

Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam

A Case Study



Who was Lyndon B Johnson?

Which US President won an election with the largest ever popular majority?

Lyndon Baines Johnson, who took 61% of the vote in 1964.

He went from powerful Senate majority leader to powerless and humiliated Vice President to towering statesman in 6 years. This is the story related in Robert Caro's book on LBJ. *The Passage of Power*

LBJ spent time in great poverty in Texas. He picked cotton as a child.

His education was limited to a Texas teacher training college, which he had to leave early, and he held a job teaching Mexican American children.

He became an assistant to a US Congressman and was later elected to the House of Representatives and then the Senate.

He soon became the **Senate majority leader** and used his **powers of persuasion** to get laws passed.

“He’d come on just like a tidal wave sweeping all over the place. He went through walls. He’d come through the door and he’d take the whole room over. Just like that. Everything”



Intimidating, Persuasive,
Powerful, Dominating.



He was Vice President to Kennedy in 1960 but was not part of the inner circle in the White House.

He was acutely aware of being the least educated person in JFK's government.

Everything changed when Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and Johnson became president.

KENNEDY
FOR PRESIDENT



JOHNSON
FOR VICE PRESIDENT



Election

Johnson

- Peace
- Dove



• Goldwater

- Total victory
- Even suggested using atomic weapons

<http://www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate/timeline/years/1964b.html>

He had an overwhelming Victory over Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election.

He campaigned on the peace ticket.

Even though he had more interest in Domestic Affairs his presidency was dominated by the Vietnam War.



Johnson was interested in the minority having spent time working with poorer Americans.

He wanted to create a better and fairer society.

The **Great Society** programme.

Head Start

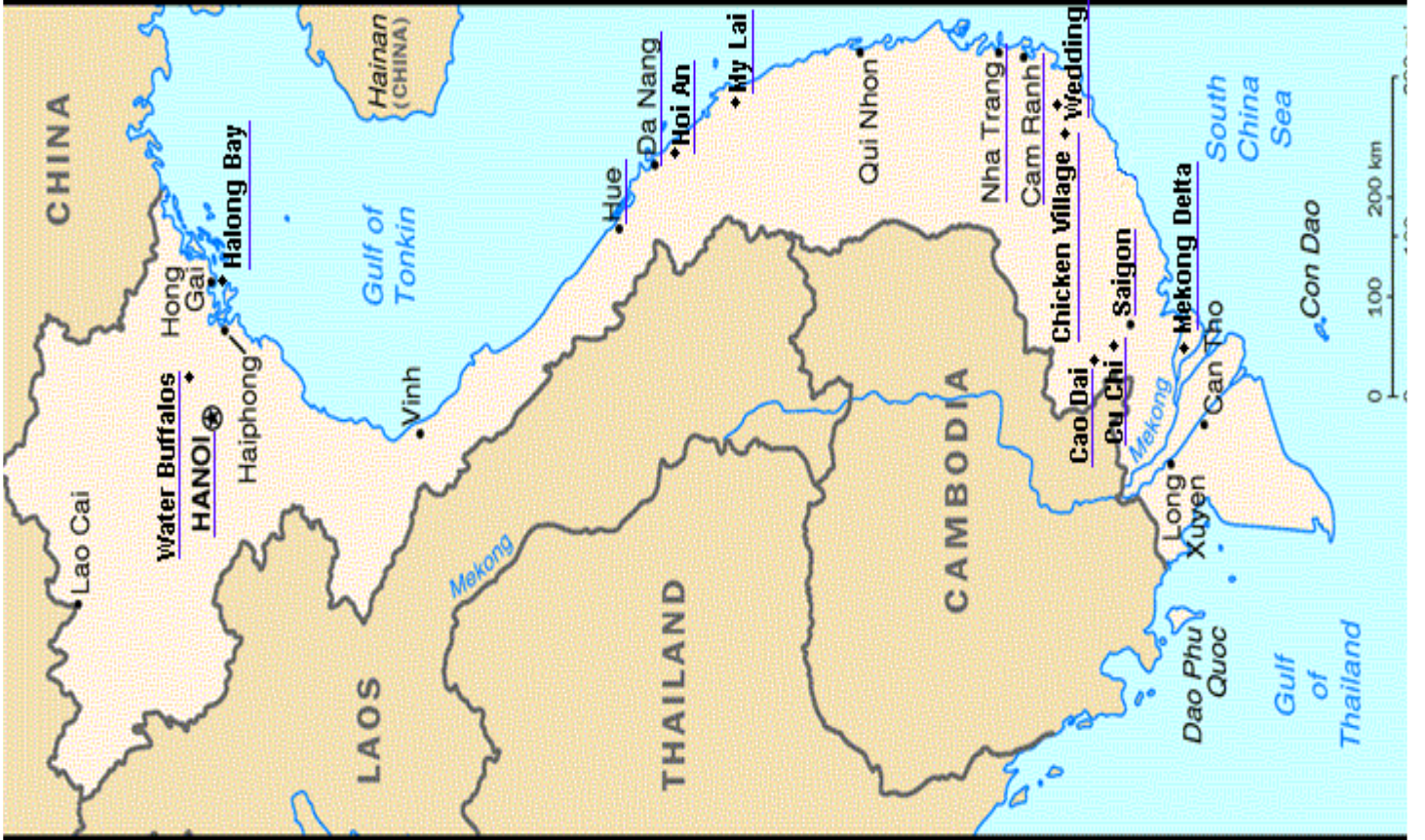
Civil Rights Act – 1964

Voting Rights Act - 1965

(Outlawed racial discrimination in jobs, voting and education.)

War on Poverty

Medicare and Medicaid



Overview of his involvement in Vietnam

Believed in the **Domino Theory**.

“If we quit Vietnam tomorrow we’ll be fighting in Hawaii and next week we will have to fight in San Francisco”.

Expanded US involvement after the **Tonkin Bay Incident**.

False claims of attacks on US Navy.

Congress passed the **Tonkin Resolution**.

Power to send in more troops.

Authorised **Operation Rolling Thunder**

Launched Massive Air Strikes

Tet Offensive showed the Vietminh and Vietcong would not be beaten.

Anti war movement grew stronger

Cut back on bombing and tried to organise **peace talks**.

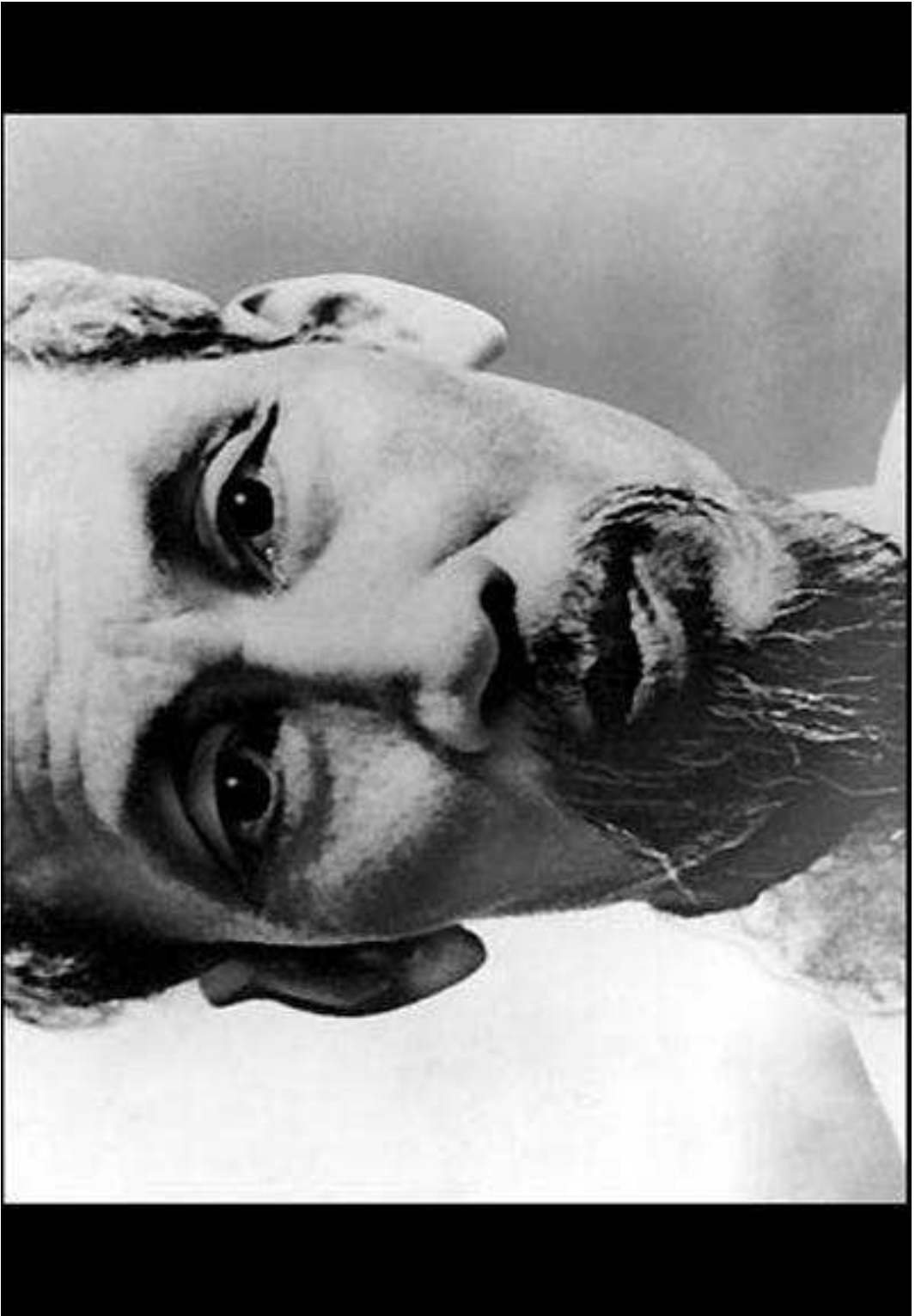
Extension of the power of the Presidency.

**In 18 months he passed more reform legislation than most
presidents did in two terms of office.**

**He believed the president and the federal government
should be used to better the lives of the ordinary person**

Ho Chi Minh Vietnam

- Interest was 1st Nationalist
2nd Communist
- They seen communism to suit the Vietnamese way of life
- The Americans did not understand this



Prelude to war

- Us involvement was based on Domino theory
- Americans were afraid that if one country falls to communism adjoining countries would quickly follow

“If we withdrew from Vietnam, the communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia Laos Malaya would go” Kennedy

- 1961 Dec A white paper recommends a big build up, some argue to stay out altogether Kennedy chooses a middle ground by adding more advisors
- 1963 Nov 16, 000 advisors
- 1964 27,000 Us begins covert raids against targets in North Vietnam and coastal surveillance missions

Kennedy assassinated

Johnson takes over

Does nothing else but increase advisors until after election

- Problem is that as electioneering progresses Johnson and his aides are coming closer to Goldwater's position
- The Vietcong extend their influence and the Southern Vietnamese were not strong and had unpopular government policies

- Johnson faced a choice either withdraw or send in huge numbers
- He had to make it relevant to Americans and present a cause worth defending. He also had to avoid appearing a war-monger

So why did they go in?

- Speech at John Hopkins
- http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/johnson_lyndon/johnshopkinsuniversity.html
- Tonkin Resolution

Rolling Thunder

- Planned for 8 weeks and lasted 3 years
- 500 US aircraft were shot down
- North Vietnamese used captures US aviators as propaganda weapons aimed at US civilians
- Critics pointed out the futility of bombing the countryside of North Vietnam which had no factories to bomb

Search and destroy

- Americans would search out and destroy the professional troops operating in the South
- They couldn't find the enemy
- They couldn't identify the enemy
- Frustration led to Zippo raids

Tactics

Vietcong

- Mines
- Bouncing betty
- Punji Stakes
- Trip wires
- Only engaged in one set piece battle La Drang Valley Nov 1965
- Aims were to maim not kill as it was better propaganda and gave a strong impact

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INITIATING ACTIONS

TÁC ĐỘNG LÀM NỔ

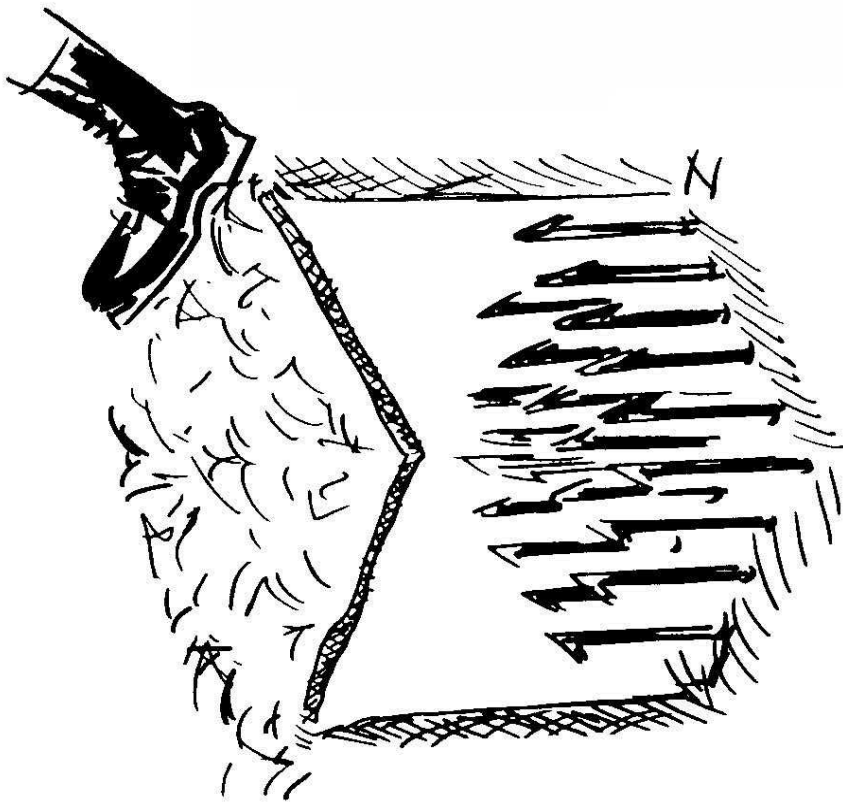
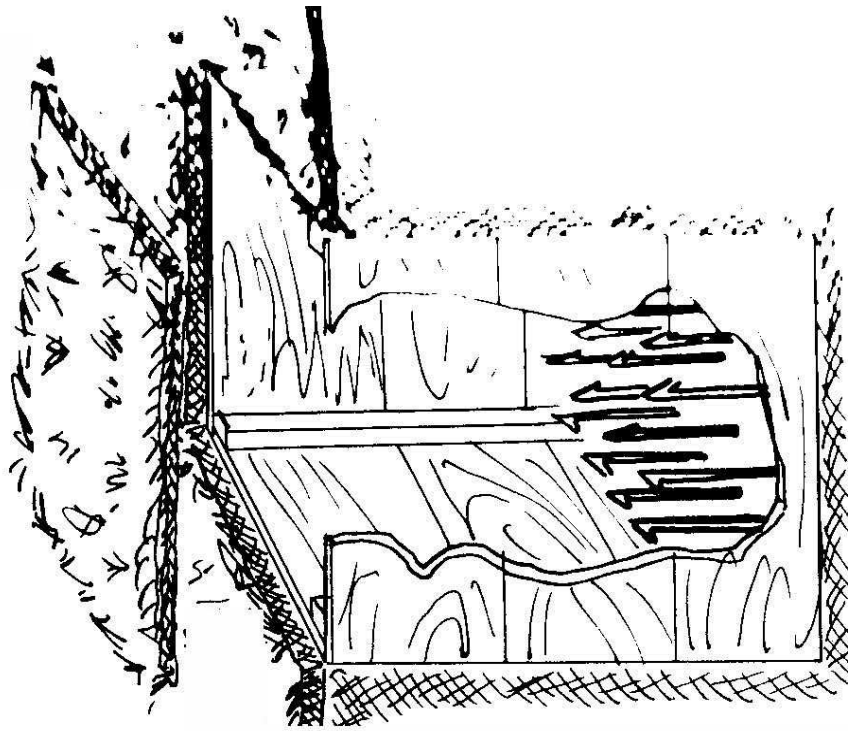


PRESSURE
ÉP



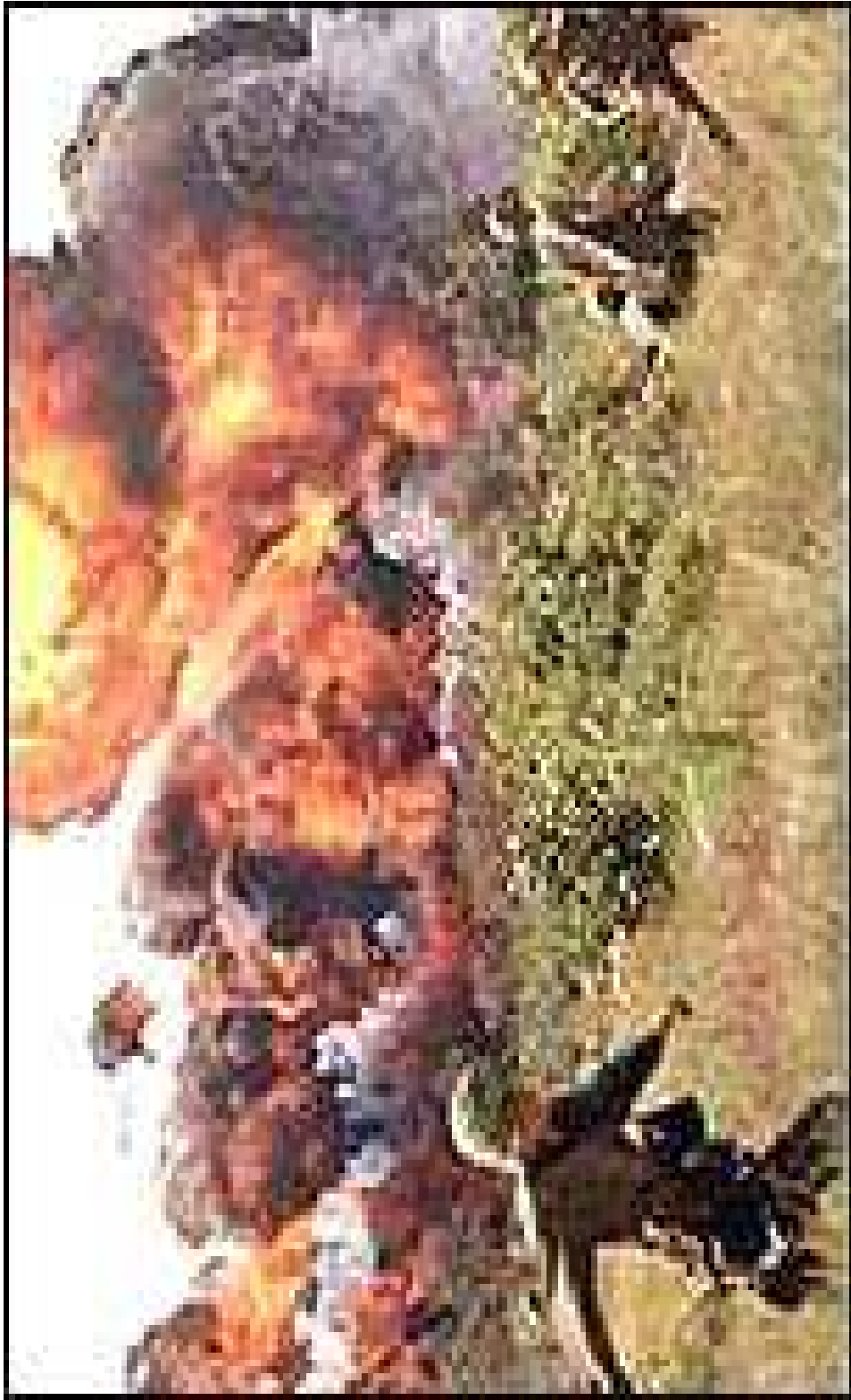
PULL
KÉO

Pressure 1
áp lực 1



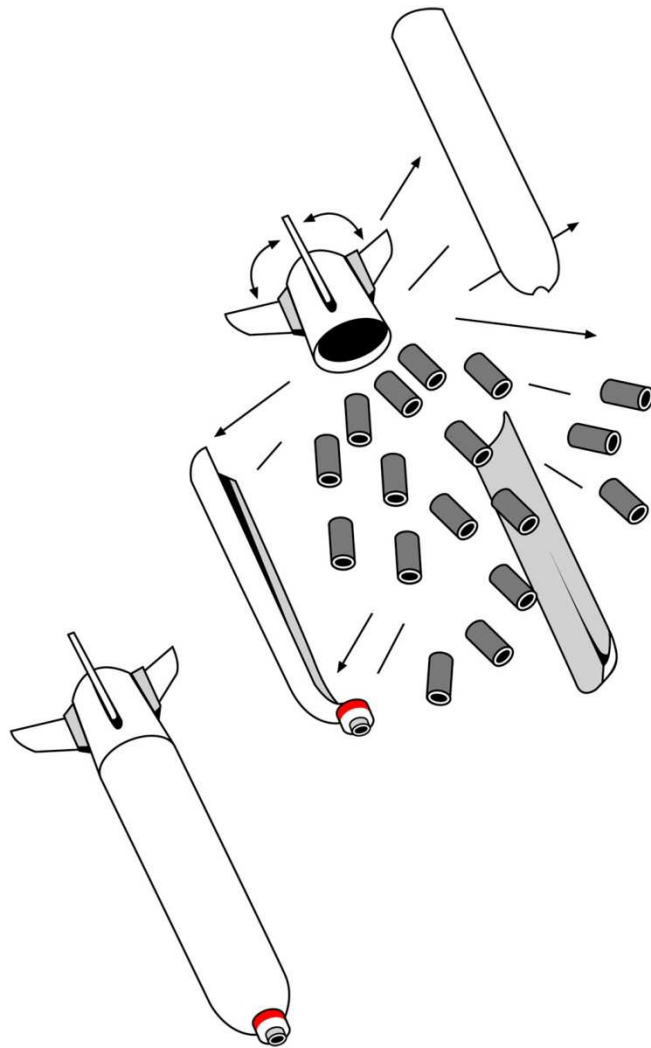
Tactics Americans

- Napalm
- Cluster bombs or mother bombs
- Wounded prisoners were shot
- Defoliants Agent Orange
- Both sides wounded and shot but there were more camera men to capture the Americans doing so which gave a bad image





AP / Nikk OG





The TET offensive

- 30 Jan 1968 vc launches attacks throughout south Vietnam
- Sought maximum psychological impact by attacking political centres including Saigon and US Embassy
- Achieve strategic and tactical surprise by attacking during the time when many us troops were on leave reduced alert

- Us and south Vietnam win tactical victories but north with the help of media achieved strategic victory
- Johnson had been assuring the American public that victory was in sight
- A credibility gap emerges
- Vietcong were virtually finished but the Americans did not realise this

1968

- Peace talks begin in Paris
- Nixon elected
- Vietnamization policy seeks to turn fighting over to South Vietnamese

Television and Vietnam

- Media turned people but it is important to know when they appeared
- Many pictures were produced after the war or in the dying stages at the time they weren't seen
- 1960s TV went colour and could see the blood impact shows the brutality of the war

Impact of opposition

- Johnson did not seek reflection
- Many were opposed on environmental grounds as the use of agent orange was killing all the trees
- Protesters were commonly labelled communists
- 1970 200 hard hat construction workers were cheered when they attacked protesters

New forces changed society

- Anti war movement
- Hippies
- Counter culture
- Collapse in consensus
- Poverty
- Great society was derailed

Contextualisation questions

1. Why did the US finally withdraw?
2. Why did a military solution fail
3. Was it inevitable that the US would fail
4. What was the lasting impact on US society
5. How did it affect the powers of the presidency
6. Evaluate Vietnams impact on LBJs great society

7. What was the impact of opposition
8. Why were troops sent in
9. What was the significance of the tet offensive