

U.S. Involvement and Escalation

MAIN IDEA

The United States sent troops to fight in Vietnam, but the war quickly turned into a stalemate.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Since Vietnam, Americans are more aware of the positive and negative effects of using U.S. troops in foreign conflicts.

Terms & Names

- Robert McNamara
- Dean Rusk
- William Westmoreland
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)
- napalm
- Agent Orange
- search-and-destroy mission
- credibility gap

One American's Story

Tim O'Brien is a novelist who has written several books about his experience in Vietnam and its lasting effects. Drafted at the age of 21, O'Brien was sent to Vietnam in August 1968. He spent the first seven months of his nearly two-year duty patrolling the fields outside of Chu Lai, a seacoast city in South Vietnam. O'Brien described one of the more nerve-racking experiences of the war: walking through the fields and jungles, many of which were filled with land mines and booby traps.

A PERSONAL VOICE TIM O'BRIEN

“You do some thinking. You hallucinate. You look ahead a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen. Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream and fall silent? Will you be afraid to look at your own body, afraid of the sight of your own red flesh and white bone? . . .

It is not easy to fight this sort of self-defeating fear, but you try. You decide to be ultra-careful—the hard-nosed realistic approach. You try to second-guess the mine. Should you put your foot to that flat rock or the clump of weeds to its rear? Paddy dike or water? You wish you were Tarzan, able to swing on the vines. You trace the footprints of the men to your front. You give up when he curses you for following too closely; better one man dead than two.”

—quoted in *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam 1965–1972*

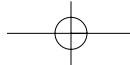
Deadly traps were just some of the obstacles that U.S. troops faced. As the infiltration of American ground troops into Vietnam failed to score a quick victory, a mostly supportive U.S. population began to question its government's war policy.



▲ Vietnam's terrain was often treacherous, such as the thick jungles and rivers these U.S. soldiers encountered in 1966.

Johnson Increases U.S. Involvement

Much of the nation supported Lyndon Johnson's determination to contain communism in Vietnam. In the years following 1965, President Johnson began sending large numbers of American troops to fight alongside the South Vietnamese.



STRONG SUPPORT FOR CONTAINMENT Even after Congress had approved the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, President Johnson opposed sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam. Johnson's victory in the 1964 presidential election was due in part to charges that his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, was an anti-Communist who might push the United States into war with the Soviet Union. In contrast to Goldwater's heated, warlike language, Johnson's speeches were more moderate, yet he spoke determinedly about containing communism. He declared he was "not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

However, in March of 1965, that is precisely what the president did. Working closely with his foreign-policy advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** and Secretary of State **Dean Rusk**, President Johnson began dispatching tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to fight in Vietnam. Some Americans viewed Johnson's decision as contradictory to his position during the presidential campaign. However, most saw the president as following an established and popular policy of confronting communism anywhere in the world. Congress, as well as the American public, strongly supported Johnson's strategy. A 1965 poll showed that 61 percent of Americans supported the U.S. policy in Vietnam, while only 24 percent opposed.

There were dissenters within the Johnson administration, too. In October of 1964, Undersecretary of State George Ball had argued against escalation, warning that "once on the tiger's back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount." However, the president's closest advisers strongly urged escalation, believing the defeat of communism in Vietnam to be of vital importance to the future of America and the world. Dean Rusk stressed this view in a 1965 memo to President Johnson. **A**

MAIN IDEA

Contrasting

A What differing opinions did Johnson's advisers have about Vietnam?

A PERSONAL VOICE DEAN RUSK

"The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interests throughout the world."

—quoted in *In Retrospect*

THE TROOP BUILDUP ACCELERATES By the end of 1965, the U.S. government had sent more than 180,000 Americans to Vietnam. The American commander in South Vietnam, General **William Westmoreland**, continued to request more troops. Westmoreland, a West Point graduate who had served in World War II and Korea, was less than impressed with the fighting ability of the South Vietnamese Army, or the **Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)**. The ARVN "cannot stand up to this pressure without substantial U.S. combat support on the ground," the general reported. "The only possible response is the aggressive deployment of U.S. troops." Throughout the early years of the war, the Johnson administration complied with Westmoreland's requests; by 1967, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam had climbed to about 500,000.

KEY PLAYER

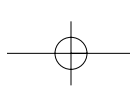


GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND (1914–)

General Westmoreland retired from the military in 1972, but even in retirement, he could not escape the Vietnam War.

In 1982, CBS-TV aired a documentary entitled *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*. The report, viewed by millions, asserted that Westmoreland and the Pentagon had deceived the U.S. government about the enemy's size and strength during 1967 and 1968 to make it appear that U.S. forces were winning the war.

Westmoreland, claiming he was the victim of "distorted, false, and specious information . . . derived by sinister deception," filed a \$120 million libel suit against CBS. The suit was eventually settled, with both parties issuing statements pledging mutual respect. CBS, however, stood by its story.



Fighting in the Jungle

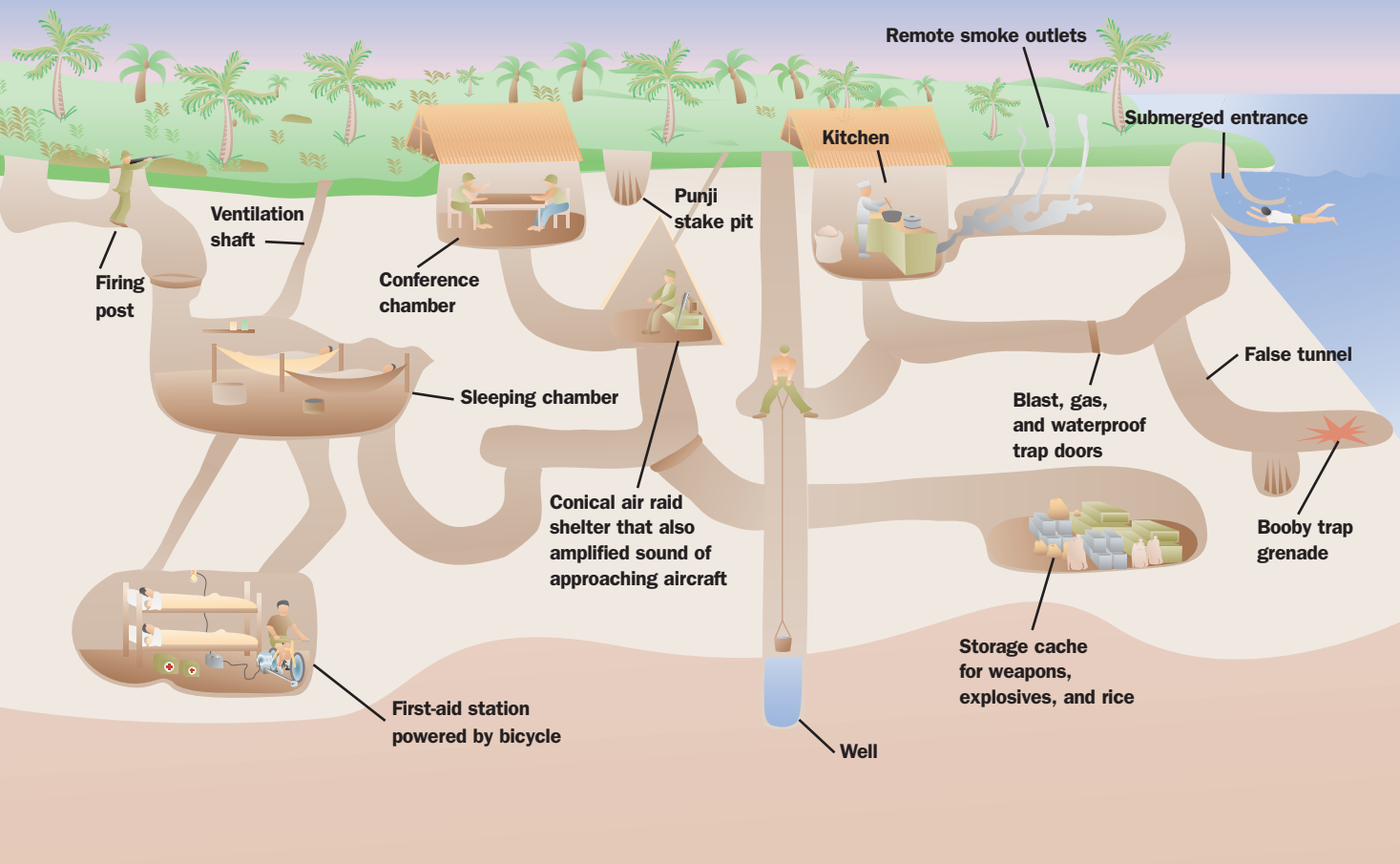
The United States entered the war in Vietnam believing that its superior weaponry would lead it to victory over the Vietcong. However, the jungle terrain and the enemy's guerrilla tactics soon turned the war into a frustrating stalemate.

AN ELUSIVE ENEMY Because the Vietcong lacked the high-powered weaponry of the American forces, they used hit-and-run and ambush tactics, as well as a keen knowledge of the jungle terrain, to their advantage. Moving secretly in and out of the general population, the Vietcong destroyed the notion of a traditional front line by attacking U.S. troops in both the cities and the countryside. Because some of the enemy lived amidst the civilian population, it was difficult for U.S. troops to discern friend from foe. A woman selling soft drinks to U.S. soldiers might be a Vietcong spy. A boy standing on the corner might be ready to throw a grenade.

Adding to the Vietcong's elusiveness was a network of elaborate tunnels that allowed them to withstand airstrikes and to launch surprise attacks and then disappear quickly. Connecting villages throughout the countryside, the tunnels became home to many guerrilla fighters. "The more the Americans tried to drive us away from our land, the more we burrowed into it," recalled Major Nguyen Quot of the Vietcong Army.

In addition, the terrain was laced with countless booby traps and land mines. Because the exact location of the Vietcong was often unknown, U.S. troops laid land mines throughout the jungle. The Vietcong also laid their own traps, and disassembled and reused U.S. mines. American soldiers marching through South

Tunnels of the Vietcong





MAIN IDEA

Drawing Conclusions

B Why did the U.S. forces have difficulty fighting the Vietcong?

Vietnam's jungles and rice paddies not only dealt with sweltering heat and leeches but also had to be cautious of every step. In a 1969 letter to his sister, Specialist Fourth Class Salvador Gonzalez described the tragic result from an unexploded U.S. bomb that the North Vietnamese Army had rigged. **B**

A PERSONAL VOICE SALVADOR GONZALEZ

"Two days ago 4 guys got killed and about 15 wounded from the first platoon. Our platoon was 200 yards away on top of a hill. One guy was from Floral Park [in New York City]. He had five days left to go [before being sent home]. He was standing on a 250-lb. bomb that a plane had dropped and didn't explode. So the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] wired it up. Well, all they found was a piece of his wallet."

—quoted in *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*

A FRUSTRATING WAR OF ATTRITION Westmoreland's strategy for defeating the Vietcong was to destroy their morale through a war of attrition, or the gradual wearing down of the enemy by continuous harassment. Introducing the concept of the body count, or the tracking of Vietcong killed in battle, the general believed that as the number of Vietcong dead rose, the guerrillas would inevitably surrender.

However, the Vietcong had no intention of quitting their fight. Despite the growing number of casualties and the relentless pounding from U.S. bombers, the Vietcong—who received supplies from China and the Soviet Union—remained defiant. Defense Secretary McNamara confessed his frustration to a reporter in 1966: "If I had thought they would take this punishment and fight this well, . . . I would have thought differently at the start."

General Westmoreland would say later that the United States never lost a battle in Vietnam. Whether or not the general's words were true, they underscored the degree to which America misunderstood its foe. The United States viewed the war strictly as a military struggle; the Vietcong saw it as a battle for their very existence, and they were ready to pay any price for victory. **C**

THE BATTLE FOR "HEARTS AND MINDS" Another key part of the American strategy was to keep the Vietcong from winning the support of South Vietnam's rural population. Edward G. Lansdale, who helped found the fighting unit known as the U.S. Army Special Forces, or Green Berets, stressed the plan's importance. "Just remember this. Communist guerrillas hide among the people. If you win the people over to your side, the communist guerrillas have no place to hide."

The campaign to win the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese villagers proved more difficult than imagined. For instance, in their attempt to expose Vietcong tunnels and hideouts, U.S. planes dropped **napalm**, a gasoline-based bomb that set fire to the jungle. They also sprayed **Agent Orange**, a leaf-killing toxic chemical. The saturation use of these weapons often wounded civilians and left villages and their surroundings in ruins. Years later, many would blame Agent Orange for cancers in of Vietnamese civilians and American veterans.

U.S. soldiers conducted **search-and-destroy missions**, uprooting civilians with suspected ties to the Vietcong, killing their livestock, and burning villages. Many villagers fled into the cities or refugee camps, creating by 1967 more than 3 million refugees in the South. The irony of the strategy was summed up in February 1968 by a U.S. major whose forces had just leveled the town of Ben Tre: "We had to destroy the town in order to save it."

NOW & THEN

LAND MINES

Around 3.5 million armed mines remain in Vietnam, causing 160 civilian casualties each month. Worldwide, more than 25,000 civilians are killed or maimed by land mines each year.

The 1997 Mine Ban Treaty bans production and use of antipersonnel mines worldwide. As of 2000, 139 nations had agreed to the treaty, with the notable exceptions of the United States, Russia, and China. In 1998, President Clinton declared that the United States would sign the treaty by 2006, if "suitable alternatives" to land mines had been developed, and asked the military to begin working toward this goal.

The United States has been a big financial contributor to humanitarian land mine clearance. Contributions in 2003–2004 are expected to reach \$105 million.

MAIN IDEA

Making Inferences

C In what way did the United States underestimate the Vietcong?



▲ A soldier with the 61st Infantry Division wears symbols of both war and peace on his chest.

SINKING MORALE The frustrations of guerrilla warfare, the brutal jungle conditions, and the failure to make substantial headway against the enemy took their toll on the U.S. troops' morale. Philip Caputo, a marine lieutenant in Vietnam who later wrote several books about the war, summarized the soldiers' growing disillusionment: "When we marched into the rice paddies . . . we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Vietcong could be quickly beaten. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost."

As the war continued, American morale dropped steadily. Many soldiers, required by law to fight a war they did not support, turned to alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. Low morale even led a few soldiers to murder their superior officers. Morale would worsen during the later years of the war when soldiers realized they were fighting even as their government was negotiating a withdrawal. **D**

Another obstacle was the continuing corruption and instability of the South Vietnamese government. Nguyen Cao Ky, a flamboyant air marshal, led the government from 1965 to 1967. Ky ignored U.S. pleas to retire in favor of an elected civilian government. Mass demonstrations began, and by May of 1966, Buddhist monks and nuns were once again burning themselves in protest against the South Vietnamese government. South Vietnam was fighting a civil war within a civil war, leaving U.S. officials confused and angry.

FULFILLING A DUTY Most American soldiers, however, firmly believed in their cause—to halt the spread of communism. They took patriotic pride in fulfilling their duty, just as their fathers had done in World War II.

Most American soldiers fought courageously. Particularly heroic were the thousands of soldiers who endured years of torture and confinement as prisoners of war. In 1966, navy pilot Gerald Coffee's plane was shot down over North Vietnam. Coffee spent the next seven years—until he was released in 1973 as part of a cease-fire agreement—struggling to stay alive in an enemy prison camp.

★ A PERSONAL VOICE GERALD COFFEE

"My clothes were filthy and ragged. . . . With no boots, my socks—which I'd been able to salvage—were barely recognizable. . . . Only a few threads around my toes kept them spread over my feet; some protection, at least, as I shivered through the cold nights curled up tightly on my morguelike slab. . . . My conditions and predicament were so foreign to me, so stifling, so overwhelming. I'd never been so hungry, so grimy, and in such pain."

—*Beyond Survival*

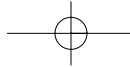
MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

D What factors led to the low morale of U.S. troops?

The Early War at Home

The Johnson administration thought the war would end quickly. As it dragged on, support began to waver, and Johnson's domestic programs began to unravel.



THE GREAT SOCIETY SUFFERS As the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam continued to mount, the war grew more costly, and the nation's economy began to suffer. The inflation rate, which was less than 2 percent through most of the early 1960s, more than tripled to 5.5 percent by 1969. In August of 1967, President Johnson asked for a tax increase to help fund the war and to keep inflation in check. Congressional conservatives agreed, but only after demanding and receiving a \$6 billion reduction in funding for Great Society programs. Vietnam was slowly claiming an early casualty: Johnson's grand vision of domestic reform.

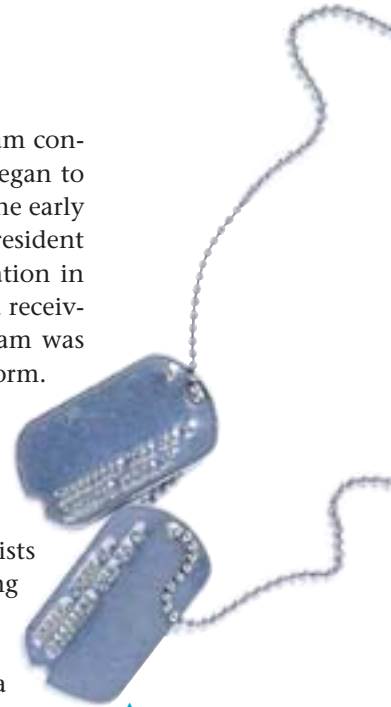
THE LIVING-ROOM WAR Through the media, specifically television, Vietnam became America's first "living-room war." The combat footage that appeared nightly on the news in millions of homes showed stark pictures that seemed to contradict the administration's optimistic war scenario.

Quoting body-count statistics that showed large numbers of communists dying in battle, General Westmoreland continually reported that a Vietcong surrender was imminent. Defense Secretary McNamara backed up the general, saying that he could see "the light at the end of the tunnel."

The repeated television images of Americans in body bags told a different story, though. While communists may have been dying, so too were Americans—over 16,000 between 1961 and 1967. Critics charged that a **credibility gap** was growing between what the Johnson administration reported and what was really happening.

One critic was Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Fulbright, a former Johnson ally, charged the president with a "lack of candor" in portraying the war effort. In early 1966, the senator conducted a series of televised committee hearings in which he asked members of the Johnson administration to defend their Vietnam policies. The Fulbright hearings delivered few major revelations, but they did contribute to the growing doubts about the war. One woman appeared to capture the mood of Middle America when she told an interviewer, "I want to get out, but I don't want to give in." **E**

By 1967, Americans were evenly split over supporting and opposing the war. However, a small force outside of mainstream America, mainly from the ranks of the nation's youth, already had begun actively protesting the war. Their voices would grow louder and capture the attention of the entire nation.



▲ First used in World War I, dog tags were stamped with personal identification information and worn by U.S. military personnel.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

E What led to the growing concern in America about the Vietnam War?



ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Robert McNamara
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)
- napalm
- search-and-destroy mission
- Dean Rusk
- Agent Orange
- credibility gap
- William Westmoreland

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Re-create the chart below. Then, show key military tactics and weapons of the Vietcong and Americans.

	Vietcong	U.S.
Tactics		
Weapons		

Which weapons and tactics do you think were most successful? Explain.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Why did Americans fail to win the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese?

4. CONTRASTING

In a paragraph, contrast the morale of the U.S. troops with that of the Vietcong. Use evidence from the text to support your response.

5. FORMING GENERALIZATIONS

What were the effects of the nightly TV coverage of the Vietnam War? Support your answer with examples from the text. **Think About:**

- television images of Americans in body bags
- the Johnson administration's credibility gap