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American History: Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War



Thousands gather at United Nations Plaza in New York City on April 15, 1967, for a peaceful demonstration against America's involvement in the Vietnam War

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STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

Today, we continue the story of America's thirty-sixth president, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

(MUSIC)

Johnson was vice president to John F. Kennedy. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas in November of nineteen sixty-three. Johnson served the last fourteen months of the president's term. Then he won a full term of his own starting in January nineteen sixty-five.

Much of Johnson's time and energy would be taken up by the war in Vietnam.

(MUSIC)

By early nineteen sixty-four, America had about seventeen thousand troops in Vietnam. The troops were there to advise and train the South Vietnamese military.

Vietnam had gained its independence from France in nineteen fifty-four. The country was divided into North and South. The North had a communist government led by Ho Chi Minh. The South had an anti-communist government led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

In nineteen fifty-seven, communist rebels -- the Viet Cong -- launched a violent campaign in the South. They were supported by the government of North Vietnam and later by North Vietnamese troops. Their goal was to overthrow the government in the South.

President Johnson believed that the United States had to support South Vietnam. Many Americans agreed. They believed that without American help, South Vietnam would become communist. There were concerns about the so-called Domino Theory, that if South Vietnam fell, other Southeast Asian countries would also fall to communists.

(MUSIC)

As Johnson began his full term, his military advisers told him the communists were losing the war. They told him that North Vietnamese troops and Viet Cong forces would soon stop fighting.

On February sixth, nineteen sixty-five, however, the Viet Cong attacked American camps at Pleiku and Qui Nhon. The Johnson administration immediately ordered air strikes against military targets in the North.

Some observers in the United States questioned the administration's policy. James Reston of the New York Times, for example, said President Johnson was carrying out an undeclared war in Vietnam.

In March nineteen sixty-five, the first American combat troops arrived in South Vietnam. Congress supported the president's actions at that time. However, the number of Americans who opposed the war began to grow. These people said it was a civil war. They said the United States had no right, or reason, to intervene.

For six days in May, the United States halted bombing of North Vietnam. The administration hoped this would help get the North Vietnamese government to begin negotiations.

The North refused. And the United States began to build up its forces in the South. By July, one hundred twenty-five thousand Americans were fighting in Vietnam.

Some Americans became angry. Anti-war demonstrations took place in San Francisco and Chicago.

More and more students began to protest. They wanted the war to end quickly.

Some people thought the anti-war demonstrations were only delaying peace in Vietnam. James Reston believed the demonstrations would make Ho Chi Minh think America did not support its troops. And that, he said, would only make him continue the war.

In December of nineteen sixty-five, the United States again halted its air campaign against North Vietnam. Again, it invited the North Vietnamese government to negotiate an end to the fighting. And, again, the North refused.

Ho Chi Minh's conditions for peace were firm. He demanded an end to the bombing and a complete American withdrawal.

Withdrawal would mean defeat for the South. It would mean that all of Vietnam would become communist. President Johnson would not accept these terms. So he offered his own proposals. The most important was an immediate ceasefire. Neither side would compromise, however. And the fighting went on.

In nineteen sixty-six, President Johnson renewed the bombing in North Vietnam. He also increased the number of American troops in South Vietnam.

(MUSIC)

Nineteen sixty-six was also a year for congressional elections. The opposition Republican Party generally supported the war efforts of Lyndon Johnson, who was a Democrat. But it criticized him and other Democrats for economic problems connected to the war.

The war cost two billion dollars every month. The price of many goods in the United States began to rise. The value of the dollar began to drop. Americans faced inflation and then a recession.

To answer the criticism, administration officials said progress was being made in Vietnam. But some Americans began to suspect that the government was not telling the truth about the war.

Opposition to the war led to bigger and bigger demonstrations.

In July nineteen sixty-seven, just over half the people questioned for opinion surveys said they did not approve of the president's policies. But most Americans believed that Johnson would run again for president the next year.

Johnson strongly defended the use of American troops in Vietnam. In a speech to a group of lawmakers he said:

"Since World War II, this nation has met and has mastered many challenges—challenges in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin, in Korea, in Cuba. We met them because brave men were willing to risk their lives for their nation's security. And braver men have never lived than those who carry our colors in Vietnam at this very hour. The price of these efforts, of course, has been heavy. But the price of not having made them at all, not having seen them through, in my judgment would have been vastly greater."

(MUSIC)

Then came Tet -- the Vietnamese lunar new year -- in January nineteen sixty-eight.

The communists launched a major military campaign. They attacked thirty-one of the forty-four provinces of South Vietnam. They also struck at the American embassy in the capital, Saigon.

GEORGE SYVERTSEN: "Military police got back into the compound of the two-and-a-half million dollar embassy complex at dawn. Before that, a platoon of Viet Cong were in control. The communist raiders never got inside the main chancery building. A handful of Marines had it locked and kept them out. But the raiders were everywhere else."

CBS News reporter George Syvertsen described more of the fighting in Saigon and how it affected civilians in a poor part of the city.

SYVERTSEN: "[Gunfire] This neighborhood is called 'the chessboard' because of the maze of alleys and passageways. Its residents are mostly poor working people, and its slums are a refuge for Saigon's hoodlum and criminal elements. Vietnamese Rangers and Marines move carefully, blasting buildings and possible Viet Cong hiding places before moving ahead. This was the first time heavy fighting has taken place in Saigon proper. Until now, most of it has been in the Chinese section of Cho Lon and in the suburbs. [Gunfire]

"The VC [Viet Cong] were difficult to dislodge. They obviously knew the section well and had built barricades in key spots. The Rangers and Marines took casualties, [gunfire] mostly from hidden snipers. As soon as a section had been cleared, more terror-stricken civilians scurried out of their homes, thousands of them fleeing from the bullets and explosives, and, even more dangerous, a fire that began to rage out of control.

"Residents in nearby buildings began dragging their most precious possessions out of their shops and homes. Saigon's water supply system is operating only at seventy percent of normal, so fires are a serious menace.

"For these people, many of whom had fled the war from outlying villages, this is the cruelest blow. The curfew has kept them from making a living. Food prices have tripled since the fighting began a week ago. And now, their homes are being destroyed."

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Thousands of people were killed in the Tet Offensive. The communists suffered heavier losses than the South Vietnamese or the Americans. But many Americans were surprised that the communists could launch such a major attack against South Vietnam. For several years, they had been told that communist forces were small and losing badly. General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. military operations in Viet Nam, spoke with reporter George Syvertsen:

GEORGE SYVERTSEN: "General, how would you assess yesterday's activities and today's? What is the enemy doing? Are these major attacks or -- [explosion]"

WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: "The enemy, very deceitfully, has taken advantage of the Tet truce, in order to create maximum consternation within South Viet Nam, particularly in the populated areas. Now, yesterday, the enemy exposed himself by virtue of this strategy, and he suffered great casualties."

As a result of the offensive, popular support for the administration fell even more.

Democrats who opposed President Johnson seized this chance. Several ran against him for the party's nomination in nineteen sixty-eight. These included Senator Robert Kennedy of New York and Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota. Kennedy and McCarthy did well in the early primary elections. Johnson did poorly.

At the end of March nineteen sixty-eight, the president spoke to the American people. He discussed his proposal to end American bombing of North Vietnam. He

talked about his appointment of a special ambassador to start peace negotiations. And he announced his decision about his own future:

LYNDON JOHNSON: "I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office -- the presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president."

Another major issue facing America in the nineteen-sixties was the civil rights movement, which sought to ensure equal rights for black Americans. That will be our story next week.

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