

The Vietnam War... a timeline review

Proxy or *Hot War* during the *Cold War*... Sacrificing Democracy for Democracy

Brief Summary

Following World War I, a young Vietnamese patriot named **Nguyen That Thanh** (later known as **Ho Chi Minh**) arrives at the Paris Peace Conference. Responding to American President **Woodrow Wilson's** promise of "**self-determination**" for nations, Thanh hopes to free Vietnam from French colonial rule. But Thanh, like many other advocates of colonial independence who descend upon the Paris peace talks, is ignored.

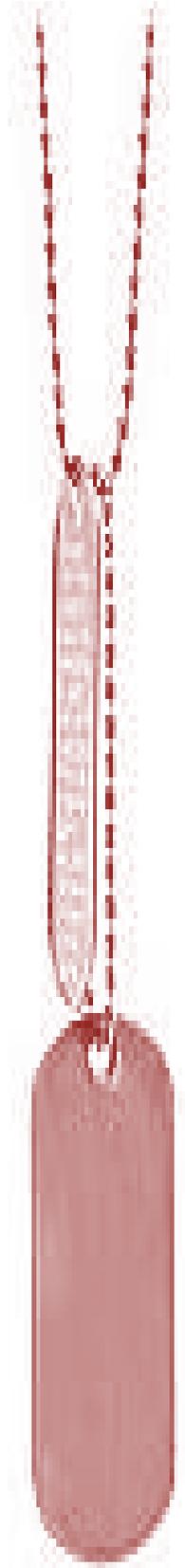
- 1940 The Japanese take possession of **French Indochina** (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam), but retain the pro-Axis French administration.
- 1941 The **Viet Minh**—the League for the Independence of Vietnam—is founded.
- 1945 Japan sweeps away French rule in Indochina. In Vietnam, it places Emperor Bao Dai in power, creating the illusion of an independent Vietnamese state. FDR dies; Truman takes over. Atomic Bombs, Japan surrenders. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, the **Viet Minh** revolts against Emperor Bao Dai, Japan's hand-selected ruler. Emperor Bao Dai surrenders leadership to **Ho Chi Minh**. **Democratic Republic of Vietnam** established with **Hanoi** its capital and **Ho Chi Minh** its president. No other countries recognize this regime. The British land in Saigon to disarm the Japanese and to restore French control south of the seventeenth parallel, in what will become known as **South Vietnam**. After some fighting, the **Viet Minh** withdraws.
- 1946 Ho Chi Minh pens a letter to President Harry S. Truman, asking him for the support of the United States in gaining independence for Vietnam. France refuses to grant Vietnamese independence and declares the southern region of Vietnam a French colony. U.S. supports France. Viet Minh attack French in Hanoi. The **First Indochina War**, also called the Franco-Vietnamese War, begins.
- 1948 Truman/U.S begins to contribute **money and supplies to the French war effort in Vietnam**.
- 1949 Bao Dai signs the **Elysée Agreement**, which gives Vietnam "independence" within the French Union. Still, the French retain control over all key governmental functions.
- 1950 The **People's Republic of China**, now a Communist state, and the **Soviet Union** recognizes Vietnam. The **United States** recognizes Bao Dai's government, the Republic of Vietnam, and gives France \$15 million in military aid. The first group of U.S. military advisors—the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)—arrives in Saigon.
- 1952 Eisenhower is elected; refuses to commit American troops to the Franco-Vietnamese War.

"I cannot conceive of a greater tragedy for America than to get heavily involved now in an all-out war in any of those regions."

- 1954 In a speech before the press, Vice President Richard Nixon explains

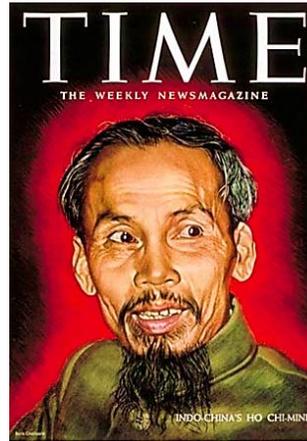
"if to avoid further Communist expansion in Asia and Indochina we must take the risk now of putting our boys in, I think the Executive has to take the politically unpopular decision and do it."

The French surrender to the Viet Minh. **The Geneva Conference** begins. **Ngô Đình Diệm** the new leader of South Vietnam. France and Ho Chi Minh sign the **Geneva Accords**, in which Vietnam is to be divided at the **seventeenth parallel** until elections can be held in 1956 to reunify the country. The South Vietnamese government and the United States refuse to sign, though both promise to abide by the agreement. Some 850,000 North Vietnamese, mostly Catholics, emigrate to S. Vietnam; 80,000 residents of the South, primarily Viet Minh sympathizers, move North.



Time magazine features Ho Chi Minh on its cover along with a lengthy feature profiling the new president of North Vietnam. "Ho Chi Minh, dedicated Communist," the article reads,

"is a matchless interplay of ruthlessness and guile."

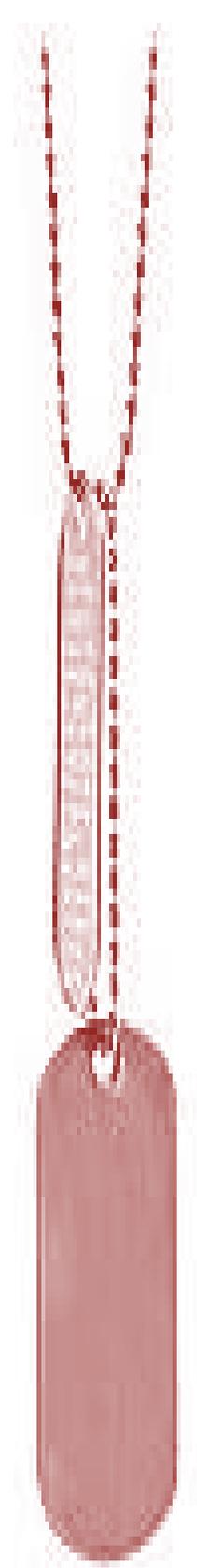


- 1955 **Ngo Dinh Diem**, with the help of the **United States**, consolidates power in **Saigon** and rejects the **Geneva Accords**. Fearing (correctly) that he will lose against **Ho Chi Minh**, Diem refuses to hold countrywide elections. Still, the United States remains committed to his regime. **Ho Chi Minh**, following the communist doctrine, orders sweeping "land reforms" in North Vietnam; thousands of people classified as landowners and wealthy farmers are imprisoned, tortured, or executed. In a mass exodus, many Vietnamese families flee and head to South Vietnam.
- 1956 **Ngo Dinh Diem** begins a campaign to repress those who fought for or sympathized with Viet Minh.
- 1957 President Ngo Dinh Diem visits the United States. He is welcomed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and other top government officials.
- 1957 Ex-Viet Minh forces in the South organize and, with the support of **Ho Chi Minh**, begin a campaign of **guerrilla warfare** against Diem's administration.
- 1959 Two military advisors are killed by Viet Minh guerilla soldiers in a raid at Bien Hoa in South Vietnam. These are the first American deaths (non-combat) reported in Vietnam.
- 1960 Eisenhower/U.S. announces that it will **increase the number of military advisors** in South Vietnam from 327 men to 685 men. President **Ngo Dinh Diem** defeats an attempted coup by his own South Vietnamese government forces, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The **National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam**, also known as the National Liberation Front (NLF) is formed to crush Diem's regime. The insurgent organization and its military wing—the **Viet Cong** (VC)—will be funded by the North Vietnamese government, and staffed by Ex-Viet Minh guerilla soldiers from the South. (Northern-born troops will join the VC in 1964.)
- 1961 **John Kennedy** enters office. Vice President **Lyndon B. Johnson** visits South Vietnam and offers military and economic aid to Diem. By the end of the year, the U.S. military presence in Vietnam will reach 3,200 men (although combat units will not be deployed until 1965).

The Vietnam War Begins

An American serviceman dies in Vietnam, the first combat death reported. For many Americans, the death will mark the beginning of the Vietnam War.

- 1962 The MAAG is replaced by the **U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam** (MACV). United States military advisors are authorized to fire if fired upon. By the end of the year, the U.S. military presence in Vietnam will reach 11,000. The United States and the South Vietnamese government attempt to initiate the **Strategic Hamlet Program** in an effort to group the peasant population into fortified villages. The program is designed to isolate the rural population from **Viet Cong** influence and, by providing education and health care, strengthen Diem's hold over the countryside. However, many of the peasants resent being uprooted from their homes and opposition to Diem grows; for this reason, the VC will easily infiltrate the hamlets.
- 1963 South Vietnamese police fire shots into a crowd of Buddhist monks demonstrating against President Diem's regime. Diem's regime is Catholic. Thich Quang Duc, a 66-year-old Buddhist monk, sets himself afire in protest of Diem's government, its religious intolerance, and discriminatory policies; in following months, other Buddhists will follow his example and **self-immolate** to demonstrate against the regime. Quang Duc's suicide, captured in an iconic Life magazine photograph, shocks—and confuses—many Americans.



President John F. Kennedy speaks of the war in Vietnam; he declares, *"to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there."*



U.S. Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** tells the press that the Kennedy administration intends to withdraw most American forces from South Vietnam by the end of 1965. The gap widens between information released by the U.S. government and the actual situation in Vietnam.

South Vietnamese General **Duong Van Minh** overthrows the Diem regime, and the following day he orders the **execution of Diem** and his brother. **General Duong's military rule is recognized by the United States.**

President John F. Kennedy is shot and killed. LBJ takes over.

1964 Some 1,000 students gather in New York City to protest the Vietnam War. Twelve **burn their selective service registration cards—draft cards—in a symbolic gesture of opposition to the war.**

North Vietnamese officials in Hanoi file a formal complaint with a commission set up by the **Geneva Accords**, declaring that under the protection of American destroyers, South Vietnamese vessels had bombarded northern ports. Responding to raids on northern ports, **North Vietnamese gunboats attack the USS Maddox** in the **Gulf of Tonkin**; the *Maddox* suffers little damage and no casualties are reported. The U.S. declares that its destroyer was on routine patrol in international waters and that it did nothing to provoke the attack, nor did it play any part in the South Vietnamese raids. Four years later, Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** will admit that the U.S. had in fact cooperated with the South.

The *USS Maddox* reports a second assault by North Vietnamese gunboats, though evidence of such an attack is inconclusive. President **Lyndon B. Johnson orders retaliatory strikes**. The **U.S. bombs North Vietnam for the first time**. The U.S. Congress passes the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, which gives President Lyndon Johnson the power to **take whatever actions he sees necessary to defend South Vietnam against Viet Cong** forces. The first unit of North Vietnamese troops is sent to the South; by May 1965 they will number 6,500.

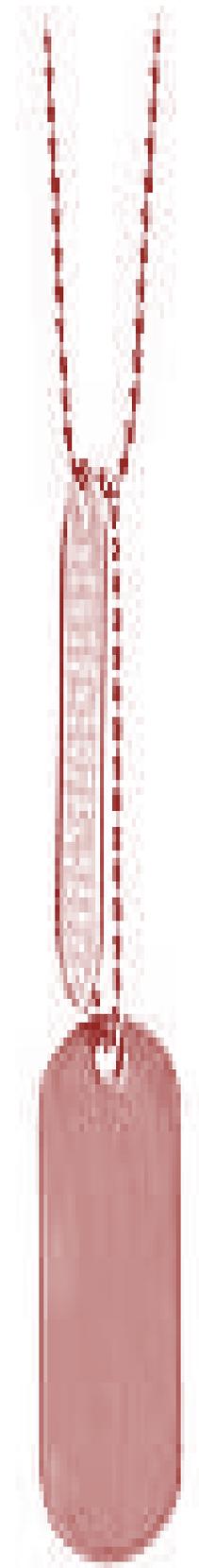
Lyndon B. Johnson wins the presidential election in a tremendous landslide.

1965 The **Viet Cong** attack a U.S. Air Force base at **Pleiku**, South Vietnam, killing eight Americans and wounding more than 100. Johnson authorizes **Operation Rolling Thunder**. The operation is a bombardment campaign meant to cripple North Vietnam's transportation system and its industrial centers in order to halt the flow of men and supplies into the South.

The first U.S. combat units arrive in Vietnam.

The **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** hold the first anti-war teach-in at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Students, faculty, and local citizens participate in debates, lectures, and film presentations meant to **challenge assumptions about the Vietnam War**. In Washington D.C., thousands attend a protest rally organized by SDS. Over 30,000 people attend a three-day **anti-war teach-in at U.C. Berkeley**. Among those in attendance are novelist Norman Mailer, socialist leader Norman Thomas, philosopher Alan Watts, civil rights activist Bob Moses, and Mario Savio, a prominent leader of the Free Speech Movement. The event, organized by the Vietnam Day Committee (VDC), will be the largest of its kind held during the Vietnam War.

American ground forces engage the Viet Cong in direct fighting for the first time. Platoons are sent to "*search and destroy*," that is, to ambush enemy forces and then withdraw immediately (rather than fortify and hold hostile territory). The highly aggressive "search and destroy" military strategy will be employed throughout **Gen. Westmorland's** tenure.

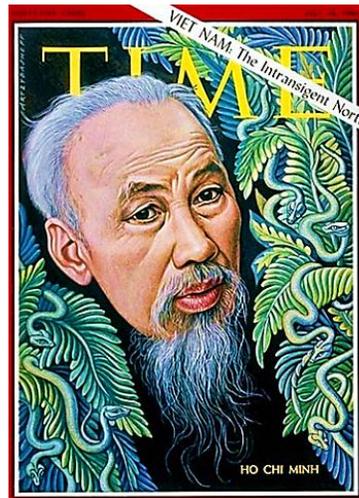


For the second time, Time magazine features **Ho Chi Minh** on its cover. In its cover article entitled "The Jungle Marxist," Time magazine asks,

"What makes kindly old 'Uncle Ho' so hard-nosed?"

The U.S. Congress passes an **amendment to the Selective Service Act that will criminalize the destruction of draft cards**. Johnson signs it into law. Those committing the act will now be subject to a five-year prison sentence and up to \$10,000 in fines. Pacifist David J. Miller, 24, becomes the first person convicted for burning a draft card under a new law signed by President Johnson in August 1965.

In the U.S., the first mass public demonstrations against American involvement in the war in Vietnam take place.



In an attempt to spur negotiations with North Vietnam, President Johnson orders a halt in the bombing. The pause will last just over a month. By the end of 1965, the U.S. troop strength in Vietnam exceeds 200,000.¹⁰

1966 Student **David O'Brien** and three friends burn their draft cards on the steps of the South Boston Courthouse in protest of the war in Vietnam. U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) are led through the streets of Hanoi, where they are attacked by angry mobs. By the end of 1966, American troops stationed in Vietnam number 389,000. More than 6,000 Americans have been killed and 30,000 wounded in 1966 alone.

1967 **Martin Luther King, Jr.** leads thousands of demonstrators to the United Nations building in New York, where he delivers a speech **attacking U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam**. Over 100,000 people attend the rally.

At the request of President Johnson, **General William Westmoreland**, commander of American troops in Vietnam, expresses optimism in his public statements about the war. In private, Westmoreland reports that he *sees no end in sight to the combat*.

In a private letter to President Johnson, Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** expresses grave concern about the war in Vietnam.

The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.

Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** publicly acknowledges the futility of bombing North Vietnam and the grave repercussions of this strategy at home and abroad. Johnson "releases" **Robert McNamara** from his duties as Secretary of Defense. By the end of 1967, the U.S. military presence in Vietnam has increased to 485,000.

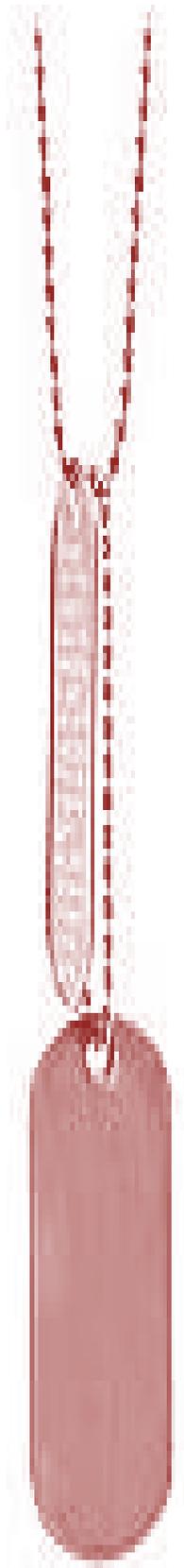
1968 Beginning on the Vietnamese Tet holiday, **Viet Cong** forces shock U.S. troops with a wave of attacks supported by North Vietnamese troops. Heavy fighting will continue for months. Ultimately, the **Tet Offensive** will be a catastrophe for both sides. Public support for the war in the U.S. plummets. General Westmoreland requests 206,000 more troops.

American soldiers, including the "Charlie" Company, a platoon led by Second Lieutenant **William Calley**, massacre hundreds of civilians—mostly women, children, and elderly men—in the hamlet of **My Lai** (pronounced "MEE LEYE") in South Vietnam. My Lai Massacre shocks America

Johnson meets with his military advisors who urge him to find a way to end the war in Vietnam. He states in a nationwide television broadcast,

"We are prepared to move immediately toward peace through negotiations. So tonight, in the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to deescalate the conflict [in Vietnam]."

He also announces that he will not seek reelection in 1968.



Ho Chi Minh's government declares it is prepared to talk about peace.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. His assassin, James Earl Ray, pleads guilty and is sentenced to 99 years in prison. Pessimism and disillusionment in America increase. Robert Kennedy also assassinated in 1968.

In *United States v. David Paul O'Brien*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that the criminal prohibition of draft card burning does not violate the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech.

The U.S. command in Vietnam announces that American battle deaths in the first six months of 1968 exceed the total in 1967. **The war in Vietnam—its beginning marked by the first death of an American serviceman reported on 22 December 1961—becomes the longest war in American history.**

At the **Democratic National Convention** in Chicago, **Hubert H. Humphrey** wins the presidential nomination; meanwhile **anti-war protestors clash with police in the streets outside** the convention. Chicago's Democratic mayor, **Richard Daley**, authorizes officers to use any force necessary to clear the protests. Hundreds of people are arrested, and dozens of demonstrators, reporters, police, and bystanders are injured in the chaos.

Republican **Richard Nixon** is elected president.

1969 Nixon enters office. **Paris Peace talks** begin.. American combat deaths in Vietnam exceed 33,629, the number lost in the Korean War. The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam peaks at 543,000. President **Richard Nixon** announces his plan for "**Vietnamization**" of the war—that is, training and transitioning South Vietnamese troops to assume the roles that have been fulfilled by American troops—and promises to withdraw 25,000 American soldiers.

Life magazine prints the portraits of the 242 Americans killed in action in Vietnam during a single week in May, a week identified by the magazine as "average for any seven-day period during the war." Twelve pages feature the faces of young people, mostly working-class black and white men, some in uniform, some posing for high school graduation in cap and gown.

At the age of 79, six years before his armies seize Saigon, **Ho Chi Minh dies**. Rather than cremate his body, as Minh had specified in his will, Minh's family has the leader embalmed and put on display in a mausoleum.

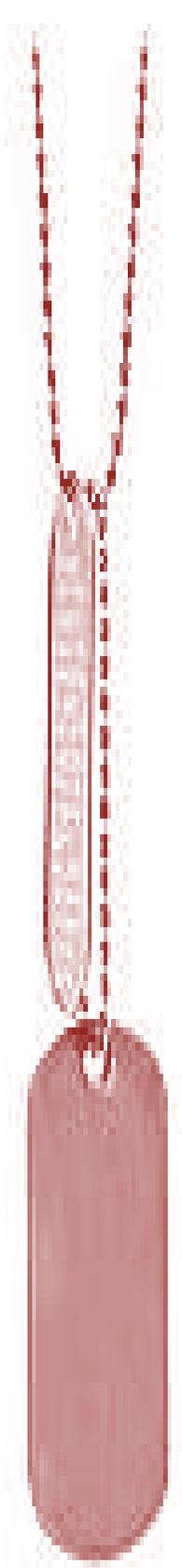
President Nixon promises to withdraw 35,000 additional troops from the war in Vietnam. Some 600,000 Americans attend an anti-war protest rally in Washington, D.C.

President Nixon promises to bring home 50,000 troops from Vietnam by April 1970.

1970 Over 420,000 American soldiers remain in Vietnam. President Nixon promises to withdraw another 150,000 within the next year.

In a nationally televised broadcast, **President Nixon announces that American and South Vietnamese units have invaded Cambodia to destroy bases that have provided aid to the NLF.**

Students at **Kent State University** in Ohio organize a massive public demonstration against the American invasion of Cambodia. On the second day of anti-war demonstrations at Kent State University students torch the R.O.T.C. building on campus. In response, the mayor of Kent, Ohio asks the governor to call in the National Guard. The Ohio National Guard attempts to disperse the growing crowd on the fourth day of anti-war protests at Kent State University. When demonstrators refuse to follow orders, chaos ensues. Members of the Guard shoot into the crowd, killing four and wounding nine; one student is paralyzed for life. Of the four killed, two had been



protesting while the other two had been walking to class. College campuses all across the country shut down. Photographs of the dead and wounded are printed worldwide, intensifying growing sentiment against American aggression in Cambodia and the war in Vietnam.

Police shoot and kill two students during anti-war protests at the historically black **Jackson State College** in Mississippi. Though the incident is similar to the shootings at Kent State, it receives far less attention from the press.

Immediately after seeing the photos of the Kent State tragedy, published in Life magazine, musician **Neil Young** takes a walk in the woods and then sits down to compose the song "[Ohio](#)," with the chorus line: "Four dead in Ohio" (lyrics below). It is performed by **Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young**, and becomes the protest anthem of a generation. David Crosby cries when the group finishes recording the song in the studio.

*Tin soldiers and Nixon coming,
We're finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drumming,
Four dead in Ohio.
Gotta get down to it
Soldiers are cutting us down
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her
And found her dead on the ground
How can you run when you know?*

1971 A military court sentences First Lieutenant **William Calley** to life in prison for the murders of 22 Vietnamese civilians in the My Lai village in 1968.

Some 200,000 people march in Washington, D.C. to protest the war in Vietnam. 14,000 are arrested.

The New York Times begins publishing portions of the "**Pentagon Papers**." **Daniel Ellsberg**, an American military analyst with an extremely high-level security clearance and a former employee of the RAND Corporation, has leaked the documents to reporter Neil Sheehan. They contain top-secret information collected by the Department of Defense about U.S. political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967.

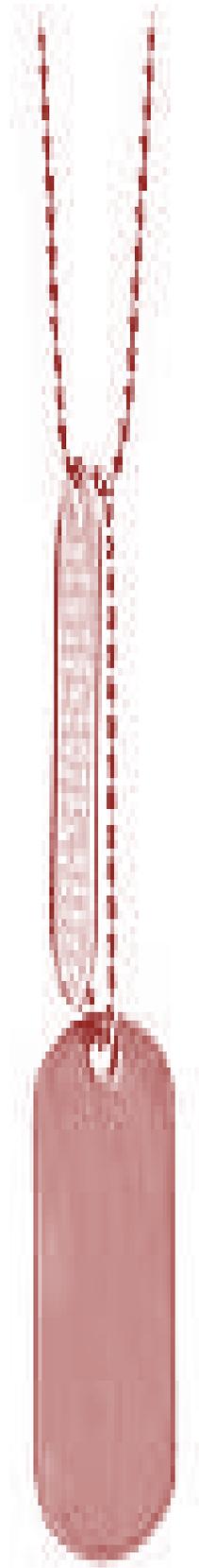
The House and the Senate vote to withdraw all U.S. troops in Vietnam by year's end. The 26th Amendment is ratified, lowering the national voting age from 21 to 18.

1972 Nixon orders massive bombing of North Vietnam in response to a major attack (**the Easter Offensive**) launched by the NLF in South Vietnam.

Five men are caught burglarizing the headquarters for the Democratic National Committee, located at the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C. Their arrests will set into motion the events that will eventually result in President Nixon's resignation.

The last U.S. ground troops leave Vietnam. Thousands of airmen, advisors, and support personnel remain.

Nixon defeats Democratic candidate Senator George McGovern in the presidential election. McGovern has run on an anti-war platform that would grant amnesty to draft evaders who have left the country, and would exchange American withdrawal from Vietnam for the return of American prisoners of war (POWs).



1973 Representatives from South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the United States sign a peace agreement in which a **ceasefire is declared**, the U.S. agrees to withdraw combat troops, and the government of **South Vietnam** promises to hold free elections to allow its people to decide their future.

North Vietnam releases nearly 600 American POWs, including future Senator and Presidential candidate, John McCain, who was imprisoned for 6 years.

The Vietnam War is officially over for the United States. The last U.S. combat soldier leaves Vietnam, but military advisors and some Marines remain. Over 3 million Americans have served in the war, nearly 60,000 are dead, some 150,000 are wounded, and at least 1,000 are missing in action.

Despite renewed fighting between the NLF and the South Vietnamese, the **U.S. Congress votes to prohibit any further U.S. combat role in Vietnam.**

War Powers Resolution passed by Congress to check the power of the President in committing the United States to an armed conflict without the consent of Congress

1974 **The ceasefire in Vietnam is officially over. The U.S. Congress rejects President Nixon's request for increased military aid to South Vietnam.**

President Nixon resigns amidst the **Watergate** scandal; his vice president **Gerald Ford** takes office.

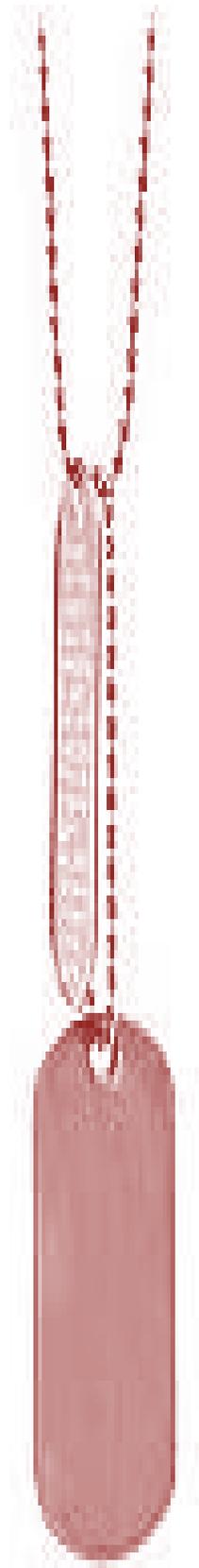
1975 *The New York Times* features an image of hundreds of South Vietnamese civilians scrambling to board a single U.S. helicopter. During the final weeks of April, an **invasion of Saigon** by the North Vietnamese has become certain, and thousands attempt to flee the region.



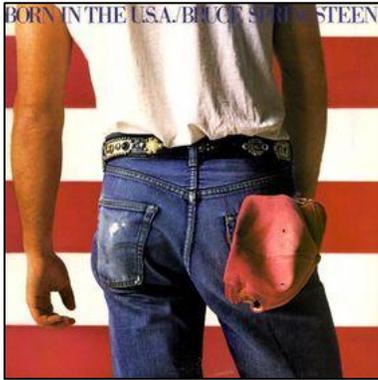
Ford interested in intervening, but America not interested... The North Vietnamese take Saigon; the war in Vietnam ends.



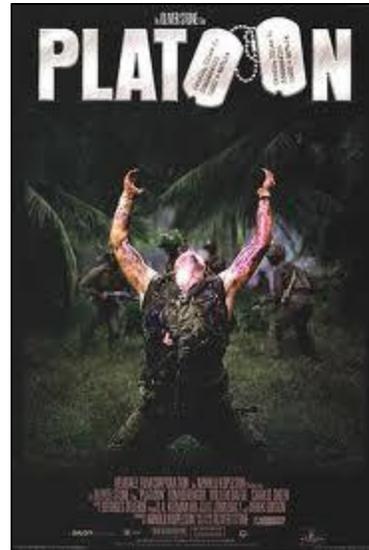
Just days after the government of South Vietnam surrendered to the VC and North Vietnamese armies, Ho Chi Minh appears on the cover of *Time* magazine, this time with the heading, "**The Victor.**"



America tried to put the memories of Vietnam behind them. Vets were shunned... there was not welcome parade like WWII vets received. People didn't talk about it... American culture ignored it... In the 1980s... that slowly changed. Slowly...



For example, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's 1984 song, "[Born in the USA](#)," was a protest record... yet it became a #1 hit for its "patriotism." Its patriotic chorus—the only lyrics most fans ever learned—stood as a bitterly ironic counterpoint to the song's verses, which told the heartbreaking story of a hopeless Vietnam vet. Even Reagan wanted to use it as his official campaign song in 1984... Springsteen wondered if he had listened to the lyrics.



*Born down in a dead man's town
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground
You end up like a dog that's been beat too much
Til you spend half your life just covering up now*

*Born in the USA., I was born in the USA
I was born in the USA., born in the USA.*

*Got in a little hometown jam
So they put a rifle in my hand
Sent me off to a foreign land
To go and kill the yellow man*

Born in the U.S.A...

*Come back home to the refinery
Hiring man says, 'Son, if it was up to me...'
Went down to see my VA man
He said, 'Son, don't you understand?'*

*I had a brother at Khe Sanh fighting off the Viet Cong
They're still there, he's all gone
He had a woman he loved in Saigon
I got a picture of him in her arms now*

*Down in the shadow of the penitentiary
Out by the gas fires of the refinery
I'm ten years burning down the road
Nowhere to run, ain't got nowhere to go*

*Born in the USA, I was born in the USA
Born in the USA, I'm a long gone daddy in the USA
Born in the USA, born in the USA
Born in the USA, I'm a cool rocking daddy in the USA*

The major turning point for America came with the movie, [Platoon](#), which hit theaters in 1986. It got people talking... facing the war... rethinking the harsh treatment of vets... and finally moving on.

Platoon is generally regarded as one of the strongest anti-war films of all time. Oliver Stone wrote and directed. It won 4 Oscars including Best Picture.

Chris Taylor (played by Charlie Sheen) was torn between two sergeants. Barnes (played by Tom Berenger) was the battle hardened, brutal murderer, who used the war as an excuse to tender to his sadistic pleasures. Some say he represented Satan or at least the darkest part of humanity. Elias (Played by William Defoe) was on the other side of the spectrum. Some say he represents God or at least the best in humanity struggling to survive in a dark world. The two sergeants symbolize the struggle that Taylor must face if he is to survive Vietnam. Elias/Good lost... as America lost. Taylor and Barnes survived.

The shooting was frantic and impossible to follow. It disorientated the viewer, just as the soldiers were. The viewer had no idea who is being shot at and neither did they. The viewer followed the war at ground level, and saw the brutalities first hand. The use of drugs, which was rampant as troubled men longed for escape... was brought to life.

It was *in your face*... now face it... and America finally did... **11 years after the fall of Saigon.**

[The Vietnam War, one minute summary](#)

