

The Vietnam War and the United States

Other than the Civil War, the Vietnam War was the most divisive war in our nation's history and the first war in which the United States did not achieve its primary military objective. The nature of the war was complex and its duration challenged administrations of Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961), John Kennedy (1961–1963), Lyndon Johnson (1963–1969), and Richard Nixon (1969–1974). On one level the Vietnam War was a manifestation of the Cold War conflict between the forces of expansion and containment of Communism in Asia. According to President Eisenhower's "domino theory," a Communist victory in Vietnam would threaten and ultimately undermine the ability of other nations (such as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, etc.) in Southeast Asia to resist Communism. On another level, the Vietnam conflict was a civil war between two nationalistic factions, Communists in the northern region and non-Communists in southern region, for political control of this recently formed nation, once known as French Indochina.

As the military involvement of the United States in this war escalated and more and more Americans were killed and injured without any compensatory political or military success, the American people became increasingly disillusioned with their government's policies. Critics of US policy, known as "doves," demanded the withdrawal of American military forces from the conflict, which they viewed as merely a civil war between the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese. Supporters of American involvement in the Vietnam conflict, known as "hawks," cited the threatening menace of Communism spreading into Southeast Asia.

As the American public became increasingly divided and polarized on the war, the demonstrations organized by both sides (protestors and supporters) grew larger and more militant. War protestors burned draft cards, took over buildings, shut down college campuses, and conducted huge rallies in the nation's capital and major cities. Moreover, thousands of young men evaded the military draft by changing their identities, "going underground," or moving to Canada, which did not extradite "draft dodgers" back to the United States.

President Nixon's strategy, known as "Vietnamization," focused on the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and an increase in military assistance and training for South Vietnamese troops. Nixon also ordered heavy bombing raids in North Vietnam and on the enemy's supply and transportation routes in Cambodia and Laos to pressure the North Vietnamese to negotiate a cease-fire. These policies increased protests in the United States. Finally, in January 1973, the United States, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords. The United States agreed to withdraw soldiers from Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese agreed to release all American prisoners of war. The bitter civil war continued between the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese for two more years until the North Vietnamese forces defeated the South Vietnamese in 1975, and Vietnam was re-united as a Communist nation.

In the United States, the Vietnam War left deep wounds. More than 58,000 American troops had been killed, more than 300,000 soldiers had been wounded, some Vietnam veterans returned home with major physical ailments and deep psychological problems, and the financial cost of the war exceeded \$120 billion dollars, leaving a huge national debt and spiraling inflation. Moreover, American society had become polarized ("hawks" vs. "doves") in a way that it had not been since the Civil War. Ironically, the American people faced the daunting task of re-uniting a nation that had been torn apart by a long conflict in a distant land.

In an attempt to heal the nation, President Gerald Ford (1974–1977) issued a proclamation on September 16, 1974, that offered amnesty with certain conditions (conditional clemency) to Americans who had evaded the draft between 1964 and 1973. To gain amnesty and avoid criminal penalties, the 210,000 young men who had refused to appear before draft boards or had fled the United States had to reaffirm their allegiance to the United States and serve two years working in a public service job. In January 1977, President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) granted unconditional pardons to most Vietnam-era draft evaders, asserting that "reconciliation calls for an act of mercy to bind the nation's wounds and to heal the scars of divisiveness." However, critics argued that pardons would encourage future draftees to defy the law and would show disrespect for the men who had served honorably and for those who had died in Vietnam.