

In your opinion, which was more significant, the Vietnam War or the Korean War?

Both the Korean and Vietnam Wars had significant impact the foreign and domestic policies pursued by the United States. Neither was conclusive yet both had long-lasting effects on the American psyche. However, in my opinion, the media coverage of the Vietnam war as well as its outcome, duration and sheer scale meant it had a far greater impact overall. The Korean War is sometimes referred to as the "Forgotten War" whereas the shock of Vietnam is still deeply entrenched in the American outlook.

The Korean War had a number of significant impacts. For one it demonstrated to America that Red China was a real power in the region. When a UN taskforce, consisting of 88% American soldiers, drove North Vietnamese invaders back across the 38th parallel, Gen. Douglas MacArthur decided to push on towards the Chinese border. He did not heed warnings to stop, and so, in October of that year a force of 250,000 Chinese soldiers crossed the Yalu River, and pushed the Americans back across the border. This began a bloody three year war of attrition after which the original border was reset and a DMZ (demilitarized zone) was established there. The Americans had not anticipated the strength of the Chinese nor their advanced technology such as the MiG fighter jets. Fearful of this power, the US would largely ignore red china for the next twenty years and recognise Chiang Ke Sikh regime on Taiwan (Formosa) as the legitimate China.

In addition the Korean War illustrated the need for strong allies in the region. This led President Truman to sign treaties with Japan and Australia (ANZUS Pact). Eisenhower further developed this policy by establishing SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organisation) to oppose communism just as NATO did in the Northern Hemisphere. For years this would be prime fighting ground for proxy wars in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Korean War brought the area to the attention of the US.

The Korean War also deepened the US resolve to pursue a policy of containment. Presidents Truman and Johnson both believed in the domino theory i.e. if one country fell to communism its neighbours would likely fall too. The 50,000 lives lost in the Korean conflict only increased American national pride and this, combined with the red scare at home, increased anti-soviet fervour to unprecedented levels. The Korean War was also a testing ground for the 'limited war' theory i.e. the idea that the US could fight localised, conventional wars with soviet backed countries without an all-out nuclear war developing. Overall the Korean War greatly exacerbated west-east tensions.

The Vietnam War was far more costly. Annually it cost over \$30bn. Coupled with Johnson's spending on the great society program and the Apollo and Gemini space programs (\$20bn), this caused a huge budget deficit and brought the age of affluence to an end. But the cost was more than financial. The Vietnam War claimed the lives of 58,000 American soldiers and left hundreds of thousands injured or suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. Over 2.7 m men participated in the war and the cost of their demobilization placed a huge burden on the state.

Beyond the economic impacts, the Vietnam War had a huge impact on society. It created huge divisions between the anti war groups (led by the SDS, the Students for Democratic Society) and what Nixon termed the "silent majority" who supported the war. This tension was visible in the mass 'teach-in' protests at over 4000 universities and incidents such as the Kent State Massacre where 4 student protesters were shot dead by national Guardsmen. The Vietnam War disillusioned much of the public, who were unwilling to believe the reports of President Johnson and his advisors Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara. Incidents such as the Tet offensive of 1968, seemed to undermine the 'official' government line that the war was going well, and caused a credibility gap to open up between the government and the people. This was best summed up by esteemed CBS newsman Walter Conkrite when he famously said, "What the hell is going on here, I thought we were winning this war."

The eventual unilateral withdrawal of troops from Vietnam was a huge shock to the national morale. It undermined the image of America as morally infallible and militarily invincible. In fact the Vietnam War was the death knell for the policy of interventionism that had characterised the early years of the cold war. Nixon brought in his Nixon Doctrine which stated that America would still supply weapons, but not soldiers to foreign countries fighting communist aggression. This was quite a way from the gung-ho Truman Doctrine of the 1950s. The war also led to the US pursuing a policy of détente with both China and the USSR, and moving toward peaceful co-existence. In short, the Vietnam War made waging wars politically unacceptable. This was best seen in Lyndon Barnes Johnson's fall from grace. His near defeat to Eugene McCarthy in the democratic New Hampshire Primary led to him not contesting the 1968 presidential election. The Vietnam War killed his career.

The Korean War was a significant manifestation of the rampant cold war tensions of the time. It certainly shocked the public, but not to the same extent as the Vietnam War which left an indelible mark on US foreign policy.