

Divisive Issue #1: Undeclared War – Tonkin Gulf Resolution

The following excerpt describes how Congress came to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964:

President Johnson became convinced that only an expanded U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam could prevent a communist victory. To increase the American military effort there, however, Johnson needed to obtain authority from the U.S. Congress. The August 1964 incident off the coast of North Vietnam gave him the opportunity to ask for this authority after claims that North Vietnamese ships had engaged in unprovoked attacks against the U.S. ship Maddox.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was approved by Congress on August 7. The resolution enabled the president to take “all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States.” Johnson and his advisers now had authority to expand the war.

Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon was one of only two senators to oppose this resolution. “I believe that history will record we have made a great mistake,” he predicted. “We are in effect giving the President war making powers in the absence of a declaration of war.”

Source: In an open letter to Congress, this father of a Marine who had died in Vietnam complained of Congressional inaction.

“We wish to express our sincere thanks to the Congress of the United States for their continuing inactivity in regard to their Constitutional responsibilities regarding the Vietnam War.

Because of your inactivity towards stopping our participation in this useless and senseless war, we have lost our only son, and only child, to a Vietnam contracted disease.

In fact, because I am an only son of an only son, the senseless death of our son will eliminate our family name for all time.

Yes, we know we are not the only ones who have lost a loved one in this nonsensical war – and that makes it even more senseless.

How, Gentlemen, can you justify the loss of over 45,000 young American boys’ lives in that hell-on-earth for what we have gotten in return, or ever hope to get in return? In fact, Gentlemen, how you can possibly sleep at night when you know that you have been able all along to stop this useless slaughter, if by no other means, than to stop the flow of money to the Armed Forces.

If I understand our Constitution correctly, no President of the United States has the right to commit anywhere near the number of troops being used in Vietnam combat on foreign soil, without first obtaining the full sanction of the U.S. Congress. Yet you have stood by and let three successive Presidents do just exactly that.

And, Gentlemen, for every week you continue to sit on your hands, another 200-300 or more American boys die over there – and for what?”

Divisive Issue #2: Escalation

The following excerpt defines “escalation” and explains how it worked during the Vietnam War:

When two sides in a conflict respond to each other’s actions with greater and greater force, the process is known as escalation. Like the steps of an escalator, the number of soldiers rises higher and higher, and the number of battles, injuries, and deaths goes up with it. This is what happened in Vietnam. The Vietcong and the United States began to fight each other with more and more soldiers and firepower.

When the number of attacks on U.S. Servicemen increased in 1964, President Johnson decided to begin bombing North Vietnam, which helped the Vietcong with weapons and supplies. The bombing, in turn, led the Vietcong to attack more American troops. The U.S. responded by sending more troops to Vietnam. From December 1964 to June 1965, the number of America ground forces in Vietnam more than tripled, from 23,500 to 75,000.

Source: In 1968 Senator Robert Kennedy described the failures of escalation.

“The reversals of the last several months have led our military to ask for 206,000 more troops. This weekend, it was announced that some of them – a ‘moderate’ increase it was said – would soon be sent. But isn’t this exactly what we have always done in the past? If we examine the history of this conflict, we find the dismal story repeated time after time. Every time – at every crisis – we have denied that anything was wrong; sent more troops; and issued more confident communiques. Every time, we have been assured that this one last step would bring victory. And every time, the predictions and promises have failed and been forgotten, and the demand has been made again for just one more step up the ladder.

But all these escalations, all the last steps, have brought us no closer to success than we were before. Rather, as the scale of the fighting has increased, South Vietnamese society has become less and less capable of organizing or defending itself, and we have more and more assumed the whole burden of the war.

And once again, the President tells us, as we have been told for twenty years, that ‘we are going to win;’ ‘victory’ is coming. But what are the true facts? What is our present situation?”

Divisive Issue #3: The Draft

The following excerpt describes how men could be drafted into the armed forces during the war:

Nothing occupied the minds of young people more during the Vietnam era than did the draft. If a 19-year-old was about to be drafted, he found himself unable to get a job. He could not borrow money or do many of the things adults can do. College students, high school graduates, and dropouts found ways to avoid the draft. Not everyone avoided it, however, or even tried. A small town in rural upper Michigan had 11 boys in a high school graduating class who all joined the military in the same year. Every one of these boys was killed later in Vietnam.

Draft boards, made up of local people, could determine how many local men were sent off. For example, Texas has 7 percent of the U.S. population and 4 percent of those in the military. Michigan had 4 percent of the population but 7 percent of those in the armed forces.

U.S. troop strength in Vietnam reached its peak in the spring of 1969. One year later, draft laws were changed. A national lottery system was created. The federal government said a lottery would make the draft more fair. Officials hoped it might stem the tide of young men who dodged the draft. The government also believed that making the draft less controversial would decrease opposition to the war.

Here is how the new system worked: All potential draftees were assigned a number drawn by chance. That number was based on their date of birth. For example, all 19-year-olds with a birthday of January 4 could be in the 193rd group to be called up that year. Those men with birthdates matched to numbers 250 through 365 did not have to work much about being called. This did not make the draft more fair, some people could still receive deferments. But it made the draft appear to be fair.

Source: A professor of religion at Stanford University explains why he will aid young men to avoid being drafted in 1967.

“I teach. I spend my professional life with American youth of draft age. And while I will not use the classroom for such purposes, I will make clear that from now on my concerns about Vietnam will be explicitly focused on counseling, aiding, and abetting all students who declare that out of moral conviction they will not fight in Vietnam.

I will ‘counsel, aid, and abet’ such students to find whatever level of moral protest is consonant with their consciences, and when for them this means refusing service in the armed services, I will support them in that stand. In doing so, I am committing a Federal offense, for the Military Selective Service Act of 1967 specifically states that anyone who ‘knowingly counsels, aids, or abets another to refuse or evade registration or service in the armed forces’ opens himself to the same penalties as are visited upon the one he so counsels, aids, and abets, namely up to give years in jail or up to \$10,000 in fines, or both.

I will continue to do this until I am arrested. As long as I am not arrested, I will do it with increasing intensity, for I am no longer willing that 18- or 19-year old boys should pay their lives for the initially bumbling but now deliberate follow of our national leaders. Nor am I willing to support them in action that may lead them to jail, from a safe preserve of legal inviolability for myself. I must run the same risks as they, and therefore I break the law on their behalf, so that if they are arrested, I too must be arrested.”

Divisive Issue #4: My Lai Massacre

Source: Hoobler, Dorothy and Thomas, Vietnam: Why We Fought (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), p. 154-155. The following excerpt describes an incident in a village in Vietnam and its aftermath:

“...on March 16, 1968, a terrible event had taken place in a Vietnamese village named My Lai (pronounced Me Lie). At 7 a.m., helicopters dropped about two hundred American soldiers into the area around My Lai. Before leaving their base, the soldiers had been told by other offices that My Lai was a Viet Cong stronghold. They were to wipe out everyone they found, because, as one soldier recalled later, ‘those people that were in the village, the women, the kids, the old men, were VC.’

The soldiers needed no urging. Not long before, a popular sergeant in the unit had been killed by a Viet Cong booby trap. The men wanted revenge , and when they moved into the village, they showed no mercy.

They began by setting fire to the village huts and raping some of the women and girls. Before long, the men lost all control and started to fire wildly at anything that moved, even the cattle, pigs, and chickens. A large group of villagers were herded into a ditch and raked by machine guns. When one soldier refused to fire, his commanding officer, Lieutenant William Calley, threatened to report him for disobeying an officers’ order.

The official report of the action described My Lai as a military victory, with 128 Viet Cong added to the body count. The task force commander called the mission ‘well planned, well executed and successful.’ Many higher officers knew the real story, but ignored it.

Some of the soldiers who were at My Lai were disturbed by what happened and told others about it. One soldier, who was appalled by what he heard, sent letters to the Army and Congress asking for an investigation. But nothing happened until November 1969, when reporter Seymour Hersh broke the story. Dozens of American newspapers printed Hersh’s article.

Life magazine obtained photographs of the slaughter from a soldier who had been on the scene. The piled-up bodies of villagers appeared in full color in one of the country’s leading magazines. The American public was stunned. My Lai caused a national soul-searching on the whole question of what we were doing in Vietnam – and what Vietnam was doing to us. The mother of one of the soldiers at My Lai, said ‘I sent them a good boy, and they made him a murderer.’ Three officers and a sergeant who led troops at My Lai were accused of atrocities, or crimes against civilians. But only Lieutenant William Calley was convicted – in his case, of killing twenty-two people, including babies. Calley’s testimony that the My Lai operation was ‘no big deal’ added to Americans’ horror and disgust. However, because Calley’s superior officers were not punished, many people felt he was a scapegoat who took the blame for a complete breakdown in army discipline.

A military court sentenced Calley to life imprisonment, but the secretary of the army reduced that to ten years. Calley was paroled after serving three years under house arrest at a military base.”

Divisive Issue #5: Kent State Shooting

The following excerpt describes an incident at Kent State University in 1970:

The storm of protest created by the invasion of Cambodia dwarfed previous outcries against the Vietnam War. Public indignation was heard loudest on the nation's campuses. From one coast to another, students took to the streets, blocking traffic, starting bonfires, and smashing the windows of federal buildings. Student anger might have subsided had not a tragic drama unfolded on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970. A crowd of five or six hundred students was demonstrating against the war. After the Reserve Officers Training Corp (ROTC) building was set afire, the governor of Ohio called out the National Guard. Students threw rocks and paving stones at the soldiers. Suddenly there was a crack of rifle fire. To the horror of the students who had collected, four of their number lay dead on the ground and nine lay wounded.

News of the student deaths spread across the United States as fast as radio and television could carry it. Within hours, angry students all around the nation had begun to demonstrate. The newspaper editors of the major eastern colleges and universities met and agreed to run a common editorial calling upon 'the entire academic community of this country to engage in a nationwide university strike to protest widening U.S. participation in the war in Southeastern Asia.'

Source: "The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest" investigated the incident on the Kent State campus.

"The May 4 rally began as a peaceful assembly on the Commons – the traditional site of student assemblies. Even if the Guard had the authority to prohibit a peaceful gathering, a question that is at least debatable – the decision to disperse the noon rally was a serious error. The timing and manner of the dispersal were disastrous. Many students were legitimately in the area as they went to and from class. The rally was held during the crowded noontime luncheon period. The rally was peaceful, and there was no apparent impending violence. Only when the Guard attempted to disperse the rally did some students react violently.

Under these circumstances, the Guard's decision to march through the crowd for hundreds of yards up and down a hill was highly questionable. The crowd simply swirled around them and reformed again after they had passed...

Even if the guardsmen faced danger, it was not a danger that called for lethal force. The 61 shots by 28 guardsmen certainly cannot be justified. Apparently, no order to fire was given, and there was inadequate fire control discipline on Blanket Hill. The Kent State tragedy must mark the last time that, as a matter of course, loaded rifles are issued to guardsmen confronting student demonstrators."

Divisive Issues from the Vietnam War

Focus Question: How and why did the Vietnam War divide Americans?

The Issue	Explain the Issue	Describe how the issue divided the country
Undeclared War Tonkin Gulf Resolution		
Escalation		
The Draft		

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Select one of the five issues and argue (below) why it is the “most divisive” issue in regards to America opinions of the Vietnam War.