

The defeat in the Vietnam war made American culture bolder

The conflict, which ended 50 years ago, precipitated new styles of music and film

The Economist, Apr 24th 2025

The images of the fall of Saigon, on April 30th 1975, are indelible. A helicopter takes off from the roof of an apartment building, leaving behind a long line of would-be evacuees. Victorious North Vietnamese soldiers roll into the city in tanks, on their way to sack the United States embassy and raise their flag over the presidential palace. Vietnamese civilians rush onto packed boats in terror.

America's involvement in Vietnam began with realpolitik and ended in shame. It started covertly in 1954, soon after the Viet Minh, a nationalist, communist guerrilla group, terminated French colonial rule and Vietnam was cleaved in two. It grew into a war that killed almost 60,000 American soldiers and over 3m Vietnamese civilians and soldiers.

America's performance in the two world wars allowed the country to think of itself as benevolent and invincible. Vietnam put that myth to rest.

The war haunted American politics for decades, but 50 years on, and with veterans' average age now 72, its salience is fading. H.W. Brands, a historian at the University of Texas, says, "To my students, the Vietnam war might as well be the civil war." But his students still live in a culture

dramatically changed by that war. It permanently altered American film, music, television and—most importantly—Americans’ relationship to their government.

In 1954 America was at peak self-confidence. The second world war wreaked devastation, but America had emerged as a geopolitical and industrial power. The ructions of the 1960s were still a decade ahead; the Depression’s privations were 15 years in the past. Polls taken in 1958 showed that 73% of Americans trusted their government to do the right thing. So when President Dwight Eisenhower sent Edward Lansdale, an air-force officer, to help the government of South Vietnam in its struggle against the communist north, it raised little public outcry.

Few Americans could even find Vietnam on a map. Many were introduced to it by a popular book called “Deliver Us From Evil” (1956). The author, Tom Dooley, an American naval medic who worked in Vietnam, described a grisly roster of horrors visited on innocent Vietnamese Christians. He cast American capitalism and compassion as the only things that could save millions of Vietnamese from communist brutality. (After Dooley’s early death from cancer in 1961, it emerged that he had worked with the CIA and fabricated his stories of communist atrocities.)

Dooley’s sensationalised narrative suited Americans’ self-image as benign, conquering heroes. Popular Westerns such as “Shane” (1953) and “The Magnificent Seven” (1960) depicted Americans as civilising folk who stood up for the downtrodden. Epic films such as “Spartacus”

(1960) depicted combat as noble and righteous, with clear battle lines and starkly defined good guys and baddies.

Meanwhile, America's involvement in Vietnam was deepening. In 1960 America had 700 military "advisers" helping the pro-Western government of South Vietnam; by the end of 1964, that number had grown to 23,000. It was still too little. And so America began drafting young men to go to Vietnam.

The horror, the horror

Two things were notable about America's military strategy. First, it was not working. In early 1965 McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser, told President Lyndon Johnson that America could either negotiate a settlement between North and South Vietnam, or increase military pressure on the north. And second, it was largely kept from the public. Soon after Bundy's memo, Johnson secretly authorised systematic bombings of the north and sent two Marine battalions to guard the bases from which American planes took off.

The first glimmers of public discontent emerged in American music. In 1963 Bob Dylan condemned the "Masters of War" who "hide in your mansion while the young people's blood/Flows out of their bodies and is buried in the mud". Nina Simone complained in 1967 about a government that would "raise my taxes, freeze my wages/And send my son to Vietnam".

In the 1960s protest songs were rarely mainstream hits, but David Suisman, a music historian at the University of Delaware, notes that this was the start of what came to be known as “alternative music”: styles with strong niche appeal and even stronger political messages. Genres such as folk stood apart from—and often in opposition to—mainstream music, which at the time was dominated by anodyne love songs. Hip-hop and punk were the inheritors of that legacy.

The brutal images Americans saw on their televisions every night fuelled such discontent. Unlike the feel-good newsreels broadcast in the second world war, coverage of Vietnam was not sanitised. New technology, in particular lightweight cameras and sound equipment, enabled journalists to go into the field and show people what was happening. This permanently changed the media’s wartime role; the public now expects to see combat footage and sceptical reporters. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the army let journalists “embed” themselves with combat units.

It took longer for the war to arrive in cinemas, but when it did, filmmakers were unsparing in their depictions. “The Deer Hunter” (1978) showed the war’s effects on three friends from an insular steel town in Pennsylvania. Francis Ford Coppola’s magnificent “Apocalypse Now” (1979) portrayed the corrosive insanity of the war’s senseless violence and the lies upon which it rested. And in Stanley Kubrick’s “Full Metal Jacket” (1987), the war was nothing more than a charnel house.

Ever since, American films have largely eschewed the tidy morality and view of combat that defined pre-Vietnam war movies. Even the last

“good war”—the second world war—had its shine removed in “Saving Private Ryan” (1998): the combat scenes were shockingly violent and confusing. “Jarhead” (2005) and “Warfare” (2025), about the fighting with Iraq, depict war as dreary and fundamentally pointless. “American Sniper” (2014) told the true story of a veteran who fought in Iraq and was murdered by another officer with PTSD; it showed how war hangs over soldiers long after they return home.

Many of these changes were welcome. Combat is brutal and war is rarely a Manichean struggle between heroes and villains. Films that reflect such complexity are richer than those that ignore it. Protest songs can be trite, but American music is better today than it was in the 1950s for having multiple genres and voices. And a sceptical press serves its watchdog purpose better than a pliant, credulous one.

Underlying all of these cultural changes has been a profound social one. In 1971 the Pentagon Papers, high-level government reports on the war, were leaked, revealing the depth of officials’ dishonesty about their motives and efficacy in Vietnam. A poll taken that year showed that 71% of Americans believed the war had been a “mistake”. By 1974 barely more than one-third of Americans trusted their government to do the right thing. Aside from a brief post-9/11 spike, America’s government has never regained the trust of a majority of its citizens. Today only 22% trust it, and it seems unlikely to win back Americans’ confidence soon. ■

Correction (April 28th 2025): In an earlier version of this article, we misidentified the building from which a helicopter carrying

evacuees took off. It was an apartment building, not the American Embassy. This has been updated. Sorry.