

Term Paper: The Memory of Vietnam War

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### **Introduction**

The Vietnam War was an armed conflict, which was characterized by substantial financial spending and extended period of the fight. The war involved two superpowers at the time, including the United States and the Soviet Union. It also pitted South Vietnam, which was supported by the US and the North Vietnam, which was funded by the communist regime (Dumbrell, 2012). Although the Vietnam War started in the period of Cold War in 1954, the skirmishes originated to the 1940s. More importantly, the war broke after Ho Chi Minh, and his socialist party rose to power. Reports noted that more than 3 million persons lost their lives in the conflict; and nearly half of these people were Vietnamese civilians (Gainsborough, 2013). Moreover, over 58 000 American soldiers were killed in the course of the war. The US government by 1969 had sent close to 500,000 soldiers in the conflict. However, the battle was the source of sharp differences among American people. Consequently, US president Nixon demanded the exit of the US military personnel in 1973 (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). However, the Vietnam War has generated current debates, controversies, movements, and commemorations especially during modern armed conflicts that the country engaged in.

### **History of the Vietnam War**

The conflict between Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam leader) and the French started after the end of the Second World War. The disputes led to the creation of South and North Vietnam, which was under Ngo Dinh Diem (Tran, 2010). The United States intervened in the conflict in 1955 after President Eisenhower agreed to support his capitalist allies in South Vietnam. Diem (South Vietnam President) benefited from the US police and military as well as equipment and training to quell the resistance of Viet Cong in South Vietnam. However, by 1957, the Viet Cong and rivals of Diem's administration had launched attacks against the government officials. From 1961, President John F. Kennedy regime decided to offer financial, technical, and military aid aiming to suppress the opposition of Viet Cong (Gainsborough, 2013).

The US believed that if a single country in the region embraced communism, several others would follow. Therefore, the Kennedy administration raised the aid to South Vietnam. Besides, by 1962, over 9,000 US soldiers were in the country (Dumbrell, 2012). The Vietnam War escalated from 1963 after both President Diem and his US counterpart J.F. Kennedy were assassinated. Consequently, the death of Diem caused political instability in the country. On the other hand, the US increased further the economic and military aid (Gainsborough, 2013). US president Lyndon B. Johnson demanded attack of military targets in North Vietnam as a retaliatory effort following US warships attack.

From 1965, US president Johnson increased the number of troops in Vietnam with an aim to support the weak South Vietnam Forces. For instance, about 100,000 were sent in 1965 with an addition of the same number of troops in 1966 (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). Furthermore, the US allies such as New Zealand, Thailand, and South Korea also sent their troops into South Vietnam. The Viet Cong and DRV troops were encouraged to fight because they could effectively retake their lost lands in South Vietnam (Tran, 2010). They received funding and technical aid from North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and China, which played a role in the reinforcement of its air defenses (Lembcke, 2015).

The number of US troops by 1967 in South Vietnam was nearly half a million. Additionally, the number of casualties among the soldiers was over 109,000 injured and 15,000 fatalities. As the war progressed, many troops developed mistrust for their continued presence (Tran, 2010). The US government painted a picture of a war that was almost being won. Furthermore, it led to the high prevalence of psychological and physical worsening among the US troops leading to mutinies, and drug use (Dumbrell, 2012). It also causes attacks on non-commissioned officers and other officers from the soldiers.

From December 1967, there was growing dissatisfaction among the American citizens on this war. The public was also against the proposal of adding more than 200,000 soldiers to the

country (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). The popularity of President Johnson further reduced in the election year. Therefore, he decided to stop the violence against North Vietnam and pledged to use his remaining term in pursuing peace in Vietnam instead of re-election (Gainsborough, 2013). The move was welcomed by North Vietnam, which culminated in the peace process between North Vietnam and the US.

After assuming power, President Nixon sought to withdraw many of the US troops from South Vietnam. However, he increased the artillery and aerial bombardment in the country (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). In 1969, more than 250,000 demonstrators gathered in Washington DC with aiming for forcing the government to withdraw all the US troops. After a period of disagreements, North Vietnam and the US entered an agreement in 1972 effectively ending the conflict and hostilities (Dumbrell, 2012). Nonetheless, the war between South and North Vietnam progressed until 1975.

#### **Contemporary Debates, Controversies, Movements, and Commemorations**

The Vietnam War serves as a significant source of contemporary debates, controversies, movements, and commemorations. Firstly, current debates appear to criticize the US engagement in the Vietnam War. Many strategies argue that Vietnam was a preventable tragedy (Lembcke, 2015). According to policymakers' arguments, the US government based Vietnam War on liberal realist concept, which irrationally exaggerated the importance of South Vietnam to the US. Therefore, had they government rationally evaluated its real value of South Vietnam to its security and economic interests; it would have noticed the popular demand or revolutionary patriotism among the Vietnamese. Besides, the US government should have embraced its power limits, which could have played a part in a version of tragedy (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). In addition, current debate point to the fact that the Vietnam War could have been avoided had the US leadership been more prudent and wiser.

The Vietnam War has also generated controversies and debates on the best policies especially those related to national security. Some policymakers argue that initiating exit strategy of any war such as Vietnam War is more difficult than entering into the armed conflict particularly for the US democracy (Dumbrell, 2012). During the reign of President Reagan, the principles on military participation demanding public support and explicit policy objectives before the war are encouraged. Secondly, controversies emerge on whether there should be a predetermined exit strategy (Gainsborough, 2013). In the Persian Gulf War, the US adhered to these principles. However, during the Iraq war, instances of Vietnam War resurfaced after the US forces were engaged in ground offensive without an explicit diplomatic and political solution (Lembcke, 2015).

More recent armed conflicts pitting the US and its allies such as the Persian Gulf and Iraq were has triggered the memories of an enormous number of deaths among the American soldiers (Tran, 2010). For instance, the US forces lost large numbers of its foot soldiers while others were injured raising the issue of the kind of strategies it should adopt in attacking enemies. Based on the lessons learned in the Vietnam War, the Department of defense has resulted to use new combative ways such as the use of airstrikes as opposed ground soldiers. However, the airstrikes have received widespread condemnations across the world as they kill many unarmed citizens. Just like in Vietnam, most of the civilians lost their lives from the bombing conducted by US airstrikes and "Vietnamization" programs. In this regard, policymakers have differed on the most effective strategy that would precisely destroy the enemy without compromising the lives of innocent civilians and soldiers (Lembcke, 2015).

Moreover, the Vietnam War also generates issues regarding how commemoration should be carried out. In 2015, when celebrating the 50th anniversary of the US engagement in the war in 1965, new arguments emerged on how or whether to commemorate the Vietnam War (Le

Espiritu et al., 2016). Precisely, controversies were triggered after the US Department of Defense announced that it would organize its memorials on the engagement in the war. Moreover, the American public was against the use of a massive amount of taxpayers' money to hold the memorials. Approximately \$15 million was used to fund the commemorations but many anti-war activists, war veterans and politicians opposed the move (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). It has triggered the memories of the massive amount of resources that was wasted during the Vietnam War leading to economic challenges.

More recently, the country has witnessed major anti-war movements and demonstrations, against the escalation of the US military in modern conflicts such as in Syria. The war against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has evoked memories of the Vietnam War (Dumbrell, 2012). Many debates have deliberated on whether its right to compare the Vietnam War with the Syrian Civil War. Additionally, the Vietnam War is utilized as a symbol to explain almost all main wars that the US gets involved since its withdrawal from South Vietnam (Gainsborough, 2013). The Afghan War has also evoked the memory of the Vietnam War.

### **Conclusion**

The Vietnam War involved the escalation of the US ground troops in South Vietnam in fighting against the Viet Cong who were supported by North Vietnam. However, the war was a costly affair with the Americans, and it took a long period than anticipated. Most of the US soldiers lost their lives while others were severely injured (Le Espiritu et al., 2016). Therefore, it caused mistrust and hopelessness among the US people on its importance. Currently, it has generated debate and controversies especially when the government decides to engage in wars such as the Iraq War. Many people have questioned the need to use many ground forces during the Iraq War and the exit strategy, which was applied (Lembcke, 2015). Therefore, the Vietnam War continues to evoke bitter memories in the contemporary societies leading to differences in opinions and policies.



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