As casualties mounted in Vietnam, many Americans began to protest against the war. Discouraged by domestic conflict over the war, rising violence, and the apparent lack of progress in Vietnam, President Johnson announced he would not seek another term as president.

An Antiwar Movement Emerges

**MAIN Idea** The Vietnam War produced sharp divisions between Americans who supported the war and those who did not, and the resulting political turmoil led President Johnson to decide not to run again for president.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Do you know people who did not support the war in Iraq and those who did? Read on to find out how differences over the Vietnam War began to divide the country.

When American troops first entered the Vietnam War in the spring of 1965, many Americans supported the military effort. A Gallup poll published soon afterward showed that 66 percent of Americans approved of the policy in Vietnam. As the war dragged on, however, public support began to drop. Suspicion of the government’s truthfulness about the war was a significant reason. Throughout the early years of the war, the American commander in South Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, reported that the enemy was on the brink of defeat. In 1967 he confidently declared that the “enemy’s hopes are bankrupt” and added, “we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view.”

Contradicting such reports were less optimistic media accounts, especially on television. Vietnam was the first “television war,” with footage of combat appearing nightly on the evening news. Day after day, millions of people saw images of wounded and dead Americans and began to doubt government reports. In the view of many, a credibility gap had developed, meaning it was hard to believe what the Johnson administration said about the war.

Congress, which had given the president a nearly free hand in Vietnam, soon grew uncertain about the war. Beginning in February 1966 the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held “educational” hearings on Vietnam, calling in Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other policy makers to explain the administration’s military strategy. The committee also listened to critics, such as American diplomat George Kennan. Although Kennan had helped to create the policy of containment, he argued that Vietnam was not strategically important to the United States.
Teach-ins Begin

In March 1965, a group of faculty members and students at the University of Michigan abandoned their classes and joined together in a teach-in. They discussed the issues surrounding the war and reaffirmed their reasons for opposing it. The gathering inspired teach-ins at many campuses. In May 1965, 122 colleges held a “National Teach-In” by radio for more than 100,000 antiwar demonstrators.

People who opposed the war did so for different reasons. Some saw the conflict as a civil war in which the United States had no business interfering. Others viewed South Vietnam as a corrupt dictatorship and believed that defending it was immoral and unjust.

Anger at the Draft

Young protesters especially focused on what they saw as an unfair draft system. Until 1969, a college student was often able to defer military service until after graduation. By contrast, young people from working-class families were more likely to be drafted and sent to Vietnam because they were unable to afford college. Draftees in the military were most likely to be assigned to combat units where they faced grave dangers. In 1969 draftees made up 62 percent of battle deaths.

The majority of soldiers who served in Vietnam, however, were volunteer enlistees. Holding out the military as an avenue to vocational training and upward social mobility, military recruiters encouraged youth in poor and working-class communities to enlist. Thus, a disproportionate number of working-class youths, many of them minorities, were among the volunteers who served in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War coincided with the high tide of the civil rights movement. From early in the war, the treatment of African American soldiers came under scrutiny. Between 1961 and 1966, African Americans constituted about 10 percent of military personnel while African Americans comprised about 13 percent of the total population of the United States. Because African Americans were more likely to be assigned to combat units, however, they accounted for almost 20 percent of combat-related deaths.
The high number of African Americans and poor Americans dying in Vietnam angered African American leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In April 1967 King publicly condemned the conflict:

**Primary Source**

“I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. . . . The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours.”

—quoted in *A Testament of Hope*

In response to such criticisms, military officials strived to lower the number of African American casualties. By the end of the conflict, African Americans accounted for about 12 percent of America’s dead, roughly equivalent to their presence in the national population.

As the war escalated, American officials increased the draft call, putting many college students at risk. An estimated 500,000 draftees refused to go. Many burned their draft cards or simply did not show up for induction. Some fled the country, moving to Canada, Sweden, or other nations. Others stayed and went to prison rather than fight in a war they opposed.

Between 1965 and 1968, officials prosecuted more than 3,300 Americans for refusing to serve. The draft became less of an issue in 1969 when the government introduced a lottery system, in which only those with low lottery numbers were subject to the draft.

Protests against the war were not confined to college campuses. Demonstrators held public rallies and marches in towns across the country. In April 1965 Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a left-wing student organization, organized a march on Washington, D.C., that drew more than 20,000 participants. Two years later, in October 1967, a rally at Washington’s Lincoln Memorial drew tens of thousands of protesters, as well.

Anger over the draft also fueled discussions about the voting age. Many draftees argued that if they were old enough to fight, they were old enough to vote. In 1971 the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, giving all citizens age 18 and older the right to vote in all state and federal elections.

**Primary Source**

**A Divided Nation**

▲ An antiwar protest in New York City in 1969.

▲ The war split the nation. Above, construction workers march in New York City in support of the war effort.

▲ Antiwar demonstrators burn their draft cards in front of the Pentagon in 1972.
Hawks and Doves

In the face of growing opposition to the war, President Johnson remained determined to continue fighting. He assailed his critics in Congress as “selfish men who want to advance their own interests.” He dismissed the college protesters as too naive to appreciate the importance of resisting communism.

The president was not alone in his views. In a poll taken in early 1968, 53 percent of the respondents favored stronger military action in Vietnam, compared to 24 percent who wanted an end to the war. Of those Americans who supported the policy in Vietnam, many openly criticized the protesters for a lack of patriotism.

By 1968 the nation seemed to be divided into two camps. Those who wanted the United States to withdraw from Vietnam were known as doves. Those who insisted that the country stay and fight came to be known as hawks. As the two groups debated, the war appeared to take a dramatic turn for the worse, and the nation endured a year of shock and crisis.

Explaining What led to the ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment?

1968: The Pivotal Year

**MAIN Idea** The Tet Offensive increased doubt that the United States could win in Vietnam.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Have you ever participated in a public-opinion poll? Read how Johnson’s plummeting approval rating made him decide not to run for re-election in 1968.

The most turbulent year of the chaotic 1960s was 1968. The year saw a shocking political announcement, two traumatic assassinations, and a political convention held amid strident anti-war demonstrations. First, however, the nation endured a surprise attack in Vietnam.

**The Tet Offensive**

On January 30, 1968, during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese launched a massive surprise attack. In this Tet Offensive, guerrilla fighters attacked most American airbases in South Vietnam and most of the South’s major cities. Vietcong even blasted their way into the American embassy in Saigon.

Militarily, Tet was a disaster for the Vietcong. After about a month of fighting, the American and South Vietnamese soldiers repelled the enemy troops, inflicting heavy losses on them. President Johnson triumphantly noted that the enemy’s effort had ended in “complete failure.” Later, historians confirmed that Tet nearly destroyed the Vietcong.

The North Vietnamese, however, had scored a major political victory. The American people were shocked that an enemy supposedly on the verge of defeat could launch such a large-scale attack. When General Westmoreland requested 209,000 troops in addition to the 500,000 already in Vietnam, he seemed to be admitting the United States could not win.

To make matters worse, the media, which had tried to remain balanced in their war coverage, now openly criticized the effort. “The American people should be getting ready to accept, if they haven’t already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed,” declared the *Wall Street Journal*. Television newscaster Walter Cronkite announced that it seemed “more certain than ever that the bloody experience in Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.”
Public opinion no longer favored the president. In the weeks following the Tet Offensive, the president’s approval rating plummeted to a dismal 35 percent, while support for his handling of the war fell even lower, to 26 percent. The administration’s credibility gap now seemed too wide to repair.

Johnson Leaves the Race

With the war growing increasingly unpopular and Johnson’s credibility all but gone, some Democrats began looking for an alternative candidate to nominate for president in 1968. In November 1967, even before the Tet disaster, a little-known liberal senator from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy, became the first dove to declare he would challenge Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination. In March 1968 McCarthy stunned the nation by winning more than 40 percent of the votes in the New Hampshire primary. Realizing that Johnson was vulnerable, Senator Robert Kennedy, who also opposed the war, quickly entered the race for the Democratic nomination.

With both the country and his own party deeply divided, Johnson addressed the public on television on March 31, 1968. He stunned viewers by announcing, “I have concluded that I should not permit the presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”
A Season of Violence

Following Johnson’s announcement, the nation endured even more shocking events. In April, James Earl Ray was arrested for killing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Just two months later, another assassination rocked the country—that of Robert Kennedy. Kennedy, who appeared to be on his way to winning the Democratic nomination, was gunned down on June 5. The assassin was Sirhan Sirhan, an Arab nationalist angry over the candidate’s pro-Israeli remarks a few nights before.

The violence that seemed to plague the country in 1968 culminated with a chaotic and well-publicized clash between antiwar protesters and police at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Thousands of protesters surrounded the convention center, demanding that the Democrats adopt an antiwar platform.

Despite the protests, the delegates chose Hubert Humphrey, President Johnson’s vice president, as their presidential nominee. Meanwhile, in a park not far from the convention hall, the protesters and police began fighting. As officers tried to disperse demonstrators with tear gas and billy clubs, demonstrators taunted the authorities with the chant, “The whole world is watching!” A subsequent federal investigation of the incident described the event as a “police riot.”

Nixon Wins the Presidency

The violence and chaos now associated with the Democratic Party benefited the 1968 Republican presidential candidate, Richard Nixon. Although defeated by John Kennedy in the 1960 election, Nixon had remained active in national politics. A third candidate, Governor George Wallace of Alabama, decided to run in 1968 as an independent. Wallace, an outspoken segregationist, sought to attract Americans who felt threatened by the civil rights movement and urban social unrest.

Public opinion polls gave Nixon a wide lead over Humphrey and Wallace. Nixon’s campaign promise to unify the nation and restore law and order appealed to Americans who feared their country was spinning out of control. Nixon also declared that he had a plan for ending the war in Vietnam.

At first Humphrey’s support of President Johnson’s Vietnam policies hurt his campaign. After Humphrey broke with the president and called for a complete end to the bombing of North Vietnam, he began to move up in the polls. A week before the election, President Johnson helped Humphrey by announcing that the bombing had halted and that a cease-fire would follow.

Johnson’s announcement had come too late, however. In the end, Nixon’s promises to end the war and restore order at home were enough to sway the American people. On Election Day, Nixon defeated Humphrey by more than 100 electoral votes, although he won the popular vote by a slim margin of 43 percent to 42 percent. Wallace partially accounted for the razor-thin margin by winning 46 electoral votes and more than 13 percent of the popular vote.

Vocabulary


Main Ideas

2. Explaining Why did some people view the draft as unfair?

3. Summarizing What are three important events that made 1968 such a violent year in the United States?

Critical Thinking

4. Big Ideas Why did support of the war dwindle by the late 1960s?

5. Organizing Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the effects of the Tet Offensive.

6. Analyzing Visuals Study the cartoon on the right on page 665. What is the message of the telegram beyond its literal meaning?

Writing About History

7. Expository Writing Suppose that you are living in 1968. Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper in which you explain your reasons for either supporting or opposing the Vietnam War.