



# Module 2 - Increasing American Involvement: 1964-1968

## [Module 2 - Increasing American Involvement: 1964-1968](#)

[Module 2 Learning Objectives](#)

[From Eisenhower to Kennedy](#)

[November 1963 – Two Important Assassinations](#)

[The Gulf of Tonkin Incident](#)

[American Strategy](#)

[Tet Offensive](#)

[Effects of the Tet Offensive](#)

[Module 2 Summary](#)

[What's Next?](#)

[Image References](#)

## Module 2 Learning Objectives

- Understand how the Tonkin Gulf Resolution impacted the American war effort.
- Identify when the first American ground troops entered Vietnam.
- Discuss how Rolling Thunder escalated the war.
- Recognize the effects of the Tet Offensive.
- Define the strategic hamlet program.
- Understand the devastating impacts of the use of Agent Orange.

## From Eisenhower to Kennedy

We learned in Module 1 that with the Election of 1960, John F. Kennedy took over the reins of the White House and with it, the increasing presence of the US in South Vietnam. Under JFK, the United States increased military aid to increase the size of the



ARVN (Army of South Vietnam) from approximately 150,000 soldiers to 170,000. In addition, the US agreed to send an extra 1000 US military advisors to help train the ARVN. [In this letter from JFK to Ngo Dinh Diem](#), you can get an idea of JFK's views on supporting the South Vietnamese government.

Under JFK, the United States formed MACV, which was Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. In 1961 the insurgency of the Viet Cong was creating chaos in South Vietnam. JFK's administration knew that they had to increase support for Diem's government or they would collapse and fall under the North Vietnamese communists. The goals of MACV were to support the ARVN and organize the Montagnards, an ethnic people who lived in the mountainous areas of Vietnam. MACV, JFK's administration, and Diem's government also created the Strategic Hamlet Program. The idea was that in order to weaken the counterinsurgency effort, the local peasant populations needed to be relocated to "hamlets" which were essentially guarded villages. The rationale was that by moving the peasant population in South Vietnam into guarded hamlets, then the NLF and VC could not easily infiltrate these villages and recruit new members. However, this plan ultimately backfired –the peasant population resented being forced to leave their homes. [Read this short interview from a South Vietnamese woman to get an idea of how the peasant population felt about this program.](#)

## November 1963 – Two Important Assassinations

We learned in Module 1 about two key political assassinations, but let's expand more on this, as these two assassinations had an indelible impact on the war. By early 1963, the US had 16,000 advisors in South Vietnam, and it had become increasingly clear to the JFK administration and members of the South Vietnamese military that Diem was a weak leader and a change in leadership was necessary. In a National Intelligence Estimate report, Diem policies were described as "autocratic" (meaning he was ruling more or less as a dictator) and his programs, instead of helping the war effort, had become a hindrance.



# VIETNAM WAR

## DIGITAL HISTORY PROJECT

Going back to 1961, Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) visited South Vietnam and concluded that either the US would have to commit to more military action or end their support of the Diem regime. When Diem asked JFK for an additional 100,000 US soldiers, JFK refused, but did continue to provide military and economic aid.



JFK's administration could not agree on the best course of action – some supported expanding American involvement, while others supported staying on the same path of military and economic aid with on ground troops other than advisors. JFK did not want to commit US ground soldiers in a major land war in Asia, so in addition to sending aid, he also worked with the Pentagon to create a large-scale counter-guerrilla program and train the ARVN on these principles.



As 1963 progressed, Diem became more and more unpopular. He persecuted Buddhists in the country – some of you may be familiar with this photo of the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc in Saigon. When your citizens start lighting themselves on fire in protest, it might be an indication that you are not an effective leader! Also, Diem's

brother Nhu and his wife Madame Nhu exerted power in the South Vietnamese



government and this nepotism also led to resentment among the population. Some high ranking generals in the ARVN decided to take matters into their own hands and began plotting a coup d'etat. Their first effort was supposed to occur in August of 1963 but this coup ultimately failed. Another coup was planned for November – and while the US was not directly involved with the planning of this coup, the JFK administration was aware of it and essentially told the generals that they would not help with the coup but that they would not stop it either.

The coup began on November 1, 1963 when the ARVN generals took over the local Saigon police headquarters and radio stations and moved on to the presidential palace. Diem was confronted by the generals and he was guaranteed safe passage from the country (along with his brother and wife) if he resigned. He was warned that if he didn't resign immediately that his palace would be attacked, and the generals held true to their word and an air attack commenced. On November 2, Diem offered to surrender for safe passage. However, there was a mix up in communication somewhere and the generals did not respond quickly enough to Diem's offer to resign and Diem and his brother escaped the palace through a secret tunnel. It's still unclear today about the series of events that took place right after their escape, but they were tracked down and arrested. Diem and Nhu were killed inside an armored personnel carrier that morning. The South Vietnamese government was led by the generals until Nguyen Van Thieu became the president of South Vietnam in 1965 (he remained the leader of South Vietnam until 1975 and the fall of Saigon).



Just three weeks later, on November 22, 1963, JFK was assassinated in Dallas, TX by Lee Harvey Oswald. LBJ was sworn in as president.

These assassinations are significant in the history of the Vietnam War – two leaders are assassinated within three weeks of each other and new leadership takes over. While initially, LBJ continued with JFK's policies, events in 1964 pushed LBJ to escalate the war in Vietnam and introduce ground combat troops into Vietnam. We can only

speculate as to how JFK would have continued the war effort had he lived and been re-elected.

## The Gulf of Tonkin Incident



In August 1964, the United States had ships in the Gulf of Tonkin on reconnaissance missions called Desoto patrols. On August 2, the USS Maddox reported they were attacked by North Vietnamese torpedoes. At that point, the LBJ administration did not retaliate. On August 4, the USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy reported another torpedo attack. In response, LBJ ordered bombing raids on strategic military sites in North Vietnam. By August 7, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that gave the president a blank check to use whatever military force he deemed necessary. You will have the opportunity to read this Resolution in this

Module's Primary Source Analysis. **This is a turning point in the Vietnam War because it gave the US a pretense for escalating involvement in the war.** It's worth noting that after a thorough investigation, the conclusion was that the attack on the 2<sup>nd</sup> happened but not the attack on the 4<sup>th</sup>. The 2003 film, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, highlights the Gulf of Tonkin incident. McNamara was Kennedy's Secretary of Defense and Johnson kept him in his cabinet when he became President. [Click here to watch a short video clip from this film - Lesson Seven: Belief and seeing are both often wrong.](#)



After the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and the US bombing response, the Viet Cong and NVA began to increase attacks on US and ARVN air bases throughout South Vietnam. I want to pause here to expand a bit more on the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong are often referred to by American soldiers as “VC” or “Charlie” and they were part of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Viet Cong can be translated to Vietnamese Communists. The NLF worked in conjunction with the North Vietnamese government and the Viet Cong were the guerrilla wing of the organization. [Click here to read more about the NLF.](#)

Ok, back to the increasing attacks on air bases. On November 1, 1964, the VC attacked the Bienhoa Air Base about 20 miles north of Saigon. In this attack, four American soldiers were killed and five aircraft were destroyed.

One thing to consider about LBJ and Congress’s reactions to the Gulf of Tonkin incident is the election of 1964. LBJ was running for his own term and some Congressional members were up for reelection – they had to walk a fine line when it came to responding to the communist threat. A weak response would make them look like they weren’t tough on communism, but escalating the war before the election could also be detrimental. In 1964, LBJ won his own term by defeating Barry Goldwater and campaigning on the idea that he sought “no wider war.”

In January, 1965 General Maxwell Taylor described the situation in South Vietnam:

*"We are faced here with a seriously deteriorating situation characterized by continued political turmoil, irresponsibility and division within the armed forces, lethargy in the pacification program, some anti-US feeling which could grow, signs of mounting terrorism by VC directly at US personnel and deepening discouragement and loss of morale throughout SVN. Unless these conditions are somehow changed and trends reversed, we are likely soon to face a number of unpleasant developments ranging from anti-American demonstrations, further civil disorders, and even political assassinations to the ultimate installation of a hostile govt which will ask us to leave while it seeks accommodation with the National Liberation Front and Hanoi."*





Read that quote above one more time and let it sink in. Generals and political leaders understood in 1964 that the war was not going well.

In February, 1964, McGeorge Bundy (National Security Advisor) reported to LBJ that “The situation in Vietnam is deteriorating and without new US action defeat appears inevitable – probably not in a matter of weeks or perhaps even months, but within the next year or so...There is still time to turn it around, but not much”

In March, 1965 the first ground troops landed in South Vietnam in Danang to protect US air bases. The next phase of the war had begun.



[Click here for a photo gallery of the Danang Landing](#)

## American Strategy

As the US escalated involvement in the war, US strategy was one of Search and Destroy. [Click here for a short video about this strategy.](#) One of the methods of determining success of this strategy was “body counts” which is exactly as it sounds – after each engagement, units had to do body counts to decide how many of the enemy they killed. It’s very hard to determine exactly how many of the enemy were killed, especially if they removed their dead from the field. Also, some commanders were under a lot of pressure to have high body counts, which led to some numbers being

inflated. Another issue facing ground troops was the Ho Chi Minh trail – US soldiers were forbidden from crossing the border into Laos and Cambodia, but the trail led through those countries so sometimes fighting did spill over into those countries. Under Nixon, the US invaded Cambodia which led to mass protests in the US.

Also, keep in mind that as ground troops were increased (in 1968 US troop numbers were over 500,000 – the peak of the war) that the US was also strategically bombing North Vietnam in the Rolling Thunder campaign - the first large sustained bombing campaign of the war. [Click here to read more about Rolling Thunder.](#)

Another area of American strategy was the use of Agent Orange. This chemical was used to defoliate the jungles of Vietnam, which were often used for cover for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The use of Agent Orange was part of Operation Ranch Hand, which lasted from 1962-1971. [Click here to read an article about Operation Ranch Hand.](#)



## Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive was a turning point in the Vietnam War. Tet is the Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday and in the years before 1968, each side recognized an unofficial ceasefire on this holiday, which falls at the end of January. To the US and the South Vietnamese, Tet in 1968 would be no different. However, the North Vietnamese and VC had other plans in mind.

In the early morning hours of January 31, 1968 the NVA and VC attacked over 100 cities, provincial capitals, district capitals and villages throughout South Vietnam. Saigon (capital of South Vietnam) was also a target with attacks on the presidential palace, the radio station, ARVN headquarters, Tan Son Nhut airfield (Saigon's main airport) and the





US embassy in Saigon. VC sappers (think of them like suicide bombers) breached the walls of the embassy, but were eventually killed by embassy guards. While the attack on the Saigon embassy and other sites in Saigon were a military failure, it was significant in regards to the public's perception of the control the US had over the military control of the VC and NVA.

Another area of fierce fighting was the Battle of Hue (pronounce "way"). Hue was the ancient capital of Vietnam and was the site of fierce urban battles during the Tet Offensive. Within a few hours of the attack, the NVA and VC controlled the city and began executing city officials. When the US and ARVN forces regained control of Hue by the end of February, they found mass graves with more than 2800 bodies. [This video clip shows CBS news coverage of Tet.](#)

## Effects of the Tet Offensive

From 1965-1968, the American public was informed that despite increasing amounts of troops sent to Vietnam and increasing US casualties, that the US war effort was working and the VC and NVA were losing. However, the Tet Offensive, while technically a military loss for the NVA and VC (as they didn't meet their objectives) was a psychological victory for them. Consider the point of view of the US public – if the war effort was going so well, how was the enemy able to execute a well planned offensive in which tens of thousands of enemy troops systematically attacked over 100 areas of South Vietnam simultaneously? The American public realized that the US government was not forthright in the information they provided to the public about the war.

The Tet Offensive inflamed the anti-war movement even more and created a credibility gap for the LBJ administration. To the LBJ administration, it became clear that a greater commitment of men and resources was necessary, and was the US public willing to invest even more?

In February, 1968 the journalist Walter Cronkite visited Vietnam in the wake of the Tet Offensive and came back to the US and reported on his findings. [Watch the short clip](#)



[below to see what he had to say about the US war in Vietnam.](#) After watching it, consider that at this point in history, Cronkite was known as the “most trusted man in America” and his opinions had a major impact on how the public viewed the war. LBJ famously said that if “I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

Also consider that 1968 was a re-election year for LBJ and it was assumed that he would run again in November. But events in early 1968 changed this assumption. The New Hampshire democratic primaries were held on March 12, 1968 and LBJ was opposed by Eugene McCarthy – who was against the war in Vietnam, and a relative unknown to the US public. LBJ anticipated a large victory against McCarthy, but he won only by a narrow margin. This showed LBJ’s vulnerability in the upcoming election in November and some of his advisors suggested LBJ de-escalate the war in Vietnam because of the effects of Tet on the American public and the popularity of McCarthy as an anti-war candidate. On March 31, LBJ made a public announcement about his intentions in the general election in November. [Watch the short clip below to see what he said about this.](#)

So the Tet Offensive had major repercussions for the US: The anti-war movement became stronger and louder, Walter Cronkite’s scathing report about the state of the war, and LBJ declining to run for president in the November election.

## Module 2 Summary

- The transition from Eisenhower to Kennedy came with an increase in advisors to Vietnam.
- Two political assassinations that impacted the war were the assassinations of Kennedy and Diem.
- American ground troops first arrived in country in March, 1965.
- Operation Rolling Thunder was the first sustained bombing campaign in the country.
- The use of Agent Orange had major negative impacts on Vietnam and the civilians and soldiers exposed to it, even with effects still being seen today.



- The strategic hamlet program created more hostility towards the American military.
- The Tet Offensive demonstrated to the American public that the war effort was not going as well as promised by the government.

## What's Next?

- Complete the Module 2 Primary Source Analysis Activity.
- Complete the Module 2 Knowledge Check.
- In Module 3, you will learn about the social movements on the homefront during the war.

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