

AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM (POST GULF OF TONKIN) 1964-1973

1964-1965

LBJ Defeats Goldwater

China, North Vietnam's neighbor and ally, successfully tests an atomic bomb. Vietcong mortars shell Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon. 4 Americans are killed, 76 wounded. Five B-57 bombers are destroyed, and 15 are damaged. Two days later, Lyndon Johnson is elected in a landslide over Republican Barry Goldwater of Arizona. During the campaign, Johnson's position on Vietnam sharply contrasted the more militant views held by Goldwater, as LBJ appeared to lean toward de-escalation of US involvement.

Operation "Rolling Thunder"

Johnson authorizes Operation Rolling Thunder, a limited but long lasting bombing offensive, on February 13. Inspired by the attrition bombings on Germany and Japan during WWII, their aim is to demoralize the North Vietnamese into stop sending supporting Vietcong guerrillas in the South. The nearly continuous air raids would go on for three years, but to miscalculated effect – whereas Germany and Japan where industrialized targets whose ways of life were completed interrupted by the bombings, the more agricultural North Vietnam was only buoyed to further support.

Aid Offered In Exchange for Peace

The U.S. offers North Vietnam economic aid in exchange for peace in April, but the offer is rejected. Two weeks later, President Johnson raises America's combat strength in Vietnam to more than 60,000 troops. Allied forces from Korea and Australia are added as a sign of international support.

Vietnam "Teach-Ins"

The practice of protesting US policy in Vietnam by holding "teach-ins" at colleges and universities begins. The first "teach-in" -- featuring seminars, rallies, and speeches -- takes place at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in March. The model is repeated in universities across the country, and in May, a nationally broadcast "teach-in" reaches students and faculty at over 100 campuses.

Operation Starlite

In August, after a deserter from the 1st Vietcong regiment reveals that an attack is imminent against the U.S. Marine base at Chu Lai, the American army launches its second major offensive (after Westmoreland sent ground forces sweeping into NLF territory in June). The U.S. scores a victory in this, the first major battle of the Vietnam War. Ground forces, artillery from Chu Lai, ships and air support combine to kill nearly 700 Vietcong; the U.S. suffers 45 dead and more than 200 wounded.

Troop Levels Top 200,000

Despite the post-Tonkin campaign promises of Johnson, "We still seek no wider war," and "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," the year ends with U.S. troop levels topping 200,000.

1966

Operation Crimp

Deploying nearly 8,000 troops in January, it is the largest American operation of the war to date. The goal of the campaign is to capture the Vietcong's headquarters for the Saigon area, which is believed to be located in the district of Cu Chi (approximately a 15 minute helicopter ride from Saigon). Though the area in Cu Chi is razed and repeatedly patrolled, American forces fail to locate any significant Vietcong base. (*See Operation Cedar Falls, below*)

B-52s Bomb North Vietnam

In an effort to disrupt movement along the Mugia Pass -- the main route used by the NVA to send personnel and supplies through Laos and into South Vietnam -- American B-52s bomb North Vietnam for the first time.

LBJ Meets With South Vietnamese Leaders

US President Lyndon Johnson meets with South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and his military advisors in Honolulu. Johnson promises to continue to help South Vietnam fend off aggression from the North, but adds that the US will be monitoring South Vietnam's efforts to expand democracy and improve economic conditions for its citizens.

Veterans Stage Anti-War Rally

Veterans from World Wars I and II, along with veterans from the Korean war stage a protest rally in New York City. Discharge and separation papers are burned in protest of US involvement in Vietnam.

Operation Attleboro

U.S. and South Vietnamese troops begin aggressive search and destroy sweeps through Tay Ninh Province. Huge caches of supplies belonging to the NLF 9th Division are discovered, but with no head-to-head conflict. The mission ends after six weeks, with more than 1,000 Vietcong and 150 Americans killed. Throughout '66, the reputation of the Vietcong 9th Division grows to mythic proportions with U.S. troops as it seems to always be in the thick of things, sustain the most casualties, but then rise from the ashes to fight fiercely in a new offensive (its losses in men and equipment are quickly and constantly replaced with reinforcements sent down the Ho Chi Minh trail).

“Burden on Minorities & Poor” Report

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) issues a report, which claiming that the US military draft places “a heavy discriminatory burden on minority groups and the poor” and calls for a withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam.

U.S. and South Vietnamese Troops Top 700,000

By the end of 1966, American forces in Vietnam reach 385,000 men, plus an additional 60,000 sailors stationed offshore. More than 6,000 Americans have been killed in this year, and 30,000 have been wounded. In comparison, an estimated 61,000 Vietcong have been killed. However, their troops now numbered over 280,000.

1967

Operation Cedar Falls

In January, the U.S and South Vietnam mounted a major a search and destroy mission of VC operations near Saigon. Encountering no major resistance, huge quantities of supplies are captured. A complex massive system of tunnels (from which snipers could surprise troops, and in which VC based their operations) is discovered in an area called the Iron Triangle, an apparent headquarters for Vietcong personnel, in a 60 square mile area lying between the Saigon River and Route 13. (For more information, see Mangold’s *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*)

Hanoi Prepares for Tet

During the Fall as Communist forces are building up for the Tet Offensive in Hanoi, 200 senior officials are arrested in a crackdown on opponents of the Tet strategy.

Protests Movement Growing

Calling the US “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world,” Martin Luther King publicly speaks out against US policy in Vietnam. King later encourages draft evasion and suggests a merger between antiwar and civil rights groups. In October, University of Wisconsin students demand that corporate recruiters for Dow Chemical -- producers of napalm -- not be allowed on campus. It was the largest campus protest to date. (For more information, see Maraniss’ *They Marched into Sunlight*)

McNamara Calls Bombing Ineffective

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, appearing before a Senate subcommittee, testifies that US bombing raids against North Vietnam have not achieved their objectives. McNamara maintains that movement of supplies to South Vietnam has not been reduced, and neither the economy nor the morale of the North Vietnamese has been broken.

1968

NVA Builds-Up Decoy Troops

In mid-January 1968 in the remote northwest corner of South Vietnam, elements of three NVA divisions begin to mass near the Marine base at Khe Sanh. The ominous proportions of the build-up lead the U.S. commanders to expect a major offensive in the northern provinces. At 5:30 a.m., a shattering barrage of shells, mortars and rockets slam into the Marine base at Khe Sanh. Eighteen Marines are killed instantly, 40 are wounded. The initial attack continues for two days.

North Vietnamese Launch Tet Offensive

In a show of military might that catches the US military off guard, North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces sweep down upon several key cities and provinces in South Vietnam, including its capital, Saigon. Though guerillas were able to capture numerous key military installations in major cities across South Vietnam, they were unable to hold them long enough to organize the populous into general revolt. Within days, American forces turn back the onslaught and recapture most areas (it took a brutal 4 weeks to recapture Hue). From a military point of view, Tet is a huge defeat for the Communists (37,000 Vietcong troops killed, including most of the Vietcong’s best fighters, political officers and secret organizers), but turns out to be a political and psychological victory. The US military’s assessment of the war is

questioned and Westmoreland's "end of the tunnel" seems very far off. The Americans, who lost 2,500 men, were dealt a serious blow to public support and troop morale. Westmoreland receives 170,000 more troops, and the Joint Chief of Staff request an additional 206,000 more.

LBJ Announces He Won't Run

With his popularity plummeting, dismayed by Senator Eugene McCarthy's strong showing in the New Hampshire primary, and the entrance of Robert Kennedy into the race, President Lyndon Johnson stuns the nation and announces that he will not "devote even one valuable hour to political causes" and will not seek re-election.

My Lai Massacre

On March 16, U.S. troops entered the village of My Lai, with a mandate from their superior officers, "This is what you've been waiting for -- search and destroy -- and you've got it." Soon after, nearly 200 civilians were killed. When news of the atrocities surfaced stateside nearly a year later (through the *New York Times* coverage of a single court martial proceeding), it sent shockwaves through the US political establishment, the military's chain of command, and an already divided American public. Only one man is tried and found guilty.

Paris Peace Talks Begin

Following a lengthy period of debate and discussion, North Vietnamese and American negotiators agree on a location and start date of peace talks. Talks are slated to begin in Paris on May 10 with W. Averell Harriman representing the United States, and former Foreign Minister Xuan Thuy heading the North Vietnamese delegation.

Democratic Convention in Chicago

After the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the frazzled Democratic party prepares to hold its nominating convention in Chicago, while city officials gear up for a deluge of demonstrations. Mayor Richard Daley orders police to crackdown on antiwar protests. As the nation watched on television, the area around the convention erupts in violent riots.

Operation Rolling Thunder Ends

After three-and-a-half years, Operation Rolling Thunder comes to an end on November 1. In total, the campaign had cost more than 900 American aircraft. Eight hundred and eighteen pilots are dead or missing, and hundreds are in captivity. Nearly 120 Vietnamese planes have been destroyed in air combat or accidents, or by friendly fire. According to U.S. estimates, 182,000 North Vietnamese civilians have been killed.

Richard Nixon Elected President

Running on a platform of "law and order," Richard Nixon barely beats out Hubert Humphrey for the presidency. Nixon takes just 43.4 percent of the popular vote, compared to 42.7 percent for Humphrey (3rd-party candidate George Wallace taking the remaining votes). During his inaugural speech, Nixon promises to achieve "Peace with Honor."

1969-1971

Bombing of Cambodia Begins

In February, in an effort to destroy Communist supply routes and base camps in Cambodia, President Nixon gives the go-ahead to "Operation Breakfast." The covert bombing of the neutral Cambodia, conducted without the permission of Congress or knowledge of the American public, continued for 14 months, dropping more than more than a half million tons of bombs on the country (more than was dropped on Germany in WWII).

Vietnamization

In winter of 1969, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced a policy of "Vietnamization" when discussing a diminishing role for the US military in Vietnam. The objective of the policy is to shift the burden of defeating the Communists onto the South Vietnamese Army and away from the United States. At this point, the 33,629 U.S. combat deaths in Vietnam exceed those killed in the Korean War. After President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu in June, 1970, on Midway Island, Nixon announced that 25,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn immediately from Vietnam. By the end of 1970, troop levels fell to below 280,000 for the first time in four years.

Kent State Incident

National Guardsmen open fire on a crowd of student antiwar protesters at Ohio's Kent State University, resulting in the death of four students and the wounding of eight others. President Nixon publicly deplors the actions of the Guardsmen, but cautions: "...when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy." Several of the protesters had been hurling rocks and empty tear gas canisters at the Guardsmen.

Nixon Announces Plans to Visit China

In a move that troubles the North Vietnamese, President Nixon announces his intention to visit The People's Republic of China. The first part of Kissinger's plan to isolate North Vietnam from both China and the U.S.S.R., China was a traditional foe of Vietnam for years and Nixon's gesture toward China is seen by the North Vietnamese as an effort to create discord between themselves and their Chinese allies.

Pentagon Papers Published

A legacy of deception, concerning US policy in Vietnam, on the part of the military and the executive branch is revealed as the New York Times publishes the Pentagon Papers in 1971. The Nixon administration, eager to stop leaks of what they consider sensitive information, appeals to the Supreme Court to halt the publication. The Court decides in favor the Times and allows continued publication.

Operation Ranchhand Ends

While herbicides containing Dioxin were banned for use by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1968, spraying of dioxin continued in Vietnam until 1971. More than one seventh of the country's total area has been laid waste.

1972-1973

Winning the War to Win an Election

By January 1972, only 133,000 U.S. servicemen remain in South Vietnam. 2/3 of America's troops have gone in two years. The ground war is now almost exclusively the responsibility of South Vietnam, which has over 1,000,000 men enlisted in its armed forces. Responding to charges by Democratic presidential candidates that he is not moving fast enough to end US involvement in Vietnam, President Nixon orders troop strength reduced by seventy thousand. The secret peace talks in Paris are revealed to the public. Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reach agreement in principle on several key measures leading to a cease-fire in Vietnam. Kissinger's view that "peace is at hand," is somewhat diminished by South Vietnamese President Thieu's opposition to the agreement. Despite very vocal protests across America and vague insinuations by the media regarding campaign finance misconduct (which later gave rise to the *Post's* Watergate investigative reporting), Nixon is re-elected by a landslide, proving his claims of support by a "Silent Majority" were not unfounded.

Christmas Bombing Interrupts Cease-Fire

In mid-December, peace talks in Paris between the North Vietnamese and the U.S. breakdown. Nixon orders a new bombing campaign starts against the North Vietnamese (that is announced on television by the president simultaneous to the first bomb dropping). Lasting for 12 days, it included a 3-day bombing period by up to 120 B-52s, with strategic surgical strikes hitting fighter airfields, transport targets and supply depots in and around Hanoi and Haiphong. U.S. aircraft drop more than 20,000 tons of bombs in the operation. 26 U.S. planes are lost, and 93 airmen are killed, captured or missing. North Vietnam admits to at least 1,300 dead. North Vietnam and the U.S. resume peace talks in Paris on January 8; all warring parties sign a cease-fire on January 27, to be effective January 28. Former President Johnson died one day before the cease-fire was signed. Later that year, the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. Kissinger accepts the award, while Tho declines, saying that a true peace does not yet exist in Vietnam.

In the words of Nixon, War is "Officially Over"

In March, the last American combat soldiers leave South Vietnam, though military advisors and Marines, who are protecting U.S. installations, remain. For the United States, the war is officially over. The end of the draft is announced. During the summer session, the Senate Armed Services Committee opens hearings on the US bombing of Cambodia. Allegations are made that the Nixon administration allowed bombing raids to be carried out during what was supposed to be a time when Cambodia's neutrality was officially recognized. As a result of the hearings, Congress orders that all bombing in Cambodia cease effective at midnight, August 14.