

A Dubious Crusade

JAMES A. WARREN

The Vietnam War, or the Second Indochina War, as it is sometimes called, was the longest and most controversial conflict in American history. Because the government of the United States never officially called the conflict in Vietnam a war, it's hard to say just when it began. The first official American deaths in Vietnam occurred in 1959. Although very few Americans died in the jungles of Southeast Asia until 1965, when the first combat units were sent there, the U.S. government supplied the French with money and equipment to fight the Vietnamese communists in their war, which began in 1946, and continued to support anticommunists in Vietnam up to 1975.



All wars are complex, brutal affairs that test the endurance of soldier and ordinary citizen alike. The Vietnam War, in which the United States, its allies, and South Vietnam fought against rebels within South Vietnam called the Vietcong and communists from North Vietnam, tested the endurance and the understanding of the American people in ways that other wars have not.

As an episode of military history, Vietnam is really just beginning to be explored, and its importance goes far beyond military history. The American experience in Vietnam provides us with a wealth of clues and insights about modern American history and American values. When President John F. Kennedy was laying the groundwork for direct American intervention in Vietnam in the early 1960s, the United States had reached the height of its power and self-confidence. We were the unchallenged leaders of the free world. There was a belief among the nation's leaders that the United States was invincible, that it had not only the political and military might to do what it wanted where it wanted, but also the moral authority to do so.

In 1975, Americans watched on television the humiliating evacuation of Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam. The surrender of the city to the communists ended a terrible era in our history—an era that changed us. America was an entirely different nation than it had been back in the early 1960s. We were no

longer so sure of our path, no longer confident that we had the answers to all the important questions.

The war had come close to tearing the nation apart. The American public no longer trusted its government. The armed forces of the nation had become demoralized and fragmented. The soul and conscience of the nation had been deeply wounded. And more than 57,000 men had sacrificed their lives in what is now thought to be a dubious crusade.

