

CHAPTER
22

Summary

TELESCOPING THE TIMES *The Vietnam War Years*

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *The United States enters a war in Vietnam, which results in the deaths of tens of thousands of American soldiers, the division of society into bitterly opposed camps, and a lasting impact on U.S. foreign policy.*

1 Moving Toward Conflict

MAIN IDEA *To stop the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, the United States used its military to support South Vietnam.*

After World War II, Vietnamese Communists led by Ho Chi Minh and other nationalist groups fought the French who tried to reestablish colonial rule. The United States helped the French with military supplies. The nationalists won in 1954. A peace agreement temporarily split the country and called for an election and unity in 1956.

South Vietnam's prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem canceled the elections and declared himself head of a new government. President Eisenhower supported Diem, fearing that Ho would win a national election. Opponents to Diem in the South—the Vietcong—began guerrilla attacks. President John Kennedy continued Eisenhower's policy and sent some American troops to train his army. Diem, meanwhile, acted harshly and lost support in the South. In late 1963, military leaders in the South, with U.S. support, overthrew Diem.

The United States did not want South Vietnam to fall to the Communist North. When U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin were attacked in 1964 by North Vietnamese torpedo boats, President Johnson retaliated with a bombing attack. Then, in February of 1965, Johnson launched a major bombing attack on North Vietnam's cities. The next month the first U.S. combat troops arrived.

2 U.S. Involvement and Escalation

MAIN IDEA *The United States sent troops to fight in Vietnam but the war quickly turned into a stalemate.*

President Johnson's decision to send American troops to Vietnam was widely popular, although some advisors did warn that the policy was dangerous. The American commander there asked for growing numbers of troops. By 1967, about 500,000 American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam. Johnson

and his advisors hoped for quick victory, but it did not happen.

These troops found the war frustrating. The Vietcong struck quickly in small groups and then disappeared in the jungle or in an elaborate system of tunnels. Americans' superior weaponry was of little use.

The policy of winning support among the people of South Vietnam did not work either. The frustrating course of war lowered the morale of American soldiers. So did the weakness and corruption of the South Vietnamese government.

Rising costs of the war forced President Johnson to cut spending on his Great Society programs. TV news film of the war contradicted the administration's glowing reports of progress. Disapproval of the president's policy spread.

3 A Nation Divided

MAIN IDEA *An antiwar movement in the U.S. pitted supporters of the government's war policy against those who opposed it.*

Many young men avoided the military draft by getting medical releases or by entering the reserves. Many—especially white middle-class young men—obtained draft deferments because they were college students. As a result, U.S. troops in Vietnam were mostly working-class whites and members of minority groups, prompting protests from civil rights leaders.

Unrest was growing on college campuses in the early 1960s as the New Left urged sweeping changes in American society. In 1965, this movement began to criticize U.S. policy in Vietnam. Thousands marched on Washington to protest the war. Eventually, some draft-resisters were imprisoned, and many deserted to Canada.

By 1967, Americans were divided into hawks—who supported administration policy—and doves—who wanted the war to end. Many felt that doves were showing disloyalty by protesting while Americans were fighting.

4 1968: A Tumultuous Year

MAIN IDEA *A shocking attack in Vietnam, two assassinations, and a chaotic political convention made 1968 an explosive year.*

As 1968 opened, all across South Vietnam the Vietcong launched surprise attacks—the Tet Offensive. After weeks of fighting, the U.S. commander said the Vietcong had been defeated, but American confidence in the war was deeply shaken. Some presidential advisors questioned the war.

Johnson's popularity fell sharply, and Senator Eugene McCarthy almost defeated Johnson in a presidential primary. Johnson responded by announcing that he would not seek re-election as president and that he was willing to seek a negotiated peace in Vietnam.

Soon the nation was stunned by the murders of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy, campaigning for the Democratic nomination for president. Meanwhile, protests rocked college campuses. The political turmoil plunged the Democratic convention in Chicago into chaos. While the convention nominated Hubert Humphrey for president, bitter antiwar protesters staged rallies and protests that were met by police attacks. The violent attacks showed deep divisions in the country.

The Republicans nominated former Vice President Richard Nixon. Campaigning for law and order and promising that he had a plan to end the war, Nixon won the election. An independent candidate—former Alabama governor George Wallace—won significant support.

5 The End of the War and Its Legacy

MAIN IDEA *President Nixon instituted his Vietnamization policy, and America's longest war finally ended.*

On reaching the White House, Nixon began to withdraw American troops from Vietnam as part of his strategy of giving the major role in the war to South Vietnam. He also ordered massive

bombing of the North to persuade leaders there to agree to a peace leaving South Vietnam intact.

When Nixon announced that he had sent U.S. troops to attack Vietcong supply lines in Cambodia, protests erupted on college campuses. At Kent State nervous National Guard troops killed four students. Support for the war eroded in Congress, cut further when newspapers published documents showing that the Johnson administration had lied about the war.

A new North Vietnamese offensive in March 1972 brought increased bombing. As the 1972 election neared, Nixon announced progress in the peace talks, but a snag then arose. Nixon ordered more bombing of the North. In January 1973, all parties agreed to a peace. U.S. troops came home—but North Vietnamese troops were allowed to remain in the South. In March 1975, they defeated the government of South Vietnam.

Vietnamese deaths topped 2 million. The victorious Communists punished many in the South; a million and a half people fled the country. Communist rebels, called the Khmer Rouge, took Cambodia and killed at least 2 million people.

The United States suffered 58,000 dead and 303,000 wounded. Surviving American soldiers found it difficult to come home, as they met with hostility or neglect. The divisions over the war lingered, with former hawks and doves angry at each other. Congress passed a law preventing the president from committing troops in a foreign conflict without its approval. The war changed American foreign policy and caused a feeling of mistrust toward the government that remains.

Review

1. Why did the U.S. enter the war in Vietnam?
2. Why could the U.S. not win a quick victory over the Vietcong, and what was the effect?
3. How did public opinion split over the war?
4. Why is 1968 considered a year of upheaval?
5. What were the effects of the war?