

Peace With Honor? The United States Withdraws From Vietnam

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

While running for president in 1968, Richard Nixon promised to end the war in Vietnam. Following his election, however, the United States remained involved in the Vietnam War for another 5 years. Nixon's escalation of the conflict, along with reports of atrocities committed by U.S. troops, provoked massive anti-war demonstrations. Like its predecessors, his administration struggled to develop an exit strategy that would achieve American war goals while remaining an honorable ally to South Vietnam.

This tutorial examines the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in three parts:

1. Fighting in Vietnam

Most American soldiers who were drafted or volunteered to fight in Vietnam were unprepared for what they encountered there: a strange and hostile tropical environment, thousands of miles from home. Many of them did not know what was expected of them. Objectives were often unclear, and officers did not provide guidance on how to interact with Vietnamese civilians. This lack of clarity, combined with the unfamiliar environment and culture, had a negative impact on their ability to fight a guerrilla war.



American soldiers check a house while on patrol in October 1966.

The National Liberation Front (i.e., the Viet Cong), with support from North Vietnamese forces, enjoyed some tactical and strategic advantages throughout the war. They used brutality and surprise to kill American soldiers on patrol. Captured servicemen frequently endured torture and imprisonment.



DID YOU KNOW

Among the most notorious North Vietnamese prisons was Hòa Lò Prison, which American inmates referred to as the “Hanoi Hilton.” Among its occupants was the future senator of Arizona, John McCain, who was a prisoner of war for 6 years.

A racist view of the Vietnamese people as backward, combined with the brutality of combat, sometimes led U.S. soldiers to retaliate against civilians.

One of the most notorious atrocities of the Vietnam War occurred in 1968. On March 16, approximately 100 soldiers commanded by Captain Ernest Medina were sent to destroy the South Vietnamese village of My Lai, which was suspected of hiding Viet Cong fighters. Although later there was disagreement regarding the captain’s exact words, platoon leaders believed they had been ordered to kill all inhabitants, including women and children.



DID YOU KNOW

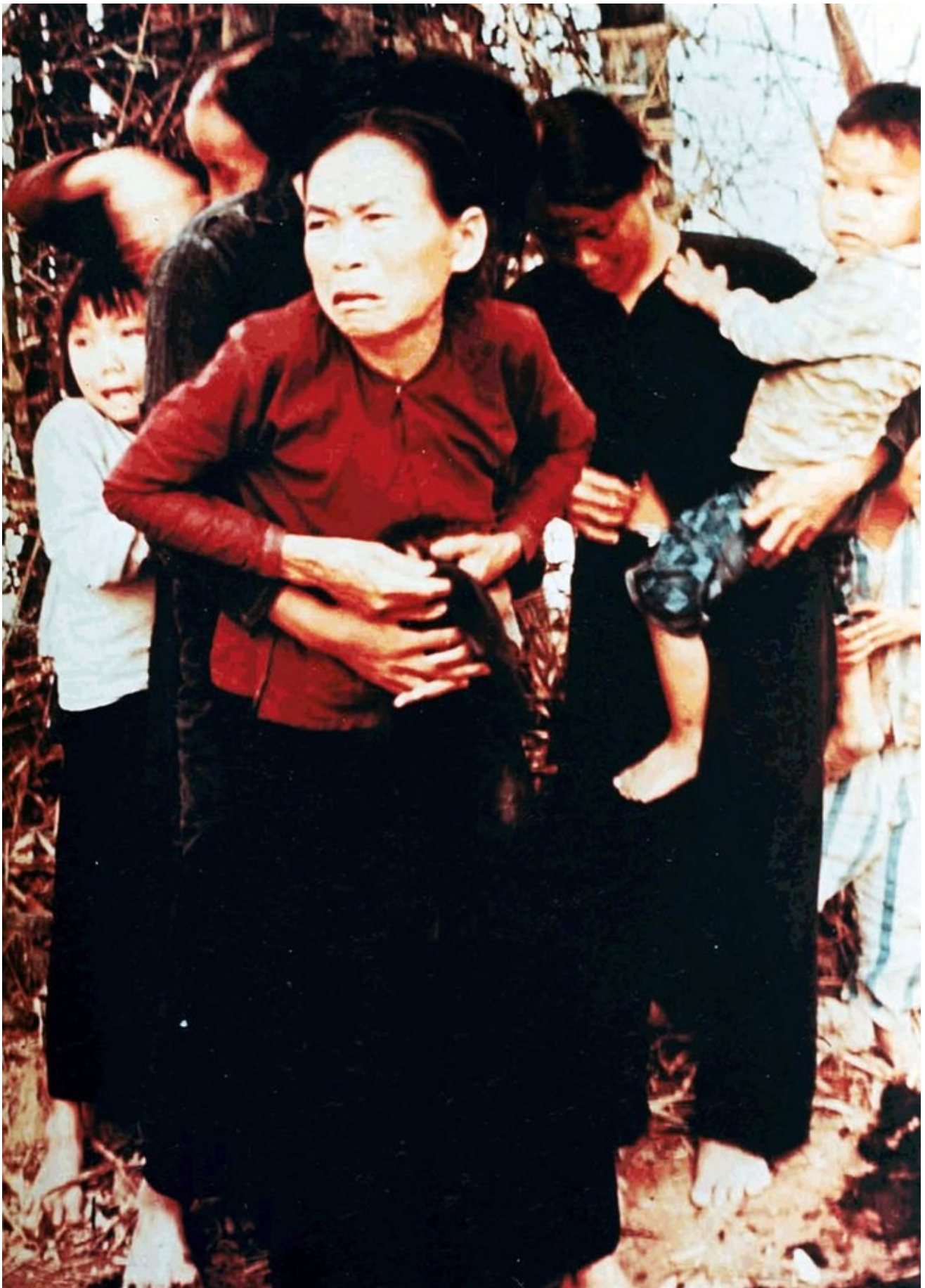
Having suffered over 20 casualties in the preceding 3 months, Medina’s men were under severe stress and were extremely apprehensive as they approached My Lai.

Two platoons entered My Lai and began shooting randomly. A group of 70–80 unarmed people, including children and infants, were forced into an irrigation ditch by members of the First Platoon, under the command of **Lt. William L. Calley Jr.** Despite their claims of innocence, the villagers were shot.



Lt. William L. Calley Jr.

U.S. Army officer who was tried and convicted for premeditated murder after the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam in 1968 was made known to the American public.



Women and children of My Lai await their fate. They were shot shortly after this photograph was taken in 1968.

Houses were set on fire, and the inhabitants were killed as they tried to flee. Estimates of the number of civilians killed during the **My Lai Massacre** range from 347 to 504.



TERM TO KNOW

My Lai Massacre

A mass killing of civilians by U.S. soldiers in a South Vietnamese village in 1968.



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Unidentified Bodies Near Burning House (Haeberle Color #14A)

Unidentified bodies lie near a burning house during the My Lai Massacre.



A photo taken by the army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle, showing the aftermath of the My Lai Massacre.

Not all of the soldiers at My Lai took part in the killings, but no one attempted to stop the massacre before Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson arrived by helicopter. Thompson tried to evacuate some of the women and children. He then reported what was taking place at My Lai. Captain Medina ordered a cease-fire.

Despite the accounts given by Thompson and his crew members, a cover-up began almost immediately after the massacre. The army first claimed that 150 people, most of them Viet Cong, had been killed during a firefight near My Lai.

After hearing details of the massacre from friends who were at My Lai, a helicopter gunner named Ron Ridenhour conducted his own investigation. In April 1969, he wrote to 30 members of Congress, demanding that they investigate the event. By that time, the *New York Times* and other newspapers had published reports (including photographs) of the atrocity. Many Americans were horrified by the graphic coverage. In September 1969, the army charged Lt. Calley with premeditated murder. He was found guilty in March 1971 and was sentenced to life in prison. Calley was the only soldier convicted as a result of the investigations into the massacre.



DID YOU KNOW

Nearly half of the respondents to a poll taken in Minnesota did not believe that the incident at My Lai had occurred. Those who were skeptical believed that American soldiers were incapable of committing such atrocities. They speculated that the **anti-war movement** had concocted the story to generate sympathy for the communist cause in Vietnam.



TERM TO KNOW

2. Vietnamization, Cambodia, and Tragedies at Home

News of the My Lai Massacre and other atrocities galvanized the anti-war movement. In the fall of 1967, a group of veterans formed a group named Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Following reports of the My Lai massacre and other atrocities, the organization grew to include 20,000 members by the early 1970s.

To reduce the pressure on his administration—and to find a way to get out of Vietnam “with honor”—President **Richard Nixon** began the process of **Vietnamization**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Richard Nixon

Cold Warrior and conservative Republican politician who won the tumultuous presidential election of 1968 by appealing to a “silent majority” of Americans who looked unfavorably upon the social upheaval of the 1960s and by promising an honorable exit from Vietnam.



TERM TO KNOW

Vietnamization

The Nixon administration’s policy of turning over responsibility for the defense of South Vietnam to Vietnamese forces.

The United States continued to support South Vietnamese forces with training, weapons, and air support while U.S. troops were gradually withdrawn from the country.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The Nixon administration began to reduce the number of young men drafted into service during the spring of 1969 and, by 1971, 200,000 American soldiers had returned home from Vietnam.

While Nixon declared that he was limiting the war in Vietnam, he secretly escalated it elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Beginning in the spring of 1969, President Nixon authorized the bombing of Cambodia (which had declared its neutrality) to destroy North Vietnamese and Viet Cong bases and cut supply routes between North and South Vietnam. The bombing was kept secret from Congress and the American public.

In April 1970, Nixon announced that he was following up the bombing campaign by sending American troops to Cambodia.



On April 30, 1970, the President announces that he is sending U.S. troops to Cambodia. To justify this action, Nixon points out the location of Vietnamese communist sanctuaries along the border between Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Protests took place across the country following Nixon's announcement. Those that occurred at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State University in Mississippi ended tragically.

Tensions between students at Kent State and the Ohio National Guard came to a head on May 4, 1970. After campus officials called off a student demonstration, between 1,500 and 2,000 students assembled. Some of them threw rocks at a security officer. National guardsmen approached the students and, for reasons that are unknown, some of the guardsmen fired at the students. Nine students were wounded; four were killed.

News of the **Kent State shootings** shocked students around the country.



TERM TO KNOW

Kent State Shootings

A violent incident in which four unarmed students were killed and nine were wounded by the Ohio National Guard in 1970.

Millions of students across the country refused to attend class. Anti-war protesters assembled in New York and Washington, DC. Neil Young penned the song "Ohio," which declared "Four dead in Ohio."

Not everyone sympathized with the students, however. Immediately after the Kent State incident, President Nixon released the following statement:

President Nixon, Statement on the Kent State Shootings

“This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy. It is my hope that this tragic and unfortunate incident will strengthen the determination of all the nation’s campuses, administrators, faculty, and students alike to stand firmly for the right which exists in this country of peaceful dissent and just as strong against the resort to violence as a means of such expression.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Who does Nixon blame for the Kent State shootings?

On May 15, a similar tragedy took place at Jackson State College, an African American college in Jackson, Mississippi. Like the Kent State students, Jackson State students gathered on campus to protest the invasion of Cambodia. The police arrived to disperse the protesters and, shortly after midnight, opened fire with shotguns. Twelve people were wounded, and two young men—one a student at the college and the other a local high school student—were killed.

3. Peace With Honor? The United States Withdraws From Vietnam

Ongoing protests and campus violence as well as the responses to these events revealed that Americans were divided by the Vietnam War. Realizing that some of them were becoming deeply disillusioned, President Nixon approved Congress’s repeal of the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** in January 1971.



TERM TO KNOW

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Gave President Johnson the authority to use military force in Vietnam without asking Congress for a declaration of war.

The resolution had given President Nixon and his predecessor, **Lyndon Johnson**, executive authority to oversee the war in Vietnam. The repeal was an attempt by Congress to roll back the president’s power in the area of foreign policy.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lyndon B. Johnson

Democratic U.S. president from 1963 to 1969 whose grandiose domestic agenda for civil rights and economic equality, known as the Great Society, ran up against a growing conflict in Vietnam and an unraveling of the liberal New Deal coalition that supported the Democratic Party.

The Nixon administration was dealt another significant blow in June 1971 when the *New York Times* published the **Pentagon Papers**.



TERM TO KNOW

Pentagon Papers

Government documents leaked to the *New York Times* that revealed that the government had misled the public about the conflict in Vietnam.

The *Pentagon Papers* were excerpts from a 7,000-page study prepared during Lyndon Johnson’s

administration that traced the extent of American involvement in Vietnam. They also provided evidence that the federal government had misled the American people about the Vietnam War.



DID YOU KNOW

Copies of the *Pentagon Papers* were given to the *New York Times* and other newspapers by **Daniel Ellsberg**, a military analyst who had contributed to the original study.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Daniel Ellsberg

U.S. military analyst who released a 7,000-page study of American decision-making in Vietnam to the *New York Times* and other media outlets in 1971.

As a result of the leak of the *Pentagon Papers*, the public learned the following (among other things):

- President Kennedy had authorized a military coup to oust the president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, in the fall of 1963.
- President Johnson had considered ways to expand the U.S. role in Vietnam and bomb North Vietnam even while publicly stating that he had no intention to escalate the conflict.
- President Johnson's administration sought to provoke North Vietnamese attacks to justify U.S. involvement in the war.

Much of the *Pentagon Papers* focused on the conduct of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, but the Nixon administration worried that the leak would set a precedent, allowing the press to publish other confidential government documents.



DID YOU KNOW

Attorney General John Mitchell sought an injunction against the *New York Times* to prevent the publication of additional articles regarding the *Pentagon Papers*. On June 30, 1971, the Supreme Court ruled that the Nixon administration could not prevent the publication of these articles.

Nixon was furious about the court's ruling. The publication of the *Pentagon Papers* led him and his administration to take action to prevent future leaks. Those actions contributed to the Watergate scandal of 1974. In 1971, however, the administration realized that it had to end the Vietnam War without admitting failure or defeat. Nixon and his advisors—most importantly, Henry Kissinger—called this strategy “peace with honor.”

In January 1973, after nearly 5 years of negotiations, the United States and North Vietnam signed an agreement that ended American participation in the Vietnam War. The United States committed to withdrawing its troops from South Vietnam within 60 days. North Vietnamese forces were allowed to remain in locations they currently occupied in South Vietnam.

The agreement between North Vietnam and the United States left the South Vietnamese government in place. The United States continued to support South Vietnam with equipment and a small number of military advisors. The United States also continued to provide funding to South Vietnam and bombing Cambodia until the fall of 1973, when Congress reduced financial aid to South Vietnam and enacted the **War Powers Act** over a presidential veto.



TERM TO KNOW

War Powers Act

Required the executive branch to inform Congress of any troop deployments abroad within 48 hours

and to bring those troops home within 60 days.

Nixon told the American people that the agreement with North Vietnam represented “peace with honor” and secured South Vietnamese and American interests in Southeast Asia, but the evidence suggests otherwise. The peace agreement allowed North Vietnamese forces to remain in South Vietnam. This meant that over 100,000 soldiers, along with Viet Cong guerrillas, were ideally situated to continue the war with South Vietnam. As it continued, and as the United States withdrew its support, it became clear that South Vietnam would not survive.

The end of the Vietnam War came in the spring of 1975 when North Vietnam and the Viet Cong launched a major military offensive. By April 29, communist forces had moved into Saigon, South Vietnam’s capital city. Rather than intervene, the United States evacuated the remaining American personnel and some South Vietnamese people. After the fall of Saigon, South Vietnam surrendered. Vietnam was reunified under communist rule.



Unable to use the airport in Saigon, U.S. helicopters ferried Americans and Vietnamese refugees from rooftops to ships off the coast. In this iconic image, an American official helps evacuees up a ladder and onto a helicopter before Saigon falls to communist forces.



BIG IDEA

Approximately 58,000 American soldiers died during the Vietnam War—a large number that seems less significant when compared to the three to four million Vietnamese civilians and combatants who lost their lives during the fighting. In addition to failing to establish an independent South Vietnam, U.S. involvement in the region—which spanned five presidential administrations—challenged long-held assumptions regarding the **containment** policy. The war contributed to a loss of consensus and confidence among fellow Americans. Many were no longer sure that the United States occupied the moral high ground in

international affairs. The unsatisfactory end of the Vietnam War, along with other trends during the 1970s, undermined Americans' confidence in institutions and politicians.



TERM TO KNOW

Containment

The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism abroad during the Cold War.

Additional Resource

Watch a short video clip to learn more about the Vietnam War from [PBS](#).



SUMMARY

Richard Nixon's administration struggled to develop a strategy to get out of Vietnam that would deliver a "knockout blow" against communist forces and appease the anti-war movement at home. His decision to escalate the conflict by invading Cambodia provoked anti-war demonstrations that included the tragic events at Kent State and Jackson State. As criticism of the Vietnam War grew, the administration negotiated an agreement with North Vietnam and withdrew U.S. troops from the country in 1973. Despite Nixon's claim to have achieved "peace with honor," South Vietnam ceased to exist as an independent nation in 1975. Americans increasingly lost faith in their leaders and institutions.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Anti-War Movement

The movement against the Vietnam War.

Containment

The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism abroad during the Cold War.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Gave President Johnson the authority to use military force in Vietnam without asking Congress for a declaration of war.

Kent State Shootings

A violent incident in which four unarmed students were killed and nine were wounded by the Ohio National Guard in 1970.

My Lai Massacre

A mass killing of civilians by U.S. soldiers in a South Vietnamese village in 1968.

Pentagon Papers

Government documents leaked to the *New York Times* that revealed that the government had misled the public about the conflict in Vietnam.

Vietnamization

The Nixon administration's policy of turning over responsibility for the defense of South Vietnam to Vietnamese forces.

War Powers Act

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**PEOPLE TO KNOW****Daniel Ellsberg**

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