

Tim O'Brien

The Things They Carried

Timeline

1838

Vietnamese successfully rebel against occupying Chinese forces; Vietnam becomes an independent nation.

1858-1883

France invades Vietnam (and neighboring Cambodia) and establishes colonial control.

1893

French extend colonial control to Laos.

1930

Vietnamese nationalist Ho Chi Minh and followers establish the Indochinese Communist Party to oppose French colonialism.

1940

Japanese occupy Vietnam; French are allowed to remain as puppet rulers.

1945

Japanese are defeated in World War II; British and Chinese forces occupy Vietnam to accept Japanese surrender. Ho Chi Minh and his followers seize control in northern Vietnam and declare their nation's independence, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. British forces in southern Vietnam return control to French.

1946

After unsuccessful negotiations with the French and the French naval bombardment of a Vietnamese city, Ho and his followers declare war on France.

1946-1954

French-Indochina War takes place. The United States supports the French in their effort to reestablish colonial control with advisers, money and supplies. American aid to France totals \$2.7 billion, or nearly 80 percent of total cost of war.

1954

The French suffer a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and decide to withdraw from Vietnam. France and its allies suffered over 170,000 casualties during the war; Ho's forces lost perhaps three times as many men. During peace negotiations at the Geneva Conference, a cease-fire is declared in Vietnam, the French agree to withdraw, and Vietnam is temporarily divided at the 17th parallel pending national elections and reunification within two years. The United States, which views Ho Chi Minh as a dangerous communist threat, refuses to sign the peace agreement.

1954-1955

With direct financial and military assistance from the United States, the "nation" of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) is created. Ngo Dinh Diem is selected by U.S. officials to lead the new country. In a corruption-ridden election, Diem is made South Vietnam's chief of state. Shortly thereafter, he declares himself president and vows to oppose the 1954 peace settlement. In the north, Ho Chi Minh responds that his government is the only real government in Vietnam.

1955-1960

The United States sends nearly \$1.5 billion worth of economic aid to sustain South Vietnam. In addition, nearly half a billion dollars of military aid is also sent to South Vietnam, accompanied by U.S. military advisers. These advisers number approximately 1,500 by 1960.

1960

The National Liberation Front (derisively referred to by Diem as the Vietcong) is established. Assisted by Ho's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the NLF begins attacks against Diem's regime.

1961-1963

The situation in South Vietnam deteriorates rapidly. Diem's government—inefficient, dictatorial and unpopular—steadily loses control over the countryside. The United States, under new President John F. Kennedy, responds with increased aid to South Vietnam. New weapons, including toxic defoliants, are sent to help in the war against the NLF. By 1963, the number of U.S. advisers in South Vietnam has increased to over 16,000. The U.S. aid does nothing to help the Diem regime, as NLF attacks and popular protests erode its power.

1963

In one of the most shocking protests against the Diem regime, a Buddhist monk sets fire to himself in the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. U.S. officials begin discussions with the South Vietnamese military and organize an effort to overthrow the increasingly unpopular Diem. On Nov. 1, the military moves against Diem, and he attempts to flee to safety. Along with his brother, he is captured and murdered by South Vietnamese soldiers. Three weeks later, President Kennedy is shot and killed by an assassin in Dallas, Texas. Vice President Lyndon Johnson is sworn in as the new president.

1964

Despite the overthrow and murder of Diem, the South Vietnamese government steadily loses ground to the NLF. Despite President Johnson's assurances that the United States will not become directly involved in the fighting in Vietnam, U.S. officials privately conclude that only direct U.S. military involvement can prevent communist forces from taking over South Vietnam. In August 1964, President Johnson informs the American people and Congress that North Vietnamese torpedo boats have twice attacked two U.S. destroyers off the coast of North Vietnam. Despite overwhelming evidence suggesting that the second attack never took place, Congress approves the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, giving Johnson a free hand to respond to "communist aggression" in Vietnam. Johnson orders retaliatory bombings against North Vietnam.

1965

Johnson approves a plan of sustained bombing for North Vietnam, named Operation Rolling Thunder. During the next three years, U.S. planes will drop two times as many bombs on North Vietnam as were dropped on Germany and Japan combined in World War II. In March, approximately 3,600 Marines land in South Vietnam; they are the first U.S. combat

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troops sent to South Vietnam. By the end of the year, nearly 185,000 U.S. troops are in South Vietnam; nearly 7,000 will be killed and wounded by the end of 1965. Scattered protests against the war begin to appear in the United States.

1966–1967

U.S. involvement in South Vietnam continues to escalate. By December 1967, there are nearly 500,000 U.S. troops fighting in South Vietnam. The war against the NLF (and increasing numbers of North Vietnamese troops who enter South Vietnam), however, is fruitless and frustrating. Despite high casualty rates, the enemy shows no signs of surrendering. Ambushes and booby traps result in a steady stream of casualties for U.S. forces. During 1966–1967, nearly 15,000 U.S. troops are killed. When antiwar protests mount, President Johnson responds with a publicity campaign designed to convince the American people that the enemy in Vietnam is incapable of carrying on the fight and that the war is being won. His popularity temporarily rises.

1968

In January, NLF and North Vietnamese forces launch the Tet Offensive—the largest military offensive for the war so far—attacking all major cities in South Vietnam. NLF commandos attack the U.S. embassy in Saigon, and enemy forces occupy the South Vietnam city of Hue. Despite the fact that the enemy forces are eventually driven back with massive casualties, the American public's faith in President Johnson and the war effort is completely shattered. In March, Johnson announces that he will stop the bombing of North Vietnam and that he will not increase the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam; he also calls for peace negotiations with North Vietnam. He ends his speech by announcing that he will not seek re-election in 1968. Another 14,000 U.S. troops are killed in 1968. The U.S. spends approximately \$30 billion that year to fight the war. Large-scale antiwar protests begin to break out in America. Richard Nixon is elected president, with the promise that he will bring "peace with honor" in Vietnam.

1969

Nixon orders secret and illegal bombings of enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. He also informs the American people that the withdrawal of U.S. troops will begin. In September, Ho Chi Minh dies. In November, the largest antiwar protest to date takes place, as millions join demonstrations across the nation. To their horror, the American people learn that in March 1968, U.S. troops in South Vietnam slaughtered hundreds of unarmed villagers in the hamlet of My Lai. Over 9,000 U.S. soldiers are killed in 1969.

1970

President Nixon, convinced that he can pressure the North Vietnamese into signing a satisfactory peace treaty, orders U.S. troops to invade Cambodia. The military value of the attack is minimal, but at home Nixon's announcement brings forth a new wave of antiwar protests. At Kent State University, National Guardsmen open fire on unarmed students, killing four and wounding 11. Riots erupt on over a hundred U.S. college campuses to protest the killings. Nixon orders the U.S. troops withdrawn from Cambodia. The United States has lost another 4,000 troops killed in Vietnam.

1971–1972

At home and abroad, support for the war almost completely evaporates. In America, Vietnam Veterans Against the War march on Washington; many stop to throw their medals on the White House lawn. The *New York Times* publishes the so-called *Pentagon Papers*, a top-secret study that reveals the government's deceptions and lies to the American people concerning the war. In Vietnam, the U.S. armed forces are self-destructing. Desertions and dishonorable discharges rise dramatically. The U.S. military admits that nearly 60 percent of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam are using marijuana; nearly 25 percent are using heroin and harder drugs. "Fraggings," the term used when U.S. servicemen in Vietnam murdered their own officers, are also on the rise. By 1979, it is estimated that U.S. soldiers have killed about 100 of their own officers.

1972

Nixon, desperate for victory in the 1972 presidential election, orders National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to reach a peace settlement with North Vietnam. In October, Kissinger announces that peace is at hand and that North Vietnam has agreed to a treaty. South Vietnam, however, refuses to support the agreement, claiming that the treaty will ensure the eventual destruction of the South Vietnamese government. The North Vietnamese refuse to renegotiate the treaty. Nixon orders a massive U.S. bombing of the North Vietnamese capital of Hanoi; these are the so-called "Christmas Bombings."

1973

North Vietnam returns to the negotiating table. A treaty that is almost exactly the same as that worked out in 1972 is signed. The United States forces South Vietnam to agree to the treaty, with assurances that America will continue to stand by its ally. U.S. forces withdraw from South Vietnam; North Vietnam returns nearly 600 U.S. prisoners of war. The Vietnam War ends. U.S. casualties include more than 58,000 dead and more than 150,000 wounded (nearly half lost one or more limbs in Vietnam). Total cost of the war is estimated at more than \$300 billion.

1973–1975

North Vietnam and South Vietnam continue their conflict. In early 1975 North Vietnamese and NLF forces begin a major military offensive; by April Saigon falls and South Vietnam surrenders. The country is reunified under a communist government and renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

1982

Maya Lin's design for the National Vietnam Veteran's Memorial is completed and officially opened to the public on Veteran's Day. Its stark design was at first controversial but it is now considered one of the great memorials of the world. Ms. Lin was 19 years old and a student at Yale University when she won this design competition.

2000–2001

President Bill Clinton becomes the first president to visit Vietnam since the end of the war. Negotiations lead to the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

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