

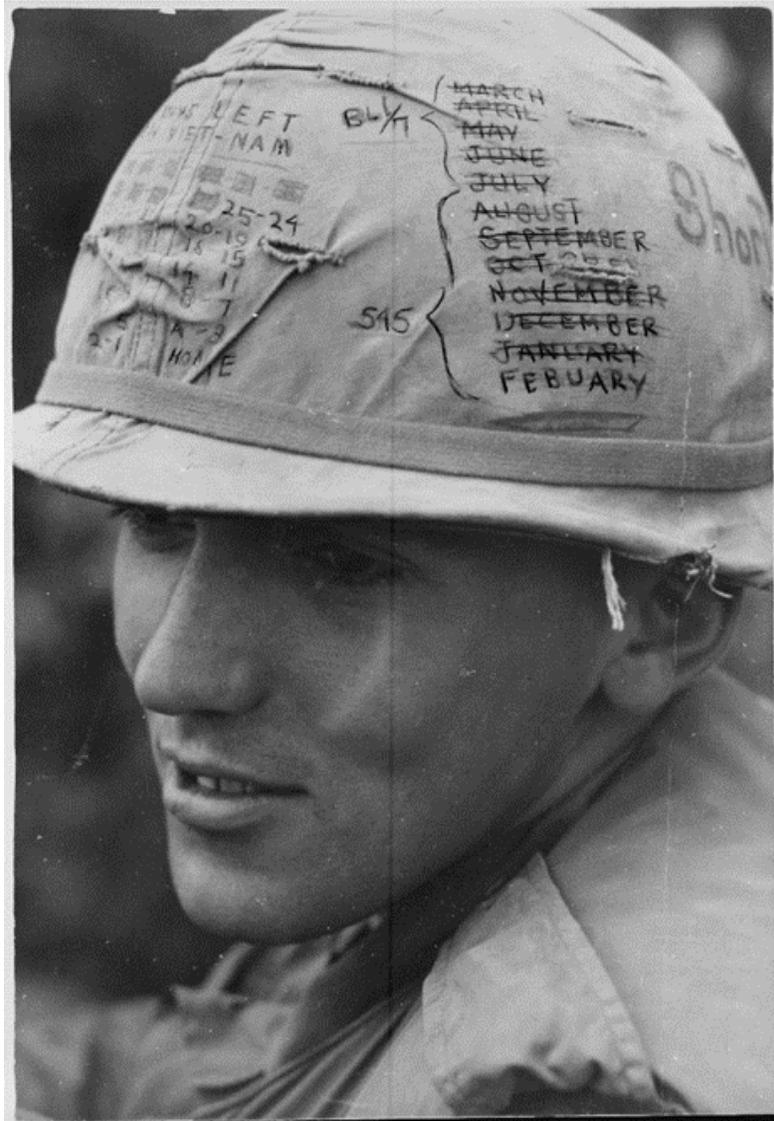


Oklahomans and the Vietnam War

OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

After more than a hundred years of French colonial rule, many Vietnamese people began to fight for independence. In the summer of 1954 **delegates** from France and Vietnam came together to sign the **Geneva Accords** to come to an agreement and end the fighting. Vietnam, pressured by France and **communist** countries such as the **Soviet Union** and the People's Republic of China, agreed to split the country of Vietnam in half at the seventeenth parallel. After growing tensions on both sides, North and South Vietnam began to fight. The United States joined South Vietnam soon after to protect against the spread of communism.

The Vietnam War lasted from 1954 to 1975. While fighting overseas, many Americans died or were severely injured in battle. This number includes a little over 1,000 Oklahomans. Tensions were strong at home as many individuals were against the war and mass protests were held around the country. The Vietnam War changed the way Americans thought about war and foreign policy.



A soldier keeping track of time on his helmet (image courtesy of the National Archives).¹

Timeline

- 1954 July – The Geneva Accords are signed by Vietnam and France, ending France’s colonial rule.
- 1955 July – **Ngo Dinh Diem** renounces the Geneva Accords
October – Diem is elected President of South Vietnam
- 1957 October – Fighting breaks out between North Vietnam and South Vietnam
- 1959 May – North Vietnam begins moving men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail
- 1960 December – Formation of the **National Liberation Front**
- 1961 May – **President John F. Kennedy** sends Special Forces to South Vietnam and approves the “secret war” in Laos
- 1962 February – The United States establishes Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) led by General Paul Harkins
- 1963 November – Ngo Dinh Diem is overthrown, captured, and killed
President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas
December – North Vietnam sends its first army units into the South
August – The Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurs
US Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
- 1965 March – The US begins Operation Rolling Thunder
The first US combat troops arrive in Vietnam
October-November – Battle of the Ia Drang Valley is the first major battle between America and North Vietnam
- 1966 December – Number of US forces in Vietnam reaches 385,000
- 1967 September – Nguyen Van Thieu is elected president of South Vietnam
President Lyndon B. Johnson offers to stop bombings of North Vietnam in return for negotiations
October – Activists hold antiwar **demonstrations** across the country
December – US forces in Vietnam reach 500,000
- 1968 January – **Tet Offensive** begins

- 1969 January – **Richard Nixon** takes office as president of the United States
- June – The withdrawal of US troops begins
 - September – Ho Chi Minh dies
- 1970 May – US forces invade **Cambodia**
- National Guard troops kill four students at **Kent State University** in Ohio
 - June – The US Senate repeals the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
- 1971 June – The *New York Times* begins publishing ***The Pentagon Papers***
- December – US forces in Vietnam down to 156,800
- 1972 August – The last US combat unit leaves South Vietnam
- October – South Vietnamese President Thieu rejects peace treaty
 - December – The US breaks off peace talks with North Vietnam
 - Operation Linebacker II begins
- 1973 January – The US and North Vietnam sign the **Paris Agreement** which calls for a ceasefire
- US military draft ends
 - March – Last American combat soldiers leave Vietnam and the war is over for America.
 - August – US bombing of Cambodia ends
 - November – US Congress passes the **War Powers Act**
- 1974 August – President Nixon resigns and is replaced by **Gerald Ford**
- 1975 March – North Vietnamese Army forces launch an invasion of South Vietnam
- North Vietnam launches its Ho Chi Minh campaign (the seizure of major bases and towns in South Vietnam) until all are taken over.
 - April – Battle of Xuan Loc is the last major battle of the Vietnam War
 - South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu resigns and flees
 - The last Americans and thousands of South Vietnamese refugees evacuated from **Saigon**
 - Saigon falls to communist forces, ending the Vietnam War
- 1977 January – President Jimmy Carter **pardons** the “draft dodgers” from Vietnam War.

The Draft

The **draft**, or conscription, has been around since the Civil War but it has always dissolved after the war ends. Because of the **Cold War**, the draft continued after World War II. From 1948 to 1973 the draft was used to fill vacancies in the military that were not filled by individuals who volunteered. Men were required to register for the draft thirty days after their 18th birthday. The **Selective Service System** held the first Vietnam lottery December 1, 1969, which was covered by radio and television. The first lottery included men whose birthdays were between January 1, 1944, and December 31, 1950. If your birthday was assigned to a low number, you were called to military service. The majority of men drafted were from less affluent backgrounds and accounted for the majority of the troops on the ground. Men were able to avoid the draft if they were attending college or for medical reasons. Others who were not able to receive legal deferments left the country for safety. A popular form of protest against the war was to burn your draft card.



Men who have been drafted line up to receive orders (image courtesy of Library of Congress).²



Young man burning a draft card (image courtesy of Library of Congress).³

Battle in Vietnam

Although America was very well known as a military superpower, the **National Liberation Front (NLF)** proved to be a tough opposition through the use of **guerrilla warfare**. The Communist Vietnamese in the North used young individuals who were not prepared to fight against experienced American soldiers and were only given basic, minimal training. They became known as the **Vietcong**. The Vietcong were armed with weapons given by other communist powers, the Soviet Union and China, to use against American forces in the South. They acquired weapons through the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a series of strategic trails located in the mountains and forest that was an important tactical system for North Vietnam. Hiding was a key element for North Vietnam's combat approach, which included hidden **bases**. Members of the Vietcong would hide among innocent civilians, which made detecting the enemy difficult. Homemade **booby traps** caused many American deaths. About a hundred Americans died per week from these guerrilla methods.

The Air Force was a fundamental component of US forces fighting in Vietnam. They provided air support as well as air evacuations for troops in trouble. In February 1965 President Lyndon Johnson called for Operation Rolling Thunder, which involved the bombing of North Vietnam military bases, **civilian** villages, and eventually the essential Ho Chi Minh Trail. American airplanes would use a chemical named **Agent Orange** to remove the vast amount of forest in Vietnam, but the powerful herbicide would cause serious health issues for those who were exposed to it. Another popular weapon used by the Americans was the **napalm bomb**, a slow-burning chemical that caused extreme damage to the environment as well as painful deaths. Tactics for American soldiers on the ground included **search and destroy** missions to find Vietcong forces and led to **Zippo raids**, which destroyed many villages and hurt many civilians in the process.



American planes protecting South Vietnamese soldiers (photograph courtesy of CNN).⁴

Oklahomans and the Vietnam War

The Antiwar Movement

While US forces fight overseas, there was tension at home. Many Americans opposed the war especially after the continuous bombing and the increase of drafted troops. The Vietnam War was the first to be televised, allowing people witness the horrors of war. A major antiwar organization was the **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)**. Originally a civil rights group with branches around the country, they evolved to planning many large anti-war protests. By 1967 antiwar protests were growing at a rapid rate due to the prolonged violence.

After President Richard Nixon approved the bombing and invasion of Cambodia in 1970, anger spread across the antiwar movement. In May 1970 students at Kent State University in Ohio gathered for a protest against President Nixon's actions. As tension rose and the crowd grew, demonstrators began throwing objects at police and breaking into buildings around campus. A state of emergency was called and the National Guard was sent in to diffuse the situation. On May 4, 1970, protestors began to assemble. As the situation escalated, some National Guardsmen opened fire into the crowd of demonstrators out of fear. Many students were wounded and four lost their lives, two of which were innocent bystanders.

Protests did not end after the violence at Kent State University. Many demonstrators continued to appeal to the government officials to end the war until President Nixon began to withdraw troops from combat in Vietnam.



Students at the University of California Berkley protest the Vietnam War (photograph courtesy of History).⁵

Bob Ford

Many Oklahomans served in the Vietnam War, whether they were drafted or they volunteered. One Oklahoman that fought in Vietnam is Bob Ford. Born in Shawnee, Oklahoma, on August 4, 1944, Bob Ford enrolled at the University of Oklahoma in 1962. He joined the **Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC)** program and started his military training. Ford graduated on June 5, 1966, and was the only person to wear his military uniform where he sat at the University of Oklahoma football stadium. That same day, he received his orders from the US Army. On July 16, 1966, Bob Ford was officially active-duty in the Army and started his training. All Ford wanted to do was fly a helicopter and he would get his chance by training at Fort Wolters in Texas. Once he started flying without assistance, he was called “one of the best” by his commanding officer.

Soon Ford went to Vietnam after insisting to his officers that his where he needed to be. While in Vietnam from July 1967 to July 1968, Bob Ford would fly his **Huey helicopter** in more than one-thousand missions, including retrieving a group of men from the ground by just the light of a Zippo lighter! His **call sign** was Black Cat 2-1 and a black cat was displayed on the front of his helicopter. During the war Ford would write his wife Diane and his parents and brother back in Oklahoma. Once Bob Ford’s **tour** in Vietnam was over, he returned to Fort Wolters and became a flight instructor. In 1969 Bob Ford returned to Oklahoma and moved to the town of Okeene. Bob Ford continues to speak about his experience in Vietnam and organizes the Veteran’s Day celebration in Okeene.



Bob Ford in Vietnam (photograph courtesy of *Stars and Stripes* and Bob Ford).⁶

Bob Kalsu

Many students at the University of Oklahoma were ROTC. Prior to the Vietnam War, **cadet** enrollment was extremely high. One of those cadets was James Robert Kalsu. Kalsu was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on April 13, 1945, and worked hard to become a football player. Kalsu attended Del City High School and was recruited to play football at the University of Oklahoma. During his playing years from 1964 to 1967, he was a star athlete and he received the honor of All-American in 1967. As well as being a leader on the football field, Kalsu was a Cadet Colonel in the ROTC. After finishing college, Bob Kalsu was drafted to play for the Buffalo Bills in New York in 1968.

Soon after moving to Buffalo, Kalsu was called to serve his two-year commitment in the US Army. While training at Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma, Bob Kalsu learned he would be sent to fight in Vietnam. While overseas Kalsu was a popular presence at the army bases. He was a great leader and would try to make everyone laugh while dealing with the high pressure of combat. On July 21, 1970, around five in the afternoon, an enemy **mortar** was dropped near his bunker. Bob Kalsu was killed during the attack. The Del City football stadium and post office are named in his honor. The University of Oklahoma created The Bob Kalsu Award, which is given to those who show great leadership, just as Kalsu did.



Bob Kalsu while playing football at the University of Oklahoma
(2012.201.B0322.0107, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography
Collection, OHS).⁷

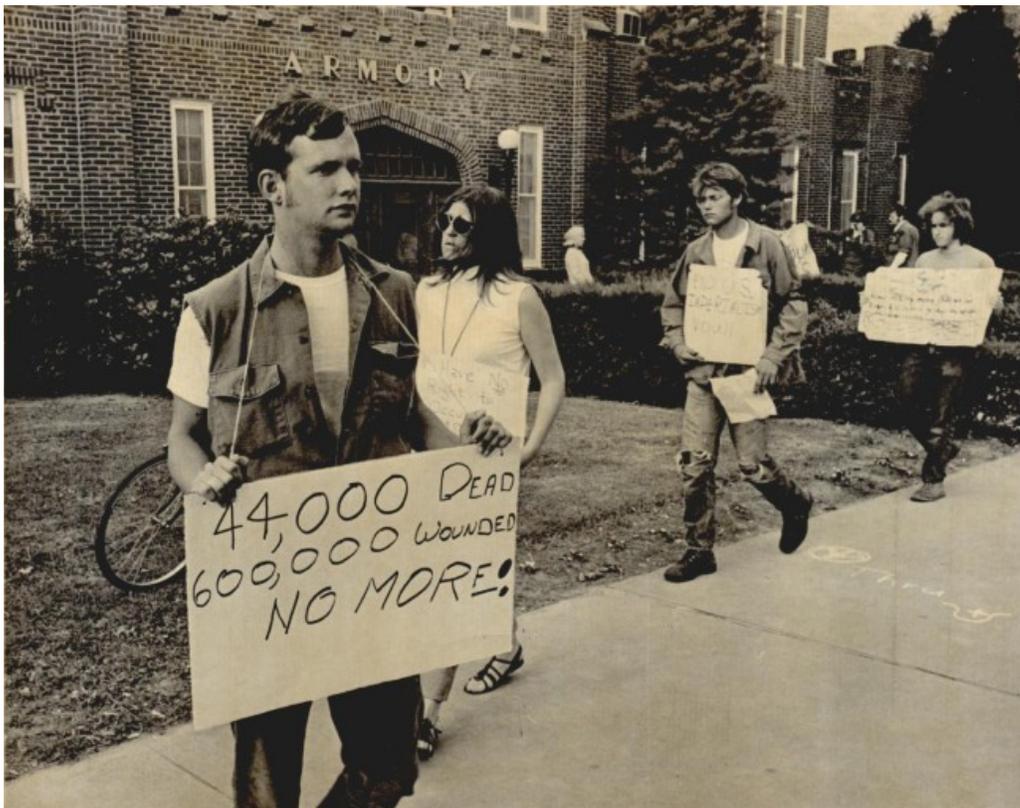
Support and Protest at Home

Many students at Oklahoma universities were outraged at the growing numbers of troops being sent to Vietnam, as well as the growing number of bombs being dropped. Following examples from around the country, students began to organize peaceful protests on college campuses around the state. In an effort to try to stop further protests against the war, the FBI wrote a fake letter to newspapers to discredit the antiwar activist group Students for a Democratic Society located at the University of Oklahoma (OU) and Oklahoma State University (OSU). On October 15, 1969, Senator Fred Harris, who was openly against the Vietnam War, spoke to students at the University of Oklahoma.

Shortly after the Kent State University shooting, students expressed their anger through minor violence. On May 4, 1970, protestors damaged OU's ROTC building. Two days later on May 6, 1970, students gathered for a protest where one student was arrested for displaying the Vietcong flag. Local authorities and protestors continued to clash, which led to more arrests. Following these events, thousands of students assembled to protest the arrest and further protest the war. There was even a call to boycott classes!

Other examples of student-led protests include Philips University in Enid, where thirty students refused to eat for three days in opposition to the war. Students at Oklahoma City University held a peace march that traveled from the campus to city hall. At a larger **demonstration** at Oklahoma State University, ROTC events on campus were disrupted by 600 student protestors.

Although many students gathered to protest the war, a few students created counter-protests to support the war at both OU and OSU. Demonstrations from students on both sides in Oklahoma grew smaller and smaller by 1970.

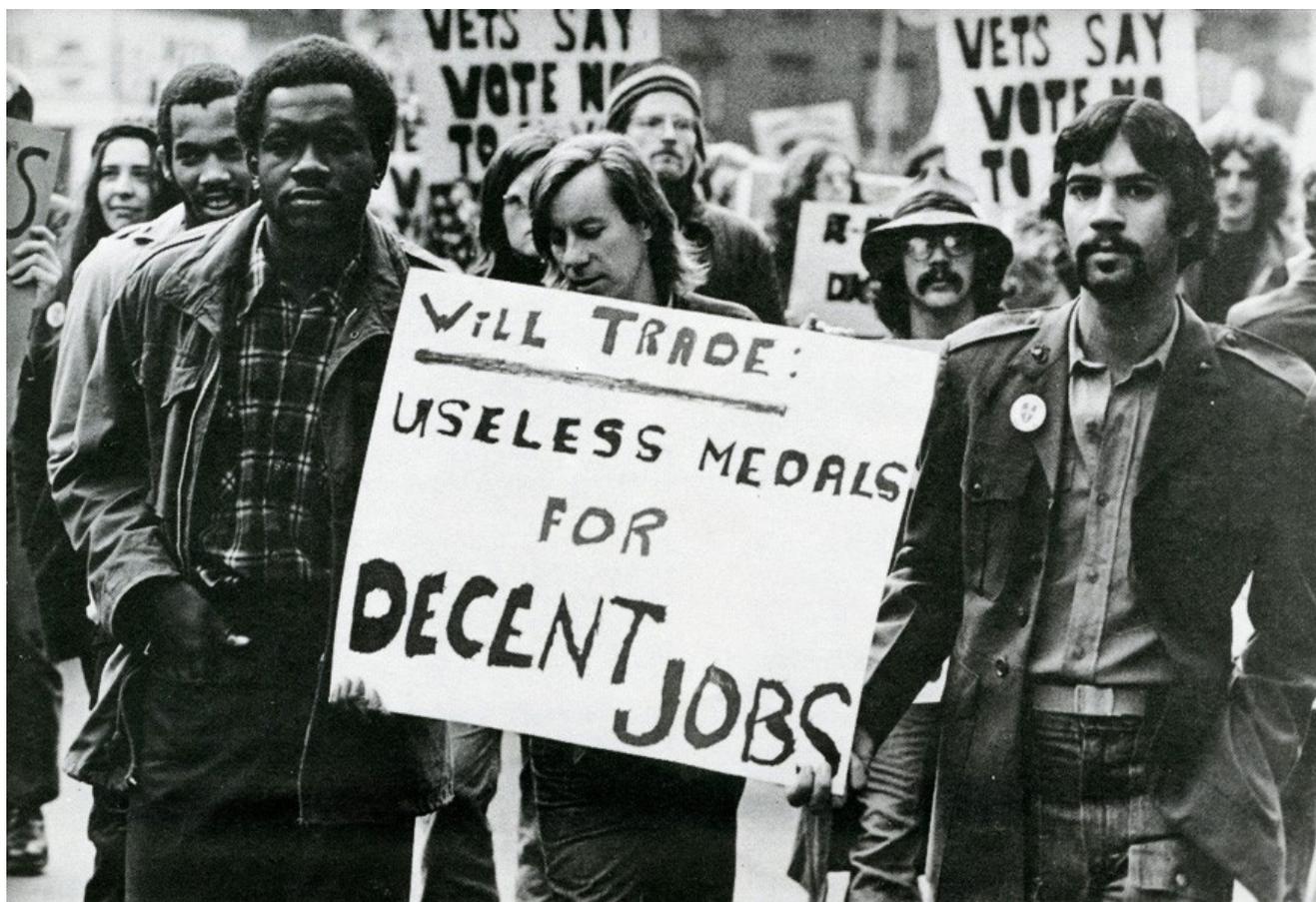


Student protesting outside of the ROTC armory at OU (2012.201.B0158.0489, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).⁸

Veterans Return Home

Unlike **veterans** of other wars, Vietnam veterans did not return home to cheers and ceremonies. Most Americans wanted to forget the trauma of the Vietnam War and move on. As a result, Vietnam veterans who were seen as a reminder of defeat and a time that should be forgotten. Some veterans struggled with physical and psychological injuries and often felt isolated from family and friends.

Some veterans blamed the antiwar protesters for the poor reception they received coming home, claiming protesters blamed the troops instead of the government. Those who supported the war resented the veterans for losing the war, which left Vietnam veterans feeling like outsiders to veterans of other wars. The Vietnam War divided American society. Those who served were often treated as traitors instead of heroes and found it difficult to adjust to life back home. Although many Vietnam veterans did have success after returning home, those who did not were often left to deal with their trauma alone. In later years progress has been made to change the narrative of Vietnam veterans and to show support, but the effects of the neglect are long-lasting.



Vietnam veterans protest their treatment at home (photograph courtesy of Reddit).⁹

Vietnamese Refugees in Oklahoma

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, many Vietnamese **refugees** fled from Vietnam to America. They left to avoid the persecution they might face in their homeland after losing the war. While looking for shelter, many Vietnamese refugees were relocated to the Central Park neighborhood in Oklahoma City by different Catholic charities. The Vietnamese refugees built their own community known as “Little Saigon,” (which became known as Oklahoma City’s Asian District) located around 23rd Street and Classen Boulevard. Over the decades more immigrants came to Oklahoma and the community continued to grow and flourish. Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese families own more than half of the businesses in the district, which include restaurants, grocery stores, and more.



Oklahoma City Asian District (photograph courtesy of *The Oklahoman*).¹⁰

Activities

Photograph Analysis

Study the picture below and answer the following questions (lesson adapted from the National Archives).



1. What can you infer from the photograph?
2. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?
3. Where might you be able to find answers to your questions?
4. Create a caption for the photograph.
5. How would you categorize this photograph? For example, is the topic jungle warfare, air warfare, weapons, or tanks?

Word Search

H H K O O D M D A Q T A E V S
S D H H F A I V M N Y L T E A
J C U M N Z E O E L S L A T I
I E O T V N W M X E S I U E G
Y B E M E L N Y S Q K R C R O
L I V G M I I R E N Z R A A N
V F D M A U U M A K I E V N C
F U V T Z N N T M R E U E K G
W U N F F F K I S I Y G T X A
N O T F A R D O S E G O L K Y
C A N T I W A R P M L R N M J
G T S E T O R P Z W K Y A U Y
N I X O N E M B A S S Y X N K
T K R W H C Y D N Q V M V C T
R H F H Z V N A H Y I M N M J

Antiwar

Communism

Containment

Draft

Embassy

Evacuate

Geneva

Vietnam

Huey

Immigrant

Nixon

Nurse

Protest

Saigon

Tank

Veteran

Guerrilla

Vietnam War Protest Song Analysis

Listen to a Vietnam War protest song such as Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" while reading along with the lyrics. Then answer the questions below. (courtesy of TES)

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today - Ya

Father, father
We don't need to escalate
You see, war is not the answer
For only love can conquer hate
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me, so you can see
Oh, what's going on
What's going on
Ya, what's going on
Ah, what's going on

In the meantime
Right on, baby
Right on
Right on
Mother, mother, everybody thinks we're wrong
Oh, but who are they to judge us
Simply because our hair is long
Oh, you know we've got to find a way
To bring some understanding here today
Oh

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me
So you can see
What's going on
Ya, what's going on
Tell me what's going on
I'll tell you what's going on - Uh
Right on baby
Right on baby

What is the tone of the song?

What is the message the artist is trying to convey to the listener?

What lyrics stand out to you?

What images come to mind while listening to the song?

What aspects of the Vietnam War does the song mention?

Vietnam War Protest Sign

Would you have protested the war in Vietnam? Use this page as a template for an antiwar protest sign.



Thinking About the Draft

Read the paragraph and have students answer the following questions. (Lesson adapted from TeacherVision).

When two battalions of Marines were sent to guard the Danang Air Base on March 8, 1965, there were already some 20,000 troops in Vietnam. By the end of the year the number had reached 200,000. In order to provide ever-increasing numbers of troops, the army used the draft to force men into military service. Not everyone supported the draft, however. The prospect of dying in a combat zone was very real. Demonstrations and antiwar rallies were held on college campuses across the nation. Male students were required to register for the draft. If they attended school, they automatically received a deferment or postponement of their service. Some young men burned their registration cards, an act that was against the law. An estimated 250,000 avoided registration. Many of them fled to Canada and Europe where they participated in huge demonstrations against US involvement in Vietnam. They remained outside the US until President Carter pardoned them in 1977.

1. Was the draft fair? Why or why not?
2. The draft did not apply to women. Should women be exempt from the draft?
3. How did the draft impact the war?
4. What other times in US history has the draft been used?
5. Do you believe President Carter should have pardoned those who dodged the draft?

Glossary

Agent Orange: A chemical used against North Vietnam to destroy forests and crops, which caused major medical damage to those who were exposed to it.

bases: A military headquarters where people slept and conducted business.

booby traps: A form of deception in which an object or area looks harmless yet is used to attack an enemy.

cadet: A lower-ranking member of the military.

call sign: A way of identifying oneself in the military.

Cambodia: A country in southeastern Asia that borders Vietnam.

civilians: A person who is not a member of the military.

communism: A form of government where there is no private property. The state owns economic resources and divides goods and wealth among the population.

Cold War: An arms race from 1945 to 1990 between the Soviet Union and the United States. Each side gathered arms and sent threats of war to the other side, yet no conflict was fought.

Ngo Dinh Diem: Elected president of South Vietnam after the split of the country. He was assassinated in 1963.

delegates: A person elected to represent a country and/or an organization.

demonstration: An event or protest in which people gather to show that they support or oppose something.

draft: A mandatory form of recruitment for military service.

Gerald Ford: US president from late 1974 to 1977, after President Nixon resigned.

The Geneva Accords: An agreement between France and Vietnam (with representatives from other powerful countries), which ended France's control over Vietnam and split the country at the seventeenth parallel.

guerrilla warfare: A small group of non-military fighters.

Gulf of Tonkin Incident: Two North Vietnam torpedoes attacked two US destroyers in 1964.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution: Orders for the American military to take all necessary measures against the enemy.

huey helicopter: Bell UH-1 helicopter commonly used in Vietnam.

Lyndon B. Johnson: US president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy from 1963 to 1969.

John F. Kennedy: US president from 1961 until his assassination in 1963.

Ho Chi Minh: Leader of Communist North Vietnam from 1945 to 1969.

mortar: A popular weapon used by both guerrillas and military forces; a type of bomb that is shot at short range.

napalm: A mixture used with firebombs which causes fire to burn slowly and to cause more damage.

National Liberation Front: A communist organization established in 1960 to unite Vietnam under their control.

Richard Nixon: US president from 1969 to 1974 until he resigned from office.

Operation Linebacker II: The heavy bombing of North Vietnam ordered by President Nixon until an agreement was reached.

Operation Rolling Thunder: The constant bombing of North Vietnam

pardon: A power given to the US president to forgive a federal crime a person is charged with

Paris Agreement: The ceasefire between the US and North Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers: Top secret Department of Defense reports on the Vietnam War that were made public.

psychological: To be directed toward the mind.

refugee: A person who leaves their home country from danger.

Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC): A volunteer program offered at some universities in America which provides early training to students for the military.

Saigon: The capital city of South Vietnam until the end of the Vietnam War.

The Selective Service System: The agency in the United States that is in charge of conscription.

Soviet Union: A communist ruled empire under Russian rule.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS): A liberal activist organization formed in 1960. Originally a civil rights group, SDS had many branches at different universities around the country.

Tet Offensive: A campaign of surprise attacks made by the Vietcong.

tour: A member of the military's time in war.

veteran: A person who served in the military.

Vietcong: The guerrilla force in North Vietnam.

War Powers Act: Limits the president's power to initiate armed conflict without approval from the US Congress.

zippo raids: A technique used by American forces to search villages then burn them.



Oklahoman veteran Bob Ford in front of his Huey helicopter (photograph courtesy of *NewsOK*).¹¹

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11. Oklahoman Veteran Bob Ford in front of his Huey Helicopter <http://newsok.com/article/3580746>