

1960's and 1970's: Forcing an End to the War in Vietnam

The United States started getting involved in Vietnam in the late 1950's when Vietnam split into two nations. North Vietnam became a communist state and South Vietnam remained a constitutional monarchy. A civil war between the two countries started to grow in size and intensity starting in 1955.

It was at this time that the "Cold War" between Russian Communism and western democracies, including the U.S., was becoming more and more of an issue. The U.S. and the non-communist nations were concerned that if South Vietnam was defeated and became a communist nation, other nations in southeast Asia would also become communist countries. That idea was encapsulated in the term "The Domino Theory."

Protests against the war and the draft system started in 1964. Opposition to the war was led by a wide range of public intellectuals and peace-activists who opposed the war on moral grounds as an unjust war, and by young men who were draft eligible during that time period. But most Americans supported the war, and President Lyndon Johnson, who was elected President by a large majority in November of 1964, began to prosecute the war more aggressively. The U.S. troop presence in Vietnam increased to over 500,000 and the military draft system started eliminating some of the draft deferment criteria which had previously existed.

Up until 1965, the U.S. mainly provided arms and advisors to support South Vietnam. But in early 1965, it looked to many that the North was going to overthrow the South Vietnam government. President Lyndon Johnson and Congress approved sending U.S. troops into Vietnam to keep South Vietnam as a non-communist country.

It was at this time that the U.S. increased its military draft processes which resulted in approximately 2.2 million American men being drafted over the next 10 years. And the deaths of U.S. military personnel began to grow substantially every year.



Anti-war protests, many on college campuses at the beginning, started to be supported by a broader range of U.S. citizens. Throughout a decade of organizing, anti-war activists used a variety of tactics to shift public opinion and ultimately alter the actions of political leaders.

The opposition to the war became so strong, that President Johnson withdrew from running for President in the 1968 election. Richard Nixon was elected as President in 1968. Over the next several years, the war continued to go badly for the U.S. Finally, the ground up anti-war movement played a strong role in forcing the United States to sign a peace treaty, withdraw its remaining forces, and end the draft in early 1973.

Since that time, the U.S. has participated in a number of military actions/wars. Each of them has drawn some opposition from ordinary people; but since the draft of young men has not been invoked for any of these wars, that aspect of creating opposition by young men and their parents to the almost endless string of wars our country has been involved with for the last 45 years has not been a factor. The U.S. military is now primarily a volunteer organization. The chances of being drafted into the military at this time is about 4% for men between the ages of 18 and 25.

Much work from the bottom up must still be done to minimize war as an acceptable alternative when our country faces threats and problems from other countries or terrorist organizations. We still need a Department of Defense, but we need to redirect money and talent to building peace at home and abroad.