

## How Vietnam was lost – BBC4, 2010



The documentary, made after David Maraniss' book *They marched into sunlight* (2003), is shaped around two events that occurred contemporaneously during two days in the sixties—October 17 and 18, 1967. The first was an ambush in Vietnam that occurred when the Black Lions, a renowned battalion of the First Infantry Division, marched into the jungle on a search-and-destroy mission forty-four miles northwest of Saigon.



The second was a demonstration at the University of Wisconsin where anti-war protestors staged a sit-in aimed at preventing the Dow Chemical Company, manufacturers of napalm, from recruiting on the Madison campus.



Most of the US soldiers in Vietnam were draftees and they were appalled at the sight of what was going on. Besides, neither they, nor their commanding officers had any experience of war. While the GIs had superior firepower, their morale would collapse as soon as they got involved in the dirty war in the jungle against an invisible enemy.



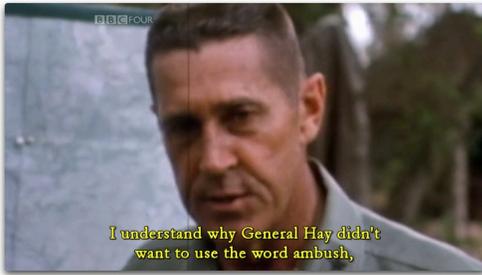
Allegedly, they were fighting the Viet Cong (VC), communist South Vietnamese guerrillas. But more than once, the VC would be made of regular North Vietnamese troops who poured in through the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and Cambodia. And the young US soldiers were no match to those battle-hardened Vietnamese, whose leaders had already defeated the French, and who were ready to die for the unification of their country.



The Vietnam war was the first one in the age of television. The Americans could watch it day by day on the screen and they were deeply shocked. This is how Jean Ponder Allen, the wife of lieutenant-colonel Terry Allen Jr and mother of their three little girls, started to question her marriage. She eventually decided to divorce, but never had to proceed.



Her husband, the son of a famous WW2 general, wanted to equal his father. Summoned by his chiefs to engage the enemy, he led the Black Lions in an ambush, in which his two companies were lost. The 160 GIs had met a VC regiment of 1,400. Colonel Allen was among the 64 American fallen soldiers.



The US Army decided to organize a cover-up. They never acknowledged that the Black Lions had been trapped in an ambush. Instead, they represented the battle as a feat of arms, that had thwarted a VC offensive on Saigon. Posthumously, colonel Allen was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross "for extraordinary heroism".



The next day, 300 students who demonstrated against Dow Chemical at the University of Wisconsin in Madison were charged by the local police. Many policemen, who belonged to the lower classes, hated the students because they were smart, good-looking and rich. Moreover the cops saw that demonstration against the war as an act of treason. More than 60 students were injured.



The brutal crackdown triggered a strike in support of the wounded students. And the anti-war movement soon gained momentum on the campus. In a sudden conversion, those who had not taken part in the first demonstration had now become militants against the war.



Many Americans resented the draft. Some of them even tried to escape to Canada, where they were granted asylum. Conscription had led to defeat in Vietnam, because the draftees had no military experience, and when they had acquired some, they would be replaced by other draftees. At home, the draft led to mass protest against the war.



So, the Vietnam war was lost, the first war ever lost by the United States of America. With the Tet Offensive in January-February 1968, the willingness to fight of the American leadership would begin to falter. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968, President Johnson, who had chosen escalation after the Tonkin Gulf incident in 1964, announced that he would not seek reelection. Johnson was succeeded by Nixon who decided the policy of "vietnamization", which implied the progressive withdrawal of American troops.



As emphasized by Professor Zeitlin, the Vietnam war brought about the civic awakening of a generation. Liberal democracies cannot wage wars which they believe to be unjust. But the lessons of Vietnam were learnt by the political leaders too. In recent wars, like in Afghanistan or Iraq, only professional soldiers were deployed. A discrete but efficient censorship prevents the public from being shocked by distasteful pictures. And appropriate propaganda justifies the war, thus forestalling dissent.