

The War in VIETNAM



AP Photo/Art Greenspon

Once you've been through it you're old. . . . And I was an old 22-year-old when I returned from there. We expect to confront death when we're 69 or 70 or 80; you don't expect to confront it when you're 21. And you also don't expect to confront it day after day, after day, after day, after day, after day, after day, after day.

—Tim O'Brien served in the Americal Division from 1968 to 1970

From young men facing the military draft to nightly “body counts” on television screens and a swelling antiwar movement, the Vietnam War permeated everyday lives. “It was a heavy cloud over our youth,” said Joann Parker. “I looked around at the boys in my class and feared that some of them might die in Vietnam.”

Yet, when another student said, “I’m supporting the war because the government tells me it’s the right thing to do,” he spoke for many polled Americans, at least in the early years of Vietnam. Martin Luther King, Jr., broke his silence on the war in a highly controversial speech delivered April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his death. He denounced the conflict and U.S. militarism, and the “cruel irony” of whites and blacks killing and dying together for a nation “that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.”

More than 80% of Americans killed in Vietnam (totaling 58,272, including 1,072 Minnesotans) were between the ages of 18 and 25. Vietnamese death estimates range from two to four million.

My church had sponsored a small delegation to march on the Pentagon. My parents . . . supported the war and doubted anti-war activism. . . . Soon-famous speakers inspired us. Folk singers lifted our spirits. We learned non-violent methods [and] if billy clubs came out, we would assume the fetal position. I was scared and exhilarated. My memories are all images and impressions. I wonder if I uttered a word from the time we left Minneapolis until we returned.

—Bonita Janda



Protesting the war, courtesy St. Paul Pioneer Press

I was with my unit for about the fourth or fifth day [on my first mission]. . . in this place called Trang Bang. We were walking along the road and the engineer was sweeping with the [mine] detectors. Then all of a sudden, Whoom! It felt like something just took all the air out of our lungs. An M-48 [tank] had hit a command detonated 500-pound bomb. . . . Sir Charles [the Viet Cong] had hooked it up. It killed everybody on the tank. . . . You were finding parts of the crew all over the place. And they were telling me, ‘that’s the way it goes.’ The whole weight of the war kind of hit me, a reality.

—Will Smith served with the 25th Infantry Division

I was buying into that whole thing about the domino theory . . . that if we lost Vietnam, that pretty soon we're going to lose [all of South East Asia]—all that rhetoric that was going on. The thing that really hit home for me was seeing all the little Vietnamese kids begging GIs. . . . And so you throw them candy. . . . After awhile, though, I started thinking, ‘Man, we just we dogged those people. I bought into this whole thing [that] these folks don't have any kind of feeling about death. They don't have any of these kinds of feelings. I bought the whole line and sinker about this, man, that these people were below us. . . so it's easier for you to pull the trigger.

—Gilbert De La O enlisted in the Army at age 19 and founded the St. Paul chapter of the Brown Berets in 1968



AP Photo/John Lengel



Vietnamese children, photographed during Walter Mondale's trip to Vietnam, 1967

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