

Part V: Values and the Vietnam War

As Americans, we attach great importance to values. Usually, we think of values in connection with our personal lives. Our attitudes toward our families, friends, and communities are a reflection of our personal values.

Values are at the center of our civic lives as well. The high value Americans place on freedom, democracy, national honor, human rights, and individual liberty rings loudly throughout U.S. history. During the Cold War, many of our country's most deeply rooted values shaped U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam and elsewhere. In addition, Americans came to place a new emphasis on security and stability in foreign affairs.

Interests are the other key component of foreign policy. In contrast to values, interests are measurable and concrete. As individuals, we have personal interests associated with our comfort and well-being. Our personal property, financial success, and the safety of ourselves and our families typically rank at the top of our interests. Nations have interests too. For example, U.S. interests include promoting the sale of American exports, securing sources of energy and other raw materials, and protecting the country from attack.

In conducting foreign policy, U.S. leaders seek to promote our country's interests and values. Many of the most difficult and controversial U.S. foreign policy decisions are tied to war, when American policymakers must choose how many lives and resources they are willing to "spend" for the sake of interests and values.

National values assume particular importance in times of war. People hold them up as vital goals that justify personal and national sacrifice. For example, millions of Americans volunteered for service during World War II because they felt freedom and liberty were under threat both in America and around the world. Moreover, the aggression of Nazi Germany and Japan posed a very real threat to U.S. economic and security interests. With so

much at stake, an overwhelming majority of Americans agreed that the costs of the war (in lives, resources, manpower, and money) were justified.

The Vietnam War was different for several reasons. First, the values at stake in Vietnam for the United States changed as U.S. involvement deepened. Originally, the goal was to preserve the freedom and independence of South Vietnam by defeating the communist forces of the Vietcong and North Vietnam. By 1965, however, U.S. leaders were most concerned with preserving the credibility of America's Cold War commitments. Four years later, as American policymakers recognized their inability to defeat the communist forces in South Vietnam militarily, discussion largely turned to the need to defend American honor internationally. For many Americans, the foreign policy goals connected to Vietnam held little meaning. The values that motivated Americans to sacrifice in World War II did not ring as clearly during the Vietnam War, especially in the last years of the struggle. Meanwhile, the media regularly reported the costs in lives and money lost in Vietnam to the American people.

Second, few Americans viewed Vietnam or the other countries of Southeast Asia as areas of vital national interest. U.S. leaders made the argument that the spread of communism in Southeast Asia would mark a significant setback in the Cold War struggle. Nonetheless, there was never a question that the United States would come under attack. Southeast Asia was rich in raw materials, but the region was hardly crucial to American industry or trade.

Finally, the conflict in Vietnam frustrated efforts to measure the progress of the war. Territory that was in the hands of the South Vietnamese army during the day might be under the control of the Vietcong at night. Reports of casualty figures were unreliable, and appeared to have little relationship to the strength of the Vietcong. As the war dragged

on, pronouncements from American leaders that the United States had turned a corner, or that a light could be seen at the end of the tunnel met with increasing public skepticism.

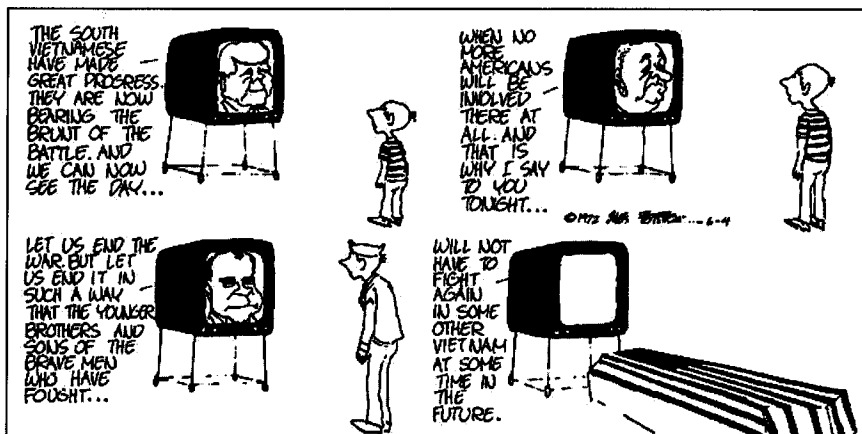
While few Americans shared the view of Senator Ernest Gruening that Vietnam was not worth a single American life, most would have agreed that there was a point beyond which the continued costs could not be justified. How to determine when and if this point had been reached became one of the central issues of the American experience in Vietnam. As George Ball predicted, the more lives and money the United States committed to achieve its goals in Vietnam, the more difficult it became to abandon the cause.

The French reached the point of exhaus-

tion in Vietnam after eight years of war, having spent more than 1.6 trillion francs and twenty-one thousand lives. Most American leaders gave up on their hopes of achieving a military victory soon after communist forces launched a large-scale offensive on the Vietnamese New Year, or Tet, in early 1968. The policy pursued after 1968 was justified primarily in terms of protecting American prestige and honor, even as decision-makers took steps toward withdrawing American troops. Whether the additional sixteen thousand American lives lost in combat after January 1969 would have been considered “well-spent” if “peace with honor” had been achieved is a difficult question to answer. The issue is likely to continue to divide Americans for many years to come.

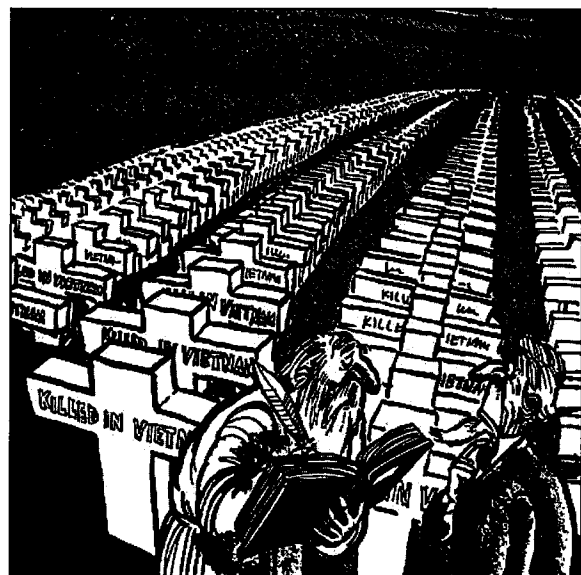
The cartoon to the right expresses one man’s opinion of this controversy. Examine it carefully.

1. What two techniques are employed to convey the passage of time?
2. How does the cartoonist express the conflict between values and interests?
3. How would the cartoon have been drawn differently if the United States had “won” in Vietnam?



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In the next cartoon, the man with the book is asking Uncle Sam a very difficult question. You have now studied the reasons why the United States became involved in the Vietnam War and how events unfolded from 1965 to 1975. After talking to your friends and family about this unit, answer the question being asked of Uncle Sam. (Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. You are being asked to make a personal judgment concerning a very controversial period in recent American history.)



Sanders in *The Milwaukee Journal*. Reprinted with permission.

“What shall I put down as the reason for dying?”