The Vietnam War

The War Itself
Learning Outcomes

• I can explain how the Vietnam War was different and why it made the war especially difficult.
Unfamiliar Terrain

- Few American GIs had ever experienced such **hot and humid** conditions
  - Temperatures rose above **90°F** much of the year
  - Heavy **monsoon** rains fell from May to October.
Unfamiliar Terrain

- Greatest geographic challenge for U.S. soldiers was Vietnam’s **rugged topography**.
  - Soggy, lowland rice paddies
  - **Swamps** and over steep jungle-clad mountains
  - Heavily forested
Tactics and Strategies

Viet Cong Advantages
• Guerilla warfare
• Familiar with terrain
• Protection in Cambodia and Laos
• Could hide in local population

US Disadvantages
• Confused and frustrated
• People at home seemed indifferent (not much support)
• Friend vs foe? (Enemy and friends are all Vietnamese)
• Even women and children posed a threat (VC could be anywhere)
The Ground War

- War of Attrition
  - William Westmoreland
  - Wear down the enemy
- Search and Destroy
  - Small units of soldiers (platoons)
  - Search for insurgents (why is this a problem?)
    - Draw them into a fight (basically making yourself bait)
    - Call in air support
- Effectiveness?
  - Makes American soldiers easy targets – high body count
The Ground War

• VC avoided head-on clashes
• Small group **sneak attacks**
• Hide in elaborate **underground tunnels**
  • Running water and electricity
• **Booby traps**
  • Punji trap – camouflaged pit of sharp stakes
  • Land mines
  • Trip wires
  • Made little contact with the enemy
The Battle in the Air

- B-52 bombers
- Target roads and bridges
- Thousands of tons of explosives
- **Saturation (Carpet) bombing**
  - Like it sounds. Super dense bombing
- **Fragmentation bombs**
  - Exploded into lots of small pieces
  - Many civilians killed
The Battle in the Air

• **Chemical weapons**
  - **Agent orange**
    - Herbicide
    - Exposed hiding places
    - Kills crops, humans and livestock
  - **Napalm**
    - Jellylike substance
    - Intensely hot burning
Running from Agent Orange and Napalm. Would burn skin and melt clothes.
Pacification

- Campaign to win over the Vietnamese people and undermine support for the Viet Cong
  - Policy designed to **promote security and stability** in South Vietnam.
  - First aimed to bring **economic development** to rural South Vietnam
    - Supplying villages with food and other goods to building schools and bridges
    - Spread **propaganda**
      - United States hoped to “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people.
Pacification

- **Second, sought to undermine the communist insurgency**
  - Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) remove the Viet Cong and their sympathizers from villages.
    - Cut off the flow of recruits to the enemy
    - Make it safe for rural Vietnamese to support the Saigon government.
  - **Problems:**
    - ARVN **lacked the leadership**, skills, and dedication
    - Second, the U.S. forces in Vietnam were too busy fighting the Viet Cong to pay much attention to “the other war” for villagers’ “hearts and minds.”
    - **The lack of security**
      - difficult to carry out their mission.