

## I. LESSONS FROM THE VIETNAM WAR

### THE ANATOMY OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

1. It was the longest war in U.S. history. It lasted from 1959 - 1975.
2. More than 3 million casualties including over 58,000 Americans.
3. It cost the U.S. \$200 billion.
4. During the active Vietnam War there were five U.S. Presidents:  
Eisenhower - Kennedy - Johnson - Nixon - Ford

### TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS

#### 1954 - 1960

- French troops with U.S. support are defeated by Viet Minh forces at Dien Bien Phu.
- The Geneva Conference divides the country at the 17th parallel.
- North Vietnam is controlled by Ho Chi Minh and communist supporters. (Viet Cong)
- South Vietnam is controlled by Ngo Dinh Diem and democratic supporters (USA).
- Eisenhower expresses concerns and his "domino theory" will shape future events.
- The USA sends thousands of advisors to train the South Vietnamese army.

#### CHECKPOINT 1:

- a) Find out more about the "domino theory" and how it still influences U.S. foreign policy today.
- b) Find out more about the U.S. draft at that time.



**1961 - 1963**

- JFK sends Green Berets to South Vietnam and secret ops against the Viet Cong begin.
- Operation Ranch Hand: U.S. aircraft start spraying Agent Orange over South Vietnam.
- Diem's favoritism of the catholic minority causes protests. (Buddhist self-immolation)
- The U.S. backs a military coup against Diem to stabilise South Vietnam. (Diem is killed)
- Chaos in South Vietnam as military coups replace one government after the other.
- JFK is assassinated in Dalls.

**CHECKPOINT 2:**

- Find out more about Agent Orange and its effects until today. Explain the cartoon below.
- Find out more about the conspiracy theories surrounding JFK's assassination.



**1964 - 1967**

- The alleged attack on the USS Maddox leads to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.
- Public opinion in the USA shifts in favour of troop deployment to Vietnam.
- President Johnson may now "take all necessary measures" against aggressors.
- The Soviets and China increase their support to North Vietnam.
- The proxy war between the Soviet Union and the USA is in full effect.
- Johnson launches a three-year campaign of sustained bombing of targets.
- Johnson sends more troops to Vietnam. More deaths spark more protests in the USA.
- Americans begin to oppose the war in Vietnam.

**CHECKPOINT 3:**

- a) Find a simple definition for the term "proxy war".
- b) Find out more about the intrigues surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin incident.
- c) Who are the people in the cartoon below?

Which historical events are being compared in the cartoon below? Why?



Now, replace "the 1960s" with "2003" and read again...

**1968 - 1969**

- *The violent Tet offensive by the Viet Minh / the North Vietnamese Army shocks the USA.*
- *During the U.S. massacre at Mai Lai, more than 500 civilians are murdered.*
- *Martin Luther King is assassinated in Memphis.*
- *The Woodstock Festival spreads the message of love, unity and peace.*
- *President Johnson announces that he will not run for reelection.*
- *Ho Chi Minh dies of a heart attack in Hanoi.*
- *Nixon is elected president and gradually reduces the number of U.S. forces in Vietnam.*

**CHECKPOINT 4:**

- Find out more about the Tet offensive.
- Find out more about the massacre at Mai Lai.
- Find out more about the relevance of the Woodstock Festival.
- Listen to Martin Luther King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech and discuss it.



**1970 - 1973**

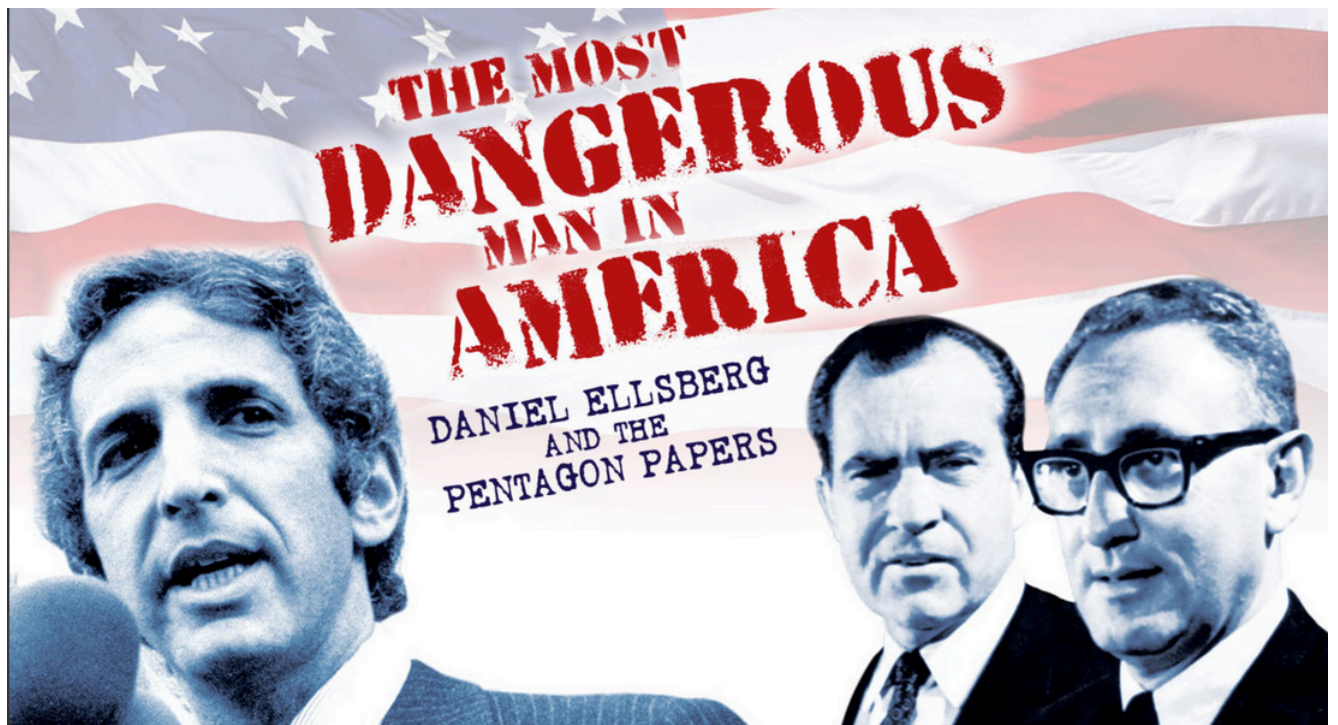
- *Secret peace negotiations with Le Duc Tho begin in Paris.*
- *The U.S. carries out secret bombings of suspected communist bases in Cambodia.*
- *Congress repeals the Gulf of Tonking resolution.*
- *The Kent State Shootings shock the USA.*
- *Daniel Ellsberg leaks the Pentagon Papers to the press.*
- *Operation Linebacker: Roughly 20,000 tons of bombs dropped over populated regions.*
- *Nixon signs the Paris Peace Accords, ending direct U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.*

**CHECKPOINT 5:**

- What did the Pentagon Papers reveal?
- Why does their release trigger a discussion about press freedom?
- Listen to Nixon's tape-recorded responses to the Pentagon Papers here:

<https://news.virginia.edu/content/blow-safe-and-get-it-listen-nixons-response-pentagon-papers>

- Whose side of the argument are you on? National security or press freedom?
- What happened to Daniel Ellsberg.



**1974 - 1975**

- Nixon resigns because of the Watergate scandal and Ford becomes president.
- Ford rules out further U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.
- Saigon is seized by communist forces and the government of South Vietnam surrenders.
- North and South Vietnam are formally unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.
- Vietnam is now under communist rule.

**CHECKPOINT 6:**

- a) Find out more about the Watergate Scandal and "the plumbers".
- b) Find out what the following terms mean in context of the Vietnam war:
  - Vietnam Syndrome
  - Post-traumatic stress disorder

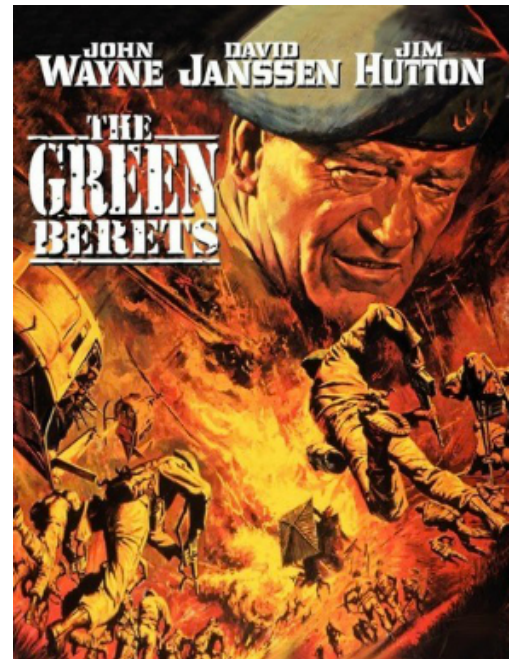
**II. THE VIETNAM WAR IN POPULAR CULTURE****The Vietnam War in pop culture  
by abc.net**

Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-18/vietnam-war-in-pop-culture-how-history-has-been-shaped/7752134>

Few conflicts have spawned as many film, music and TV spin-offs as the Vietnam War — and few have divided the pop culture world as much. Long before Robin Williams shouted "Gooooood morning, Vietnam!" into the microphone, the pop culture industry had latched on to the Vietnam War to shape a compelling, if conflicting, narrative. Films, music and TV shows — mostly coming out of the US — have tackled the war in different ways and told stories that in the years since may have shaped our perception of history. Films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* have become cultural icons. Credence Clearwater Revival's *Fortunate Son* and Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* have found a similar spot in the musical canon. Closer to home, Cold Chisel's *Khe Sanh* is in high rotation in any Australian pub and Redgum's *I Was Only Nineteen* still stirs emotions. So how have these pop culture depictions affected our view of the Vietnam War?

## The first shot

In the early days of Western involvement in the Vietnam War the champions of film and music were notably split on how to spin the conflict. "Hollywood has made a significant effort to portray America's Vietnam experience," Professor of cinema studies David Desser wrote in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. "Yet the films ... hardly present a unified, coherent vision. "If we take these films as a group, we find contradictions and ambiguities throughout, while many individual works are similarly conflicted in what they are trying to say about the Vietnam War and America's involvement in it."



John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) was a staunchly pro-US military film that told the story of a journalist who was cynical about the war but came to support it after travelling to Vietnam with US troops. The film was released at the height of the war and was panned by critics — partly for its quality, but also because of reports of heavy US government involvement in the editing and production of the film. Its pro-military message was in stark contrast to the growing public protests back home in the US that musicians were starting to tap into.

The 1967 song *I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag* was satirical and anti-war and received widespread attention after it was performed at the now famous 1969 Woodstock festival. *Fortunate Son* wasn't explicit in its criticism of the war, but it tapped into the counterculture that was starting to be seen in the pop culture material of the time. And while Sergeant Barry Sadler's *Ballad of the Green Berets* (1966) was a pro-military song, it became the outlier in the collection of songs from the era.

## The aftermath of the war



When the war officially ended in 1975 there was not a rush from Hollywood to create the epic dramas many might associate with the conflict. Instead, many productions dealt with the issue by proxy and focussed on the effect the war had on returned soldiers. *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978) both looked at former soldiers who were prone to violence and were struggling to return to normal life after the war. After these two films were met with critical acclaim and Academy Award nominations, the "tortured Vietnam vet" become a stock character in many films over the years, including *Jacknife* (1989) *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Dead Presidents* (1995).

In the music scene, *Khe Sanh* (1978), *I was Only Nineteen* (1983) and *Born in the USA* (1984) picked up on the theme of returned soldiers and ran with it. *I Was Only Nineteen* is a first-person narrative about a soldier who goes to fight in Vietnam and comes home disillusioned and scarred. The song's writer and performer, John Schumann, told ABC News Breakfast it encapsulated how many Australians felt about the war. "It was a pretty accurate and compelling insight into the lives, minds and bodies, as it turned out, of the young men who went off to fight and came back to a society that did not value or respect their service as it had their fathers in WWII and grandfathers in WWI," he said. "I've had so many stories from veterans about when they first heard the song, but I think the most telling one for me, the one that grabbed me the most was a veteran from Queensland who had tried to slip back into his life in rural Queensland and he heard the song and he pulled over to the side of the road ... and he listened and his first thoughts he told me were, 'those bastards were lying to me'. "All the symptoms I talked in the song, he had. He then realised that if somebody else had those symptoms, then he was not alone."

## The action '80s

Slow-burn dramas about traumatised soldiers were soon on a collision course with the desire for action films that came in the 1980s. The success of the epic *Apocalypse Now* (1979) arguably helped steer films about the Vietnam War in this direction and they hit their stride

with *Rambo* in 1982 — an action-packed feature film about a Vietnam veteran who had to survive while being chased through the American wilderness.

By the mid '80s films and TV were starting to base their stories back in Vietnam itself, rather than dealing with the aftermath and soldiers coming home. *Rambo* returned to the Vietnamese jungle in the second film of the series in 1985, and *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) quickly followed. Television — a relative latecomer to the Vietnam War story — did eventually join the action/adventure narrative in with *The A-Team*, a story of Vietnam vets-turned-mercenaries. The 1987 series *Tour of Duty* — a story of US troops fighting in Vietnam — followed soon after.



Towards the end of the decade, cinemagoers watched *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) deal with the politics of the war both in Vietnam and back at home. In *Born on the Fourth of July* Tom Cruise plays a wounded veteran who becomes an anti-war political activist after feeling betrayed by his country. Since the turn of the century there have been comparatively fewer depictions of the Vietnam War, with the political drama *Quiet American* (2002), the action-escape film *Rescue Dawn* (2006), and the musical *Across the Universe* (2007) being notable exceptions.

But by the time the '90s began almost every film was tapping into at least part of a now-established narrative: that the US should not have joined the Vietnam War; that soldiers were returning traumatised; and that the public had long protested against US involvement.

### COMPREHENSION:

- 1) List the different ways in which popular culture tried to spin the conflict.
- 2) How important is the film industry and the music industry during a war? Why?
- 3) Do you know of any other films or songs that deal with the Vietnam conflict.
- 4) Choose one of the films or songs and do a short presentation on it.