

## Task 1

1. Read Short Summary of Vietnam
2. Answer Questions on worksheet

### A Short Summary of the Vietnam War

#### *Imperialism and Colonialism*

The Vietnam War has roots in Vietnam's centuries of domination by imperial and colonial powers—first China, which ruled ancient Vietnam, and then France, which took control of Vietnam in the late 1800s and established **French Indochina**. In the early 1900s, nationalist movements emerged in Vietnam, demanding more self-governance and less French influence. The most prominent of these was led by Communist leader **Ho Chi Minh**, who founded a militant nationalist organization called the Viet Minh.

#### *The First Indochina War*

During World War II, when France was occupied by Nazi Germany, it lost its foothold in Vietnam, and Japan took control of the country. The Viet Minh resisted these Japanese oppressors and extended its power base throughout Vietnam. When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II in 1945, Ho Chi Minh's forces took the capital of **Hanoi** and declared Vietnam to be an independent country, the **Democratic Republic of Vietnam**. France refused to recognize Ho's declaration and returned to Vietnam, driving Ho's Communist forces into northern Vietnam. Ho appealed for aid from the United States, but because the United States was embroiled in the escalating Cold War with the Communist USSR, it distrusted Ho's Communist leanings and aided the French instead. Fighting between Ho's forces and the French continued in this First Indochina War until 1954, when a humiliating defeat at **Dien Bien Phu** prompted France to seek a peace settlement.

#### *Divided Vietnam*

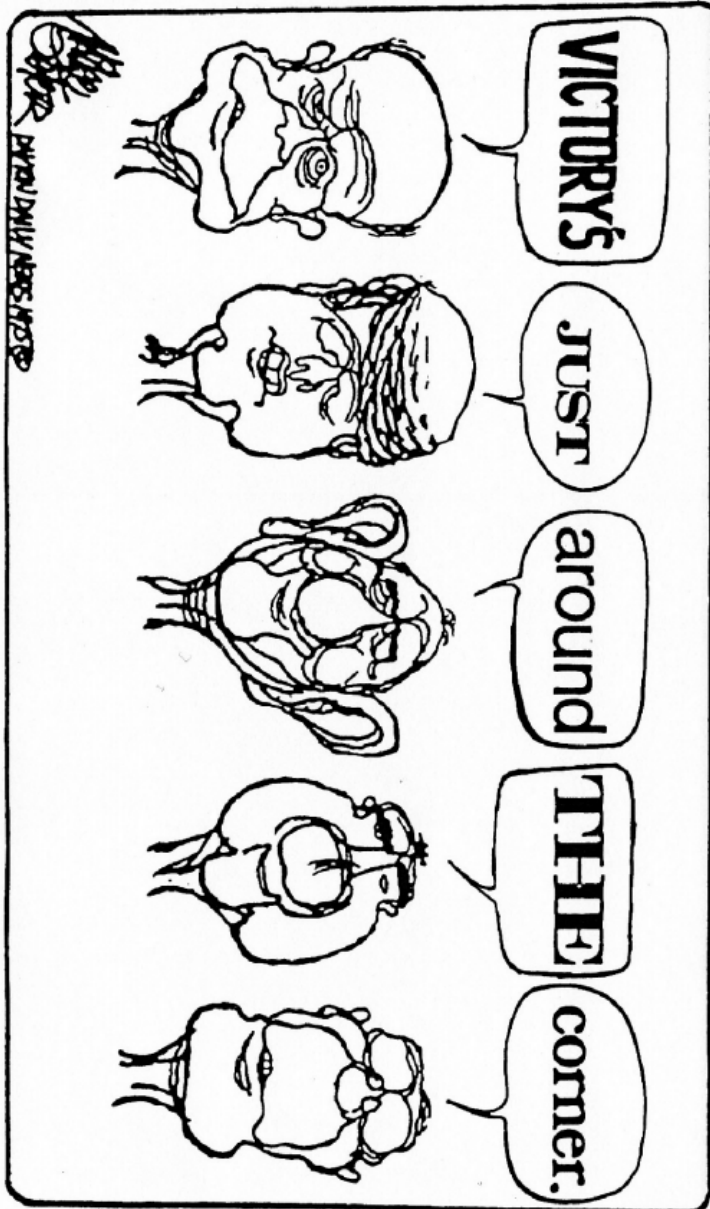
The Geneva Accords of 1954 declared a cease-fire and divided Vietnam officially into **North Vietnam** (under Ho and his Communist forces) and **South Vietnam** (under a French-backed emperor). The dividing line was set at the 17th parallel and was surrounded by a demilitarized zone, or DMZ. The Geneva Accords stipulated that the divide was temporary and that Vietnam was to be reunified under free elections to be held in 1956.

#### *The Cold War and the Domino Theory*

At this point, the United States' Cold War foreign policy began to play a major part in Vietnam. U.S. policy at the time was dominated by the **domino theory**, which believed that the "fall" of North Vietnam to Communism might trigger all of Southeast Asia to fall, setting off a sort of Communist chain reaction. Within a year of the Geneva Accords, the United States therefore began to offer support to the anti-Communist politician **Ngo Dinh Diem**. With U.S. assistance, Diem took control of the South Vietnamese government in 1955 and declared the Republic of

Vietnam. Due to the popularity of Ho Chi Minh throughout Vietnam, Diem promptly canceled the elections that had been scheduled for 1956.

SOURCE A



An American cartoon, 1975. It shows the five Presidents involved in the Vietnam war: from left to right they are Eisenhower (1953–61), Kennedy (1961–63), Johnson (1963–69), Nixon (1969–74) and Ford (1974–77).

## Task 2

1. Read The Tonkin Gulf Historical Context
2. Answer Questions on Worksheet

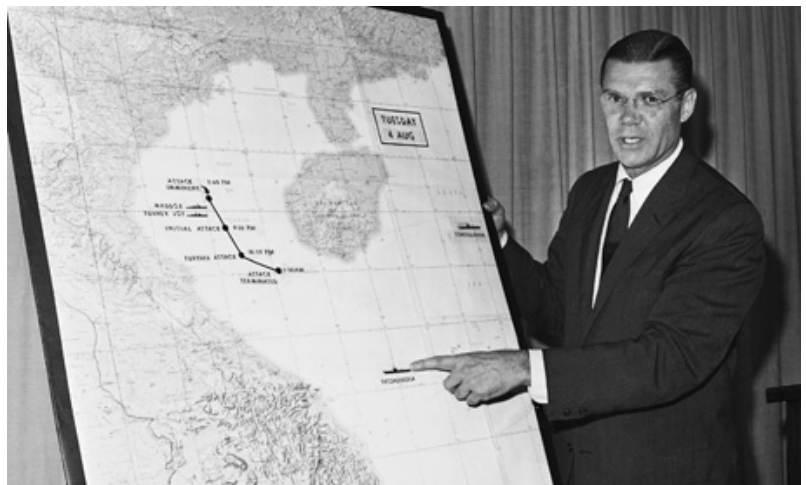
*Historical Context, Part 1:* On August 2, 1964, the U.S.S. Maddox was collecting evidence while patrolling in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the eastern boarder of North Vietnam. Also in the Gulf were South Vietnamese gunboats, which had just launched a clandestine raid on the North Vietnamese coastline as part of Operations Plan (OPLAN) - 34A, a covert intelligence operation coordinated by the United States. The Maddox reported being fired upon by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. In the battle that followed, two DRV (North Vietnamese) ships were sunk, but the Maddox sustained no losses. When word reached Washington, President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, along with other senior advisors began to discuss how the US should respond and what information should be shared with Congress and the public at large about the incident.

On August 3, at 10:30 pm, McNamara and Johnson discussed the incident on the phone.

Secretary McNamara: Well I just talked to George Ball a few minutes ago, and I'll have George arrange it. Or at least I'll tell him that, and then I'll call the Speaker and Mansfield himself.

President Johnson: Now I wish that uh you'd give me some guidance on what we ought to say. I want to leave an impression on the background in the people we talk to over here that we're gonna be firm as hell without saying something that's dangerous. Now what do you think? Uh, uh, the people that are calling me up, I just talked to a New York banker, I just talked to a fellow in Texas, they all feel that the Navy responded wonderfully and that's good. But they want to be damned sure I don't pull 'em out and run, and they want to be damned sure that we're firm. That's what all the country wants because Goldwater's raising so much hell about how he's gonna blow 'em off the moon, and they say that we oughten to do anything that the national interest doesn't require. But we sure oughta always leave the impression that if you shoot at us, you're going to get hit.

Secretary McNamara: Well I think you would want to instruct George Reedy this morning at his news conference to say that you you personally have ordered the, the Navy to carry on the routine patrols uh off the coast of North Vietnam, uh to add an additional destroyer to the one that has been carrying on the patrols, to provide an air cap, and to issue instructions to the commanders to destroy any uh force that attacks our force in international waters....



*Historical Context, Part 2:* Two days later, on August 4, 1964 the *U.S.S. Maddox*, and another US ship, the *C. Turner Joy*, were in the Gulf of Tonkin together. Both ships were on high alert, following the reported August 2 attack. That day, both ships recorded a number of sonar and radar signals they assumed to be from hostile DRV torpedo boats. In addition, naval personnel confused North Vietnamese radio signals actually sent on August 2 as new orders from Hanoi to attack the American ships. In this confusion, the ships radioed to Washington that they were under attack. The local commander, Captain John D. Herrick, quickly questioned this initial report, but the head of the Pacific fleet and Washington moved forward as if the initial confused reports were accurate.

On August 4, at 9:43 am, McNamara and Johnson discussed the incident on the phone. As you listen to or read their discussion, consider the following questions to discuss with your group:

- Why did President Johnson and Secretary McNamara want to believe the early reports which erroneously claimed that the U.S. was attacked by North Vietnam on August 4?

Secretary McNamara: .... I've talked to Mac Bundy [national security adviser] a moment ago and told him that I thought that was the most important subject we should consider today, and, and be prepared to recommend to you a response, a retaliation move against North Vietnam in the event this attack takes place within the next six to nine hours. And we

President Johnson: All right. Now we better do that at lunch. There's some things I don't want to go in with these other, I want to keep this as close as I can. So let's just try to keep it to the two....

Secretary McNamara: Now, thirdly, Sharp recommends that, that, uh, the, uh, task force commander be authorized to engage in hot pursuit beyond the eleven-mile limit in as far as the three-mile limit, which we [i.e., the United States] accept as the definition of territorial waters. At present the instructions to the commander are: do not pursue an attacker, uh, closer to shore than eleven miles. Uh, Sharp recommends that that eleven mile limit be shifted to three miles. I've talked to Dean about this; he agrees, uh, as far as air pursuit is concerned. Pursue by air as close as three miles to shore. Do not pursue by sea closer than eleven miles... The air power is likely the most effective power anyhow. And I would, therefore, recommend that we accept Sharp's recommendation but limit it to air.

President Johnson: All right. OK....



## Task 3

1. Read American Policy
2. Read LBJ's reason for being in Vietnam
3. Answer Questions on Worksheet

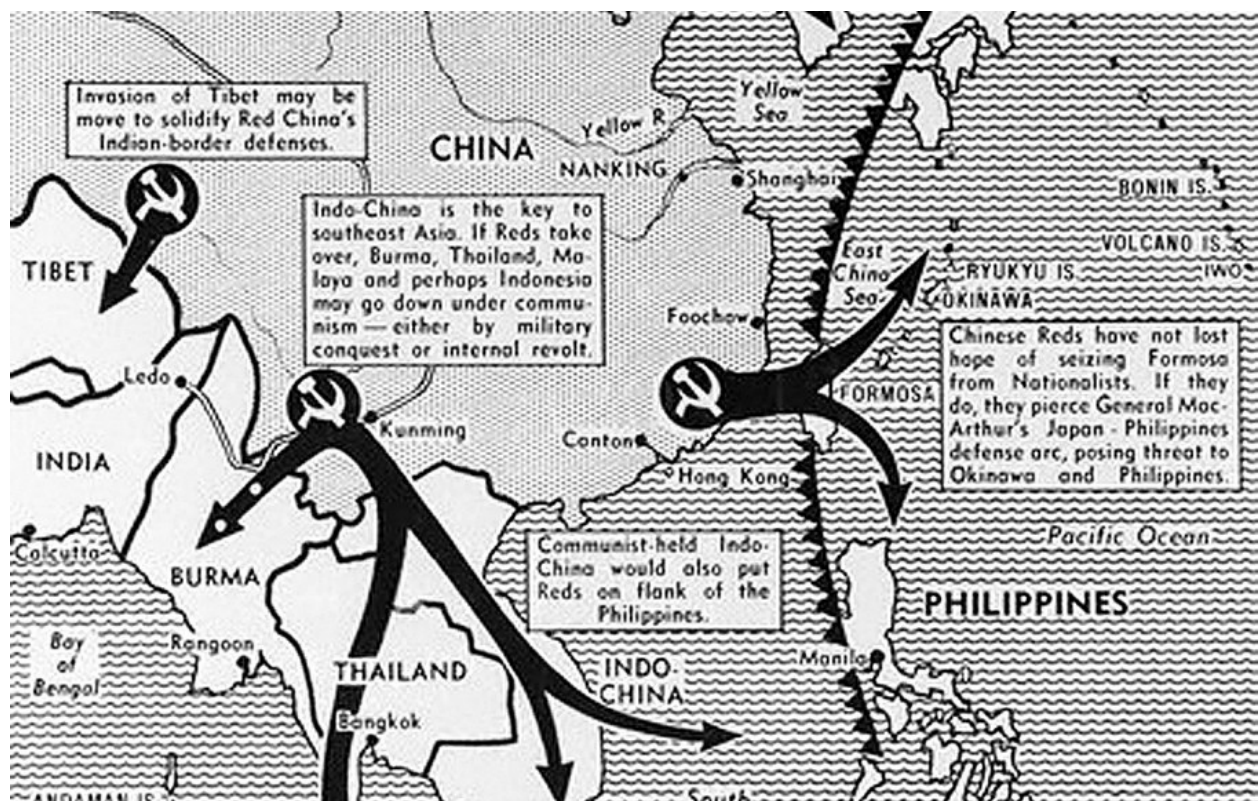
### American Policy

Why did we plunge into a war to support a regime-- South Vietnam--that we had created and that had demonstrated little or no capacity to earn popular support?

1. Containment--necessity of maintaining worldwide "balance of power" between US and the Soviet Union.
  2. "Domino theory"--again, a "theory" which shows no awareness of the history, culture and politics of other nations
  3. Something else, something harder to quantify--a belief in the special mission and destiny of America. Kennedy advisor McGeorge Bundy believed, as he'd learned from his predecessors in the State Department, "that in the final analysis, the United States was the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose." He assumed that American culture was always superior and would be preferred. It's difficult to underestimate the force of this assumption in the early 1960s.
  4. Similarly, an assumption that given America's technological superiority and wealth, the war would end soon. One journalist touring an American aircraft carrier wrote, "They just ought to show this ship to the Viet Cong--that would make them give up." Marine Lieutenant Philip Caputo recalled, in his book *Rumors of War*: "when we marched into the rice paddies [in 65] we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit conviction that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten." Johnson himself called Vietnam "a raggedy-ass fourth-rate country." It seemed hard to believe a nation of people living, in rural areas at least, in grass huts, could defeat the world's most technologically advanced society.
  5. Fear of losing face, of international humiliation.
- 

*We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American president has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence.*

*President Lyndon B. Johnson  
April 7, 1965*



## Task 4

1. Read Path to Escalation
2. Answer Questions on Worksheet

### Path to Escalation

#### *The Diem Regime*

Diem's regime proved corrupt, oppressive, and extremely unpopular. He was so unpopular that some Buddhist monks protested his regime using **self-immolation** – setting oneself on fire. Nonetheless, the United States continued to prop Diem up, fearful of the increasing Communist resistance activity in South Vietnam. This resistance against Diem's regime was organized by the Ho Chi Minh-backed **National Liberation Front**, which became more commonly known as the **Viet Cong**. In 1962, U.S. president John F. Kennedy sent American "military advisors" to Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese army, the ARVN, but quickly realized that the Diem regime was unsalvageable. Therefore, in 1963, the United States backed a coup that overthrew Diem and installed a new leader. The new U.S.-backed leaders proved just as corrupt and ineffective.

#### *Johnson and U.S. Escalation*

Kennedy's successor, **Lyndon B. Johnson**, pledged to honor Kennedy's commitments but hoped to keep U.S. involvement in Vietnam to a minimum. He kept Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, **Robert McNamara**, but replaced the previous American military commander with **William C. Westmoreland** – a U.S. general who advocated aggressive strategies against Viet Cong and NVA using large numbers of U.S. forces. After North Vietnamese forces allegedly attacked U.S. Navy ships during the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, Johnson was given



carte blanche in the form of the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**. This resolution allowed Johnson "to take all necessary measure to repel any armed attack against the forces of United States and to prevent further aggression;" this greatly expanded his presidential power. With the free hand recently provided by Congress, Johnson ordered the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy to begin an



intense series of air strikes called **Operation Rolling Thunder**. He hoped that the bombing campaign would demonstrate to the South Vietnamese the U.S. commitment to their cause and its resolve to halt the spread of Communism. Ironically, the air raids seemed only to increase the number of Viet Cong and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) attacks. Johnson's "Americanization" of the war led to a presence of nearly 400,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam by the end of 1966.

## *Quagmire and Attrition*

In 1965, Westmoreland began to implement a **search-and-destroy** strategy that sent U.S. troops out into the field to find and kill Viet Cong members.



Westmoreland was confident that American technology would succeed in slowly wearing down the Viet Cong through a war of attrition—a strategy of extended combat meant to inflict so many casualties on the enemy that it could no longer continue. U.S. leaders agreed, believing that North Vietnam’s economy could not sustain a prolonged war effort. In light of this new strategy of

fighting a war of **attrition**, U.S. commanders were instructed to begin keeping body counts of enemy soldiers killed. Although body counts were indeed tallied, they were often exaggerated and proved wildly inaccurate, as the bodies of Viet Cong soldiers often were difficult to distinguish from the bodies of friendly South Vietnamese soldiers. However, the Viet Cong’s guerrilla tactics frustrated and demoralized U.S. troops, while its dispersed, largely rural presence left American bomber planes with few targets. The United States therefore used unconventional weapons such as napalm – a highly flammable jellied substance -- and the herbicide defoliant Agent Orange but still managed to make little headway.



### **SOURCE B**

The sonic roar of the B-52 explosions tore eardrums; the shock waves knocked victims senseless. The bomb craters were gigantic and, in the lowland areas, would fill with water. Frequently, some surprised guerrilla was suddenly swallowed up. The first few times I experienced a B-52 attack it seemed that I had been caught in the Apocalypse. The terror was complete. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out. We were all veterans of the same symptoms. When it was over no one had been hurt.

*From ‘A Vietcong Memoir’ by Truong Nhu Tang, published in 1985.  
He was a founder of the Vietcong.*

### **The Ho Chi Minh Trail**

Meanwhile, U.S. forces continued to try to cut off Viet Cong supply lines through air power. These efforts expended a great deal of time and resources, but the North Vietnamese government proved extremely savvy in its ability to keep the Viet Cong supplied. Rather than attempt to send materials across the heavily guarded DMZ (the demilitarized zone surrounding the border between North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel), they sent supplies via the **Ho Chi Minh Trail, which** ran from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam (see map above). Troops and supplies streamed into South Vietnam via the trail and despite intense U.S. bombing throughout 1965, the trail never closed once, not even temporarily.





## Task 5

1. Read Public Opinion of the Vietnam War
2. Answer Questions on Worksheet

### Public Opinion of the Vietnam War

#### *The “Credibility Gap”*

Despite the numerous setbacks, Johnson and other U.S. officials, citing increased troop numbers and redefined objectives, again claimed to be making headway in the war. Many government officials reported that the North Vietnamese were declining in strength and were on the brink of defeat. Photos and video footage of dead American soldiers in newspapers and on evening news programs, however, indicated otherwise. Moreover, U.S. spending in support of the war had reached record levels, costing the government an estimated \$3 billion a Vietnam takes its toll on President Johnson month. As a result, many people in the United States began to speak of a “**credibility gap**” between what Johnson and the U.S. government was telling the American people and what actually was transpiring on the ground.

#### *The Antiwar Movement*

Meanwhile, the antiwar movement within the United States gained momentum as student protesters, countercultural hippies, and even many mainstream Americans denounced the war.



Protests against the war and the selective service system -- military draft -- grew increasingly violent, resulting in police brutality outside the **Democratic National Convention in 1968** and the deaths of four students at **Kent State University** in 1970 when Ohio National Guardsmen fired on a crowd. Despite the protests, Johnson’s successor elected in 1968, President Richard M. Nixon, declared that a “silent majority” of Americans still supported the war.

#### *SOURCE C*

##### AN APPEAL TO OUR STUDENTS

We the faculty are deeply worried about the war in Vietnam. We think its moral, political and military consequences are very grave and that we must examine them and find new alternatives before irreparable actions occur. We are devoting this night, March 24–25, to seminars, lectures, informal discussions, and a protest rally to focus attention on the war, its consequences, and ways to stop it. An advertisement placed in a local newspaper by 216 professors at Michigan University, March 1965. The response was so positive that meetings of the same type were convened throughout the U.S.

*An advertisement placed in a local newspaper by 216 professors at Michigan University, March 1965. The response was so positive that meetings of the same type were convened throughout the U.S.*

## ***SOURCE D***

Popular opinion was vital and we failed to keep it because we did not explain fully what was happening so people were confused by the news from the war. We had neither prepared the public to understand the complex events we faced nor how to react constructively to the need to change course as the nation confronted difficult military challenges after Tet. A nation's deepest strength lies not in its military prowess but, rather, in the unity of its people. We failed to maintain it. From *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* by Robert McNamara, published in 1995. He was Secretary of Defense in the administrations of Kennedy and Johnson.

*From In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam by Robert McNamara, published in 1995. He was Secretary of Defense in the administrations of Kennedy and Johnson.*

## ***SOURCE E***



*A Vietcong poster, used in the late 1960s, shows their men in the undergrowth and U.S. soldiers in the clearing. Propaganda was effective in uniting opposition to America.*

## Task 6

1. Read the Tet Offensive
2. Answer Questions on Worksheet

### Tet Offensive

#### *The Tet Offensive*

In 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong launched a massive campaign called the **Tet Offensive**, attacking nearly thirty U.S. targets and dozens of other cities in South Vietnam at once. Although the United States pushed back the offensive and won a tactical victory, American media coverage characterized the conflict as a defeat, and U.S. public support for the war plummeted. Morale among U.S. troops also hit an all-time low, manifesting itself tragically in the 1968 **My Lai Massacre**, in which frustrated U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in a small village.

#### **SOURCE F**

In the end, anybody who was still in that country was the enemy. The same village you'd gone in to give them medical treatment you could go through later and get shot at by a sniper. Go back in and you would not find anybody. Nobody knew anything. We were trying to work with these people but they were basically doing a number on us. You didn't trust them anymore. You didn't trust anybody.

*From an interview with Frederick Widmer, a U.S. soldier, 1969.  
He was at My Lai at the time of the massacre there in 1968.*

#### **SOURCE G**

Hi [Connie]

First it rained for six days solid, I got muddy and wet. My hands are covered with cuts. The jungles have thousands of leeches and mosquitoes of which I think I have gotten bitten almost all over my body. I personally had to dig up two dead gooks. The smell was terrible. I just about got sick. About three or four guys got hurt through accidents. Only two got shot chasing a gook.

*Infantryman Salvador Gonzalez's Letter Home, 1969*

#### ***Vietnamization and U.S. Withdrawal***

Nixon promoted a policy of **Vietnamization** of the war, promising to withdraw U.S. troops gradually and hand over management of the war effort to the South Vietnamese. Although Nixon made good on his promise, he also illegally expanded the geographic scope of the war by authorizing the bombing of Viet Cong sites in the neutral nations

"General Nguyen Ngoc Loan  
executing a Viet Cong  
prisoner in Saigon"  
Famous Tet Offensive Photo



of **Cambodia and Laos**, all without the knowledge or consent of the U.S. Congress. The revelation of these illegal actions, along with the publication of the secret **Pentagon Papers** in US newspapers in 1971, caused an enormous scandal in the United States and forced Nixon to push for a peace settlement. These papers revealed that the U.S. Army, as well as presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, had authorized a number of covert actions that increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam unbeknownst to the American public. The government tried to block the publication of these papers under the guise of “national security”, but the Supreme Court ruled in *New York Times v. US* that the government must prove an immediate threat to national security to censor the papers.

### ***SOURCE H***

The defense of freedom is everybody’s business – not just America’s business. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened. In the previous administration, we Americanized the war in Vietnam. In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace. And now we have begun to see the results of this long-overdue change in American policy in Vietnam. After five years of Americans going into Vietnam, we are finally bringing men home. Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat.

*From an address to the American people by President Nixon, November 3, 1969. The policy outlined was in keeping with the Nixon Doctrine first formulated at Guam in July 1969.*



## Task 7

1. Read the End of Vietnam
2. Answer Questions on Worksheet

### End of Vietnam

#### *Congress's Response*

Outraged by the unauthorized invasion of Cambodia and by the double scandal from the My Lai Massacre and the Pentagon Papers, many in Congress took steps to exert more control over the war and to appease the equally angry public. The Senate voted to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to reduce the military's unchecked spending power (although the House of Representatives did not follow suit). Congress also reduced the number of years drafted soldiers needed to serve in the army. Finally, the **Twenty-Sixth Amendment** was ratified in 1971 to lower the U.S. voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, on the grounds that the young men serving in Vietnam should have a say in which politicians were running the war.

#### *The War Powers Resolution*

In July 1973, Congress and the American public learned the full extent of the secret U.S. military campaigns in Cambodia. Testimony in congressional hearings revealed that Nixon and the military had been secretly bombing Cambodia heavily since 1969, even though the president and Joint Chiefs of Staff had repeatedly denied the charge. When the news broke, Nixon switched tactics and began bombing Cambodia openly despite extreme public disapproval. Angry, Congress mustered enough votes to pass the November 1973 **War Powers Resolution** over Nixon's veto. The resolution restricted presidential powers during wartime by requiring the president to notify Congress upon launching any U.S. military action abroad. If Congress did not approve of the action, it would have to conclude within sixty to ninety days. In effect, this act made the president accountable to Congress for his actions abroad. Congress also ended the draft in 1973 and stipulated that the military henceforth consist solely of paid volunteers. Both the War Powers Resolution and the conversion to an all-volunteer army helped quiet antiwar protesters.

#### *The Cease-fire and the Fall of Saigon*

After secret negotiations between U.S. emissary **Henry A. Kissinger** and North Vietnamese representative **Le Duc Tho** in 1972, Nixon engaged in diplomatic maneuvering with China and the USSR—and stepped up bombing of North Vietnam—to pressure the North Vietnamese into a settlement. The **Paris Peace Accords** were finally signed in January 1973, and the last U.S. military personnel left Vietnam in March 1973. Under the terms of the agreement, Nixon pledged to withdraw all remaining military personnel from Vietnam

and allow the tens of thousands of NVA troops in South Vietnam to remain there, despite the fact that they controlled a quarter of South Vietnamese territory. However, Nixon promised to intervene if North Vietnam moved against the South. In exchange, North Vietnam promised that



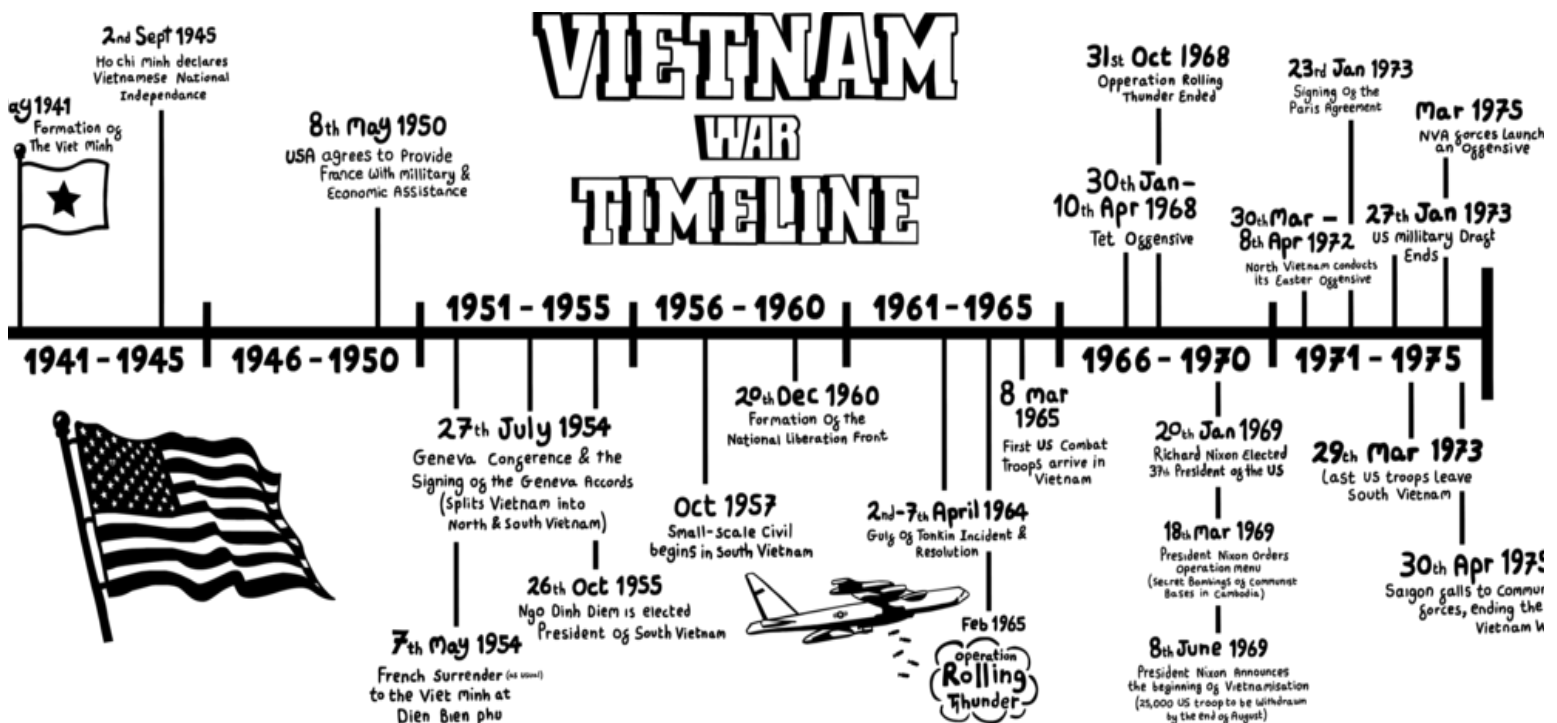
elections would be held to determine the fate of the entire country. Although Nixon insisted that the agreement brought “**peace with honor**,” South Vietnamese leaders complained that the terms amounted to little more than a surrender for South Vietnam. The U.S. government continued to fund the South Vietnamese army, but this funding quickly dwindled. Meanwhile, as President Nixon became embroiled in the **Watergate scandal** that led to his resignation in August 1974, North Vietnamese forces stepped up their attacks on the South and finally launched an all-out offensive in the spring of 1975. On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, who reunited the country under Communist rule as the **Socialist Republic of Vietnam**, ending the Vietnam War.

**SOURCE I**

We are in a new phase. The United States has withdrawn its troops in accordance with the Paris Agreement, which it regards as a victory after suffering many defeats with no way out. Now, there is no way that they could intervene again by sending in troops. They may provide air and naval support, but that cannot decide victory or defeat. I’m kidding, but also telling the truth, when I say that the Americans would not come back even if you offered them candy.



*From a report to the Politburo of North Vietnam by Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister, December 18, 1974. After years of talks in Paris, a peace settlement was reached in January 1973.*



## Task 1 Worksheet

1. What is French Indochina?
2. Why was Ho Chi Minh fighting the French? What was the name of his organization?
3. What happened at Dien Bien Phu?
4. Study Source A. What is the message of this cartoon? Explain your answer.

## Task 2 Worksheet

1. What did McNamara and Johnson want Congress and the public to know about what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2?
2. Why do you think Johnson and McNamara were so worried about controlling what the public heard about the incident?
3. Why did President Johnson and Secretary McNamara want to believe the early reports which erroneously claimed that the U.S. was attacked by North Vietnam on August 4?
4. Consider Johnson's argument that military action will promote peace and freedom in Southeast Asia. Why does Johnson use this language and what does that reasoning have to do with American efforts to contain communism?

### **Task 3 Worksheet**

1. Of the 4 reasons for war, which do you think was the most important to Lyndon B. Johnson and why?
2. Describe Johnson's reasons why America is fighting in Vietnam?
3. What does Johnson state the objective is for the US in Vietnam?
4. How did the United States' foreign policy relate to an increased presence in Vietnam?

### **Task 4 Worksheet**

1. What group organized resistance to Diem's regime? List both names for the organization.
2. What was the Gulf of Tonkin resolution? Why was it passed/ why is it significant?
3. What was the purpose of Operation Rolling Thunder? Did it work?
4. What strategies did the United States use in Vietnam? Why did they believe they would work?
5. Why was the Ho Chi Minh Trail significant?



### **Task 5 Worksheet**

1. What is the Creditability Gap? Who was the silent majority?
2. Study Source C. How far does this advertisement reflect public attitudes in the war in Vietnam?
3. Study Source D. How far does this source agree about public opinion in America on the war in Vietnam?
4. Study Source E. What does this poster tell you about Vietcong tactics?

### **Task 6 Worksheet**

1. What was the Tet Offensive?
2. Study Source F. To what extent can the account of the soldier in Source F help you to understand the actions of the soldiers in the My Lai Massacre?
3. Study Source G. How does the soldier describe life in Vietnam?
4. What was Vietnamization?

