

Vietnam War Protests

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Vietnam War protests began among peace activists and leftist intellectuals on college campuses, but gained national prominence in 1965, after the United States began bombing North Vietnam in earnest. Antiwar marches and other protests, such as the ones organized by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), attracted a widening base of support over the next several years, peaking in early 1968 after the successful Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese troops proved that war's end was nowhere in sight.

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1. Antiwar Movement Begins

In August 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the [Gulf of Tonkin](#), and President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) ordered the retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. By the time U.S. planes began regular bombings of North Vietnam in February 1965, some critics had begun to question the government's assertion that it was fighting a democratic war to liberate the South Vietnamese people from [Communist](#) aggression.



How WWII and Vietnam Veterans Were Treated Differently

The antiwar movement began mostly on college campuses, as members of the leftist organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began organizing "teach-ins" to express their opposition to the way in which it was being conducted.

Though the vast majority of the American population still supported U.S. government policy in the [Vietnam War](#), a small but outspoken minority was making its voice heard by the end of 1965, especially after Johnson began an increasingly aggressive air and ground war in Vietnam.

This vocal minority included many students as well as prominent artists, intellectuals and members of the "hippie" movement, i.e., the growing number of mostly young people who rejected authority and embraced the counterculture.

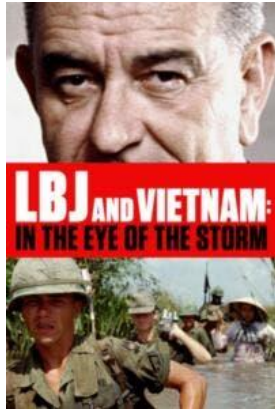
Did you know? Boxer Muhammad Ali was one prominent American who resisted being drafted into service during the Vietnam War. Ali, then heavyweight champion of the world, declared himself a "conscientious objector," earning a prison sentence (later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court) and a three-year ban from boxing.

2. Widespread Disillusionment

By November 1967, American troop strength in Vietnam was approaching 500,000 and U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded. The Vietnam War was costing the United States some \$25 billion per year, and disillusionment was beginning to reach greater sections of the taxpaying public.

More casualties were reported in Vietnam every day, even as U.S. commanders demanded more troops. Under the [draft system of conscription](#), as many as 40,000 young men were called into service every month, adding fuel to the fire of the antiwar movement.

On October 21, 1967, one of the most prominent antiwar demonstrations took place as some 100,000 protesters gathered at the [Lincoln Memorial](#)—around 30,000 of them continued in a march on the [Pentagon](#) later that night.



Though Eisenhower and Kennedy charted its course, the Vietnam War quickly became known as Lyndon Johnson's war. Hear phone conversations that reveal his inner torment over the conflict that would become his unwanted legacy.

40 HISTORY Vault: LBJ and Vietnam: In the Eye of the Storm

After a brutal confrontation with the soldiers and U.S. Marshals protecting the building, hundreds of demonstrators were arrested. One of them was the author Norman Mailer, who chronicled the events in his book "The Armies of the Night," published the following year to widespread acclaim.

45 Also in 1967, the antiwar movement got a big boost when the civil rights leader [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) went public with his opposition to the war on moral grounds, condemning the war's diversion of federal funds from domestic programs as well as the disproportionate number of Black casualties in relation to the total number of soldiers killed in the war.

At a march of over 5,000 protestors in [Chicago, Illinois](#), on March 25, 1967, King called the Vietnam War "a blasphemy against all that America stands for."

50 3. Vietnam War Protest Songs

The Vietnam War protest inspired many popular songs that became an anthem for that generation. Phil Ochs wrote "What Are You Fighting For?" in 1963 and "I Ain't Marching Anymore" in 1965. Other songs whose very titles were a protest themselves included Pete Seeger's "Bring 'Em Home" (1966) and [Joan Baez](#)'s "Saigon Bride" (1967).

55 [Nina Simone](#)'s "Backlash Blues" (1967) took a [civil rights](#) poem by [Langston Hughes](#) and adapted it into a protest of Vietnam: "Raise my taxes/Freeze my wages/Send my son to Vietnam." [Marvin Gaye](#)'s "What's Going On?" from 1971 went on to be one of the most popular songs of all time.

[John Lennon](#)'s first song after leaving [the Beatles](#), "Give Peace a Chance," hit airwaves in 1966. "Imagine," from 1971, has transcended the Vietnam era to be a timeless song of peace and unity.



60 On March 8, 1965, two battalions of U.S. Marines landed on beaches of Da Nang, marking the first official engagement of American troops in the Vietnam War. Over the next several years, as the United States escalated its ill-fated involvement in that conflict, hundreds of thousands of Americans joined in mass protests across the country, [...]Read more

65 How the Vietnam War Empowered the Hippie Movement

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75 **A Timeline of U.S. Anti-War Movements**

The history of anti-war protests in the United States is as old as the country itself. Every war in American history—even the one that spawned the country—generated internal dissent from pacifists who rejected all wars and from citizens who objected to specific military conflicts on moral, religious, political and economic grounds. The following is a [...]Read more

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7 Iconic Photos From the Vietnam War Era

Many of the reporters and photographers who covered the conflict in Vietnam came from a new generation of journalists. Coverage of earlier wars was heavily influenced by the government, says Susan Moeller, a journalism professor and author of *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat*, but in Vietnam, the journalistic mission was different. “There was no [...]Read more

85 **4. Political Consequences of Vietnam War Protests**

The launch of the [Tet Offensive](#) by North Vietnamese communist troops in January 1968, and its success against U.S. and South Vietnamese troops, sent waves of shock and discontent across the home front and sparked a most intense period of antiwar protests. By February 1968, a Gallup poll showed only 35 percent of the population approved of Johnson’s handling of the war and a full 50 percent disapproved.

Joining the antiwar demonstrations by this time were members of the organization [Vietnam Veterans Against the War](#), many of whom were in wheelchairs and on crutches. The sight of these men on television throwing away the medals they had won during the war did much to win people over to the antiwar cause.

95 After many 1968 [New Hampshire](#) primary voters rallied behind the antiwar [Democrat Eugene McCarthy](#), President Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection.

Later that year, [Hubert Humphrey](#) accepted the Democratic nomination for president at the [1968 Democratic Convention](#), held at Chicago’s International Amphitheatre. Meanwhile, outside the convention hall, 10,000 antiwar demonstrators showed up, clashing violently with security forces assembled by Mayor [Richard Daley](#).

Humphrey lost the 1968 presidential election to [Richard M. Nixon](#), who promised in his campaign to restore “law and order”—a reference to conflict over antiwar protests as well as the rioting that followed [King’s assassination](#) in 1968—more effectively than Johnson had.

5. Silent Majority

105 The following year, Nixon claimed in a famous speech that antiwar protesters constituted a small—albeit vocal—minority that should not be allowed to drown out the “silent majority” of Americans. Nixon’s war policies divided the nation still further, however: In December 1969, the government instituted the first U.S. draft lottery since [World War II](#), inciting a vast amount of controversy and causing many young men to flee to Canada to avoid conscription.

110 Tensions ran higher than ever, spurred on by mass demonstrations and incidents of violence by officials such those at [Kent State](#) in May 1970, when National Guard troops shot into a group of protesters demonstrating against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, killing four students.

At the Mayday Protest in 1971, thousands of antiwar protestors tried to shut down Washington, D.C., completely, all but crippling the U.S. government. Traffic was stopped for a few hours, and [CIA](#) director Richard Helms later remarked that Mayday was “one of the things that was putting increasing pressure on the [Nixon] administration to try and find some way to get out of the war.”

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6. Vietnam War Ends

120 As antiwar fervor grew, in mid-1971, [Daniel Ellsberg](#) brought about the publication of the [Pentagon Papers](#)—which revealed previously confidential details about the war’s conduct—and misconduct by government and military officials. Ellsberg called the Pentagon Papers “evidence of a quarter-century of aggression, broken treaties, deceptions, stolen elections, lies and murder.”

These and other revelations caused more and more Americans to doubt the accountability of the U.S. government and the integrity of the U.S. military establishment.

125 Finally, in response to an almost overwhelming antiwar mandate, Nixon announced the effective end to U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia in January 1973. The [Paris Peace Accords](#) were signed on January 27, 1973, effectively ending the Vietnam War.

7. Sources

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