**The Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War was one of the longest military conflicts in U.S. history, claiming the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and wounding more than 300,000. Estimates place the number of killed or wounded North and South Vietnamese at roughly four million soldiers and civilians—roughly 10% of the population.

In 1959, North and South Vietnam were divided along what is known as the "17th parallel." The North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front sought to unify the country under Communist rule; the South Vietnamese army struggled to maintain independence. In 1964, the U.S. Congress authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to take steps "to prevent further aggression" and keep the South Vietnamese government from collapsing, or as Woodrow Wilson once pledged, to "make the world safe for democracy."

In 1965, the U.S. sent ground troops to South Vietnam and began a series of bombing missions over North Vietnam called Operation Rolling Thunder. Densely forested countryside prevented the effective use of tanks, provided cover for **guerrilla** fighters and medical evacuations, and allowed helicopters to transport troops and supplies. By the end of 1966, the U.S. had nearly 400,000 troops fighting in Vietnam; by the start of 1969, the draft was in full force and that number had increased to 540,000.

In mid-1969, strategies shifted as it became more evident to American soldiers, politicians, and citizens that the U.S. efforts in Vietnam were not **prevailing**. Newly elected President Richard Nixon responded by withdrawing 25,000 troops.

Unlike in World War II, there was no front in Vietnam, the danger was pervasive and unrelenting, and the most common measure of "success" was counting the dead bodies of the enemy. The average age of U.S. service members in Vietnam was 19, seven years younger than in WWII, making soldiers even more susceptible to psychological strain.

Although the war claimed countless Vietnamese civilian **casualties**, Americans were shocked when they learned about an incident that occurred in March of 1968. In what is known as the My Lai Massacre, members of a U.S. infantry company slaughtered more than 300 Vietnamese villagers, including women, elderly men, children, and infants. As news of this incident and other failures of the war broke in Western publications, the American peace movement gained momentum.

Large antiwar protests spread across America. The morale among troops—particularly those coming home from the war to a country with little empathy for what they had experienced—was low. Suicide, alcoholism, divorce, and unemployment were more **rampant** among veterans of Vietnam than of any other war in U.S. history until then.

In January 1973, the warring governments signed a peace accord, ending open **hostilities** between North Vietnam and the U.S. However, the conflict between Vietnamese forces continued until the fall of Saigon in South Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

The complexity of the struggle and the reasons for America's involvement are still widely debated. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is the most famous tribute to the war. Designed by Maya Ying Lin and constructed in 1982, the memorial is a stark black granite wall with the names engraved of American service members killed and missing in the war.

*"War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead."*

—Tim O'Brien, from *The Things They Carried*

**THE VIETNAM WAR**

**DIRECTIONS: After reading the short article with background information on the Vietnam War, please carefully and thoroughly complete each section of this handout.**

NAME: DUE:

**PART ONE: VOCABULARY**

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|  Word in Context  | Definition  |
| 1. Densely forested countryside prevented the effective use of tanks, provided cover for **guerrilla** fighters |  |
| 2. In mid-1969, strategies shifted as it became more evident to American soldiers, politicians, and citizens that the U.S. efforts in Vietnam were not **prevailing.** |  |
| 3. Although the war claimed countless Vietnamese civilian **casualties**… |  |
| 4. Suicide, alcoholism, divorce, and unemployment were more **rampant** among veterans of Vietnam than of any other war in U.S. history until then.  |  |
| 5. In January 1973, the warring governments signed a peace accord, ending open **hostilities** between North Vietnam and the U.S. |  |

**PART TWO: WRITTEN RESPONSE**

1. What is the difference in casualities between the United States and North and South Vietnam?

2. According to the reading, why did President Johnson get involved in the conflict in Vietnam?

3. What were the conditions like in Vietnam? Were they optimal for war?

4. There was a draft that was enacted during the Vietnam War which resulted, partly, in many of the soldiers being significantly younger than they were in WWII. What would some of the results of sending such young troops to war be? How do you think it might have felt for young people waiting to find out if they were going to be drafted?

5. Read the italicized quote at the bottom of the reading. Why do you think the author describes war in this manner? Do you agree or disagree with the description? Why?