

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

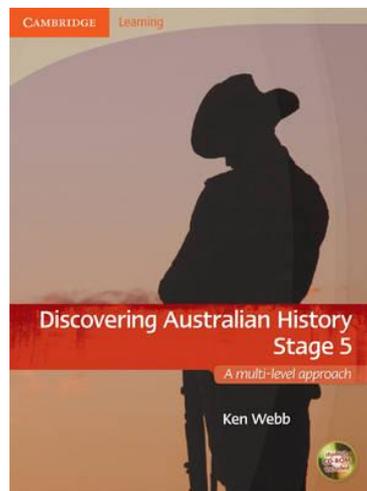
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Webb, K. (2008). *Discovering Australian history stage 5*. Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press.



Interact with history!

Concern about the growing threat of communism was not restricted to Australia at this time. The United States did not trust the Soviet Union. The Soviets had taken over half of Europe, were allies of communist China and were assisting communists in a host of other countries. Soviet spies inside the US and the UK had provided the Soviet Union with the information needed to produce a Soviet atomic bomb.

US Senator Joseph McCarthy saw communist sympathisers wherever he looked: in the army, in Hollywood, even in the White House. To seek out these suspected traitors, McCarthy used the House Committee on Un-American Activities. This led to the phenomenon of '**McCarthyism**'.

2 In groups, research the activities of McCarthy and similar events of the time, and report back to the class. Your research might be done under the following headings:

- | | |
|--|--|
| a McCarthy's attacks on Hollywood | d The Rosenbergs |
| b McCarthy's attacks on the army | e Arthur Miller's <i>The Crucible</i> and McCarthyism |
| c Alger Hiss | f The demise of McCarthy |

McCarthyism practice of seeking out communists in America, real or imagined

Why did Australia become involved in the Vietnam War?

Background to the Vietnam conflict

The region of Indochina in South-East Asia comprises the countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Between the early 1860s and 1940, this region came under the colonial control of France. During World War II, it was occupied by Japan. With the defeat of Japan in 1945, France sought to restore its colonial control. However, the nationalist Vietnamese wanted to create their own nation. Between 1946 and 1954, war raged between the French and the nationalist **Vietminh** forces led by Ho Chi Minh. In 1954, French rule came to an end when the French army suffered a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Although victorious against the French, Ho Chi Minh failed to gain control of all of his country. The Geneva Conference of 1954 determined that Vietnam would be divided at the 17th parallel into a communist North Vietnam, and non-communist South Vietnam. South Vietnam soon came under the control of Ngo Dinh Diem, who had the solid backing of the United States.



Figure 5.10 Map of South-East Asia in 1954 showing the division of Vietnam.

Vietminh revolutionary nationalist Vietnamese organisation that fought against the Japanese and the French

By the early 1960s, Diem's government faced major problems. Its repressive policies had made it very unpopular. It also faced constant attacks from **Vietcong** guerrillas. The Vietcong was originally an alliance of various Vietnamese groups opposed to Diem. However, it increasingly came under communist influence. Its aim became a united communist Vietnam. With strong backing from communist North Vietnam, by 1964, the Vietcong were on the verge of overthrowing the government of South Vietnam.

This situation caused great concern in the United States. American leaders believed in the 'domino theory', that is, the belief that if South

Vietnam fell to communism, other countries in the region – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia – would also fall under communism, just like a row of dominoes. Faced with this situation, the United States decided to send troops to Vietnam to support the government of South Vietnam and fight against the communists. In 1968, the US had 550 000 troops fighting in the Vietnam War. By the end of the war, US forces had suffered almost 60 000 dead; over three million Vietnamese died during the war.

Vietcong Vietnamese communist guerrilla forces who fought against the Americans and South Vietnamese

Exercise 5.5

Did you get it?

- 1 Which three countries comprise Indochina?
- 2 Who ruled Indochina before 1940?
- 3 What happened following the defeat of Japan in 1945?
- 4 Where did France suffer a humiliating defeat in 1954?

Consider this!

- 5 Research the details of the 1954 Geneva Conference. To what does the 17th parallel refer?
- 6 How was North Vietnam ruled after 1954?
- 7 Why did the United States support the government of South Vietnam?
- 8 What was the situation in South Vietnam by 1964?

Interact with history!

- 9 In 1947, US President Truman announced the Truman Doctrine; in 1954 President Eisenhower announced the domino theory. Research both ideas and then produce a mind map to explain why it was likely the United States would intervene in Vietnam after 1954.

Reasons for Australia's involvement

In 1965, the Menzies government decided to commit combat troops to support the United States in the Vietnam War. The reasons behind Australian thinking are summarised in Figure 5.11.

- In 1962, Australia sent thirty military advisors to South Vietnam to help train the Southern army; by 1964 this figure was sixty.
- Throughout 1964, Foreign Minister Hasluck was encouraging the Americans to take a stand against communism in Vietnam.

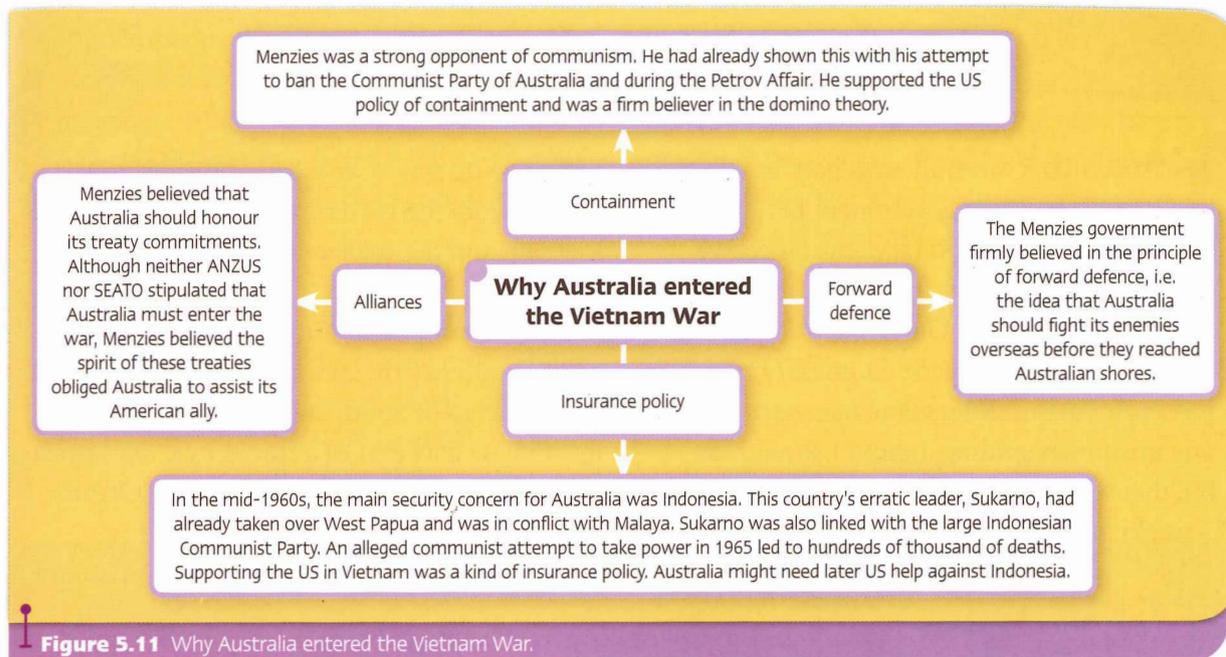


Figure 5.11 Why Australia entered the Vietnam War.

- In November 1964, Menzies introduced **conscription**, aiming to increase army numbers to 37 000 in three years.
 - Once they reached twenty years of age, men had to register for national service.
 - The birthdays of those registered would be drawn out of a barrel similar to a lotto draw.
 - If a man's number was drawn, they were liable for two years national service.

In December 1964, Menzies informed US President Johnson that Australia was willing to commit troops to Vietnam. However, the Australian Government faced a major difficulty: the South Vietnamese Government did not want Australian troops.

- Throughout April, there was pressure placed on the South Vietnamese Government by Australian and American diplomats to 'invite' the Australians into the war.
- Eventually, on 29 April 1965, the South Vietnamese Government 'requested' Australia to send military assistance to help it in its campaign against the communists.

- Menzies gleefully told parliament of the 'request' and soon Australian troops were on their way to Vietnam.
- Menzies' deception did not become public knowledge until ten years later. It highlights the deep desire of the Menzies government to enmesh the US in the Vietnam War and show Australia as a loyal ally.

Menzies retired in January 1966 and was succeeded by Harold Holt. On a visit to Washington in July 1966, Holt gave a speech in which he addressed President Johnson and stated: 'You have an admiring friend, a staunch friend that will be all the way with LBJ.' Johnson visited Australia in October and was generally warmly welcomed, although there were some protests against his visit. In November 1966, Holt easily won the Federal election, which was fought mainly on the issue of Vietnam.

At its height, Australian troop numbers in Vietnam reached 8000. Over 43 000 Australian troops served in Vietnam; 504 died.

Interesting fact

Harold Holt was one of the longest continually serving members in the House of Representatives. He served for 32 years 4 months. He spent 30 years in parliament before he became Prime Minister. He was the first Prime Minister to employ a speech-writer.

Source 5.2

Prime Minister Menzies addressing Federal Parliament, 29 April, 1965

The Australian Government is now in receipt of a request from the government of South Vietnam for further military assistance. We have decided – and this has been after close consultation with the Government of the United States – to provide an infantry battalion for service in South Vietnam. In case there is any misunderstanding, I think I should say, Sir, that we decided in principle some time ago – weeks and weeks ago – that we would be

willing to do this if we received the necessary request from the Government of South Vietnam and the **collaboration** from the United States ...

The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

collaboration cooperating and working together

Source 5.3

Extract of a letter from Alan Renouf, First Secretary in the Australian Embassy in Washington, to the Department of External Affairs in Canberra, 11 May 1964

The problem of Vietnam is one, it seems, where we could, without a disproportionate expenditure, pick up a lot of credit with the United States for this problem is one to which the United States is deeply committed and in which it genuinely feels it is carrying too much of the load.

Source 5.4

Extract from the 1967 Australian Military Forces Pocketbook, South Vietnam

The war in Vietnam is not a civil war as some people try to make out, but deliberate, sustained aggression started, controlled, directed and supported by North Vietnam against the South. In this type of conflict the standard communist tactics of subversion, terror, murder, attacks on women and children and the wanton killing of village administrators are being employed daily by the Viet Cong ... tens of thousands of local government officials, civilian school teachers and even nurses have been slaughtered by the Viet Cong.

Australian Military Forces Pocketbook, South Vietnam, Canberra, 1967, p. 10

Source 5.5

Extract from an article by journalist Alan Ramsay, Sydney Morning Herald, 1994

After Robert Menzies announced on 29 April 1965 that he was committing Australian troops to the escalating Vietnam War, (Labor Party leader) Calwell, in a speech to parliament the following week as Opposition Leader said in part:

‘We do not think it is a wise decision ... We do not think it is a right decision. We do not think it will help the fight against communism. We do not believe it will promote the welfare of the people of Vietnam. On the contrary, we believe it will prolong and deepen the suffering



of that unhappy people ...

... As the war drags on, who is to say that (Australian troop numbers) will not rise to 8000, and that these will not be drawn from our voteless, conscripted 20-year-olds? (It did, and they were).

... When the drums beat and the trumpets sound, the voices of reason and right can be heard in this land only with difficulty ... I offer you the probability ... that your patriotism will be impugned, that your courage will be called

into question. But I also offer you the sure and certain knowledge that we will be vindicated, that generations to come will record with gratitude that when a reckless Government wilfully endangered the security of this nation, the voice of the Labor Party was heard, strong and clear ...'

There's rarely been a more prophetic political speech.

Alan Ramsay, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 April 1994.

Exercise 5.6

Did you get it?

- 1 How does Source 5.2 illustrate Menzies' belief in the domino theory?
- 2 In what way do you think Menzies is telling the truth in Source 5.2?
- 3 In what way do you think Menzies is lying in Source 5.2?
- 4 How does Source 5.4 try to present the conflict in Vietnam?

Consider this!

- 5 Renouf is arguing for Australian involvement in Source 5.3. Does he base his argument on principle or self-interest? Give reasons.
- 6 Do you consider Source 5.4 to be a reliable source? Give reasons.
- 7 In Source 5.5, why is Calwell opposed to sending troops to Vietnam?
- 8 Why does Alan Ramsay describe Calwell's speech as 'prophetic'?

Interact with history!

- 9 Compared to the Americans, the Australian presence in Vietnam was minor.



Figure 5.12 Soldiers in Vietnam record Christmas messages to be sent to their families back in Australia.



Figure 5.13 A group of Australian soldiers in Vung Tau, Vietnam, 1966.

continued →

Exercise 5.6 continued

However, in those areas in which it operated, it was effective. Write an exposition, about 500 words, on the following topic:

'Regardless of the rights and wrongs of Australian entry into the Vietnam War, Australian service personnel performed effectively and honourably and continued the tradition of the Anzac legend.'

Useful websites

There are many websites that can help you research this topic. The following will help get you started:

www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam.htm

This site will take you to some additional links which cover this area well.

<http://www.diggerhistory.info>

Once you are in this site, click on 'Enter here', then click on 'Military History', and then scroll down and click on 'Vietnam'.

Australian involvement in the Vietnam War

Figure 5.14 highlights some aspects of Australian involvement in the war in Vietnam.

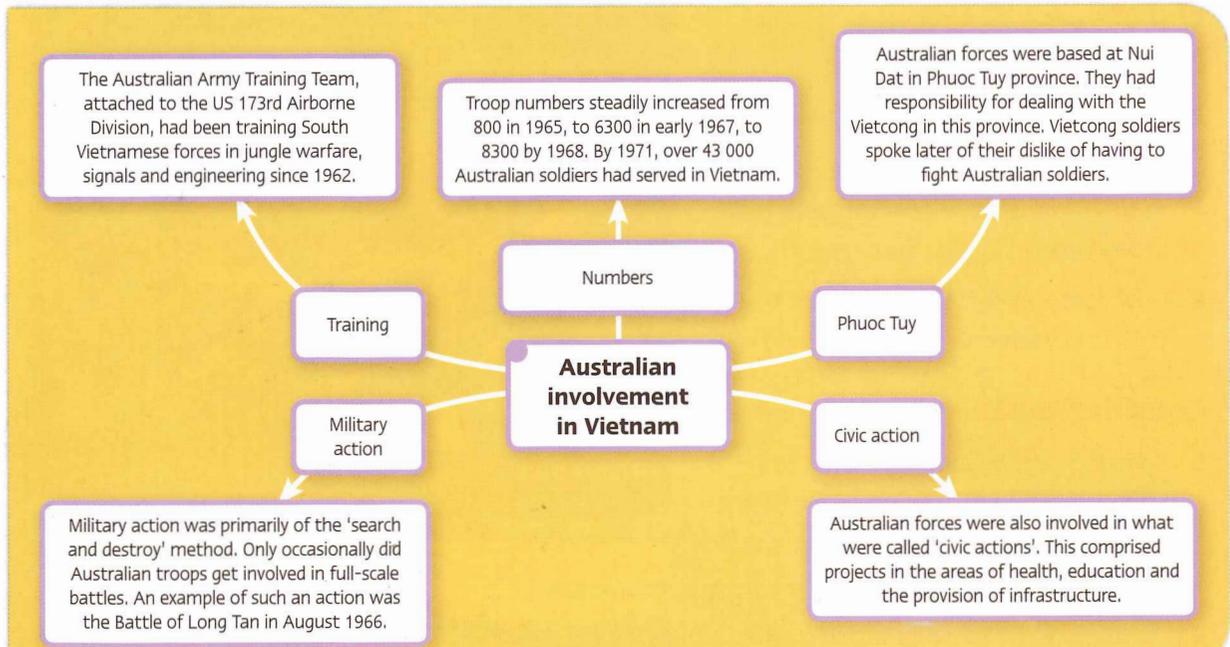


Figure 5.14 Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.

How did various groups respond to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War?

Supporters of the war

There was very little opposition in Australia to the government's decision to become involved in Vietnam. Robert Menzies had been Prime Minister

since 1949 and he was trusted by the Australian public to 'make the big decisions'. Newsreel films of the time show Menzies dealing with the



media in a contemptuous manner and the media accepting such treatment. Politicians in the early twenty-first century would never get away with Menzies-style treatment of the media. Life in Australia was good, the economy was prosperous and the good life was there to be had. A conflict in a distant country which most people had never heard of before was not yet fully on the nation's political radar.

Those Australians who did take an interest in such things were solidly behind the Prime Minister's decision. Australia shared the view of the United States that communism was a worldwide threat, and the domino theory was accepted without question. A '**Cold War consensus**' existed, that is, an acceptance of the belief that communism had to be contained for the good of Australia. This consensus had been behind Australia's decisions to fight in Korea and Malaya, and to join ANZUS and SEATO. Involvement in Vietnam was not viewed any differently.

Support in Australia for the war was widespread:

- The media – newspapers, radio, television – were mostly in favour of the war.
- Older Australians and the RSL tended to agree with the war and expected the younger generation to 'do their bit' as they had during World War II.
- Support for the war was strong in the Liberal and Country (National) parties, the Catholic Church and the DLP.
- Opinion polls showed widespread support for the decision to join the war.
- When US President Johnson visited Australia in 1966, he was received rapturously.
- The Labor Party opposed the war and in the 1966 Federal election it suffered its worst election defeat since the Depression.

Cold War consensus agreement within a country that communism must be resisted

Exercise 5.7

Did you get it?

Figure 5.15 is an election advertisement produced by the Liberal Party for the November 1966 Federal election. Study it carefully and answer the questions that follow.

- 1 What commonly accepted belief is the poster highlighting without actually stating it?
- 2 What basic principle of Australian foreign policy is the poster referring to when it says communism should be stopped 'far from our shores'?
- 3 What emotions is the poster playing on? Consider the black arrow, references to the United States and references to the Labor Party.
- 4 Do you think this is an effective piece of political advertising? Give reasons.
- 5 Were similar ideas and emotions played upon in Australia after 2003 regarding the war in Iraq?

IF VIETNAM GOES... WHO'S NEXT?

Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore... eventually, Australia, unless communist aggression is stopped while it is still controllable and far from our shores. That is why the Federal Liberal Government has established strong defence alliances with Great Britain, America and our Asian neighbours. To disregard the threat — to isolate Australia — is suicidal... and that is Labor Party policy... suicidal!

KEEP AUSTRALIA SECURE AND PROSPEROUS — PLAY SAFE

Vote 1 LIBERAL

AND FOR THE SENATE VOTE 1 COTTON, R. C.

Authorised by I. L. Curlich, Liberal Party

Figure 5.15 Liberal Party election advertisement, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 1966.

continued →

Exercise 5.7 continued

Consider this!

- 6 It is December 1966. Australian troops have been in Vietnam for well over a year and US President Johnson has visited the country. Prime Minister Holt's government has been returned to parliament with an increased majority because of its support for the Vietnam War. Write a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* explaining your support for Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.

Interact with history!

- 7 The 1966 election was decided almost entirely on issues of foreign policy. In Australia today, do you think people would vote for a party purely on foreign policy issues? To test this idea, do the following:
- In groups of three or four, compose a short questionnaire which seeks people's views on why they vote for a particular party/ the importance of foreign policy issues/ terrorism/ Australian military involvement overseas/ domestic issues. The questions need to be multiple choice.
 - Each member of the group should ask 8-10 people of voting age for their responses.
 - Back in class, group members share their results and report to the class.

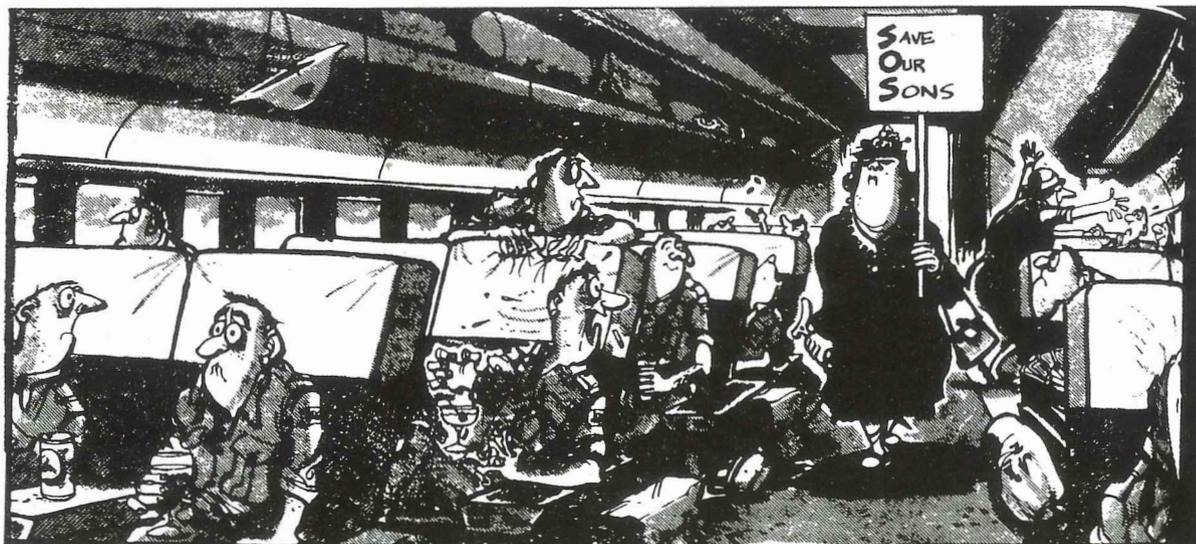
Opponents of the war

Early opposition in Australia to the Vietnam War was limited. **Pacifists** and some church groups opposed the war on moral grounds. When it became known that conscripts could be sent overseas to fight, more people began to take an

interest in the war. Groups such as the Youth Campaign Against Conscription were established.

Save Our Sons

In May 1965, the Save Our Sons (SOS) organisation was set up. This comprised a group of mothers who opposed conscripts being sent overseas to fight.



“MUM!! WHERE DID YOU SPRING FROM?!”

Figure 5.16 Newspaper cartoon from 1965.



They engaged in generally peaceful, traditional protests such as handing out leaflets, writing to members of parliament and attending demonstrations. In 1971 five SOS members were imprisoned after a protest outside the Department of Labour and National Service in Melbourne. Figure 5.16 is a contemporary amusing look at SOS.

Conscientious objectors

Another group who opposed the war from an early stage were conscientious objectors. A conscientious objector was a person who would refuse to do military service on the basis of strong personal religious or ethical reasons. Such a person might be a Jehovah's Witness. If a person claimed conscientious objection as a reason for not registering for national service, he had to prove his case in court. During the period of the Vietnam War, over 1200 men were declared conscientious objectors out of 800 000 men who had registered.

The most well known case of conscientious objection was that of school teacher Bill White in 1966. Bill White refused to register and was dragged from his home by police. White lost his job and was sent to prison. The Bill White case did much to raise the issue of opposition to the Vietnam War. He was not a 'radical, long-haired, ratbag student' but a 'clean-cut all Australian boy'. Cases such as White's and protests by 'Save Our Sons' began to place doubts in people's minds about the justice and wisdom of Australia's presence in Vietnam.

However, growing opposition to the war in Vietnam had deeper roots. Many Australians were beginning to ask questions about the war and demand answers from their government.

- What the hell are we doing fighting in the jungles of Vietnam?
 - What has this war got to do with us?
 - If the Vietnamese want to fight each other and kill each other, let them get on with it.



Figure 5.17 Bill White being dragged away by police.

But why should young Aussie lads have to die?

- Isn't this North Vietnam–South Vietnam thing a civil war? What business is it of ours?
- Why are we still in Vietnam? It's obvious the Americans are losing, what's the point?
 - Look at the **Tet Offensive** – how could the Vietcong do that if we were winning?
 - Shouldn't we bring our boys home instead of letting them die for nothing?
- Aren't we supposed to be the good guys? Look at the TV news every night, look at the terrible things we're doing.
 - We're shooting bound captives in the head at point blank range. We're **napalming** women and children.
 - We're destroying that country. What's going on?
- Conscription stinks! Why should we be forcing our young boys to go and fight in a war that has got nothing to do with us?
 - And the **birthday lottery** is disgusting. Isn't it just a 'lottery of death'?
 - Isn't it time we got rid of conscription and got out of that awful war?

radical extreme, sometimes violent protestor

Tet Offensive major Vietcong attack against US/South Vietnamese forces in January 1968

napalming attacking with napalm, a highly flammable mixture of gasoline jellied with aluminium soaps that causes instant fires

birthday lottery Australian method of conscription based on the selection of various birthdays

Exercise 5.8

Did you get it?

- 1 What major policy decision did the Menzies government make in November 1964?
- 2 What request did the South Vietnamese Government make in April 1965?
- 3 Was this a sincere request?
- 4 Who was the Labor Party leader in 1965?
- 5 What was the Labor Party view of Australian involvement in Vietnam?
- 6 What supportive phrase of the United States' action in Vietnam will always be associated with Prime Minister Harold Holt?
- 7 How many Australian troops were in Vietnam by 1968? How many Australians served in Vietnam? How many died?
- 8 Australians were mainly based in which Vietnamese province?
- 9 Which groups in Australia were most in support of the war in 1966?
- 10 Explain what is meant by the term 'a Cold War consensus'.

Consider this!

- 11 It is December 1969. Australian troops have been in Vietnam for well over four years. US President Nixon has started bringing home American troops from Vietnam with his **Vietnamisation** program. The Gorton Liberal government has been returned to parliament with a reduced majority and anti-war feeling is growing in the country. Write a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* explaining your reasons for opposing continued Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.

Interact with history!

- 12 It is December 1969. Australian troops have been in Vietnam for well over four years. US President Nixon has started bringing home American troops from Vietnam with his Vietnamisation program. The Gorton Liberal government has been returned to parliament with a reduced majority and anti-war feeling is growing in the country. Draw up a propaganda poster with the object of encouraging national pride in continuing involvement in Vietnam.

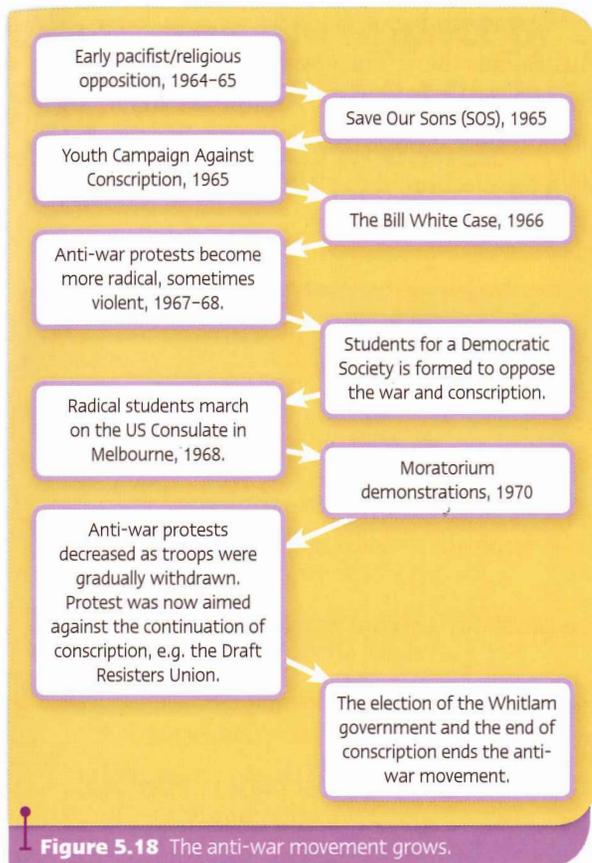
Vietnamisation President Nixon's policy of withdrawing American troops from Vietnam so South Vietnamese troops do the fighting

The growth of the anti-war movement

As stated earlier, anti-war feeling in Australia at the beginning of the Vietnam War was small-scale and something the government could easily ignore. By 1967–68, anti-war protests had become more radical and often violent. However, these protests

were counter-productive, as it turned moderate thinking Australians away from the anti-war movement. By 1970, the protest movement had become more mainstream, as seen in the large **moratorium** demonstrations across Australia. Once the government began bringing the troops

moratorium a national stop work to protest against the Vietnam War



home, protest lessened. The election of the Whitlam government in 1972 saw the end of the anti-war movement.

Figure 5.18 shows the development of the anti-war movement in Australia to 1970.

The moratorium movement

The anti-war movement in Australia often mirrored that of the United States. Protests in the United States had become extremely violent by 1968, seen most clearly in Chicago during the Democratic Party Convention of that year. The violence weakened the anti-war movement. Ordinary Americans found it difficult to align themselves with abusive, radical students yelling obscenities at police. For the peace movement to grow, the nature of protest had to change. It had to become local, decentralised, organised by ordinary, moderate people who could gain the

trust and confidence of local communities. This happened in the United States in 1969 and 1970 and led to massive moratorium demonstrations in many US cities.

Similar developments occurred in Australia.

- The radicalism of 1968–69 alienated many ordinary Australians from the anti-war movement.
- Thousands of ordinary Australians opposed the war, hated the concept of conscription and wanted to bring the boys home. However, they found it difficult to align themselves with the radicals.
- By 1970, Australia was ready to emulate the American moratorium demonstrations.

The idea behind the moratorium was that everybody in Australia would stop working at a specified time and go on to the streets to protest against the war. The aims of the moratorium were the withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam and the end of conscription.

On 8 May 1970, moratorium demonstrations were held all over Australia. The largest was held in Melbourne, where between 80 000 and 100 000 people marched, led by Dr Jim Cairns. Central Melbourne was brought to a standstill. Similar demonstrations occurred in other capital cities and regional centres. Within a year of the



Figure 5.19 Moratorium demonstration at Parliament House, Melbourne, 1970.

moratorium, nearly all Australian troops had been brought home.

However, it is questionable how important the moratorium demonstrations had been in bringing this about. US President Nixon was steadily reducing the number of American troops

in Vietnam and so it made no sense to keep Australians there. The government maintained conscription, which now became the main target of protesters. Conscription was finally ended with the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972.

Exercise 5.9

Did you get it?

- 1 Read each of the following statements and decide whether it is true or false.
 - a At the start of the Vietnam War, anti-war feeling inside Australia was considerable. True/False
 - b A 'Cold War consensus' existed which supported the government's stance against communism in the Asia region. True/False
 - c US President Johnson was received with enormous enthusiasm when he visited Australia in 1966. True/False
 - d Labor leader Calwell strongly supported the government's policy of sending troops to Vietnam. True/False
 - e The government admired Bill White's convictions in the stand he took against the war. True/False
 - f Television coverage of the Vietnam War had little impact on the feelings of Australians towards the war in Vietnam. True/False
 - g As anti-war protests became more radical, support for the anti-war movement steadily increased. True/False
 - h The moratorium demonstrations of 1970 were decentralised and organised locally. True/False
 - i The moratorium movement was the main reason why the Australian Government decided to bring Australian troops home. True/False
 - j Conscription was not removed until the election of the Whitlam government in 1972. True/False

Consider this!

- 2 Why do you think the radicalism of 1968–69 alienated many ordinary Australians from the anti-war movement?
- 3 What was the idea behind the moratorium on 8 May 1970?
- 4 What event finally ended conscription in December 1972?

Interact with history!

- 5 Imagine it is May 1970. You are intending to participate in a moratorium demonstration in Sydney and, as part of your preparation, you have decided to produce your own anti-war protest banner. On pieces of A3 paper, create your anti-war banner and have your teacher pin them up around the room. Once they are all up on the wall, each student can explain the thinking behind the poster. Some late 1960s protest music could be playing in the background. A quick search on the internet will bring up many sites advising you on the music.