

The Vietnam War didn't start in 1965.

The conflict known as the “Vietnam War” in the United States—and the “American War” in Vietnam—was long in the making. Although the United States had been involved in Vietnam for many years, it was only in 1965 that the first battalions of U.S. Marines arrived in the country.

This is not a full timeline of the Vietnam War. Instead, it chronicles major events that brought the war home to ordinary people living in the United States—among them, the artists in this exhibition. It is a timeline of the dramatic events that challenged artists to respond.

The Vietnam War didn't end in 1975.

Though North Vietnamese forces captured the South Vietnamese capital of Sài Gòn (Saigon) on April 30, 1975, officially ending the war, the repercussions continued. More than 100,000 people fled when South Vietnam collapsed. The exodus of refugees from Vietnam—as well as those from Laos and Cambodia—continued for years, driven by ongoing instability and conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians eventually settled in the United States, but finding a new home was not the end of their journey. Some of their stories and the legacy of war are explored in the companion exhibition “Artists Reflect: Contemporary Views on the American War.”

U.S. military veterans, who were returning to a divided country, also had to negotiate new lives; some were bearing physical or psychological scars. Families who lost loved ones continue to grieve. In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial created a site for remembrance on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In 1995, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam normalized relations, an effort led in large part by veterans.