#91 - 8.8 The Vietnam War
APUSH Name: _____

The Vietnam War

Theme: America in the World

Learning Objective 8.I: Explain the causes and effects of the Vietnam War.

French Colonial History in Vietnam

KC-8.1.I.D.ii: Postwar decolonization and the emergence of powerful nationalist movements in Asia led both sides in the Cold War to seek allies among new nations, many of which remained nonaligned.

- _____ tried to reclaim colonial territory post-WWII, fails
- Vietnam divided at _____, communist gov. emerges in north (_____), anti-communist in south (_____)
- US gives aid to Diem from 1955-1961
- Sec. of State _____ creates defense pact _____ (SEATO)

Domino Theory in Vietnam

KC-8.1.I.B.ii: Concerned by expansionist Communist ideology and Soviet repression, the United States sought to contain communism through a variety of measures, including major military engagements in Vietnam.

- US military "_____" sent under JFK, 1963 Diem overthrown, killed
- 1964 US warships attacked in _____, US enters - 500k troops at peak
- _____ by N. Vietnam showed Americans war was not as leaders said
- LBJ announces _____
- Nixon and Kissinger enter with _____ strategy
- 1973 Paris Accords signed, US leaves S. Vietnam —> _____

Executive War Powers

KC-8.1.II.C.ii: Americans debated the appropriate power of the executive branch in conducting foreign and military policy.

- LBJ got Congress authorization from _____
- Blanket bombings (_____), operations in _____ and _____, _____ Massacre, _____ shifts public opinion
- Backlash
    - Protests across college campuses, burning draft cards, ex. _____
    - Antiwar candidate- _____
- Congress reacts, passes_____ to limit presidential power -Constitutionality yet to be tested

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Recap

- US sought to keep dominos from falling in Southeast Asia
- Gulf of Tonkin attack draws US into conflict
- War was devastating to Vietnamese, 58,000 American soldiers

Part II

Short Answer Questions

Answer the following in AT LEAST three sentences.

1. Explain the causes and effects of the Vietnam War.

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Secondary Source Document Analysis

Read the essay and fill in the chart below. Identify one claim for each subsection of the essay and provide a piece of evidence that corresponds to the claim.

Title:	
Author:	
Historical Period and Topic:	
Thesis:	
Claims	Evidence
Identify an alternative viewpoint to the author's thesis.	
Does the author address this viewpoint by refuting or conceding to it?	

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The Vietnam War and the My Lai Massacre

Retrieved from: http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/sixties/essays/vietnam-war-and-my-lai-massacre?period=8

The murder of more than 400 Vietnamese civilians in My Lai and My Khe by US soldiers on March 16, 1968, stands as one of the darkest days in the nation's military history. It left an indelible stain on America's record in Vietnam, the nation's longest, least popular, and most controversial war. It raises fundamental questions about the American way of war, US military leadership in Vietnam, and the difficulties of fighting insurgencies, a problem of major contemporary concern. It needs to be remembered and studied.

The United States' involvement in Vietnam expanded through a series of stages between 1950 and 1965. From 1950 to 1954, in the name of containing communism, the US assisted the French in fighting a Communist-led nationalist revolution in Vietnam, ultimately paying close to 80 percent of the cost of the war. From 1954 to 1961, after the French had departed, the American government attempted to construct in the southern part of Vietnam an independent, non-Communist nation to stand as a bulwark against further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. From 1961 to 1965, the United States assisted the South Vietnamese in fighting an internal insurgency backed by Communist North Vietnam. A full-fledged shooting war between US and South Vietnamese combat forces and National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgents and North Vietnamese regulars lasted from 1965 to 1973.

After 1965, the United States undertook what one top official with no apparent sense of paradox described as an "all-out limited war" in Vietnam. US aircraft carried out bombing campaigns in South and North Vietnam that in time exceeded the tonnage dropped by all nations in all theaters in World War II. By 1968, the United States had more than 500,000 troops in South Vietnam fighting a variety of wars in different regions. Along the demilitarized zone separating North from South Vietnam, US Marines and North Vietnamese regulars were dug in like the armies of World War I pounding each other with artillery. In other parts of South Vietnam, major increments of US forces conducted massive "search-and-destroy" operations to root out NLF and North Vietnamese regulars. In remote areas, small units probed inhospitable terrain in search of an elusive but deadly enemy. In villages across South Vietnam, military personnel and civilians conducted "pacification" operations designed, in the phrase of the day, to win the hearts and minds of the people. Even with this level of engagement, the best the United States could achieve was a costly stalemate. The massive North Vietnamese-NLF Tet Offensive of February 1968 escalated the violence still further. For the first time, the enemy struck with lethal force at the major towns and cities of South Vietnam, even the supposedly secure capital of Saigon, sparking heavy fighting nationwide. The United States and South Vietnam regained what been lost, but at enormous cost and with huge destruction and loss of life.

The My Lai massacre occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Tet Offensive. On March 16, 1968, the soldiers of Charlie Company, First Battalion, Americal Division, helicoptered into what they called My Lai 4, a hamlet in the larger village of Son My in Quang Ngai province, a beautiful but for Americans deadly region along the northeastern coast of South Vietnam and for years an enemy stronghold. Charlie Company was part of Task Force Barker, commanded by LTC Frank Barker and given the mission to root out NLF units deeply entrenched in the area. CPT Ernest Medina headed Charlie Company; 2nd LT William Calley commanded the First Platoon. Bravo Company undertook a similar operation in nearby My Khe.

The savagery that followed defies description. Geared up for action, the men entered My Lai at 8 a.m. with weapons blazing and for the next four hours engaged in an orgy of killing. "We just rounded 'em up, me and a couple of guys, just put the M-16 on automatic, & just mowed 'em down," one soldier later recalled. Meeting no resistance, the Americans killed old men, women, and even children and babies. They burned homes and destroyed livestock. There were rapes. The GIs suffered but one casualty, a self-inflicted wound to a single soldier. The company's after-action report counted 128 "enemy" dead and—tellingly—three weapons captured. An official account boasted that Task Force Barker had "crushed an enemy stronghold." The carnage might have been worse without the courageous intervention of helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, decorated many years later, who, upon witnessing the scene from above landed and protected a small group of Vietnamese by threatening his fellow soldiers with his machine guns.

Among a people that have historically prided themselves on their exceptional virtue, the question that still lingers is how could My Lai happen. Part of the answer rests with the way the war in Vietnam was fought. All wars produce atrocities. Since World War II, moreover, civilians have increasingly been victimized. In Vietnam, the United States relied on its technological superiority, mainly its massive firepower, to disrupt enemy operations, kill enemy soldiers, and inflict sufficient pain on the NLF and North Vietnam that they would be persuaded to cease the fight. In a war without front lines, the principal measure of progress was the notorious body count, which incited GIs to kill as many enemy as possible. In a guerrilla war like Vietnam, the

distinction between warrior and civilian was often blurred. Many villages willingly or under duress harbored guerrilla fighters. To the GIs, civilians were often indistinguishable from guerrillas and thought to be in league with them.

The mentality of war also contributed to My Lai. The soldiers of Charlie Company brought to this operation a melange of intense emotions: fear, anger, a lust for revenge, even a sort of emotional numbness that deadened normal human inhibitions. One of the company's troopers had been killed by a sniper on February 12, its first death in Vietnam. In the weeks that followed, others were killed or wounded by booby traps and land mines, even though the company had never actually seen, much less engaged the enemy. These conditions provoked in the Americans anger, frustration, and a determination to avenge their buddies, manifesting itself even before My Lai in the increasingly brutal treatment of Vietnamese civilians, including several reported rapes. The day before the action, the company held a highly emotional memorial service for a fallen comrade. The formal briefing for My Lai followed soon after and further conditioned the men for revenge. The soldiers thus vented their rage on civilians who were deemed to be the enemy or at least in league with the enemy.

Leaders from the top down failed abjectly in planning, preparation, and execution of the operation. Senior officers ordered an attack they believed would demonstrate to the people of Quang Ngai the costs of harboring the enemy. The plan was based on faulty assumptions regarding enemy strength and the presence of civilians. The soldiers were told that the area was full of NLF sympathizers and must be cleaned out. Civilians would be at market. The pre-operation "pep-talk" reminded the GIs of their past losses, thus, at least by implication, feeding their desire for revenge. It said nothing about dealing with civilians. Leaders on the ground failed to lead. Calley was young, inexperienced, and by most accounts incompetent. Officers and non-coms got caught up in a herd mentality. Senior officers such as Barker and Medina had some idea what was going on but failed to intervene.

These same officers participated in a full-fledged cover-up. No one bothered to question the apparent discrepancies in the after-action report. Those who knew the truth sat on it or looked the other way. An order to go back to My Lai and take a second look was countermanded by MG Samuel Koster. In violation of Army regulations, the division command allowed the brigade to do its own investigation. CL Oran Henderson, the brigade commander, conducted a perfunctory investigation, admitting only that twenty "non-combatants" had been killed accidentally. Thompson's superiors did not follow up on his reports. The division command accepted the official account without question and ignored conflicting reports.

The horrific story of My Lai was finally revealed more than eighteen months later by an intrepid and conscience-stricken former GI, Ron Ridenhour, who initially heard about it in a bar and traced various leads to get the facts. Ridenhour's letter to a Congressional committee prompted an Army investigation that led to charges against Calley in September 1969. The story of Calley's indictment in turn spurred investigative reporter Seymour Hersh to uncover the truth, which he published in November. Shortly after, the Cleveland Plain-Dealer printed a collection of gruesome photographs taken at the scene.

The nation's reaction to My Lai mirrored its attitudes toward a war that by November 1969 had become markedly unpopular. The press properly expressed horror at the revelations, but it also treated My Lai ethnocentrically as an American story. Some blamed the war itself rather than the men of Charlie Company. Many newspapers that opposed the war saw in My Lai added reason to end it as soon as possible. Some also questioned why it took so long for the story to come out. The public judged My Lai similarly. Some of those who still backed the war questioned whether My Lai had happened at all or blamed the media for publicizing it. Others pointed out that the enemy committed atrocities as a matter of policy. Those who wanted the war to end were appalled at the horror and pressed for its termination.

Under the glare of media publicity and public discussion, the Army sought to deal with My Lai through its legal system. Thirteen soldiers were charged with murder. The charges against six were dropped for lack of evidence; six were tried in military courts and found not guilty. Twelve officers were accused of a cover-up. Only Henderson went to trial. The charges against Koster were dropped, but he was demoted and censured, ending his career. The trial of Calley for murder drew as much attention as the incident itself. In March 1971, he was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. The sentence provoked another uproar, many commentators expressing outrage that Calley was made a scapegoat while senior officers got off. President Richard M. Nixon intervened by agreeing to review the case, setting off more outrage. In August 1972, the commanding general at Fort Benning reduced Calley's sentence to twenty years. Two years later, a US District Court freed him on bail and made him eligible for parole in six months. Later that year, another federal court overturned his conviction on grounds that the pre-trial publicity had made a fair trial impossible.

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In Vietnam and the United States, memories of My Lai have dimmed over the years. Americans, including some veterans, helped construct a hospital at the site of the massacre and a “peace park” to remind future generations of the horrors of war. For those Vietnamese who lost loved ones, of course, forgetting is impossible. Yet even in Vietnam there are signs of a desire to move on. Luxury beachfront hotels have been constructed near My Khe as part of the nation’s campaign to attract tourists. In the United States, the Army has determinedly attempted to use My Lai to train officers and men in problems of military ethics and leadership. Yet atrocities continue, whether the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the massacre of unarmed Iraqis by US Marines at the side of a roadside bombing in Hidatha, Iraq, or in the indiscriminate killing of civilians, often by high technology weapons, in Afghanistan. And for most Americans, My Lai is forgotten. Inasmuch as they recall Vietnam, they see themselves as victims and evince little sympathy for the Vietnamese. If the United States is to live up to the high ideals it professes to believe in, events such as My Lai must be remembered and must be seen not simply in terms of the impact upon ourselves but also on the horrors visited on others. The courageous efforts of heroes like Hugh Thompson and Ron Ridenour offer compelling examples of what individuals can do to stop or expose injustice.

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