Lecture 2.17: Vietnam War and US Politics

JFK’s Cold War:

* One of the things that are shaping convo is cold war
* JFK is D 🡪 thinking about the 1950s 🡪 his has fear that if he does not take strong stance on communism, he will be accused of being soft on communism
  + Political ramifications
* So, before he’s in office 🡪 Fidel Castro/Che Guevarra overthrow US dictator of Cuba 1959
  + End up with communist cuba, aligns with USSR
  + First thing that JFK does as president, he starts
* 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion
  + JFK authorizes CIA trained agents (Cubans with US military support) to invade cuba
  + Fails miserably, doesn’t get anything done
* Same year that Berlin Wall is being built
  + Taking a strong stance
  + Families being divided, hardening cold war conflict
* Next year 🡪 Cuban missile crisis 1962
  + Framed to the public: US has found reconnaissance photos that soviet union is building missile sites in Cuba
  + People afraid of missiles on cuba
  + JFK has to respond quickly, puts military blockade around island of cuba to try and force soviet union to stop and take missiles away from cuba
  + This October, closest world has come to nuclear war
  + Someone going to press red button? People genuinely afraid
  + JFK good at negotiation, comes to agreement that USSR will withdraw missiles if US decides to not \_\_\_ cuba
  + Wasn’t public info for 25 years: one of things USSR was responding to was US putting missiles in Turkey 🡪 missiles in turkey was lot closer to USSR 🡪 but people didn’t know this
  + Problem maybe wouldn’t have existed if we hadn’t [put missles in turkey in the first place

1954 Geneva Convention:

* Before WWI 🡪 ho chi minh went to paris peace conference and says hey we want vietnam to be independent of French Indochina 🡪 US ignores him, he becomes more radical
* End of WWII 🡪 he returns to Vietnam, says he will fight against French colonizers here
  + From 1945-54, he leads insurgency against French colony/gov in French Indochina
  + In 1954, gives crushing blow to french military, leads to french saying we have to figure smth out
  + Bunch of international countries get together in Geneva to figure out way to solve this bc french aren’t handling this
  + Geneva convention says ok lets split Vietnam in half 🡪 north (Viet Minh) goes to ho chi minh (communist military/leadership), South goes to US and french and for people not interested in being part of communist leadership
  + Also tried to set up elections 🡪 S. Vietnam not communist, should have elections for democratic gov
  + They think if we have free election, what if people vote for communism? Instead they back S. Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and put him in power without elections
  + Decide to just cancel elections altogether
  + He’s not very popular, runs oppressive gov, not aligned with the people 🡪 creates lots of unrest 🡪 in US’s mind, what if you become communist bc gov isn’t working?? Uh oh
  + US solves problem by supporting coup against Ngo, in nov 1963 he’s assassinated and new gov led by S. Vietnamese military is established with JFK support
  + Fear of communism making all the decisions here
  + And then, couple days later, JFK assassinated 🡪 so now who deals with this? VP LBJ
  + Johnson stuck solving problem he wasn’t ready to solve

Golf of Tonkin Resolution:

* Other element of this: new S. Vietnamese gov isn’t any better than the \_\_ gov
* This pushes people towards more communist approaches bc it isn’t working
* Leads to creation of national liberation front in S. Vietnam 🡪 comm. Org to oppose new military gov 🡪 political organization
  + Viet Cong 🡪 military branch of this
  + Both groups gaining members, gaining support, bc communism does look better than this
  + Support for comm. In s. Vietnam is growing
* In aug 1964 🡪 Johnson goes to congress, says US ships have been attacked by n. Vietnamese torpedoes (twice in last 2 days) (also not clear that anything actually happened) 🡪 I’m asking you for permission to take all necessary military actions to combat comm. In Vietnam
  + Doesn’t ask for declaration of war, just military power
  + Congress response 🡪 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
    - House 414-0, senate 88-2
    - Winning by such a clear majority shows fear of communism, fear of being accused of being soft on communism
    - This is considered official start of V war

Operation Rolling Thunder:

* Johnson runs for reelection in 1964
* Promises no escalation in V
* But, early in 1965 approves operation rolling thunder to bomb NV
* Bombing becomes central strategy in V 🡪 over next 10 years, US drops two times number of bombs as all the allies did in WWII
* Strategy backfires for couple reasons:
  + When Vs lose homes and villages in bombings, it strengthens resistance to the US
    - This gives democracy a bad rep! US is bombing them!
    - Democracy bombing you, but communism isn’t 🡪 increasing resentment towards US bc you are losing family, homes, etc
  + HO chi minh and NV are very organized, so even as things are destroyed, they rebuild
    - Don’t keep NV out of commission for very long
  + Ho Chi Minh trails
    - He sends supplies + soldiers through Laos and Cambodia 🡪 if we bomb NV, not actually bombing supply lines, still able to get supplies to SV? uninterrupted

Guerilla War:

* Johnson sends first troops into V war in 1965
* 300k by 1966, 485k by 1967 🡪 getting people from draft
* Can only get out of draft by medical exemptions, in college 🡪 people who can do this are richer people, who are rich
* People in draft are disproportionately Black, low income, or other minority groups
* HCM aware he was smaller numbers and fewer supplies, so he cautions SV to not go head to head with US military
* Lets work with Guerilla war tactics
  + Small regional units coming together for surprise attacks
    - Hit and run, night attacks, then disappearing into general pop. 🡪 similar to Philippine American war
  + Some of things that allowed them to do this:
    - Viet Kong created sophisticated tunnel network so they could move around underground 🡪 had first aid, supplies, water, generated electricity, could pop up in middle of village too
    - Land mines 🡪 going out and gathering the bombs that don’t explode, harvesting explosive material, and creating land mines with the explosive material
    - Go hand in hand with booby traps
      * Safer, cheaper, can operate independently
      * Can’t be detected by mine detector
* Put all these tactics together 🡪 US scared, no like 🡪 very easy turn to racist mentality

US Tactics:

* How US responds? Turn to brutal tactics that start in basic training
* Many testimonies that in basic trainings that teachers were reinforcing dehumanization of V people
  + Stressed on killing aspect instead of the rules of war and such
  + Reduced V people to representation of letter that represented Viet Kong
  + Term “guk?” used to reference V enemy, another racial slur like “gugu” in PS war
* US turns to getting rid of the jungle bc it provides
  + Drop a lot of Napalm and Agent Orange 🡪 jelly herbicide that they use to explode the jungle
  + Covers 25% of V after the war
  + Makes water undrinkable, long lasting impacts in terms of illnesses + birth defects in later generations
  + US veterans also get sick from Agent Orange
* Forced relocations 🡪 pick up whole village, and force them to go live somewhere bc don’t know if they are enemy? But tell them that we are protecting them
* Body counts
  + How to tell if you are winning the war or not? One of thins that military turns to 🡪 body counts
  + Killed 100k V soldiers this week, we are doing well
  + But nobody is checking whose bodies they are 🡪 encourages more indiscriminate killing
* Search and destroy missions:
  + Search for anybody who is comm. Ally or Viet Kong related person and kill them
  + One mentality 🡪 burn village to save village

The Credibility Gap:

* Beginning of war 🡪 strong support for war
* Pretty quickly, popularity starts to disappear
* Public opinion shifts bc of credibility gap
* People afraid tha tJOhnson was concealing bad news from them in V war
* One of things is reality 🡪 first really televised war
  + Journalists recording with video, photograph in V war
  + Being broadcasted to Americans
  + Makes things a lot more real, lot more uncomfy
  + Journalists point to discrepancy between what Johnson says and what is actually happening
  + Johnson says we’re winning, but doesn’t seem like it
  + Comes to head in early 1968: when SV and NV comm forces combine together with massive coordinated attack on US in provincial areas WHILE people are doing lunar new year celebrations in a country that celebrates lunar new year
  + Tech. US fights back, but people say this shouldn’t have happened in the first place if US was doing well
  + So johnson, why are you not telling us the truth? Credibility gap so big and such an issue that Johnson decides to not run for reelection
  + Steps down bc he is so discredited by credibility gap