

Why We Are in Vietnam

Primary Source: Presidential Press Conference, 1965

On July 28, 1965, after meeting with top foreign-policy and military advisers, President Johnson called a press conference at the White House to explain his policy on Vietnam. He announced that the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam would be increased from 75,000 to 125,000 and that the monthly draft call would rise from 17,000 to 35,000. In a poll taken the week of the press conference, 75 percent of the people questioned about Vietnam felt that "we have no other choice but to send in more troops." Read the following excerpt from Johnson's statement to the press, and think about why so many people agreed with the president's position at that time.

Why must young Americans, born into a land exultant with hope and with golden promise, toil and suffer and sometimes die in such a remote and distant place?

The answer, like the war itself, is not an easy one, but it echoes clearly from the painful lessons of half a century. Three times in my lifetime, in two world wars and in Korea, Americans have gone to far lands to fight for freedom. We have learned at a terrible and brutal cost that retreat does not bring safety and weakness does not bring peace.

It is this lesson that has brought us to Vietnam. This is a different kind of war. There are no marching armies or solemn declarations. Some citizens of South Vietnam, at times with understandable grievances, have joined in the attack on their own government.

But we must not let this mask the central fact that this is really war. It is guided by North Vietnam, and it is spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the South, to defeat American power, and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism.

There are great stakes in the balance.

Most of the non-Communist nations of Asia cannot, by themselves and alone, resist growing might and the grasping ambition of Asian communism.

Our power, therefore, is a very vital shield. If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise or in American protection.

In each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened and an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States itself.

We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else.

Nor would surrender in Vietnam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another country, bringing with it perhaps even larger and crueler conflict, as we have learned from the lessons of history.

Moreover, we are in Vietnam to fulfill one of the most solemn pledges of the American nation. Three presidents—President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and your present president—over 11 years have committed themselves and have promised to help defend this small and valiant nation.

Strengthened by that promise, the people of South Vietnam have fought for many long years. Thousands of them have died. Thousands more have been crippled and scarred by war. We just cannot now dishonor our word, or abandon our commitment, or leave those who believed us and who trusted us to the terror and repression and murder that would follow.

This, then, my fellow Americans, is why we are in Vietnam.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Johnson gave several reasons for continuing to support the South Vietnamese government. Which of those reasons do you find most persuasive? Why?
2. How did Johnson use historical events to support his policy?
3. What do you think Johnson meant when he said, "We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else"?
4. What do you think Stephan Gubar, an 18-year-old college student, and his father, a World War II veteran, might have said to each other after listening to Johnson's statement?

Vietnam Veterans Against the War

Primary Source: Testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1971

Angered and disillusioned by what they had seen and done in Vietnam, some returning soldiers joined together in 1967 to form Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). From April 19 to April 23, 1971, the VVAW staged a series of antiwar protests on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., and on April 22, John Kerry, representing the VVAW, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Kerry had been awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star with oak leaf cluster, and three Purple Hearts during his service in Vietnam, and 13 years after his appearance before the Senate committee, he would himself be elected to the U.S. Senate.

... I want to relate to you the feeling that many of the men who have returned to this country express because we are probably angriest about all that we were told about Vietnam and about the mystical war against communism.

We found that not only was it a civil war, an effort by a people who had for years been seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever, but also we found that the Vietnamese whom we had enthusiastically molded after our own image were hard put to take up the fight against the threat we were supposedly saving them from.

We found most people didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy. They only wanted to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bombs with napalm burning their villages and tearing their country apart. They wanted everything to do

with the war, particularly with this foreign presence of the United States of America, to leave them alone in peace, and they practiced the art of survival by siding with whichever military force was present at a particular time, be it Vietcong, North Vietnamese, or American.

We found also that all too often American men were dying in those rice paddies for want of support from their allies. We saw firsthand how moneys from American taxes were used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. We saw that many people in this country had a one-sided idea of who was kept free by our flag, and blacks provided the highest percentage of casualties. We saw Vietnam ravaged equally by American bombs and search-and-destroy missions, as well as by Vietcong terrorism, and yet we listened while this country tried to blame all of the havoc on the Vietcong. . . .

We learned the meaning of free-fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals.

We watched the United States falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts. We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break. We fought using weapons against "oriental human beings." We fought using weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in the European theater. We watched while men charged up hills because a general said that

hill has to be taken, and after losing one platoon or two platoons they marched away to leave the hill for reoccupation by the North Vietnamese. . . .

Now we are told that the men who fought there must watch quietly while American lives are lost so that we can exercise the incredible arrogance of Vietnamizing the Vietnamese.

Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first president to lose a war."

We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Kerry, the returning veterans were angriest at having been misinformed about the war by their government. How did the soldiers' firsthand experience contrast with what they had been told?
2. In what way, according to Kerry, was the United States' conduct in the war racist?
3. What did Stephan Gubar's experience in Vietnam have in common with John Kerry's?