Martin Jezer, a 27-year-old copywriter living in New York City, had never considered himself a radical. “I campaigned for Lyndon Johnson in 1964,” he recalled. As his opposition to the war in Vietnam grew, however, Jezer decided to stage a public protest.

On April 15, 1967, he and dozens of other young men gathered with their military draft cards in New York’s Central Park. Before an audience of reporters, photographers, FBI officials, and citizens, the men pulled out matches and lighters and burned the cards.

“We began singing freedom songs and chanting, ‘Resist! Resist!’ and ‘Burn Draft Cards, Not People’... People in the audience were applauding us, shouting encouragement. Then some guys began to come out of the audience with draft cards in hand. They burned them. Alone, in pairs, by threes they came. Each flaming draft card brought renewed cheering and more people out of the crowd... Some of the draft card burners were girls, wives, or girlfriends of male card burners... It lasted this way for about half an hour.”

—quoted in The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints

A Growing Credibility Gap

Jezer’s protest was just one of many, as American opposition to the Vietnam War grew in the late 1960s. When American troops first entered the Vietnam War in the spring of 1965, many Americans had supported the military effort. A Gallup poll
published around that time showed that 66 percent of Americans approved of the policy in Vietnam. As the war dragged on, however, public support began to drop. Suspicion of the government’s truthfulness about the war was a significant reason. Throughout the early years of the war, the American commander in South Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, reported that the enemy was on the brink of defeat. In 1967 he confidently declared that the “enemy’s hopes are bankrupt” and added, “we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view.”

Contradicting such reports were less optimistic media accounts, especially on television. Vietnam was the first “television war,” with footage of combat appearing nightly on the evening news. Day after day, millions of people saw images of wounded and dead Americans and began to doubt government reports. In the view of many, a credibility gap had developed, meaning it was hard to believe what the Johnson administration said about the war.

Congress, which had given the president a nearly free hand in Vietnam, soon grew uncertain about the war. Beginning in February 1966, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held “educational” hearings on Vietnam, calling in Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other policy makers to explain the administration’s war program. The committee also listened to critics such as American diplomat George Kennan. Although Kennan had helped create the policy of containment, he argued that Vietnam was not strategically important to the United States.

**Reading Check**

**Explain** Why was the Vietnam War the first “television war”?

**An Antiwar Movement Emerges**

As casualties mounted in Vietnam, many people began to protest publicly against the war and to demand that the United States pull out. Although many other Americans supported the war, opponents of the conflict received the most attention.

**Teach-Ins Begin** In March 1965, a group of faculty members and students at the University of Michigan abandoned their classes and joined together in a teach-in. Here, they informally discussed the issues surrounding the war and reaffirmed their reasons for opposing it. The gathering inspired teach-ins at many campuses. In May 1965, 122 colleges held a “National Teach-In” by radio for more than 100,000 antiwar demonstrators.

**Analyzing Political Cartoons**

**Dark Passage** One particular phrase came to represent the government’s claims that it was on the verge of ending the Vietnam War: “the light at the end of the tunnel.” Why did many people become skeptical about such government claims?

People who opposed the war did so for different reasons. Some saw the conflict as a civil war in which the United States had no business. Others viewed South Vietnam as a corrupt dictatorship and insisted that defending that country was immoral and unjust.

**Anger at the Draft** Young protesters especially focused on what they saw as an unfair draft system. At the beginning of the war, a college student was often able to defer military service until after graduation. By contrast, young people from low-income families were more likely to be sent to Vietnam because they were unable to afford college. This meant minorities, particularly African Americans, made up a disproportionately large number of the soldiers in Vietnam. By 1967, for example, African Americans accounted for about 20 percent of American combat deaths—about twice their proportion of the population within the United States. That number would decline to roughly match their population proportion by the war’s end.
Flower Power  Student antiwar protests ranged from violent confrontation to this peaceful but dramatic demonstration near the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. What were some reasons many people opposed the war?

The high number of African Americans and poor Americans dying in Vietnam angered African American leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Early on, King had refrained from speaking out against the war for fear that it would draw attention from the civil rights movement. In April 1967, however, he broke his silence and publicly condemned the conflict:

“Somehow this madness must cease. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam and the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leader of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop must be ours.” — quoted in A Testament of Hope

As the war escalated, American officials increased the draft call, putting many college students at risk. An estimated 500,000 draftees refused to go. Many publicly burned their draft cards or simply did not report when called for induction. Some fled the country, moving to Canada, Sweden, or other nations. Others stayed and went to prison rather than fight in a war they opposed.

Between 1965 and 1968, officials prosecuted more than 3,300 Americans for refusing to serve. The draft became less of an issue in 1969 when the government introduced a lottery system, in which only those with low lottery numbers were subject to the draft.

Protests against the war were not confined to college campuses. Demonstrators held public rallies and marches in towns across the country. In April 1965, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a left-wing student organization, organized a march on Washington, D.C., that drew more than 20,000 participants. Two years later, in October 1967, a rally at Washington’s Lincoln Memorial drew tens of thousands of protesters as well.

Anger over the draft also fueled discussions of voting age. Many draftees argued that if they were old enough to fight, they were old enough to vote. In 1971 the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, giving all citizens age 18 and older the right to vote in all state and federal elections.
Hawks and Doves In the face of growing opposition to the war, President Johnson remained determined to continue fighting. He assailed his critics in Congress as “selfish men who want to advance their own interests.” As for the college protesters, Johnson viewed them as naive and unable to appreciate the importance of resisting communism.

The president was not alone in his views. Although the antiwar protesters became a vocal group, they did not represent majority opinion on Vietnam. In a poll taken in early 1968, 53 percent of the respondents favored stronger military action in Vietnam, compared to only 24 percent who wanted an end to the war. Of those Americans who supported the policy in Vietnam, many openly criticized the protesters for a lack of patriotism.

By 1968 the nation seemed to be divided into two camps. Those who wanted the United States to withdraw from Vietnam were known as doves. Those who insisted that the United States stay and fight came to be known as hawks. As the two groups debated, the war took a dramatic turn for the worse, and the nation endured a year of shock and crisis.

1968: The Pivotal Year

The most turbulent year of the chaotic 1960s was 1968. The year saw a shocking political announcement, a pair of traumatic assassinations, and a violent political convention. First, however, the nation endured a surprise attack in Vietnam.

TURNING POINT

The Tet Offensive On January 30, 1968, during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese launched a massive surprise attack. In this Tet offensive, the guerrilla fighters attacked virtually all American airbases in South Vietnam and most of the South’s major cities and provincial capitals. Vietcong commandos even blasted their way into the American embassy in Saigon.

Militarily, Tet turned out to be a disaster for the Communist forces. After about a month of fighting, the American and South Vietnamese soldiers repelled the enemy troops, inflicting heavy losses on them. General Westmoreland boasted that the Communists’ “well-laid plans went afoul,” while President Johnson triumphantly added that the enemy’s effort had ended in “complete failure.”

In fact, the North Vietnamese had scored a major political victory. The American people were shocked that an enemy supposedly on the verge of defeat could launch such a large-scale attack. When General Westmoreland requested 209,000 troops in addition to the 500,000 already in Vietnam, it seemed to be an admission that the United States could not win the war.

To make matters worse, the mainstream media, which had tried to remain balanced in their war coverage, now openly criticized the effort. “The American people should be getting ready to accept, if they haven’t already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed,” the Wall Street Journal declared. Walter Cronkite, then the nation’s most respected television newscaster, announced after Tet that it seemed “more certain than ever that the bloody experience in Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.”

Public opinion no longer favored the president. In the weeks following the Tet offensive, the president’s approval rating plummeted to a dismal 35 percent, while support for his handling of the war fell even lower, to 26 percent. The administration’s credibility gap now seemed too wide to repair.

Johnson Leaves the Presidential Race With the war growing increasingly unpopular and Johnson’s credibility all but gone, some Democrats began looking for an alternative candidate to nominate for president in 1968. In November 1967, even before the Tet disaster, a little-known liberal senator from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy, became the first dove to announce his candidacy against Johnson. In March 1968, McCarthy stunned the nation by winning more than 40 percent of the votes in the New Hampshire primary.

The Peace Symbol This familiar symbol of the 1960s was originally designed to stand for the fight for nuclear disarmament. Created by British artist Gerald Holtom in 1958, the symbol was first used at a British demonstration against a research center for the development of nuclear weapons. It combined the semaphore for the letters “N” and “D,” standing for nuclear disarmament. Semaphore is a system of visual signaling using two flags, one held in each hand. N is two flags held in an upside-down V, and D is one flag pointed straight up and the other pointed straight down.
and almost defeating the president. Realizing that Johnson was vulnerable, Senator Robert Kennedy, who also opposed the war, quickly entered the race for the Democratic nomination.

With the division in the country and within his own party growing, Johnson addressed the public on television on March 31, 1968. He stunned viewers by stating, “I have concluded that I should not permit the presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”

A Season of Violence Following Johnson’s announcement, the nation endured even more shocking events. In April James Earl Ray was arrested for killing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an event which led to riots in several major cities. Just two months later, another assassination rocked the country—that of Robert Kennedy. Kennedy, who appeared to be on his way to winning the Democratic nomination, was gunned down on June 5 in a California hotel just after winning the state’s Democratic primary. The assassin was Sirhan Sirhan, an Arab nationalist apparently angry over the candidate’s pro-Israeli remarks a few nights before.

The violence that seemed to plague the country at every turn in 1968 culminated with a chaotic and well-publicized clash between protesters and police at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Thousands of protesters descended on the August convention, demanding that the Democrats adopt an antiwar platform.

On the third day of the convention, the delegates chose Hubert Humphrey, President Johnson’s vice president, as their presidential nominee. Meanwhile, in a park not far from the convention hall, the protesters and police began fighting. A full-scale riot soon engulfed the streets of downtown Chicago. As officers tried to disperse demonstrators with tear gas and billy clubs, demonstrators taunted the authorities with the chant, “The whole world is watching!”
**Nixon Wins the Presidency** The violence and chaos now associated with the Democratic Party benefited the 1968 Republican presidential candidate, Richard Nixon. Although defeated in the 1960 election, Nixon had remained active in national politics. A third candidate, Governor George Wallace of Alabama, also decided to run in 1968 as an independent. Wallace, an outspoken segregationist, sought to attract those Americans who felt threatened by the civil rights movement and urban social unrest.

Public opinion polls gave Nixon a wide lead over Humphrey and Wallace. Nixon’s campaign promise to unify the nation and restore law and order appealed to Americans who feared their country was spinning out of control. Nixon also declared that he had a plan for ending the war in Vietnam, although he did not specify how the plan would work.

At first Humphrey’s support of President Johnson’s Vietnam policies hurt his campaign. After Humphrey broke with the president and called for a complete end to the bombing of North Vietnam, he began to move up in the polls. A week before the election, President Johnson helped Humphrey by announcing that the bombing of North Vietnam had halted and that a cease-fire would follow.

Johnson’s announcement had come too late. In the end, Nixon’s promises to end the war and restore order at home were enough to sway the American people. On Election Day, Nixon defeated Humphrey by more than 100 electoral votes, although he won the popular vote by a slim margin of 43 percent to 42. Wallace helped account for the razor-thin margin by winning 46 electoral votes and more than 13 percent of the popular vote.

Speaking to reporters after his election, Nixon recalled seeing a young girl carrying a sign at one of his rallies that said: “Bring Us Together.” This, he promised, would be his chief goal as president. Nixon also vowed to implement his plan to end the Vietnam War.

**Reading Check** Why did President Johnson not run for re-election in 1968?