

# *Portraits in Oversight:*

## **Congress Investigates the Vietnam War**



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From 1966 to 1971, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a series of oversight hearings that questioned the justification, tactics, and effectiveness of the U.S. military in the Vietnam War. Popularly called the “Fulbright hearings” after its chair, Arkansas Democrat Senator J. William Fulbright, these televised congressional hearings educated Congress and the American public about unknown facts, forced greater scrutiny of U.S. military actions, exposed misrepresentations by the executive branch, and helped shift public opinion against the war. The hearings illustrate the powerful role that congressional inquiries can play in informing the public about their government and shaping public opinion.



U.S. troops in Vietnam (Source: U.S. Dept. of Defense).

Sen. Fulbright was a well-known, popular senator when he launched the hearings. A foreign policy expert, he chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for 16 years, from 1959 to 1974, becoming the longest serving chair of that committee in Senate history.<sup>1</sup> He was also part of the class of southern Democrats who, due to their Senate longevity, dominated committee leadership during those years. Sen. Fulbright compiled a complex legacy that included opposition to civil rights and integration of public schools; the establishment of the Fulbright scholarship program supporting educational exchanges between the United States and other countries; and opposition to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Red Scare tactics in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> He served with Lyndon B. Johnson in the Senate and, for years, was a friend and strong supporter of his colleague.<sup>3</sup>



Sen. J. William Fulbright  
(Source: [U.S. Senate](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm)).

The Fulbright hearings were held by the standing Senate Foreign Relations Committee which was comprised of ten Democrats and seven Republicans, many of whom were senior, respected members of the Senate. In addition to committee chair Fulbright, the Democrats included over time Frank Church (Idaho), Albert Gore, Sr. (Tennessee), Hubert H. Humphrey (Minnesota), Mike Mansfield (Montana), Gale W. McGee (Wyoming), George S. McGovern

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senate. (n.d.). *J. William Fulbright: A featured biography*.

[https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured\\_Bio\\_Fulbright.htm](https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_Fulbright.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Yergin, D. (1974, November 24). Fulbright's last frustration: The great dissenter finally found himself a compatible Secretary of State. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/11/24/archives/fulbrights-last-frustration-the-great-dissenter-finally-found.html>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Senate Historical Office. (2023, June 12). *Senate stories: Chairman J. William Fulbright and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution*. U.S. Senate. <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm>



(South Dakota), Edmund S. Muskie (Maine), Claiborne Pell (Rhode Island), John Sparkman (Alabama), and Stuart Symington (Missouri). The Republican committee members included George D. Aiken (Vermont), Clifford P. Case (New Jersey), Robert P. Griffin (Michigan), Jacob P. Javits (New York), James B. Pearson (Kansas), Charles H. Percy (Illinois), and Hugh Scott (Pennsylvania).

The hearings took testimony from a wide variety of witnesses including Members of Congress, administration officials, generals, diplomats, journalists, anti-war advocates, and veterans of both Vietnam and other wars. The full series, spanning a period of five years, included five days of hearings in February 1966, 22 rounds of testimony in the spring of 1971, and additional hearings and closed-door sessions along the way. Unlike congressional investigations reviewing past military actions using historical data, the Fulbright hearings provided a contemporaneous review of the conduct of the war in Vietnam.

Instead of official military reports, the hearings often relied on first-hand accounts, news reports, and experts to gather facts and raise questions. The hearings uncovered key information previously hidden from Congress and the public, exposed misrepresentations by the Johnson and Nixon Administrations about the nature and effectiveness of U.S. military actions, and over time legitimized opposition to American involvement in Vietnam.

## Early Years of the Vietnam War

U.S. military involvement in Vietnam started years before the Fulbright hearings began in 1966. In 1946, in the First Indochina War, Vietnamese rebel forces known as the Viet Minh, with Communist assistance, fought and expelled colonial French forces from the country. After that war ended in 1954, the Geneva Accords split Vietnam in two with a Communist-backed government in North Vietnam and a non-Communist, U.S.-backed government in South Vietnam.



Gulf of Tonkin Incident Map  
(Source: [U.S. Naval Institute](https://www.usni.org/Portals/0/pubs/naval/1966/06600101.pdf)).

North Vietnamese forces, by then called the Viet Cong, sought to reunify the Vietnamese peninsula. South Vietnamese forces fought back, and the two sides escalated the conflict over the next ten years. By the early 1960s, President John Kennedy viewed defending South Vietnam as critical to stopping the global spread of Communism and was supplying both military advisers and funding to the South Vietnamese government.<sup>4</sup>

In November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated, and Lyndon Johnson became president. President Johnson continued U.S. support for South Vietnam and, in 1964, gradually

<sup>4</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. (n.d.). *Vietnam*. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/vietnam>

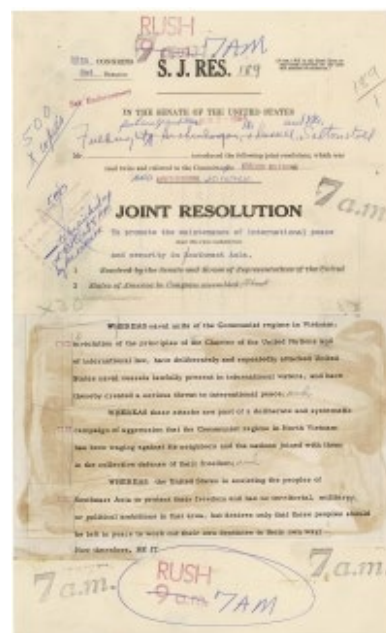
escalated U.S. involvement by approving counterinsurgency operations, airstrikes, and staging U.S. Navy warships in the region.<sup>5</sup>

On August 2, 1964, a U.S. destroyer, the *USS Maddox*, stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin was attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats, sustained minor damage, and withdrew further south. Two days later, on August 4, the *Maddox*, on patrol with a second Navy destroyer, the *USS Turner Joy*, reported being under “continuous torpedo attack,” although later inquiries question whether any attack actually occurred.<sup>6</sup> The two ships also reported a third attack which later evidence showed never happened.<sup>7</sup>

On the evening of August 4, 1964, President Johnson gave a televised address announcing the United States had been attacked by North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin in at least two separate incidents. The next morning, the President sent Congress a “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” to authorize additional military action in Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup>

The next day, August 5, 1964, Sen. Fulbright convened a joint session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Armed Services Committee to discuss the resolution. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, among other witnesses, strongly supported additional military action in Vietnam. The joint committee voted 14-1 in favor of the resolution.<sup>9</sup>

On Friday, August 7, 1964, the House approved the resolution 416-0.<sup>10</sup> That same day, on the Senate floor, Sen. Fulbright urged his colleagues to provide “prompt and overwhelming



S. J. Res. 189 (Aug. 5, 1964)  
(Source: [U.S. Senate](#)).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian. (n.d.). *U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964*. U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/gulf-of-tonkin>; *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Together with joint sessions with the Senate Armed Services Committee (historical series)*. 88<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1964). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.a0002205565&seq=1>

<sup>6</sup> Moise, E. (2019). *Tonkin Gulf and the escalation of the Vietnam War* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Naval Institute Press.

<sup>7</sup> Paterson, P. (2008, February). The truth about Tonkin. *Naval History Magazine*, 22(1). <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2008/february/truth-about-tonkin>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Senate Historical Office. (2023).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Senate Historical Office. (2023). The lone dissenting vote in committee was cast by Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon.

<sup>10</sup> 110 Cong. Rec. 18,555 (1964) (roll call vote). <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1964/08/07/house-section>

endorsement of the Resolution.”<sup>11</sup> The Senate passed it by a vote of 88-2.<sup>12</sup> President Johnson signed it on Monday, August 10, 1964.<sup>13</sup>



U.S. Airlift Operation, Vietnam  
(Source: [National Archives](#)).

In February 1965, the U.S. Air Force began a years-long destructive bombing campaign known as Operation Rolling Thunder against North Vietnamese targets. In an effort to destroy the so-called “Ho Chi Minh Trail” that supplied North Vietnamese armed forces, the Air Force had already begun secretly bombing Laos in 1964, and began bombing Cambodia in 1965. On November 14, 1965, the United States initiated its first ground operation in the central highlands of South Vietnam. In the three-day battle that ensued, U.S. ground troops lost more than 240 soldiers. A second battle a few days later led to the deaths of over 500 U.S. soldiers. Thousands more were wounded over the following days.

Throughout 1965, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee received closed-door briefings about U.S. operations in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> In early 1966, Sen. Fulbright began receiving frontline accounts from a journalist who had interviewed nearly 200 U.S. combat troops.<sup>15</sup> According to the journalist, many of the soldiers described a deadly and disorganized war effort. The journalist quoted one U.S. general stating, “If there is a God, and he is very kind to us, and given a million men, and five years, and a miracle in making the South Vietnamese people like us, we stand an outside chance – of a stalemate.”<sup>16</sup>

## 1966 Fulbright Hearings

On January 24, 1966, Sen. Fulbright convened a closed-door executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and took testimony from Secretary of State Dean Rusk about U.S. military operations in Vietnam. Secretary Rusk reassured concerned senators, “I believe myself that we must persist in this effort. ... [A]nd I would hope that we could press it, press the prospects of peace on the one side, and do what is necessary to be sure that the Vietcong does not achieve a military victory on the other.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Senate Historical Office. (2023). The resolution was S. J. Res. 189 (Aug. 5, 1964).

<sup>12</sup> 110 Cong. Rec. 18,470 (1964) (roll call vote). <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1964/08/07/senate-section?p=1> The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was designated H. J. Res. 1145 in the House and S. J. 189 in the Senate. Because the House passed its resolution first, the Senate adopted it.

<sup>13</sup> Pub. L. No. 88-408 78 Stat. 384 (1964). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg384.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Together with joint sessions with the Senate Armed Services Committee (historical series)*. 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1965). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000017167185&seq=3>

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Senate. (n.d.). *Vietnam Hearings*. [https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Vietnam\\_Hearings.htm](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Vietnam_Hearings.htm)

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Senate. (n.d.). *Vietnam Hearings*.

<sup>17</sup> *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (historical series)*. 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. p. 139 (1966, January 24). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b4470025&seq=3>

On January 28, 1966, the committee held an untelevised hearing examining a supplemental foreign aid bill that included a request of \$415 million for the war in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> Secretary Rusk testified again in support. Led by Sen. Fulbright, the hearing was the first to question American involvement in Vietnam. Sen. Fulbright asked Secretary Rusk, “How do you foresee the end of this struggle? Do you think we are likely to be there, 5, 10, or 20 years?” Secretary Rusk responded, “Well, I would hate to try to cast myself in the role of a specific prophet in the development of this particular situation.”<sup>19</sup>

Dissatisfied, Sen. Fulbright announced that the committee would continue with a series of public hearings to delve into the facts and gain a greater understanding of the situation in Vietnam and whether the additional funding should be approved. In a later interview with the Senate Historian, the Foreign Relations Committee chief of staff at the time, Carl Marcy, who worked for the committee from 1959 to 1974, offered this explanation of why Sen. Fulbright decided to hold a series of hearings:

What Fulbright was trying to do was educate himself. *He* wanted to learn more about what these other people were thinking and what they had to say .... I think he was rather surprised that in the process of educating himself and those few members he expected would come, that [the hearings] would attract TV, press, and public attention. ... The fact they attracted attention at that time was because people were beginning to be worried.<sup>20</sup>



Diplomat George Kennan (Source: [C-SPAN](#)).

In February 1966, the committee held five days of televised hearings on Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> Key testimony took place on February 10, 1966, when diplomat George Kennan, a respected foreign policy analyst, presented testimony highly critical of U.S. involvement in the war.<sup>22</sup> He advised the United States to withdraw from Vietnam “as soon as this could be done without inordinate damage to our prestige or stability in the area.”<sup>23</sup> He testified that a continued military presence could further damage U.S. foreign policy in the Eastern Hemisphere and risk a potential war with China. He also said in his prepared statement: “I would submit that there is more respect to be won in the opinion of this world by a resolute and courageous liquidation of unsound positions

<sup>18</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1966, January 28). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-89shrg58320p1/pdf/CHRG-89shrg58320p1.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, January 28, 1966, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Senate Historical Office. (1983, September 14). *An interview with Carl M. Marcy*. U.S. Senate. <https://www.senate.gov/about/resources/pdf/marcy-carl-m-full-transcript-with-index.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 4, 8, 10, 17, and 18, 1966.

<sup>22</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 10, 1966. See also Doyle, R. (2004). The reluctant heretic: George F. Kennan and the Vietnam War, 1950 – 1968. *Grand Valley Review*, 27(1), 54 – 83. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol27/iss1/11>

<sup>23</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 10, 1966, p. 374.



than by the most stubborn pursuit of extravagant or unpromising objectives.”<sup>24</sup> Mr. Kennan’s testimony was later seen as one of the turning points in the hearings’ impact on U.S. public opinion, encouraging the public to begin to question and criticize the war in Vietnam.



Gen. Maxwell Taylor (Source: [C-SPAN](#)).

On February 17, 1966, the committee took testimony from General Maxwell Taylor, a special consultant to President Johnson.<sup>25</sup> Gen. Taylor had sent several telegrams claiming it would be a mistake to use ground troops, rather than just air and naval forces in Vietnam, but was ignored. He nevertheless supported the war effort and vehemently defended U.S. military strategy. Sen. Fulbright responded as follows: “We have burned a lot of innocent people in this war. I am not blaming you or anyone else for it. It is the nature of war. This is why I would like to find some way to stop it.”<sup>26</sup>

When Secretary Rusk returned to the committee on February 18, 1966, he maintained that further expansion of the war effort was justified by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the ongoing threat of Communism in Southeast Asia:

We must recognize that what we are seeking to achieve in South Vietnam is part of a process that has continued for a long time – a process of preventing the expansion and extension of Communist domination by the use of force against the weaker nations on the perimeter of Communist power.<sup>27</sup>

Later in the hearing, Sen. Fulbright pushed back again: “[T]his isn’t the kind of conflict that warrants a vast escalation, a vast expenditure of money and many thousands of deaths.”<sup>28</sup>



Secretary of State Dean Rusk (Source: [C-SPAN](#)).

The televised hearings generated widespread media coverage. Sen. Fulbright’s public criticism of the war, despite having led the effort to approve the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing U.S. military action in Vietnam, gave new legitimacy to the concerns being raised by

<sup>24</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 10, 1966, p. 331.

<sup>25</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 17, 1966. See also American History TV. (1966, February 17). 1966 Fulbright Vietnam hearings, General Maxwell Taylor [Video]. C-SPAN. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?404585-1/1966-fulbright-vietnam-hearings-general-maxwell-taylor>

<sup>26</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 17, 1966, p. 546.

<sup>27</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 18, 1966, p. 564. See also American History TV. (1966, February 18). 1966 Fulbright Vietnam hearings, Secretary of State Dean Rusk [Video]. C-SPAN. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?404584-1/1966-fulbright-vietnam-hearings-dean-rusk>

<sup>28</sup> *Supplemental foreign assistance fiscal year 1966 – Vietnam*, February 18, 1966, p. 668.

skeptics and opponents of the war. By the end of February 1966, the President's war policy approval ratings had dropped from 63% to 49%.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next year, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held several additional hearings on Vietnam. In the summer of 1966, it held a hearing examining how U.S. agencies were interacting with journalists in Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> In early 1967, it took testimony from a New York Times editor who had spent two weeks traveling North Vietnam and speaking with North Vietnamese leaders.<sup>31</sup> In the summer of 1967, the committee addressed Vietnam-related issues during its annual hearing on the foreign aid bill.<sup>32</sup> In the fall of 1967, it examined legislation proposing to submit the Vietnam conflict to the United Nations.<sup>33</sup> The committee also held closed-door sessions on the war.<sup>34</sup>



Pres. Johnson and Sec. of Defense McNamara (Source: National Archives).

On July 25, 1967, Sen. Fulbright and other Senate committee chairmen were invited to the White House in an off-the-record meeting where President Johnson attempted to convince them that the war was being won. During the meeting, Sen. Fulbright reportedly said, "Mr. President, what you really need to do is stop the war. That will solve all your problems."<sup>35</sup> President Johnson reportedly responded:

If you want me to get out of Vietnam, then you have the prerogative of taking the resolution under which we are out there now. You can repeal it tomorrow. You can tell the troops to come home. You can tell General Westmoreland that he doesn't know what he is doing.<sup>36</sup>

President Johnson viewed Sen. Fulbright's hearings and public statements as a disloyal challenge to his executive authority, especially given that Sen. Fulbright was a former supporter

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Senate. (n.d.). *Vietnam Hearings*.

<sup>30</sup> *News policies in Vietnam: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1966, August). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-89shrg68000/pdf/CHRG-89shrg68000.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> *Harrison E. Salisbury's trip to North Vietnam: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1967, February 2). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d02094736o&seq=5>

<sup>32</sup> *Foreign Assistance Act of 1967: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1967, June and July). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b5148856&seq=9>

<sup>33</sup> *Submission of the Vietnam conflict to the United Nations: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1967, October and November). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-90shrg85837/pdf/CHRG-90shrg85837.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee together with joint sessions with the Senate Armed Services Committee (historical series)*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1967). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000060855695&seq=3>

<sup>35</sup> Langguth, A.J. (2000). *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975*. Simon & Shuster.

<sup>36</sup> LBJ Presidential Library. (1967, July 25). *President's daily diary entry, 7/25/1967*. President's Daily Diary Collection. <https://discoverlbj.org/item/pdd-19670725>



and from the same political party. Sen. Fulbright once remarked, “With a man like President Johnson, you either went along or you got off. He didn’t tolerate differences of opinion very easily.”<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Sen. Fulbright told a journalist that he was convinced President Johnson had engaged in deception when it came to the Gulf of Tonkin: “I personally feel that the committee, the public and [me] personally were duped, that we were lied to .... You can't have an opportunity to exercise judgment if the facts are misrepresented.”<sup>38</sup>

## Hearings From 1968 to 1970

On January 17, 1968, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff completed a memorandum and chronology on “The 1964 Incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin.”<sup>39</sup> Citing evidence



U.S. soldier on a paddleboat (Source: National Archives).

gathered during a committee investigation, the staff memorandum concluded that President Johnson and the U.S. military had misled both Congress and the public about the attacks. It stated that while the U.S. military initially claimed a series of three attacks on the *USS Maddox* and *USS Joy Turner*, only one was confirmed to have actually occurred, while evidence for the second attack was questionable, and the third attack was entirely disproven. The committee decided not to release the staff memorandum and chronology to the public at that time but sent a copy to the Department of Defense.<sup>40</sup>

Six days later, on January 30, 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the “Tet Offensive,” a surprise military attack that inflicted massive American and South Vietnamese casualties. Intensive fighting and casualties

followed, further eroding public support for the war.

Over the next year, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held nearly 50 closed-door executive sessions examining issues related to Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> In one stormy session on February 20, 1968, the committee confronted three defense officials, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, about misrepresentations related to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing U.S. military operations in Vietnam. Near the end of that session, Sen. Albert Gore, Sr., told Secretary McNamara: “I do not in any sense question your patriotism or your sincerity. On the other hand, I feel that I have been misled, and that the American people have been misled.”<sup>42</sup> In lieu of

<sup>37</sup> Yergin, D. (1974).

<sup>38</sup> Yergin, D. (1974).

<sup>39</sup> *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (historical series)*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. pp. 107-129 (1968, January 24). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d031406993&seq=3>

<sup>40</sup> *The Gulf of Tonkin: The 1964 incidents: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. pp. 2-3 (1968, February 20). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-90shrg90187/pdf/CHRG-90shrg90187.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (historical series)*, 1968.

<sup>42</sup> *The Gulf of Tonkin: The 1964 incidents*, February 20, 1968, p. 91.

releasing the committee staff memorandum, the committee authorized the transcript of the executive session to be released to the public the next day.<sup>43</sup>

On March 10, 1968, the New York Times disclosed that Gen. Westmoreland had called for the conscription of 200,000 more American soldiers, prompting public outcry. The next day, at a previously scheduled hearing to consider the annual foreign aid bill, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee grilled Secretary of State Rusk about possible plans to increase U.S. troops in Vietnam and whether the president would consult Congress before ordering an increase.<sup>44</sup> The hearing, in which Secretary Rusk was the sole witness, began at 10:00am and finished at 6:30pm. Sen. Fulbright asked him to appear the following morning as well to continue his testimony. That hearing, on March 12, 1968, lasted another four and a half hours. On March 20, 1968, the committee held still another hearing focused on Vietnam, taking testimony from a retired Marine Corps general critical of the war effort.<sup>45</sup>



“...as if to ask why?” (Source: [National Archives](#)).

On March 31, 1968, President Johnson announced he would not run for re-election. He also initiated negotiations to end the Vietnam conflict. In October 1968, he formally halted the U.S. bombing campaign in order to advance the peace talks. Some hoped President Johnson’s ceasefire and peace negotiations would bring an end to the war. After the November 1968 election, however, President Nixon reaffirmed U.S. commitment to the military effort.

Several decades later, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee published excerpts and related materials from the many executive sessions on Vietnam in 1968. Then Committee Chair Senator John Kerry (D-MA) wrote in a preface to the 2010 publication:

The committee sparred with the administration over whether to conduct their Vietnam hearings in public or in closed session. For some Senators it was a matter of constitutional prerogative, for others it was a threat to national unity in wartime. Those who argued they had a duty to dissent were accused of aiding and abetting the enemy.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *The Gulf of Tonkin: The 1964 incidents*, February 20, 1968, p. V. See also Miller Center. (1968, February 21). *Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert S. McNamara on 21 February 1968*. Presidential Recordings Digital Edition. <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4005952> Secretary McNamara resigned from the Department of Defense a week later, on February 29, 1968. Pritzker Military Museum & Library. (n.d.). *Vietnam War: Key people*. <https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/explore/vietnam-war/key-people>

<sup>44</sup> *Foreign Assistance Act of 1968: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1968, March 11). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d020947788&seq=7> See also Freeburg, R. (1968, March 11). Secretary, Fulbright clash; hearing to continue today. *Chicago Tribune*.

<sup>45</sup> *Present situation in Vietnam: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1968, March 20). [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b643618&seq=5](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b643618&seq=5)

<sup>46</sup> *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 1968, p. VI.

In 1969, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held few public hearings focused on Vietnam but did discuss the war during its annual hearing on the foreign aid bill.<sup>47</sup> Sen. Fulbright continued his public opposition to the war, speaking, for example, at a rally held by the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, on November 3, 1969, in a televised address, President Nixon announced his intention to maintain military operations in Vietnam while pressing for peace negotiations.<sup>49</sup>

On November 6, 1969, Sen. Fulbright met with a military analyst, Daniel Ellsberg, who had secretly copied a series of internal reports and related documents from the Department of Defense, later known as the Pentagon Papers, tracking U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.<sup>50</sup> The Pentagon Papers provided evidence that the Johnson and Nixon Administrations had been misleading the public about the likelihood of victory.<sup>51</sup> While Sen. Fulbright read the documents, he declined an Ellsberg request to leak them to the public.

On November 12, 1969, the New York Times published a shocking expose about how a U.S. Army regiment known as Charlie Company had, more than a year earlier, killed hundreds of civilian men, women, and children in Vietnam, an event that became known as the My Lai massacre. On December 1, 1969, the Department of Defense held a lottery to draft American men for military service, the first involuntary conscription of American citizens since 1942.

By the end of 1969, U.S. troops in Vietnam had surpassed 500,000, nearly thirty thousand had died in the war, and a significant anti-war movement had gained force. Demonstrations spread to college campuses. On May 4, 1970, after President Nixon disclosed expanded military operations in Cambodia, National Guardsmen opened fire on Ohio Kent State University students engaged in an anti-war protest, killing four and wounding nine. On May 15, 1970, at Jackson State University in Mississippi, police shot and killed two students and wounded twelve.



Kent State Massacre (Source: [Wikipedia](#)).

During 1970, Sen. Fulbright issued a report and held a series of hearings on Vietnam that generated little media or public attention. The report summarized the observations of committee staff who had traveled to Vietnam to gather information firsthand.<sup>52</sup> An initial set of hearings, lasting four days, examined legislative

<sup>47</sup> *Foreign Assistance Act of 1969: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 91<sup>st</sup> Cong. (1969, July and August). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d020947796&seq=5>

<sup>48</sup> Berman, W. (1988). *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War*. Kent State University Press. p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> Nixon, R. (1969, November 3). *Address to the nation on the war in Vietnam*. The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-war-vietnam>

<sup>50</sup> Trickey, E. (2023, June 23). Daniel Ellsberg leaked his Vietnam secrets to senators first. They balked. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2023/06/23/daniel-ellsberg-leaking-pentagon-papers-vietnam-war/>

<sup>51</sup> Pieces of History. (2011, June 13). *The Pentagon Papers, now online after 40 years*. National Archives. <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2011/06/13/the-pentagon-papers-now-online-after-40-years/>

<sup>52</sup> S. Rep. No. 39-914 (1970, February 2). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d03524833p&seq=3>



proposals related to the war.<sup>53</sup> A second set of hearings, taking eight days, focused on U.S. nonmilitary field operations in Vietnam including pacification, refugee, and rural development efforts.<sup>54</sup> Those hearings are usually not mentioned as part of the “Fulbright Hearings” on Vietnam, since none presented a high-profile challenge to the war.

During the same period, public opposition to the war continued to increase. In response, in the summer of 1970, Congress formally rescinded the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, revoking congressional authorization for military action in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> Despite that action, Congress continued to appropriate funds to conduct the war for the next several years.

## 1971 Fulbright Hearings

By 1971, public opposition to the Vietnam War was widespread, and Members of Congress, including Sen. Fulbright, had introduced multiple legislative proposals to restrict U.S. military operations in Southeast Asia. In the spring, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held 22 rounds of testimony with various witnesses spread across eleven days from April 20 to May 27, 1971, to examine the legislation, the latest war developments, and expert opinion on what steps the United States should take. The televised hearings heard from dozens of witnesses, including Members of Congress, administration officials, diplomats, scholars, and veterans.<sup>56</sup>



The Fulbright hearings (Source: [PBS](#)).

Sen. Fulbright opened the hearings with this statement:

Over the course of the last 5 years, this committee has held many hearings on the executive branch's war policies. When the first public series began in early 1966, the principal question that concerned the committee and the public was “Why are we in Vietnam?” It was never answered to the satisfaction of many members of this committee. But now 5 years later, 52,000 American lives, and \$120 million later, the question being asked by the American people is ... “When and how do we get out?”<sup>57</sup>

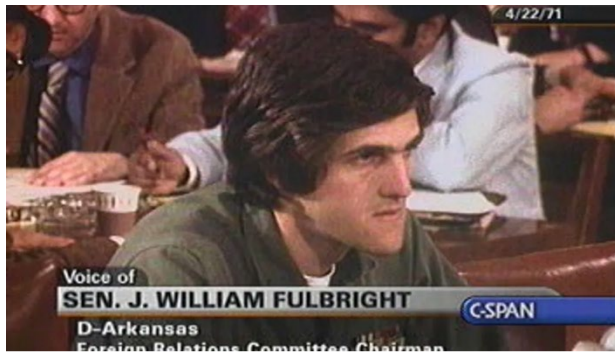
<sup>53</sup> *Vietnam policy proposals: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 91<sup>st</sup> Cong. (1970, February-March). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-91shrg41185/pdf/CHRG-91shrg41185.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> *Vietnam: Policy and prospects, 1970: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 91<sup>st</sup> Cong. (1970, February-March). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-91shrg44706/pdf/CHRG-91shrg44706.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Foreign Military Sales Act of 1971, Pub. L. No. 91-672 84 Stat. 2053 (1971). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-84/pdf/STATUTE-84-Pg2053.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate*. 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong. (1971). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d035247711&seq=3>

<sup>57</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, April 20, 1971, p. 22.



Testimony of John Kerry (Source: [C-SPAN](#)).

Some of the most striking testimony occurred on April 22, 1971, when the committee called the 27-year-old decorated Vietnam combat veteran, and future senator and statesman, John Kerry who was then representing Vietnam Veterans Against the War.<sup>58</sup> He condemned the war in scathing remarks that were often applauded by the audience in the hearing room and praised by committee members.

His testimony began with a recent account of the “Winter Soldier Investigation,” an assembly of Vietnam veterans in Detroit, Michigan, during which nearly 150 war veterans publicly shared their stories about the violence they experienced in Vietnam and the impact on their lives.<sup>59</sup> Mr. Kerry testified:

It is impossible to describe to you exactly what did happen in Detroit, the emotions in the room, the feelings of the men who were reliving their experiences in Vietnam, but they did. They relived the absolute horror of what this country, in a sense, made them do.<sup>60</sup>

Mr. Kerry called for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam, explaining:

Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, “the first President to lose a war.” ... How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?<sup>61</sup>

On May 3, 1971, the committee heard from Secretary of State John Irwin and Deputy Assistant Secretary William Sullivan on the Nixon administration’s policies in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>62</sup> Senators posed tough questions in exchanges that lasted hours.

Beginning on May 11, 1971, the committee heard from a wide array of witnesses who had either firsthand experience in Vietnam or expertise on specific issues. They included public interest group representatives, a businessman, activists who lived in Vietnam, professors, veterans, and diplomats, most of whom opposed the war.<sup>63</sup> Near the end of the hearings on May

<sup>58</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, April 22, 1971. See also American History TV. (1971, April 22). *Vietnam War Hearing 1971, John Kerry* [Video]. C-SPAN. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?181065-1/vietnam-war-hearing-1971> Many years later, Sen. Kerry became chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

<sup>59</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc. (1999, January 28). *Winter soldier investigation*. The Sixties Project. [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter\\_Soldier/WS\\_entry.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_entry.html)

<sup>60</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, April 22, 1971, p. 180.

<sup>61</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, April 22, 1971, p. 183.

<sup>62</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, May 3, 1971, p. 263.

<sup>63</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, May 11, 1971, p. 317.

27, 1971, Commander in Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Herbert Rainwater, called for the unilateral, unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. forces in Southeast Asia.<sup>64</sup> By presenting repeated testimony by war opponents, the hearings legitimized that point of view and educated the country about the level of internal dissent against American military actions in Vietnam.



Daniel Ellsberg (Source: [Wikipedia](#)).

In June 1971, only a month after the last day of the Fulbright hearings, the New York Times and Washington Post published some of the documents that Daniel Ellsberg had earlier shared with Sen. Fulbright, disclosing additional war-related information that had been hidden from the American people.<sup>65</sup> The papers shocked the public by exposing massive U.S. military, policy, and intelligence failures in Vietnam and proof that the military had deliberately misrepresented key facts. The Pentagon Papers struck another blow against public confidence in government.

Even after those revelations, Congress continued funding the war for another two years. U.S. forces finally withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. That same year, Congress enacted the War Powers Resolution over President Nixon's veto, seeking to limit the executive branch's power to wage war without congressional authorization.<sup>66</sup>

The Fulbright hearings were not the only congressional hearings to address the Vietnam War. Hearings led by Sen. John Stennis, for example, supported the war effort.<sup>67</sup> House hearings examined important issues such as the My Lai massacre.<sup>68</sup>

The Fulbright hearings gained historical significance over time, because they used first-hand accounts of war veterans, diplomats, journalists, and activists to expose important facts about U.S. military operations in Vietnam and challenged as untrue official accounts of the war provided by the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Sen. Fulbright, an unlikely war opponent, also persisted in challenging the war over a period of years, using the committee's lengthy investigation and numerous hearings to build the case against the war.

By engaging in factfinding, collecting evidence, and informing Members of Congress and the public about what the committee learned, the Fulbright investigation and hearings not only clarified the historical record, but also legitimized dissent, influenced public opinion, and helped bring an end to American involvement in the Vietnam War. This multi-year inquiry demonstrates

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<sup>64</sup> *Legislative proposals relating to the war in Southeast Asia*, May 27, 1971, p. 591.

<sup>65</sup> Trickey, E. (2023).

<sup>66</sup> War Powers Resolution, Pub. L. No. 93-148 897 Stat. 555 (1973). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/house-joint-resolution/542>

<sup>67</sup> Fry, J.A. (2006). *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and their Senate hearings*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

<sup>68</sup> *Investigation of the My Lai incident: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee, House of Representatives*. 91<sup>st</sup> Cong. (1970). <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llmlp/MyLaiHearings/MyLaiHearings.pdf>; H. Rep. No. 47-4040 (1970). <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llmlp/MyLaiReport/MyLaiReport.pdf>



the power of congressional oversight to expose hidden information, inform the public, and hold the executive branch accountable for its actions.

### **To Learn More**

- U.S. Senate
  - Vietnam Hearings. [https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Vietnam\\_Hearings.htm](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Vietnam_Hearings.htm)
  - Chairman J. William Fulbright and 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution. <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/chairman-fulbright-and-the-tonkin-gulf-resolution.htm>
- C-SPAN videotaped testimony from 1966 and 1971 Fulbright hearings
  - Secretary of State Dean Rusk. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?404584-1/1966-fulbright-vietnam-hearings-dean-rusk>
  - General Maxwell Taylor. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?404585-1/1966-fulbright-vietnam-hearings-general-maxwell-taylor>
  - George Kennan. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?404438-1/1966-fulbright-vietnam-hearings-george-kennan>
  - John Kerry. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?181065-1/vietnam-war-hearing-1971>
- Fry, Joseph A. (2006) *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and Their Senate Hearings*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

