TIMES PAST

1964

The Vietnam WAR



Fifty years ago, the United States stepped up its involvement in a war that tore the nation apart

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

On the morning of Nov. 9, 1965, 22-year-old Roger Allen LaPorte sat cross-legged outside the United Nations in midtown Manhattan, poured gasoline over his body, and set himself on fire.

"I'm against wars, all wars," the devout Catholic said before dying in the hospital the next day. "I did this as a religious act."

LaPorte's was one of the more tragic acts of protest against the Vietnam War, a decade-long conflict that tore the U.S. apart, spawned a near-revolution by young people, and left many Americans' faith in their nation and its political leaders shaken.

"The Vietnam War was one of those events that touched practically everybody in America," says David L. Anderson, a historian and co-editor of *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*. "It led people to question . . . is their country always right? Does America always win?—concepts that Americans had never thought about."

One reason the Vietnam War was so divisive is that many Americans came to see it as a civil war in a faraway country that didn't concern the U.S. Another reason was because of the draft. Since 1973, the U.S. has had an all-volunteer army; no one is now forced to serve. But during Vietnam, when able-bodied men ages 18 to 26 were called up, they had no choice, and many ended up fighting, and dying, in Vietnam. Exemptions for people like college students made the draft even more controversial since the system seemed to favor privileged Americans.

U.S. combat troops first landed in South Vietnam in 1965 to help prevent a Communist takeover. By the time the last U.S. soldiers withdrew in 1975, more than 2.7 million Americans—many of them teenagers—had served in the war and 58,000 had been killed.

The Domino Theory

U.S. involvement in Vietnam was part of America's Cold War battle against the spread of Communism, which had already begun gaining a foothold in Asia. In China, Mao Zedong had successfully led a Communist revolution in 1949, and a year later, the Korean War began when Communist North Korea, with Soviet and Chinese support, invaded South Korea. A U.S.-led United Nations coalition intervened on South Korea's behalf. By the time the war ended in a stalemate in 1953, 34,000 Americans had been killed.

The following year Vietnam was partitioned into a Communist North and a pro-Western South after France lost its century-old colonies in Southeast Asia *(see Timeline, p. 20)*. But Ho Chi Minh, the Communist and nationalist leader whose forces had defeated the French, wanted all of Vietnam to be a single Communist state. Communist guerillas in South Vietnam, the "Vietcong," had the same goal.

That alarmed President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who feared that a Communist victory in Vietnam would lead to the fall of other Asian countries. The "domino theory" became the foundation for U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia for the next two decades. To prevent a Communist takeover, Eisenhower sent military advisers to train and arm the South Vietnamese Army.

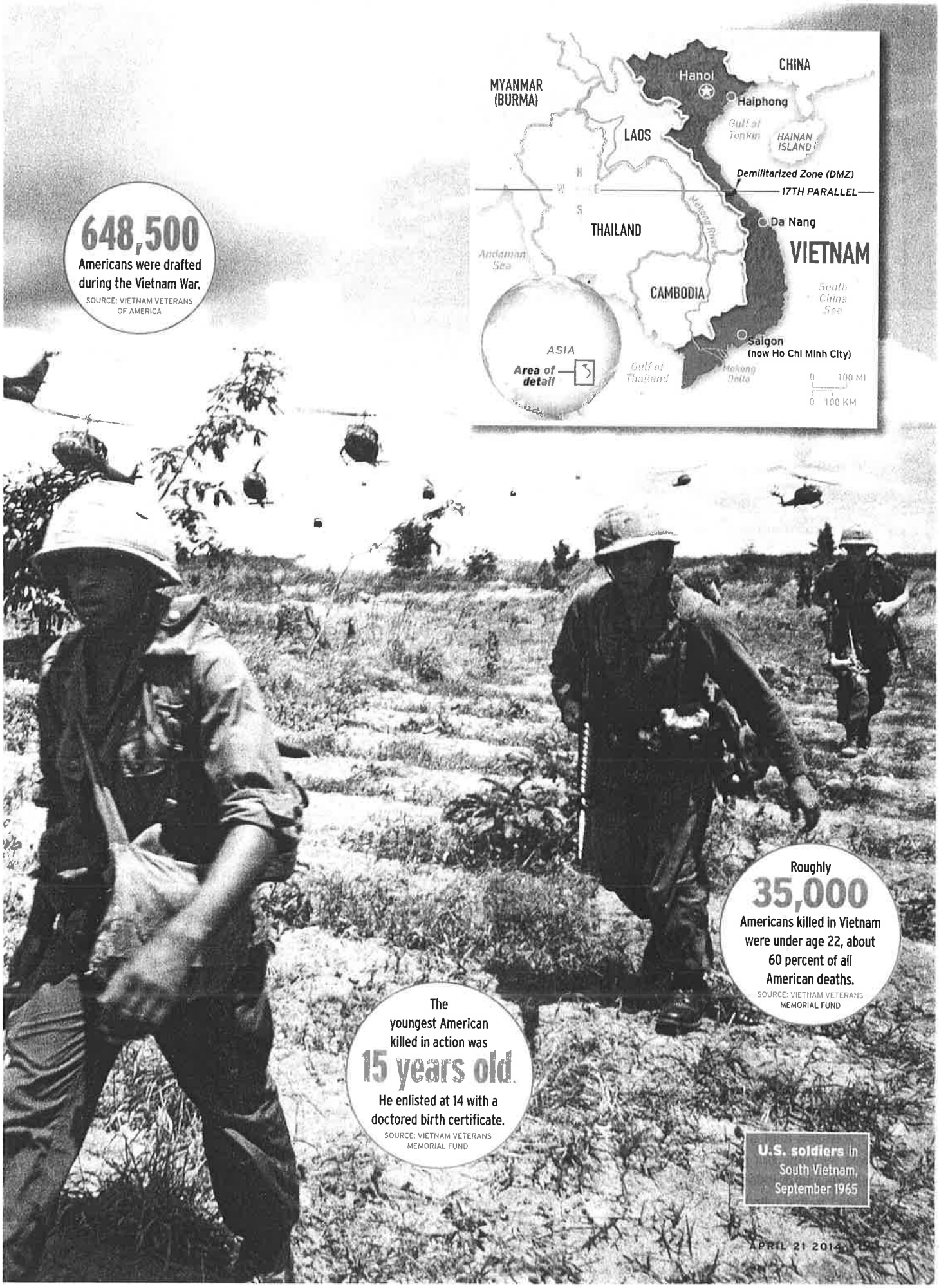
> **'The Vietnam War... touched practically everybody in America.'**

President John F. Kennedy (1960-63) continued sending American advisers to Vietnam. After Kennedy's assassination, his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, grew increasingly concerned about the situation there. "I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went," he told the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam in 1963.

In August 1964, Johnson told the nation that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked a U.S. destroyer without provocation in the Gulf of Tonkin *(see*

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TIM PAGE/CORBIS


MYANMAR (BURMA)
CHINA
Hanoi
Haiphong
Gulf of Tonkin
HAINAN ISLAND
LAOS
Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)
17TH PARALLEL
THAILAND
Mekong River
Da Nang
VIETNAM
Andaman Sea
CAMBODIA
South China Sea
Saigon
(now Ho Chi Minh City)
ASIA
Area of detail
Gulf of Thailand
Mekong Delta
0 100 MI
0 100 KM
648,500
Americans were drafted during the Vietnam War.
SOURCE: VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Roughly
35,000
Americans killed in Vietnam were under age 22, about 60 percent of all American deaths.
SOURCE: VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL FUND
The youngest American killed in action was
15 years old.
He enlisted at 14 with a doctored birth certificate.
SOURCE: VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL FUND
U.S. soldiers in South Vietnam, September 1965

Timeline VIETNAM & THE U.S.





1954
French Defeat

After Communist forces defeat the French, Vietnam is partitioned into a Communist North and pro-Western South. President Eisenhower sends advisers to help the South battle Communism.

1964
Gulf of Tonkin

Following a disputed attack on a U.S. ship by North Vietnam, Congress authorizes President Johnson *(above, with U.S. troops)* to respond without a formal declaration of war.

1965
Troops & Protests

Johnson sends combat troops to Vietnam; youth-led protests *(above)* intensify as U.S. troop levels increase to 543,000 by the end of the decade.

1968
Tet Offensive

In January, the Communists launch a brutal month-long offensive at the start of the lunar New Year. The attack turns more Americans against the war.

map, p. 19). Whether his account was accurate is still disputed; but Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing the president to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack" against U.S. forces in Vietnam, without formally declaring war *(see box)*. At the start of 1965, Johnson sent 25,000 U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam.

Most Americans initially supported the war. But as it escalated—from 184,000 troops at the end of 1965 to more than half a million by the end of the decade—a powerful antiwar movement began taking hold.

Mass protests, led mostly by students and young people, began in 1965 and grew larger and more intense. In 1967, 300,000 people marched in New York and 100,000 in Washington, with protestors trying to close down the Pentagon. Sit-ins, teach-ins, and peace marches took over college campuses; men burned their draft cards, and radicals attacked college ROTC buildings.

Johnson kept insisting that the U.S. was winning. But Americans got a very different impression of what was essentially the first televised war. Every night, the evening news programs showed relatively uncensored images of GIs plodding through jungles and rice paddies, bombs dropping from B-52 airplanes, and piles of corpses and wounded on both sides. As media scholar Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1975, "Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America—not on the battlefields of Vietnam."

'Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America.'

America's First Guerrilla War

Vietnam was also America's first real guerrilla war. Much of the fighting involved confusing jungle warfare against Vietcong guerrillas who attacked, then easily melted back into the civilian population (similar to what U.S. soldiers have faced in the current war in Afghanistan).

It was a month-long battle at the start of 1968 that really turned the tide. In January, amid fireworks and parties celebrating "Tet," the lunar New Year, 80,000 Communist troops launched a surprise attack across the South. Though ultimately a military defeat for North Vietnam and the Vietcong, the Tet Offensive proved a psychological blow to Americans, who saw it as evidence that the war was still escalating.

After Tet, CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, known as the "most trusted man in America," offered this analysis:

"We've been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders . . . both in Vietnam and Washington to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. For it seems now more certain than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."

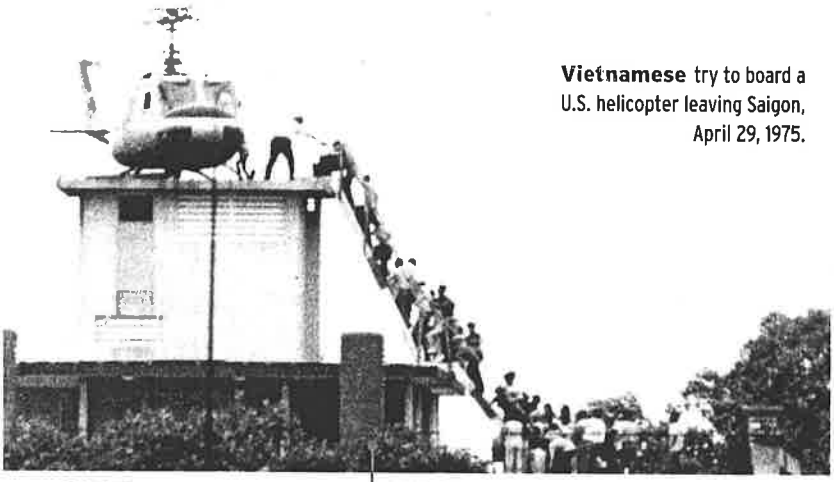
In March, with his popularity plummeting, President Johnson announced the start of peace talks in Paris—and that he would not run for re-election.

Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, lost the 1968 presidential election to Republican Richard M. Nixon of California. Nixon promised to restore order at home and said he had a "secret plan" to get the U.S. out of the war.

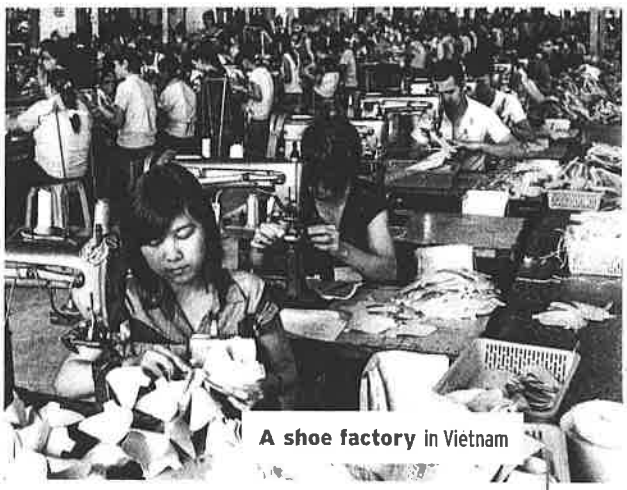
In 1969, President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger began a process of "Vietnamization," withdrawing U.S. troops and training the South Vietnamese army to carry on the fight. By 1972, only 70,000 U.S. troops remained in Vietnam. After a cease-fire was announced in 1973 as part of the Paris Peace Accords, nearly all U.S. troops were withdrawn.

In Vietnam, fighting soon resumed

TIMELINE, FROM LEFT: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGE; LEONARD FREED/MAGNUM PHOTOS; BETTMANN/CORBIS; AARON JOEL SANTOS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX



Vietnamese try to board a U.S. helicopter leaving Saigon, April 29, 1975.



A shoe factory in Vietnam

1975
Communist Victory

Two years after a cease-fire, North Vietnamese forces overrun the South. Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) falls, and the last Americans evacuate along with a fraction of the Vietnamese who want to flee.

1986
Economic Reforms

After a decade of repression and grinding poverty, Vietnam's Communist government begins introducing free-market reforms.

1994
Restoring Ties

Twenty years after the end of the war, President Bill Clinton lifts the U.S. trade embargo and begins restoring diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

TODAY
Trading Partners

Vietnam's economy is growing at 5 percent a year; the U.S. and Vietnam are vital trading partners, with bilateral trade totaling nearly $30 billion.

between the North and South. In April 1975, Saigon fell to the invading North Vietnamese and Vietcong, who renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. Remaining U.S. military personnel were hastily evacuated, along with a fraction of the Vietnamese who wanted to flee. In addition to the 58,000 Americans who died in the war, 153,000 were wounded, and at least 2,500 Americans were unaccounted for.

Nearly 3 million Vietnamese were killed in the war. And for the South Vietnamese, the horrors didn't end. The Communists executed as many as 65,000 of their political enemies and sent at least 200,000 to "re-education camps," where many died from starvation and overwork.

In 1986, after a decade of grinding poverty, Vietnam began introducing free-market reforms, and in 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted a U.S. trade embargo and started normalizing relations with Vietnam.

Today, the U.S. is the largest importer of Vietnamese goods, with bilateral trade between the two countries totaling nearly $30 billion. Many American companies, including Nike and Columbia Sportswear, have factories in Vietnam. Vietnamese students are the eighth-largest group of foreigners studying in the U.S., and the U.S. was the fourth-largest source of tourists to Vietnam in 2013. For the more than 60 percent of Vietnamese who were born after 1975, the war they learn about in school as the "American War" might as well have happened centuries ago.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who was a Naval officer in the war, recently visited Vietnam to speak about expanding trade and security ties. Addressing businesspeople and educators in Ho Chi Minh City, he marveled over Vietnam's economic progress and how far U.S.-Vietnamese relations have come.

"What has taken place in just a little over 20 years is extraordinary" Kerry said. "I can't think of two countries that have worked harder, done more, and done better to try to bring themselves together and change history." •

The War Powers Act

Did President Lyndon B. Johnson have the right to send U.S. troops to Vietnam beginning in 1965?

Congress never formally declared war on North Vietnam but it gave Johnson authority to do what he wanted through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. By the end of the war, however, many lawmakers felt that control over the nation's armed forces—which the Constitution says is shared by the President and Congress—had swung too far to the president. So in 1973, over President Nixon's veto, Congress passed the War Powers Act, which requires the president to terminate the use of military force after 90 days unless Congress authorizes it.

Presidents have largely managed to sidestep the Act, often arguing that it doesn't apply to their particular foreign crisis. But historian David L. Anderson says the War Powers Act still changed the way presidents approach war.

"Most presidents have . . . felt compelled to be more transparent, to give more information to Congress," he says. "In other words, they've behaved in a way that they're aware of the Act, even if they've often argued they're not being compelled by it." •



President Obama is commander-in-chief of the military, but only Congress has the power to declare war.

JEWEL SAMAD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (OBAMA)