All the way

Many movies on the subject of the Vietnam War give the impression that Australians had been against involvement in the Vietnam War from the start. This reveals how historical fiction can distort the facts. In reality, Australian support for our involvement in the conflict was overwhelmingly positive for most of the war.

In this lesson, you learn about the public and political support for the Vietnam War in Australia, including the views held by older Australians and the media.

People and politics

In the early years of Australian involvement in Vietnam (from 1964 to 1967) statistics show Australians supported the war and our alliance with the United States.

For example, The Australian newspaper published the results of a poll in August 1966. It revealed that 74 per cent of Australians backed our partnership with the US in the military activities in Vietnam. Only 24 per cent were opposed with two per cent undecided.

Significantly, the support from Australians aged between 16 and 25 was in line with the national average. Later in the war, this group, especially those who attended universities, strongly opposed Australia's ongoing commitment.

The Liberal Party Government of Sir Robert Menzies had made the decision first to send advisors to Vietnam, and then to increase our participation. So it was not surprising that 85 per cent of Liberal voters followed the party line and agreed with Australia's involvement. More surprising perhaps was the fact that a clear majority of ALP voters (63 per cent) also wanted our troops to go to Vietnam.
The Vietnam War was a major issue in the last three federal elections of the 1970s. On each occasion, the Coalition (the Liberal and Country Parties) campaigned heavily for a continuation of Australia's involvement in the war. With the majority of the population behind them, the Vietnam War was a major factor in keeping the Coalition in power until 1972.

Examine the following graph. It shows the election results for the House of Representatives from this era.


By 1969, when the election result was quite close, support for Australia's participation in the Vietnam War had turned into opposition. A year later, a Morgan poll (Roy Morgan International is a well-known research organisation) showed that only 45 per cent of Australians believed the country’s troops should be fighting in Vietnam, with 43 per cent against.

**Activity 4**

Answer the following questions based on the election results graph and your own knowledge.

1. Rank the three election outcomes, from the easiest Coalition win to the closest result.

2. Calculate the percentage of seats won by the Coalition in 1966?

3. Compare with the opinion polls, this percentage of seats won in 1966?
By this stage only 37 per cent of the Australian population thought we should be in Vietnam. Research the results of the 1972 federal election by clicking on the URL on the previous page.

Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

You deal with opposition to the war in greater detail in the next two lessons.

**Being careful with sources**

As an historian, you should always consider a number of sources, both primary and secondary, before reaching any conclusions. Sources may be biased, exaggerated, lacking detail, or just plain incorrect. If you only look at one or two pieces of evidence, you may not be getting the full story.

Consider the sources on the following page. They appeared in the newspapers during the visit in 1966 of American President, Lyndon Baines Johnson (who was nicknamed LBJ).

Remember, Johnson was a staunch supporter of US involvement in the Vietnam War, a policy that was shared by the Australian Government. His visit was marked by a number of anti-war protests as he toured Australia.
What is your first impression, based on the headlines?

Source: Photo of demonstrators at President Johnson’s Melbourne visit

That’s paint all over the front window of the President’s car. A protester threw it there.
Activity 5

Answer the following questions based on the previous sources and your own knowledge.

1 If you used only these particular sources, what would be your opinion of the President’s visit and the anti-war sentiment in Australia at this time?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2 Compare your answer to Question 1 with opinion poll results from the year (these were mentioned earlier in the lesson).

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

In Sydney and Melbourne, the number of LBJ supporters outnumbered opponents by one and a half million to twenty thousand. In 1966, Australia was certainly ‘all the way with LBJ’.

Lest we forget

Away from politics, another large group who generally supported Australia’s participation in Vietnam, especially in the early years of the war, comprised of ‘older’ Australians. Their experience of growing up in the previous decades helped to mould this attitude.

These people had been steeped in the traditions of the ANZAC legend and its themes of honour, valour and patriotism. Many of them did not have a very good opinion of the ‘long-haired louts’ of the 1960s, who seemed to have few cares and little discipline in their lives. The military would provide that necessary discipline.

The older Australians remembered the desperate times of World War II, when Japan had attacked mainland Australia and appeared to be on the verge of invasion. To some, the prospect of the ‘Domino Theory’ was eerily similar to the southward expansion of the Japanese forces in the early 1940s.
They also recalled the role that the United States had played in the defence of Australia during these years. If the Australian debt of thanks to the US meant supporting them against perceived communist aggression, then so be it.

Finally, for those older than 35 years of age, they had clear memories of the bitter struggle to survive during the Great Depression. They were very wary of talk of change to their economic security. If the spread of communism threatened that security, then it was something to be forcefully opposed.

**Activity 6**

Complete the following passage, based on ‘Lest we forget’, by choosing the right words. Write them in the spaces so each sentence makes sense.

America      communism     Depression
            economy      older       south

One of the ways people form opinions is through experience. Therefore, it is understandable that __________ Australians were cautious about the possible expansion of __________, the so-called ‘Domino Theory’.

They remembered how quickly Japan had pushed __________ during World War II. Many also believed that Australia owed __________ a debt of thanks for their support in World War II, and so felt obliged to support them in Vietnam.

Australians over the age of, say 40 had clear memories of the __________ in the 1930s and the collapse of the Australian __________. If communism represented a threat to their security, it must be stopped.

Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.
The media

The media’s support for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War followed a similar pattern to the feelings of the public in general. In the early years of the conflict, there was almost unanimous support from the country’s newspapers.

Read the following extract. It is an editorial that appeared in The Age newspaper in 1967, giving three reasons for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. The editorial below was typical of most opinions at this time. The extract includes two words that may be new to you. The first is ‘aspirations’. It means ‘hopes’. The second is ‘untenable’. It means ‘unsound’.

Source: Editorial in The Age, 20 October 1967

This newspaper has supported the Australian commitment to Vietnam since the Menzies’ Government first accepted it. We continue to do so because we believe in three fundamental propositions: first, that the war in Vietnam represents the illegitimate aspirations of communism cloaked in legitimate popular aspirations which would be more easily and more humanely achieved without communism; second, that we have a moral responsibility to our allies and, more selfishly, a vital interest in preserving American interest in South-East Asia; third, that the alternatives suggested by those who oppose the Vietnam commitment (usually unconditional withdrawal) are untenable.


To clarify the meaning of the editorial, the next activity puts the three reasons quoted in this editorial in simpler language.

Activity 7

Write which of the three reasons given for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War in The Age editorial match the statements below. For example, if you think the first statement is a simplified version of the third reason, then write, ‘third reason’ on the line provided.

1 We need to support the USA, in case a country in Southeast Asia should ever threaten us.

2 Even though North Vietnam say they have invaded the South in order to unite the country, we think that their real goal is to spread communism.
3 We think that leaving Vietnam is not an option because it would really benefit no one.

Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

In general, newspaper support for the war continued into the early 1970s with few exceptions. One of the few voices of dissension was the Sunday Review that was launched in 1971.

The radio and television sections of the media generally echoed their print equivalents. During the Vietnam War years there was no talkback radio, a vehicle that is often used today for people to express differing opinions.

Current affairs programmes, as with television itself, were in their infancy in Australia. The first current affairs program to regularly oppose the war was This Day Tonight, which premiered on 10 April 1967.

The only other show of any significance to disagree with our commitment to the war was The Mavis Bramston Show, launched in 1964. Rather than editorialising, this satirical comedy poked fun at the news of the day, including the conflict in Vietnam.

Later in the war, forms of media, such as student newspapers, ‘protest theatre’ and protest songs played on the radio would actively oppose the war. For their part, the ‘mainstream’ media bitterly opposed such informal means of expression. From 1964 to at least 1967, the general public agreed with them.

Go to the exercises section and complete Exercises 2.3 to 2.4 as directed by your teacher.