

Tet Offensive Is the Turning Point

In November 1967, President Johnson brought General Westmoreland home from Vietnam to address the nation's concerns about the war. Westmoreland said that the Vietcong were declining in strength and could no longer mount a major offensive. As Westmoreland made his claims, however, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong were planning just such an attack.

Communist Assault Shocks Americans

In early 1968, U.S. officials anticipated a communist offensive. As expected, on January 21, the North Vietnamese Army hit Khe Sanh in northwest South Vietnam. However, nine days later, the communists expanded their attack by hitting U.S. and ARVN positions throughout South Vietnam. The **Tet Offensive**—named after the Vietnamese lunar new year—was a coordinated assault on 36 provincial capitals and 5 major cities, as well as the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

The communists planned to take and hold the cities until the urban population took up arms in their support. They thought the Tet Offensive had a good chance of ending the war. The fighting was fierce, but in the end, American and South Vietnamese forces repelled the offensive and there was no popular uprising against the government of South Vietnam. Although U.S. forces won a tactical victory by preventing the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army from achieving their primary objectives, the Tet Offensive was a strategic blow to the Americans. It demonstrated that the communists had not lost the will or the ability to fight on.

War's End Is Nowhere in Sight After the Tet Offensive, American military leaders seemed less confident of a quick end to the war. When Westmoreland requested more troops, President Johnson asked his new Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford to take an objective look at the military and political situation in Vietnam. The deeper Clifford delved into the matter, the more pessimistic he became. Sending more troops would inevitably require raising taxes, increasing draft rolls, and calling up reserves. It would lead to increased casualties in the field and dissent at home. And it still might not lead to victory. Clifford concluded that the President should radically shift U.S. policy from one that pursued victory to one that pursued a negotiated peace.

Johnson Steps Down While Clifford deliberated, many Americans began to turn dramatically against the war. Some marched in protest and engaged in antiwar activities. Others registered their disapproval at the polls. In early



Map Skills In launching the Tet Offensive, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army wanted to demoralize South Vietnam and deal American forces a devastating blow.

- 1. Regions** Identify two regions of South Vietnam that were hard-hit by the Tet Offensive.
- 2. Draw Conclusions** How do you think the Tet Offensive affected the morale of North Vietnam? Explain.

Vocabulary Builder

inevitable—(ihn EHV ih tuh buhl)
adj. certain to happen

1968, Minnesota senator **Eugene McCarthy**, the antiwar candidate for the Democratic Party nomination, made a surprisingly strong showing in the New Hampshire primary. Sensing that Johnson was in a politically weakened position, New York's Democratic senator **Robert Kennedy** announced his candidacy for the presidency. Both McCarthy and Kennedy believed that the war had divided America and drained resources away from the fights against poverty and discrimination. What Johnson feared most was happening: The war was undermining his presidency.

On March 31, 1968, two months after the Tet Offensive, the President addressed the nation on television. He announced that America would limit its bombing of North Vietnam and seek a negotiated settlement to the war. Johnson then shocked the nation by announcing that he would not run for another term as President. The speech marked another turning point in the war. The fight for victory was over. Peace was now the official government policy.

✓ **Checkpoint** How was the Tet Offensive both a victory and a defeat for the United States?

Violence Rocks 1968 Presidential Race

Johnson's decision not to seek reelection in 1968 threw the presidential race wide open. Many Americans believed it provided an opportunity to enact fundamental political and social changes. They argued that the future of the country was at stake. It was a time of new ideas and new plans. But the optimism and high hopes of the early campaign would soon die amidst political infighting, violence, and assassination.



Chicago 1968: Politics and Protest

As Democrats prepared to select a new presidential candidate at their convention in Chicago (see campaign artifacts at left), antiwar activists converged on the city in August 1968. Inside the main hall, dissension between hawks and doves in the party sparked angry outbursts. On the streets outside, violent clashes broke out between antiwar protesters and the Chicago police. The crowds chanted, "The whole world is watching! The whole world is watching!" And indeed it was. Television viewers saw a vivid display of the political strife and social unrest besieging America.



▲ Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley shouts insults at Senator Abraham Ribicoff during the senator's speech criticizing the tactics of the Chicago police.

◀ As U.S. combat deaths in Vietnam increased from roughly 5,000 in 1966 to more than 14,000 in 1968, American public opinion turned against the war.

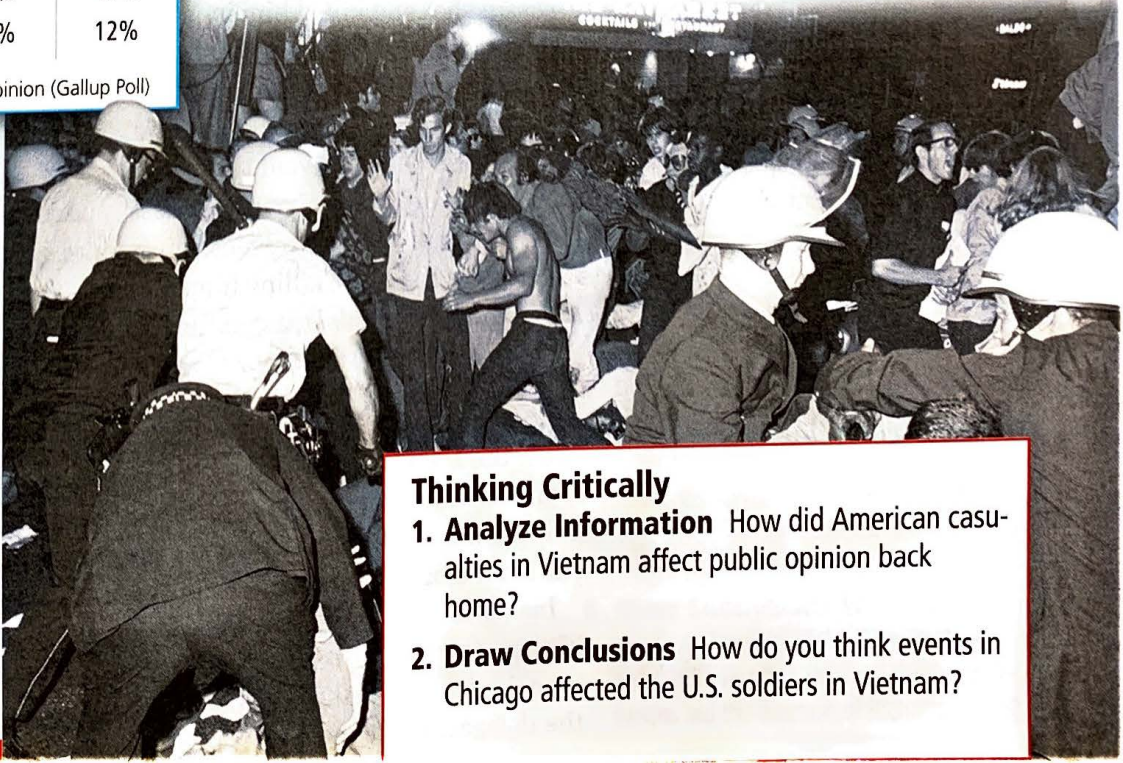
Opposition to the Vietnam War

In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?

	March 1966	April 1967	April 1968
Yes	26%	37%	48%
No	59%	50%	40%
Don't Know	16%	13%	12%

SOURCE: American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup Poll)

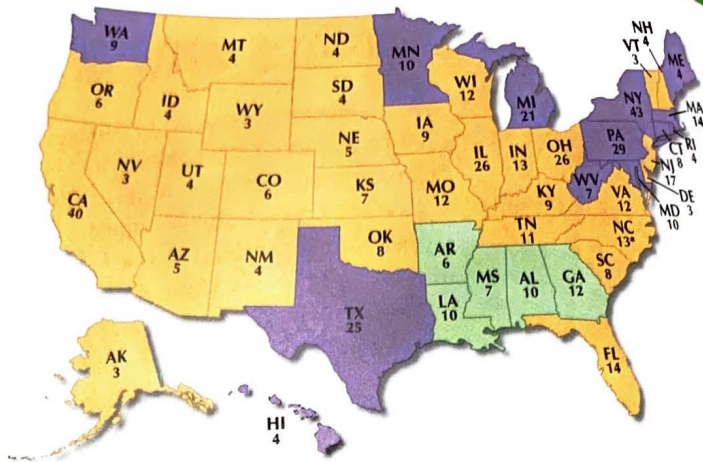
Many protesters sought only to exercise their right to free speech. Others, eyeing the ever-present television cameras, sought—and succeeded in attracting—a police response. Here, a melee erupts outside a hotel where delegates are gathered.



Thinking Critically

- Analyze Information** How did American casualties in Vietnam affect public opinion back home?
- Draw Conclusions** How do you think events in Chicago affected the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam?

Presidential Election of 1968



Candidate (Party)	Electoral Vote	Popular Vote	% Electoral Vote	% Popular Vote**
Richard M. Nixon (Republican)	301	31,710,470	56	43.6
Hubert H. Humphrey (Democratic)	191	30,898,055	36	42.5
George C. Wallace (American Independent)	46	9,906,473	8	13.6

* One Nixon elector voted outside the party's endorsement
 ** Minor parties received 0.3% of the popular vote

Map Skills In 1968, Richard Nixon defeated Vice President Hubert Humphrey and third-party candidate George Wallace, who had split from the Democratic Party.

- Regions** From where did Wallace draw most of his support?
- Draw Conclusions** What might have happened if Wallace had renounced his candidacy and rejoined the Democratic ranks?

Two Leaders Fall In the spring and summer of the campaign season, bullets struck down two Americans who spoke out eloquently for peace in Vietnam and peaceful change in American society. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement, had publicly turned against the war in 1967. He contributed compelling social and moral reasons to the argument for peace. But his voice was tragically silenced on April 4, 1968, when a racist assassin shot and killed him in Memphis, Tennessee.

Robert Kennedy was the next leader to fall. He had based his campaign for the presidency on compassion and idealism, and millions of Americans rallied to his camp. On June 5, 1968, at a rally celebrating his victory in the California primary, Kennedy asserted that "we are a great country, an unselfish country, a compassionate country," and that he intended "to make that the basis of my running." Minutes later, a Palestinian immigrant named Sirhan Sirhan shot Kennedy in the head, killing him instantly. Sirhan may have wanted revenge for America's support for Israel in that country's war with Egypt the year before.

Protesters Disrupt Chicago Democratic Convention The murders of King and Kennedy cast a dark shadow over the election campaigns. In August 1968, the Democrats convened in Chicago to choose a presidential candidate to represent their party in the November election. As the delegates arrived, so too did antiwar protesters. Chicago's mayor deployed police and members of the National Guard to prevent any outbreaks of violence.

Inside the convention, the Democrats angrily debated placing an antiwar plank in the party platform. They chose Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's Vice President, over Eugene McCarthy, who had garnered support from many antiwar groups. As the delegates cast their votes, violence erupted outside the convention between police and protesters. After police beat activists with nightsticks, some protesters retaliated by throwing rocks and bottles at the onrushing tide of police.

The television coverage of the fierce fighting in the streets and bitter arguments on the convention floor shocked Americans. Chaos and civil disorder appeared to have replaced civil debate in the political arena. The divisions and violence in Chicago mirrored the deep divisions in American politics and the heartbreaking violence on the front lines in Vietnam.

Richard Nixon Wins the Presidency At a much more peaceful convention in Miami, Republicans nominated Richard M. Nixon, who promised if elected he would deliver “peace with honor.” He wanted the United States out of Vietnam, but he also demanded honorable peace terms. He promised to listen to “the great, quiet forgotten majority—the nonshouters and the nondemonstrators.” This large group of Americans, described by one commentator as “the young, the unblack, and the unpoor,” was dubbed the “silent majority.” Throughout his campaign, Nixon used a “southern strategy” of courting more conservative southern voters with appeals to law and order, striving to pull them away from their traditional support of the Democratic Party.

Alabama governor George Wallace also ran for the presidency on a third-party ticket. A lifelong Democrat prior to his entry into the race, Wallace said that neither of the traditional political parties represented southern voters who were unsettled by the cultural and social changes in the country. He had no sympathy for the demands of antiwar radicals, counterculture hippies, or African American militants. He represented the “white backlash” against the civil rights movement and the desire to press forward to victory in Vietnam.

The combination of Nixon’s “southern strategy” and Wallace’s third-party candidacy siphoned traditionally Democratic votes away from Humphrey. In a close election, Nixon captured victory by winning 43.6 percent of the popular vote and 301 electoral votes. Humphrey received 42.5 percent of the popular vote and Wallace 13.6 percent. The election marked the end of the Democratic “Solid South” and signaled significant changes in the nation’s political landscape. Richard Nixon’s ascendancy marked a new Republican domination of the American presidency.

✓ **Checkpoint** What happened at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago?



“Silent” Support
In 1969, President Nixon courted the “silent majority” of Americans. Especially strong in the West, the silent majority included patriotic veterans and the Korean War generation of blue-collar workers and young Americans.