UCF Veterans Legacy Program

UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War
Episode Three: The War at Home
Written by John Lancaster
Edited by Sebastian Garcia

JOHN LANCASTER: Please note this episode contains mature language and graphic content. Listener discretion is advised.

LANCASTER: As the Vietnam War intensified in Southeast Asia, on the opposite side of the world growing discontent strengthened in the United States. By the late 1960s, protest movements against the war imposed real pressure on government leaders. On a single day in June 1967, over 30,000 protesters arrived in Washington, DC to demonstrate their objection to the American presence in Vietnam. From inside the White House, Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors could hear the protestors chanting slogans intended to oppose the president's decision to send more troops to Vietnam.[1] In 1967 alone, the war claimed the lives of over 11,000 US soldiers.[2] Worse still, there seemed no clear end in sight.

LANCASTER: I am John Lancaster, and this is ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War*, Episode Three: The War at Home.** American support for the Vietnam War dwindled by the late 1960s. After the 1968 Tet Offensive, the public began to question the official government narrative of American success in the war. Discontent and distrust of the government's reasons for sending troops to Vietnam ignited the counterculture movements back home. But what was the counterculture, and how did it intersect with Vietnam? How exactly did Americans learn about progress in Vietnam? What did news reports about the war depict, and why did Americans trust them over government reports? What was the draft, and how did its perceived unfairness contribute to opposition? How and why did the war contribute to the Civil Rights Movement as part of the larger counterculture? To answer these questions, we must first transport ourselves back to the average 1960s American home.

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[1] Lindsay M. Chervinsky, "Vietnam War Protests at the White House," *The White House Historical Association,* June 15, 2020, accessed August 8, 2026, https://www.whitehousehistory.org/vietnam-war-protests-at-the-white-house.
[2] "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," *US National Archives and Records Administration*, accessed August 8, 2026, https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.

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WALTER CRONKITE: Good evening, everyone. This is Walter Cronkite speaking to you from CBS Television Election Headquarters, here in New York City.[3]

HOWARD K. SMITH: The candidates need no introduction. The Republican candidate, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, and the Democratic candidate, Senator John F. Kennedy.[4]

NEIL ARMSTRONG: That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.[5]

NARRATOR: Vietnam is a long strip of coastal land, about the size of California. I Corps, or the Third Marine Amphibious Force Area, covers the five northern provinces.…[6]

LANCASTER: By the 1960s, many American families learned about national and global events from the television. Reporters who went to Vietnam to detail the war took photos and videos, which news outlets then included in their television broadcasts to the American public about the war. But these news reports at times contradicted what the government officially told the public about the conflict.

BARBARA ANN GANNON: Between '64 and '68, the government assured us that we were winning. My name is Barbara Ann Gannon. I am a professor of history at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. The Reds were on the run. We had them. It only took a little bit more, a little bit more of a push. They would give briefings showing how many planes had been destroyed. The way they counted victory was what they called body count, counting how many Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army soldiers we

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[3] "CBS News' coverage of the 1952 United States presidential election," CBS News, November 1952, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CBS_News%27_coverage_of_the_1952_United_States_presidenti al_election.webm.

[4] "Kennedy-Nixon, First Presidential Debate," *JFK Library*, September 26, 1960, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TNC-172_Kennedy-Nixon_First_Presidential_Debate,_1960.webm.

[5] "Restored Apollo 11 Moonwalk - Original NASA EVA Mission Video - Walking on the Moon," *NASA*, July 20, 1969, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Restored_Apollo_11_Moonwalk_-_Original_NASA_EVA_Mission_Video_-_Walking_on_the_Moon.webm.

[6] "196U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam Orientation and Indoctrination Film," *The federal government of the United States of America*, 1967, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:196U.S._MARINE_CORPS._VIETNAM_ORIENTATION_%26_INDOCT RINATION_FILM_YOU_IN_VIETNAM_99434.webm.

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killed. And we were told, "We've killed the Viet Cong three times over. We've destroyed these planes. We've bombed these cities. We're winning. Just a little bit more and we'll have won. Communism will be defeated." We were told that.

LANCASTER: To add insult to injury, news reporters captured harrowing footage of US and South Vietnamese forces combatting large groups of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops all over the country. These images conflicted with the US government's message of defeating the Viet Cong in droves and winning the war.

GANNON: And everyone said, "Now, wait a minute. We thought they're all dead, and we're this close to victory. What are you talking about?" It's brought to you by CBS News every night. Every day, you got your TV dinner, and you sat down and watched the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army destroying our bases.

LANCASTER: As a result, the American public began to trust the three traditional networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC, over the federal government regarding the war's status. Most Americans gravitated toward CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite and his commentary about Vietnam.

GANNON: There was no cable, and everyone watched CBS News mostly, and Walter Cronkite. He was the news anchor for CBS News. And he said he thought we had lost in Vietnam, and many people took that to heart 'cause he went to Vietnam to see what happened. So that's what turned many people against the war, not completely. The country still wants to win, but distrust of the government began in 1968.

LANCASTER: As reporters transmitted images and recordings of Vietnam back to the US, the American public saw the harsh realities of service in Vietnam. Not only did soldiers deal with the violence of war, but they also combatted the dangers of the Vietnamese jungle and the diseases that existed in a foreign environment.

GANNON: The infrastructure there is nonexistent. And the jungle has many diseases. Now, we've done better with some of them, like malaria, for example. We have vaccines and such. But there's all sorts of diseases that, particularly if you're not from a tropical area you're not used to, there was a high, not so much death count from disease, you would continue to operate, but you'd be very weakened. Your clothes would often almost evaporate and your boots due to fungus and mold. It was very, very harsh service.

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LANCASTER: In order to tame the jungle and assist with movement through the lush environment, the US military used a herbicide called Agent Orange.[7] A powerful poison, American troops also used it to destroy enemy food supplies. But it proved highly toxic to humans.

GANNON: The real killer was Agent Orange, probably killed many, many more than war did. It was used to clear out the jungle, ironically, to make it easier to operate in. It was a herbicide that just killed foliage and bushes and trees.

LANCASTER: Agent Orange had hidden dangers that only became apparent years after the war.

GANNON: The problem was it also had many, many, cancer-causing elements. So from Vietnam until today, somewhere, Vietnam Veterans are dying of Agent Orange.

LANCASTER: Rosewell “Buck” Allen Southworth died in 2014 from an ischemic heart condition caused by Agent Orange. He served in the US Air Force from 1952 to 1972, attaining the rank of master sergeant. As a flight crew chief, Southworth carried supplies to men and flew covert missions. As his wife, Priscilla Southworth, recalled in an oral history from 2025, Southworth applied for disability after undergoing a quadruple bypass surgery in the 1990s. Though the VA historically denied many Vietnam Veterans from Agent Orange claims, Southworth secured his 100% disability rating in 2010.

PRISCILLA SOUTHWORTH: Quadruple bypass was in the '90s. And then the doctor told him he had the ischemic heart condition, and he applied for the disability. 2010 is when he became 100% disabled because of the ischemic heart condition. Because they hadn't really decided that Agent Orange caused it, but then they got more and more research done and found out that it did.

LANCASTER: Gerald “Jerry” Kervin also suffered health complications from Agent Orange. Kervin served in the US Army between 1969 and 1972, attaining the rank of sergeant. In an oral history from 2026, his wife, Mary Kervin, recounted his 22-year struggle fighting three separate cancers that resulted from Agent Orange.

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[7] Sound effect comes from historical footage of the US Army spraying Agent Orange. See, “US Army Newsfilm V-73-69: Weed Killer Knocks Out VC's Riverbank Ambush Sites, South Vietnam [VC Weed Killer],” 8-11 February 1969, Michael Sheets Collection, *Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive*, Texas Tech University, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=987VI0672.

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MARY KERVIN: He had three separate cancers from Agent Orange. So we fought that for 22 years. They did the radiation on his larynx. But we were lucky. He was showing me some pictures, and I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Oh, that's them spraying Agent Orange." I said, "You keep that picture, and you keep it safe." Because I figured we would have a fight, because his first cancer was not accepted as Agent Orange. Fortunately, right away after that, we didn't have a problem. He always said he was lucky that he didn't have the problems with the VA that so many had in the past.

ED HERLIHY: Anti-war demonstrators protest US involvement in the Vietnam War. Before the parade, mass draft card burning was urged. Demonstrators claimed 200 draft cards were burned.[8]

LANCASTER: Back in the 1960s, frustration with the war in Vietnam continued to grow. As the fighting in Southeast Asia escalated, the American government used military conscription to meet the growing demand for troops. Known more commonly as the draft, military conscription became increasingly unpopular as young men voiced their opposition to the war.

GANNON: In some ways, the real explosions against Vietnam were tied to the draft. If you were a young man in 1967, when you turned eighteen, you had to register for it. What they do is from there, the draft board would examine you, and they would find out to what degree you were available for service. Were you 1A, available for any service? Were you 1B? Maybe you didn't see very well with your glasses. Were you 4F? Did you have some kind of medical or other issue? So they would classify you, and you would be on a list. And when the draft call went out every month, they would take 1A's, they would take all of the people who were available.

LANCASTER: But this process did not always choose people fairly.

GANNON: Here's the issue. One of the ways you could get a medical deferment is if your doctor wrote a note saying your knees were bad. That was often how wealthy people did not serve. If you went to college, it was a deferment. If you then decided to go to graduate school, it was another deferment. Teachers were deferred. There were a lot of ways to get deferred that mostly were best used by people with money. So the lower ranks tended to be poorer whites, Native Americans, and African Americans, the

[8] "Universal Newsreel: Peace March, Thousands Oppose the Vietnam War," *Universal Newsreels*, April 1967, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1967-04-18_Peace_March.ogv.

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non-college-going population. If you were at a university and you failed in a semester, they would send your name to the draft board, and they would draft you the minute you lost your exemption.

LANCASTER: In December 1969, the US government amended the draft process and implemented a lottery system. This lottery system chose draftees based on randomly selected birthdays, and got rid of the possibility for deferments based on education or wealth. Though officials argued this made the process fairer, the damage had already been done.

GANNON: That actually caused a lot more problems because everyone knew the draft was now fair, and they couldn't use all these ways of getting out of it.

LANCASTER: Large-scale opposition to the draft helped give rise to a number of social protest movements, mostly led by young people, aimed at challenging the norms of mid-twentieth-century society. Collectively, these protests formed the counterculture movement. In the US, the fight for racial equality constituted one important facet of the counterculture. Like other protest movements of the period, the Civil Rights Movement remained intimately tied to the draft.

GANNON: The counterculture movement was multidimensional. Probably the first protest movement that really began was the Civil Rights Movement. The Vietnam draft, i.e., conscription, initially levied African Americans very heavy. More African Americans initially served in the military than they represented in the population. So people wondered about race discrimination just in who served and who died, who were in combat units.

LANCASTER: In 1967, Muhammad Ali helped amplify these issues when he refused to be drafted to fight in Vietnam, citing both his Muslim faith and his opposition to the war. Officials later criminally charged him with draft evasion.

GANNON: Muhammad Ali, a champion boxer who wouldn't serve, said, "What has a Vietnamese person ever done to me?"

LANCASTER: The remark rang true for many young Americans, especially Blacks busy waging their own battles at home against segregation and inequality. Racialized violence only exacerbated the tension.

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GANNON: Martin Luther King, when he's assassinated in '68 in April, it coincides with Tet. So African Americans see themselves being killed in a war they don't agree with, while at home they're still struggling for political, civil, and economic rights. So you had it get all mixed up, quite rightly, in the economic, political, social struggles of African Americans trying to realize the promises of integration.

LANCASTER: Despite the racial contention of the period, however, many Black Americans made lasting contributions to the war effort.

LANCASTER: One such Veteran was Tom Davis Jr. Davis Jr. began his tour in Vietnam on February 5, 1968. Born in 1936, he grew up in St. Augustine, FL, alongside two younger brothers, Calvin and Charlie. He served as an Armor crewman as part of the 9th Infantry Division, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry, meaning he helped man armored vehicles like tanks that drove through the thick jungles of Vietnam. On March 25, 1968, Davis Jr. died as the result of enemy action in South Vietnam as part of the ongoing Tet Offensive. He was thirty-one years old. A Black man, his service and sacrifice embodied the call for racial equality expressed by the Civil Rights Movement intensifying back home. Today, he rests in St. Augustine National Cemetery in Florida, where his marble headstone matches those of all other Veterans interred alongside him, regardless of rank, gender, or race.

LANCASTER: By the early 1970s, most Americans no longer supported continued intervention in Vietnam. US officials began to limit military operations. In January 1973, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords, which sought to officially end the conflict. Though some US military personnel remained, the majority of American troops left Southeast Asia.

GANNON: We made an agreement with the North Vietnamese, and we signed a treaty. We had been working on it for a while to end the war between us and them, but we also had to bring the South Vietnamese into it. So theoretically, the entire war ended.

LANCASTER: But, like what happened in 1954, after the French left the region, North Vietnam and South Vietnam continued to fight. Without US troops in the area, the North Vietnamese military quickly made progress as they marched south. The peace agreement did not last.

GANNON: The North Vietnamese saw it as a rest. They rested up their forces, and the minute we were gone, they continued the war. They had a massive offensive into South

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Vietnam. At home, Congress decided they had enough of Vietnam, so there would be no air support. There would be no military funding.[9]

LANCASTER: Two years after the US pulled out of Vietnam, the last American servicemembers boarded helicopters and escaped Saigon just before the city fell. Unable to evacuate everyone, the helicopters left thousands of South Vietnamese allies behind.

GANNON: We abandoned them as the North Vietnamese were very quickly subduing most of South Vietnam. And the South Vietnamese government surrendered to them in April of 1975.

LANCASTER: The Vietnam War's legacy remains nuanced and complex. Despite the many sacrifices Vietnam Veterans made, the American public initially did not embrace their memorialization. For Veterans like Southworth and Kervin, insults such as being spit on and being called "baby killers" characterized their homecoming.

SOUTHWORTH: He was one of those that when they came back home, they were spit upon and called baby killers. It just, it wasn't a good experience.

KERVIN: He came home to the, you know, being spit on.

LANCASTER: Others like Carlos Antonio Deliz remembered their service much differently than their relatives who served in previous conflicts.

CARLOS ANTONIO DELIZ: My father felt proud of his role in World War II. I didn't feel that proud of mine. I feel proud of my service in the Army, not in my service in the Vietnam War. My father felt like he put a grain of sand in the victory of World War II. I didn't put a fucking grain of sand in anything. Okay? I only put the grain of sand in surviving, which was good enough at that time.

GANNON: They were considered baby killers even by World War II generation Veterans. They were seen as people who lost the war and broke our tradition of winning wars. No one would hire them. There were a lot of movies where they were always the

[9] The helicopter sound effect comes from the same historical footage as the US Army spraying Agent Orange. The helicopter appears toward the end of the film. See, "US Army Newsfilm V-73-69: Weed Killer Knocks Out VC's Riverbank Ambush Sites, South Vietnam [VC Weed Killer]," 8-11 February 1969, Michael Sheets Collection, *Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive*, Texas Tech University, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=987VI0672.

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bad guy. They were the person who killed everyone. They were the evil people. I would say that their homecoming was terrible, but that would be an understatement. Americans wanted to justify abandoning the war, so by the '80s, people were very angry, particularly Vietnam Veterans, and the first effort to memorialize them was all private.

LANCASTER: Since then, national and local groups have made greater efforts to commemorate Vietnam Veterans. In 1982, officials unveiled the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Composed of two long black granite walls, the monument commemorates American servicemembers killed in action or missing in Vietnam.

GANNON: They weren't welcomed home, but at least they had a memorial, particularly since artistically it was probably one of the best ever made. And so slowly but surely, particularly in the '80s, people began to realize how bad that had been, and they started embracing, during the Reagan era, Veterans. It started improving.

LANCASTER: The story of the Kervins reflects the efforts to address the lack of memorialization and respect for Vietnam War Veterans in the decades following the war's bitter conclusion. Jerry and Mary Kervin led the initiative to bring the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Traveling Wall to Kissimmee, FL, in 2000 and 2001, and then to St. Cloud, FL, in 2003.

KERVIN: The military organizations around shunned the Vietnam Vets. We go back to the next VVA meeting, and he says to the officers, "How'd you like to have the wall come to Kissimmee?" And we did it in 2000. It would be, like, four days, and they would bring the wall in, and there were ceremonies. We had candlelight vigils, and a guy named, Mad Dog, did T-shirts for us, and we sold them, and just wonderful camaraderie.

LANCASTER: Through the continued memorialization of our nation's Veterans, the history of the Vietnam War endures.

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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Department of Veterans Affairs-funded partnership with the National Cemetery Administration through which UCF students, faculty, staff, and K-12 teachers across 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 for listening. This has been ***UCF VLP Presents: The Vietnam War***.

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