

# WHAT ROLE DID THE VIETNAM WAR PLAY IN LYNDON JOHNSON'S DECISION NOT TO SEEK RE-ELECTION IN 1968?

## Introductory Sentence

The Vietnam war was the main feature of Johnson's Presidency. As such it played the leading role in his decision not to seek re-election in 1968.

## The collapse of American morale

Many soldiers serving in Vietnam were conscripts; they were forced to fight. In theory, all young men could be drafted to serve in the army, but in practice well-off boys could easily "*dodge the draft*" by going to university. As a result, most soldiers came from poor white or black families. They felt the draft was unfair. This lowered the morale of American troops. Over a third took drugs, many deserted and some killed unpopular officers. To survive, many soldiers tried to avoid any contact with the enemy. Others behaved savagely towards the Vietnamese. The most notorious case was the My Lai Massacre in 1968, when troops killed 347 men, women and children in one village. 5

## How the war was fought

The Vietcong used guerrilla tactics. They staged ambushes, booby-trapped houses and villages, dressed as peasants to launch surprise attacks and used the jungle for cover. Westmoreland sent his soldiers on 'search and destroy' missions to root out the Vietcong. They measured their success in 'body counts'. The US air force bombed towns and villages. They dropped cluster bombs that scattered hundreds of smaller bombs and napalm which burned into the skin. The Vietnamese dug tunnels as escape routes and bomb shelters, retreating into them when the bombers came. To make it easier to see its enemies, the air force sprayed herbicides weed killers, mostly Agent Orange, over six million acres of trees and crops. This killed many Vietnamese people. The herbicides also affected pregnant women, leading to birth defects. Americans de-personalised the Vietnamese, calling them "*gooks*". That made it easier to ignore the suffering they were causing the Vietnamese people. 7

## Opposition to the war in America

As the war dragged on and the number of deaths rose, many Americans began to wonder if they should be in Vietnam. An anti-war movement began in Michigan University in 1965. Protesters objected to the war on several grounds. They claimed that the Vietnam War was a civil war and America should not intervene. They argued that the war was having an adverse effect in Johnson's plans for the Great Society Programme. Many also felt that the tactics used by the Americans were morally wrong. From the mid-1960s, there were marches and demonstrations protesting at the war. The number of 'doves' in the Democratic Party grew, with Congressmen and Senators coming out against the war. Respected black leaders, like Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali, began to oppose it, claiming that black men were fighting a white man's war. 6

### **The Credibility Gap**

Many ordinary Americans began to feel that the government was being less and less truthful in revealing the full extent of what was happening in Vietnam and this led to a credibility gap. Media in Vietnam beamed back horrific pictures of the reality of war. Johnson came under increasing pressure to either win quickly or withdraw. However, even as the anti-war movement gathered momentum, Johnson continued to claim that he was winning, and American troops would be home *"by Christmas"*. However, the Tet Offensive contradicted his claims. The event led to the deaths of 81,000 people, and 4,000 Americans came home in body bags. Johnson's reputation began to suffer and everywhere he went he was bombarded with slogans like *"Hey, hey LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?"* As opposition grew, Johnson was forced to withdraw from the presidential race. 6

### **Conclusion: Johnson's role in the war**

Johnson's involvement in the Vietnam War overshadowed his achievements in other areas like civil rights and social welfare. The war diverted resources from these projects and made them less effective. He refused to raise taxes to pay for the war and this created inflation, which undermined the US economy in the 1970s. His inability to either win or leave destroyed his career and forced him to retire early. 4

CM= 24/24 (28)

OM= 16/16

Excellent essay, well done.