A Nation Divided
The Vietnam War, 1945–1975

Vietnam was America’s longest war to date, a conflict that divided the nation to an extent not seen since the Civil War. For 30 years the United States invested money and then eventually soldiers in the struggle to prevent the establishment of communism in the small Southeast Asian country of Vietnam. From 1945 to 1964, the United States fought a proxy war by funneling supplies and aid to others willing to fight the Vietnamese Communists. In 1965, the conflict became an American war when President Lyndon Johnson sent U.S. ground forces to fight in Southeast Asia.

By 1967, the antiwar movement had taken to the streets to protest America’s involvement in Vietnam. On October 21, 1967, antiwar protesters held a peace rally before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., after which thirty thousand demonstrators linked arms and marched to the Pentagon, the headquarters of the Department of Defense. When they arrived, soldiers advanced toward the crowd with their guns drawn. An 18-year-old actor from New York with a flair for the dramatic stepped forward holding a bouquet of pink carnations and carefully placed one into each soldier’s rifle. Washington Star news photographer Bernie Boston captured this poetic gesture in “Flower Power,” an iconic photo of the civil strife that the war triggered. Competing interpretations of this image revealed key divisions of the era. For peace advocates the photograph illustrated the stark contrast between government-sponsored violence in Vietnam and American citizens’ demand for peace. Critics of the peace movement, who accused activists of destroying respect for law and order, viewed the gesture as a ploy to distract the soldiers moments before demonstrators stormed the steps of the Pentagon and armed guards beat them back.

The Vietnam War originated as an anticolonial struggle to win independence from France, and then evolved into a civil war between North and South Vietnam. At first the crucial debates about Vietnam took place behind closed doors in the White House. Over the course of the country’s 30-year engagement in Vietnam, despite being presented continuously with other viewpoints, five American presidents from Truman to Nixon chose escalation when faced with the option of pulling back or pressing forward. Viewing the Vietnamese conflict through the prism of the global Cold War, each president feared that losing all of Vietnam to communism would set off a chain reaction of communist revolutions throughout Southeast Asia.

World War II had united the nation. Vietnam fractured it. The guerrilla war under way in South Vietnam, in which Communist soldiers intermingled with the civilian population to avoid detection, made it particularly difficult for Americans to separate enemy combatants from civilians. When the American military tried using overwhelming force to flush Communist guerrillas out of South Vietnamese villages, the civilian death toll turned many Americans against the war. The conflict ultimately tore apart both Vietnam and America before the United States finally withdrew in 1973. The war ended with a Communist victory in 1975.
"We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw."

President LYNDON B. JOHNSON in 1965
The Long Road to War

From 1945 to 1965, America gradually shifted its Cold War focus from Europe to Asia. The United States first supported French efforts to recover Vietnam as a colony, and then sustained an independent anti-communist South Vietnam with financial aid. At home some American policymakers envisioned the war as part of the worldwide struggle between democracy and communism. In Vietnam, however, Americans confronted a country torn apart by a civil war that reflected its long-standing religious and political divisions. No American president sought a war in Vietnam, and key advisors offered competing assessments of America’s chances for victory. Yet at critical moments when the intractable political and military situation called for a response, each president chose to bolster the American commitment rather than turn back.

The Escalating Importance of Vietnam

America first became involved in Vietnam during World War II, when Japan took over the French colony of Indochina (present-day Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam). In 1945, U.S. intelligence operatives worked with Ho Chi Minh, the leader of an underground Vietnamese communist resistance movement that launched guerrilla attacks against the Japanese occupiers. When the war ended Ho Chi Minh and his rebel force formed a provisional government in Hanoi and declared independence from France. Eager to reestablish its position as a world power after the humiliating occupation by Germany in World War II, France sent in troops to crush the Vietnamese independence movement.

In search of international support for Vietnamese independence, the Western-educated Ho Chi Minh turned to the United States. Ho Chi Minh had previously tried to interest the United States in Vietnamese independence by submitting a petition to the American delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 after World War I that called for democratic reforms in French Indochina. The American delegation ignored his request, mindful that his proposal would anger the French, whose support President Woodrow Wilson needed to create the League of Nations (see Chapter 20). After the rebuff in Paris, Ho Chi Minh became a communist, attracted by communism’s revolutionary promise to free colonized peoples. “It was patriotism, not communism, that inspired me,” he later claimed. In 1941, after nearly three decades abroad working as a Soviet spy, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam to help organize communist resistance to the Japanese occupation. Despite this revolutionary background he hoped that the United States would support Vietnamese independence when Japan withdrew in 1945. His communist credentials, however, tainted him in the eyes of President Harry S. Truman, who remained unmoved by Ho Chi Minh’s truthful assurances that the Soviet Union did not control or finance him.

In the 1940s, the Americans saw Ho Chi Minh as a communist puppet doing Moscow’s bidding. His Vietnamese followers, however, viewed him as a charismatic leader ignited with a patriotic desire to free his nation from French colonial control. As one disciple recalled, the 55-year-old “Uncle Ho” spoke with an “ardent and idealistic nationalism” that encouraged many Vietnamese to join the Vietminh, the term used initially to describe all Vietnamese communists, and after 1954 solely for North Vietnamese communists. This photograph (26.1) of Ho Chi Minh sitting with children reinforced his reputation in Vietnam as a beloved, wise elder. The image tapped into prevailing Confucian ideals, including filial piety (respect toward living and dead relatives), loyalty, and humane treatment of others. Ho Chi Minh broadened his appeal by eschewing personal luxuries and living simply in a small cottage. By the time American troops arrived in the late 1960s, an ailing Ho Chi Minh played almost no official role in the conflict. He nonetheless remained the face of Vietnamese communism for supporters and opponents throughout the war.

Cold War geopolitics consistently influenced how Americans reacted to the Vietnamese Communist revolt. As the emerging Cold War with the
Soviet Union in the 1940s made containing communism in Europe a national obsession, Vietnam took on new political significance. The United States needed help from a vigorous and cooperative France to defend Western Europe from Soviet incursion. To rebuild the French economy and establish goodwill, the United States gave France arms and funds beginning in 1947 (see Chapter 24). The French government used some of this aid to finance the war in Vietnam. The United States also agreed to support French efforts to regain control of its Vietnamese colony.

In 1950, the strategic importance of Vietnam for the United States changed dramatically. The fall of China to communism in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 when Communist-led North Korea invaded the anti-communist South Korea created fears that all of Asia might fall to communism. The “who lost China” debate hurt Truman politically, and no subsequent president wanted to be the one blamed for Vietnam falling to communism.

Containing communism in both Europe and Asia became cornerstones of American foreign policy from this point on, requiring the United States to maintain military bases throughout Western Europe and along a string of Pacific islands from Japan to the Philippines.

As the Cold War spread to Asia, key presidential advisors saw the hand of the Soviet Union behind every communist victory. By the early 1950s, National Security Council Report 68, or NSC-68, a document that described a global communist monolith, set the tone for U.S. foreign policy (see Chapter 24). Any more territory “under the domination of the Kremlin,” the National Security Council warned, would make the Soviet Union invincible in a future military conflict. The threat would deepen if the Soviets gained control of resource-rich Southeast Asia, whose rubber, rice, tin, and oil were important economically to the United States. These resources were even more vital for Japan, now a key American ally in the struggle against communism, and the United States wanted to ensure Japanese access to these materials by preventing them from falling into unfriendly communist hands.

Hardliners in the Truman and Eisenhower administrations embraced the domino theory, the fear that a communist Vietnam would open the door to a complete communist takeover of Southeast Asia, with communists repeating Japan’s conquest of the region in World War II. Announcing the domino theory President Dwight D. Eisenhower explained in a 1954 press conference: “You have a row of dominos set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.” Events in the 1950s gave credence to these fears. Josef Stalin’s success in pressuring China and North Korea to accept an armistice to end the Korean War strengthened the American conviction that the Soviet Union could start or stop

26.1 Ho Chi Minh Poses with Children, 1954
Ho Chi Minh's followers revered him as a wise elder who loved his nation.

What political and strategic importance did Vietnam assume in U.S. foreign policy by the mid-1950s?
Taking Over from the French

To hold the line in Vietnam, the American government was willing to foot the bill but wanted the French to do the actual fighting. The United States upheld its end of the bargain. By 1954, the United States was paying for 80 percent of the war’s costs, money used to purchase arms and fund humanitarian projects including free health clinics, food for refugees, and seeds for farmers. Increasingly, however, the United States doubted, in the words of Truman’s outgoing secretary of state Dean Acheson, the “French will to carry on.” As Acheson anticipated, the incoming Eisenhower administration soon faced a crisis in Vietnam. In 1954, the Vietminh defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, in the northwest corner of the country, prompting the French to seek an international agreement with the Vietminh. The resulting Geneva Accords (1954) called for a temporary partition of Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel, with the Vietminh in the north and the French in the south, and a general election in two years to reunify the country under one government. Refusing to sign the Geneva Accords, the Eisenhower administration instead resolved to use the two-year period to ease the French out of South Vietnam and create a government capable of raising and training a strong military to resist communist aggression.

To head the new South Vietnamese government, the United States selected Ngo Dinh Diem, a wealthy Catholic who had served as minister of the interior in the French colonial administration before resigning, when the French refused to enact reforms he proposed. A staunch nationalist, Diem moved to the United States, where he became well known to American policymakers. Neither Diem nor the United States intended to let the scheduled election take place, certain that Ho Chi Minh’s authoritarian government would use force and fraud to ensure victory in the North and perhaps in the South as well. Instead the United States tried to destabilize Ho Chi Minh’s fledgling Communist government by creating political turmoil in North Vietnam. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives destroyed government printing presses, contaminated the oil used in bus engines, sabotaged railway tracks, and planted rumors of Chinese troops raping North Vietnamese women.

Eisenhower supported the creation of an anti-communist South Vietnam to stem the tide of communism in Southeast Asia. As an additional defense against communism, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in 1954. Through SEATO, the United States was joined by France, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines in a separate agreement to defend Cambodia as areas that were considered essential to American military strategy. The alliance was designed to prevent the spread of communism in Asia.

What key choices did Eisenhower make in 1954 that increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam?
against communism, the United States formed the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954. Through SEATO the United States, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan and the Philippines (granted independence by the United States in 1946) pledged to meet common danger” in Southeast Asia together. A separate agreement identified Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as areas that would endanger the “peace and security” of SEATO members, if any of these three nations came under attack. Unlike the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which guaranteed the mutual defense of member nations in Europe, the SEATO treaty left each nation’s exact commitment vague. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wanted it that way, reluctant to overextend American military responsibilities around the world by guaranteeing the borders of SEATO members. Even if this loosely worded pact failed to deter communist aggression, Dulles reasoned, it would provide a justification for direct American involvement in Vietnam to protect SEATO members, if the United States decided to escalate its involvement in the future. An important development in America’s ever-increasing involvement in Vietnam, SEATO illustrated how completely the United States linked the civil war in Vietnam to the global crusade against communism.

With the United States poised to embark on a major campaign to create an independent South Vietnam, dissenting voices within the government urged the president to pull back. Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson warned that he could “see nothing but grief in store for us if we remained.” The Joint Chiefs of Staff complained it would be impossible to build a capable South Vietnamese army without a “reasonably strong, stable civil government in control.” This “chicken and egg” argument over which needed to come first, a strong South Vietnamese government or a strong military, divided American policymakers for the next 15 years.

With Diem the United States got neither. A short, stocky man who always dressed in white, Diem’s stiff and privileged appearance contrasted poorly with the plain dress and manners of Ho Chi Minh. The Eisenhower administration recognized Diem’s shortcomings, but Secretary of State Dulles accepted the American ambassador’s conclusion “that there is no one to take his place who would serve U.S. interests better.” The United States quickly realized that Diem intended to build a dictatorial regime in South Vietnam.

Diem modeled his rule on nineteenth-century Vietnamese emperors, issuing decrees and refusing to abide criticism. “I know what is best for my people,” he declared in one interview. The secret police, headed by Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, arrested, tortured, and executed thousands of South Vietnamese accused of opposing his rule.

Most Vietminh had relocated to North Vietnam when the country split into two, but remnants of the communist guerrilla force still existed in the south. They found ample discontent with Diem among peasants, students, Buddhists, and even South Vietnamese soldiers. To destabilize the Diem regime, the Communists unleashed a wave of assassinations targeting wealthy landlords and rural officials who worked for the regime. Diem tried to cut off guerilla fighters from their supply base. He moved peasants off their ancestral lands and into “strategic hamlets” protected by forts and walls and imprisoned thousands of civilians suspected of aiding the rebels. Enraged over the forced removals, the peasants were like a “mound of straw ready to be ignited,” claimed one Vietnamese Communist.

The U.S. government and press revealed none of Diem’s internal difficulties to the American people. When Diem visited the United States in 1957, the American press praised him as the “tough little miracle man” who had brought stability to South Vietnam. “We can take pride in our support,” Newsweek trumpeted.

In the mid-1950s, Ho Chi Minh offered southern Communists little support. He was instead preoccupied with subduing the widespread protests that greeted his forced land redistribution in North Vietnam, a campaign that sent armed posses into the countryside to confiscate land. These “land reforms” left thousands of property owners dead, destroyed communities, and created famine. By 1960, however, the North Vietnamese government was sending soldiers and supplies to southern Communists, unleashing a terror campaign to pave the way for a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. In 1960, the southern Communists formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to unite the factions in South Vietnamese society opposed to the Diem regime into a fighting coalition. Diem derogatorily called South Vietnamese Communists Vietcong, slang meaning “Vietnamese Commies.” The name stuck. From this point on Americans called all Communists from South Vietnam “Vietcong” and Communists from North Vietnam “Vietminh.”

Why did the civil war in Vietnam reignite in the late 1950s and early 1960s?
Debates within the Kennedy Administration

John F. Kennedy became president in 1961 having proclaimed Vietnam the “cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia.” Kennedy understood the negative political consequences of “losing” a nation to communism. As a congressman he had joined the chorus criticizing Truman when China succumbed to communism. In 1961, Kennedy suffered two setbacks of his own in the global war against communism with the botched Cuban Bay of Pigs invasion and his inability to stop the Soviets from constructing the Berlin Wall (see Chapter 24). His leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, however, redeemed his reputation as a Cold War warrior. Kennedy did not intend to let the conflict in Vietnam bring his administration down.

Faced with a worsening political and military situation in Vietnam, Kennedy received conflicting recommendations from his advisors. One group envisioned escalating the American commitment by sending in combat troops. Another wanted to seek a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Faced with these divided opinions, Kennedy chose a middle path. Instead of infantry troops he sent more financial aid and increased the number of American "advisors" in South Vietnam from one thousand to sixteen thousand. Officially these advisors helped train the South Vietnamese Army. In actuality many “advisors” were Green Berets, the army’s special-force troops who organized South Vietnamese attacks on Vietcong supply lines, flew planes when South Vietnamese pilots were unavailable, and picked up casualties in helicopters after skirmishes. When word of these activities leaked out, Kennedy publicly denied that Americans were participating in active combat operations in Vietnam.

"Supporting the Diem regime while applying pressure for reform appears to be the only practicable alternative at this time," the Joint Chiefs convinced Kennedy, cautioning that "any reversal of U.S. policy could have disastrous effects" throughout Southeast Asia. As South Vietnamese anger against his rule intensified, Diem privately voiced his own mounting frustration with the growing American presence in South Vietnam. "All these soldiers," he fumed, referring to the Green Berets and military advisors, "I never asked them to come here." To rid South Vietnam of Americans, Diem and his police chief brother Nhu decided to seek a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam in 1963. Upset with Diem’s overture to North Vietnam, the turning point for the Kennedy administration came in June, when a Buddhist monk set himself on fire in a busy street in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam.

The Catholic Diem had long discriminated against Buddhists. Thousands of North Vietnamese Catholics fled to the south when the Communists took over in 1954, and Diem rewarded them with land and governmental positions. In May 1963, Nhu refused to let the Buddhists fly a multicolored flag honoring Buddha on his birthday. Widespread street protests ensued, which Nhu suppressed with soldiers who used water hoses, tear gas, and on one occasion bullets, killing a woman and eight children. On June 10, 1963, a Buddhist monk invited Associated Press photographer Malcolm Browne to witness "something important" the next morning. Browne arrived at the designated street crossing and watched monks take a canister of gasoline out of the white car shown in this picture (26.3) and place a brown mat in the middle of the street. Moments later a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, sat down on the mat in the lotus position. After another monk poured gasoline over him, Duc struck a match. Flames instantaneously engulfed his body. "His eyes were closed, but his features were twisted in apparent pain," Browne recalled. As Browne snapped this memorable photo, a monk shouted into a microphone in Vietnamese and English: "A Buddhist priest burns himself to death. A Buddhist priest becomes a martyr." Monks (seen in the background) lined the streets to prevent anyone from trying to save Duc. Immediately proclaimed a Buddhist saint, Duc’s ashes were distributed to pagodas, towering Buddhist temples, throughout South Vietnam.

Duc carefully staged his suicide to gain maximum exposure for the Buddhists’ political protest, using the Western press to help rally opposition to Diem within South Vietnam and the United States. The burning monk image shocked but also bewildered Americans. The American government and press had continually praised Diem as a valiant Cold War ally, but this photo suggested strong opposition to his rule at home. Students, Buddhist priests, and soldiers in South Vietnam responded to the suicide as a call to action. Street protests erupted, the military began planning a coup, and six other monks set themselves on fire in front of Western journalists. With a framed copy of Browne’s burning monk image on his desk, Kennedy secretly agreed to support a military coup to overthrow the Diem regime.

What conflicting recommendations did Kennedy receive from his advisors about Vietnam?
"I must say that during the monk episode, I had no impulse to try to go in and save him. I knew for one thing that he intended it this way."

Photographer Malcolm Browne, on photographing Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in 1963

The Kennedy Assassination

The military coup supported by President Kennedy led to the murder of Diem and Nhu, but Americans had little time to reflect on these events. Three weeks later, on November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, as Kennedy waved to onlookers from an open convertible with his wife by his side. In the midst of his presidential reelection bid, Kennedy was visiting Dallas to shore up his fading popularity among Texans angered by his support for the Civil Rights Movement (see Chapter 27). This was the first trip that Jackie Kennedy had taken with her husband since the death of their two-day-old son Patrick three months before. Kennedy decided to ride in an open-air convertible, rejecting the suggestion from his Secret Service guards that he sit within a bulletproof clear glass bubble for the ride past the crowds. An amateur movie by Abraham Zapruder, a Russian immigrant and Kennedy supporter, gave the nation its most enduring images of this killing, film stills that provoked countless controversies over who killed the president. In its investigation of the assassination, the Warren Commission cited the Zapruder film as evidence that Oswald acted alone, claiming that the film footage showed bullets entering the president's body from...
only one direction. Counterclaims that the assassination was the result of a wider conspiracy involving other gunmen, the mafia, Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, and the CIA continue to this day.

Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) was riding two cars behind Kennedy in the Dallas motorcade. When Kennedy died within hours of the shooting, Johnson, who was next in line to assume the presidency, insisted on taking the oath of office before Judge Sarah Hughes with Jackie Kennedy on one side and his wife on the other before the presidential airplane Air Force One left Dallas. The presence of the slain president’s widow would, Johnson felt, immediately legitimize the transfer of power in the eyes of the American people. Already on board the plane, which was carrying her husband’s body back to Washington, D.C., Jackie Kennedy complied with Johnson’s request, but had no chance to change her clothes. In this portrait (26.4) of Johnson’s swearing in, photographer Cecil Stoughton carefully framed out Jackie Kennedy’s skirt, which was stained with her husband’s blood. Her pale and drawn expression nonetheless reflected the day’s ordeal.

A wealthy Massachusetts-born Catholic, Kennedy had selected Johnson, a powerful Texan politician, as his vice presidential running mate to help broaden his appeal in the South. Johnson grew up poor and worked as a teacher before entering national politics as an avid supporter of the New Deal in 1937. Johnson relied heavily on his superior political instincts and outgoing personality to rise to prominence. In the Senate, he became the most powerful majority leader in history. A larger-than-life figure, his brashness contrasted sharply with the slain president’s debonair manner. Johnson’s most legendary gaffe came in 1965, when he lifted his shirt during a press conference to show reporters his 12-inch scar from recent gallbladder surgery. Johnson wanted to reassure the nation about his recovery, but critics lampooned the act as crude and undignified.

The Gulf of Tonkin

Lyndon Baines Johnson inherited a rapidly deteriorating situation in Vietnam after the Diem assassination. Like his predecessors he faced the choice of pulling back or escalating the American commitment, which at this point consisted of sixteen thousand military advisors and Green Berets and substantial financial aid to South Vietnam. After the Diem assassination, South Vietnam slipped into perpetual political instability as a succession of rulers failed to gain the support of the people. The shifting geopolitical situation also prompted a reappraisal of the American assumption that the Soviet Union was controlling the movements of communists throughout the world. The previous American conception of a global communist conspiracy became harder to maintain in the face of the open split between the Soviet Union and China in 1964. The Sino-Soviet alliance fell apart, when the Soviets suggested that the two countries scale back their support of worldwide Communist insurrections to improve relations with the United States. Mao refused.

Once again elected officials and policymakers differed behind closed doors on the best course of action. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy told Johnson that “the right course is to continue to strengthen our struggle against the Communist terror (which is exactly what this is).” Senator Richard Russell, a close confidant of the president, disagreed with those who claimed that “we’ll lose everything in Southeast Asia if we lose Vietnam.” Johnson himself feared that withdrawal would mark him as a weak leader, embolden conservative challenges to civil rights laws and expand social welfare programs for poor that he wanted to enact and determine to keep the pressure on Johnson to do what time the war the financial resources and the president needed to fulfill (Chapter 27).

Events off the coast of Vietnam gave Johnson an excuse to increase U.S. military presence in Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin, the Maddox where office sheepish grins on their face working radar, overreager visual sightings of the torp joint commander now dock had taken place. Ace second attack as conclusively Robert McNamara told Johnson not sit still as a nation and the high seas and get away away reporter asked Secretary of Defense would attack “I can’t come up with a real Rusk answered. Behind cloaks admitted to knowing better private conversation that covert operations that are carrying on—blowing up so and so forth. So I imagine to stop to it.”

Besides ordering reprisals against North Vietnam, Johnson used the incident to win congressional military action in Vietnam rallying behind the president a Gulf of Tonkin Resolution dissenting votes in the Senate gave Johnson permission “war measures to repel any armed forces of the United States aggression" in Vietnam.
withdrawal would mark him as a weak leader, emboldening conservative challenges to the civil rights laws and expanded social welfare programs for the poor that he wanted to enact. "I was determined to keep the war from shattering that dream," Johnson later admitted, by which time the war had indeed consumed the financial resources and political goodwill that the president needed to fully realize this dream (see Chapter 27).

Events off the coast of North Vietnam soon gave Johnson an excuse to act boldly. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked an American destroyer, the USS Maddox, in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Maddox easily repelled the confirmed attack. Two days later its crew and a second destroyer, the USS Turner Joy, both reported coming under attack from North Vietnamese torpedoes. After failing to locate any North Vietnamese boats, U.S. Navy pilot James Stockdale landed on the Maddox where officers met him "all with sheepish grins on their faces." Citing improperly working radar, overeager sonar operators, and no visual sightings of the torpedo boats, the ships' joint commander now doubted that a second attack had taken place. Accepting initial reports of a second attack as conclusive, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told Johnson that "we cannot sit still as a nation and let them attack us on the high seas and get away with it." A television reporter asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk why North Vietnam would attack an American ship. "I can't come up with a rational explanation for it," Rusk answered. Behind closed doors the president admitted to knowing better, acknowledging in a private conversation that "there have been some covert operations in that area that we have been carrying on—blowing up some bridges ... roads and so forth. So I imagine they wanted to put a stop to it."

Besides ordering reprisal bombing against North Vietnam, Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin incident to win congressional approval for further military action in Vietnam. In August of 1964, rallying behind the president, Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution with only two dissenting votes in the Senate. The resolution gave Johnson permission "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression" in Vietnam.

On March 8, 1965, the first American Marines landed at Da Nang along the northern coast of South Vietnam, where young women put lei around their necks during an official ceremony. In the years that followed, troops received a distinctly less warm welcome. As the American Air Force began a major bombing campaign against North Vietnam called Rolling Thunder, General William Westmoreland requested a dramatic escalation in American ground forces. "You must take the fight to the enemy," General Earle Wheeler, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, agreed.

Choices and Consequences: Making Vietnam America's War (page 788) explores how Johnson decided to intensify America's involvement in the war. By choosing escalation Johnson sealed his legacy as the American president who made winning the war a priority for the United States. In 1966, the political cartoonist David Levine imagined the 1965 scene of Johnson lifting his shirt to expose his gallbladder incision. In Levine's rendition (26.5), the mark now assumed the shape of Vietnam, the conflict destined to scar Johnson's presidency and the nation. Johnson's willingness to expose the minute details of his health to the public contrasted sharply with the ethos of misinformation and secrecy (suggested by the Pinocchio-like nose of the caricature) he embraced as commander-in-chief.
Choices and Consequences

MAKING VIETNAM AMERICA'S WAR

In early 1965, Johnson initiated a regular bombing campaign against North Vietnam and sent 82,000 ground troops to South Vietnam. The theater commander General William Westmoreland soon requested 150,000 more. In deciding how to respond to Westmoreland's request, the president's advisors gave Johnson the following choices in the summer of 1965.

**Choices**

1. Avoid a protracted war with little chance for a military or political victory over the Communists and seek a negotiated settlement in Vietnam.

2. Continue at the present level of military aid to South Vietnam and push for political reforms there to create a more democratic anti-Communist government.

3. Send the requested troops, expand the bombing campaign, and work for political reforms in South Vietnam.

**Decision**

Johnson considered a negotiated settlement as tantamount to losing Vietnam to communism, an outcome he viewed as a threat to both Southeast Asia and his presidency. Certain that South Vietnam would lose the war without additional U.S. aid, he publicly agreed to send fifty thousand troops immediately. He privately guaranteed Westmoreland an additional fifty thousand and promised to send more as needed. He also approved heavy bombing of Vietcong strongholds in South Vietnam and tried to institute political reforms in South Vietnam to erode support for the Vietcong.

Johnson's Dilemma. He is shown here with Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara.

**Consequences**

The United States was no longer simply aiding South Vietnam in its struggle against communism, but now took the lead in fighting the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. By 1967, there were nearly 500,000 American troops in Vietnam. During the war the United States dropped more bombs there than it had in World War II.

**Continuing Controversies**

Should the United States have fought a major war in Vietnam?

Detractors claim that Johnson committed the United States to an unwinnable war by trying to use the military to solve a political problem in South Vietnam. He underestimated the will of the Vietcong and exaggerated the importance of South Vietnam to containing communism in the rest of Southeast Asia. He failed to build strong domestic support for a long war, leading to unrest at home over the draft and rising casualties. Johnson's supporters argue that he honored a commitment to South Vietnam made by his predecessors. This reassured American allies worldwide that they could count on the United States. Retreat would only have invited further Communist aggression in Southeast Asia and Europe. Losing Vietnam would have weakened Johnson politically, putting his controversial domestic reform and civil rights legislative agenda in jeopardy.

Why was Johnson's decision to escalate U.S. troop levels in 1965 important?