

# Fighting the War

## READING FOCUS

- How did battlefield conditions in Vietnam affect American soldiers?
- How would you describe the course of the war between 1965 and 1968?
- Why was the Tet Offensive a turning point in the war?

## MAIN IDEA

The violence and brutality of the Vietnam War affected civilians as well as soldiers.

## KEY TERMS

land mine  
saturation bombing  
fragmentation bombs  
Agent Orange  
napalm  
escalation  
Ho Chi Minh Trail  
hawks  
doves  
Tet Offensive

## TAKING NOTES

As you read, prepare an outline of this section. Use Roman numerals for the major headings of the section, capital letters for the subheadings, and numbers for the supporting details. The sample below will help you get started.

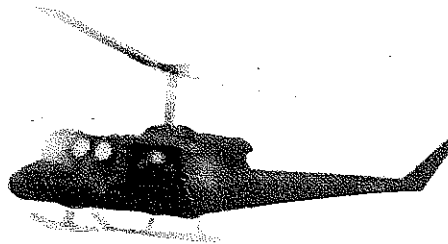
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| <p><b>I. Battlefield Conditions</b></p> <p><b>A. One Soldier's Story</b></p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p><b>B. The Ground War</b></p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> |
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**Setting the Scene** Nearly 3 million Americans served in the Vietnam War. These soldiers found themselves thousands of miles from home, fighting under conditions that were far different from those they had seen in films. Marine Corps officer James Webb served as rifle platoon and company commander in the An Hoa Basin near Da Nang:

*“We moved through the boiling heat with 60 pounds of weapons and gear, causing a typical Marine to drop 20 percent of his body weight while in the bush. When we stopped we dug chest-deep fighting holes and slit trenches for toilets. We slept on the ground under makeshift poncho [tents]. . . . Sleep itself was fitful, never more than an hour or two at a stretch for months at a time as we mixed daytime patrolling with night-time ambushes, listening posts, foxhole duty, and radio watches. Ringworm, hookworm, malaria, and dysentery were common, as was trench foot when the monsoons came.”*

—James Webb

American soldiers encountered unfamiliar terrain and conditions when they landed in Vietnam.



## Battlefield Conditions

When Americans first started arriving in Vietnam in large numbers, they encountered all the frustrations of guerrilla warfare. American forces had superior arms and supplies. The Viet Cong, however, had some advantages of their own. For one thing, they were familiar with the swamps and jungles of Vietnam. In addition, they could find protection across the border in Cambodia and Laos. Finally, the Viet Cong could often count on the support of the local population.

American soldiers found the war confusing and disturbing. They were trying to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese, but the people seemed indifferent to the Americans' effort. The dishonest and inept government in Saigon may have caused that indifference. "We are the unwilling working for the unqualified to do the unnecessary for the ungrateful," Kit Bowen of the First Infantry Division wrote to his father in Oregon.

American troops never knew what to expect next, and they never could be sure who was a friend and who was an enemy. The Vietnamese woman selling soft drinks by the roadside might be a Viet Cong ally, counting government soldiers as they passed. A child peddling candy might be concealing a live grenade.

In the face of this uncertain situation, one GI wrote home:

*"The VC [Viet Cong] are getting much stronger, so I think this war is going to get worse before it gets better. . . . I try and take great pride in my unit and the men I work with. A lot of the men have been in a lot of trouble and have no education or money. But I feel honored to have them call me a friend."*

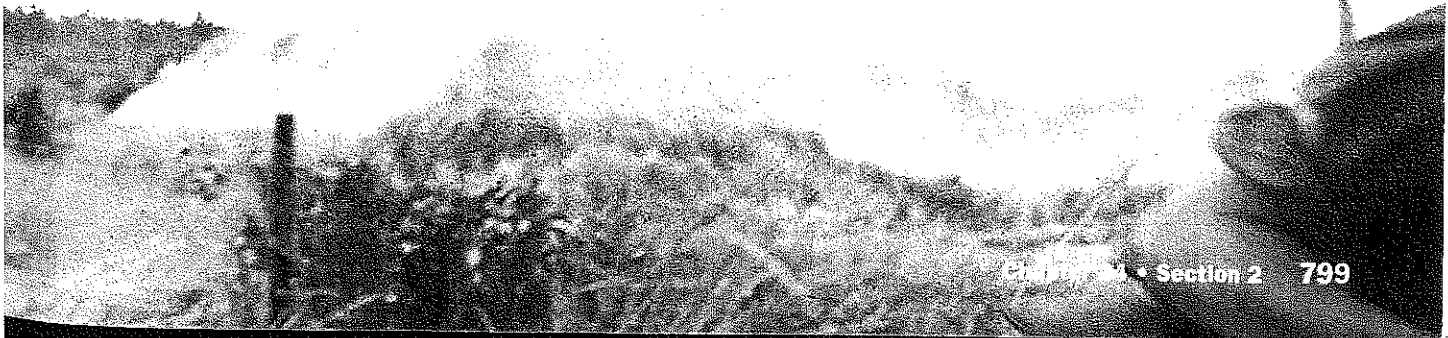
—Letter home from an American soldier

**One Soldier's Story** Many American soldiers went to war enthusiastic about the job they were being asked to do for their country. Some, like Ron Kovic of Long Island, worried about the Communist threat. Kovic was afraid that Communists "were infiltrating our schools, trying to take over our classes and control our minds." After high school, he joined the marines to do his part to defend his country. He proudly served a tour in Vietnam and signed up for a second tour. This second tour of duty would take a terrible toll on Kovic's body and mind.

Ron Kovic confronted his fears by making an aggressive effort to be a good soldier. But the horrors of war came to haunt him after he accidentally killed a

### READING CHECK

What were battlefield conditions like for American soldiers?





American soldiers like this one endured extremely difficult battlefield conditions in Vietnam.

United States corporal. Later he shot at shadowy figures in a village hut, only to learn that his unit had killed and wounded innocent children.

The final blow for Ron Kovic came when a sniper's bullet entered his spine. As his spinal column was severed and he lost the feeling in his legs, all he could think of was "the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing." Kovic survived the bullet wound but was paralyzed from the chest down. The injury caused him to feel, in his words, "like a big clumsy puppet with all his strings cut." Kovic later wrote about his experiences in the book *Born on the Fourth of July*.

### INTERPRETING DIAGRAMS

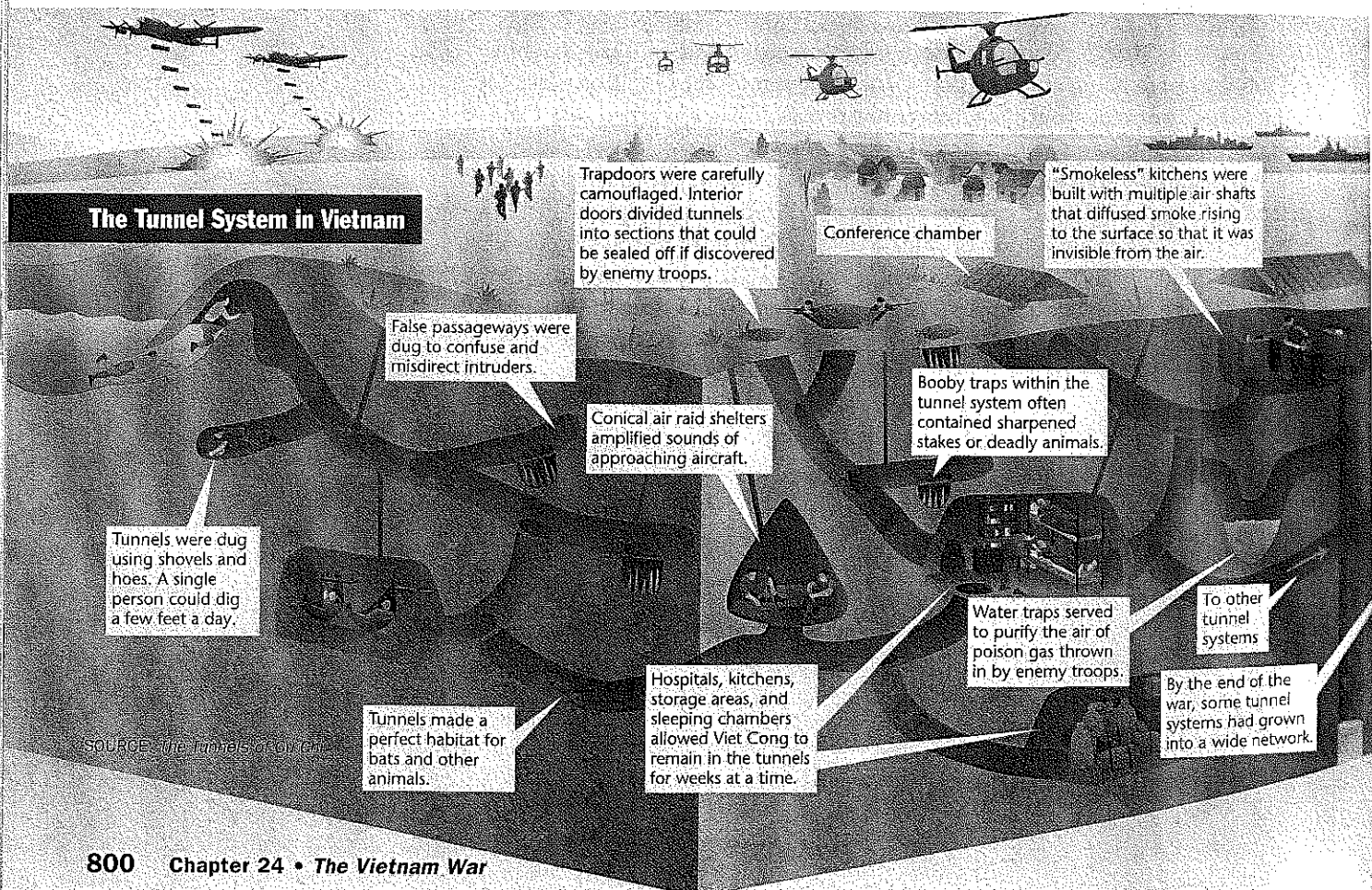
Some components of the Viet Cong tunnel system are shown below.

**Drawing Conclusions** How did these tunnels help the Viet Cong hold out against superior firepower?

**The Ground War** The Viet Cong lacked the sophisticated equipment of the United States troops, so they avoided head-on clashes. Instead they used guerrilla warfare tactics, working in small groups to launch sneak attacks and practice sabotage. They often frustrated American search parties by hiding themselves in elaborate underground tunnels. Some of these were equipped with running water and electricity. The largest contained hospitals, stores, and weapons storage facilities.

The various booby traps set by the guerrilla fighters posed constant hazards to the Americans. A soldier might step into a punji trap—a camouflaged pit filled with razor-sharp stakes that were sometimes poisoned. The pressure of a footstep could set off a **land mine**—an explosive device planted in the ground. Many soldiers were wounded or killed by grenades, which were triggered by concealed trip wires. GIs could go weeks without making contact with the enemy—in fact, most never did—but there was always the possibility of sudden danger.

The war was also devastating for Vietnamese civilians. Because American soldiers were never sure who might be sympathetic to the Viet Cong, civilians



suffered as much as soldiers. As the struggle intensified, the destruction worsened. The war affected everyone in Vietnam. Le Thanh, a North Vietnamese, recalled the horrors he had witnessed as a child in the 1960s:

*“Nobody could get away from the war. It didn't matter if you were in the countryside or the city. While I was living in the country I saw terrible things. . . . I saw children who had been killed, pagodas and churches that had been destroyed, monks and priests dead in the ruins, schoolboys who were killed when schools were bombed.”*

—Le Thanh



**The Air War** In April 1966, the Americans introduced the huge B-52 bomber into the war to smash roads and heavy bridges in North Vietnam. During air raids, these planes could drop thousands of tons of explosives over large areas. This **saturation bombing** tore North Vietnam apart.

Many of the bombs used in these raids threw pieces of their thick metal casings in all directions when they exploded. These **fragmentation bombs** were not confined to the north alone. They were also used in the south, where they killed and maimed countless civilians. Near the village of My Thuy Phuong, the war suddenly intruded on the life of a peasant who later described the frightening incident:

*“One day I was walking back home from the ricefield, carrying tools on my shoulder. Then behind me I heard a large, loud noise. A very bad noise. I looked back and saw an American helicopter following me, shooting down the path toward me. I was very scared, so [I] jumped into the water by the side. Just one moment later, the bullets went right by. So scary.”*

—Vietnamese peasant

United States forces also used chemical weapons against the Vietnamese. Pilots dropped an herbicide known as **Agent Orange** on dense jungle landscapes. By killing the leaves and thick undergrowth, the herbicide exposed Viet Cong hiding places. Agent Orange also killed crops. Later it was discovered that Agent Orange caused health problems in livestock and in humans, including Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers.

Another destructive chemical used in Vietnam was called **napalm**. When dropped from airplanes, this jellylike substance splattered and burned uncontrollably. It also stuck to people's bodies and seared off their flesh.

## The Course of the War, 1965–1968

After winning the election in 1964, President Johnson started a gradual military **escalation**, or expansion, of the war. Enemy gains in South Vietnam led Johnson to devote ever more American money and personnel to the conflict. Initially, United States soldiers had gone to Vietnam to advise the South Vietnamese. Now they took on the task of propping up the South Vietnamese government, which was led by military officer Nguyen Cao Ky.

**VIEWING HISTORY** In addition to killing and injuring many civilians, the war also forced many Vietnamese to flee their homes.

### Recognizing Cause and Effect

*What impact do you think the war had on Vietnamese culture?*

*Explain your answer.*

## Focus on CULTURE

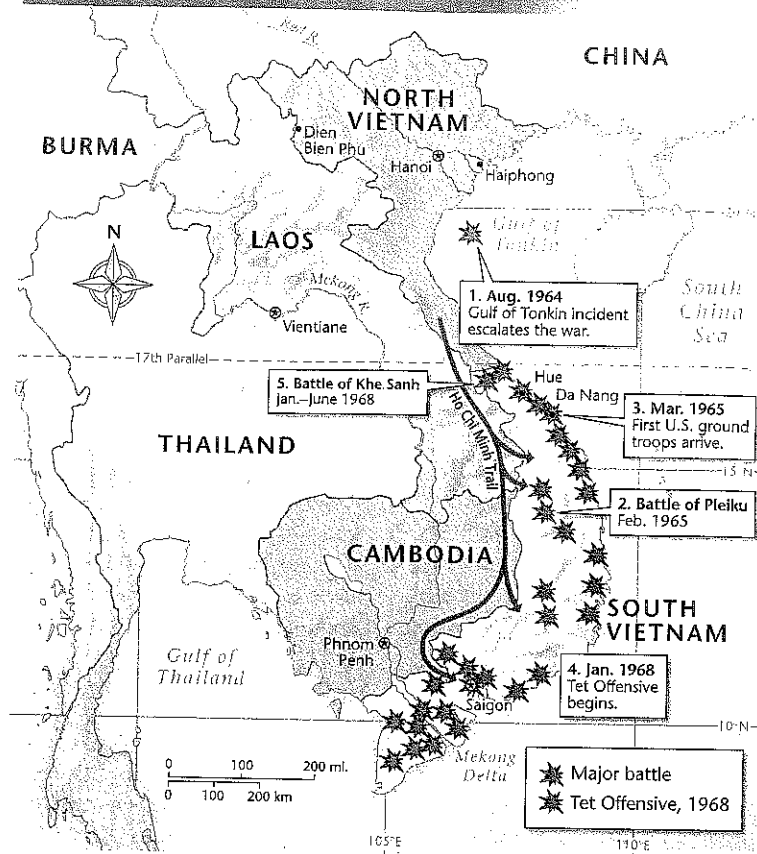
### The Ballad of the Green Berets

For several weeks in 1966, the number one song in the United States was “The Ballad of the Green Berets.” This song, written by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, popularized American patriotism and honored the United States Army Special Forces, known as the Green Berets:

*“Put silver wings on my son's chest  
Make him one of America's best,  
He'll be a man they'll test one day,  
Have him win the Green Beret.”*

—Barry Sadler, medic in Vietnam War

## The Vietnam War, 1964–1968



**MAP SKILLS** The Ho Chi Minh Trail, shown in the map above, was an important supply route for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops. **Movement** (a) *Why do you think the Ho Chi Minh Trail was located exactly where it was?* (b) *How did it contribute to the Tet Offensive?*

Rolling Thunder—the relentless bombing campaign that continued for almost three years. Although the bombing produced heavy damage, it failed to stop the Viet Cong. The enemy dug thousands of miles of tunnels through which troops and supplies moved south from North Vietnam.

United States forces launched search and destroy missions, but their victories failed to have a significant effect on the course of the war. Nothing seemed to diminish the enemy’s willingness or ability to continue fighting. When the Viet Cong suffered heavy losses, North Vietnam sent new troops.

**Hawks and Doves** As the war unfolded, it came under increasing criticism at home from both **hawks**—those who supported the war—and **doves**—those who opposed the war. Senator J. William Fulbright, a Democrat and a leading dove, raised questions about the expansion of the war. As head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Fulbright held televised hearings to examine U.S. policy in 1966.

At the hearings, Secretary of State Dean Rusk defended American involvement in Vietnam. George Kennan, who had helped draft U.S. foreign policy after World War II, opposed involvement in Vietnam. He argued that Vietnam was not strategically important to the United States and that Americans should not be called upon to solve the problems of that nation. Although both sides gave voice to their opinions, the war continued in Vietnam.

### The Tet Offensive: A Turning Point

In 1967, Nguyen Van Thieu succeeded Ky as president of South Vietnam. Ky and Thieu were more effective leaders than Diem had been, but they remained

**Intensifying the War** By 1965, the Viet Cong were steadily expanding within South Vietnam. North Vietnamese troops and supplies poured into the south via the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**, a supply route that passed through Laos and Cambodia. In February, a Viet Cong attack at Pleiku within South Vietnam killed 8 Americans and wounded 126. President Johnson responded by authorizing the bombing of North Vietnam.

Two weeks after the Pleiku attack, General William Westmoreland, the commander of United States forces in Vietnam, requested more soldiers. He asked Johnson for two battalions of marines to protect the American airfield at Da Nang. Johnson heeded the request, beginning a rapid buildup of American combat troops. At the start of 1965, some 25,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam. By the end of the year, the number had risen to 184,000.

Despite this large buildup of American troops, between 1965 and 1967 the war was at a stalemate. The American objective was not to conquer North Vietnam but rather to force the enemy to stop fighting. In 1965, President Johnson authorized Operation

authoritarian. Neither was able to put together an army that could successfully defend the country. The Americans brought with them advanced weaponry and new tactics that achieved some success. However, the American forces failed to drive out the Viet Cong, who were masters at jungle warfare. Month after month the fighting continued. United States planes bombed North Vietnam, and the flow of American soldiers into the south increased. Their number climbed to 385,000 by the end of 1966; to 485,000 by the end of 1967; and to 536,000 by the end of 1968. Despite the large United States presence in South Vietnam, the Communist forces intensified their efforts.

Those efforts reached a climax early in 1968, during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. On January 30, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched a major offensive. The **Tet Offensive**, shown on the map on the previous page, included surprise attacks on major cities and towns and American military bases throughout South Vietnam. In Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital, the Viet Cong attacked the American embassy and the presidential palace. Fierce fighting continued in Saigon for several weeks.

**Communist Brutality** During the Tet Offensive, Communists were uncommonly brutal, slaughtering anyone they labeled an enemy, including minor officials, teachers, and doctors. While the Communists had control of Hue, they ordered all civil servants, military personnel, and those who had worked for the Americans to report to special locations. Of those who obeyed, some 3,000 to 5,000 were killed. Their bodies were found in mass graves after American and South Vietnamese forces retook the city.

**Massacre at My Lai** Surrounded by brutality and under extreme distress, American soldiers also sometimes committed atrocities. Such brutality came into sharp focus at My Lai, a small village in South Vietnam. In response to word that My Lai was sheltering 250 members of the Viet Cong, a United States infantry company moved in to clear out the village in March 1968. Rather than enemy soldiers, the company found women, children, and old men. Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., was in charge. First he ordered, "Round everybody up." Then he gave the command for the prisoners to be killed. Private Paul Meadlo later described what happened to one group of Vietnamese:

*"We huddled them up. We made them squat down. . . . I poured about four clips [about 68 shots] into the group. . . . Well, we kept right on firing. . . . I still dream about it. . . . Some nights, I can't even sleep. I just lay there thinking about it."*

—Private Paul Meadlo

Probably more than 400 Vietnamese died in the My Lai massacre. Even more would have perished without the heroic actions of a helicopter crew which stepped in to halt the slaughter. At great risk to himself and his crew, pilot Hugh Thompson landed the helicopter between the soldiers and the fleeing Vietnamese. He ordered his door gunner, 18-year-old Lawrence Colburn, to fire his machine gun at the American troops if they began shooting the villagers. Thompson got out, confronted the leader of the soldiers, and then arranged to evacuate the civilians. Thompson's crew chief, Glenn Andreotta, pulled a child from a ditch full of dead bodies.

## The War in Vietnam Escalates

Year	Event
1964	Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passes. Gradual military escalation begins.
1965	President Johnson responds to attacks against American troops by authorizing the bombing of North Vietnam and by rapidly increasing the number of American combat troops in South Vietnam.
1966–1967	The number of American soldiers in South Vietnam continues to increase.
1968	The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launch the Tet Offensive.

### INTERPRETING CHARTS

This chart shows several examples of the escalation of the Vietnam War beginning in 1964.

**Determining Relevance** How did the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution contribute to this escalation?



### Sounds of an Era

Listen to television journalist Walter Cronkite's editorial about the Tet Offensive and other sounds from the Vietnam era.

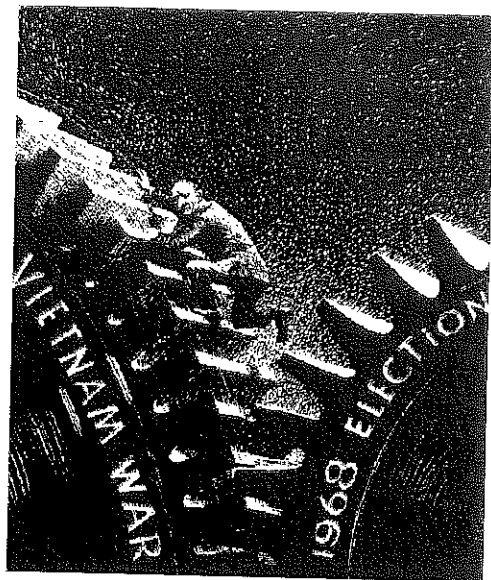
Such breaches of the rules of military combat did not go unpunished. Pilot Thompson testified about Calley's conduct at My Lai. Although at first his testimony was covered up, eventually, in 1971, Lieutenant Calley began serving a sentence of life in prison with hard labor for his role in the massacre. Many Americans saw him as a scapegoat, however, and public outcry was such that

President Nixon reduced his life sentence to 20 years. Calley was released on good behavior three years later. The heroics of the helicopter crew also did not go unnoticed. In 1998, the United States honored all three men with the Soldier's Medal, the highest award for bravery unrelated to fighting an enemy.

The Tet Offensive became a turning point in the war. Even though the Viet Cong were turned back with heavy losses, they had won a psychological victory. Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented on the American public's reaction to Tet:

“ [E]ven though it was a considerable military set-back for the North Vietnamese and Vietcong out there on the ground, it was, in effect, a brilliant political victory for them here in the United States. I'm not sure I fully understand the reasons why that should have occurred, but it became very clear after the Tet offensive that many people at the grass roots, . . . finally came to the conclusion that if we could not tell them when this was going to end, and we couldn't in any good faith, that we might as well chuck it.”

—Dean Rusk



**INTERPRETING POLITICAL CARTOONS** This British cartoon appeared in 1967. **Drawing Inferences** (a) What does the cartoonist think of President Johnson's chances for reelection? (b) How does the cartoon convey this opinion?

The Tet Offensive demonstrated that the Viet Cong could launch a massive attack on targets throughout South Vietnam. Furthermore, as images of the fighting flooded American television, many people at home began to express reservations about American involvement in Vietnam. Many Americans were discouraged, believing that U.S. troops had not been allowed to win the war. In spite of the vocal antiwar protesters, a majority of Americans supported a policy tougher than the one pursued by the administration. President Johnson, caught in the middle, saw his popularity plunge.

## Section

## 2

## Assessment

### READING COMPREHENSION

1. How did the use of **land mines** and **fragmentation bombs** make the war especially brutal for soldiers and civilians?
2. Why did the early military action result in a stalemate?
3. How were **Agent Orange** and **napalm** used during the war?
4. What was the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**?

### CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Analyzing Information** Why was the Tet Offensive a turning point in the Vietnam War? Support your answer with examples.
6. **Writing a Letter to the Editor** Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper. The year is 1968. Write your letter from the point of view of a hawk in support of the war or a dove opposed to the war.



### Take It to the NET

**Activity: Creating a Diary Entry**  
Investigate battlefield conditions during the Vietnam War. Use your research to write a diary entry from the viewpoint of an American soldier in Vietnam. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.  
[www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com)