

18. The Vietnam War, 1945-1975

- Purpose: to gain an understanding of the problematic US involvement in the Vietnam War, specifically:
 - The French phase of the war
 - The election of 1956 and the growing Vietcong insurrection against the Diem regime
 - The Americanization of the war 1964-1968
 - The Tet offensive and the repudiation of Johnson's Vietnam policy
 - The Nixon administration's handling of the war: escalation, Vietnamization, and negotiation
 - The end of US involvement in 1973 and the fall of South Vietnam, 1975
- Timeframe: ca. 1945-1975, focus on 1965-1973

Introduction: France's War In Vietnam

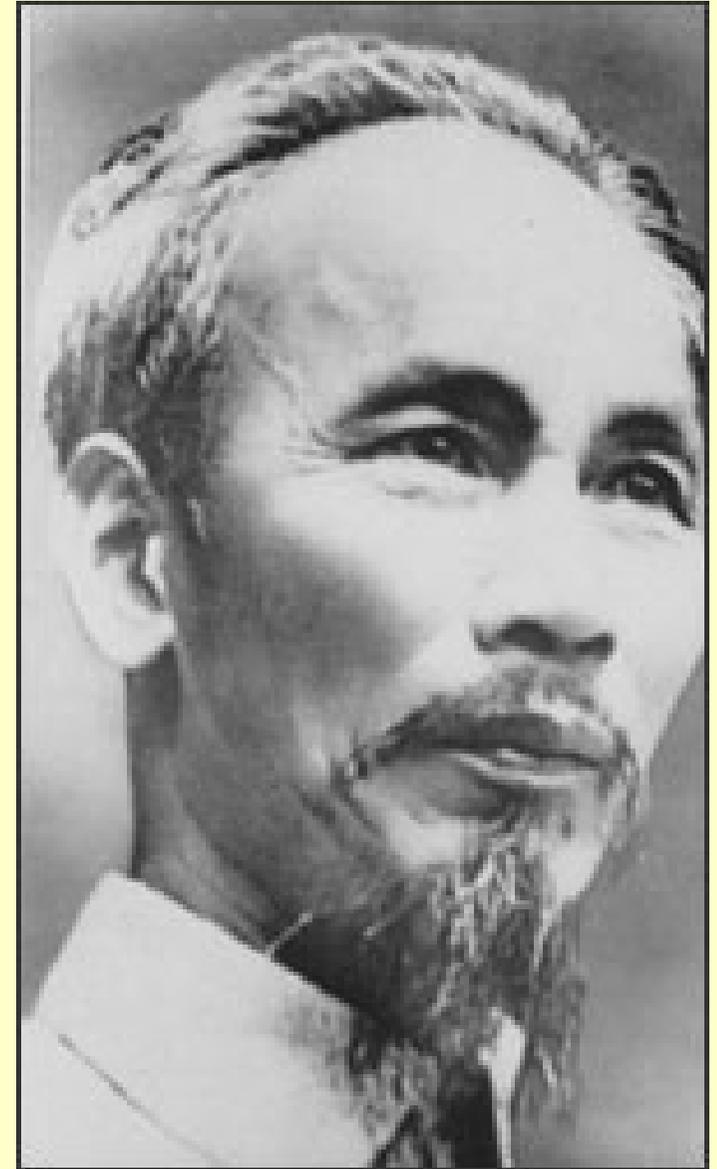
- French Indochina since 19th century
- Japanese occupation 1940-45
- Vietminh insurgence with OSS support
- 1945 Declaration of Independence
- French efforts to reestablish colonial rule
- Bao Dai regime in Indochina
- Vietminh insurrection against France and Bao Dai
- US financial support for France
- 1954 French defeat at Dien Bien Phu
- Eisenhower decision not to intervene then
- 1954 Geneva accords: partition of Indochina into Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam
- Temporary partition into North and South Vietnam
- Elections scheduled for 1956



Indochina partitioned in 1954

1.1 The Domino Theory and the Election of 1956

- Eisenhower and Dulles believed that if one regional ally fell to communism, others would follow. Domino Theory: fear of communist rule from Korea to Thailand or even India.
- SEATO 1954: UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan. Military alliance to contain communism in South East Asia.
- Vietminh under Ho Chi Minh was expected to win 1956 election. Communist and Nationalist leader.
- US replaced France as the primary power behind South (non-communist) Vietnam.
- CIA involvement in South Vietnam, covert ops against the North since 1954.
- Support for pro-US leader in South Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem (instead of French puppet Bao Dai).
- Fraudulent elections in 1956 gave Diem 98 percent of the vote in South Vietnam. Used as justification not to reunify Vietnam but to maintain non-communist South Vietnam.



Ho Chi Minh / Nguyen Sinh Cung
(1890-1969)



America: A Narrative History, Sixth Edition. Copyright © 2004 W. W. Norton & Company

1.2 The Diem Regime in South Vietnam

- Diem was a rich Catholic in a poor Buddhist nation. Maintained autocratic rule, jailed dissenters, abolished village elections. US support for his anti-communism.
- Protests in the late 1950s, not only by pro-North Vietnam communists but also other groups.
- South Vietnamese military trained and supplied by US. 1955-1961 \$1 billion military aid. Military advisers, increasing numbers.
- Also development aid to South Vietnam.
- Americanization of South Vietnamese culture, esp. in Saigon.
- Diem's regime, South Vietnam, utterly dependent on US for its very existence.



Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-63)

1.3 The Vietcong, Diem, and Kennedy

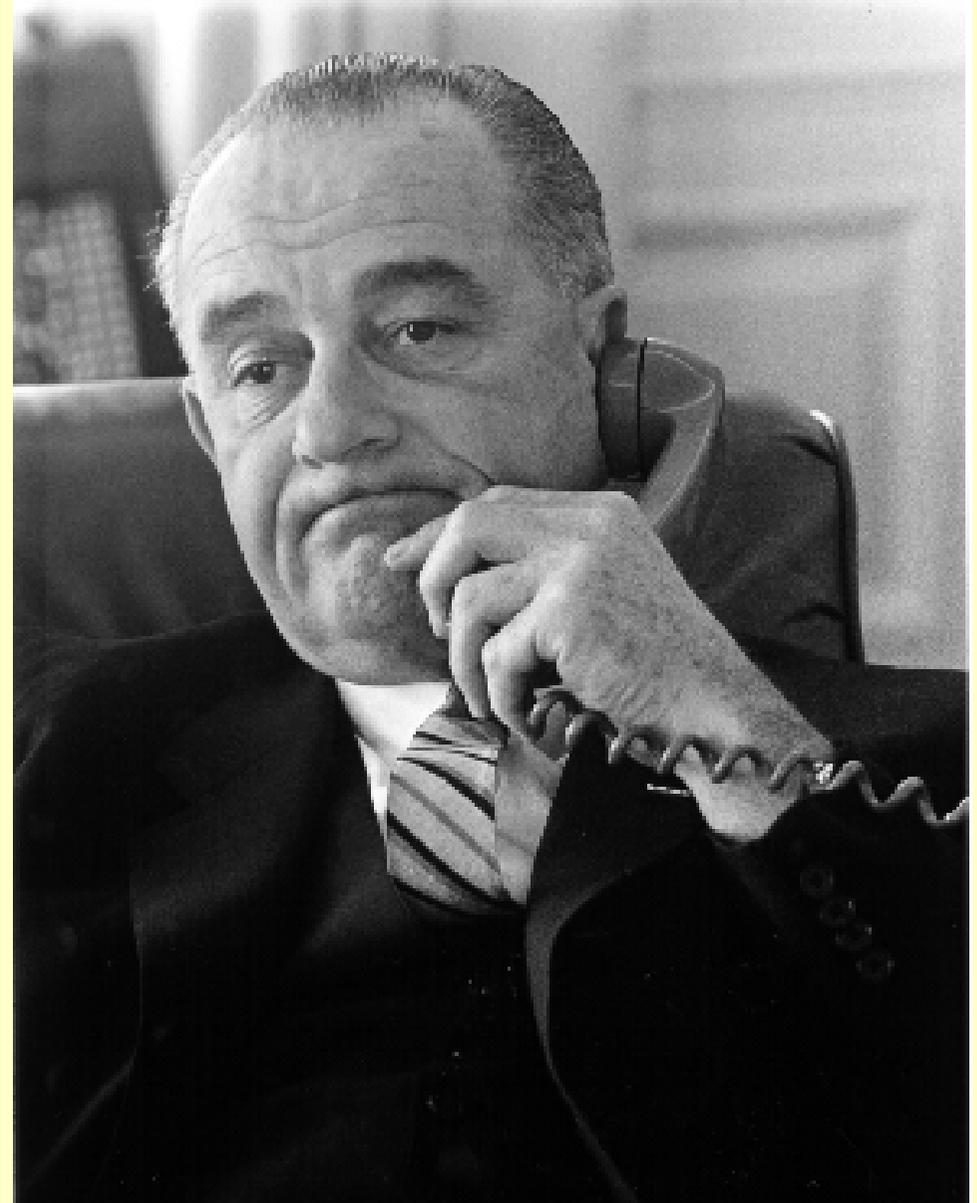
- By 1960, insurgence by pro-North rebels. National Liberation Front or "Vietcong."
- Guerilla warfare mostly in rural areas, but also attacks in cities. Supplied from North Vietnam. Multifaceted civil war.
- Kennedy stepped up military aid: 16,000 military "advisers," really combat troops. Also more secret incursion into North V.
- Strategic Hamlets: barbed-wire towns to isolate rural population from Vietcong. Did not work, alienated farmers.
- Kennedy urged Diem to reform system, make it more democratic and liberal. Instead, Diem stepped up repression.
- Self-immolation of Buddhist monks 1963.
- Kennedy authorized CIA to support a coup against Diem in 1963. Diem was killed, military regime took over. A few weeks later, JFK was assassinated.



Buddhist monk self-immolation in protest against Diem regime. Diem's harsh policies against Buddhists cost him much support among US policy makers.

2.1 The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

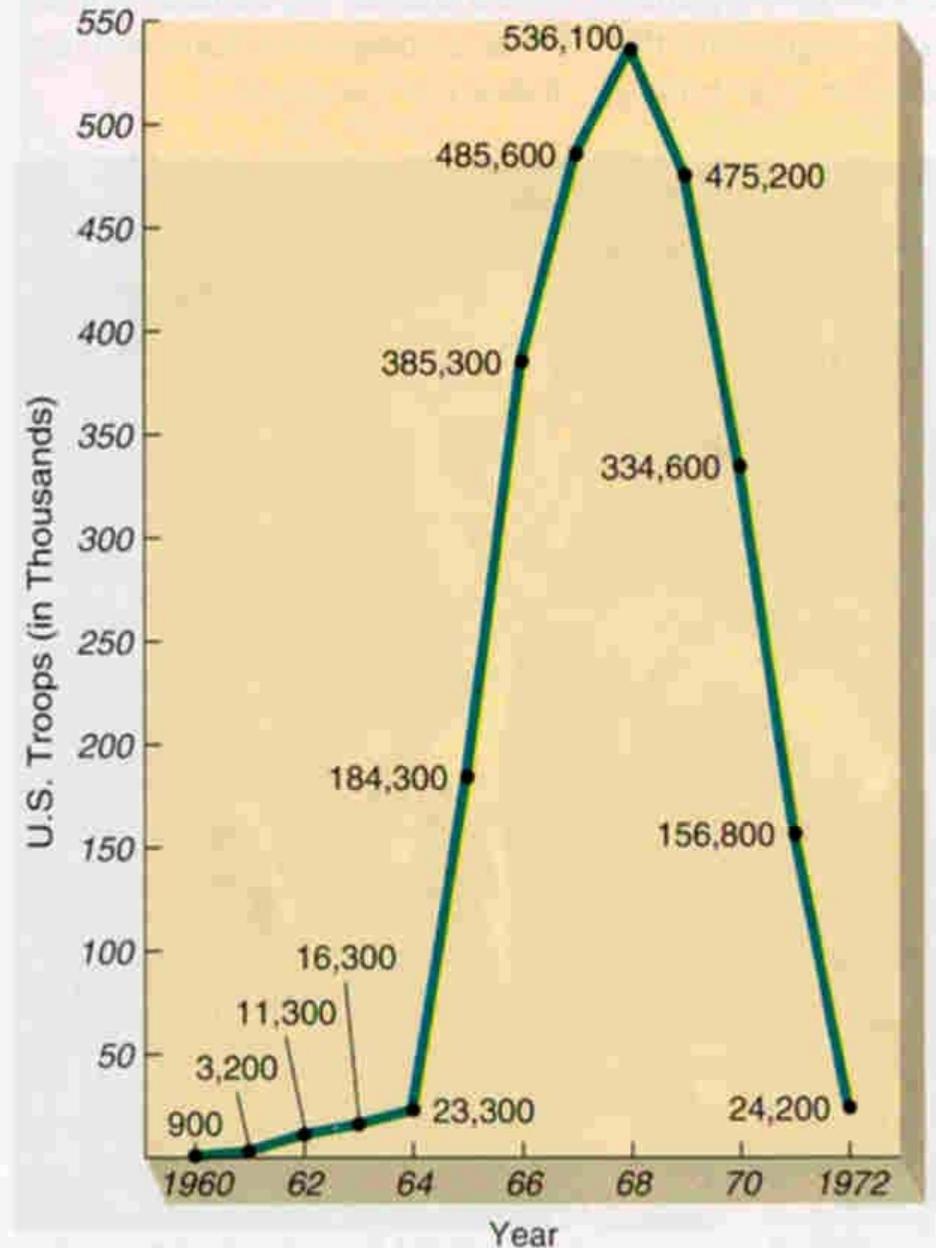
- LBJ inherited JFK's Vietnam policies and most high-level advisers. Johnson, too, believed that South East Asia could not be allowed to "fall" to communism.
- By summer 1964, rebel forces controlled nearly half of South Vietnam. Intense criticism by Rep. candidate Goldwater.
- In 1964, US destroyer Maddox reported an attack by North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin. Error: no attack had taken place, and Johnson knew it.
- Johnson asked for and received authority from Congress to "repel any armed attack" on US forces and to "prevent further aggression." Carte blanche.
- Johnson interpreted the Gulf of Tonkin resolution as a declaration of war.



Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973)

2.2 Americanization

- Johnson stepped up US involvement in South Vietnam. 200,000 troops by 1965, more than 500,000 by 1968. Fight against Vietcong became an American fight.
- Also: massive bombardment of North Vietnam, also of Laos to disrupt the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” supply line. Eventually more bombing tonnage than in WWII.
- But: no invasion of North Vietnam. LBJ wanted to keep the war “limited” so as not to provoke Soviet or Chinese intervention.
- Gruesome war of attrition. Search and destroy tactics. Anti-guerilla warfare. Agent Orange. Napalm. Vietcong bombs.
- General William Westmoreland pursued a strategy of inflicting more casualties on the enemy than their ability to recruit, thus reaching the Vietcong’s and N. Vietnam’s “breaking point.”





SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR



2.3 Body Counts, Morale, and the My Lai Massacre

- Pressured for success in a chaotic war, units often inflated their “body count” statistics. US casualties also mounted.
- Troop morale deteriorated. Drug use. AWOL. Fraggings. Tour of duty concept and youth of soldiers problematic.
- Instances of atrocities, torture, trophy-taking.
- Worst atrocity at My Lai, 1968, when troops under the command of Lt. William Calley raped and killed a village of 500 civilians. Commendation for killing 128 “enemies.” Military cover-up. Story exposed in 1969 by journalist Seymour Hersh. Calley charged and convicted, but served only part of his sentence.
- The destructiveness of warfare and reports of atrocities made S. Vietnamese population increasingly resentful.

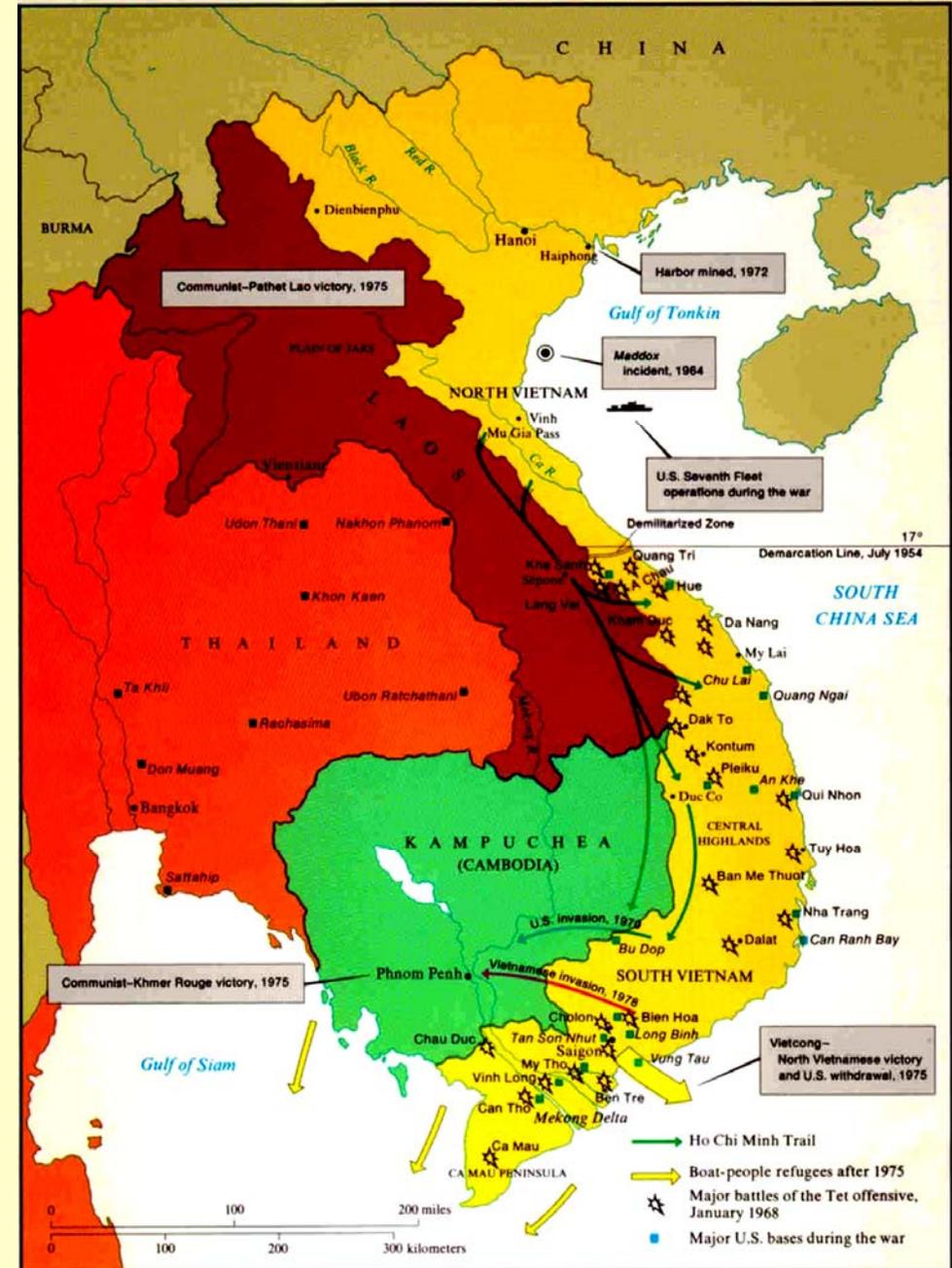


SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR



2.4 The Tet Offensive

- Based on body count statistics, the Johnson administration insisted that the US were winning the war, that the Vietcong were close to crumbling, that there was “light at the end of the tunnel.”
- On Tet (30 Jan.) 1968, series of massive North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacks all over the country, including US embassy in Saigon. Eventually beaten back with great effort and at high cost.
- Tet offensive exposed that US was not winning, that Vietcong could mount coordinated attacks throughout the country with great strength. As US military called for more than 200,000 additional troops, it became clear that Johnson’s strategy of “limited” war had failed.







2.5 Growing Antiwar Sentiment

- Increasing anti-war demonstrations on university campuses (see next lecture). Draft dodging, burning draft cards, moving to Canada, joining National Guard, etc.
- As war escalated, increasing doubts in the administration. Robert McNamara left in 1968 but publicly supported the war (until 1990s).
- Criticism of the war's injustice: 80% of soldiers came from working class families; blacks disproportionately represented.
- Prominent critics like Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Dr. Benjamin Spock, even television news anchor Walter Cronkite came to doubt the war. Also criticism from veterans like John Kerry.
- But no clear public opinion to end the war if it meant defeat. "Hawks" and "doves." Most Americans felt that the war was going wrong but could not agree on what to do about it.



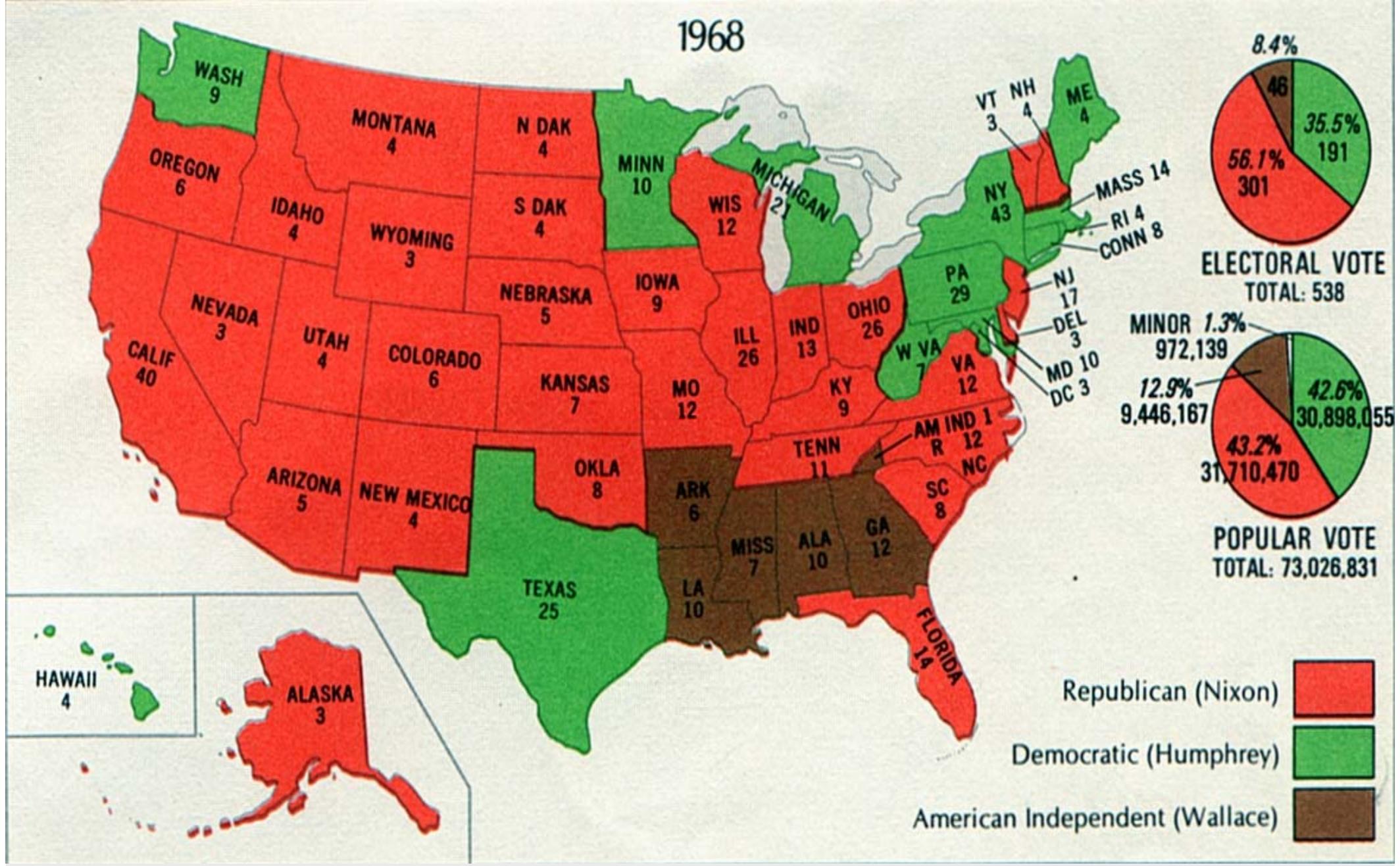
2.6 The Election of 1968

- In spring 1968, Johnson stopped the bombing of N. Vietnam, opened negotiations with Hanoi. Still, the war in S. Vietnam continued.
- Johnson dropped out of presidential race.
- Robert Kennedy seemed most likely candidate for Democrats, but he was shot after the California primary.
- A number of Democrats supported Eugene McCarthy, an anti-war politician. Police violence at the Democratic nomination convention in Chicago 1968.
- Democrats nominated Hubert Humphrey, whose positions were similar to LBJ's.
- The Republican candidate Richard Nixon won the election narrowly – largely because the Deep South supported independent candidate George Wallace.



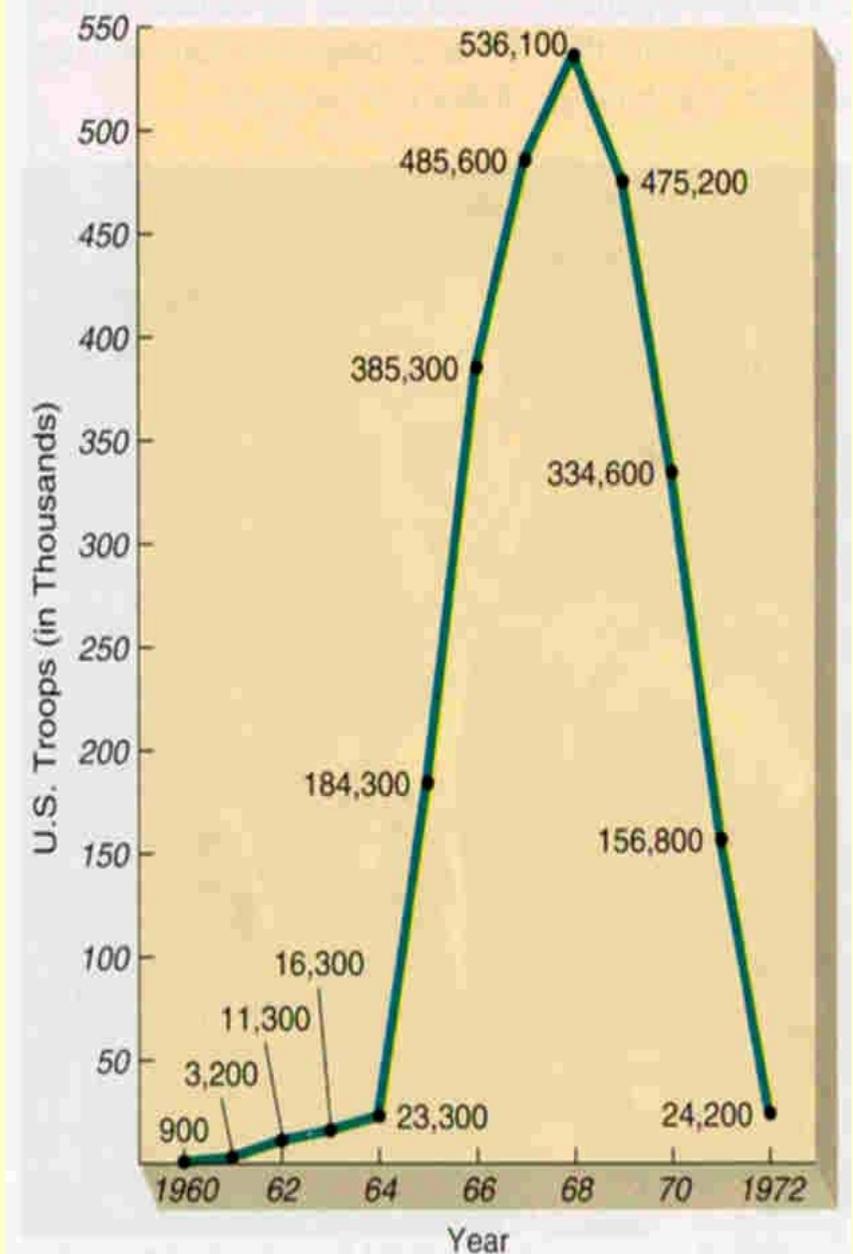
Senator Eugene McCarthy (b. 1916) made an unsuccessful bid for the Dem. Nomination in 1968 on a peace ticket.

1968



3.1 Nixon, Escalation, and Vietnamization

- Nixon wanted to get out of Vietnam, but not lose face in the Cold War.
- Double strategy: decrease US troop strength while increasing strength of South Vietnamese army, while at the same time stepping up bombing of North Vietnam. Hope to reach a negotiated settlement while reducing cost to the US.
- Also escalation: 1970 invasion of Cambodia to destroy Vietcong supply lines and retreat zones. Secret operation, but quickly became public, generating more protests and destabilizing Cambodia
- 1971 invasion of Laos
- The Vietnam War ground on during Nixon's first term, but with fewer US troops.
- 1971 Pentagon employee leaked the Pentagon Papers to the NY Times, revealing the history of lies and deceit by all administrations involved with Vietnam.



3.2 From Christmas Bombing to Ceasefire

- Fearing that Vietnam would undermine his standing with the Soviet Union and China and cost him the election, Nixon wanted to achieve a negotiated success.
- Christmas bombing of 1972: most massive bombing of N. Vietnam yet to pressure N. Vietnamese negotiators.
- January 1973, over S. Vietnamese protests, Nixon's secretary of state Henry Kissinger signed a ceasefire agreement with N. Vietnam's Le Duc Tho. US agreed to withdraw its troops within 60 days; all fights should cease and a coalition government of South Vietnam with Vietcong participation be formed.
- Nixon also promised the safety of South Vietnam – doubtful with US troops leaving the country.



3.3 The End of the Vietnam War

- US troops left S. Vietnam in 1973.
- Without US support, the S. Vietnamese government proved unstable.
- Ceasefire violations on both sides ended the truce; full-scale war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam ensued.
- Nixon did not intervene.
- In 1975, North Vietnam won the war. US embassy frantically evacuated with helicopters just before the surrender. Saigon renamed to Ho Chi Minh City.
- Indochina remained a crisis region for years. Khmer Rouge regime's genocide in Cambodia, Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, etc.
- US-Vietnamese diplomatic relations not normalized until Clinton presidency.







CORBIS/Bettmann

Evacuees are helped aboard an Air America helicopter perched atop a Saigon building on April 29, 1975. The evacuation site was one of many from which Americans and foreign nationals were evacuated to waiting Navy ships.



Epilogue: The Costs of the Vietnam War

- 58,000 US soldiers dead. (Vietnamese deaths over 1,5 million plus Laotian and Cambodian deaths).
- Domino theory became self-fulfilling prophecy, as Laos and Cambodia became communist countries, partly due to US invasions' destabilizing effects.
- "Vietnam syndrome:" Intense fear in US public opinion of getting involved in "another Vietnam."
- War was major impediment to Nixon's otherwise successful détente policy.
- War undermined US reputation in Third World and among allies.
- Immense financial costs. Inflation. Money not available to Great Society programs.
- Imperial Presidency: Expansion of executive power over foreign policy. Attempts by Congress to rein in the president (1973 War Powers Act) largely unsuccessful.
- War veterans: post-traumatic stress disorder, cancer from chemicals. Return to a society that wanted to forget the war.
- Polarization of American society: doves v. hawks, cultural conflicts sharpened, repercussion to the present day. Military critics of "limited" war.
- In the end, the history of the Vietnam war clearly showed what went wrong when the Cold War and decolonization overlapped. US presidents thought they were containing communism; Vietcong and North Vietnamese felt they were fighting imperialism.

Document Assignment and Sample Keyword

Document Assignment:

George Ball, Dissenting Opinion (1965)

Available online or from the folder in the library.

Sample Keyword:

Tet Offensive

1968. Massive military offensive by North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops all over South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Surprise attacks during most important holiday. The offensive was beaten back by US and South Vietnamese forces. It nevertheless revealed that the Johnson administration's claims of being close to winning the war were obviously false, contributing to anti-war sentiment in the US.