fair.

The civil rights movement forced a reluctant country to confront its values and its shameful past. The sexual revolution and the women's rights movement sought to fundamentally change how Americans lived, loved and worked. It reshaped gender roles and widened a growing gap between the younger and older generations.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy stunned the country and exposed deep and dark divisions. The subsequent murders in 1968 of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy destroyed lingering illusions about an idyllic America and raised troubling questions about our violent national character.

The mostly peaceful civil rights movement was fiercely and violently resisted. Police brutally suppressed peaceful demonstrations, and not just in the south. Civil rights workers were murdered or beaten, black churches were bombed, black men lynched. Race riots in the '60s rocked New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles. Americans were shocked by television images of National Guardsmen and U.S. paratroopers, locked and loaded, patrolling the streets of burning American cities.

America's disaffected youth recoiled from society and their discontent gave rise to an anti-authoritarian counterculture that sought to reinterpret the American dream. Peace and love replaced duty and honor. The popular refrain "Don't trust anyone over 30," defined the boundaries of the generation gap.

Entertainers such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and others made rebellion part of popular culture. Dylan caught the emerging tenor in his 1964 song "The Times They Are A-Changin':

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is
Rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'

The Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary became a counterculture guru by advocating mind-altering drugs such as LSD. He popularized the phrase "Turn on, Tune in, Drop out."

He was fired by Harvard, but he was seen as something of a philosopher by the "sex, drugs and rock and roll" culture of the '60s. So much so that even today a common joke is: "If you can remember the '60s, you weren't really there."

Despite the obvious excesses, mainstream society began to embrace causes of the youth movement, particularly its anti-war sentiment.

Peace marches that began with a few thousand students grew into marches by tens of thousands from all walks of life.

Nixon sought to deflect criticism of the war and growing distrust in government. He spoke in 1969 of the "silent majority" of Americans whose views supported him and the war but whose voices were being drowned out by a more vocal minority.

That was the summer Apollo 11 landed on the moon and confirmed our belief in American exceptionalism.

Americans constantly boasted that if we could go to the moon, we could do anything.

Many historians argue that a series of U.S. presidents and their military and political aides believed it too and erroneously assumed military might would win in Vietnam.

"Tell the Vietnamese they've got to draw in their horns or we're going to bomb them into the Stone Age," warned Gen. Curtis LeMay, the Air Force chief of staff, in May 1964. U.S. warplanes dropped more tons of explosive on Vietnam than fell on Germany, Japan and Italy in World War II, but his hollow threat would later be lampooned by critics of the war.

In just three years, that overconfidence retreated to a position of curious optimism. Walt Rostow, President Johnson's national security adviser, tried to deflect bad news about the war in 1967 by saying: "I see light at the end of the tunnel." That light, his critics joked, was an oncoming train.

Even the curious optimism faded.

Two years later, Nixon, under pressure to end the war vowed: "I'm not going to be the first American president to lose a war."

Nixon later claimed victory in Vietnam but blamed a hostile press and an irresponsible Congress for "losing the peace."

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The Vietnam experience

- An interactive map of key battles
- A multimedia timeline of cultural changes throughout the war
- Videos and photo galleries
- Stars and Stripes war photos
- Stories from the men and women who fought there

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Show last page (End)

VIETNAM AT 50

THE CULTURAL STRUGGLE OVER VIETNAM

'It left us with a corrosive understanding of public life'

By Travis J. Tritten
Stars and Stripes

In 1959, "Leave It to Beaver" was in its second season on TV, the first Barbie dolls hit store shelves and Elvis Presley was on the music charts.

Americans returning from World War II and the Korean War had built up a comfortable middle class and moved into the suburbs. It was a time of rigid social rules and faith in authority.

"There was a kind of widespread assumption about the way the world was supposed to work. The people who were in charge were in charge because they knew best," said David Steigerwald, a history professor who teaches a course on the 1960s at the Ohio State University.

"This is the way people were supposed to live, just by the rules," he said.

That same year, North Vietnamese communist forces began building the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Southeast Asia. As the conservative decade of the 1950s closed, the United States began its long slide into a bloody and protracted war in far-off Vietnam, a conflict that bitterly divided the nation.

The strict rules and norms that dictated public behavior the decade before — from dress to family to politics — would prove to be a "fragile crust" that was shattered by war in the '60s and '70s, Steigerwald said.

The fallout and public disillusionment remains a part of American culture today.

"I would say that the most important thing that it left us with is a corrosive understanding of public life, of the efficacy of government, and I would say of our leadership," he said.

Television for the first time broadcast the "brutality of war into the comfort of the living room," as media scholar Marshall McLuhan would later observe in 1975. Images of escalating violence overseas and divisions at home drove many to have deep doubts about the war effort.

At times the country clung to its patriotism. The cultural struggle over Vietnam played out on the radio with the hit song "The Ballad of the Green Berets" and in the theaters with John Wayne waging a righteous battle against the North Vietnamese.

But the tide of public opinion was destined to turn against the war. For the first time in the country's history, hundreds of thousands of Americans participated in anti-war marches in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. Musicians and protesters openly mocked the military draft and the president. Abbie Hoffman and other counterculture figures made a joke of authority.

Troops saw a growing gap between what was happening on the ground and the successes claimed by military leaders and the government. Pentagon documents leaked to the press in 1971 would show that the government had intentionally misled the public about the nature of the war.

"There was a rottenness to the core that was very unsettling for Americans," said Edward Berkowitz, a professor of history and of public policy and public administration at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

The end of the war became another national trauma — after a history of spectacular successes in war, the U.S. was faced with its first apparent defeat, Berkowitz said.

"It made it look like America was not omnipotent," he said.

The so-called Vietnam syndrome would leave the public wary of entering new wars for decades and still echoes in the current war debate and President Barack Obama's promises of no "boots on the ground" against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, according to Berkowitz.

The public effort to come to terms with the toll and meaning of the war continued in films and books for decades too. A generation after John Wayne was critically panned for his film about Green Berets, Sylvester Stallone would play John Rambo in his Special Forces movie about returning to Vietnam to rescue prisoners of war and right the wrongs of the 1960s. President Ronald Reagan and a new wave of American conservatism would try to reinvigorate patriotism over the war in Southeast Asia.

But the cynicism for the government and authority that grew out of the war remains the lasting legacy of Vietnam among Baby Boomers and older generations, Steigerwald said.

That has set the war apart from the conflicts that came since.

"I marvel at my students. Most of them have lived the bulk of their lives in a nation at war," he said. "To some extent, I think they have escaped that inherent cynicism that people in my age group have and I kind of like that about them."

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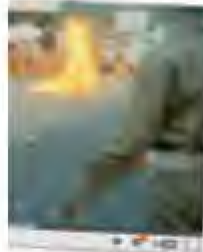

The Burning Monk

The Vietnam experience

For a multimedia timeline of cultural changes throughout the war, go to

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In the book "Chasing Shadows: The Nixon Tapes, the Chennault Affair and the Origins of Watergate," journalist Ken Hughes said this year that newly released transcripts of FBI wiretaps indicated then presidential candidate Nixon ordered the sabotage of the Paris peace talks in October of 1968, apparently to bolster his election chances that November.

Over the years, news coverage of the war shifted from supportive to an increasingly grim portrayal of the fighting. As the reporting became increasingly negative, as casualties continued to mount, public doubts grew dramatically.

One of the most enduring legacies of Vietnam and its negative impact on public opinion and policy is the Vietnam Syndrome, the name to the paralyzing effect on U.S. foreign policy brought on by the fear of becoming mired in another quagmire, a questionable war with no clear objectives and a defined end game. Every president since the war ended has had to deal with the syndrome.

The Vietnam War was perhaps the most publicized war in American history and certainly the first televised war with ghastly images nightly on the evening news.

"Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America — not on the battlefields of Vietnam," Marshall McLuhan, the highly regarded Canadian philosopher of communication theory told the Montreal Gazette in 1975.

That coverage of the Vietnam War and its impact on the public became a serious concern. Early in 1968 polls showed 61 percent of Americans supported the war. By years end, 53 percent opposed it. By the time Armstrong landed on the moon, 58 percent opposed it and s upport for the war would continue to fall.

"Vietnam was the first war ever fought without censorship. Without censorship, things can get terribly confused in the public mind," retired Gen. William Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, would tell Time magazine in 1982.

For some, the key lesson learned was that it was the coverage of failed policies, and not the policy failures themselves, that caused Americans to lose faith and confidence in government.

The military now tightly controls access to a battlefield. With the policy it can and at times has limited what could be seen and by extension, what could be reported. Critics argue the policy supports the old adage: "Truth is the first casualty of war."

Although support for the war dwindled, until Saigon finally fell April 29, 1975, many still refused to believe we could lose. Today, many scholars contend the war marked the loss of American innocence. It deeply divided a nation unified by World War II and the division and distrust of government continues to grow.

Doing away with the draft

With a war-weary and draft-weary country, Vietnam was the mother of volunteer force

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

During the dark days of Vietnam, morale was so low hit lists were known to circulate within units, nominating unpopular leaders to be fragged—the military term when soldiers murder one of their own.

"Don't desert. Go to Vietnam and kill your commanding officer," wrote one underground GI newspaper during the height of the war.

At the time, there were close to 150 underground newspapers circulating in the war zone and at bases at home, in which troops vented about the state of war, urged dissent and even in some cases the murder of leaders. As the war grew in unpopularity, inside and outside of the military, so did the idea of maintaining an Army that in large measure relied on filling the ranks with soldiers conscripted against their will.

> "By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous."
> **Col. Robert D. Heinl Jr.**
> Marine military historian writing in the 1971 edition of the Armed Forces Journal

"The Vietnam war was absolutely the mother of the volunteer force. The country was not only war weary, it was draft weary," said Bernard Rostker, a former top Pentagon manpower official and author of "I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force."

But while Vietnam was a low point, it also served as the engine of change that brought about perhaps the single greatest reform to transform the military in the post-Vietnam war era: the launch of the all-volunteer force. Its legacy is the warrior class of today, the 1.3 million-strong active duty service that is just a fraction of the roughly 140 million Americans eligible to serve.

To be sure, many served with great honor and valor during Vietnam, but the consensus at the time was that order and discipline had never been worse. There were tens of thousands of desertions and widespread drug use within the garrisons at home and abroad.

Vietnam, where 648,500 draftees were sent, exposed the pitfalls of fighting an unpopular war with conscripted soldiers. There also was growing concern about the fairness of a system that resulted in a disproportionate number of poor and minority Americans being drafted.

For instance, in 1970 the Army had more than 65,000 deserters, just one sign of a military reaching the breaking point. The combined effects of low morale, undisciplined troops and questions about fairness of the draft system proved to be the death knell of the conscripted force.

Marine military historian Col. Robert D. Heinl Jr., writing in the 1971 edition of the Armed Forces Journal, captured the mood at the time.

"The morale, discipline and battle worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States," he wrote.

"By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous," Heinl stated.

Learning to recruit

The road to today's professional force was bumpy, requiring about a decade to fully take shape after the last draft notices were issued in late 1972.

The move toward the all-volunteer force began in earnest in 1968, when presidential candidate Richard Nixon made the idea part of his official platform. Upon taking office, Nixon then created the Gates Commission in 1969, which examined the logistics of making the switch to a volunteer service. After several years of working out the details in Congress and at the Pentagon, the draft ended for good in 1973.

Low morale and too many disgruntled troops in the ranks were part of what pushed political leaders to move away from the draft. But the early days of the volunteer force didn't bring about immediate order and discipline.

"The quality of the soldiers was not very good, largely because the Army had to learn how to recruit," Rostker said. "The Army thought they were bringing in qualified people and they weren't. It doesn't sort itself out until 1979 and 1980."

Over the objections of President Jimmy Carter, senators Sam Nunn, D-Ga., and John Warner, R-Va., leading proponents of the volunteer force, pushed legislation that would give significant salary increases to troops, something President Ronald Reagan backed upon taking office. Previous raises hadn't been enough to attract enough high-quality recruits, Rostker said.

Throughout the 1980s the force steadily improved as new Army institutions such as the National Training Center at Fort Irwin took shape.

"I think the revolution in tactics and training that came later by general officers who served in Vietnam is also very much tied to the volunteer force," said Rostker, who now serves as an analyst with the Rand Corp. in Washington. "It would all fall on deaf ears if we had a high turnover conscription force and not a professional force. The linchpin to today's professional force is the stability of the all-volunteer force."

Then in 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and troops headed to the Persian Gulf for their first major test.

"In the first Gulf War, that's when the all-volunteer force proved itself," said Rostker, who served as the Pentagon's undersecretary of personnel and readiness in 2000-2001.

Proponents of the volunteer service say ending the draft also contributed to establishing a force more representative of the nation as a whole.

In 1973, only 2 percent of enlisted members were women, compared to about 15 percent today. During Vietnam, a major flaw of the draft was that the poor and minorities served at disproportionate rates to middle class white America.

At the end of the draft, 28 percent of enlisted personnel were African American — while just 11 percent of the population at the time.

That number is down to about 16 percent today, which is more in line with today's general population of 13 percent.

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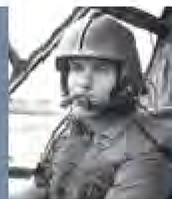

Voices
Read memories from those who were there, and add your own.

Casualties
Men made sure the dead made it back home to their families.

Media
For the first time, the war was everywhere in America

10 men who shaped the war

By Wyatt Olson
Stars and Stripes

Every war has key figures who have an outsized effect on how it's started and waged and ultimately how it's won or lost. In a complex conflict such as the one between the United States and North Vietnam — lasting a decade and three presidential administrations — a short list will always come up wanting. These 10 men, however, had a significant and traceable effect — good or bad — on the Vietnam War.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap

Aug. 25, 1911-Oct. 4, 2013

North Vietnam's foremost military figure, Giap assembled the Vietnamese People's Army in the 1940s, becoming its first full general and remaining in command for three decades as it morphed into North Vietnam's armed forces. He masterminded the stunning route of French forces at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Giap's declaration during that period that the enemy "does not possess the psychological and political means to fight a long drawn-out war" would guide his strategy against the United States years later. Giap biographer Peter MacDonald concluded that Giap "can claim the largest share of the credit for winning two wars." He employed guerrilla and conventional warfare, although many of the offensives he planned in the Vietnam War were tactical failures and cost dearly in lives. One French general said that "to Giap a man's life was nothing," and other observers described him as arrogant and ruthless.

Perhaps Giap's most significant contribution to the war effort was logistically, with the formation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply line that provided manpower and materiel for the fight in the south.

Robert McNamara

June 9, 1916-July 6, 2009

America's longest-serving defense secretary, McNamara was the architect of America's approach to turning back the North Vietnamese insurgency under two presidents before resigning in November 1967. President John Kennedy hired McNamara — who during World War II was with the Office of Statistical Control — from Ford Motor Co., where he and a group of colleagues had been dubbed the "Whiz Kids" for their sophisticated use of analytical management. McNamara approached his new job with the same diagnostic style, an approach that dovetailed with the ultimately disastrous strategy of success-by-body-count championed by Gen. William Westmoreland. McNamara believed that "graduated pressure" — military force not intended to conquer but to convey U.S. resolve and alter the enemy's behavior — would "achieve maximum political payoff with minimal investment of military force," wrote military historian H.R. McMaster. McNamara and his Whiz Kids were "arrogant" and "disparaged military advice because they thought that their intelligence and analytical methods could compensate for their lack of military experience," McMaster wrote. Almost 30 years after resigning as defense secretary, McNamara wrote a memoir confessing that by the end of his tenure he'd lost faith that America could prevail, telling the Associated Press at the time, "We were terribly wrong."

Gen. William Westmoreland

March 26, 1914-July 18, 2005

Westmoreland once suggested that an engraving of the highlights of his life include a "dramatic spread of activities such as horseman, paratrooper, three wars, teacher, my wife Kitsy, father of three, talking to a Joint Session of Congress, Time man of the year," according to biographer Lewis Sorley. For all his notable accomplishments, however, the West Point graduate is remembered for commanding all U.S. military operations in Vietnam from 1964-68, leading a force of more than a half million before his promotion to Army chief of staff. His chosen strategy was a war of attrition through a torrent of search-and-destroy missions, with the goal of inflicting so many casualties that the North Vietnamese would give up attacks on South Vietnam. Reviled by the growing anti-war movement, Westmoreland pleaded during a joint session of Congress in 1967 that lawmakers not lose their resolve to continue the fight. Despite the high body count achieved by the strategy, the surprise Tet Offensive in 1968 by communist forces was a stinging rebuttal of Westmoreland's claims that the enemy's will had been broken.

Lyndon B. Johnson

Aug. 27, 1908-Jan. 22, 1973

Johnson was a president "whom history may well remember as our most reluctant and indecisive wartime commander in chief," wrote military historian Dave R. Palmer. Johnson had inherited the White House and the Vietnam War with the death of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and the following year Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution giving Johnson carte blanche to use the military in Southeast Asia. But the Texas Democrat would have been far more content to shepherd through his Great Society social reforms than waging war. He avoided public pronouncements on the conflict, which vastly expanded during his five years in office. His inability or refusal to explain clearly to the nation why young Americans were fighting and dying in Vietnam helped to undermine his wartime leadership, military historian Phillip B. Davidson wrote, and as casualties mounted many Americans saw Johnson as "an indecisive conniver playing politics in the shadows." Historian Russell Weigley has opined that no "capable" wartime president would have left Gen. William Westmoreland in charge of U.S. forces after years-long failure of his search-and-destroy strategy.

Gen. Creighton Abrams

Sept. 15, 1914-Sept. 4, 1974

Replacing Gen. William Westmoreland in 1968 as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, Abrams' approach was radically different. A West Point graduate, Abrams had been a tank commander under Gen. George Patton during World War II and helped lead the relief effort to Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. Unlike Westmoreland, however, Abrams didn't rigidly apply lessons from that war to the conflict in Southeast Asia.

Search-and-destroy missions were replaced with a "clear and hold" strategy, in which beefed-up South Vietnamese Territorial Forces would do much of the holding of secured territory, according to biographer Lewis Sorley. Abrams positioned U.S. and South Vietnamese forces among villagers in a strategy of "pacification," by which troops sought to lessen Viet Cong influence by providing security and assistance to the countryside population — an approach that proved to be successful in itself but failed to turn the tide of negative U.S. public opinion on the war. By the time he was promoted to Army chief of staff in 1972, U.S. troops in Vietnam numbered fewer than 50,000.

Ho Chi Minh

May 19, 1890-Sept. 2, 1969

Despite the geniality of his nickname, "Uncle Ho," the top leader of the Vietnamese Communist revolutionaries adopted some of the most brutal tactics used by Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and China, where he spent much of the 1920s and '30s. Frail and prone to illness, Ho led the Viet Minh independence movement in an attempt to drive out Japanese occupiers during World War II, continuing the struggle against the colonial French in the 1950s. After the 1954 Geneva Accords split the country into north and south, Ho became president and prime minister of North Vietnam, suppressing competing political factions through imprisonment, exile and assassination. By the late 1950s, Ho ordered troops and aid to Viet Cong rebels in South Vietnam, and the supply trail to the south would eventually bear his name. After the U.S. began bringing troops in, Ho adopted a national strategy of prolonging the war by avoiding offensives with large, conventional forces, an approach eventually leading to U.S. withdrawal. Today the Communist Party of Vietnam fosters a Ho personality cult that bans criticism of the former leader.

Richard M. Nixon

Jan. 9, 1913-April 22, 1994

Elected president in 1968 as the antiwar movement reached its height, Nixon had promised to bring "peace with honor," but the war slogged on into his second term under policy that became "a crazy quilt of threats, bombing spasms and inexorable withdrawals," wrote biographer Walter Isaacson. Nixon pinned his hopes on turning the battle over to the South Vietnamese Army, a strategy dubbed "Vietnamization," while at the same time escalating bombing to keep pressure on North Vietnam with fewer U.S. troops on hand. Nixon's policies in Vietnam were dictated not primarily by requirements there, but by "the need to assuage anti-war dissidents" in the U.S., wrote military historian Phillip B. Davidson. Around the time of a massive peace rally in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1969, Nixon broadcast an appeal to the "silent majority" of Americans for patience as the administration negotiated with Hanoi and prepared Saigon. The peace accord was signed in January 1973, officially ending U.S. military involvement, but much of Nixon's remaining time in office would be consumed with the Watergate scandal that led to his resignation in August 1974.

Daniel Ellsberg

Born April 7, 1931

A Harvard doctoral graduate and former Marine, Ellsberg worked in the Pentagon and several years in South Vietnam for the U.S. State Department in the first half of the 1960s. By 1967, he was working as an analyst for Rand Corp. on a top-secret report on the Vietnam War.

"There was no question in my mind that my government was involved in an unjust war that was going to continue and get larger," Ellsberg said of the epiphany that led him and a colleague to secretly copy the document, according to "The Right Words at the Right Time" by Marlo Thomas. Excerpts from "the Pentagon Papers" were published by the New York Times in June 1971, a move that came only after the Supreme Court unanimously ruled against the federal government's attempt to censor publication. The Pentagon Papers made clear to the public that even the officials waging the war doubted it could be won. Ellsberg and his colleague were indicted on 12 federal counts of conspiracy, theft and espionage, but a judge dismissed the case in 1973 because of government misconduct.

John F. Kennedy

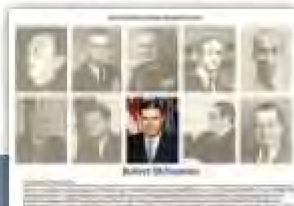
May 29, 1917-Nov. 22, 1963

Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower committed significant aid to France in its battle against the Viet Minh after World War II, but it was Kennedy, elected in 1960, who expanded that support to about 16,000 military advisers in South Vietnam by the fall of 1961, according to history professor Marc Selverstone. Cold War tensions reached a zenith during Kennedy's shortened term, and slowing Soviet influence and the spread of socialism permeated U.S. foreign policy and Kennedy's thinking. Debate remains over whether Kennedy would have continued to escalate U.S. involvement, with some historians noting that he'd called for a review of all options at the time he was assassinated in November 1963, passing such decisions to Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Historian Richard Reeves quotes Kennedy saying in April 1963, "We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. Those people hate us." In the next breath, however, Kennedy said that losing any territory to the communist forces would end his chances for reelection in 1964.

Henry Kissinger

Born May 27, 1923

Secretary of state and national security adviser during the Richard Nixon administration that began in 1969, Kissinger was a proponent of realpolitik diplomacy, which called for handling foreign affairs pragmatically rather than through ideology or ethics. Even before becoming secretary, Kissinger saw no value in continued U.S. fighting in Vietnam but believed American "credibility" could only be preserved through a "decent interval" between U.S. withdrawal and the inevitable collapse of South Vietnam. Kissinger brokered the 1973 peace accord that "brought the nation's misadventure in Vietnam to an end" and secured a cease-fire between North and South that "at least for the moment, curtailed the killing," wrote biographer Walter Isaacson. A Defense Department assessment of the war years later quotes Kissinger: "We found more than half a million American troops in Vietnam when we came into office, and we got them home without destroying those who had relied on us."



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