



Module 5 - The Fall of Saigon and the Consequences of Vietnam

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Module 5 Learning Objectives

- Understand how the POW situation impacted peace negotiations
- Determine the main tenets of the Paris Peace Accords
- Understand the rules set by the Geneva Conventions
- Articulate the legacy of the Vietnam War on American society

The POW Issue

An important issue that held up peace negotiations during the Vietnam War was the repatriation of Prisoners of War (POWs) from both sides. In every major war the US has fought, there has been the issue of the treatment of POWs and their repatriation after fighting concludes. In the American Revolution, approximately 20,000 Continental Army soldiers were held as POWs – and about 8500 of them died in captivity. Most were kept on prisoner ships and any high ranking prisoners were used as part of an exchange



system. During the War of 1812, American POWs were again held on prisoner ships, but as this was not as long and drawn out as the American Revolution, a much lower number of Americans were held as POWs – the estimate is approximately 5000 men were held as POWs and about 250 died while in captivity.

During the Civil War, both sides had high numbers of POWs – approximately 195,000 Union soldiers were held as POWs, while slightly more Confederates, 215,000, were held as POWs. Both sides had predicted a short war so neither side was prepared for the large number of prisoners and didn't have proper facilities in which to hold such a large number of POWs. Many Civil War POW camps, like the one in Andersonville, GA, (pictured) were mismanaged, lacked basic supplies, and experienced high mortality rates of the prison population.

During WWI, 4000 Americans were held as POWs, but this number would have been much higher had the US entered the war in 1914 instead of 1917. Of these 4000 POWs, there were 147 confirmed deaths while incarcerated. This is a rather low percentage, as rules dictating how combatants were supposed to be treated had been put in place by the Geneva Conventions.



In WWII, there were two theaters of war – European and the Pacific. In Europe, approximately 94,000 US soldiers were POWs while about 30,000 US soldiers were POWs in the Pacific Theater. However, the death rate for the POWs in Europe was one percent, while the death rate for the POWs in Japanese POW camps in the Pacific was 34 percent. If you have ever seen the film *Unbroken*, it shows the treatment many American POWs faced at the hands of the Japanese – who considered surrendering to be cowardly, as Japanese soldiers were taught to commit suicide rather than be taken prisoner.



The POWs of the Korean War have the distinction of having the highest death rate of any group of American POWs – with an official death rate of 38 percent. Of the 7100 POWs held by the Chinese and North Koreans, 2700 died while interned. My graduate research focused on the death rates of the Korean and Vietnam POWs and I have spent many hours conducting oral history interviews with the surviving POWs. [If you click here you can listen to an excerpt of my interview with Bill Borer as he explains his experience shortly after capture.](#) Their experience led to the US military creating the Code of Conduct. (on a personal note - this was one of the hardest oral histories that I ever recorded and I did indeed cry a lot during this interview. Bill had never told anyone his story until he spoke with me in 2013.)



The Vietnam War POWs hold the distinction of having the longest captivity of any group of US POWs – many spent seven years as a POW, and Everett Alvarez (pictured) spent eight and a half years as a POW. Most POWs of the Vietnam War were Air Force and Navy pilots shot down over North Vietnam during Rolling Thunder and they were held at the “Hanoi Hilton.” Some men were held as POWs of the Viet Cong and were held in outdoor camps and forced to travel with the VC – their death rates were

quite a bit higher than the POWs held in the North. The official death rate for POWs in Vietnam was eight percent. The return of the POWs was a major sticking point in the peace negotiations. With the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, the US POWs arrived home shortly after the signing.



There is a great documentary titled Return With Honor that details the POW experience in North Vietnam. I did find it streaming online – [click here if you are interested in viewing it](#). Around the 24 minute mark you can see the Hanoi Hilton and around the 1:22:00 mark you can view the part of the film about the homecoming of the POWs.

I also wanted to share this powerful photo of a returning POW meeting his family called “Burst of Joy.” It’s hard to not get emotional when looking at the faces in this picture.



And this image of returning POWs on the “Freedom Bird” and heading back to the United States. I like to look at each of their faces individually and imagine what they are feeling at that moment. Also such a powerful image!



The Geneva Conventions

The world community has attempted to put restrictions on warfare when it comes to treatment of prisoners, treatment of the non combatant population, and other rules of war. You may have heard of these referred to as the Geneva Conventions. There are Four Geneva Conventions – [watch this video clip for a brief introduction.](#)

The First Geneva Convention was held in 1864 and titled “The First Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field.” World leaders wanted to create rules of international law that offered protection for the “victims of armed conflicts.” [Click here for the first 10 articles of the First Geneva Convention](#) which will give you an idea of what types of protections world leaders sought.

The Second Geneva Convention was held in 1906 and titled “The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick, and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea.” This Geneva Convention was impacted by the recent Russo-Japanese War” and included 63 provisions that dealt with how to protect and care for the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked victims of war, protections for neutral vessels, and protections for religious and medical personnel on a combat ship, to name a few.



The Third Geneva Convention specifically addressed the treatment of POWs and was adopted in 1929 (revised in 1949) and defined the humanitarian protections for POWs. The key articles of this convention defines exactly what makes someone a POW (as opposed to a political prisoner – which the North Vietnamese claimed that US POWs were political prisoners and not POWs), the medical needs of POWs, what information a POW is required to supply to his/her captor, specific interrogation methods, housing, food, clothing, discipline, how repatriation should work, and the sharing of information about POWs with neutral parties (like the International Red Cross).

The Fourth Geneva Convention was in 1949 and titled “the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.” This addressed the protections that civilians and non-combatants should be entitled to in time of war. It defines who is a protected person, how humanitarian organizations can aid protected persons, and how to protect whole populations of countries in conflict. This Geneva Convention was necessary after millions of civilians died in WWII.

Paris Peace Accords and the Fall of Saigon

The final “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam” was signed on January 27, 1973 and ended US involvement in the war. It’s often referred to as the Paris Peace Accords. However, it’s important to note that the war still continued between North and South Vietnam until April 30, 1975 when the North Vietnamese took Saigon and reunited the country. Saigon was then renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

It’s also important to note that negotiations began in March 1968 under the Johnson administration – when LBJ halted bombings over the northern part of North Vietnam as a way to encourage the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table. The first meeting was set for May 10, 1968 but talks quickly stalled as the North Vietnamese demanded that all the bombing stop in North Vietnam and the US demanded that the North Vietnamese de-escalate their efforts in South Vietnam. Naturally, neither side wanted to make those concessions. In October 1968, LBJ agreed to end the air strikes so that serious negotiations could begin. The first major hurdle once negotiations began



again was that the South Vietnamese government and the NLF (National Liberation Front with the Viet Cong as their military wing) refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other. One of the US ambassadors developed the system that named the North Vietnamese and the US as the “named parties” and the NLF and South Vietnamese government could join the negotiations behind the named parties. They also debated about the size of the table used for the talks! Literally, they debated this. The North wanted a circular table so that all the representatives would be equal in importance at the table, while the South wanted a rectangular table so that each side could sit at one end to show the two distinct sides. Here was the compromise – the representatives for the North and South sat at a circular table, while other members sat at individual square tables around them. Can you imagine how irritating and frustrating that must have been to argue about the shape of the table???



When Nixon took office, the talks took a more secretive approach with Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho (representing North Vietnam and pictured here) began secret negotiations in August 1969. However, for the next three years, the talks didn't move forward as the North insisted that no agreement could be

signed unless the US agreed to the removal of Nguyen Van Thieu (who was president of South Vietnam from 1965-1975).

A breakthrough came in May 1972 when Nixon made a concession – he announced that the US was open to the acceptance of a cease fire as a precondition for US military withdrawal. This broke the deadlock and the negotiations began again. Another breakthrough came in October 1972 – the North Vietnamese were disappointed in the results of their Easter Offensive and at the same time they feared the closer relationship between the US and China due to détente (which was a cooling off of Cold War tensions and the beginning of nuclear limitation treaties). Le Duc Tho made the



concession that the South Vietnamese government could remain in power and negotiations continued to move forward. Later in October, Kissinger announced at a press conference that “Peace is at Hand.” The main hurdle at this point was the South Vietnamese government as they were furious with the agreements made between Kissinger and Tho and they refused to accept it without making major changes to the agreement. However, Nixon was under major domestic pressure to end the war so the US pressured the South to accept the agreement. Nixon still pledged aid to South Vietnam and in December 1972 he ordered a new bombing operation (Linebacker II) that killed North Vietnamese civilians – and put further pressure on the North to continue negotiations. By mid-January 1973 Kissinger and Nixon announced the suspension of offensive operations against the North and by January 27, the deal was done.

The key terms of the agreement dictated an immediate ceasefire, US troops had 60 days to withdrawal, the release of POWs, allow the South Vietnamese people to “decide themselves the political future of South Vietnam through genuinely free and democratic general elections under international supervision” and the reunification of Vietnam to be “carried out step by step through peaceful means.”

Another important part of the negotiations was that the US feared that as soon as the US troops were pulled out that South Vietnam would fall immediately, and this would essentially make the US look bad – in the sense that we “abandoned” South Vietnam and allowed them to be taken over immediately by a communist government. Nixon and Kissinger knew the South would not be able to stand alone against the North and they wanted the North to wait at least a year before they took over the South – which they did as Saigon fell in April 1975 – two years and three months after the peace agreement.

This is a famous image of people clamoring to get on a helicopter. It’s often cited as a picture from the Embassy, but it’s actually an apartment complex for government officials. But I think it shows the desperation many felt:



After the US troop withdrawal, the US was still providing some aid to the South. However, with the resignation of Nixon (which was pretty much the go ahead the North needed to take the South), Gerald Ford asked Congress for more aid to South Vietnam, to which Congress refused. Without this aid, the South inevitably fell to the North.

I highly recommend that you view the film [“The Last Days in Vietnam.”](#) It’s not required for this module, but it provides great insight and first person accounts into the chaotic evacuation of Saigon as the North Vietnamese were descending on the city.

Remember, many South Vietnamese worked for the US led government in South Vietnam and they were targets for “reeducation” by the North Vietnamese. We tried to evacuate as many of them as we could, but inevitably, many were left behind.

Legacy of the Vietnam War

After reading these five modules, you should have a better understanding of the political and social history of the Vietnam War. When studying military history, it’s not enough to know the events that occurred during the conflict, but understanding the impact of the war on society in the subsequent years is crucial.

When considering the Vietnam War, there are positive and negative impacts of this conflict on American society. In the immediate years following the fall of Saigon, there was not much public analysis of the war - it seemed like most wanted to forget. In the



1980s, we started to see some books and movies released about the war. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, archives in Vietnam and the Soviet Union were opened for researchers, which helped historians better understand the war and its legacies.

The first legacy seemed positive - it seemed that no future US administration would commit the country to a foreign war except for reasons of self defense. The invasion of Iraq shows that was incorrect. Additionally, after Vietnam, Congress was much more wary of providing presidents a blank check to wage war, much like they gave LBJ with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

The war impacted the public as the majority of the American public viewed the war as either wrong, or a bad mistake. It also impacted the public by dropping the voting age from 21 to 18, as well as ending the draft. Since the Vietnam War, the US has had no military draft and our entire military is volunteer based. The public also was able to understand the horrific effects of Agent Orange as many returning soldiers struggled with cancer and other diseases from their exposure. In fact, in 2020 I interviewed a Vietnam Veteran who was in the late stages of cancer due to Agent Orange, so we see impacts of the war five decades later. Another important impact of the war on the public is we see a marked increase in government distrust following Vietnam, which has not really gone away since. The leak of the Pentagon Papers and Nixon's secret invasion of Cambodia demonstrated to the public that the government could and would lie with impunity regarding foreign wars.

Another legacy is the creation of the Vietnam War Memorial, built in DC in the 1980s. If you have never visited, I highly recommend you do if you are ever in DC. It's incredibly powerful.



Finally, in my personal opinion, one of the largest legacies of the war is the understanding that entering a foreign war is much easier than extracting yourself from a foreign war. Consider the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s - we easily invaded but then our withdrawals from both theaters of war created unrest and violence. My goal in educating the public about the Vietnam War is to help people better understand this concept so they have a better understanding of current and future foreign conflicts.

What do you think is the most important legacy of the war?

What's Next?

- Complete the Module 5 Primary Source Analysis Activity.
- Complete the Module 5 Knowledge Check



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