Topic 17 – The Vietnam War
Causes of The War
Cause #1: American Support of France in Vietnam

• France ruled most of Indochina (including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) until WWII
• Dissent grew among Vietnamese peasants
• Indochinese Communist Party under Ho Chi Minh grew; he formed the Vietminh, an organization whose goal it was to win Vietnam’s independence from foreign rule
• 1950 – U.S. sent $15 million in aid to France in war against Vietminh
• 1954 – Eisenhower explained domino theory
• May 1954 – Vietminh overran French outpost at Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam
• Geneva Accords of 1954 – divided Vietnam along 17th parallel – Communists and Ho Chi Minh controlled the north (capital: Hanoi), nationalists controlled the south (capital: Saigon)
Causes of The War

Cause #2: U.S. Steps In

• Ho Chi Minh won support in the North by breaking up large estates and redistributing land to peasants
• U.S. promised support to the South’s president, Ngo Dinh Diem, in return for a stable reform government in the South
• Diem ushered in corrupt gov’t that suppressed opposition and offered no land distribution to peasants
• Also restricted Buddhist practices (Diem was a devout Catholic)
• 1957 – communist opposition group, the Vietcong (National Liberation Front), began attacks on the Diem gov’t
• Ho Chi Minh provided arms to the Vietcong

This map is compiled from the Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War by Spencer C. Tucker, ABC-CLIO, 1998, and from Hanoi press agencies.
Causes of The War

Cause #2 (continued): U.S. Steps In

• JFK increased aid to Diem’s regime to stop accusations that Democrats were “soft” on communism
• Diem continued oppressive policies – Nov. 1, 1963, U.S.-supported military coup toppled Diem’s regime and Diem was assassinated (just a few weeks before JFK was also assassinated)

A Buddhist monk sets himself on fire in a busy Saigon intersection in 1963 as a protest against the Diem regime.
Causes of The War

Cause #3: LBJ Expands the Conflict

• LBJ believed a communist takeover of South Vietnam would be disastrous
• August 2, 1964 – North Vietnamese patrol boat fired a torpedo at the USS Maddox, which was patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin off the North Vietnamese coast
• The torpedo missed its target, but the Maddox returned fire and inflicted heavy damage
• Two days later, crew reported enemy torpedoes and the destroyers fired (later declared they had neither seen nor heard hostile gunfire)
• LBJ used this incident to ask Congress for powers to take “all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression” – Gulf of Tonkin Resolution – not a declaration of war, but gave Johnson broad military powers in Vietnam
Causes of The War

Cause #3 (continued): LBJ Expands the Conflict

• Johnson didn’t tell Congress or the American people that the U.S. had been leading secret raids against North Vietnam (the Maddox had been in the Gulf of Tonkin to collect information for these raids)
• Johnson had prepared the resolution months beforehand and was waiting for the chance to push it through Congress
• Feb. 1965 – Johnson unleashed “Operation Rolling Thunder” (the first sustained bombing of North Vietnam) in response to a Vietcong attack that killed eight Americans
• By June, there were more than 50,000 U.S. soldiers battling the Vietcong
Johnson Increases U.S. Involvement

• March 1965 – began dispatching tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to fight in Vietnam
• 1965 poll showed 61% of Americans supported U.S. policy in Vietnam at this time (strong anticommunist sentiment)
• By end of 1965 – more than 180,000 Americans had been sent to Vietnam
• By 1967 – 500,000 troops were in Vietnam

General William Westmoreland, the American commander in South Vietnam
Fighting in the Jungle

• Vietcong attacked U.S. troops both in the city and countryside
• Difficult for U.S. troops to discern friend from foe
• Network of elaborate tunnels also allowed them to withstand airstrikes and launch surprise attacks and disappear quickly
• Terrain was laced with booby traps and land mines
• Received supplied from China and the Soviet Union
• Different views of the war: U.S. saw it as a military struggle, Vietcong saw it as a battle for their very existence
Concealed entrance under a cooking pot

Air vents hidden in bushes

Water

Underwater entrance

Trapdoors

Upper trench

Lower tunnel and hiding place
The Battle for “Hearts and Minds”

- Tried to win support of South Vietnam’s rural population – proved more difficult than imagined
- In attempt to expose tunnels and hideouts, U.S. planes dropped napalm (a gasoline-based bomb that set fire to the jungle); also sprayed Agent Orange, a leaf killing toxic chemical
- Wounded civilians and left villages in ruins
- Conducted search-and-destroy missions, uprooting civilians with suspected ties to the Vietcong, killing their livestock, and burning villages
Sinking Morale on the Battlefield and at Home

• Frustrations of guerilla warfare, brutal jungle conditions, and failure to make headway against the enemy took toll on troop morale
• At home, inflation rate more than tripled by 1969
• Great Society programs were reduced
• Vietnam was America’s first “living-room war” – combat footage contradicted administration’s optimistic war scenario
• Most soldiers who fought were called into combat under the draft – thousands began looking for ways around it
• Could put off military service if enrolled in a university; most were white and financially well-off so many of the men who fought in Vietnam were lower-class whites or less privileged minorities – Vietnam became a working class war
The Protest Movement

• Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – called for a restoration of “participatory democracy” and greater individual freedom

• Free Speech Movement (FSM) – UC Berkeley – focused criticism on the American “machine,” the nation’s faceless and powerful business and gov’t institutions
Reasons for Opposition Among Youths

• Belief that the conflict was basically a civil war and the U.S. military had no business there
• The oppressive South Vietnamese regime was no better than the Communists
• The U.S. couldn’t police the entire globe and war was draining American strength in other parts of the world
• Some saw the war as morally unjust
• The war divided Americans into two camps – hawks (supported the war) and doves (opposed the war)
Protests Lead to Violence: Kent State

• Massive student protest at Kent State University in Ohio led to the burning of the ROTC building
• May 4, 1970 – Local mayor called the National Guard, who fired live ammunition into a crowd of campus protestors who were hurling rocks at them
• The gunfire wounded nine people and killed four (two hadn’t even participated in the rally)
• The country hotly debated the shootings – a sign that the nation still remained sharply divided over the war
Ohio by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young

Tin soldiers and Nixon's comin'.
We're finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drummin'.
Four dead in Ohio.

Gotta get down to it.
Soldiers are gunning us down.
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her and
Found her dead on the ground?
How can you run when you know?

Na, na, na, na, na, na, na.
Na, na, na, na, na, na, na.
Na, na, na, na, na, na, na.
Na, na, na, na, na, na, na.
Na, na, na, na, na, na, na.

Gotta get down to it.
Soldiers are cutting us down.
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her and
Found her dead on the ground?
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Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.

“Four dead in Ohio”
For What It's Worth by Buffalo Springfield

There's something happening here
What it is ain't exactly clear
There's a man with a gun over there
Telling me I got to beware
I think it's time we stop, children, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
There's battle lines being drawn
Nobody's right if everybody's wrong
Young people speaking their minds
Getting so much resistance from behind
I think it's time we stop, hey, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
What a field-day for the heat
A thousand people in the street
Singing songs and carrying signs
Mostly say, hooray for our side
It's time we stop, hey, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
Paranoia strikes deep
Into your life it will creep
It starts when you're always afraid
You step out of line, the man come and take you away
We better stop, hey, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
Stop, hey, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
Stop, now, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
Stop, children, what's that sound
Everybody look what's going down
Volunteers by Jefferson Airplane

Look what's happening out in the streets
Got a revolution got to revolution
Hey I'm dancing down the streets
Got a revolution got to revolution
Ain't it amazing all the people I meet
Got a revolution got to revolution
One generation got old
One generation got soul
This generation got no destination to hold
Pick up the cry
Hey now it's time for you and me
Got a revolution got to revolution
Come on now we're marching to the sea
got a revolution got to revolution
Who will take it from you
We will and who are we
We are volunteers of America
Yeah, come on all of you, big strong men,
Uncle Sam needs your help again.
He's got himself in a terrible jam
Way down yonder in Vietnam
So put down your books and pick up a gun,
We're gonna have a whole lotta fun.
And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.
Well, come on Wall Street, don't move slow,
Why man, this is war au-go-go.
There's plenty good money to be made
By supplying the Army with the tools of the trade,
Just hope and pray that if they drop the bomb,
They drop it on the Viet Cong.
And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam.
And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.
Well, come on generals, let's move fast;
Your big chance has come at last.
Gotta go out and get those reds —
The only good commie is the one who's dead
And you know that peace can only be won
When we've blown 'em all to kingdom come.
And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.
Huh!
Nixon and Vietnamization

• Summer 1969 – Nixon announced first troop withdrawals
• Negotiations stalled
• Along with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, created plan called Vietnamization – gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops in order for the South Vietnamese to take more active combat role
• August 1969 – first 25,000 troops returned home
• Aimed at establishing “peace with honor” – Nixon intended to maintain dignity in the face of its withdrawal from war
The My Lai Massacre

- The platoon was searching for Vietcong rebels; finding no sign of the enemy, the troops rounded up the villagers and shot more than 200 innocent Vietnamese – mostly women, children, and elderly men
- The troops insisted they weren’t responsible for the shootings because they were only following orders
- 25 army officers were charged with some degree of responsibility, but only Calley was convicted and imprisoned (only to be granted house arrest by Nixon and was paroled in 1974, having served three years)

“...We all huddled them up. I poured about four clips into the group... The mothers were hugging their children... Well, we kept right on firing.”

When asked what his directive had been, one soldier answered, “Kill anything that breathed.”
The Invasion of Cambodia

• April 30, 1970 – Nixon announced that U.S. troops had invaded Cambodia to clear out North Vietnamese and Vietcong supply centers
• By first bombing and then invading Cambodia without notifying Congress, Nixon stirred anger on Capitol Hill
• Dec. 31, 1970 – Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
The Pentagon Papers
• June 1971 – former Defense Dept. worker Daniel Ellsberg leaked a 7,000 page document revealing (among other things) that the government had drawn up plans for entering the war even as LBJ promised that he wouldn’t send American troops to Vietnam)
• Showed that there was never a plan to end the war as long as the North Vietnamese persisted
• Government tried to block the publication of the papers; New York Times vs. United States protected their First Amendment right to do so
• For many, the Papers confirmed the belief that the gov’t hadn’t been honest about its war intentions
America’s Longest War Ends

• Kissinger eventually dropped his insistence that North Vietnam withdraw all troops from the South before the complete withdrawal of American troops.
• Oct. 26, 1972 – Kissinger announced, “Peace is at hand.”
• January 27, 1973, after massive bombings in North Vietnam, the U.S. signed an “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.”
• Under the agreement, North Vietnamese troops would remain in South Vietnam.
• March 29, 1973 – last U.S. combat troops left.
• Within months, cease-fire between North and South Vietnam collapsed; March 1975 – North Vietnamese launched a full-scale invasion against the South.
• April 30, 1975 – North Vietnam captured Saigon and South Vietnam surrendered.
The Painful Legacy of Vietnam

- 58,000 Americans killed, 303,000 wounded, over 2 million North and South Vietnamese lives lost
- 15% of the 3.3 million soldiers who served suffered from PTSD
- New period of violence and chaos ushered into SE Asia; Communists imprisoned 400,000 South Vietnamese in harsh “reeducation,” or labor, camps; nearly 1.5 million people fled Vietnam
- U.S. invasion of Cambodia unleashed civil war in which the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, took power and killed at least 1 million Cambodians
Changes in U.S. Policy

• Nov. 1973 – Congress passed the War Powers Act, which stipulated that a president must inform Congress within 48 hours of sending forces into a hostile area without a declaration of war.
• Troops may remain no longer than 90 days unless Congress approves the president’s actions or declares war.
• Vietnam War altered America’s views on foreign policy.
• Contributed to overall cynicism among Americans about their government and political leaders.
• Americans grew suspicious of a gov’t that could provide as much misleading information or conceal as many activities as the Johnson and Nixon administrations had done.
• Diminished the optimism and faith in gov’t that had been felt during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years.