I. The Vietnam Crisis Deepens

- The Eisenhower administration had supported Ngo Dinh Diem’s decision to cancel the unification elections scheduled for 1956 and had begun to send weapons and military advisors to help Diem build a new nation.

- Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh consolidated his rule in North Vietnam and had his supporters in the south—called “Vietcong”—form secret cells and ‘bide their time.’

- In May 1959, Ho Chi Minh attempted to overthrow Diem’s government as Vietcong guerrillas infiltrated thousands of villages and assassinated government officials. By the time Kennedy took office, Diem’s government was clinging tenuously to power, so JFK agreed to increase military and economic aid to South Vietnam.

- However, Diem soon fell out of favor with Kennedy when he began to arrest and even shoot leaders of Vietnam’s Buddhist community. In
protest, some Buddhist monks were martyred by self-immolation, grabbing international headlines and sympathy.

• Unable to convince Diem to moderate his approach, Kennedy sent word to a group of dissident generals that he would support them in a coup attempt. On November 1 1963, Diem’s palace was surrounded with troops and tanks, and he was seized and shot. Kennedy immediately granted diplomatic recognition to the generals’ new government.

• However, three weeks later, Kennedy himself was killed, leaving the situation in Vietnam to his successor, LBJ.

II. John F. Kennedy

• Among the initiatives pushed by the Kennedy administration, he is notable for committing the U.S. to the “space race.” In response to Soviet advances into space with the launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the first astronaut (“cosmonaut”) in orbit, Yuri Gagarin in 1961, in May 1961 Alan Shepard became the first American in space, but not in orbit, and in February 1962 John Glenn becomes the first American to orbit the earth.
Kennedy then declared that America would land a man on the moon before the end of the decade, a bold prediction that unfortunately he did not live to see fulfilled. Space program part of the Cold War, helped the American economy, and furthered Kennedy’s youthful, forward-looking image.

Kennedy helped to create the Peace Corps, useful for providing idealistic young people the opportunity for humanitarian service but also a useful tool in the ongoing Cold War effort to win the hearts and minds of the Third World.

Kennedy also furthered voting rights and civil rights. Under Kennedy’s watch the 23rd Amendment was ratified, granting D.C. residents the right to vote for president, and the 24th Amendment, eliminating the poll tax, was proposed. (Ratified 1964). Following the March on Washington in August 1963 (MLK Jr., I Have A Dream), Kennedy sent a Civil Rights Bill to Congress. He traveled south in order to gain public support for the bill…
• However, the promise and optimism of the Kennedy years was cut tragically short when, on his trip to Texas in November 1963, Kennedy was killed as he rode in a motorcade through downtown Dallas. (Nov. 22).

• Lee Harvey Oswald, a loner who had a long flirtation with communism, was quickly arrested as the assassin.
• Two days later, he was himself killed by Jack Ruby as he was being transferred from one holding cell to another. Conspiracy theories abound, but the Warren Commission declared that Oswald was the lone assassin.
• Following Kennedy’s assassination, his vice president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, was sworn in as the nation’s 36th president.

• The nation was stunned and in mourning, as the Kennedy funeral was televised nationally. Especially poignant are the images of Jackie Kennedy and their young children:
III. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the Escalation of the Vietnam War

- President Johnson greatly expanded the United States role in Vietnam. He decided to punish North Vietnam directly for pursuing the war in the south. In early 1964, he ordered American warships to escort the South Vietnamese navy on missions far into the Gulf of Tonkin. During one of these spy missions, North Vietnamese gunboats allegedly fired on two American destroyers.

Gulf of Tonkin incident (1:40)
In response, Johnson got Congress to pass the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,” authorizing him to take whatever steps necessary to prevent further attacks. Under the same resolution, Johnson dispatched combat troops to South Vietnam and directed air attacks against targets in North Vietnam.

Defence Secretary Robert McNamara showing the media where the alleged Gulf of Tonkin Incident took place.

Johnson committed himself to pursuing the war at all costs, believing he was defending freedom and democracy. He said, “I’m not going to be the president who sees Vietnam go the way China went.” The American strategy was not to seize any particular battlefield, but to kill as many of the enemy as possible through ‘search and destroy’ missions. Soon, the United States was engaged in a full-scale war never declared by Congress. US troop strength in Vietnam escalated rapidly under Johnson. By 1966, there were 190,000 US troops in South Vietnam. By the end of 1967, there were over 500,000 troops in South Vietnam.
• Johnson’s escalation of the war in Vietnam and its increasing unpopularity, particularly after the Tet Offensive (January 1968) and controversy surrounding the draft, led to his decision not to run for reelection in 1968. Thus, Richard Nixon inherited the war and declared he had a plan to bring “peace with honor” in Vietnam.

**Nixon as President: “Vietnamizing the War”**

The Failure of Vietnamization

1. Though Nixon promised to end the war in Vietnam, the process of doing so proved challenging; Nixon inaugurated a strategy known as Vietnamization in which American troops would gradually turn over responsibility for fighting the war to the South Vietnamese.

2. Although Nixon was attempting to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam, the American military continued to act aggressively in other ways, as Nixon ordered a secret bombing operation against Cambodia to attempt to rid that nation of Vietcong support networks.

3. Nixon had U.S. forces invade Cambodia in April 1970 after the bombing campaign failed, but the U.S. military presence destabilized the nation and propelled the violent and oppressive Khmer Rouge into power. The United States also invaded Laos, with little success.

4. In December 1972, Nixon ordered an eleven-day bombing campaign that pushed the North Vietnamese government to seek an opportunity for peace. An accord was signed on January 27, 1973, giving the United States a sense of achieving “peace with honor;” by 1975, however, the North Vietnamese had captured the South and implemented Communist rule.
5. By the end of the conflict, the United States had lost 58,000 soldiers, South Vietnamese forces had suffered 215,000 casualties, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had lost 1 million soldiers, and roughly 4 million North and South Vietnamese civilians had lost their lives.

   Fall of Saigon (6 min.)

6. The antiwar movement continued at home and picked up momentum when Nixon made it more difficult for American men to avoid the draft; the invasion of Cambodia also spurred widespread student demonstrations, the most famous of which was the protest at Kent State University, where four students were killed by the National Guard.

   Kent State (3:30)

8. In 1971 the New York Times and the Washington Post printed a classified report known as the Pentagon Papers, which stated that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had lied to the public about the purposes of the Vietnam War; the publication of the report led to the 1973 passage of the War Powers Act, which required the president to consult with Congress about various aspects of war conduct.

9. The revelation of so many lies and cover-ups by top government officials also permanently damaged the relationship between politicians and the press. This was further eroded by the Watergate scandal in 1973-1974.