Alfred S. Bradford served in Vietnam from September 1968 to August 1969. A member of the 25th Infantry Division, he was awarded several medals, including the Purple Heart, given to soldiers wounded in battle. One day, Bradford’s eight-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, inquired about his experience in Vietnam. “Daddy, why did you do it?” she asked. Bradford recalled what he had told himself.

**A PERSONAL VOICE  ALFRED S. BRADFORD**

“Vietnam was my generation’s adventure. I wanted to be part of that adventure and I believed that it was my duty as an American, both to serve my country and particularly not to stand by while someone else risked his life in my place. I do not regret my decision to go, but I learned in Vietnam not to confuse America with the politicians elected to administer America, even when they claim they are speaking for America, and I learned that I have a duty to myself and to my country to exercise my own judgment based upon my own conscience.”

—quoted in Some Even Volunteered

The legacy of the war was profound; it dramatically affected the way Americans viewed their government and the world. Richard Nixon had promised in 1968 to end the war, but it would take nearly five more years—and over 20,000 more American deaths—to end the nation’s involvement in Vietnam.

**President Nixon and Vietnamization**

In the summer of 1969, newly elected president Richard Nixon announced the first U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam. “We have to get rid of the nightmares we inherited,” Nixon later told reporters. “One of the nightmares is war without end.” However, as Nixon pulled out the troops, he continued the war against North Vietnam, a policy that some critics would charge prolonged the “war without end” for several more bloody years.
THE PULLOUT BEGINS  As President Nixon settled into the White House in January of 1969, negotiations to end the war in Vietnam were going nowhere. The United States and South Vietnam insisted that all North Vietnamese forces withdraw from the South and that the government of Nguyen Van Thieu, then South Vietnam’s ruler, remain in power. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong demanded that U.S. troops withdraw from South Vietnam and that the Thieu government step aside for a coalition government that would include the Vietcong.

In the midst of the stalled negotiations, Nixon conferred with National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger on a plan to end America’s involvement in Vietnam. Kissinger, a German emigrant who had earned three degrees from Harvard, was an expert on international relations. Their plan, known as Vietnamization, called for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops in order for the South Vietnamese to take on a more active combat role in the war. By August of 1969, the first 25,000 U.S. troops had returned home from Vietnam. Over the next three years, the number of American troops in Vietnam dropped from more than 500,000 to less than 25,000.

“PEACE WITH HONOR”  Part of Nixon and Kissinger’s Vietnamization policy was aimed at establishing what the president called a “peace with honor.” Nixon intended to maintain U.S. dignity in the face of its withdrawal from war. A further goal was to preserve U.S. clout at the negotiation table, as Nixon still demanded that the South Vietnamese government remain intact. With this objective—and even as the pullout had begun—Nixon secretly ordered a massive bombing campaign against supply routes and bases in North Vietnam. The president also ordered that bombs be dropped on the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, which held a number of Vietcong sanctuaries. Nixon told his aide H. R. Haldeman that he wanted the enemy to believe he was capable of anything.

A PERSONAL VOICE  RICHARD M. NIXON

“I call it the madman theory, Bob . . . I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that ‘for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communists. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button’—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.”

—quoted in The Price of Power

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Trouble Continues on the Home Front

Seeking to win support for his war policies, Richard Nixon appealed to what he called the silent majority—moderate, mainstream Americans who quietly supported the U.S. efforts in Vietnam. While many average Americans did support the president, the events of the war continued to divide the country.

THE MY LAI MASSACRE In November of 1969, Americans learned of a shocking event. That month, New York Times correspondent Seymour Hersh reported that on March 16, 1968, a U.S. platoon under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, Jr., had massacred innocent civilians in the small village of My Lai (mē’ lī’) in northern South Vietnam. Calley was searching for Vietcong rebels. Finding no sign of the enemy, the troops rounded up the villagers and shot more than 200 innocent Vietnamese—mostly women, children, and elderly men. “We all huddled them up,” recalled 22-year-old Private Paul Meadlo. “I poured about four clips into the group. . . . The mothers was hugging their children. . . . Well, we kept right on firing.”

The troops insisted that they were not responsible for the shootings because they were only following Lieutenant Calley’s orders. When asked what his directive had been, one soldier answered, “Kill anything that breathed.” Twenty-five army officers were charged with some degree of responsibility, but only Calley was convicted and imprisoned.

THE INVASION OF CAMBODIA Despite the shock over My Lai, the country’s mood by 1970 seemed to be less explosive. American troops were on their way home, and it appeared that the war was finally winding down.

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that U.S. troops had invaded Cambodia to clear out North Vietnamese and Vietcong supply centers. The president defended his action: “If when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations . . . throughout the world.”

Upon hearing of the invasion, college students across the country burst out in protest. In what became the first general student strike in the nation’s history, more than 1.5 million students closed down some 1,200 campuses. The president of Columbia University called the month that followed the Cambodian invasion “the most disastrous month of May in the history of . . . higher education.”

Disaster struck hardest at Kent State University in Ohio, where a massive student protest led to the burning of the ROTC building. In response to the growing unrest, the local mayor called in the National Guard. On May 4, 1970, the Guards fired live ammunition into a crowd of campus protesters who were hurling rocks at them. The gunfire wounded nine people and killed four, including two who had not even participated in the rally.

Ten days later, similar violence rocked the mostly all-black college of Jackson State in Mississippi. National Guardsmen there confronted a group of antiwar demonstrators and fired on the crowd after several bottles were thrown. In the hail of bullets, 12 students were wounded and 2 were killed, both innocent bystanders.

In a sign that America still remained sharply divided about the war, the country hotly debated the campus shootings. Polls indicated that many Americans supported the National Guard; respondents claimed that the students “got what
they were asking for.” The weeks following the campus turmoil brought new attention to a group known as “hardhats,” construction workers and other blue-collar Americans who supported the U.S. government’s war policies. In May of 1970, nearly 100,000 members of the Building and Construction Trades Council of New York held a rally outside city hall to support the government.

THE PENTAGON PAPERS
Nixon and Kissinger’s Cambodia policy, however, cost Nixon significant political support. By first bombing and then invading Cambodia without even notifying Congress, the president stirred anger on Capitol Hill. On December 31, 1970, Congress repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which had given the president near independence in conducting policy in Vietnam.

Support for the war eroded even further when in June of 1971 former Defense Department worker Daniel Ellsberg leaked what became known as the Pentagon Papers. The 7,000-page document, written for Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in 1967–1968, revealed among other things that the government had drawn up plans for entering the war even as President Lyndon Johnson promised that he would not send American troops to Vietnam. Furthermore, the papers showed that there was never any plan to end the war as long as the North Vietnamese persisted.

For many Americans, the Pentagon Papers confirmed their belief that the government had not been honest about its war intentions. The document, while not particularly damaging to the Nixon administration, supported what opponents of the war had been saying.
America’s Longest War Ends

In March of 1972, the North Vietnamese launched their largest attack on South Vietnam since the Tet offensive in 1968. President Nixon responded by ordering a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnamese cities. He also ordered that mines be laid in Haiphong harbor, the North’s largest harbor, into which Soviet and Chinese ships brought supplies. The Communists “have never been bombed like they are going to be bombed this time,” Nixon vowed. The bombings halted the North Vietnamese attack, but the grueling stalemate continued. It was after this that the Nixon administration took steps to finally end America’s involvement in Vietnam.

“PEACE IS AT HAND” By the middle of 1972, the country’s growing social division and the looming presidential election prompted the Nixon administration to change its negotiating policy. Polls showed that more than 60 percent of Americans in 1971 thought that the United States should withdraw all troops from Vietnam by the end of the year.

Henry Kissinger, the president’s adviser for national security affairs, served as Nixon’s top negotiator in Vietnam. Since 1969, Kissinger had been meeting privately with North Vietnam’s chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho. Eventually, Kissinger dropped his insistence that North Vietnam withdraw all its troops from the South before the complete withdrawal of American troops. On October 26, 1972, days before the presidential election, Kissinger announced, “Peace is at hand.”

THE FINAL PUSH President Nixon won reelection, but the promised peace proved to be elusive. The Thieu regime, alarmed at the prospect of North Vietnamese troops stationed in South Vietnam, rejected Kissinger’s plan. Talks broke off on December 16. Two days later, the president unleashed a ferocious bombing campaign against Hanoi and Haiphong, the two largest cities in North Vietnam. In what became known as the “Christmas bombings,” U.S. planes dropped 100,000 bombs over the course of eleven straight days, pausing only on Christmas Day.

At this point, calls to end the war resounded from the halls of Congress as well as from Beijing and Moscow. Everyone, it seemed, had finally grown weary of the war. The warring parties returned to the peace table, and on January 27, 1973, the United States signed an “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.” Under the agreement, North Vietnamese troops would remain in South Vietnam. However, Nixon promised to respond “with full force” to any violation of the peace agreement. On March 29, 1973, the last U.S. combat troops left for home. For America, the Vietnam War had ended.

THE FALL OF SAIGON The war itself, however, raged on. Within months of the United States’ departure, the cease-fire agreement between North and South Vietnam collapsed. In March of 1975, after several years of fighting, the North Vietnamese launched a full-scale invasion against the South. Thieu appealed to the United States for help. America provided economic aid but refused to send troops. Soon thereafter, President Gerald Ford—who assumed the presidency after the Watergate scandal forced President Nixon to resign—gave a speech in which he captured the nation’s attitude toward the war:
“America can regain its sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned.” On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon and captured the city. Soon after, South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam.

The War Leaves a Painful Legacy

The Vietnam War exacted a terrible price from its participants. In all, 58,000 Americans were killed and some 303,000 were wounded. North and South Vietnamese deaths topped 2 million. In addition, the war left Southeast Asia highly unstable, which led to further war in Cambodia. In America, a divided nation attempted to come to grips with an unsuccessful war. In the end, the conflict in Vietnam left many Americans with a more cautious outlook on foreign affairs and a more cynical attitude toward their government.

AMERICAN VETERANS COPE BACK HOME

While families welcomed home their sons and daughters, the nation as a whole extended a cold hand to its returning Vietnam veterans. There were no brass bands, no victory parades, no cheering crowds. Instead, many veterans faced indifference or even hostility from an America still torn and bitter about the war. Lily Jean Lee Adams, who served as an army nurse in Vietnam, recalled arriving in America in 1970 while still in uniform.

A PERSONAL VOICE LILY JEAN LEE ADAMS

“In the bus terminal, people were staring at me and giving me dirty looks. I expected the people to smile, like, ‘Wow, she was in Vietnam, doing something for her country—wonderful.’ I felt like I had walked into another country, not my country. So I went into the ladies’ room and changed.”

—quoted in A Piece of My Heart

Many Vietnam veterans readjusted successfully to civilian life. However, about 15 percent of the 3.3 million soldiers who served developed post-traumatic stress disorder. Some had recurring nightmares about their war experiences, while many suffered from severe headaches and memory lapses. Other veterans became...
In an effort to honor the men and women who served in Vietnam, the U.S. government unveiled the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in 1982. Many Vietnam veterans, as well as their loved ones, have found visiting the memorial a deeply moving, even healing, experience.

**FURTHER TURMOIL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

The end of the Vietnam War ushered in a new period of violence and chaos in Southeast Asia. In unifying Vietnam, the victorious Communists initially held out a conciliatory hand to the South Vietnamese. “You have nothing to fear,” declared Colonel Bui Tin of the North Vietnamese Army. However, the Communists soon imprisoned more than 400,000 South Vietnamese in harsh “reeducation,” or labor, camps. As the Communists imposed their rule throughout the land, nearly 1.5 million people fled Vietnam. They included citizens who had supported the U.S. war effort, as well as business owners, whom the Communists expelled when they began nationalizing the country’s business sector.

Also fleeing the country was a large group of poor Vietnamese, known as boat people because they left on anything from freighters to barges to rowboats. Their efforts to reach safety across the South China Sea often met with tragedy; nearly 50,000 perished on the high seas due to exposure, drowning, illness, or piracy.

The people of Cambodia also suffered greatly after the war. The U.S. invasion of Cambodia had unleashed a brutal civil war in which a communist group known as the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, seized power in 1975. In an effort to transform the country into a peasant society, the Khmer Rouge executed professionals and anyone with an education or foreign ties. During its reign of terror, the Khmer Rouge is believed to have killed at least 1 million Cambodians.
THE LEGACY OF VIETNAM  Even after it ended, the Vietnam War remained a subject of great controversy for Americans. Many hawks continued to insist that the war could have been won if the United States had employed more military power. They also blamed the antiwar movement at home for destroying American morale. Doves countered that the North Vietnamese had displayed incredible resiliency and that an increase in U.S. military force would have resulted only in a continuing stalemate. In addition, doves argued that an unrestrained war against North Vietnam might have prompted a military reaction from China or the Soviet Union.

The war resulted in several major U.S. policy changes. First, the government abolished the draft, which had stirred so much antiwar sentiment. The country also took steps to curb the president’s war-making powers. In November 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Act, which stipulated that a president must inform Congress within 48 hours of sending forces into a hostile area without a declaration of war. In addition, the troops may remain there no longer than 90 days unless Congress approves the president’s actions or declares war.

In a broader sense, the Vietnam War significantly altered America’s views on foreign policy. In what has been labeled the Vietnam syndrome, Americans now pause and consider possible risks to their own interests before deciding whether to intervene in the affairs of other nations.

Finally, the war contributed to an overall cynicism among Americans about their government and political leaders that persists today. Americans grew suspicious of a government that could provide as much misleading information or conceal as many activities as the Johnson and Nixon administrations had done. Coupled with the Watergate scandal of the mid-1970s, the war diminished the optimism and faith in government that Americans felt during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years.

NOW & THEN

U.S. RECOGNITION OF VIETNAM

In July of 1995, more than 20 years after the Vietnam War ended, the United States extended full diplomatic relations to Vietnam. In announcing the resumption of ties with Vietnam, President Bill Clinton declared, “Let this moment . . . be a time to heal and a time to build.” Demonstrating how the war still divides Americans, the president’s decision drew both praise and criticism from members of Congress and veterans’ groups.

In an ironic twist, Clinton nominated as ambassador to Vietnam a former prisoner of war from the Vietnam War, Douglas Peterson, a congress member from Florida. Peterson, a former air force pilot, was shot down over North Vietnam in 1966 and spent six and a half years in a Hanoi prison.

MAIN IDEA

Contrasting

Contrast the two viewpoints regarding the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Hawks: The U.S. could have won if greater military power had been used; protest movements damaged American morale.

Doves: An increase in military power would have resulted in a continuing stalemate.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING EFFECTS

In your opinion, what was the main effect of the U.S. government’s deception about its policies and military conduct in Vietnam? Support your answer with evidence from the text. Think About:

• the contents of the Pentagon Papers
• Nixon’s secrecy in authorizing military maneuvers

4. MAKING INFERENCE

How would you account for the cold homecoming American soldiers received when they returned from Vietnam? Support your answer with reasons.

5. SYNTHESIZING

In the end, do you think the United States’ withdrawal from Vietnam was a victory for the United States or a defeat? Explain your answer.

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