

Australia and the Vietnam War



***Why did Australia enter the war in 1965?
Did Australians support this decision?***

Why does a nation go to war in another country?

In 2003 Australia went to war in a country thousands of kilometres away, against an enemy that had not directly threatened our nation in any way. In 2004 we still have military forces in that country, trying to help it re-establish itself.

Forty years earlier we had done the same thing, in Vietnam.

Why did we go to war then? And should we have done so? To answer these questions you need to explore:

- why a government might act as it does,
- what values affect people's decisions, and
- what social institutions might influence their ideas.

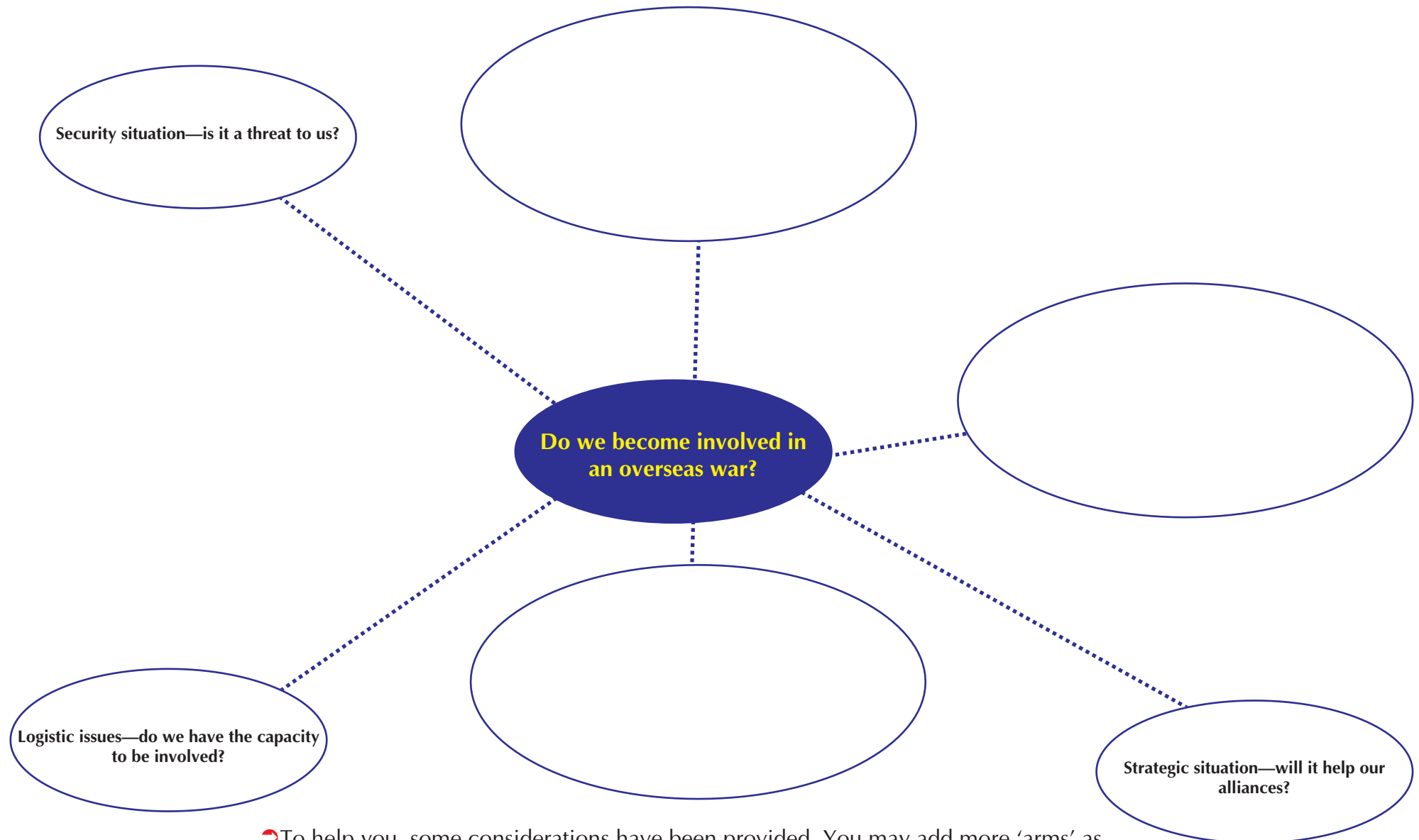
What might influence a government?

What issues or considerations does a government and its people take into account in deciding whether to become involved in an overseas war?

Q. 1 Brainstorm to create a list of these considerations using the summary drawing provided on the next page.



AWM BEL/69/0389/VN. Binh Ba, South Vietnam. June 1969. Centurion tanks from 1st Armoured Regiment, and armoured personnel carriers (APCs) from B Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, move along the main road of the village past Plantation Gallia. Armour together with infantry dislodged a strong North Vietnamese Army (NVA) group which had entered the village.



➡ To help you, some considerations have been provided. You may add more 'arms' as you come up with more ideas. You could base your thinking on your knowledge of the Iraq situation, or a more general and theoretical one.

Once you have decided on your list examine these considerations provided below, and decide if you want to add any to create a final list.

- Moral issues
- Alliances
- National Security
- Economic benefits
- Self-interest
- Military capacity
- Global citizenship obligations
- Likelihood of winning

What you have done is to create some hypotheses about the reasons why Australia might go to war in a hypothetical situation. You will soon be asked to test those ideas against the reality of Australian involvement in the Vietnam War.



SKE/67/1139/VN. Vietnam, November 1967. Justin, one of two tracker dogs with 7th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (7RAR) has a cup of water poured over his muzzle by his handler, Private Tom Blackhurst of Swansea, NSW. Justin had just successfully located a group of Viet Cong during operation Santa Fe in the north-east of the province. A little while after the Viet Cong had withdrawn, the 7th Battalion tracker team was called in, eventually locating members of the enemy about thirty yards ahead. The tracker team immediately opened fire and inflicted two fatal casualties.

Would you go to war? Personal values

The Australian government made the decision to go to war, but individuals also make decisions about whether they are prepared to support that decision. One of the factors that influence this is a person's values.

Q. 2

Imagine that Australia was suddenly at war, and you had to decide if you would participate. Look at this list, and decide which, if any, of the following reasons might be ones that would lead you to go to fight. You may end up with several—or with one, or none. Discuss your ideas with your classmates.

	Circumstance under which you might go to war	Yes	No	Not sure
A	You are personally threatened by an enemy.			
B	Your family is threatened by an enemy.			
C	Australia is threatened with invasion by an enemy.			
D	To help another nation be free from being invaded by an enemy.			
E	To stop the progress of a dangerous philosophy or form of government.			
F	To help another nation establish democracy.			
G	To stop a danger in another country (such as terrorism) before it comes to your country.			
H	To help a friendly nation that has asked for your support.			
I	To build up good will with a strong and friendly country, by helping to fight its enemies so that it will be prepared to fight for Australia if we need help.			
J	To be able to use another country for your own country's benefit.			
K	Under no circumstances.			

Which social institutions might influence people's decisions?

Individuals are also influenced by their society. Here are some potentially influential elements in society, each of which might help to influence a person's attitude to an issue.

Social institution	Your importance rating (1=highest)
Newspapers and other mass media	
Church leaders	
Unions	
Politicians	
Family	
Friends	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	
Other (specify...)	

Q. 3 Using the column provided, rank these social institutions, and any others you can think of, in importance in your own life today.

You will now be able to look at the situation in Australia in 1965 and see how these and other elements might have influenced people in that society at that time.

Why did Australia go to war in 1965? Did Australians support the decision?

On 29 April 1965 Robert Menzies, leader of the Liberal Party and Prime Minister of Australia, announced in Federal Parliament that Australia would send combat troops to help the Government of South Vietnam in its struggle against the attempt by North Vietnam to control and unify the two countries. Australia was going to war.

Examine the information at Source 1 (following page) and use it to decide why Australian society acted in that way at that time.

Q. 4 How might this background situation help explain why Australia chose to be involved in the Vietnam War in 1965?



AWM EKN/69/0081/VN. Long Tan, Vietnam. 18 August 1969. Members of the 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment - New Zealand (ANZAC) (6RAR-NZ (ANZAC)) during the ceremony at which a white cross was erected as a memorial to those who died during the Battle of Long Tan.

Source 1

The war in Vietnam was the result of hundreds of years of foreigners' occupation of Vietnam. It was a war for Vietnamese independence, but also a civil war between the two halves of Vietnam, the North and the South. It had its origins in the French occupation of the whole Indochina area (today's Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) in the eighteenth century. The French controlled the area through their military strength, and ruled it as a colony. Its main appeal was rubber—a vital commodity for French manufacturing and trade. Many Vietnamese opposed the French colonial control, but were not strong enough to force the French to leave.

In the Second World War the Japanese invaded the area, and Vietnamese nationalists formed a group known as the Viet Minh and fought beside French troops to defeat the Japanese army. After the victory over the Japanese, the Vietnamese expected to gain their independence—but the French remained as colonial masters. Many Vietnamese troops now turned to fighting the French.

The Viet Minh were stronger in the North of Vietnam than in the South. Their leader, Ho Chi Minh, declared Vietnam independent in 1945, and focused on fighting the French. In 1954 the French were defeated in the North at Dien Bien Phu, but in the South, Vietnamese leaders did not want to be part of the pro-Communist system being set up by the north. The country was divided along the 17th parallel of latitude. Ho controlled the government in the North, and Ngo Dinh Diem was head of government in the South. The agreement was for there to be a



referendum (or popular vote) in 1956 for the Vietnamese people to decide if they wanted to re-unite as one country.

Ho's government was a communist one. Communism was anti-democratic and anti-capitalism. Many people in the South did not want a communist government, and the United States was worried about the growing strength of communism in Asia. China had become communist in 1949; North Korea had become communist in 1950; and there were strong communist movements in many other Asian countries.

The United States therefore decided to support the South against the North, which had the support of China and Russia. The South refused to hold the referendum in 1956. The North, and many supporters of unification in the South, therefore began to try and re-unite the country by force—by defeating the government of the South.

Northern troops moved south, to join those southerners who wanted to defeat the government of Diem and create a united Vietnam under Ho's leadership.

By 1962 the United States was heavily involved in training and supplying South Vietnam's military forces to resist the North Vietnamese army, and those supporters of the North who lived in the South.

In this year Australia also decided to help the South, and provided some military advisers to help train South Vietnamese troops. Then, in 1965, Prime Minister Menzies made the announcement that was to commit the first one thousand of more than 50,000 Australian servicemen to Vietnam over the next seven years, with the death of 501 of them.

Australia and the region

One of the major issues of the time was the spread of communism in Asia.

Communism in Asia was a political system that imposed a single party system of government, was not democratic, and forced people to have a state-controlled economic system.

Q. 5 Why might Australia oppose the existence of communism in Asia?

A widely-held belief was of the 'domino theory', that if one nation fell, others would in turn topple, like one domino knocking down a series of others. The two comments at Source 2 show how it would possibly work.

Source 2

The 'domino' theory

A If ... South Vietnam [were] allowed to fall under communist rule, the rest of South-East Asia could not long remain free.

Once that door was opened the extension of the Chinese communist pressures and influence through Malaysia and Indonesia would only be a matter of time, and Australia would lie on the immediate [edge] of Chinese power.

Sydney Morning Herald 13 August 1964

B Australia's stake in what started out as a Red-engineered dirty little civil war is this: if communism takes over in South Vietnam, then Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia will surely be swallowed, too, in time. We could be next.

The Courier-Mail 19 April 1965

Q. 6

Why might Australia be inclined to become involved in a conflict in South Vietnam where a communist North was trying to unify the country against the American-backed non-communist South?

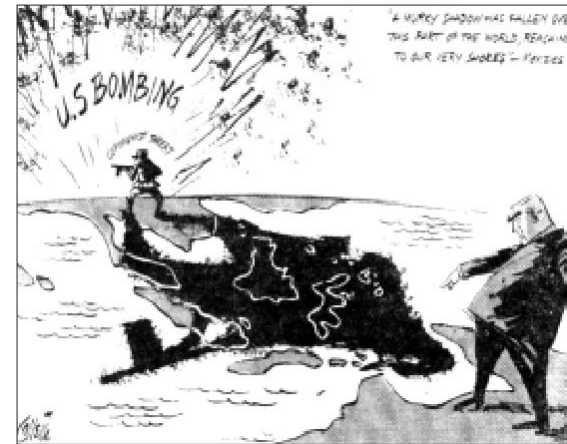
Q. 7 Examine the two cartoons in Source 3, both of which deal with this 'domino theory'. Prepare a caption for each that explains the main idea that the cartoonist is putting to the viewer.

Q. 8 Do the cartoons suggest that all Australians agreed with the 'domino' theory? Discuss the reasons for your answer.

Q. 9 How might the existence of the 'domino theory' help explain why Australia chose to be involved in the Vietnam War in 1965?

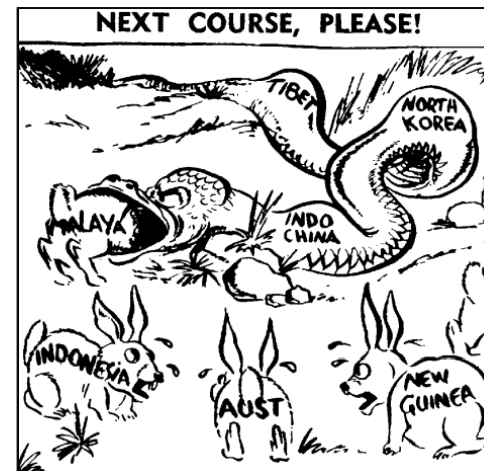
Source 3

Two cartoons



← A murky shadow has fallen over this part of the world, reaching to our very shores – Menzies

The Australian 14 June 1965



News-Weekly 21 July 1954

The regional situation

Look at this description of what was happening in a variety of Asian countries by 1965.

Source 4

What was happening in the region?

Burma	Had fought a civil war in the 1950s involving communist and non-communist forces.
Thailand	A member of SEATO. Thailand had a policy of anti-communism.
Cambodia	A radical but non-communist government. Strong pro-communist forces there.
Laos	Divided by civil war into three competing and warring factions—anti-communist, neutral, and pro-communist.
Malaysia	Aligned with the west. Australian troops there to help combat communist guerrillas.
Sarawak	Aligned with the west. Australian troops there to help combat communist guerrillas.
Singapore	Strongly anti-communist.
Brunei	Strongly anti-communist.
Indonesia	A conservative government, with a strong communist party and support.
Philippines	Western-oriented government.
China	Communist controlled from 1949, a supporter of the spread of communism.
Vietnam	North Vietnam was communist controlled, South Vietnam was backed by the United States, but with strong pro-communist forces in the population.
Korea	North Korea was communist and supported by China, South Korea was supported by the United States

Q. 10

- Mark each country listed in Source 4 on the map below.
- Colour in on the map those countries that seem most accepting of or likely to be influenced by communism.



Q. 11

How might this regional situation help explain why Australia chose to be involved in the Vietnam War in 1965?

The issue in Vietnam

Was the war in Vietnam part of a communist 'domino' movement, or was it a civil war within one country only?

Look at this evidence at Source 5.

Source 5

Attitudes towards the issue

A US Department of State opinion:

In Vietnam a Communist government [in the North] has set out deliberately to conquer a sovereign people in a neighbouring state. And to achieve its end, it has used every resource of its own government to carry out its carefully planned program of concealed aggression ... [Its] aggression is as real as that of an invading army.

B Leading Australian anti-war campaigner, Federal Member of Parliament Jim Cairns:

Until 1965 everyone in authority agrees that almost all the men and arms of the Viet Cong had not come even from North Vietnam, and only a few arms and no men from China. It was mainly an indigenous movement for national independence against first French and later American control.

Peace in Vietnam Association, *Vietnam: Points of View*, Melbourne, 1967 pp 7–9

Q. 12 What different explanation does each give for the nature of the war in Vietnam?

Q. 13 Each of these interpretations or analyses of what was happening in Vietnam had a great deal of support from other commentators and experts. What difficulties does this create for students in knowing what was happening in Vietnam? What difficulties would it create at the time for people trying to make judgements about the situation?

International obligations and alliances

In the 1950s Australia became part of two international defence agreements: ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and United States, 1951), and SEATO (South-East Asia Treaty Organisation, 1954— involving Australia, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United States).

These treaties committed Australia to helping other member countries if they were attacked, and committed them to helping Australia if we were attacked.

The closest defence problems for Australia at this time were occurring in Malaysia and Indonesia. Australia was very worried about Indonesia, which it saw as both vulnerable to communist takeover, as well as potentially hostile militarily to Australia. In 1963 Indonesia's attempts to subvert the establishment of Malaysia led to Australia's providing troops to fight Indonesians on Malaysia's Borneo border with Indonesia. Australia was also concerned that the United States did not seem to share its concerns about Indonesia, and was worried that it might not support Australia in any difficulties with that country.

Q. 14 Examine these cartoon comments at Source 6 on the situation and in each case, decide:

- what the cartoon shows (who are the main characters, what they are doing/saying, etc.); and
- what the meaning or message of each cartoon is—that is, the idea that the cartoonist wants you to accept and agree with.

Q. 15 What do the cartoons suggest about Australia's relationship with and reliance on Great Britain and the United States in our region?

Source 6

Two cartoons



"He may be my baby, but he's on YOUR doorstep!"

The Australian 1 February 1966



The Courier-Mail
10 September 1954

In 1964 and 1965 Australia's Ambassador to Washington was concerned to create a strong link to Australia's main ally in the region. The United States, starting the process of committing itself more heavily to the defence of South Vietnam, asked Australia for more military advisers to be sent to Vietnam. Australia believed that it could not afford to send so many expert troops, but could send combat forces instead. Renouf provided the advice at Source 7 to the Australian Government:

— Source 7***Allan Renouf, Australian
Ambassador in Washington***

It is recommended that we make a response which is both as positive and as prompt as possible... Our objective should be ... to achieve such an habitual closeness of relations with the United States and sense of mutual alliance that in our time and need, after we have shown all reasonable restraint and good sense, the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want.

The problem of Vietnam is one, it seems, where we could ... pick up a lot of credit with the United States, for this problem is one to which the United States is deeply committed and in which it genuinely feels it is carrying too much of the load, not so much the physical load the bulk of which the United States is prepared to bear, as the moral load.

Michael Sexton, *War For The Asking*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2002 page 57.

Q. 16 How might Australia's international obligations and alliances help explain why Australia chose to be involved in the Vietnam War in 1965?

The announcement of the decision to go to war

On 29 April 1965 Prime Minister Menzies made the announcement, see Source 8, that Australia would contribute combat troops, including conscripts, to the Vietnam War.

Source 8

Prime Minister Menzies announces that combat troops will be sent to South Vietnam

The Australian Government is now in receipt of a request from the Government of South Vietnam for further military assistance. We have decided—and this has been after close consultation with the Government of the United States—to provide an infantry battalion for service in Vietnam... There can be no doubt of the gravity of the situation in South Vietnam. There is ample evidence to show that with the support of the North Vietnamese regime and other Communist powers, the Viet Cong has been preparing on a more substantial scale than ... [before] insurgency action designed to destroy South Vietnamese Government control, and to disrupt by violence the life of the local people... The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South-East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 29 April 1965, vol 45 pages 1060–1

Q. 17

List the reasons why Prime Minister Menzies committed Australian combat troops to the war.

The leader of the Opposition, Arthur Calwell, said (see Source 9):

Source 9

Opposition leader Arthur Calwell opposes the sending of troops

[O]n behalf of all my colleagues of Her Majesty's Opposition, I say that we oppose the Government's decision to send 800 men to fight in Vietnam. We oppose it firmly and completely... We do not think it is a wise decision. We do not think it is a timely decision. We do not think it will help the fight against Communism. On the contrary, we believe it will harm that fight in the long term. We do not believe it will promote the welfare of the people of Vietnam. On the contrary, we believe it will prolong and deepen the suffering of that unhappy people so that Australia's very name may become a term of reproach among them. We do not believe that it represents a wise or even intelligent response to the challenge of Chinese power. On the contrary, we believe it mistakes entirely the nature of that power, and that it materially assists China in her subversive aims. Indeed, we cannot conceive a decision by the Government more likely to promote the long term interests of China in Asia and the Pacific.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 4 May 1965, vol 46 pages 1102–7

Q. 18 List the reasons why Calwell is opposed to it.

Q. 19 Do you think most people would be likely to agree or disagree with Menzies rather than Calwell? How could you test this idea?

Several years later Australians learned that the South Vietnamese Government had not requested any troops from Australia. Prime Minister Menzies had lied to Parliament and the Australian people about why Australians were about to become involved in military combat in Vietnam.

Q. 20 Does this matter? Explain your views.

How did people react to the announcement?

Q. 21 What was the main reaction of newspapers? (See Source 10.)

Q. 22 Do you think this would have influenced people's reactions to involvement?

— Source 10

Newspaper reactions

The West Australian (1 May 1965)

The government could not shirk its responsibilities there. The decision gives expression to the fundamentals of our policy in South-East Asia.

The Age (30 April 1965)

These are inescapable obligations which fall on us because of our geographical position, our treaty commitments and our friendships. ... There is clearly a United States call to share, even in a small way, more of the burdens. ... There was no alternative but to respond as we have.

The Australian (30 April 1965)

The Menzies Government has made a reckless decision on Vietnam which this nation may live to regret.

The Adelaide Advertiser (1 May 1965)

We have made the necessary commitment.

The Courier-Mail (1 May 1965)

Australia is to fight on the Asian mainland to aid the United States in stopping the advance of Communism, which threatens us directly. ... Our Government has made the decision in our name, and that is its duty. The nation now has to support that. ... For us, the cost will not be light. Brave men will die in jungles without even seeing the other side's soldiers; many others will be wounded.

The Sydney Morning Herald (30 April 1966)

No Australian who is conscious of the dangerous position in which his country stands, and the crucial importance to it of the war in Vietnam, can doubt that this is a right and indeed inevitable decision.

Look at this summary of reactions in Source 11 of various elements in society to the announcement of involvement in the war.

Q. 23

How might the responses of social institutions help explain why Australia chose to be involved in the Vietnam War in 1965?

— Source 11

Reactions of social institutions to involvement in the war

Trade unions

Most unions opposed the war strongly. Many were very vehement against the policy, and thought that the Labor Party was not strong enough in its condemnations. Some militant unions moved to ban supplies, equipment and mail to Australian troops—which the Labor Party did not endorse.

Churches

Some Protestant church leaders were strongly outspoken critics, but many came out publicly in support. Jewish leaders adopted a 'purposeful silence', it was not seen as an issue that Jewish church leaders needed to speak out on. There were prominent secular Jewish individuals prominent on both sides of the argument.

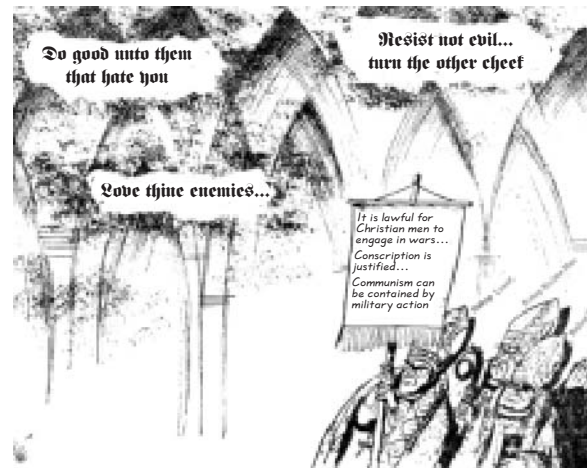
Catholic church leaders felt a strong commitment to Catholic-led South Vietnam. There was also a strong connection between Catholics and the anti-Labor party, the Democratic Labor Party. However, some Catholic intellectuals spoke out against the war.

Universities

Relatively little disturbance at this stage.

Other opposition

Some peace groups forming, including SOS —many middle class ordinary people. Some more radical groups.



"But WE say unto you..."

The Australian 8 April 1966

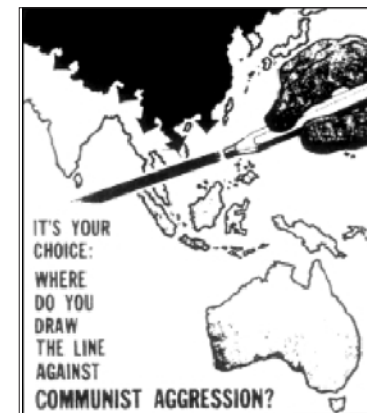
Did Australians generally support the policy of sending troops to Vietnam?

The evidence at Source 11 has shown how various social institutions reacted to the announcement of involvement in the war. How did ordinary people respond? There are two major ways in which we can see people voicing their opinions: public opinion polls, and elections. After the government had announced its commitment, the Australian Labor Party, in Opposition in the Federal Parliament, opposed this commitment and campaigned against it at the 1966 House of Representatives and 1967 Senate elections.

Q. 24 Do the election posters in Source 12 suggest that the 1966 election was fought on the issue of Australia's involvement in the war?

Source 12

1966 election posters



Peter Edwards, *A Nation At War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997 page 138

Here in Source 13 are the election results, showing the change in representation from 1963/64 (before the commitment) to 1966/67 (after the commitment).

Source 13

1963/64 and 1966/67 election results

Party	House of Representatives		Senate	
	1963	1966	1964	1967
	Australian Labor Party (anti)	52	41	28
Liberal Party (pro)	52	61	23	21
Country Party (pro)	20	21	7	7
Democratic Labor Party (pro)	—	—	2	4
Independent (pro)	—	1	1	1

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bp/1996-97/97bp1.htm>

Q. 25 Describe the election results.

Source 14

Public opinion polls

A number of public opinion polls were conducted on the issue of whether people wanted Australian troops to go to Vietnam.

Poll date	Continue to fight (%)	Bring back (%)	Undecided (%)
Sept 65	56	28	16
Sept 66	61	27	12
May 67	62	24	14

Peter Cook, *Australia and Vietnam 1965–1972*, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1991 page 39

Q. 26 What does the information in Source 14 show about people's attitude to being involved in the war?

Conclusions

In 1965 the Australian Government committed Australian combat troops to fight in Vietnam. Why did the government do this? Was this decision supported by the Australian people?