UCF Veterans Legacy Program

UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War
Episode Two: American Intervention
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JOHN LANCASTER: Please note this episode contains graphic content. Listener discretion is advised.

LANCASTER: On November 22, 1963, spectators watched in horror as an assassin's bullet struck President John F. Kennedy as his motorcade meandered through the streets of Dallas, TX. The youngest person ever elected to the presidency, Kennedy inspired the possibility for social change that characterized the post-World War II era. Now, he was gone. In a solemn moment aboard Air Force One later that day, as the news of Kennedy's death spread across a shocked nation, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took the oath of office and assumed the presidency. The course of domestic and global politics shifted in an instant, especially as they related to America's actions in Vietnam.

LANCASTER: I am John Lancaster, and this is ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War,*** **Episode Two: American Intervention.** Although Kennedy sent money, advisors, weapons, and some troops to Vietnam during his presidency, when he died in 1963 many Americans still paid little attention to the conflict. Most had never even heard of Vietnam. So how and why did American intervention intensify after Kennedy's death? What major US military campaigns in the late 1960s signaled the height of the conflict? And who exactly were US troops and their South Vietnamese allies fighting in Vietnam? The answers to these questions partly lie in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination. When he died in late 1963, only months remained before the 1964 election cycle began. Given his age, charisma, and popularity, many assumed Kennedy would run for reelection. Now, that task fell to Lyndon B. Johnson.

BARBARA ANN GANNON: In 1963, John F. Kennedy is assassinated. So LBJ, Lyndon Baines Johnson, steps into office, and fairly quickly he's going to be looking at another election campaign to be, quote-unquote, re-elected. My name is Barbara Ann Gannon. I am a professor of history at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. And he is not a foreign policy military expert. He was a New Deal senator. And he was very much interested in domestic and social programs, and very much less interested in foreign policy. So he kind of let the experts run that.

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LANCASTER: Despite his lack of expertise in foreign and military policy, Johnson knew that if he wanted to keep the presidency after the 1964 election, he needed to convince voters that he would fight communism's advancement across the globe, especially as anxieties over its global spread continued to preoccupy the American public. He still did not want to send foot soldiers to Vietnam; but to prove his anti-communist stance, he supported continued bombing efforts against the North Vietnamese.

GANNON: In 1964, Americans were very anti-communist, all Americans. It was bipartisan. No one had any trouble with the containment policy. There wasn't any kind of division in foreign policy. So to win, you could not be someone who they questioned your anti-communist credentials. He believed that they had to escalate in Vietnam and become more involved, particularly bomb North Vietnam, not so much foot soldiers. They needed a justification for that. And suddenly one occurred.

LANCASTER: As the US military continued their bombing attacks, American Navy destroyers began patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin in North Vietnam. In early August, 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked one of these American Navy ships. The Johnson administration immediately viewed the event as an excuse to intensify US military operations against the North Vietnamese. To ensure American public support, some US military personnel overstated aspects of the attack.

GANNON: In the Gulf of Tonkin, which is a body of water off North Vietnam, we had intelligence ships listening in onto what the North Vietnamese were doing. And so supposedly the North Vietnamese attacked them with small speed boats. And based on that attack, which may or may not have happened as they say, at least part of it was not true. Congress did not declare war, but they authorized LBJ and the government to do whatever needed to be done to retaliate against North Vietnam. And the first thing they did was a bombing campaign against it.

LANCASTER: Johnson won the 1964 presidential election. As he continued to support containing North Vietnam, his advisors also increasingly worried about the South Vietnamese Army's dwindling strength. Ten years had passed since the French left Vietnam, and in that time, North and South Vietnam continued to fight. The constant battling took a toll on the South Vietnamese.

GANNON: In 1964, '65, the South Vietnamese Army were deserting. And they were falling apart. So the United States recognized that, and that's part of the lead into the Gulf of Tonkin.

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LANCASTER: Rather than abandon their policy of containment against the communist North Vietnamese, the US decided to increase their presence alongside South Vietnamese forces. But they quickly realized their efforts on the ground proved more complicated than they originally thought.

LANCASTER: The Viet Cong, a group of guerilla fighters allied with North Vietnam, caused great difficulty for American troops. Unlike North Vietnamese Army soldiers, the Viet Cong hid in plain sight within South Vietnam.

GANNON: The Viet Cong were the local people who supported North Vietnam. They don't officially wear uniforms. They don't get in the long line and attack the enemy 'cause they'll all be killed. We use guerrilla warfare a lot in sort of the normal discussions. Guerrilla warfare is the warriors hide within the population. We might call it unconventional warfare. What they do is they unconventionally hide behind trees. They ambush small parties. They ambush supply trains. They cut off. They cause enormous amount of trouble in a lot of different places so the Army can't concentrate. They don't fight in a conventional way.

LANCASTER: American soldiers often struggled to differentiate a South Vietnamese ally from a Viet Cong enemy.

GANNON: What would happen is a Viet Cong person would go out all night and set booby traps for American troops, and then they would go back to their village. And they would just wave at the Americans as they went by, that they were loyal South Vietnamese citizens.

LANCASTER: Intelligence analysis constituted one way the US responded to the Viet Cong's unconventional fighting. Carlos Antonio Deliz served in the US Army from 1970 to 1972, attaining the rank of specialist five, SP-5. In his oral history from 2026, Deliz discussed his role in intelligence and how it supported the Americans' fight against the Viet Cong.

CARLOS ANTONIO DELIZ: I was in charge of what was called a Viet Cong infrastructure section of the Strategic Research and Analysis Division, MACV-J2. Strategic Research and Analysis Division was like a think tank within the V-J2 section. In my case, I had all these biographics that came from the field on Vietnamese cadre in the different villages and districts. So in other words, the enemy's infrastructure in the

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country. And I would get those updates from the field every, every month. And then I would do an analysis of what changes in each district and villages and what did that mean. And then I would publish my analysis to my bosses, and that of course was right in Washington, DC. For example, if a district manager for Viet Cong in a village was moved to division at the county level, that was an important Viet Cong figure, so it was important for us to know. And every time one of those guys would be captured, then instead of getting them killed, like the CIA did, they would have to—which is another aspect of my job—I had to sometimes go and pick them up, bringing them as POWs to Saigon. And in the meantime, in a helicopter, interview a bit of what they were doing there. So I would feed that information also to the counterintelligence people.

LANCASTER: The continued threat of the Viet Cong necessitated more American troops in Vietnam. After a number of attacks on South Vietnamese air bases, the US military increased their presence in the region substantially.

GANNON: The Viet Cong, and The North Vietnamese Army, they would attack air bases in South Vietnam. Well, of course, then we need people to protect the air bases. So we sent people to protect the air bases. So we had very few ground forces, and then we had 5,000 and 10,000 and 50,000. And then we said, "Well, we're protecting the air bases, but shouldn't we go after the Viet Cong in the villages they live in?" Oh, so we'll have to send more troops. So we send another 50[,000]. We get up to 100,000. And then when you have 100,000 combat troops, well, we need more support units to support their needs on the ground. It's the jungle. It's very hard. So before you know it, you have 200,000 or 300,000. So we send more and more troops. And we keep escalating it partly because we're not getting the success we need. But in a bare environment like the jungle, you always need more troops to push supplies up. So more and more it was like this escalation, uncontrolled escalation.

LANCASTER: This escalation continued over the next few years. Still, before 1968 most of the fighting in Vietnam consisted of small skirmishes that only lasted a few days at most. Then, in January 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and their Viet Cong allies launched a series of surprise attacks on South Vietnamese and US forces. The attacks stunned the American military and the public back home, largely because it occurred during the Vietnamese lunar New Year holiday, known as Tet. Armies usually paused their fighting during Tet celebrations.

GANNON: We had our Christmas in 1967, and suddenly it's 1968. We went through our New Year's, but then the Vietnamese have their own New Year's. It's like Chinese New

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Year, and it's called Tet. And everyone goes on leave for Tet 'cause you gotta go home. So it's a big holiday. People usually don't fight, so everyone goes home because it's the big holiday. Think of Christmas, New Year, and Thanksgiving all put together.

LANCASTER: North Vietnam and the Viet Cong used the occasion to devastate American and South Vietnamese forces. The resulting military operations, the most major of which lasted until March 1968, were collectively known as the Tet Offensive.

GANNON: The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong decided to hit us, not in one place, but in multiple places. There were provinces in Vietnam, and they hit all of the capital cities. They hit major bases. They hit Saigon itself, the capital. They hit all simultaneously. And we experienced huge casualties in the month of January, February, and March.

LANCASTER: On January 21, 1968, one of the most consequential battles of the Tet Offensive began when North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces attacked the Khe Sanh Marine Corps base in South Vietnam.

GANNON: Khe Sanh was very emblematic of Tet. It began in late January just before the other attacks started. Khe Sanh was a huge base that was in northwest Vietnam, and there were people who supported us. There were plantations there, i.e. big landowners, and Montagnard tribesmen. They were an ethnic group that often supported us in Vietnam.

LANCASTER: Despite the friendly presence at the base, however, the defense proved too small. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces trapped American soldiers and their allies at Khe Sanh Base for months.

GANNON: What happened was that they besieged the base for 77 days. I mean, we did not stop them. They surrounded it. They hit it. There were, like, 40 or 50,000 of them and maybe 7, 8,000 Americans, something really small.

LANCASTER: In April 1968, US troops and their South Vietnamese allies commenced Operation Pegasus, a military campaign that aimed to relieve the besieged Marine Corps base at Khe Sanh. As a platoon leader, John Holladay helped combat enemy forces as part of this operation. Holladay served in the US Marine Corps from 1966 to 1995, attaining the rank of Colonel. As told by his wife, Cassandra Holladay, in her 2025

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oral history, John Holladay suffered serious injuries in the fight to defend the Marine Corps base at Khe Sanh.

CASSANDRA HOLLADAY: He was there when it was Khe Sanh. And that was part of where the injuries that he got. He was very lucky, had some great Marines and a corpsman that took care of him the night he was severely wounded. It was a shrapnel, and they were of course moving to try to get to their foxholes, and he was running so his legs were stretched out. And he got all hit on the left side. And it hit from the, just below his left ear, all the way down the side, hip, arm.

LANCASTER: Fortunately, Holladay survived his injuries and completed a second tour in Vietnam before the war ended. Others, however, were not as fortunate. Corporal Lou Boria III also fought at Khe Sanh. As his father, Lou Boria, a US Marine Corps Veteran himself, recounted in his oral history from 2026, Corporal Boria III died from injuries he sustained at Khe Sanh.

LOU BORIA: I was outside working in the yard. And my son Bruce, he comes, "Dad, Dad, there's a Marine." So when I got there, there was this captain, and he's telling me that my son had been very seriously wounded. He got affected. He was up in, uh, Khe Sanh, really bad. And what's happening was, the Vietnamese were planting where the Marine base was at Khe Sanh. They had come down and under they were putting, so that they were gonna blow that—so they started to pull the troops out of there. So he [Corporal Lou Boria III] was on a patrol and got wiped out. And, uh, took months before we can get him home. Every time they'd put him on a plane, they'd have to land and give him medical attentions. So he got shot twice in the stomach. So they really tore him up. But he died. He, he didn't make it.

LANCASTER: Corporal Lou Boria III did not die in vain. His sacrifice, along with Holladay's, enabled the Marines to defend their base. By the summer of 1968, with the help of air strikes and artillery, the US military declared the Battle of Khe Sanh a critical victory.

GANNON: Between air power and artillery and everything else we had, we managed to beat them. And of course everyone's excited because it's a military victory.

LANCASTER: However, given Khe Sanh's strategic position near North Vietnam's border, US military personnel feared similar attacks in the future.

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GANNON: What we decided, though, was, you know, this is a lot of work maintaining Khe Sanh base. Let's get rid of it.

LANCASTER: Beginning in June, soldiers began withdrawing from Khe Sanh Base. Later that summer, the US military destroyed the base to prevent the North Vietnamese army from taking any supplies left there. Quickly, each side expressed different results about the Battle of Khe Sanh. Seeing the base destroyed, North Vietnamese forces declared the battle a victory for themselves. At the same time, the US military continued to call it their victory, and claimed they only destroyed the base because they no longer needed it.

GANNON: The American people did not go for that. And blowing up the base and leaving the area did not strike anyone as a victory.

LANCASTER: US forces did make military progress during the Tet Offensive in 1968. Yet, events like the Battle of Khe Sanh and its aftermath prompted a shift in attitudes back home.

GANNON: Tet was a military victory without doubt, and there's no one that will dispute that. We literally wiped the Viet Cong out almost. The North Vietnamese had tremendously high casualties. By any standards, it was a victory, except the standards the American people had.

LANCASTER: After years of increased intervention in Vietnam, many Americans began to more forcefully question the presence of troops there in the first place. As soldiers continued to funnel into Vietnam, issues back home like the draft, the fight for racial equality characteristic of the Civil Rights Movement, and the growth of youth movements gave rise to what is known as the counterculture. Thousands of miles away from Southeast Asia, the American public fought their own war on the homefront.

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.

LANCASTER: ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War*** is made possible by the University of Central Florida's Veterans Legacy Program. The UCF VLP is a US Department of Veterans Affairs-funded partnership with the National Cemetery Administration through which UCF students, faculty, staff, and K-12 educators across

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Florida collaborate to extend the memorialization of Veterans buried in National 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: Oral history clips come from interviews the UCF VLP team conducted with the Veterans' families throughout the 2025-2026 grant cycle. The clips were edited for length and clarity. To listen to the entire oral histories, please visit our website with the link in this episode's description. Our website also contains more information about the Veterans featured in this episode and 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.

LANCASTER: Thanks again for listening. Until next time.

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