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## The Effects of The Cold and Vietnam Wars

After speaking with my grandparents, their plethora of experiences during the Cold War and Vietnam War were outlined more clearly. My grandparents, who were borne two years apart, were nine and seven years old when the Cold War started. As a result, they grew up during the Cold War, and it continued throughout their adolescence and into their adulthood. On the other hand, my grandparents were twenty-two and twenty years old when the Vietnam War began; therefore, they were the prime age group that was affected by this war and by the draft.

Before discussing my grandparents' personal experiences during the Cold War and the Vietnam War, it is important to differentiate what occurred during these wars. The Cold War, which started in 1947 and ended in 1991, was primarily a war between the United States and Russia. In the United States, there was a grave fear of the spread of communism, which is the political stance in Russia. Furthermore, the threat of nuclear warfare was new and frightening to not only the military, but to the civilians of each country. Because of this, the war consisted of a standoff between both countries, waiting to see if nuclear warfare would occur. On the other hand, the Vietnam War, which started in 1955 and ended in 1975, was quite different and included a great deal of bloodshed. The only similarity was that the United States entered the war under the pretense of stopping the spread of communism. Many Americans felt that the Vietnam War was a French problem; however, since NATO had been formed prior to this war, France was now an ally of the United States (Hammond, 2021). Therefore, the United States decided to support the war efforts in Vietnam. During this war about 2.2 million men were drafted in the United States and about 58,000 of them died (Michigan World History, 2016). As a result, this

led to heightened tensions in the United States and a negative sentiment about the draft itself and the Vietnam War in general.

The Cold War had become normalized by the time my grandparents were old enough to really process the reality of the tension between Russia and the United States. Because of this, my grandparents did not recall the Cold War really affecting their childhood to a large degree other than having to practice duck and cover drills in school which amounted to hiding under their desks and staying away from the windows in their classrooms. Today, these drills are not utilized in schools so they seem out of place, but to my grandparents, it was normal. Not only were drills in school practiced frequently, but also there were many nervous people who constantly bickered with each other about their different stances on the Cold War. According to my grandparents, these discussions typically involved conversations about possible missiles and were perpetuated on the news, radio, and television as well. The only solace came after Dwight Eisenhower was elected President of the United States because of his military background and extensive experience, people felt reassured.

This tension, although mostly from the risk of nuclear warfare, also came from the grave fear and threat of the spread of communism as well. Since the United States was, and still is, a capitalist country, there was strong opposition to the threat that communism posed. As communism spread throughout Eastern Europe, the tension between capitalism and communism grew. This affected everyday life and even what my grandparents were taught in school, having communism being presented as the worst option for the United States Government. To pair with the threat of communism, nuclear warfare was much more highly feared. There was constantly an outright concern that atomic bombs would be dropped and kill family and loved ones. My grandparents commented that after they were married, they moved from Poughkeepsie, New

York to Washington, D.C. for my grandpa's work. Of course, prior to accepting the position, my grandparents considered the positives and negatives of such a move but what they seriously discussed was the risk of moving to D.C., where an atomic bomb was more likely to be dropped. My grandparents did not realize the magnitude of this decision at the time because these conversations were typical during the Cold War. Although doing so may seem drastic, the fear of nuclear warfare came from a place of being prepared for the worst, as many people thought that a miscalculation or misstep would account for an accidental bombing.

Because of the Cold War's longevity, it overlapped with the Vietnam War causing even more tension in an already frightened country. My grandpa was of draft age when the Vietnam War began, but he was in college at the time so he was exempt. After my grandpa graduated from college, he secured a job with New York University's (NYU) College of Engineering. His position was part of a Federal Government contract that required a security clearance and exempted him from the draft. Not everyone was as lucky as my grandpa was. Many of his college fraternity brothers were drafted and fought in the war. Of course, the draft still heavily dictated his life as he could not leave his job at NYU for fear of being drafted. This all changed when President Kennedy allowed married men to be exempt from the draft. As a result, my grandpa was afforded the privilege of leaving his job at NYU and accepting a new position with IBM. Luckily, this was the last time he had to worry about being drafted. With respect to the Vietnam War, my grandma had a very different experience because she was a woman and did not have to worry about being drafted herself. Throughout her collegiate experience, the war and the draft were always a nervous topic of conversation with her male friends gravely fearing the draft after graduation because they felt it was a war not worth fighting. Most newspapers and radio stations shared this sentiment with *The New York Times* being completely against the war

itself, although there was a vast range of opinions throughout all outlets in the United States, which typically would spark on-air debates. This feeling was also mutual throughout the country causing a plethora of anti-war protests. My grandparents did not participate in any of the peace marches simply because they were scared of the possible violence that may have been projected onto the protestors. However, they completely agreed with them that the Vietnam War was not the United States' war to be fought, but decided it was safer to watch the protests unravel from afar. Because of this grave anti-war sentiment, which spread throughout the United States, the soldiers returning from Vietnam were severely mistreated by their fellow Americans, which was in stark contrast to how previous soldiers had been treated after returning home from war. While my grandparents do not recall any protests specifically against the veterans, there also was not outward enthusiasm towards them when they returned home.

Unfortunately from their perspective, there was no day of solace for my grandparents and many other Americans to the Vietnam War itself. The United States pulled out suddenly from Vietnam, and shortly after that, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam and declared victory. Of course, there is some debate about who won the Vietnam War, but my grandparents were in agreement that even though there was no formal declaration, that the combined forces of the West lost.

Overall, when both wars ended, my grandparents and the community around them were overjoyed and relieved. With respect to the Cold War, my grandparents explained that globally the tension went down astronomically because although the problem was not resolved completely, citizens concerns and news reports declined. Similarly, after the Vietnam War ended, my grandparents explained how it felt as if a cloud had been lifted off their heads and the weight of the war was gone. Not only did both wars' endings cause civilian behavior to change

but also what was projected on the news became more focused on domestic issues instead of global concerns. This was reflected in the United States' policies as well as with less government spending being allocated to the military itself. Consequently, the face of politics was forever changed with many Americans no longer willing to blindly believe our President and take what is said as an absolute truth.

After my interview with my grandparents, they realized the impact that living through multiple wars had on their daily lives. My grandma suddenly recognized that the reason she regularly watches the nightly news is because it was a habit she developed in her adolescence due to these wars. Not only this, but growing up with the culture surrounding the hatred of communism also affected my grandparents' political views as well. My grandma strongly believes that the Cold War influenced the liberalistic ideals that guide her to this day, especially when she votes. Of course, elections are based on local, state, or national issues, but my grandparents' experiences definitely have influenced how they view each candidate. Not only this but growing up during wartime drastically affected how my grandparents viewed the concept of war. To my grandma, the idea of killing people over an argument when negotiation is still on the table is too common and too drastic of a measure. On the other hand, my grandpa agrees, but recognizes the need for some war if it is for a justified cause.

The consistent tension caused by these wars that my grandparents endured still affects their mindsets to this day. When asked about the pandemic, my grandparents felt just as unprepared as my generation despite living through so many tragedies. With their deeper perspectives, my grandparents do have the ability to think more towards the future and how the pandemic will change parts of society permanently. Consequently, my grandparents believe they will never travel again or even vacation across the country. They even feel uncomfortable sitting

at an outdoor restaurant right now, really feeling the multitude of restrictions the pandemic has placed upon them. Even though my grandparents have lived through so much more than my generation, they remain very optimistic and are better equipped to get through this trying time. With this comes the perspective that our society will overcome this hardship and as a result will emerge stronger. This is something I think is sorely lacking in my generation who cannot see past the present whatsoever.

Overall, there is no comparison between what my grandparents' generation has experienced and endured and what my generation has gone through. Not only were my grandparents born during World War II and lived through the trauma of that war and of the Holocaust, they also lived through the Cold War, the Vietnam War, 9/11, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I think all of these tragedies speak to the resilience of my grandparents and how each tragedy has only made them stronger and more prepared to overcome future challenges and to thrive. Not only has growing up during the frightening and tension filled times of the Cold War and Vietnam War directed the course of my grandparents' lives but also enabled them to greatly appreciate the calm nature of simple domestic affairs, a perspective only attainable with age and experience.