

Protests against the Vietnam War did not start when America declared her open involvement in the war in 1964. America had been through nearly twenty years of the Cold War and they were told by the government that what was happening in South Vietnam would happen elsewhere (the Domino Theory) unless America used her military might to stop it. Involvement in the Vietnam War was very much sold as a patriotic venture so few were prepared to protest. If there was to be a political protest, it never became apparent in Congress where the entire House voted to support Johnson and only two Senators voted against US involvement.

The first protests came in October 1965 when the draft was increased. In February 1965, it had only been 3,000 a month but in October it was increased to 33,000 a month. Those who had the necessary 'pull' had the opportunity to 'draft-dodge' – but this was not a luxury open to many poor working class young men. Tearing up or burning your draft paper became a common occurrence and was seen to be the first of the protests against the Vietnam War. The most famous person to do this was the world heavyweight-boxing champion Muhammad Ali. He was punished by having his boxing title taken away from him. However, his very public stance brought a more worldwide dimension to the problem America was experiencing with the draft.

The war had been sold to the US public as one where a sophisticated and ultra wealthy super-power would have few problems defeating a Third World nation that North Vietnam seemed to represent. The protests against the war started to pick up when body bags started to return to America in increasing numbers. The war that had been sold to the US public as one where victory was guaranteed was in reality taking many young lives. In May 1968, 562 US troops were killed in one week alone. Coupled with these casualty figures were stories that eventually came out about atrocities committed by US troops against the very people they were meant to be defending and supporting. The most infamous was the My Lai massacre. This event actually highlighted to the US public the enormous strain frontline troops were experiencing on a daily basis against a supposedly inferior enemy. 1968 seems to be the key year for protests. To some, especially the young, America was not only sacrificing her male youth but the government was also sanctioning the death of children not only in South Vietnam but also in the North with the blanket bombing raids that were occurring on almost a daily basis.

However, it would be wrong to assume that everyone protested against the American involvement in South Vietnam. While there were those who were vociferous in their condemnation of US policy in South Vietnam, a Gallup poll held in 1968 showed that 46% of Americans approved of Johnson's handling of the war while 50% believed that it was essential to combat the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia.

International coverage of the protests showed that as the years moved on the protests got larger and more vocal. In March 1966, 50,000 anti-war protesters took part in a rally in one of America's most famous cities – New York. With a population that ran into millions, it could be argued that they represented a very small minority of the city. In 1967, 100,000 took part in a protest rally in Washington DC. In 1971, 300,000 took part in an anti-war demonstration in the same city. This particular protest involved many veterans from the war. When they publicly threw away their medals and medal ribbons, many in America were shocked that those who had worn the uniform of the US military had come to think that the only way ahead was to discard the very things that had been issued to them to represent their bravery – their medals. Many veterans used the opportunity to throw their medals on the steps of the Capitol building.

The late Sixties and early Seventies were a curious mixture of cultures and this clearly came across in America at a time when the Vietnam War was at its height. The hippy movement preached love not war. Many young men and women claimed that they wanted to 'drop out' of society. All of this clashed with any concept that involved doing the 'right thing' for your nation. The world's media also played into this. US television could bring into the homes of all US citizens what the war was actually like. The Vietnam War was the first to actually receive such broadcasts and they clearly had a marked influence on the American population as a whole. It is said that two images in particular did a great deal to turn US opinion with regards to was in Vietnam. The first was film of children running away from their village having been burned by napalm and the second was the summary execution of a Vietcong suspect by a South Vietnamese police chief on the streets of Saigon in 1968. These images were published internationally and could do nothing to help the US government's cause, especially when it became known that the napalm attack was a mistake against the wrong village. It seemed to the protesters to summarise exactly why America should not be in South Vietnam. If the result of any protest was to undermine what the American government was seeking to achieve it was the one that took place at Kent State University, Ohio, in 1970.