It was a turbulent time. It was an era of change. It was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. It was the perfect setting for HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE ROCK MUSICAL. A product of the hippie counterculture revolution of the 1960s, HAIR opened on Broadway in 1968. The musical's profanity, depiction of illegal drug use, treatment of sexuality, irreverence for the American flag and its nude scene caused a sensation. The show broke new ground in musical theatre by defining the genre of "rock musical", using a racially integrated cast and inviting the audience onstage for a "Be-In" finale.

Scott Miller, author of INSIDE HAIR wrote, "With very little plot, a unit set, explicit sexual content, rituals, lyrics that didn't rhyme, music that didn't follow the rules, and the sound of genuine rock and roll on the Broadway stage for the first time, this musical knocked Broadway on its collective ass. Many of the songs didn't really have endings, just a slowing down and stopping, so the audience didn't know when to applaud. Other songs segued directly into the next number so the audience didn't have time to applaud. The show rejected every convention of Broadway, of traditional theatre in general, and of the American musical in specific. And it was brilliant. Most surprising of all, it was an enormous hit."

Director Tom O'Horgan said at the time that HAIR was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create "a theatre form whose demeanor, language, clothing, dance and even its name accurately reflect a social epoch in full explosion."

And it was, paving the way for the non-linear concept musicals that dominated musical theatre innovation in the 1970s: COMPANY, FOLLIES and A CHORUS LINE to name a few.

HAIR creators James Rado, Gerome Ragni and Galt MacDermot

York City and fighting against conscription into the Vietnam War. Claude, Berger, NYU student activist Sheila and the rest of the tribe struggle to balance their young lives with their rebellion against the war, their conservative parents and society. Ultimately, Claude must decide whether to resist the draft along with his friends, or to succumb to the pressures from his parents and conservative America, to serve in Vietnam, compromising his principles and risking his life.

After an Off-Broadway debut in October 1967 at The Public Theatre followed by a run at The Cheetah, a midtown discothèque, the show opened on Broadway in April 1968 and ran for 1,750 performances. Productions across the U.S. and Europe followed, including a successful London production that ran for 1,997 performances.

Since then, numerous productions have been staged around the world, spawning dozens of recordings of the musical, including the original Broadway cast recording, which sold over 3 million-selling copies. The show was nominated for the 1969 Tony Award for best musical. Some of the songs from its score became Top 10 hits, and a feature film adaptation was released in 1979. A Broadway revival opened in 2009, winning the Tony Award for best revival of a musical. In 2008, Time magazine wrote, "Today HAIR seems more daring than ever."
The book and lyrics for HAIR were written by James Rado and Gerome Ragni, with music by Galt MacDermot. Rado was born James Radomski in 1932 and raised in Rochester, N.Y. and Washington, D.C. After his college graduation, he served two years in the U.S. Navy. He later returned to Washington for graduate work at The Catholic University of America, where he co-authored a musical revue called CROSS YOUR FINGERS. He then moved to New York to study acting with Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio, considered the nation’s most prestigious acting school. He also wrote pop songs which he recorded with his own band.

Rado’s first Broadway show was MARATHON ’33 in 1963. In 1966, he originated the Broadway role of Richard Lionheart in THE LION IN WINTER by James Goldman, starring Robert Preston and Rosemary Harris.

Gerome Ragni (1935–1991) was born in Pittsburgh, one of ten children from an impoverished Italian family. He started acting in high school and studied at both Georgetown University and The Catholic University of America. He made his acting debut in Washington, D.C. in 1954 in SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE.

He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1955, serving until 1958 when he moved to New York to work in the rapidly growing Off-Broadway theatre community. In 1963 he appeared in the Village South Theatre production of the hit play WAR, for which he won the Barter Theatre Award for Outstanding Actor.

Rado and Ragni came from different artistic backgrounds. Rado aspired to be a Broadway composer in the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition. Ragni was an active member of The Open Theatre, one of several groups, mostly Off-Off Broadway, that were developing experimental theatre techniques and modern styles. Rado and Ragni met in 1964 when they performed together in the Off-Broadway flop HANG DOWN YOUR HEAD AND DIE, an anti-capital punishment musical. Later, both were cast in the Chicago company of Mike Nichols’ production of THE KNACK.

In 1966, while they were working on HAIR, Ragni performed in The Open Theatre’s production of Megan Terry’s play, VIET ROCK, about young men being deployed to the Vietnam War. In addition to the war theme, VIET ROCK employed the improvisational exercises being used in the experimental theatre scene, which they later used in the development of HAIR.

Rado described the inspiration for HAIR as “a combination of some characters we met in the streets, people we knew and our own imaginations.” Rado and Ragni were in attendance and absorbed the whole experience at an event called the Human Be-In, during the Summer of Love in 1967. In this gathering of “tribes” as many as 100,000 people converged on the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco which became the epicenter of the Hippie Revolution.

These hippies rejected the material values of modern life; there was an emphasis on sharing and community. Sometimes called “flower children,” they were an eclectic group. Many were suspicious of the government, rejected consumerist values, and generally opposed the Vietnam War. All were eager to integrate new ideas and insights into daily life, both public and private. Rado recalled, “There was so much excitement in the streets and the parks and the hippie areas, and we thought if we could transmit this excitement to the stage it would be wonderful.... We hung out with them and went to their Be-Ins [and] let our hair grow. It was very important historically, and if we hadn’t written it, there’d not be any examples. You could read about it and see film clips, but you’d never experience it. We saw it happening in the streets, and we wanted to bring it to the stage.” Many cast members were recruited right off the streets.

The main characters in HAIR were autobiographical, with Rado’s Claude being a pensive romantic and Ragni’s Berger an extrovert. Their close relationship, including its volatility, was reflected in the musical. Rado explained, "We were great friends. It was a passionate kind of relationship that we directed into creating this piece. We put the drama between us on stage." In a 2008 interview with The Advocate, Rado described himself as omnisexual and Ragni’s lover.

They brought a draft of the show to producer Eric Blau who connected them with Canadian composer Galt MacDermot, pianist and writer of musical theatre.
Rado and Ragni pitched the show to many Broadway producers and eventually Joe Papp, who ran the New York Shakespeare Festival, selected HAIR to open the new Public Theatre in New York City's East Village. The musical was Papp's first non-Shakespeare production.

HAIR premiered Off-Broadway at the Public on October 17, 1967 and ran for a limited, six week engagement. It got a tepid critical reception, but it was popular with audiences and a cast album was released. Papp wasn’t interested in moving the show to Broadway but co-producer Michael Butler was. He bought the rights from Papp and got ready to stage a whole new, grander production.

In the meantime, the show moved to the Cheetah, a nightclub in Midtown, where it had a month-long run. Director Tom O’Horgan, who had built a reputation directing experimental theatre, was hired to do a complete overhaul. Working with choreographer Julie Arevalo, they encouraged freedom and spontaneity in their actors, introducing “an organic, expansive style of staging” that had never been seen before on Broadway. New songs, 13 in all, including Let the Sun Shine were added.

On April 29, 1968, the show re-opened in its completely revised form at the Biltmore Theatre on Broadway. Rado and Ragni reprised their roles from the Off-Broadway production. MacDermot was now the show’s musical director.

The Broadway production of HAIR was a traumatic experience for Ragni. He became wealthy, his marriage broke up and he fell from mainstream society. He joined a Christian cult and contributed money to the Black Panther Party and Hippie causes. After the success of HAIR, Rado and Ragni went their separate ways for a period of time in the early Seventies.

MacDermot had another hit with the musical TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA (1971), which won the Tony Award for Best Musical; he was nominated for a Tony for Best Music and won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music. He also collaborated with Ragni on the musical DUDE, which was not successful.

In 1990, Ragni, Rado and Steve Margoshes collaborated on a new musical called SUN, also known as YMCA. It is an environmental musical about politics, pollution and the rain forests being cut down.

Ragni died of cancer in New York in 1991 at age 56. Rado continues to be active in developing new productions of HAIR. Since 2011, he has been creative consultant for the futuristic rock musical BARCODE, which premiered in August 2013 at the New York International Fringe Festival.
HAIR explores many of the themes of the hippie movement of the 1960s described by theatre writer Scott Miller: The youth of America, especially those on college campuses, started protesting all the things that they saw wrong with America: racism, environmental destruction, poverty, sexism and sexual repression, violence at home and the war in Vietnam, depersonalization from new technologies, and corruption in politics.

Contrary to popular opinion, the hippies had great respect for America and believed that they were the true patriots, the only ones who genuinely wanted to save our country and make it the best it could be once again.

Long hair was the hippies’ flag, their symbol not only of rebellion but also of new possibilities, a symbol of the rejection of discrimination and restrictive gender roles, a philosophy celebrated in the song My Conviction.

The hippies’ chosen clothing also made a statement. Drab work clothes (jeans, work shirts, pea coats) were a rejection of materialism. Clothing from other cultures, particularly the Third World and Native Americans, represented their awareness of the global community and their rejection of U.S. imperialism and selfishness. Simple cotton dresses and other natural fabrics were a rejection of synthetics, a return to natural things and simpler times. Some hippies wore old World War II or Civil War jackets as a way of co-opting the symbols of war into their newfound philosophy of nonviolence.

Race and the tribe
The many references to Native Americans throughout the script are part of the anti-consumerism, naturalism focus of the hippie movement and of HAIR. The characters in the show are referred to as the “tribe,” borrowing the term for Native American communities. Extending the precedents set by SHOW BOAT (1927) and PORGY AND BESS (1935), HAIR opened the Broadway musical to racial integration, with one-third of the cast being African American. Except for satirically in

skits, the roles for the black members of the tribe broke away from the traditional roles in entertainment as slaves or servants. An Ebony magazine article declared that the show was the biggest outlet for black actors in the history of the U.S. stage.

Several songs and scenes from the show address racial issues. Colored Spade, which introduces the character Hud, a militant black man, is a long list of racial slurs, topped off with the declaration that Hud is the “president of the United States of love.” Black Boys/White Boys is a celebration of miscegenation; the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down laws against the practice in 1967.

Nudity, sexual freedom and drug use
The brief nude scene at the end of Act I was a subject of controversy and notoriety. Miller writes that “nudity was a big part of the hippie culture, both as a rejection of the sexual repression of their parents and also as a statement about naturalism, spirituality, honesty, openness, and freedom. The naked body was beautiful, something to be celebrated and appreciated, not scorned and hidden. They saw their bodies and their sexuality as gifts, not as ‘dirty’ things.”

The inspiration to include nudity, which had not been in the previous productions, was inspired by two men who took off their clothes to antagonize the police during an informal anti-war gathering. In the Broadway production, during Where Do I Go?, the stage was covered in a giant scrim, beneath which those choosing to participate in the scene removed their clothes. At the musical cue, “they [stood] naked and motionless, their bodies bathed in a light projection of floral patterns.” It lasted only twenty seconds. Nevertheless, the scene prompted threats of censorship and even violent reactions in some places.

Original Broadway cast member Melba Moore said, “It doesn’t mean anything except what you want it to mean. We put so much value on clothing.....It’s like so much else people get uptight about.” Donna Summer, who was in the German production, said that “it was not meant to be sexual... We stood naked to comment on the fact that society makes more of nudity than killing.” Rado said that “being naked in front of an audience, you’re baring your soul. Not only the soul but the whole body was being exposed. It was very apt, very honest and almost necessary.”

Various illegal drugs are taken by the characters during the course of the show, most notably a hallucinogen during the trip sequence. The song Walking in Space celebrates the experience declaring “on a rocket to the fourth dimension, total self awareness the intention...walking in space we find the purpose of peace, the beauty of life you can no longer hide.” Similarly, in the song Donna, Berger sings that “I’m evolving through the drugs that you put down.” Generally, the tribe favors hallucinogenic or “mind expanding” drugs, such as LSD and marijuana, while disapproving of other drugs such as speed and depressants.
Pacifism and environmentalism
The theme of opposition to the war that pervades the show is unified by the plot thread that progresses through the book – Claude’s moral dilemma over whether to burn his draft card. Pacifism is explored throughout the extended trip sequence in Act 2.

The lyrics to Three-Five-Zero-Zero, which is sung during that sequence, evoke the horrors of war (“ripped open by metal explosion”). The song is based on Allen Ginsberg’s 1966 poem, WICHITA VORTEX SUTRA. In the poem, General Maxwell Taylor proudly reports to the press the number of enemy soldiers killed in one month, repeating it digit by digit, for effect: Three-Five-Zero-Zero. The song begins with images of death and turns into a manic dance number, echoing Maxwell’s glee at reporting the enemy casualties, as the tribe chants "Take weapons up and begin to kill."

Don't Put It Down satirizes the unexamined patriotism of people who are literally "crazy" for the American flag. Let the Sun Shine In is a call to reject the darkness of war and change the world for the better.

Religion and astrology
Religion appears both overtly and symbolically throughout the piece, and it is often the brunt of jokes. Berger sings of looking for "my Donna", giving it the double meaning of the woman he's seeking for and the Madonna. Before singing Sodomy, a hymn-like paean to all that is "dirty" about sex, Woof recites a modified rosary.

In Going Down, after being kicked out of school, Berger compares himself to Lucifer: "Just like the angel that fell, Banished forever to hell, Today have I been expelled from high school heaven." Claude becomes a classic Christ figure at various points in the script. In Act I, Claude enters, saying, "I am the Son of God. I shall vanish and be forgotten," then gives benediction to the tribe and the audience.

Claude suffers from indecision, and, in his Gethsemane at the end of Act I, he asks Where Do I Go?. There are textual allusions to Claude being on a cross, and, in the end, he is chosen to give his life for the others. Berger has been seen as a John the Baptist figure, preparing the way for Claude.

The book and score of HAIR is rich in literary themes and symbolism. There are frequent quotes from the Bible, and many references from Shakespeare’s plays, especially ROMEO AND JULIET and HAMLET.

For example, the lyrics to the song What a Piece of Work Is Man are from HAMLET and portions of Hush Failures are from Hamlet's final lines. In Flesh Failures/Let The Sun Shine In, the lyrics "Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, O you! The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss" are from ROMEO AND JULIET. According to Scott Miller, the Romeo suicide imagery makes the point that, with our complicity in war, we are killing ourselves.

Symbolically, the running plot of Claude’s indecision, especially his resistance to burning his draft card, which ultimately causes his demise, has been seen as a parallel to Hamlet: "the melancholy hippie." The symbolism is carried into the last scene, where Claude appears as a ghostly spirit among his friends wearing an army uniform in an ironic echo of an earlier scene, where he says, "I know what I want to be ... invisible."
On January 20, 1961, the young and charismatic John F. Kennedy became president of the United States. Many Americans believed they were standing at the dawn of a golden age, but it never materialized. On the contrary, by the end of the 1960s it seemed that the nation was falling apart.

The Great Society
During his presidential campaign, Kennedy had promised the most ambitious domestic agenda since the New Deal: the “New Frontier,” a package of laws and reforms that sought to eliminate injustice and inequality in the United States. But the New Frontier ran into problems right away. And other problems just off our shores began to create stress and tension for the nation.

When Fidel Castro declared he was a communist after taking over the leadership of Cuba, the United States broke off diplomatic relations. Castro seized American property and in retaliation the CIA attacked Cuba in an ill-fated mission at the Bay of Pigs. The mission failed and the Castro administration proceeded to openly proclaim their intention to adopt socialism and strengthen ties with the Soviet Union. This led to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when President Kennedy readied troops to invade Cuba, and the Soviet Union prepared to fire at US cities if we made a move. Fortunately, in secret back-channel communications the President and Premier initiated a proposal to resolve the crisis.

After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson became president and was reelected the following year. The new President began to muster the political capital to enact his own expansive program of reforms. Johnson declared that he would make the United States into a “Great Society” in which poverty and racial injustice had no place. He developed a set of programs that would give poor people “a hand up, not a handout” including Medicare and Medicaid for the elderly; Head Start, for young children and Job Corps, a program that trained unskilled workers for jobs.

Unfortunately, President Johnson had inherited a substantial American commitment to anti-communist South Vietnam and the war in Vietnam gradually became our government’s top priority. Soon after he took office, Johnson escalated that commitment into a full-scale war. In 1964, Congress authorized the president to take “all necessary measures” to protect American soldiers and their allies from the communist Viet Cong. Within days, the draft began.

Efforts to Resist the Draft
Draft evasion and draft resistance reached a historic peak when young men began burning their draft cards as acts of defiance. About 500,000 American men from 1965-73 became “draft dodgers,” with many fleeing to Canada to evade conviction. So great were the numbers of draft resisters that in 1977, President Carter passed a general amnesty to all those who had fled the draft, allowing them to return to the United States. Of 209,517 accused draft offenders, less than 9,000 were convicted.

The Fight for Civil Rights
The struggle for civil rights had defined the ‘60s ever since four black students sat down at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960 and refused to leave. As their movement spread, the protesters drew the nation’s attention to the injustice and brutality of the current state of America.

In general, the federal government stayed out of the civil rights struggle. But in 1964, President Johnson pushed a Civil Rights Act through Congress that prohibited discrimination in public places, gave the Justice Department permission to sue states that discriminated against women and minorities and promised equal opportunities in the workplace to all. The next year, the Voting Rights Act eliminated poll taxes, literacy requirements and other tools that southern whites had traditionally used to keep blacks from voting.

But these laws did not eliminate racism or poverty and they did not improve the conditions in many black urban neighborhoods. Many black leaders began to rethink their goals, and some embraced a more militant ideology of separatism and self-defense.

The Radical ‘60s
Just as black power became the new focus of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, other groups were growing similarly impatient. Student activists grew more radical, taking over college campuses with massive, organized antiwar demonstrations, occupying parks and other public places.

At the same time, young women who had read THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE, celebrated the passage of the 1963 Equal Pay Act and joined the moderate National Organization for Women. But they were increasingly annoyed with the slow progress of reform and became more militant.

As the 1960s progressed, many young people turned from mainstream religions to mystic eastern religions such as Transcendental Meditation or Zen Buddhism. Respect for authority declined, and crime rates soared to nine times the rate of the 1950s. Marijuana use also soared. Well-known Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary encouraged the use of LSD as a mind-opening drug. The hippie movement endorsed drugs, rock music, mystic religions and sexual freedom—but it opposed violence.
The Culture of the 60s

In 1960, Elvis returned to the music scene from the US Army, joining the other white male vocalists at the top of the charts: Bobby Darin, Neil Sedaka, Jerry Lee Lewis, Paul Anka, Del Shannon and Frankie Avalon. America, however, was ready for a change.

The Motown Record Company came on the scene, popularizing black rhythm and blues, aided in the emergence of groups such as the Supremes, the Temptations, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Martha and the Vandellas and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles.

Folk music contributed to the counterculture with Bob Dylan helping to bring a revival, along with Joan Baez and Peter, Paul & Mary. The Beatles burst into popularity with innovative rock music that appealed to all ages.

There was a major change in popular music in the mid-1960s, caused in part by the drug scene. Acid Rock, highly amplified and improvisational, and the more mellow Psychedelic Rock gained prominence.

Movies became more political, commenting on the arms race as in DR. STRANGELOVE. Sex became more explicit, and occasionally nontraditional, as in MIDNIGHT COWBOY, BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE and THE GRADUATE. Six James Bond movies, including DR. NO, FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE and GOLDFINGER combined sex and violence and were enormously popular. Previous taboos on sex, violence and language were ignored, resulting in the need for a new film code by the MPAA.

The Death of the 1960s

The '60s really went sour in 1968. That year, the brutal North Vietnamese Tet Offensive convinced many people that the Vietnam War would be impossible to win. The Democratic Party split, and in March, Johnson announced that he was ending his re-election campaign. Richard Nixon, chief spokesman for the silent majority, won the election that fall. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, the two most prominent progressives in American politics, were assassinated. Police used tear gas and billy clubs to break up protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Furious anti-war protestors took over Columbia University in New York as well as the Sorbonne in Paris and the Free University in Berlin. The urban riots that had erupted across the country every summer since 1964 intensified.

Shreds of the hopeful '60s remained. In the summer of 1969, for example, more than 400,000 young people trooped to the Woodstock music festival in upstate New York, a harmonious three days that seemed to represent the best of the peace-and-love generation. By the end of the decade, however, community and consensus lay in tatters. The era's legacy remains mixed. It brought us empowerment and polarization, resentment and liberation—and it has certainly become a permanent part of our political and cultural lives.

Sources include:
http://www.wikipedia.org/
James Rado: HAIR, THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE-ROCK MUSICAL, Copyright 2009, James Rado

LBJ cartoon by David Levine, 1968

Costume design by Shima Orans
The Vietnam War was a long, costly armed conflict that pitted the communist regime of North Vietnam and its southern allies, known as the Viet Cong, against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The war began in 1954 (though conflict in the region stretched back to the mid-1940s), after the rise to power of Ho Chi Minh and his communist Viet Minh party in North Vietnam, and continued against the backdrop of an intense Cold War between two global superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

**Roots of the Vietnam War**

During World War II, Japan invaded and occupied Vietnam, a nation on the eastern edge of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia; the country had been under French administration since the late 19th century. Inspired by Chinese and Soviet communism, Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Minh to fight both Japan and the French colonial administration. Japan withdrew its forces in 1945, leaving the French-educated Emperor Bao Dai in control of an independent Vietnam. France set up the state of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in July 1949, with Saigon as its capital. Armed conflict continued until a decisive battle in May 1954 ended in French defeat by Viet Minh (Northern) forces. The subsequent treaty negotiations at Geneva split Vietnam along the latitude known as the 17th parallel. With the Cold War intensifying in 1955, President Eisenhower pledged his firm support to South Vietnam.

**U.S. Involvement Escalates**

A team sent by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 advised a build-up of American military and economic aid to confront the Viet Cong threat. Working under the “domino theory,” which held that if one Southeast Asian country fell to communism, many would follow, Kennedy increased U.S. aid. By 1962, the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the 1950s.

After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, the ensuing political instability in South Vietnam persuaded his succes-
sor Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to further increase U.S. military and economic support. The following August, after DRV (North Vietnamese) torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson ordered the retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. Congress soon passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave Johnson broad war-making powers, and U.S. planes began regular bombing raids.

In March 1965, Johnson made the decision to send U.S. combat forces into battle in Vietnam. By June, 82,000 combat troops were stationed in Vietnam. Despite the concerns of some of his advisers, Johnson authorized the immediate dispatch of 100,000 troops at the end of July 1965 and another 100,000 in 1966.

**A Nation Divided**

The war dragged on, and it divided the nation. The anti-war movement began mostly on college campuses beginning at UC Berkeley in California in 1965. By 1968, there were massive anti-Vietnam war marches, protests, sit-ins and student strikes in major cities and on college and university campuses across the country. Meanwhile, many others formed a “silent majority” in support of the war.

On November 15, 1969, the largest protest in American history took place in Washington, D.C., as over 250,000 Americans gathered peacefully, calling for withdrawal of American troops. The tragic turning point was on May 4, 1970, when four peaceful student demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio were murdered by Kent State National Guardsmen during a noon-time campus anti-war rally.

**The Beginning of the End**

By the end of 1967, Hanoi’s communist leadership sought to strike a decisive blow aimed at forcing United States to give up hopes of success. On January 31, 1968, some 70,000 DRV forces launched the Tet offensive (named for the lunar new year), a co-ordinated series of attacks on more than 100 cities in South Vietnam.

Though taken by surprise, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces managed to strike back quickly, and the communists were unable to hold any of the targets. Reports of the attacks stunned the U.S. public. Although the Tet Offensive failed in its goal of overthrowing the South Vietnamese government, it showed that South Vietnam was unable to fend for itself against the North, despite many years of massive U.S. military aid. U.S. ground forces were gradually withdrawn as part of a policy known as Vietnamization, which aimed to end American involvement in the war while transferring the task of fighting the Communists to the South Vietnamese themselves.

Although the Paris Peace Accords was signed in January 1973, the fighting continued. President Richard Nixon ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973. The capture of Saigon at the hands of the North Vietnamese Army in April 1975 marked the end of the war, and North and South Vietnam were reunified the following year. The war exacted a huge human cost in terms of fatalities. Estimates of the number of Vietnamese service members and civilians killed vary from 800,000 to 3.1 million. Over 200,000 Cambodians, 20,000–200,000 Laotians and 58,220 U.S. service members died in the conflict.