

VIETNAM—A TRAGEDY!

By John A. Braithwaite

DIRECTIONS:

Using your knowledge of the time period and topic, and any other resources you have or care to consult, respond to the following question fully, accurately, and from a variety of viewpoints.

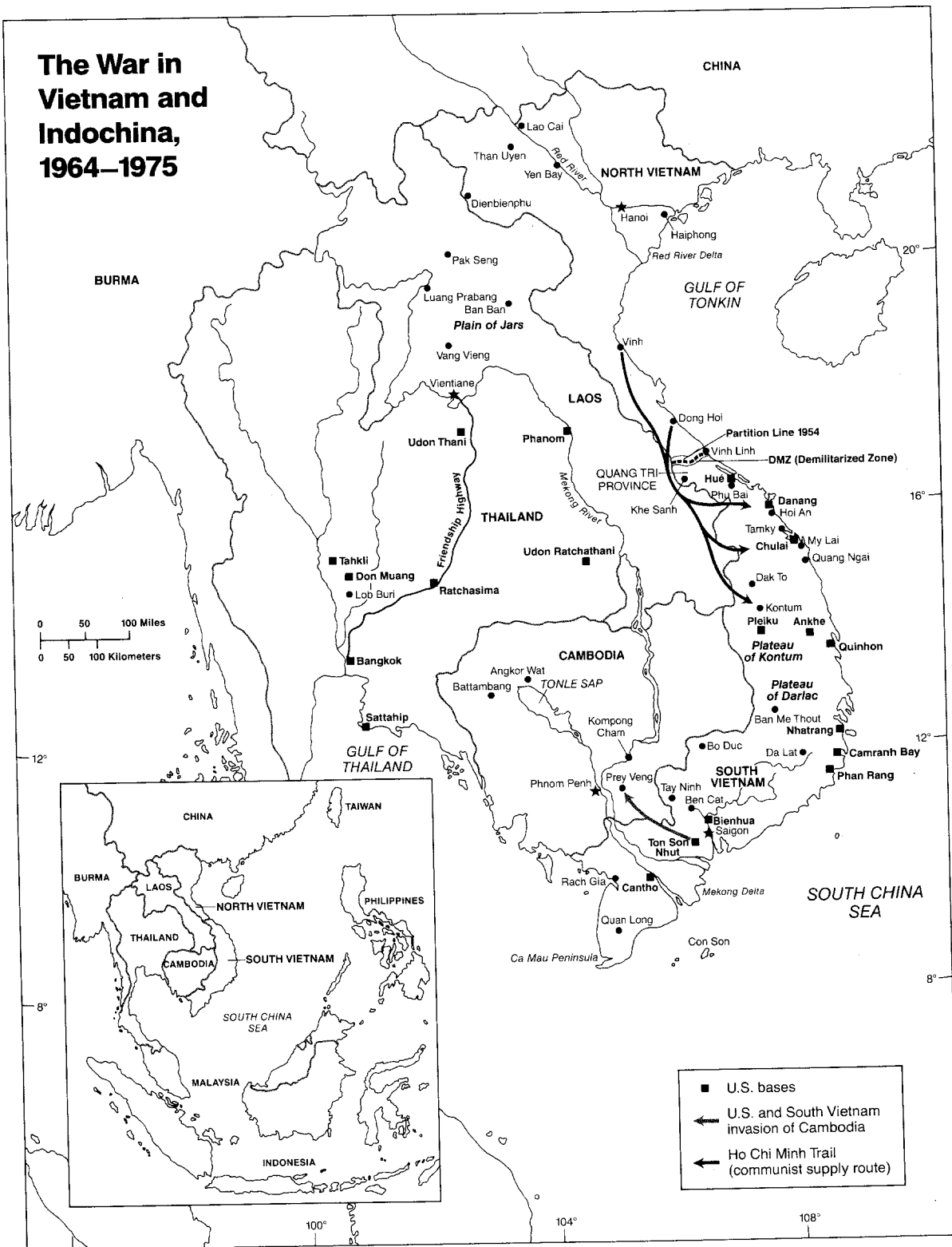
QUESTION:

What factors (general and specific) led to the total tragedy of Vietnam? Identify and analyze how three of the following issues affected developments and outcomes of the war—geo-political problems, diplomatic crises, military challenges, religious struggles, cultural conflicts and/or personal calamities that were encountered in the Vietnam conflict 1954-1973.

PROMPT:

1. Discuss and analyze the issues.
2. Discuss in some detail the major diplomatic, military, religious & political crises
3. What role does ideology play in the Vietnam struggle?
4. What four major nations were involved in this long, costly, and brutal war?
5. Were there any winners in the conflict—both immediate and long-range?
6. Read the Nexttext book, *The Vietnam War*

Document A



Document B:

Source: Nexttext. Article by Bernard B. Fall. "Settlement at Geneva." P.17

Soon after the cease-fire in Korea, in July 1953, Communist equipment and advisers began to flow more plentifully to Ho Chi Minh's Viet-Minh forces fighting the French in Indochina. Pressures began to build up in France for a negotiated settlement along Korean lines. Pres. Eisenhower, Prime Minister Churchill, Premier Joseph Laniel of France decided to discuss Indochina problem with the Soviet Union at the foreign-minister level.

That was the signal for General Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho's Commander-in-Chief to deliver a stunning blow to the French in Indochina so as to strengthen his side's negotiating position to the utmost.

When the conference began in Geneva on April 27, the ghastly news of the agony of Dien Bien Phu completely overshadowed the Korean part of the negotiation, which soon quagmire into a stalemate. By the time the delegates turned to Indochina on May 8, 1954, Dien Bien Phu had fallen a few hours earlier, and France's Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault, his voice choked with tears, could do little else but to begin the discussion with a eulogy to his country's fallen heroes

Document C:

Source: *The Vietnam War*. Nexttext. Abstract of NY Times article by Homer Bigart.

SAIGON, Feb.24—The United States is involved in a war in Vietnam American troops will stay until victory.

American support to Vietnam has always been based on the fear that Communist control of this country would jeopardize all Southeast Asia. And it continues despite the fact that Diem's American critics—especially liberals repelled by the dictatorial aspects of his regime—have been predicting his imminent downfall.

Diem remains firmly in charge and Washington's support for his regime today seems more passionate and inflexible than ever.

Thereafter the United States played an increasingly important role. To use a favorite Washington term, aid was "escalated" until \$2 billion has been sunk into Vietnam with no end to the outlay in sight.

This may sound more reckless than the best brinkmanship of John Foster Dulles' days, and perhaps it is. But...the Kennedy Administration seems convinced that the Communists won't rise to the challenge of the American presence and assistance.

The battle that is being fought is complex—in the nature of fighting, in internal political background and its international implications.

American combat troops are not likely to be thrown into Vietnam unless Communist North Vietnam moves across the seventeenth parallel or pushes large forces down through Laos into South Vietnam.

The man who is at the center of the Vietnamese effort and who is also a center of controversy—President Diem—is something of an enigma. He is a mandarin (aristocrat) and a devout Catholic. So there are two strikes against him at the start...

The United States seems inextricably committed to a long, inconclusive war. The Communists can prolong it for years. Even without large-scale intervention from the north, which would lead to "another Korea," what may be achieved at best is only restoration of a tolerable security similar to that achieved in Malaya after years of fighting. But it is too late to disengage; our prestige has been committed. Washington says we will stay until the finish.

--Homer Bigot, Correspondent, NYT

Document D:

Source: Lyndon B. Johnson, speech to the American People, April 7, 1965

THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

The world as it is in Asia is not a serene or peaceful place.

The first reality nation of South Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest.

Of course, some of the people of South Vietnam are participating in attack on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from north to south.

This support is the heartbeat of the war.

And it is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks.

The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy.

Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. Peking urges the rulers in Hanoi on.

Why are these realities our concern?

We are there because we have a promise to keep.

Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.

We will do everything necessary to reach that objective. And we will do only what is absolutely necessary.

Document E:

Source: Ho Chi Minh's Speech to the National Assembly, April 15, 1965

Over the past ten years, the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen have carried out an extremely ruthless war and have caused much grief to our compatriots in South Vietnam. Over the past few months, they have frenziedly expanded the war to North Vietnam.

The U.S. imperialists are precisely the saboteurs of the Geneva Agreements... yet, they have brazenly declared that because they wished to "restore peace" they have brought ... troops to our country.

We love peace but we are not afraid of war.

The American people have been duped by the propaganda of their government, which has extorted from them billions of dollars to throw into the crater of war.

Our people are living in an extremely glorious period of history. Our country has the great honor of being the outpost of the socialist camp and of the world's peoples struggling against imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism

I call on our compatriots and fighters to constantly heighten their revolutionary heroism, vigilance, and fighting spirit...

For the future of the Fatherland, for the happiness of our people, let all compatriots and fighters throughout the country valiantly march forward.

Document F:

GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT

What happened in the Gulf? As noted earlier, *U.S.S. Maddox* commenced the second DE SOTO patrol on 31 July. On the prior night South Vietnamese coastal patrol forces made a midnight attack, including an amphibious "commando" raid, on Hon Me and Hon Nieu Islands, about 19 N. latitude. At the time of this attack, *U.S.S. Maddox* was 120-130 miles away just heading into waters off North Vietnam. On 2 August, having reached the northernmost point on its patrol track and having headed South, the destroyer was intercepted by three North Vietnamese patrol boats. Apparently, these boats and a fleet of junks had moved into the area near the island to search for the attacking force and had mistaken *Maddox* for a South Vietnamese escort vessel. When the PT boats began their high speed run at her, at a distance of approximately 20 miles, the destroyer was 28 miles from the coast and heading farther into international waters. Two of the boats closed to within 5,000 yards, launching one torpedo each. As they approached, *Maddox* fired on the boats with her 5-inch batteries and altered course to avoid the torpedoes, which were observed passing the starboard side at a distance of 100 to 200 yards. The third boat moved up abeam of the destroyer and took a direct 5-inch hit; it managed to launch a torpedo which failed to run. All three PT boats fired 50-caliber machine guns at *Maddox* as they were firing rounds, and a bullet fragment was recovered from the destroyer's superstructure. The attacks occurred in mid-afternoon and photographs were taken of the torpedo boats as they attacked.

Upon first report of the PT boats' apparently hostile intent, four F-8E aircraft were launched from the aircraft carrier, *Ticonderoga*, many miles to the south, with instruction to provide air cover but not to fire unless they or the *Maddox* were fired upon. As *Maddox* continued in a southerly direction, *Ticonderoga's* aircraft attacked the two boats that had initiated the action. Both were damaged with Zuni rockets and 20mm gunfire....

Document G:

Source: Eisenhower Press Conference April 7, 1954

Question, Robert Richards, Copley Press:

"Mr. President, would you mind commenting on the strategic importance of Indochina for the free world?"

Eisenhower's Reply:

"You have, of course, both the specific and the general, when you talk about such things. First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs.

Then you have the possibility that many human beings pass under a dictatorship that is inimical to the free world.

Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences....

So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.

Document H:

Source: In 1964 General Maxwell D. Taylor, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent the following memorandum, to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, proposing intensified U.S. military actions in Vietnam

(The) Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that the United States must make ready to conduct increasingly bolder actions in Southeast Asia; specifically as to Vietnam to:

- a. Assign to the U.S. military commander responsibilities for the total U.S. program in Vietnam.
- b. Induce the Government of Vietnam to turn over to the United States military commander, temporarily, the actual tactical direction of the war.
- c. Charge the United States military commander with complete responsibility for conduct of the program against North Vietnam.
- d. Over fly Laos and Cambodia to whatever extent is necessary for acquisition of operational intelligence.
- e. Induce the Government of Vietnam to conduct overt ground operations in Laos of sufficient scope to impede the flow of personnel and material southward.
- f. Arm, equip, advise, and support the Government of Vietnam in its conduct of aerial bombing of critical targets in North Vietnam and in mining the sea approaches to that country.
- g. Advise and support the Government of Vietnam in its conduct of large-scale commando raids against critical targets in North Vietnam.
- h. Conduct aerial bombing of key North Vietnam targets, using U.S. resources under Vietnamese cover, and with the Vietnamese openly assuming responsibility for the actions.
- i. Commit additional U.S. forces, as necessary, in support of the combat action within South Vietnam.
- j. Commit U.S. forces as necessary in direct actions against North Vietnam.

Document J:

Source: Soldier's Letter Home

19 October 1967

Mom and Dad—

Your oldest son is now a captain in the United States Marine Corps. I was promoted yesterday. Of all the men selected for captain, 1,640 men, only 50 have been promoted to date. I was one of the 50, to my surprise and and pleasure. My effective date of rank is 1 July 1967, which means I have technically been captain for 3 ½ months. I am thus due back pay for 3 ½ months. With this promotion, my annual income is \$9,000.00 a year. I am single, 24 years old, college educated, a captain in the Marine Corps, and I have \$11,000.00 worth of securities. That is not bad start in life is it?

Mom, I appreciate all your letters. I appreciate your concern that some of the things you write about are trivial, but they aren't trivial to me. I'm eager to read anything about what you are doing of the family is doing You can't understand the importance these trivial event take on out here. It helps keep me civilized. For a while, as I read your letters, I am a normal person. I'm not killing people, or worried about being killed. While I read your letters, I'm not carrying guns and grenades. Instead I am going ice skating with David or walking through a department store exchange a lamp shade. It is great to know your family's safe, living a secure country; a country made secure by thousands upon thousands of men who have died for that country

In the Philippines I took a bus ride along the infamous route of the Bataan death march. I passed graveyards that were marked with row after row of plain white crosses. Thousands upon thousands. These were American graves—American graves in Okinawa, Korea, France, England, and North Africa—around the world. I was proud to be an American, proud to be a Marine, proud to do the fighting in Asia.

No, Mom, these things aren't trivial to me. They are vitally important to me. Those are the truly important things, not what I'm doing. I hope you will continue write about those "trivial" things because that is what I enjoy learning about the most.

Your son,
Rod

[Rod was killed October 22, at age of 25]

Document K:

Steve Gillon, *The American Experiment*. pp. 1160-1162

The Soldier's War:

Who fought in Vietnam? From 1964 to 1973, 2.2 million men were drafted, 8.7 enlisted, and 16 million did not serve. The average age of American soldiers in Vietnam was 19. In World War II, the average American soldier was 26 years old. The total number of women who served...was 50,000.

For combat soldiers in the field, Vietnam could be hell. Climate and country imposed horrible conditions. Malaria, blackwater fever, dysentery took their toll. "Our days were spent hacking through mountainous jungles," one marine remembered. "At night we squatted in muddy holes, picked off the leeches that sucked out veins, and waited for an attack to come rushing down from the blackness beyond the perimeter wire."

Combat involved constant patrolling, days and days of suspense waiting for an ambush or a booby trap, and then a short, intense firefight followed by more suspense. Units swept across the same area repeatedly, taking casualties each time, never seeming to achieve any lasting effect. One day they were trying to "win the hearts and minds" of local villagers; the next day they were ordered to destroy the village. A chopper pilot expressed typical bitterness: "Vietnam, man, Bomb 'em and feed 'em, bomb 'em and feed 'em."

In a war of attrition, the "body count" became the primary measure of the success. It inflicted a terrible emotional toll on the nineteen year-olds ordered to fight. "What am I doing here?" asked a young soldier. . . Not a single shot was fired at them and almost no men of military age were present in the village. Nonetheless, the American soldiers slaughtered more than 450 people and burned the village to the ground.

In the final years of the war, as American troop withdrawals increased, many soldiers refused to risk their lives in what they believed was a futile effort. Who wanted to be, asked Lieutenant John Kerry, "the last man to die in Vietnam"? Desertion and absent-without-leave (AWOL) rates skyrocketed. Violence against officers multiplied. Drug abuse reached epidemic proportions. In 1969 the Pentagon estimated that nearly two-thirds of combat soldiers had used marijuana, while one third had tried heroin. "What the hell is going on?" asked a bewildered general. "Is this a goddamned army or mental hospital?"

Document L:

Source: James S. Olsen and Randy Roberts *My Lai: A Brief History*. New York: Bedford Books, 1998. P.82

Congressional Testimony of Varnado Simpson

Question: “Did you see anyone killed?”

Answer: “Yes. I saw Wright, Hutto, Hudson, Rucker (deceased), and Mower go into a hut and rape 17-18 girl. I watched from the door. When they all got done, they took their weapons...and fired until she was dead. Her face was just blown away and her brains were just everywhere. I did not take part in the rape or the shooting.

Question: Did each of these men—Hutto, Wright, Hudson, Rucker and Mower have sexual intercourse with that girl?

Answer: Yes they did.

Question: Did you see anyone else killed?

Answer: I witnessed a lot of people being killed...I estimate there 400 people killed in My Lai. I would like to stress that everyone was ordered by Medina to kill these people: the killing was done on his orders.

Document M:

Vietnam in American Literature after 1966 poetic protest

All was still.
The sun rose through
silver pine boughs
Over sleeping green-straw huts,
Over cool rice ponds,
Through the emerald jungles
Into the sky

The men rose and went out to the fields and ponds.
The women set pots on the fire, boiling rice and jungle
Berries, and some baskets went for fish.
The children played in the streams and danced
Through the weeds.

Then there was a flash—silver and gold
Silver and gold,
Silver birds flying,
Golden water raining,
The rice ponds blazed with new water,
The jungles burst into gold and sent up little birds of fire
Little animals with fur of fire.

Then the children flamed.
Running—their clothes flying like fiery kites
Screaming—their screams dying as their faces seared.
The woman's baskets burned on their heads
The men's blazed on the rice water.

Then the rains came.
A rag, fire black, fluttered.
A curl of smoke rose from a lone rice stem.
The forest lay singed, seared.
A hut crumbled.

And all was still.
Listen, Americans,
Listen, clear and long.
The children are screaming
In the jungles of Haiphong

Document N:

Source: Bill Mauldin's Cartoon, Chicago Sun-Times, 1966.

By 1966, many Americans were agonizing about their country's involvement in Southeast Asia, and a bitter argument over the Vietnam War was intensifying. In the following image, from the Chicago Sun-Times, renowned cartoonist Bill Mauldin ridiculed both the pro-war and antiwar factions. Was his criticism fair? What is the cartoonist's own view of the war? What policy choices other than escalation and withdrawal were there?



Document O:

Source: President Richard Nixon's Speech, November 3, 1969

Let me begin by describing the situation I found when I was inaugurated on January 20th;

- The war had been going on for four years.
- 31,000 American had been killed in action.
- The training program in South Vietnam was behind schedule
- 540,000 Americans were in Viet-Nam, with no place to reduce the number.
- No progress had been made at the negotiations in Paris.
- The war was causing deep division at home and criticism abroad.

The defense of freedom is everybody's business—not just American business.

The policy of the previous administration not only resulted in our assuming the primary responsibility for fighting the war but, even more significantly did not adequately stress the goal of strengthening the South Vietnamese so that they could defend themselves when we left.

The Vietnamization plan was launched... I ordered first a substantial increase in the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces.

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States, Only Americans can do that.

Document P:

Source: Robert F. Kennedy Speech, Quoted in the New York Times (9 February 1968).

No one can predict the exact shape or outcome of the battles now in progress, in Saigon or Khesanh. Let us pray that we will succeed at the lowest cost to our young men.

First, that a total military victory is not within sight or around the corner; that, in fact is probably beyond our grasp, and that the effort to win such a victory will only result in the further slaughter of thousands of innocent and helpless people—a slaughter which forever will rest on our national conscience.

Second, that the pursuit of such a victory is not necessary to our national interest, and is even damaging that national interest.

Third, that the progress we claimed toward increasing our control over the country and the security of the population is largely illusionary.

Reality is grim and painful. But it is only a remote echo of the anguish toward which a policy founded on illusion is surely taking us.

This is a great nation and a strong people. Any who seek to comfort rather than speak plainly, reassure rather than instruct, promise satisfaction rather than reveal frustration—they deny that greatness and drain that strength. For today as it was in the beginning, it is a truth that makes us free.

Document Q:

Source Colin Powell Remember His Two Tours of Vietnam. *My American Journey*. New York: Random House, 1995

The Saigon I had known in 1962 now looked as if it had been trampled by a giant. Where before the streets had been full of pedicabs, now they jammed with jeeps, staff cars, and Army trucks. Where previously the U.S. presence had been muted. GIs now swarmed all over the place. Quiet Bistros had been displaced by noisy bars populated by B-girls catering to our troops. The charming colonial capital was encircled by American barracks, headquarters, storage depots, airfields, hospitals, even military jails. Saigon now resembled an American garrison town more than the Paris of the Orient. I could not wait to go up-country.

But as time passed and my perspective enlarged, another part of my brain began examining the experience more penetratingly. I had gone off to war in 1962 standing on the bedrock of principle and conviction. And I had watched that foundation eroded by euphemisms, lies, and self-deception. The pernicious game-playing that I first detected...during my first tour had reached full flowing during my second.

Dark episodes like My Lai resulted, in part, because of the military's obsession with another semifiction, the "body count." That grisly yard stick produced by the Vietnam War.

At the end of my first tour, I had guessed that finishing the job would take half a million men. Six years later, during my second tour, we reached the peak of 543,400 and it still was not enough. Given the terrain, the kind of war the VC were waging, and the casualties, no level of US involvement would have been enough

I remember a soldier...who stepped on a mine and one leg hung like a shred, and his lung was punctured. He was just a kid, and I can never forget the expression on his face, a mixture of astonishment, fear, curiosity, and most of all, incomprehension. He kept trying to speak, but the words would not come out. His eyes seemed to be saying, why? I did not have an answer, then or now. He died in my arms before we could reach Duc Pho.

Document R:

This was a press statement issued by President Johnson on July 28, 1965

It [the Vietnam War] is guided by North Viet-Nam, and it is spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the South, to defeat American power, and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism....

Most of the non-Communist nations of Asia cannot, by themselves and alone, resist the growing might and the grasping ambition of Asian Communism.

...If we are driven from the field in Viet-Nam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise or in American protection.... We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else.

Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another country, bringing with it perhaps even larger and crueller conflict, as we have learned from the lessons of history.

Moreover, we are in Viet-Nam to fulfill one of the most solemn pledges of the American nation. Three Presidents--President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and your present President--over 11 years have committed themselves and have promised to help defend this small and valiant nation.

Strengthened by that promise, the people of South Viet-Nam have fought for many long years. Thousands of them have died. Thousands more have been crippled and scarred by war. We just cannot now dishonor our word, or abandon our commitment, or leave those who believed us and who trusted us to the terror and repression and murder that would follow.

This, then, my fellow Americans, is why we are in Viet-Nam.

RECOMMENDED OUTSIDE READING FOR THIS DBQ:

Steve M. Gillon, *The American Experiment*. Chap 29 pp.1133

Stephen B. Oates, *The Portrait of America*. Chap 25 pp. 332

Robert J McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*

Nexttext Reader, *The Vietnam War* McDougal Littell

The American Journey. [Documents edited by Ohio State University History Department.]

David M. Kennedy, *The American Pageant*. Houghton Mifflin

Carol Berkin, et.al. *Making America* Houghton Mifflin.

WEBSITES FOR RESEARCH:

"The War of Vietnam: An Overview."

<http://students.vassar.edu/~vietnam/overview.html>