

# Disillusionment of the Late 20th Century

Vietnam & Watergate

# Vietnam war

- As the Civil Rights Movement continues to influence policy in the mid-1960s, American involvement in Vietnam ramps up
- The official government narrative of the war didn't always match the reality of what was actually happening
- 1965 and the “televised war” - Morley Safer's report on the torching of the South Vietnamese village of Cam Ne by US Marines
- 1968 Tet Offensive revealed an “unwinnable” war in which years of fighting and reassurances from the US government seemed to have done little to contain the Northern Vietnamese forces

# Vietnam & the turbulent 1960s

- *The Graduate* premieres in 1967
- We're still a year off from 1968 - the year that the futility of the War is evidenced via the Tet Offensive, the chaos surrounding the 1968 Democratic Convention, and the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and Robert F Kennedy
- War doesn't figure into the film in any direct way, but the general malaise of the 1960s certainly filters through. How? What does the message seem to be?

# Vietnam War

- Years of American losses, reports of American war crimes, and unreported/half-reported American actions disillusioned many; young people are the stereotypical “antiwar protestor types” of the 1960s, but by the end of the decade, it isn’t just college students and hippies who are calling for peace
- LBJ decides not to run for reelection as he feels it’s an uphill climb given the unpopularity of the war

# Nixon & Vietnam

- Richard Nixon, GoP Presidential nominee in 1968, successfully ran on both withdrawal from the war and a message casting himself as representative of “order” in the face of seeming chaos represented by Democratic politics (Chicago Convention) and policies (crisis in Vietnam and dogwhistle politics, essentially)
- But instead of a solid path to withdrawal, American involvement actually escalated under Nixon - the US would not formally withdraw from active battle until early 1973

# Nixon & Vietnam

- Nixon authorized bombings in Cambodia and Laos in an attempt to cut off Northern Vietnamese supply channels - the public didn't know and Congress did not formally approve the action
- Nixon also worked in secret to sabotage LBJ's 1968 peace talks with North and South Vietnamese leaders in attempts to try to make Democrats look bad during the election, effectively convincing South Vietnamese leaders that he could get them a better deal once he was in office
- HR Haldeman - the guy who would become his Chief of Staff during the Watergate Era and a major player in that scandal - participated in this Vietnam, scheme, too

# Vietnam & Constitutional Checks & Balances

- Huge breaches of both public trust and Constitutional delegation of powers
- The attempt to sabotage LBJ's peace talks essentially violated the Logan Act
- The **War Powers Act of 1973** was a reaction against this type of unilateral action by the president. The Vietnam conflict itself was never an officially-declared, Congressionally-approved War by Constitutional standards
- While the president is deemed the "commander in chief" of the military by Article II of the US Constitution, Article I grants Congress the power to declare/fund war and raise, fund, and support the US military

# Vietnam & Constitutional Checks & Balances

- The act reinforces Congress' primary role in approving prolonged overseas military action by limiting when, where, how much, and how long, a president can commit military resources without Congressional authorization
- In more recent times, the "Authorization of Use of Military Force" has been used as an open-ended "blank check" to justify a variety of overseas military activity directed by the president in attempts to fight terrorism (2001 AUMF); additionally, multiple presidents have side-stepped requirements of the act, invoking technicalities such as Congressional funding of the activity (if Congress likes it, Congress funds it; if they don't, they won't)



# Government Distrust

- For many, the US government's approach to war - in both the Johnson and Nixon administrations - was enough to forge tremendous mistrust of the government among Americans
- John Kerry's testimony before Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 1971 encapsulates the sentiments of many Americans regarding the war
- As a Vietnam veteran, the future US Senator and Secretary of State had compelling perspective of the war and its costs

# Statement by John Kerry of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

- In his testimony, how does John Kerry characterize the conflict in Vietnam?
- What does Kerry think is actually at stake in the war? Is there any important American value to be defended, or cause to be saved, by continuing hostilities?
- Who pays the ultimate price in this war?
- Why does he believe the war continues? Whose goals does it justify?

# Statement by John Kerry of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

- It's a civil war that never had to affect the United States in any material way: "there is nothing in South Vietnam which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse, is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy"
- The Vietnamese have wanted freedom from colonialism; we have not given them that in attempting to "mold them after our own image"

# Statement by John Kerry of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

- They just want to be left alone; average people are brutalized by all sides in this fight
- Destroying villages to “save” them - it’s not just the Viet Cong that terrorizes or “cheapens” Vietnamese lives
- American soldiers are stuck in the middle, too - they are dying for nothing: “We watched pride allow the most unimportant battles to be blown into extravaganzas, because we couldn’t lose, and we couldn’t retreat, and because it didn’t matter how many American bodies were lost to prove that point”

# Statement by John Kerry of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

- Nixon does not want to be the “first American president to lose a war.”
- “We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

# Watergate

- The sentiment dovetails into the next really huge American leadership scandal: an obstruction of justice extravaganza that involves coverups orchestrated by dozens of high-level officials in the Executive Branch - including President Nixon
- Before America's involvement in the war winds down, the June, 1972 break-in at the DNC's Watergate complex headquarters happens
- An odd, poorly-executed break-in intended to bug the Democratic HQ ends up taking down a whole lot of important people - in the Nixon administration and the Committee to Reelect the President - who tried to cover it up

# Watergate

- People in the administration and the Nixon campaign conspired to pay off the break in crew (and others in the know) to keep them quiet
- Officials in the administration tried to impede the FBI's investigation of the break-in via the CIA
- Nixon went as far as ordering his AG and Deputy AG to fire the Special Prosecutor designated to look into the case - they refused and resigned - this exodus is called the "Saturday Night Massacre"
- It's not clear if Nixon actually ordered the initial break-in, but he was involved in the coverup - the taped conversations from the White House involving him, Chief of Staff Haldeman, White House Counsel John Dean, and others prove it
- He *had*, however, asked that the DNC chair be wiretapped to reveal the names of big Democratic donors and subsequently use the IRS and DOJ to investigate (and, ostensibly, try to use the information to harass or discredit) them

# Watergate

- As seen in *All the President's Men*, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward “break” the story with their investigations for the *Washington Post*
- These guys were young - in their 20s - and were not senior political reporters; they were initially met with resistance from editors and essentially did their investigations from the city desk of the paper
- Associate FBI Director W. Mark Felt (aka “Deep Throat”) was Bob’s “deep background” source for much of their reporting
- Their reporting led to Congressional investigation of the matter and the preparation of Articles of Impeachment in the House; Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974 and was pardoned by President Gerald Ford soon after



# Video Response

- Vietnam and Watergate are two very different kinds of American “scandals,” and yet they share many basic elements in common. What commonalities do they share? Why are they often discussed in tandem during conversations about abuse of power and mistrust of government?
- In your opinion, how much personal culpability for lingering bad feelings regarding Vietnam and Watergate does Richard Nixon hold? With whom - if anyone - should he share culpability, and why?
- What roles did “young people” (Americans under 30) of the era seem to play in shaping our national memories of this turbulent era? Why? What experiences and perspectives gave their voices moral authority in speaking on these issues? How and why were their perspectives markedly different from older Americans on these issues? Consider especially the real-life examples of John Kerry and Bernstein and Woodward, but also the fictional model of Ben in *The Graduate*.
- Use the Kerry and *Watergate Tapes* primary sources, the textbook chapter, and the two most recent films to back up your answers.