

# LBJ and Vietnam War – Part 2 – 1965 and Beyond

## 1. Escalation Continues

- 1965 – first ground troops arrive at **Da Nang** having been requested by **General Westmoreland** to protect the airbase
- 200,000** troops by end of 1965, **500,000** by 1968 & **2.7m** will have served in Vietnam by end of the war
- Operation Starlite** (Battle of Van Tuong) was the first major offensive action conducted by a purely U.S. military unit during the Vietnam War from 18-24 Aug 1965.
- Operation Ranch Hand**, 1962-1971 [to clear vegetation] 20 million U.S. gallons (76,000 m<sup>3</sup>) of defoliants and herbicides
- Fighting conditions – jungle & guerrilla warfare, booby traps, heat, humidity & disease, tunnels, deliberate or accidental civilian deaths, herbicides & **napalm**, **fragging**, no clear goals, falling support at home, low morale, going **AWOL**, drug use.
- Battle of **Khe Sanh** (21 January – 9 July 1968)
- Mar 68 - **Mai Lai Massacre**. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Calley. War Crime.

## 2. Jan '68 – The Tet Offensive – Event & Impact

- LBJ estimates 70 attempts at diplomatic solution – all fail.
- January 1968 **Tet Offensive** is massive turning point – huge military defeat for Vietcong (70% of soldiers killed – 58,000), but a political victory...
- But Vietcong had driven deep into South Vietnam, even attacking the **US Embassy in Saigon**
- Walter Cronkite's** "What the hell is going on?" speech leads LBJ to admit that if he had lost Cronkite he'd lost America
- Johnson's approval rating plummets to **26%**
- Growing opposition, bad news & discontent within his own administration means LBJ decides not to run for re-election. "**I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.**"
- 220,000** US troops killed or wounded under LBJ's presidency
- Emergence of anti-war candidates within the Democratic Party. Very unusual for an Incumbent (sitting) president to be challenged in a primary. **Eugene McCarthy** and **Robert (Bobby) Kennedy** (assassinated in 1968). **Hubert Humphrey** wins nomination, but he loses to Nixon in the General Election.

## 5. US Withdrawal – 'Peace with Honour'?

- "**Peace with Honor**" - Nixon used in a speech on 23 Jan 1973 to describe the Paris Peace Accords to end the War.
- The Accords specified that a ceasefire would take place four days later.
- Within 60 days of the ceasefire, the North Vietnamese would release all U.S. Prisoners of War (**POWs**), and all U.S. troops would **withdraw** from South Vietnam.
- On **March 29, 1973**, the last U.S. soldier left Vietnam.
- 30 Apr 75**, Saigon fell to N-Vietnamese troops. Evacuation of US Embassy in Saigon
- North Vietnamese troops allowed remain in South – **occupying 40%** of the country
- By 1975 the state of South Vietnam collapsed to the North & Ho Chi Minh sees dream of **united, communist Vietnam**. Saigon renamed **Ho Chi Minh City** (1976)

## 3. Anti-War Movement - Opposition Grows

- Unrestricted media access meant it had powerful influence on public opinion. Media 'Agenda Setting'.
- Slaughter seen on TV & in newspapers become more anti-war. **Norman Morrison: Self-Immolation** at the Pentagon
- Prominent figures oppose it – **Norman Mailer, Martin Luther King & Muhammad Ali**
- Growing frustration of US troops results in atrocities like 1968 **My Lai massacre** – 347 men, women & children killed
- Opposition at home growing earliest & fastest on University campuses – **teach-ins**, draft card burnings etc
- Culminates in **Kent State Massacre**– 4 students shot and 9 wounded by National Guard in Ohio during anti-war protest – 2 more killed and 12 injured in Jackson
- 4 Mil students university occupations and strikes. **SNCC** – Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.
- Draft system** (Conscription) seen as unfair, rich can dodge (defer) it by going to university/leaving the country. Jail sentence for punishment. Escape to Canada?
- Slogans:** "Hey, Hey LBJ, How many kids d'you kill today?"

## 4. Nixon – A change of approach?

- Richard Nixon** takes over – policy of "**Vietnamization**" or strengthening ARVN to do most of fighting so that US can begin withdrawing its troops
- 1969 – 1972 troops numbers from **543,000 to 69,000**
- Despite attempts to discredit them as "pro-communist" & "anti-American", protests continue & highlight divisions in US society. The **Silent Majority**?
- Vietcong tries to capitalise on falling US troop levels & attacks in 1972 – ARVN much stronger now & pushes offensive back
- Nixon presses advantage with **Operation Linebacker** – biggest bombing raid in history, 41,500 attacks on **Hanoi** & 6 other cities. Followed by **Linebacker II** – Christmas Bombings
- These two factors weaken North Vietnam sufficiently to revive peace negotiations – **Paris Peace Accords** of 1973.
- Both sides under pressure! Nixon – Election Promises!

## 6. Results

- Massive death, destruction, and environmental damage
- Huge cost of **\$112 bn** – Great Society?
- Policy of Containment in ruins** – Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia all communist
- US military morale at lowest ebb & US wary of any international involvement for next 20 years
- Very **divisive** domestically – experience of returning vets
- Publication of leaked **Pentagon Papers** by Daniel Ellsberg of RAND - LBJ's administration had misled the public. The Most Dangerous Man in America!
- Lack of **trust** or respect for US governments
- Conservatives who had voted Democrat now saw it as dominated by anti-war faction & voted Republican instead. Lasting impact on US politics

