

17.2 After the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, President Johnson began to shift U.S. military efforts in Vietnam into high gear. But America's leaders and soldiers soon found themselves stuck in a deadly quagmire with no quick victory in sight. The war began to weaken the economy, divide the American people, and erode the nation's morale.



>> An American B-52 bombs North Vietnamese supply lines and military installations in Operation Rolling Thunder. **Make Predictions** Would the superior firepower of the United States determine the outcome of the war?

Interactive Flipped Video

America's Role Escalates

Escalation of Forces in Vietnam

In February 1965, President Johnson dramatically altered the U.S. role in the Vietnam War. In response to a Vietcong attack that killed American troops at Pleiku, Johnson ordered the start of Operation Rolling Thunder, the first sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Johnson hoped that this new strategy of intensive bombing would convince North Vietnam to stop reinforcing the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

The bombs caused widespread destruction, but they failed to convince North Vietnam to make peace. As the communist forces continued to fight, the United States committed more troops to battle them on the ground. American soldiers moved beyond their advisory roles and assumed greater combat responsibilities, while South Vietnamese troops accepted a secondary, more limited role in the war. U.S. military and civilian leaders hoped that American airstrikes, along with the troops on the ground, would eventually force the communists to the peace table.

Johnson Changes Strategies Johnson's change in strategy in 1965 stemmed primarily from the counsel of Secretary of Defense Robert

>> Objectives

Analyze the major issues and events that caused President Johnson to increase American troop strength in Vietnam.

Assess the nature of the war in Vietnam and the difficulties faced by each side.

Evaluate the effects of low morale on American troops and on the home front.

>> Key Terms

- William Westmoreland
- napalm
- hawk
- dove

McNamara and General **William Westmoreland**, the American commander in South Vietnam. These two advisors believed that the United States needed to increase its military presence in Vietnam and do more of the fighting in order to win the war. Operation Rolling Thunder and increased troop commitments fulfilled this need to "Americanize" the war effort.

Beginning in March 1965, U.S. airstrikes hammered North Vietnam and Vietcong strong points in South Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1973, American pilots dropped more than 6 million tons of bombs on enemy positions—almost three times the tonnage dropped by all the combatants during World War II. In addition to conventional bombs, American pilots dropped napalm and sprayed Agent Orange. **Napalm** is a jellied gasoline which was dropped in large canisters that exploded on impact, covering large areas in flames. It clung to anything it touched and was difficult to extinguish. Agent Orange is an herbicide meant to kill plant life. U.S.

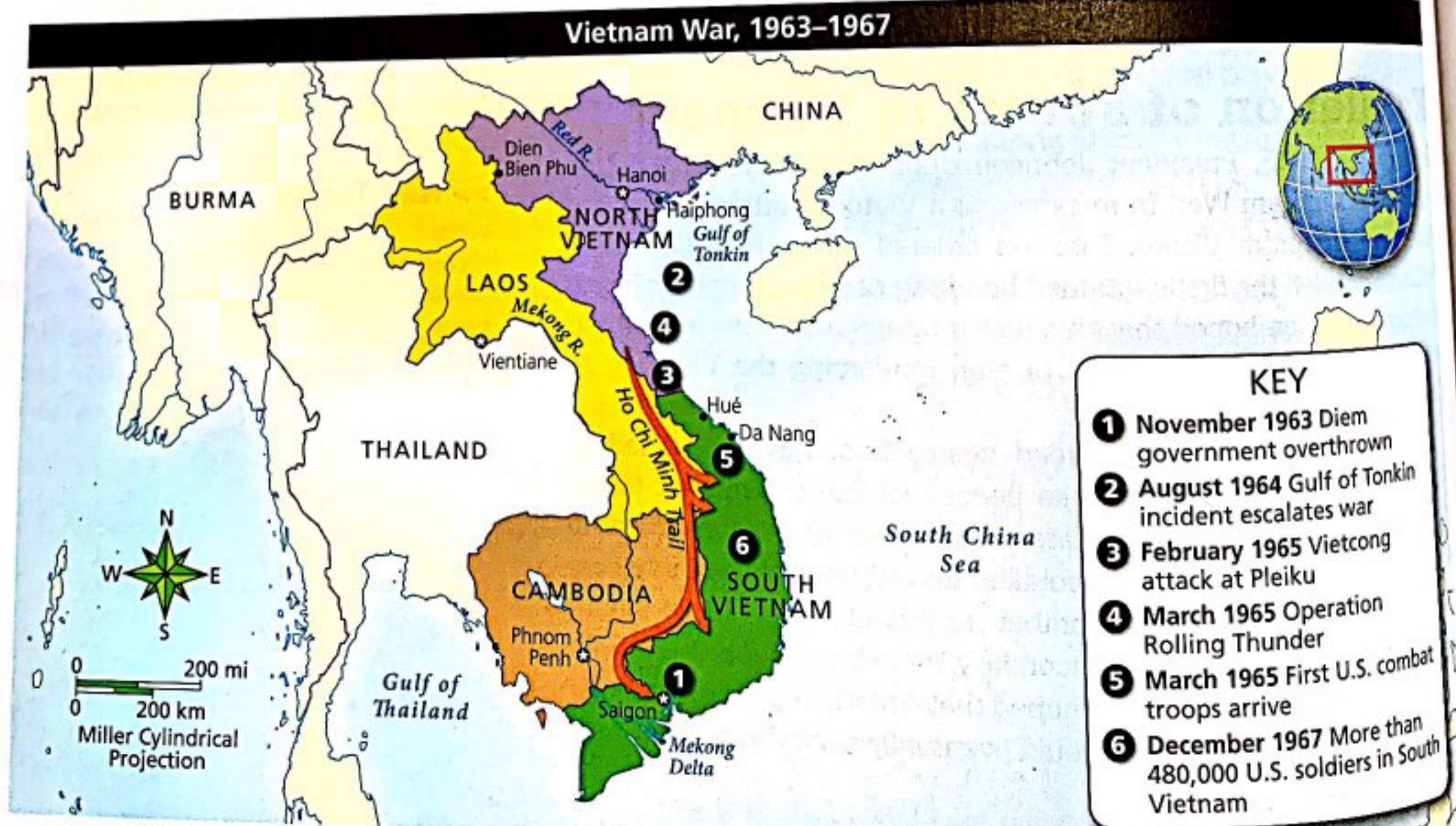
forces used it to defoliate forest areas that might conceal enemy fighters and to disrupt the enemy's food supply. Almost half of South Vietnam's forested areas were sprayed at least once, and the ecological impact was devastating. There also may have been a hidden human cost, as many scientists believe that Agent Orange causes cancers and other physical problems.

As the war continued, U.S. troops landed in South Vietnam. On March 8, 1965, U.S. Marines arrived to defend the airbase at Da Nang. They were soon followed by other troops. The soldiers accepted a wide range of missions. Some guarded bases. Others conducted search-and-destroy missions to kill as many Vietcong guerrillas as they could. Helicopters ferried commandos to and from remote locations for quick strikes against enemy positions.

Vietcong Tactics and Strategies Large-scale battles against Vietcong or North Vietnamese Army units were not typical of America's strategy in Vietnam. American soldiers generally fought lightly armed Vietcong guerrillas in small engagements.

Ho Chi Minh's military doctrine hinged on fighting only when victory was assured, which meant never fighting on his opponents' terms. He compared his troops to a tiger, while the Americans were like an elephant. If the tiger stands still, the elephant will crush it. But if the tiger keeps moving and occasionally jumps on the elephant to take a bite out of it, the elephant will slowly bleed to death.

During the war, the Vietcong behaved like Ho's tiger. They traveled light, often carrying just a rifle and a few handfuls of rice. They hid in tunnels during the day and emerged at night to ambush American patrols. They infiltrated American bases and set off explosives. They

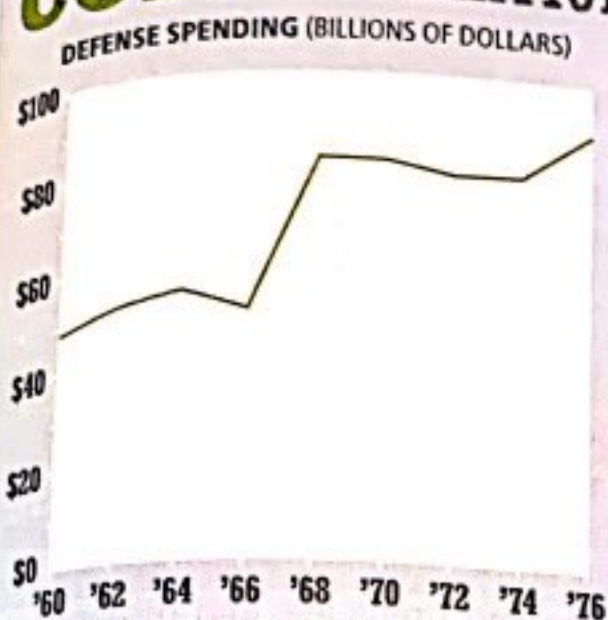


>> **Analyze Maps** Based on the information in the map, what advantage did the Ho Chi Minh Trail give the Vietcong?

Interactive Chart

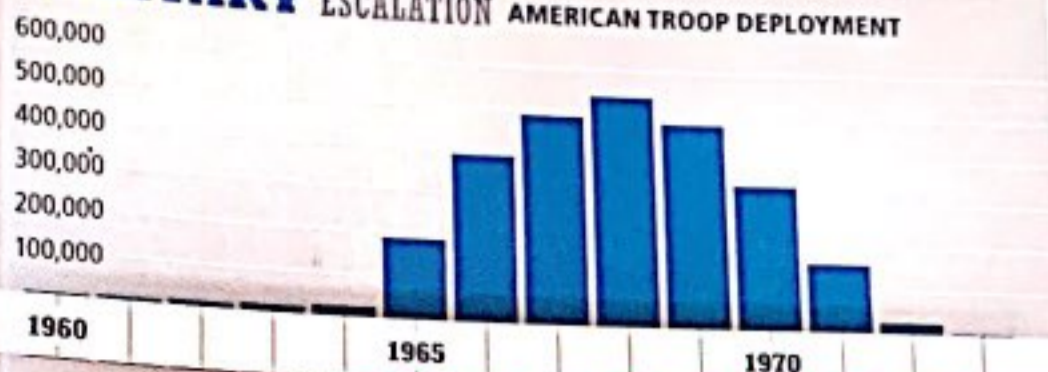
VIETNAM EFFECTS OF ESCALATION

COST ESCALATION



Sources: Office of Budget and Management, Fiscal Year 2012 Historical Tables; National Archives, Military Records

MILITARY ESCALATION AMERICAN TROOP DEPLOYMENT



FATALITY ESCALATION AMERICAN CASUALTIES



Analyze Data What does the data reveal about the war during the years 1965 to 1968?

set booby traps that maimed and crippled American troops. Their strategy was to wear the Americans down. The leaders of North Vietnam and the Vietcong remained convinced that if they could just avoid losing the war, the Americans would eventually leave.

American Casualties Escalate American strategy during this stage of the war yielded limited results. U.S. bombers did disrupt North Vietnamese industry and slow the movement of supplies to the Vietcong. But when the communists did not sue for peace, American troop commitments and battlefield deaths escalated rapidly. By the end of 1965, there were 184,300 U.S. troops in Vietnam, and only 636 American soldiers had died in the war. Three years later, there were more than 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, and the number of American dead had risen to more than 30,000.

Each year, the war claimed more American lives and cost more American dollars. But at the end of each year, the United States seemed no closer to success. America's mission was to help South Vietnam build a stable noncommunist nation and thereby win the "hearts and minds" of its citizens. But corruption plagued the South Vietnamese administrative structure. Outside of the major cities, the government enjoyed little support. Although American forces won most of the larger battles, they did not achieve a successful end to the war. By 1967, the war had devolved into a stalemate. Some U.S. critics of the war

compared it to a quagmire—muddy terrain that sinks underfoot and is difficult to exit.

? INFER Why did General Westmoreland and Secretary of Defense McNamara want to "Americanize" the war?

Patriotism, Heroism, and Sinking Morale

For American soldiers in the field, the Vietnam War presented difficult challenges that demanded courage and patience. Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War did not emphasize territorial acquisition. The United States and its allies did not invade North Vietnam, march on Ho Chi Minh's capital of Hanoi, or attempt to destroy the communist regime. As in the Korean War, the United States was wary of triggering both Chinese and Soviet entry into the conflict. Instead, U.S. forces supported the survival and development of South Vietnam, which was besieged by the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies. In this fight, U.S. troops could never fully tell their friends from their enemies. Yet from the outset, they faced the dangers of Vietnam's battlefields with dedication and bravery.

New Battlefield Dangers and Guerrilla Warfare Although American troops won numerous battles,

American ground troops on March 8, 1965, U.S. the airbase at Da Nang. her troops. The soldiers missions. Some guarded h-and-destroy missions guerrillas as they could. s to and from remote st enemy positions.

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—David Ross, United States Army medic



>> Lieutenant Commander Dorothy Ryan, a Navy Nurse aboard the hospital ship USS *Repose*, was one of about 10,000 American women who bravely served in Vietnam.

they could not win the war outright. The problem was that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese avoided significant engagements. Rather than expose themselves to superior American firepower, the communists employed guerrilla warfare tactics, fighting smaller skirmishes where their small-unit abilities and their knowledge of the landscape bettered their chances for victory.

U.S. forces often had no alternative but to fight indecisive battles in the jungles, rice paddies, and mountains of Vietnam. Most of these battlefields abounded with natural cover. Clad in black clothing, Vietcong gunmen would spring out of the dense foliage, attack with automatic rifles and grenades, and disappear back into the landscape. Much of this fighting took place at night, which reduced the effectiveness of American planes, artillery, and troop tactics.

American Soldiers Fulfill Their Duty

Despite the trials of war, American soldiers adapted to adverse conditions in Vietnam and fought with the same intensity that U.S. forces had shown in World Wars I and II. Many fought to prevent the spread of communism. Some fought to protect villagers in South Vietnam and win their trust and respect. Others fought because their country was at war, and they felt it was their duty. A medic in the First Infantry Division explained his reason for going to Vietnam:

I volunteered. . . . Ever since the American Revolution my family had people in all the different wars, and that was always the thing—when your country needs you, you go. You don't ask a lot of questions.

—David Ross, United States Army medic

Later, many did ask questions about America's involvement in the war, but overwhelmingly while they were in Vietnam, the soldiers met their duties with courage. More than 58,000 of them gave their lives for their country.

Women also displayed courage and valor. About 10,000 American military

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—Lynda V

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Impact of the War on the U.S. Economy, 1968

INFLATION	Reached 4%
TAXES	Income tax increased by 10%
GDP (GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT)	Reached a high of 9.5% devoted to the war effort
GREAT SOCIETY INITIATIVES	President Lyndon B. Johnson's reform programs weakened by rising costs of the war: \$94.3 billion spent on the war, \$14.9 billion spent on welfare
EDUCATION	Out of the \$277 billion spent by the U.S., 16% was directed toward education, 34% toward the war effort

>> Analyze Data In your opinion, which two effects had the most negative impact and why?

women served in Vietnam during the war. Most female military personnel were nurses.

Not only did they face danger working close to the front, but they also had to cope with the emotional toll of constantly working with injured and dying soldiers and civilians.

Lynda Van Devanter volunteered to go to Vietnam and spent a year there as a nurse. Like other nurses, she confronted war and death on a daily basis. However, on one occasion she had to deliver a baby. She later recalled:

It was creation of life in the midst of all that destruction. And creation of life restored your sanity. . . . Those were the things that kept you going. That there was life coming. There was still hope.

—Lynda Van Devanter, United States Army nurse

Questioning the Cause As the war lengthened, many Americans began to question U.S. involvement. The earliest soldiers in Vietnam had been volunteers, men committed to the fight against communism. But by the end of 1965, most American soldiers in Vietnam had been drafted into military service, and they were not as certain that preserving the government in South Vietnam was crucial to American interests. They

sensed that many South Vietnamese people were indifferent—if not openly hostile—to their own nation. Increasingly, it seemed that Americans were dying to defend a nation whose people were unwilling to die to defend themselves.

? DESCRIBE What relatively successful tactic did North Vietnamese and Vietcong fighters employ against U.S. forces?

Doubt Grows on the Home Front

The lack of progress toward victory in Vietnam also led to doubt in the United States. When President Johnson had begun to send troops to war, Americans had expected a relatively quick victory. After all, the United States was a militarily powerful, technologically advanced country, and North Vietnam was a poor country with comparatively little technology. Over the next few years, the Johnson administration kept asserting that an American victory was close at hand. But when that did not come, many began to question the President's foreign policy.

Impact of Defense Spending on the Economy The war strained government finances. President Johnson's Great Society plan called for enormous domestic spending to eliminate poverty, improve education and medical care, and fight racial discrimination. The costs of fighting a war on the other side of the world

were just as mammoth. Although massive government spending lowered the unemployment rate, it also led to rising prices and inflation. The combination of heavy government spending, rising prices, and inflation forced Johnson to raise taxes. Ultimately, Johnson had to cut back on his Great Society reform initiatives to help pay for the war.

An Antiwar Movement Emerges As long as America's involvement in Vietnam had been small and relatively inexpensive, few politicians voiced serious opposition. Congress offered bipartisan support for the Vietnam policies of Johnson's predecessors. Soon after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, however, Congressional support began to waver over the President's escalation of the war.

Beginning in 1967, Congress—and eventually most of the nation—divided into two camps: hawks and doves. The mostly conservative **hawks** supported Johnson's war policy. Believing strongly in the containment of communism and the domino theory, they accepted rising troop levels, escalating costs, and increasing numbers of battlefield deaths. For the hawks, Vietnam was a crucial front in the Cold War. **Doves**, however, broke with Johnson's war policy. A diverse group that included liberal politicians, pacifists, student radicals, and civil rights leaders, doves questioned the war on both moral and strategic grounds. For them, the conflict was a localized civil war, not a vital Cold War battleground.

Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, emerged as the

early leader of the doves in Congress. A Democrat, who had supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Fulbright soon came to believe that the war in Vietnam was a national civil war, not a Cold War conflict directed from Moscow or Beijing. In 1967 and 1968, Fulbright held public hearings on the war, providing a platform for critics of the conflict.

? RECALL How did the growing belief that the Vietnam War was not a vital, Cold War conflict affect American society?

ASSESSMENT

- 1. Distinguish** Discuss the relationship between U.S. troops and South Vietnamese troops during the Vietnam War.
- 2. Identify Cause and Effect** Explain how Operation Rolling Thunder represented a change in the U.S. war strategy.
- 3. Compare and Contrast** Explain the advantages that North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers had over U.S. soldiers during the war.
- 4. Generate Explanations** Explain the respective goals of the United States and North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.
- 5. Determine Point of View** Discuss reasons that some Americans opposed the Vietnam War.

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