

## Operation Rolling Thunder

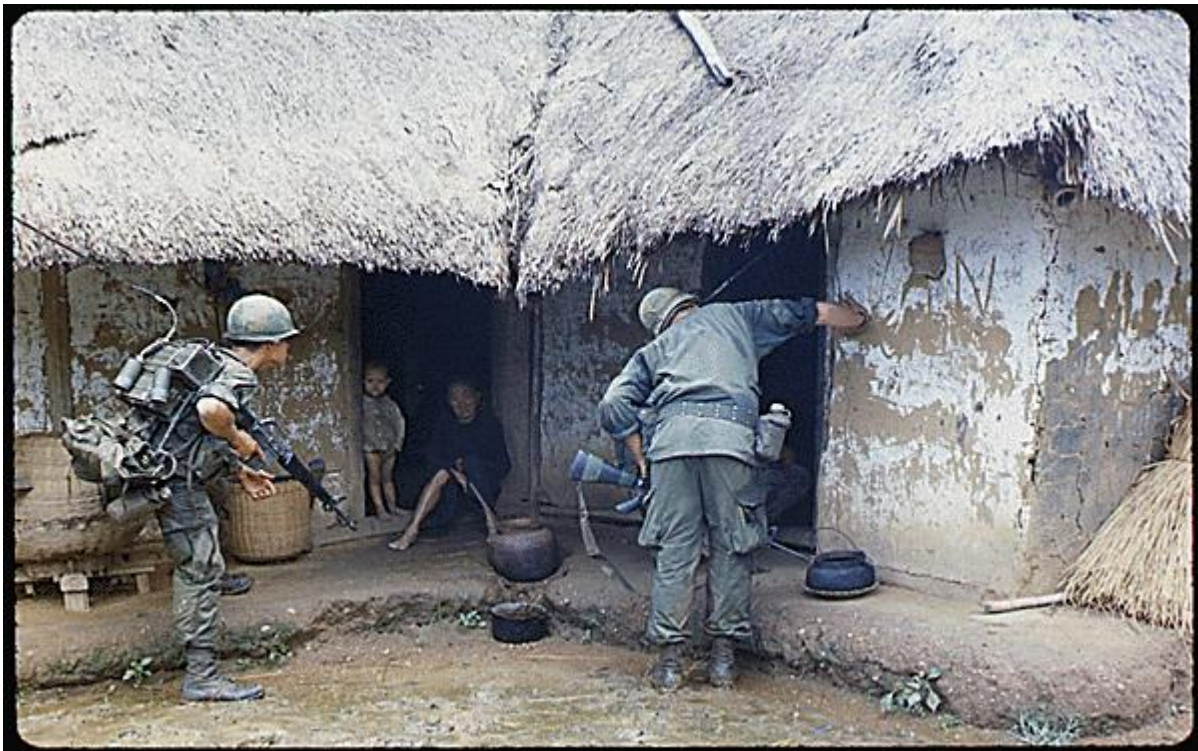


The United States, for example, hoped to defeat North Vietnam through massive bombing campaigns, such as ***Operation Rolling Thunder***. Starting in early 1965, American planes began to drop what would eventually total 4.6 million tons of bombs onto North Vietnam, as well on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a supply line that the communists used to transport people and goods from the north to the south. American commanders intended the campaign to demoralize the Communist soldiers and compliment U.S. ground troops. When President Richard Nixon took office in 1969 he employed a secret plan to end the war, which expanded the American air campaign. He began a secret bombing campaign in the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, sovereign nations separate from Vietnam, in an effort to attack the communist forces hiding in these border nations.

## Search and Destroy Missions

The war in Vietnam was not fought on traditional battlefields with clearly identified soldiers seizing new territory. While initial operations did inflict damage on their opponents, both sides ultimately settled into a war of *attrition*, a series of relatively small battles designed to deplete the resources of the enemy, weaken their morale and reduce public support for the conflict so that they were willing to surrender.

On the ground, American troops conducted “*search and destroy missions*,” to seek out the enemy and kill them to increase the body count, one measure of American success or failure in the conflict. Helicopters, a new military asset, quickly transported soldiers in and out during these missions. Soldiers burned to the ground many villages that contained suspected communist sympathizers. This displaced many civilians leaving them without food or shelter.

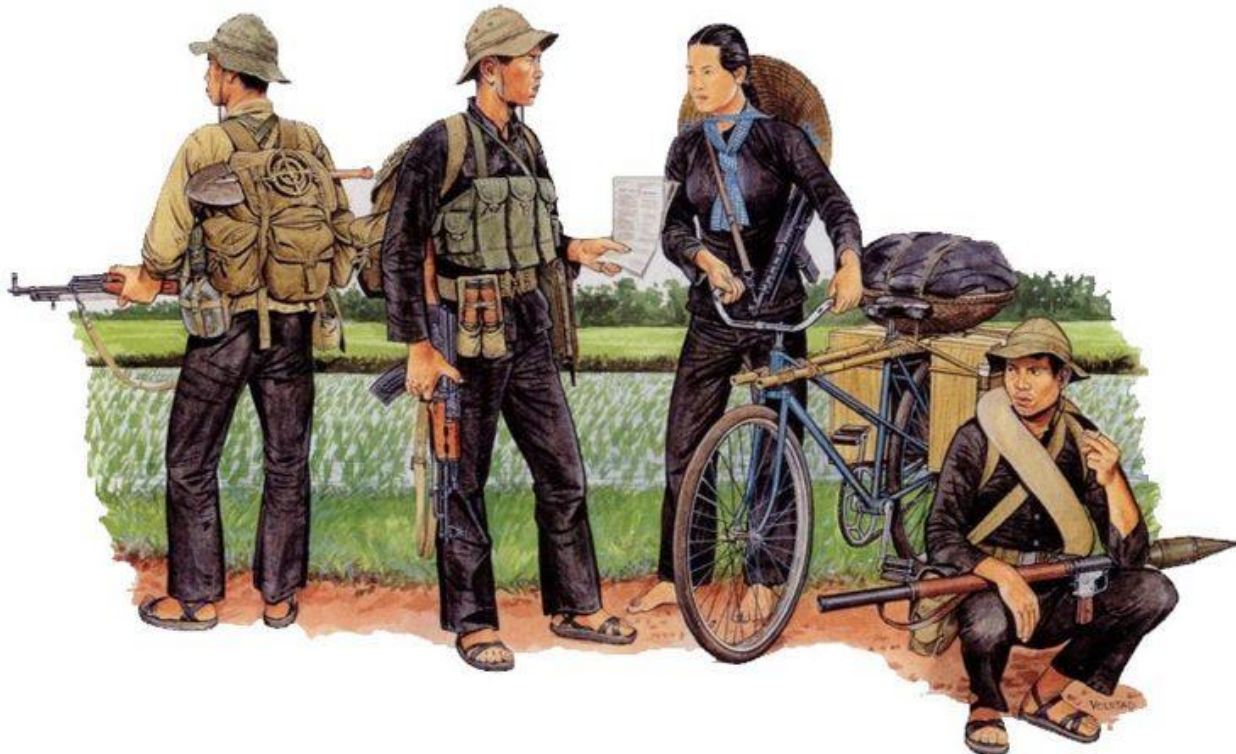


*Vietnam. As the second phase of operation "Thayer," the 1st Air Cavalry Division (airmobile) is having operation "Irving" in the area 25 miles north of Qui Nhon which lies 400 miles north-northeast of Saigon. The 1st Air Cavalry was given the mission of clearing a mountain range where an estimated two battalions of North Vietnam regulars were supposed to be massing an attack on Hammond Airstrip. Troops of "A" Company, checking house during patrol, 10/06/1966.*

## Vietnamese Communist Battle Plan

Employing a *guerilla warfare* strategy, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) forces favored hit and run attacks and surprise ambushes over full-scale military conflict. Although American forces benefitted from more training and advanced military technology, NVA and VC forces posed significant challenges to the Americans.

- 1. Neither the VC or the NVA wore bright uniforms marking their enemy status, making it difficult for American soldiers to distinguish between a civilian and a communist guerilla.*
- 2. The communists also benefitted from a series of tunnels stretching throughout North and South Vietnam. The tunnels allowed for safe travel; stored ammunition, food, and water; provided sleeping quarters; and hospice for those in need of medical aid.*
- 3. The Communists were also aided by many civilians who provided safe haven, food, and support in local villages across South Vietnam.*





## Tet Offensive (1968)

On January 30 of the same year, the communists staged their largest military campaign, the **Tet Offensive**, a surprise attack of nearly all of South Vietnam's major cities and the U.S. Embassy in 1968. Tet, Lunar New Year, had been traditionally observed as a time of cease-fire for Vietnam's most important holiday and with the exception of Khe Sanh, American forces had expected a relatively quiet holiday. In a coordinated attack by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese forces, American troops were at first surprised, but quickly rallied to push back the communist offensive.



NVA attacks in South Vietnam



Major Battles Fought during Tet Offensive

## News Coverage of Tet Offensive



Several years after the war in Vietnam was “escalated,” American military officials and government leaders continued to tell the public that a victory over the Communists was within sight. However, in the early months of 1968, in what became known as the Tet Offensive, the North

Vietnamese Army conducted a coordinated attack of dozens of major cities in the South. Television cameras recorded American and Vietnamese soldiers fighting in this gruesome seemingly guerilla style of urban warfare. Watching these scenes on television disturbed many Americans. Although the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were able to defeat the North, the battles damaged American support for the war; in the days and weeks after Tet many Americans came to believe that the war could not be won and that it was therefore not worth fighting.

## “Vietnamization” and Peace Talks

President Richard Nixon shifted America’s military strategy with his election in 1968. Nixon advocated a policy of “*Vietnamization*,” which called for gradual reduction of American forces and increasing military leadership by the South Vietnamese. At the same time, Nixon’s Secretary of State began secret peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris.

These negotiations dragged on for years; a peace treaty between the U.S. and North Vietnam wasn’t signed until 1973. In the interim period, the fighting continued and Nixon launched a controversial bombing campaign in Cambodia designed to destroy the supply bases supporting the communist forces. Public support for American involvement in the conflict declined precipitously during the period as well, increasing pressure on the Nixon Administration to end the war. Following the American departure from the war in 1973, South Vietnamese forces continued to fight until they were overrun in 1975 with the fall of Saigon.



*Richard M. Nixon during a press conference on Vietnam and Cambodia, 04/30/1970.*

**Unit 8: Cold War**  
**The Vietnam War**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

*The Vietnam War (1965 – 1973) was the longest conflict in American history. Along the way, a range of perspectives teaches students that America’s longest war (up until that point) went through a number of transformations on the battlefield and in public support. Ordinary Americans both participated in and protested the war as the media played an important role in turning the tide of opinion in the war.*

<b>American Strategy</b>	Operation Rolling Thunder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>American</b>	“Search and Destroy” Missions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>Communist Strategy</b>	Vietnamese Communist Battle Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

<b>Ending the Vietnam War</b>	“Vietnamization” and the Peace Talks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>Covering the Vietnam War</b>	Media Coverage of Tet Offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>The Turning Point</b>	Tet Offensive (1968)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

**Focus Question:** *According to the facts above, what factors led to the US losing the Vietnam War?*

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