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## ***The Things They Carried***

### **Historical Focus: The Vietnam War and America in the 1960s**

Before, during, or after your study of this novel, your teacher may ask a Vietnam veteran to visit your class and share his or her memories of the experience. Or your teacher might invite a Vietnam War protester to present to the class. Perhaps both representatives will come for a debate. What makes Tim O'Brien's novel unique is that he personified both roles. He was a war protester, and he is a Vietnam veteran, which is why his perspective on the war is multifaceted. O'Brien does not provide much background information about the Vietnam War. In fact, O'Brien arguably wrote his novel for an informed audience. The purpose of the text that follows is to inform you so that you can understand O'Brien's novel in a clearer context.

#### **America's Role in Vietnam**

How can the Vietnam War mean so many different things to so many different Americans? While some believed passionately that it was a war worth fighting, others considered it a failure in our country's history and a contradiction of our country's values. Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried*, captures this conflict and develops it.

#### **Vietnam: A General Chronology**

French culture influences Vietnamese culture very much, since Napoleon III took full control of Vietnam during his reign in the mid-1800s, making Vietnam a French colony. However, when one culture seeks to overtake or absorb another, conflict ensues. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ho Chi Minh began to lead a revolt against the French. The Vietnamese people revered him as the leader who would restore their culture. In response to this rebellion, in 1932, the French government decided to allow Vietnamese representatives to be the country's leaders. Critics labeled this form of government "puppet government," because many believed that the people appointed to these positions, while Vietnamese, were simply doing what the French wished.

By 1941, Ho Chi Minh had traveled extensively and learned about many forms of government, particularly communism. Communism is the belief that social classes should be destroyed, property should be publicly owned, and individuals should work and be paid according to their talents and needs. When Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam, he formed the *Vietminh*. Other terms for the Vietminh include The North Vietnamese Army, The Vietcong, or VC. In 1946, war began between French forces and the Vietminh. By early 1950, Ho Chi Minh claimed leadership of the North Vietnamese government. The Soviet Union and China, both communist countries, recognized his claim. This is where American involvement officially began.

As allies of the French, the United States and Britain accepted the "puppet government" in South Vietnam. In addition, the United States' hostility towards communist countries during the Cold War period made it clear that America supported South Vietnam, not North Vietnam. Proof of this support came in President Harry Truman's allowance for \$15 million in military aid to the French. When Ho Chi Minh appealed for aid from the United States, the U.S. leadership distrusted him due to his communist affiliations with China and the Soviet Union. Despite this lack of aid, Ho's forces conquered the French in 1954, a humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, ending the First Indochina War. As a result of this defeat, France sought a peace settlement, and the American government under President Eisenhower reaffirmed support of South Vietnam with \$100 million in aid. In addition, the United States agreed to train the South Vietnamese army.

The Geneva Accords of 1954 officially divided Vietnam into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. This divide was supposed to be temporary, since the Vietnamese were to hold free elections in 1956. At this point, U.S. policy was dominated by "domino theory," the belief that communism in North Vietnam would spread throughout Asia. Because of this domino theory, the United States backed an anti-communist politician, Ngo Dinh Diem. Unfortunately, Diem's leadership proved harsh and unpopular, but America was fearful of communism's popularity in South Vietnam.

By 1960, when President John F. Kennedy took office, the United States' involvement in Vietnam grew even more substantial, and the American government provided South Vietnam with more supplies and personnel. By 1962, American advisers increased from 700 to 12,000. Despite all of these reinforcements, the U.S. Government could not redeem Diem's regime. In 1963, the United States overthrew Diem and played an active role in installing a new leader. But the cycle of corruption was already in place, and the new leaders were no better than the old ones in achieving the United States' objectives.

After President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, President Lyndon Johnson oversaw the placement of 15,000 American military advisers and another \$500 million in aid to the South Vietnamese government. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese forces attacked U.S. Navy ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Five days later, the U.S. Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, and President Johnson began to send U.S. troops to Vietnam. The United States began bombing North Vietnam, deployed large military forces, and entered into combat in South Vietnam. By the end of 1968, five hundred eighty-five thousand American troops were present in Vietnam.

The death tolls mounted as the number of troops and the intensity of fighting escalated. The United States' strategy in Vietnam was to wear down the enemy, attempting to bury the Vietnamese communist forces with fatalities. However, the Viet Cong's radical tactics frustrated and discouraged American troops. Since combat occurred in a widespread rural environment, America resorted to alternative forms of warfare, using napalm and the chemical Agent Orange. Neither of these unconventional weapons proved successful.

### **The Antiwar Movement**

Following President Kennedy's assassination, the Johnson administration initially undertook an effort to limit mobilization, attempting to keep everyday life in America as separated from the war as possible. Eventually, however, there simply were not enough volunteers entering the U.S. Military, and the government instituted a draft. The military drafted men into its ranks to fill vacancies that volunteers could not fill. After being drafted, a man might be able to defer his induction if he was a student, or if his induction would put his dependents (wife and children) in extreme hardship. Unless he was unqualified for military service, however, the government considered a young man over the age of 18 ready for immediate induction into the military.

*Draft resisters*, also known as *conscientious objectors* or "draft dodgers," included men who could no longer defer their induction into the military. For those who did not agree with America's stance on the Vietnam War and refused to be drafted, Canada quickly became a refuge. For some time, Canada's government would not allow American men to immigrate if they could not offer proof of discharge from the U.S. military, but this changed in 1968. As a result, many young men who did not wish to serve in the Vietnam War fled to Canada, and some never returned to reside in the United States.

Because of the draft, the Johnson administration was the target of American antiwar sentiments. Demonstrations against the war and the draft grew increasingly violent in America. The antiwar movement within the United States escalated as young protesters, countercultural hippies, and even many mainstream Americans criticized the American government for going to war. At the Democratic National Convention in 1968, after antiwar protesters occupied the streets of Chicago for eight days, police brutality brought national attention to the war protests. After President Richard Nixon was elected, large-scale antiwar demonstrations began in Washington, D.C. Even though President Nixon began gradual withdrawal of American troops, protests continued in the United States. When Ohio National Guardsmen fired on a crowd at Kent State University in 1970, the deaths of four students evoked an emotional response on college campuses across America.

One of the most historically renowned protesters of the war was Vietnam veteran John Kerry. In April of 1971, he testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and his testimony proved shocking. As a result of hearing Kerry's testimony, many Americans were persuaded to oppose the war in Vietnam. Kerry revealed disturbing facts about war crimes, such as rape, mutilation, torture, and other brutalities committed by high-ranking Vietnam veterans. He informed the Committee on Foreign Relations that the veterans returning from Vietnam felt angry and betrayed by their fellow citizens. Kerry criticized President Nixon's administration for supporting the Vietnam War rather than admitting that America had made a mistake going into the war. He also expressed frustration that veterans were not receiving the help that they needed to recover emotionally, physically and financially from their war wounds, citing that one in ten unemployed people in America was a Vietnam veteran.

Despite many protests, Nixon declared that a "silent majority" of Americans still supported the war. Shortly after President Nixon was inaugurated into his second presidential term in 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed cease-fire agreements. American troops began to leave Vietnam on March 29, 1973.

## *The Things They Carried*

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#### Comprehension Check –

*Directions: After reading the article, answer the following questions using complete sentences.*

1. What makes Tim O'Brien a unique novelist as an author about the Vietnam War?
2. Why was Ho Chi Minh an influential leader?
3. What is Communism? Why might Communism be a form of government that Americans opposed?
4. What was the "puppet government" in South Vietnam? Why was it criticized?
5. Why did the American government support South Vietnam and not North Vietnam?
6. What was domino theory?
7. Why was Ngo Diem's regime overthrown?
8. Why was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed in 1964?
9. In what situations could a young man defer his draft into the U.S. Military?
10. How was the antiwar protest at Kent State University in Ohio important to the antiwar movement?
11. What did John Kerry reveal in his testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 1971?