

Vietnam and the Limits of Power

1961–1975

Chapter Learning Objectives

1. What was John F. Kennedy's New Frontier in American foreign policy? What new approach did his administration take to the third world? What crises with Cuba did his administration face? How did Kennedy deepen U.S. involvement in Vietnam?
2. How did Johnson "Americanize" the war in Vietnam, and how effective was this strategy?
3. In what ways was the nation polarized by the war? What effect did the antiwar movement have on American society? Why was 1968 a year of upheaval?
4. What new opportunities and dangers confronted the United States in the multipolar world? How did Nixon move the United States closer to détente with the Soviet Union and China? How did the United States shore up anticommunism in the third world?
5. What was Nixon's search for "peace with honor," and why did it fail? What was Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, and why did the president initiate a secret war in Cambodia? What was achieved at the peace talks, and why did Saigon fall? What were the legacies of defeat in Vietnam?
1. Kennedy and other Democrats criticized the Eisenhower administration for relying too heavily on nuclear weapons.
2. They wanted to build up conventional ground forces as well, to provide the nation a "flexible response" to Communist expansion.
3. Although the president exaggerated the actual threat to national security, several developments in 1961 heightened the sense of crisis and provided rationalization for a military buildup.
4. Nowhere was the perceived threat closer to home than in Cuba, just ninety miles from the United States.
5. On April 17, 1961, about thirteen hundred anti-Castro exiles who had been trained and armed by the CIA landed at the Bay of Pigs on the south shore of Cuba.
6. Contrary to expectations, no popular uprising materialized in Cuba to support the anti-Castro uprising, and the invaders quickly fell to Castro's forces, providing a humiliating defeat to the Kennedy administration.
7. Shortly before the Bay of Pigs invasion, the United States had suffered a psychological blow when a Soviet astronaut became the first human to orbit the earth.
8. Early in 1961, Kennedy and Khrushchev held a meeting in which the Soviet premier demanded an agreement recognizing the existence of two Germanys; otherwise, he warned, the Soviets would sign a

Annotated Chapter Outline

- I. New Frontiers in Foreign Policy
 - A. Meeting the "Hour of Maximum Danger"

separate treaty with East Germany, a move that would threaten America's occupation rights in West Berlin and its access to the city, which lay some one hundred miles within East Germany.

9. The massive exodus of East Germans into West Berlin, which had begun shortly after Berlin was partitioned following World War II, embarrassed the Communists.
 10. To stop this flow of escapes from behind the iron curtain, East Germany erected a wall between East and West Berlin, shocking the world.
 11. Kennedy used the Berlin crisis to add \$3.2 billion to the defense budget and to expand the military by 300,000 troops.
- B. New Approaches to the Third World
1. The Kennedy administration sought to complement its hard-line policy toward the Soviet Union with fresh approaches to the independence movements that had convulsed the world since the end of World War II.
 2. More than his other predecessors, Kennedy publicly supported third world democratic and nationalist aspirations.
 3. In 1961, Kennedy launched his most dramatic third world initiative: the Peace Corps.
 4. Nevertheless, Kennedy's foreign aid initiatives fell far short of their objectives.
 5. Kennedy also reverted to direct military means to bring political stability to the third world.
 6. He promoted counterinsurgency forces to put down insurrections that smacked of communism.
- C. The Arms Race and the Nuclear Brink
1. The final piece of Kennedy's defense strategy was to strengthen American nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union.
 2. The superpowers came perilously close to using nuclear weapons in 1962, when Khrushchev decided to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, probably intending to get the United States to withdraw from Berlin in exchange for the Soviets withdrawing the missiles from Cuba.
 3. Projecting the appearance of toughness was paramount to Kennedy.
 4. While Americans experienced the most fearful days of the cold war, Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged offers and counteroffers.
 5. Finally, the Soviets removed the missiles and pledged not to introduce new offensive weapons into Cuba; the United States promised not to invade the island.
6. By misjudging Kennedy's resolve, the Soviets lost ground in their contest with China for the allegiance of third world countries, and the missile crisis contributed to Khrushchev's fall from power two years later.
 7. Having proved his toughness, Kennedy could afford to be conciliatory.
 8. Responding to pressures from scientists and others alarmed by the dangers of nuclear weapons, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain signed a limited test ban treaty.
- D. Venturing into a Quagmire in Vietnam
1. The new approach that Kennedy outlined did not mean abandoning South Vietnam to communism.
 2. Kennedy's strong anticommunism, his interpretation of the lessons of history, and his commitment to an activist foreign policy prepared him to take a stand in Vietnam.
 3. Kennedy's military adviser, General Maxwell Taylor, thought that Vietnam would be a good testing ground for the Green Berets.
 4. Two problems undercut Taylor's analysis.
 5. First, the South Vietnamese insurgents were an indigenous force whose initiative came from within, not from the Soviet Union or China.
 6. Second, the South Vietnamese government and army proved to be ineffective at containing communism.
 7. Intervention by North Vietnam made matters worse.
 8. When Kennedy took office, more than \$1 billion of aid and seven hundred U.S. military advisers had failed to stabilize South Vietnam.
 9. South Vietnamese military leaders launched a coup on November 2, 1963, brutally executing Premier Diem and his brother who headed the secret police.
 10. Although shocked by the killings, Kennedy indicated no change in policy.
- II. Lyndon Johnson's War against Communism
- A. Toward an All-Out Commitment in Vietnam
1. Having sent more military advisers, weapons, and economic aid to South Vietnam during his first year as president, in August 1964, Lyndon Johnson seized opportunity to increase the pressure on North Vietnam.

2. Johnson's tough stance in the Gulf of Tonkin crisis, just two months before the 1964 elections, helped counter the charges made by his opponent, Barry Goldwater, that he was soft on communism.
 3. Soon after winning reelection, Johnson widened the war, initiating a bombing campaign against North Vietnam, "Operation Rolling Thunder."
 4. By 1965, the first U.S. ground troops landed near Da Nang, South Vietnam, and in July, Johnson shifted U.S. troops from defensive to offensive operations.
- B. Preventing Another Castro in Latin America
1. Closer to home, Johnson faced perpetual problems in Latin America despite the efforts of the Alliance for Progress.
 2. In 1964, riots erupted in the Panama Canal Zone, which the United States had seized and made a U.S. territory early in the century.
 3. Meanwhile, Johnson's Latin American policy generated new cries of "Yankee imperialism," an ongoing complaint about U.S. interference in the region.
 4. In 1961, the United States intervened in the Dominican Republic after rebels launched an uprising against the military government.
 5. This first outright show of Yankee force in Latin America in forty years damaged the administration at home and abroad.
- C. The Americanized War
1. The apparent success in the Dominican Republic no doubt encouraged the president to press on in Vietnam.
 2. Over the course of the war, U.S. pilots dropped 3.2 million tons of explosives, more than the United States had launched in all of World War II.
 3. Because there was no battlefield as in previous wars, General William Westmoreland's strategy of attrition was designed to search out and kill the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regular army.
 4. In this situation, American soldiers did not always distinguish between military combatants and civilians.
 5. In contrast to World War II, when the average soldier was twenty-six years old, teenagers fought the Vietnam War.
 6. Much more than World War II, the Vietnam War was a men's war; women's share of all military personnel during the Vietnam era was just half what it was during World War II.
7. Early in the war, African Americans constituted 31 percent of combat troops, often choosing the military over the meager opportunities in the civilian economy.
 8. The young Americans faced extremely difficult conditions.
 9. The South Vietnamese government itself was an obstacle to victory.
 10. After 1965, the rationale for involvement in the war shifted from the need to contain communism in Southeast Asia to the need to prove to the world the ability of the United States to make good on its commitments.
- III. A Nation Polarized
- A. The Widening War at Home
1. Before 1965, American actions in Vietnam evoked little domestic criticism.
 2. But Johnson's authorization of Operation Rolling Thunder sparked a mass movement against the war.
 3. In April 1965, chapters of Students for a Democratic Society sprang up on more than three hundred college campuses across the country.
 4. Antiwar sentiment also entered society's mainstream.
 5. Opposition to the war took diverse forms: letter-writing campaigns to officials, teach-ins on college campuses, mass marches, student strikes, withholding of federal taxes, draft card burnings, civil disobedience against military centers, and attempts to stop trains carrying troops.
 6. Opponents of the war held far from unanimous views.
 7. The antiwar movement outraged millions of Americans who supported the war.
 8. President Johnson tried a number of means to silence critics.
 9. Without the president's specific authorization, the FBI infiltrated the peace movement, disrupted its work, and spread false information about activists. Even the resort to illegal measures, however, failed to subdue the opposition.
- B. 1968: Year of Upheaval
1. By late 1967, public impatience and frustration had intensified.
 2. Grave doubts about the war penetrated the administration itself in 1967, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara now believed that the United States could not defeat the North Vietnamese.
 3. The critical turning point came with the Tet Offensive, which began on January

- 30, 1968, when the North Vietnamese and Vietcong attacked key cities and every major American base in South Vietnam.
4. The Tet Offensive underscored the credibility gap between official statements and the war's actual progress.
 5. In the aftermath of Tet, Johnson considered a request from Westmoreland for 200,000 more troops.
 6. On March 31, 1968, Lyndon Johnson announced in a televised speech that the United States would reduce its bombing of North Vietnam and that he was prepared to begin peace talks with its leaders.
 7. Then, he stunned the audience by declaring that he would not run for reelection.
 8. That announcement marked the end of the gradual escalation that had begun in 1965, and the beginning of the shift from "Americanization" of the war to "Vietnamization."
 9. Negotiations began in Paris in May 1968, but nothing was settled immediately.
 10. Meanwhile, violence escalated at home.
 11. Spring 1968 saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Democratic presidential candidate Robert Kennedy.
 12. Spring 1968 also saw campus demonstrations intensify around the world as well as in the United States, where some two hundred protests occurred before summer.
 13. In August, protesters battled the police in Chicago, where the Democratic Party had convened to nominate its presidential ticket.
 14. Chicago's leading Democrat, Mayor Richard Daley, issued a ban on rallies and marches, ordered a curfew, and mobilized thousands of police.
 15. On August 25, police responded to jeering protesters with tear gas and clubs, initiating three days of "police riots."
 16. The bloodshed in Chicago and upheaval across the country had little effect on the outcome of either major party's convention.
 17. For the first time in nearly fifty years, a strong third party entered the electoral scene: Staunch segregationist George C. Wallace ran on the ticket of the American Independent Party.
 18. Few differences separated the two major-party candidates on the central issue of Vietnam.
 19. With nearly ten million votes, the American Independent Party produced the strongest third-party finish since 1924.
 20. Nevertheless, Republican Nixon edged out Democrat Hubert Humphrey by just half a million popular votes.
 21. The 1968 elections revealed deep cracks in the coalition that, except in the Eisenhower years, had kept the Democrats in power for thirty years.
- IV. New Opportunities and Dangers in a Multi-polar World
- A. Moving toward Détente with the Soviet Union and China
1. Even while fighting against communism in Vietnam, the United States reached some accord with the major Communist nations.
 2. In 1968, building on negotiations that had begun in the early 1960s, the United States, Soviet Union, and sixty other nations agreed to a nuclear nonproliferation treaty.
 3. The nonproliferation treaty was largely the work of the Johnson administration and built on negotiations with the Soviet Union going back to the 1950s.
 4. Nixon took the initiative in a dramatic move toward China. After two years of secret negotiations, in February 1972, Nixon became the nation's first president to set foot on Chinese soil.
 5. As Nixon and national security adviser Henry Kissinger hoped, the warming of U.S.-Chinese relations increased Soviet responsiveness to their strategy of détente.
 6. In May 1972, Nixon visited Moscow, signing several agreements on trade and cooperation in science and space.
 7. Gerald Ford, who became president when Nixon resigned, failed to sustain widespread support for détente.
- B. Shoring Up Anticommunism in the Third World
1. In Vietnam and elsewhere, Nixon and Kissinger continued to equate Marxism with a threat to U.S. interests and actively resisted social revolutions that might lead to communism.
 2. The Nixon administration found such a threat in Salvador Allende, a self-proclaimed Marxist who was elected president of Chile in the 1970s.
 3. In 1973, with the help of the CIA, the Chilean military engineered a coup, killed Allende, and established a brutal dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet.

4. In other parts of the world too, the Nixon administration stood by repressive governments.
 5. Like his predecessors, Nixon pursued a delicate balance between defending Israel's security and seeking the goodwill of Arab nations strategically and economically important to the United States.
 6. Israel won a stunning victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, seizing territory that amounted to twice its original size.
 7. That decisive victory did not quell Middle Eastern turmoil.
 8. The simmering conflict contributed to anti-American sentiment among Arabs who viewed the United States as Israel's supporter.
- V. Nixon's Search for Peace with Honor in Vietnam
- A. Vietnamization and Negotiations
1. Nixon and Kissinger embraced the overriding goal of the three preceding administrations: a non-Communist South Vietnam.
 2. By 1969, that goal had become almost incidental to the larger objective of maintaining American credibility.
 3. From 1969 to 1972, Nixon and Kissinger pursued a four-pronged approach in Vietnam.
 4. As part of the Vietnamization of the war, ARVN forces grew to over one million, supported with the latest American equipment and training.
 5. The other side of Vietnamization was the withdrawal of U.S. forces.
 6. Nixon and Kissinger also endeavored to link Soviet interest in expanded trade and in arms reductions with U.S. goals in Vietnam.
- B. Nixon's War
1. In the spring of 1969, Nixon began a ferocious air war in Cambodia, carefully hiding it from Congress and the public for more than a year.
 2. In April 1970, Nixon ordered a joint U.S.-ARVN invasion of Cambodia, thus turning Vietnam into "Nixon's" war and provoking outrage at home.
 3. Upon learning of the bombing and invasion of Cambodia, furious legislators attempted to curb the president.
 4. The invasion of Cambodia failed to break the will of the North Vietnamese and set in motion a terrible tragedy for the Cambodian people.
 5. By 1971, Vietnam veterans themselves were a visible part of the peace movement, the first men in U.S. history to organize against a war in which they had fought.
6. After the spring of 1971, there were fewer massive antiwar demonstrations, but protest continued, especially after Americans learned of the My Lai massacre and the government's cover-up of the event.
 7. Administration policy suffered another blow in June 1971 with the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, a secret government study critical of U.S. policy in Vietnam.
- C. The Peace Accords and the Fall of Saigon
1. Nixon and Kissinger continued to combine military force and negotiation.
 2. With peace talks stalled, in December Nixon ordered the most devastating bombing of North Vietnam yet: In twelve days, U.S. planes dropped more bombs than they had in all of 1969–1971.
 3. The ferocious bombing, called "jugular diplomacy" by Kissinger, was costly to both sides, and resumed talks brought agreement.
 4. Nixon announced that the agreement brought "peace with honor," but it actually allowed only a face-saving withdrawal for the United States.
 5. Fighting resumed immediately among the Vietnamese.
 6. Confusion, humiliation, and tragedy marked the hasty evacuation of Americans and their South Vietnamese allies.
- D. The Legacy of Defeat
1. It took Nixon four years to end the war.
 2. Only after the peace accords did the legislative branch stiffen its constitutional authority over the making of war with the passage of the War Powers Act of 1973.
 3. The dire predictions of three presidents that a Communist victory in South Vietnam would set the dominoes cascading turned out to be false.
 4. Most Americans wanted simply to forget defeat in Vietnam, but veterans and those who lost loved ones could not so easily put the war behind them.
 5. Because the Vietnam War was in large part a civil, guerrilla war, combat was especially brutal.
 6. Veterans generally expressed two kinds of reactions to the defeat. Many regarded the commitment as an honorable one and felt betrayed by the U.S. government for not letting them and their now-dead comrades win the war.

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7. Others blamed the government for sacrificing the nation's youth in an immoral or useless war.
 8. The Veterans Administration estimated that nearly one-sixth of the three million veterans suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. Among its symptoms were fear, recurring nightmares, feelings of guilt and shame, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal tendencies.
 9. The incorporation of the Vietnam War into the collective experience was symbolized most dramatically in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial unveiled in Washington, D.C., in November 1982.

LECTURE 1

Kennedy and Vietnam

LECTURE 2

Johnson and Vietnam