

US tactics in Vietnam, 1965–1972

SOURCE 41



People in the South Vietnamese city of Hue sort through the wreckage of their homes after a US bombing raid in 1968.

Bombing

On 7 February 1965 the USA launched Operation Rolling Thunder. Rolling Thunder involved extensive bombing raids on military and industrial targets in North Vietnam. It was the beginning of an air offensive that was to last until 1972. The list of targets was soon expanded to include towns and cities in North and South Vietnam. The list also included sites in Laos and Cambodia along the Ho Chi Minh trail. More bombs were dropped on North Vietnam than were dropped in the whole of the Second World War on Germany and Japan.

To some extent bombing was effective.

- It certainly damaged North Vietnam's war effort and it disrupted supply routes.
- It enabled the USA to strike at Communist forces even when it was reducing US ground forces in Vietnam after 1969.
- From 1970 to 1972, intense bombing campaigns against Hanoi (North Vietnam's capital) and the port of Haiphong forced the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table.

However, US air power could not defeat the Communists – it could only slow them down. The Viet Cong continued to operate its supply lines. Even after major air raids on North Vietnam in 1972, the Communists were still able to launch a major assault on the South.

The cost of the air war was horrendous. The Communists shot down 14,000 US and South Vietnamese aircraft. In 1967 the American *Life* magazine calculated that it cost the USA \$400,000 to kill one Viet Cong fighter, a figure that included 75 bombs and 400 artillery shells.

Chemical weapons

The US developed a powerful chemical weapon called Agent Orange. It was a sort of highly toxic 'weedkiller'. It was used to destroy the jungle where the Viet Cong hid. The Americans used 82 million litres of Agent Orange to spray thousands of square kilometres of jungle. Napalm was another widely-used chemical weapon. It destroyed jungles where guerrillas might hide. It also burned through skin to the bone. Many civilians and soldiers were also killed by these chemical weapons.

SOURCE 42



A ten-year-old Vietnamese girl runs naked after tearing her burning clothes from her body following a napalm attack. This photograph became one of the most enduring images of the war.

- 1 'Mixed results.' Is this a fair summary of the effectiveness of bombing in the Vietnam War? Explain your answer.
- 2 Would you say the US ground forces in Vietnam were more or less effective than the air forces? Explain your answer.

Search and destroy

Bombing could not defeat a guerrilla army. The US commander General Westmoreland developed a policy of search and destroy. He established secure and heavily defended US bases in the south of the country and near to the coasts. From here, US and South Vietnamese forces launched search-and-destroy raids from helicopters. They would descend on a village and destroy any Viet Cong forces they found. Soldiers had to send back reports of body counts.

Search-and-destroy missions did kill Viet Cong soldiers, but there were problems.

- The raids were often based on inadequate information.
- Inexperienced US troops often walked into traps.
- Innocent villages were mistaken for Viet Cong strongholds.
- Civilian casualties were extremely high in these raids. For every Viet Cong weapon captured by search-and-destroy, there was a body count of six. Many of these were innocent civilians.
- Search-and-destroy tactics made the US and South Vietnamese forces very unpopular with the peasants. It pushed them towards supporting the Viet Cong.

SOURCE 43

An increasing number of recruits scored so low on the standardised intelligence tests that they would have been excluded from the normal peacetime army. The tour of duty in Vietnam was one year. Soldiers were most likely to die in their first month. The large majority of deaths took place in the first six months. Just as a soldier began gaining experience, he was sent home. A rookie army which constantly rotated inexperienced men was pitted against experienced guerrillas on their home ground.

From *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Bilton, 1992. The average age of US combat troops in Vietnam was only 19. Many recruits had just left school. This was their first experience of war.

SOURCE 44



US troops on a search-and-destroy mission in Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive, 1968 – a turning point

In 1968 the Communists launched a major offensive. During the Tet New Year holiday, Viet Cong fighters attacked over 100 cities and other military targets. One Viet Cong commando unit tried to capture the US embassy in Saigon. US forces had to fight to regain control room by room. Around 4500 fighters tied down a much larger US and South Vietnamese force in Saigon for two days.

In many ways the Tet Offensive was a disaster for the Communists. They hoped that the people of South Vietnam would rise up and join them. They didn't. The Viet Cong lost around 10,000 experienced fighters and were badly weakened by it.

However, the Tet Offensive proved to be a turning point in the war because it raised hard questions about the war in the USA.

- There were nearly 500,000 troops in Vietnam and the USA was spending \$20 billion a year on the war. So why had the Communists been able to launch a major offensive that took US forces completely by surprise?
- US and South Vietnamese forces quickly retook the towns captured in the offensive, but in the process they used enormous amounts of artillery and air power. Many civilians were killed. The ancient city of Hue was destroyed (see Source 41). Was this right?

- 3 Why was the Tet Offensive a turning point? Explain your answer.

The Peace Movement in the USA

SOURCE 45

Vietnam is thousands of miles from the USA . . . Contrary to the 1954 Geneva conference, the USA has ceaselessly intervened in Vietnam. The US government has committed war crimes . . . Half a million US troops have resorted to inhuman weapons . . . Napalm, toxic chemicals and gases have been used to massacre our people, destroy our crops and raze our villages to the ground . . . US aircraft have dropped thousands of bombs destroying towns, villages, hospitals, schools. We will never submit to force; never accept talks under threat of bombs.

Ho Chi Minh speaking in 1967.

SOURCE 46

One does not use napalm on villages and hamlets sheltering civilians if one is attempting to persuade these people of the rightness of one's cause. One does not defoliate [destroy the vegetation off] the country and deform its people with chemicals if one is attempting to persuade them of the foe's evil nature.

An American comments on US policy failure in Vietnam.

For a war on such a scale the USA had to have the support of the American public, but it was increasingly difficult to keep it. Public opinion in the USA was turning against the war even before the Tet Offensive. After it, the war became very unpopular. Many Americans felt deeply uncomfortable with what was going on in Vietnam.

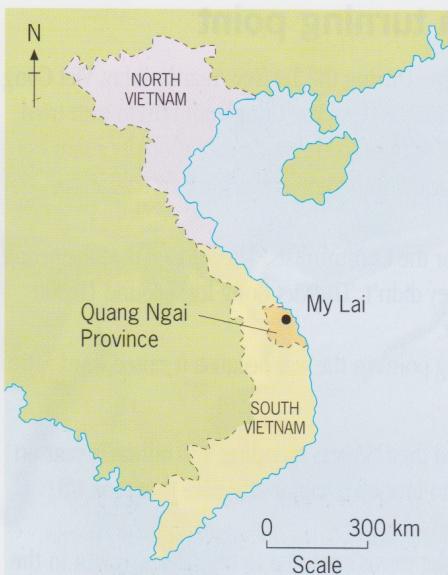
The Vietnam War was a media war. Thousands of television, radio and newspaper reporters, and a vast army of photographers sent back to the USA and Europe reports and pictures of the fighting. Television showed prisoners being tortured or executed (see Source 47), or women and children watching with horror as their house was set on fire.

SOURCE 47



A Viet Cong suspect is executed in the street by a South Vietnamese policeman in February 1968. Televisions beamed this scene into the living rooms of the USA. It deeply shocked the American people.

SOURCE 48



The Quang Ngai area of Vietnam.

The media showed crying children burned by American napalm bombs. Was this why 900,000 young Americans had been drafted? Instead of Vietnam being a symbol of a US crusade against Communism, it had become a symbol of defeat and confusion. There were anti-war protests all over the country. Students taunted the American President Lyndon B Johnson with the chant 'Hey Hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?' Thousands began to 'draft dodge' – refusing to serve in Vietnam when they were called up. There were hundreds of demonstrations in universities across the USA (see page 387). At the most infamous, at Kent State University in Ohio, the National Guard broke up the demonstration, killing four students. The public was horrified. The Vietnam War seemed to be making the USA unstable.

Against this background one event had a particularly devastating effect on American and international support for the war – the My Lai Massacre.

SOURCE 49

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 that village 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, they were basically doing a number on us. You didn't trust them anymore. You didn't trust anybody.

Fred Widmer, an American soldier,
speaking in 1969.

SOURCE 50

A photograph taken at My Lai on 16 March 1968.

The My Lai massacre

In March 1968, a unit of young American soldiers called Charlie Company started a search-and-destroy mission in the Quang Ngai region of South Vietnam. They had been told that in the My Lai area there was a Viet Cong headquarters, and 200 Viet Cong guerrillas. The soldiers had been ordered to destroy all houses, dwellings and livestock. They had been told that all the villagers would have left for market because it was a Saturday. Most of them were under the impression that they had been ordered to kill everyone they found in the village.

Early in the morning of 16 March, Charlie Company arrived in My Lai. In the next four hours, between 300 and 400 civilians were killed. They were mostly women, children and old men. Some were killed while they worked in their fields. Many of them were mown down by machine-gun fire as they were herded into an irrigation ditch. Others were shot in their homes. No Viet Cong were found in the village. Only three weapons were recovered.

At the time, the army treated the operation as a success. The commanding officer's report said that 20 non-combatants had been killed by accident in the attack, but the rest of the dead were recorded as being Viet Cong. The officers and men involved were praised. The event passed into army folklore. All the soldiers knew that it had taken place, but they just took it to be a normal and inevitable part of the war.

However, 12 months later, a letter arrived in the offices of 30 leading politicians and government officials in Washington. It was written by Ronald Ridenhour, an American soldier who had served in Vietnam and who personally knew many of the soldiers who took part in the massacre. He had evidence, he said, of 'something rather dark and bloody' that had occurred in My Lai – or Pinkville as the American soldiers called it. He recounted in detail all the stories he had been told about what had taken place and asked Congress to investigate.

Soon after, *Life* magazine, one of the most influential magazines in the USA, published photographs of the massacre at My Lai that had been taken by an official army photographer.

This triggered an investigation that ended in the trial for mass murder of Lieutenant William Calley. He was an officer in Charlie Company. He had personally shot many of the people in the irrigation ditch at My Lai. In September 1969 he was formally charged with murdering 109 people. Ten other members of the company and the commanding officers were also charged. The charges were too much for the army. They placed all responsibility on Calley. They denied that Calley was acting under orders. His senior officers were acquitted. After a long court case surrounded by massive media attention and publicity, in March 1971 Calley was found guilty of the murder of 22 civilians. In August he was sentenced to 20 years' hard labour. In November 1974 he was released.

The revelations about My Lai deeply shocked the American public. It was the clearest evidence that the war had gone wrong. In November 1969, almost 700,000 anti-war protesters demonstrated in Washington DC. It was the largest political protest in American history.

SOURCE 51

Most of the soldiers had never been away from home before they went into service. And they end up in Vietnam going there many of them because they thought they were going to do something courageous on behalf of their country, something which they thought was in the American ideal.

But it didn't mean slaughtering whole villages of women and children. One of my friends, when he told me about it, said: 'You know it was a Nazi kind of thing.' We didn't go there to be Nazis. At least none of the people I knew went there to be Nazis.

Written by Ronald Ridenhour.

SOURCE 52

We were not in My Lai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill ideology that is carried by – I don't know – pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh. And I wasn't in My Lai to destroy intelligent men. I was there to destroy an intangible idea. To destroy Communism.

From Lieutenant Calley's account of the event, *Body Count*, published in 1970.

FOCUS TASK

Work in pairs.

You are opponents of American involvement in Vietnam. Use the evidence in this chapter to make a poster or a leaflet putting forward your views.

You can include stories and images from pages 353–61. However, you must also include an explanation that will convince the supporters of containment that the policy is not working in Vietnam.