

MODERN HISTORY: *CONFLICT IN INDOCHINA*

Discuss the different perspectives on US involvement in the Vietnam War.

From the outbreak of the Vietnam War in 1965, until its end in 1975, there have been many perspectives and interpretations on why the United States of America joined the war. The diverse nature of the war is due to the numerous countries involved (due to direct involvement or indirect) and the extensive media coverage. This diversity bred many interpretations from the start of the war, to the present day. The most relevant groups and their views are; the various American versions (Pro-War/Pacifist/Veteran) the American media's perspective, the North and South Vietnamese views and the war as a political conflict. This essay will use three Board of Studies (BOS) questions; who are the historians? What are the aims and purposes of the history? How has the history been constructed and recorded over time?

As tension grew between North and South Vietnam, pressure began to accumulate on the USA to become involved. This eventually led to the US sending a military force to Vietnam, starting in December 11, 1962. From the outset, there was a clear distinction between pro-war and pacifist (meaning anti-war) American civilians. ¹The extensive media coverage of the war aided in creating a hatred for the deceptive nature of military propaganda, and hence the Vietnam War itself, this resulted in an influx of anti-war pacifists. Modern scholar Jensen Richards (an American historian who specializes in the Vietnam War) has a blogging website, where the public can ask questions and comment. He also uses a separate personal messaging service via email. Jensen's purpose is to discuss both anti-war and pro-war perspectives, and portray his perspective that there was no clear American (civilian) perspective, and that the views on US involvement in the war had continually changed through the ten year duration of the conflict. Richard claims that at the start of the war, the everyday American civilian had ideals of patriotism and defending your country. These ideals were established by propaganda such as the "Uncle-Sam" poster (PICTURE A) which uses the family association of "uncle" and the patriotic colours of the American flag, to oblige young men and individuals to ²join in the fight against communists to preserve their freedom, values and their families.³

The success and influence of US propaganda can be seen through Erin McLaughlin's surveys and interviews of post-war civilians and Veterans; she attempts to portray an authentic civilian perspective. (From her work) "The soldiers were portrayed as the good guys fighting the bad"⁴ was a common phrase/opinion throughout her interviews, which demonstrated a consensus support for the war. These views are re-iterated and further expanded by the blogging website: "warbirdforum."⁵The purpose of this American site is to discuss the Vietnam War, and to allow informed historians, to comment and challenge one another. (Blogging is blocked to the general public). The site attempts to portray a holistic account (all American perspectives both civilian and military) of the Vietnam War from all American perspectives. The site, and the historians who are active on the site, provide example from interviews with American civilians, in 2009, who lived during the war, outlining that there was a large number of civilians who believed the USA was invincible before the war (giving rise to the invincibility myth) due to other military success such as in Korea. "Mr Leonard" (a civilian during the war) in an interview stated that "when I was growing up, the society of America

¹ [george-bush-the-unauthorized-biography/chapter-10-rubbers-goes-to-congress/](#) By Webster Griffin Tarpley and Anton Chaitkin

² [george-bush-the-unauthorized-biography/chapter-10-rubbers-goes-to-congress/](#) By Webster Griffin Tarpley and Anton Chaitkin

³ Interview on the Charlie Rose Show, Interview, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, Hotel Adlon, Berlin, Germany November 9, 2009

⁴ <http://www.britains-smallwars.com/Borneo/units.html> (interview that warbirdforum uses)

⁵ <http://www.warbirdforum.com/media.htm>

was apparently perfect...the military had one every battle (Korea)... the government was infallible....by the time the war had started, I was more than happy to join⁶". This interview and the corroboration of eleven of the fourteen documents and the consensus of other sources paint the picture of a confident population who were understanding and supportive of the US involvement in the war. ⁷

However, as the war progressed to its bloody and destructive climax, the public's support of US involvement diminished. The 1968-71 American support polls found on Digitalopinion ("Digitalopinion.com" is a database of primary sources and textbooks, which provides a section based on the Vietnam War which includes polls. Source B) demonstrates a support ratio towards the US involvement war in the Vietnam War of only 28% in 1971, from 61% in 1965 (this is also supported by other polls such as "seanet.com")⁸ As the media coverage of the war became more watched events such as the Mai Lai massacre in 1968 (a famous event where a group of innocent Vietnamese were massacred by US soldiers) become an everyday occurrence. A clear majority of Americans turned against involvement in the war, as shown through the public opinion polls of 1967-68 were, for the first time, the opinion support fell below 50% to 35%.⁹

The Vietnam War involved many countries with different agenda's and desires. The various nations involved are evident through analysing the War as a political conflict between Democracy, Capitalism and Communism. Fredric Jameson is an American literary critic and Marxist/Post-modern political theorist who represents the post-modernist view of the Vietnam War as a whole. He is best known for his analysis of contemporary cultural trends and has been known to criticize post-modernist views as incomplete preferring a Marxist (a branch of post-modernism) theory which encompasses all "forms." (Social, political and military texts).¹⁰ Jameson defines that books, 11magazines and other histories "do not represent the real, but construct their own reality." This means that Jensen believes there is a difference between what actually happened versus what has been recorded.

In the book Jameson argues that the physical distance between the military fighting in Vietnam and American society during the 1960's-70's allowed for many flaws such as the creation of the 'baby killer myth' disrupting the accuracy of information describing the War. The post-modernist view suggests that the army and military officials defined the war in their own way, that the battle was the USA against the "commies" (communists) and that it was not a holistic presentation of what actually occurred. Jameson argues that US involvement in the war was an attempt by the developed nations to colonize, conquer and deconstruct the fabric of all South-east Asia (mainly Vietnam). The context of the time such as the political and social changes must be taken into consideration; ¹²

The 1960's were a time of continued pressure on the major powers of the USA and Soviet Russia who attempted to advance economically and militarily. US involvement in the war was a demonstration of American power over ALL nations, and an attempt to continue the US leadership of the world as an industrial power by containing the "Communist Threat". Involvement in Vietnam was an attempt to introduce a "consumer-economy" where American society, business and trade would shift to Asia which was another potential market for America to trade with. This would provide the USA with more international markets, especially within Asia, where capitalism was mainly rejected by communist countries such as the Chinese.

The Vietnam War has often been considered a mistake of the USA. It has been argued that the Americans overlooked the Vietnamese desire for independence from foreign powers, considering

⁶ <http://www.britains-smallwars.com/Borneo/units.html>

⁷ War and American Popular Culture, P. Hollinger, 1999.

⁸ http://www.seanet.com/~jimxc/Politics/Mistakes/Vietnam_support.html (opinion polls)

⁹ http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm

¹⁰ <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/jameson.htm>

¹¹ in the book "The Vietnam War and Postmodernity"

¹² War and American Popular Culture, P. Hollinger, 1999.

Vietnam as a battle ground to stop the communist threat. The USA's involvement in Vietnam generated a clear and decisive hatred of America within communist and non-communist Vietnamese. A primary source displaying this is a short documentary called the "Cu Chi Guerrillas"¹³ Which is a film that displays the awards given to guerrilla warriors for killing American soldiers. The documentary was filmed as the events of the Vietnam War occurred, and is hence a primary source. The documentary's purpose was to demonstrate the negative effect of US involvement in Vietnam society from the start of the war, and to generate anti- American support by displaying the destruction caused by US involvement. The documentary reveals that the Vietnamese civilian view to US involvement changed drastically over time.

In the beginning of the war the civilians are shown accepting and greeting the US soldiers into their homes, (this demonstrates how the Vietnamese accepted American soldier's occupation of their villages). Jensen argues this was due to the civilian belief that the Americans were an improvement from the French who had ruled the territory with harsh and exploitative policy. ¹⁴However, as the war began to have a negative effect on the villages the civil population turned against the US involvement. The documentary illustrates the destruction of the "Cu Chi" village, due to bombing ¹⁵raids that had taken place. The general consensus of the Vietnamese was that the US involvement had lasted too long; they (the Vietnamese) were now free from the French and wanted to have their independence from all foreign powers. The source along with the consensus of modern scholars demonstrates that the soldiers were no longer welcome. In "Cu Chi Guerrillas" the viewer is shown a handout of awards to individuals that had killed American soldiers.¹⁶

However, despite this being the view of most Vietnamese citizens, the hatred of US involvement was not shared by all civilians. There were different attitudes to US involvement in Vietnam that were directly correlated with American operations. ¹⁷In an interview with William Colby a high-ranking CIA officer during the Vietnam War¹⁸, he discusses the success and impact of the American/CIA pacification programs. Pacification was a program that attempted to bring peace and amenity between the South Vietnamese and American involvement. This was completed by eliminating the South Vietnamese countryside of communism, by murder or placing communist supporters in captivity¹⁹. Colby in the interview from 1981 states "I always thought that the key to the war in Vietnam was the war in the villages."²⁰ The American government understood the importance of the civilian population in the war and hence focused heavily on pacifying as many groups as possible. These operations were successful as the regions that were targeted remained peaceful throughout the whole Vietnam War; the people living in these regions often had no dispute with American involvement, some actually supporting the US cause even after events such as My Lai. This perspective of US involvement differs vastly from the Vietnamese civilians outside the target regions. The success of these programs display how ²¹there was a difference of Vietnamese views on the involvement of the USA. These views directly correlated with the region surveyed. If civilians outside of the pacification zones were surveyed, they would often have detested and hated the American involvement in the War, as shown in the "Cu Chi Guerrillas". However, if civilians within the pacification zones were surveyed, they were likely to have liked and supported the American's in their fight against communism. ²²

¹³ CuChiGuerrillas,1960.From tourist shop.

¹⁴ <http://mailman.anu.edu.au/pipermail/hepr-vn/2008-August/000188.html>

¹⁵ CuChiGuerrillas,1960

¹⁶ CuChiGuerrillas,1960

¹⁷ Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report. A-8.

¹⁸ William Colby was a high-ranking CIA officer during the Vietnam War.

¹⁹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/vietnam2-pacification.htm>

²⁰ William Colby was a high-ranking CIA officer during the Vietnam War. <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-4e3224-interview-with-william-egan-colby-1981>

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²² Pacification: The American Struggle For Vietnam's Hearts And Minds,Richard A. Hunt,Westview Press, 1998

(PICTURE A)



(PICTURE B)

Question: "In view of developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?"

DATE	PERCENT WHO SAID NO
August 1965	61
March 1966	59
May 1966	49
September 1966	48
November 1966	51
February 1967	52
May 1967	50
July 1967	48
October 1967	44
December 1967	46
February 1968	42
March 1968	41
April 1968	40
August 1968	35
October 1968	37
February 1969	39
October 1969	32
January 1970	33
April 1970	34
May 1970	36
January 1971	31
May 1971	28

Fredrick Jameson <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell19.htm>