

Vietnam's Legacy

TRANSCRIPT

GWEN IFILL: Nearly 60,000 names etched in black granite, each name a life of a man or woman killed in places with names like Hetong and Quantri – the black granite legacy of a war and an era: Vietnam. 25 years later, the images remain searing for those who lived it, obscured by time for the generations born after the war ended. Helicopters lifting off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon; the U.S. retreating...

SPOKESMAN: Get out! (Gunfire)

GWEN IFILL: ...The North Vietnamese taking over, decades after the first American military advisers arrived to fight a shadow Cold War. A conflict that began slowly in the 1950's escalated dramatically throughout the 1960's, leaving horrific memories in its wake: Buddhist monks immolating themselves to protest the South Vietnamese government.

NEWSREEL: The United States Marines head for security duty in South Vietnam.

GWEN IFILL: U.S. Combat troops arriving, nearly 200,000 of them by the end of 1965, up to nearly half a million only two years later. Although undeclared, Vietnam had become a war, while on the home front, a different kind of war exploded: Massive demonstrations, some peaceful, some not. Many young men began to protest the draft.

YOUNG MAN: I don't want to go to Vietnam because I don't want to get killed. (Gunfire)

GWEN IFILL: While on the battlefield, resentment grew.

SOLDIER: Everybody just wants to go back home and go to school. Know what I mean?

GWEN IFILL: A turning point: The 1968 Tet offensive. 70,000 North Vietnamese soldiers launched a series of brutal attacks, breaching even the walls of the U.S. Embassy. The streets of Saigon imploded, the pictures telegraphed home, a public opinion disaster for U.S. policy makers, fueling even more antiwar protest.

MAN: There's a struggle going on in the world today between young people and between those old menopausal men who run this country, and it's a struggle about what the future

of this country's about.

GWEN IFILL: Two months to the day after the Tet Offensive, President Lyndon Baines Johnson became the war's major political casualty.

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON: I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.

GWEN IFILL: And the political fallout was just beginning. As Democrats picked Johnson's successor that summer, antiwar chaos spread to the streets of Chicago.

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON: To you, the great silent majority...

GWEN IFILL: Americans elected Richard Nixon, who won popular support in part by promising to "win the peace" in Vietnam.

But Nixon expanded the bombing war to Cambodia instead, and new atrocities came to light: U.S. troops killing innocents at My Lai. And at Ohio's Kent State University, National Guardsmen killed four student protesters. The nation erupted.

Against this backdrop, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger launched secret peace talks in Paris, and a peace accord was finally signed in 1973. Long-held prisoners of war came home. Still, the Vietnamese civil war continued for two more years after American combat troops left. The North prevailed. Vietnam eventually became one nation, but its war left America divided, generations later still coping with the cultural and emotional backwash from the first foreign war America ever lost.

GWEN IFILL: Now, five American historians join us to discuss the cultural, political and emotional legacies of the war in Vietnam: NewsHour and Presidential historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and Michael Beschloss; journalist Stanley Karnow, author of "Vietnam: A History"—that book became an award-winning public television series; Richard Norton Smith, director of the President Ford Museum & Library in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Jonathan Holloway, an Assistant Professor of African American Studies at Yale University. Stanley Karnow, I want to read you a quote from your book. You wrote "the names of the dead of the dead"—speaking of the Vietnam wall, the memorial— "the names of the dead engraved on the granite record more than lives lost in battle; they represent a sacrifice to a failed crusade, however, noble or illusory its motives. They bear witness to the end of America's absolute confidence in its moral exclusivity, its military invincibility,

its manifest destiny." America still bears the scars of Vietnam.

STANLEY KARNOW, Author: It certainly does. And the legacy of Vietnam I think cannot quite be understood if you don't understand how we got involved in the first place. I traced the involvement back to the Truman administration, when President Truman decided to help the French. The French had been... had colonized, controlled Vietnam as a colony. And after the Second World War, they were trying to retrieve it, fighting against a communist-led nationalist movement. and Truman decided to give them what seems a paltry sum today, of \$10 million, \$15 million. But it was the first step in, and that's followed by President Eisenhower, and then of course Kennedy escalates it and Johnson and so forth, and we'll go through all that. But during this all, the public really doesn't know very much about what's going on. And..

GWEN IFILL: You wrote that we "oozed our way into Vietnam."

STANLEY KARNOW: We oozed in. And those were the days when people didn't ask questions. People had confidence in the government. I mean one of the great speeches was Kennedy's inaugural address, "we will help any friend, oppose any foe," and so forth, it was to assure liberty in the world, and everybody thought it was marvelous. It was just – what happens eventually – as the war goes on and there is no progress, and Americans are getting killed, and you begin to see what some reporters in those days called a credibility gap between the public statements and the realities on the ground. And as a result of that, just to fast-forward, I think people look back and realize how much the leadership lied, and so forth. You have just one example, Robert McNamara, who was the defense secretary during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, writes a book saying, "We were wrong, terribly wrong." I mean, that's cold comfort for the families of the Americans who were killed.

GWEN IFILL: Well, let me pick up on that, Michael Beschloss. Obviously, people felt disillusioned. They felt that Presidents, a succession of Presidents had lied to them about the war. How are we still feeling the reverberations of that now?

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS, Presidential Historian: Well, you know, part of it, we always talk a lot on this program about the fact that we don't have much confidence in our system. A lot of it goes back to that period. You know, one of the ideas of the American system is that, if we Americans are going to make a sacrifice like sending 56,000 of our people to die in a war in Vietnam, that that should be something that our presidents should tell us about

in advance and give us a choice. The 1964 election, LBJ versus Goldwater, Vietnam was not discussed very openly. I've been listening to LBJ on these tapes he made of his private conversations. Even during the '64 campaign, he's saying, "I can't really level with the public and say that we may have to get involved in a big war next year, '65." '68 was even worse. A lot of those voting for Richard Nixon thought that he would get us out of the war quickly. If they had had any idea that he was going to extend that war for four years, probably 25,000 Americans more dying and also expand it beyond Vietnam, they never would have elected him. So when you go through an experience like that, you begin to think that the votes you cast may not have very much connection to the kind of policies America follows.

GWEN IFILL: Doris Kearns Goodwin, there seems to be such an ambiguity about how people... There's no blame that can be properly laid, or at least that people can happily lay — McGeorge Bundy called it "Gray is the color of truth," when talking about the ambiguities of the Vietnam War — how does America cope with that now?

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, Presidential Historian: Well, I think that the most important lesson that people have to take from the war, which has partly just been said, is that no foreign war can succeed without that large domestic support. Franklin Roosevelt understood that way back in the 30's when he "quarantine the aggressor speech," and the country didn't respond to want to go get involved in Europe's war. Later he said it's like looking back in a parade and no one's following you. You can't go forward. So wherever we lay blame or not, I think there's no question that the lesson to be learned is you have to level with the country, you have to make them understand the price they're paying. Somehow the country got the feeling with each new endeavor in Vietnam that it was going to be over soon, that there was light at the end of the tunnel, instead of being told that it might be a long war, and what the reasons for that war were.

You know, you just think about the emotional response to McNamara's book, when he finally came out and said, "we were wrong, we mis-estimated the situation in the North. We overestimated the strength of the South. We should have gotten out in '63 or '64." Imagine what the parents of those soldiers who died felt when they thought that their kids died in vain without a reason. So unless you in a democracy give a reason for people's lives being put on the line and then after the fact, the emotional out coming from that is so terrible, even though McNamara was trying to do a good thing, "look at the lessons of why we were wrong," the impact of it was so deeply felt on the part of the people who

wanted to believe that their children, their lovers, their wives and husbands died for some good reason.

GWEN IFILL: Professor Holloway, you hear us talking about the incredible deep scars of Vietnam, and yet you teach at a college campus where students have no contemporaneous memory or scars, other than it's some dark family secret that nobody wants to talk about. Is it something that we're missing here, or something that they're missing?

JONATHAN HOLLOWAY, Yale University: Well, I don't think any of the commentators are missing anything. The Vietnam War was the end of American innocence, as far as thinking about political culture. The students I teach are part of a generation, that they grew up with the Vietnam war as being "Apocalypse Now" on the big screen, they grew up with Rambo as being some sort of post- Vietnam survivalist ethic, and so you see a whole cultural shift in terms of what one expects out of war, there are no good wars left. You see a whole cultural shift in terms of people's expectations of a political process or even any sort of notion of justice on this kind of international scale.

GWEN IFILL: Is there also a basic and fundamental distrust now of government, that government is going... Means what it says and can be trusted to say what it means?

JONATHAN HOLLOWAY: I don't want to say there's a fundamental mistrust, but there is a first step that's missing, that the first step used to have been, "we'll trust our president, we'll support the president," where the first step now is a cynical and skeptical first step, which I think actually is fairly health. And then maybe we'll trust our leaders after that.

GWEN IFILL: Richard Norton Smith, it seems that when we talk about the cleavages that's left from Vietnam, we often break it down into left versus right. Is that a correct formulation?

RICHARD NORTON SMITH: Certainly the culture war continued long after the military war ended, and in fact, it could be argued, it's still going on. Certainly those on the right who fundamentally distrust the 60's, indeed who blame the Clintons as the personification of what they see as 60's excess, and those on the left who have retreated to a kind of neo-isolationism. But there's one factor I think we haven't mentioned that I think cannot be over exaggerated. And that's television. This very medium, after all, brought us the Vietnam War. Contrast how we're observing the 25th anniversary of the end of our

involvement in Indochina with, say, the 25th anniversary of the Korean Armistice. Korea today conjures up memories of what, "MASH" reruns? – and a memorial in Washington that was overshadowed the day it opened by the Vietnam Wall. This was a television war, and American foreign policy for the last 25 years, and particularly the projection of American military force, has been governed in many ways by the television pictures. Think of an instance, perhaps aside from the Gulf War, where government was willing to commit large numbers of American ground forces for more than a few days in a life-threatening situation.

GWEN IFILL: It just doesn't happen that way anymore.

RICHARD NORTON SMITH: No. And it's interesting, you know, the historical legacy, every generation will interpret it for themselves. One of the ironies of this whole discussion is that it was the generation obsessed with Munich that got us into Vietnam. I suspect there's a generation of those who fought in the war and those who protested the war here at home who are as obsessed with Vietnam as their fathers and grandfathers were with Munich.

GWEN IFILL: Mr. Karnow, you said that there was relief and humiliation when the war ended. Does that continue to kind of dog our steps now as we consider other military or any other kinds of national movements?

STANLEY KARNOW: Well, we're trying to reconcile ourselves, of course, with what happened in Vietnam. At the time the war ended it was relief. Let me just try to answer your question in an indirect way. I think there's a kind of silver lining, if you want, to the Vietnam tragedy, which is that people are much more skeptical today. They're asking questions leadership. Yes, on the one hand it's eroded faith in government, but after all, people are realizing that the leaders are our employees, we pay their salaries, right? We have a right to know what they're doing. The second point I want to make is... And I might have to amend someday what you quoted from my book – the fall of Saigon was a debacle but it wasn't a disaster. Sure, it shocked us when it happened. But look what's happened to America since then. I mean, America's economy is the strongest in the world, people look to America... It's a beacon for all sorts of things, the surge toward democracy in all sorts of countries. I mean, Communism is finished. High-tech– America is the cornucopia of high-tech, and so forth. So you go everywhere in the world today, you see kids, you can't tell whether they're American or German or French or whatever, I mean they're all in blue jeans, they all look like Americans. Everybody wants to imitate America today.

GWEN IFILL: And that's a good thing, in your opinion?

STANLEY KARNOW: Well, yes I like the differences in the world, and I'm not sure I like French kids going on skate boards, wearing New York Yankees baseball caps, or as Doris would prefer, Brooklyn Dodgers baseball caps. But there is... I mean, we've been projected differently... When you go back to the days, the Cold War days, we were basically thinking of ourselves in military strategic terms. Now, America has a great role to play economically, culturally and morally, too. I mean, people do look to America.

GWEN IFILL: Professor Holloway, speaking about the moral question, there seemed to be a broken social contract a lot of people saw between the United States government and minorities and poor people, who felt they had to go and fight this war. Is that something that you still see people worried about?

JONATHAN HOLLOWAY: Oh, absolutely. I think... Well, first of all, I want to offer a corrective. I'm not sure that America ever had a real contract with black America, except for on the bottom of possession of a slave title, so I think that when you talk about black America or other minority populations and poor white America, you have to talk sometimes at cross-purposes. But the fact remains that there is, I think, a very real skepticism about who's going to be called up first when something happens. We do have a voluntary armed forces, but even during the Persian Gulf, I remember seeing black troops complaining to hopefully, Colin Powell, I think they were trying to get his attention, about the way that they were being treated when they're overseas in Saudi Arabia. So I don't think this is a story that's actually finished.

GWEN IFILL: Michael?

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: It was, it was a war that, especially as it went on, was fought by Americans who were poor and African American, and it also generated this cultural divide because you had a situation where 18-year-olds who were not even able to vote were sent to war by Presidents who had been voted in by other people and by Senators and members of Congress, to the extent that they acquiesced. And so there really was that generational divide, and that was so powerful, it exists still. Just take a look at the year 2000, how much we've heard about George W. Bush and Al Gore and their draft records or what they were doing at the time of Vietnam, how they met that challenge. This is something that we're still asking about people, and we look at it, I think, too much as a litmus test to give you some insight into their inner selves.

GWEN IFILL: Doris Kearns Goodwin, when we talk about Vietnam, is there anything positive we can say about... That binds us together instead of splits us apart as a result of that war?

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN: Well, I think one of the saddest chapters has now been turned around a little bit, and that was the contempt with which the soldiers were greeted when they came home from that war. I think that's the most humiliating, horrible memory of it all. Here they had fought for us, and were treated so badly by so many people who were against the war at the time. And I do think in the last couple of decades, there's been much greater empathy, much greater reaching out, much greater understanding. The wall partly did that. Our movies have partly done that I think to make us understand what they went through more. I still think that one legacy that's left from that, however, is that we let the draft go because we didn't want a selective draft, as we had in the war, because it seemed to weigh so heavily on those who were poor and working-class and the middle-class, better educated kids got out of it. So we turned to a volunteer force, and that sometimes to me still to be a form of economic conscription because poorer, working class kids are still the ones joining the army. So maybe these wounds have been partly healed, but I think there's still a lot of open questions that it raises for us to answer.

GWEN IFILL: Richard Norton Smith, open wounds or good news that we can get out of any of this?

RICHARD NORTON SMITH: Oh, I think Doris is absolutely right. I think there is real healing going on. I see it every day. You know, in the lobby of the Ford Museum here, we have an amazing relic of the war. We have the actual original staircase that led to the rooftop of the Saigon Embassy, which was torn down two years ago, and which was the last means of escape for thousands of Vietnamese and Americans, as the city was encircled. And it's an amazing thing, day in and day out, to watch people approach that artifact. Some of them physically recoil. They are deeply moved. To some people it will always be a symbol of military humiliation, but to other people, including by the way, Gerald Ford, it's a symbol of the desire to be free, every bit as much as the Berlin Wall that's out in front of the museum.

GWEN IFILL: Mixed messages that don't seem to actually go away. Thank you all very much.