UCF Veterans Legacy Program

UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War
Episode One: The Cold War and the Threat of Communism
Written by John Lancaster
Edited by Sebastian Garcia

JOHN LANCASTER: April 30, 1975. On a warm, humid, spring morning, American helicopters evacuated the last remaining US military personnel stationed in Saigon. Then the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon functioned as a center of operations for the South Vietnamese military and their US allies as they combatted the North Vietnamese and their allies throughout the Vietnam War. Since 1954, Vietnam existed as two separate countries, the communist North Vietnam and the capitalist South Vietnam. Both sides waged a costly war that lasted decades, as each desired to unify the country under their own worldview. Though most American soldiers and servicemembers left Vietnam in 1973, following a peace deal, a few dozen remained at the US embassy in Saigon in 1975. From high above the city, amid the whirring of the helicopter blades, these individuals escaped just before the North Vietnamese Army captured the city. With the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War finally came to an end.

LANCASTER: I am John Lancaster, and this is ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War*, Episode One: The Cold War and the Threat of Communism.** The Vietnam War drastically changed American life and global politics. As a catalyst for social, cultural, and political change around the world, it altered the ways Americans viewed military intervention abroad, ignited domestic and international protest movements, and highlighted the persisting legacies of colonization. Closer to home, the war's memory also continues to bear on contemporary issues like the ways we support and memorialize US Veterans.

LANCASTER: But questions remain about this complicated and, at times, controversial conflict. Why were American servicemembers stationed in Vietnam to begin with? How and why did the US get involved? Why was Vietnam split into two countries, North and South, and what did each side want? To begin to answer these questions, we must first travel back to another costly conflict, the end of the Second World War in the mid-1940s—a moment of fragile hope for a world so recently torn apart by the most devastating struggle humanity had ever faced.

LANCASTER: The Allies during World War II—those countries that united in their fight against Germany and Japan, among other nations—celebrated the end of the war with

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great triumph. But soon another conflict began to emerge. Not all the Allies agreed on how to rebuild war-ravaged Europe after the fighting ended.

BARBARA ANN GANNON: What happened after World War II is everyone just remembers it as a decisive victory against both Germany and Japan. My name is Barbara Ann Gannon. I am a professor of history at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. The problem was that among the allies were the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union.

LANCASTER: While most of the Allied countries had adopted capitalist systems, the Soviet Union endorsed communism. After the war, they quickly sought to exert their communist ideology across Eastern Europe, and perhaps even farther.

GANNON: The Soviet Union was what we call Russia today, with a number of other countries that were, either willingly or unwillingly, part of this larger empire. Now, they were communists, and the other allies were capitalists. They had an authoritarian style of government with an extraordinarily ruthless leader named Joseph Stalin, who had been our ally during the war and had done a great deal, but the minute the war was over the Red Army, the Soviet Union's army, had taken over the entire region. And the Allies, the democratic capitalist Allies, including ourselves, had said you could have an influence block there. They interpreted control as putting in communist governments by rigging elections, and if you didn't vote a communist into office and the party, it was overthrown. So they took direct control of many of the nations of Hungary and other nations in Western Europe, Czechoslovakia, and on and on. We saw that as a betrayal. We saw that as part of a larger conspiracy by communists to take over the entire world.

LANCASTER: As the postwar anxiety about the spread of communism across Europe intensified, another dangerous development threatened to up the stakes even more.

GANNON: Behind all of this was a development of nuclear weapons. We had developed nuclear weapons. We had used them on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the war, and then we took quite a comfort in the idea that we were the only ones that had them. But then the Soviet Union got nuclear weapons, partly through stealing our diagrams. And so now they had nuclear weapons. And there was a nuclear arms race. So no one could use nuclear weapons because they were so horrible, and they might be the end of the world. But on the other hand, they were a cause of nonstop tension. So we were always in an arms race. We always were concerned, and we decided that communists' ultimate goal was to take over the world and that our job was to stop it.

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LANCASTER: For many in the US, the risk of global nuclear war after the devastation already suffered during World War II seemed a real possibility. The fear of nuclear destruction raised anxieties over communism's spread and gave rise to the Cold War. This Cold War had a profound impact on US military policy.

GANNON: We went from this state of peace to a Cold War, that was not always cold, but it was a state of almost permanent militarization of the United States, one that hadn't existed before.

LANCASTER: Part of this owed to the fact that the Soviet Union, like the United States, possessed great military and technological strength. Though the US looked toward the Soviet Union with distrust, it knew that going to war with them so soon after World War II would prove apocalyptic. But the fear of communism's spread remained an immediate threat. As a result, the US adopted a policy known as "containment," which emphasized blocking the further spread of communism in Europe rather than attacking the Soviet Union directly.

GANNON: We say, "Well, we can't take them over. We can't conquer Russia. We'll just contain them where they are. We won't let them move another foot. So you may have Eastern Europe, but you won't get Germany or West Germany. You won't get another foot. We're going to contain you where you are."

LANCASTER: For the time being, containment seemed to ease anxieties over communism's spread. The US could slow its advancement while at the same time avoid fighting another costly war. But the end of the Second World War intersected with another global shift. Historians often call the 1950s and 1960s the period of decolonization.

LANCASTER: For centuries before World War II, Europeans had ventured to places like Africa, the Americas, and Asia to control their resources and exert power over the people who lived there—a process called colonization. By the end of the war, nations like Great Britain and France had some of the largest colonial empires in the world, spanning multiple continents. Yet, such imperial expansion and wealth came at the cost of exploiting the indigenous populations who lived in their empires. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, many former European colonies decolonized and became new nations. But for some of these new nations that for centuries had been exploited for wealth by capitalist Europe, communism seemed to promise a chance at a more

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equitable future. And, much to the dismay of the US and its allies, the Soviet Union offered a model these new nations could follow.

GANNON: Particularly in the 1950s, there were countries that they had been controlled by Britain or France, and they had decided they wanted to be independent. Vietnam is a perfect example. That was a French colony. And there had been actually efforts to fight the French before World War II, led by a man named Ho Chi Minh. And he actually had been our ally in World War II. But after the war, we decided he was a communist. Now, it's very simple. A communist must be contained. Communism cannot extend. Ho Chi Minh was a communist and called himself a communist, and we saw that as part of the ongoing threat to democracy and capitalism.

LANCASTER: As a result, some European nations fought long and bloody wars in an effort to maintain their colonies. France, for example, fought an eight-year war against a group called the Vietminh, a communist-led resistance movement formed by Ho Chi Minh during World War II, to keep control of Vietnam, then called French Indochina. In the spring of 1954, French forces surrendered to the Vietminh after a disastrous defeat.

GANNON: So the French went back after World War II and tried to keep Vietnam, and the Vietnamese were having none of this. So what happened was that there was a guerrilla war between the French and the Vietnamese. Mostly, they were centered in the north part of the country. So the Vietnamese beat the French when they did something very stupid at a place called Dien Bien Phu. They went into a valley and decided the Vietnamese would not get artillery up on the hills surrounding it. They did. Lesson learned, don't underestimate the Vietnamese.

LANCASTER: The French left Vietnam. But this did not mark the end of the conflict in the country. Though the Vietminh defeated the French, they did not control southern Vietnam. Afraid that the Vietminh might advance south and turn the entire country communist, European and Asian diplomats met in Geneva, Switzerland to determine Vietnam’s fate.

GANNON: There was an agreement that separated Vietnam at a parallel. There would be a North Vietnam and a South Vietnam. North Vietnam were called Reds, and everyone was a Red who was a communist. And the French withdrew.

LANCASTER: Never intended to be permanent, the partition of Vietnam reflected the growing anxiety among western nations over the continued spread of communism. By

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the 1950s, the US and others not only feared communism's encroachment across Europe, but also across former colonies around the world. Desolated after both World War II and the war in Indochina that followed, France could no longer afford a presence in southeast Asia. The US, largely motivated by their fear of communist diffusion across Asia, began to intervene in Vietnam.

GANNON: We sort of stepped into their place as part of the containment policy. They had been destroyed during the war, and they did not have the wealth. We had the wealth, and we stepped in.

LANCASTER: Instead of sending troops, the US government initiated a proxy war against North Vietnam and in support of South Vietnam in the 1950s and early 1960s.

GANNON: So a proxy war initially often is when you're fighting someone and you don't fight them yourselves, but you send them weapons. You give them air support. You give them funding. Eventually Vietnam will go beyond a proxy war, but initially from about the mid-'50s until 1964, we are just supplying them with advisors and money and weapons and training and all of these other things so that they will fight the war for us.

GANNON: The only problem with that is that then everyone just sees them as our puppet.

LANCASTER: As tensions between North and South Vietnam heightened, the United States felt increasingly compelled to take a more explicit role in the conflict. Several events throughout 1963 and 1964 helped push American intervention to drastic levels. A distant conflict to contain communism in North Vietnam quickly transformed into a violent war that changed US culture, society, and politics forever.

LANCASTER: Thank you for listening to ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War***, an educational podcast produced by the University of Central Florida's Veterans Legacy Program. I'm your host, John Lancaster.

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Cemeteries across the state by using cutting-edge technology and innovative pedagogy.

LANCASTER: This episode of ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War*** is researched, written, and produced by me, John Lancaster. This episode is edited and mixed by Sebastian Garcia. Music and sound effects provided by Pixabay artists. Executive producers are Dr. Amelia Lyons and Sebastian Garcia.

LANCASTER: Special thanks to Dr. Barbara Gannon for her expertise throughout this episode.

LANCASTER: To learn more about the other deliverables we produced as part of our VLP work, such as grade-level Veteran biographies, cemetery mini-tours, K-12 lesson plans, and more, visit our website. The link is in the episode's description.

LANCASTER: Thanks again for listening. Until next time.

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