Varying Perspectives on Vietnam: Using Primary Sources to Show Individual Experiences of the Vietnam War

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Varying Perspectives on Vietnam:
Using primary sources to show individual experiences of the Vietnam War

by

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INTRODUCTION

As many students attempt to grasp the implications of historical events on our history, they struggle to truly relate to the material. When the content in a social studies classroom involves a war, it becomes difficult for an instructor to show students the immense significance of war events. Often, students are able to recall events without appreciating the complicated and human experience of the war. While it is important that our curriculum focuses on key events, people and timelines, we must be careful not to simplify war. Each war covered in the social studies classroom involves intense emotions and controversy. By allowing students to view war from the very personal level of those who lived through it, we can help students relate to events and appreciate the varying perspectives of individuals surrounding events in history.

For some adults in our society today, the Vietnam War is a not so distant memory of uncertainty, anger, protests and lost lives. Those who lived through the tumultuous years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam view the events as must more than key people and dates. This is especially true for those who had first-hand experiences of devastating losses during the war. The students who come through today’s classrooms have very little knowledge of the events of Vietnam. The complicated nature of the Vietnam War can help students to see more that simple causes and effects and right and wrong. It is important that we show the war as more than events that occurred but as horrors that people experienced and challenges that people overcame. Use of materials from those who experienced a complex war with no easy answers will expose students to complicated problems involved in history.
Part I: Historical Perspective on the Events of Vietnam

The complex issue of the Vietnam War is often the source of much debate. Many historians have made great efforts to understand the motivations behind the use of American lives and resources in battle. Any type of combat is a risky decision that can have costly consequences. In the case of the Vietnam War, the degree of death and destruction left many asking why we would have put ourselves in such a situation. Others have speculated as to what ultimately prompted the United States to remove our forces in 1975. As scholarship progressed throughout the years following the Vietnam War, historians have found varying answers to questions about the war.

Although the research from various historians is necessary for Americans to understand the events of the war, we must also take time to appreciate the complicated experiences of those who participated in Vietnam. The Vietnam War was more than a series of political decisions. If Americans take time to examine the very human experience of war from those who faced it firsthand, we can realize the truly complicated and human nature of war.

There are three aspects of the war that I have chosen to review throughout historical analysis of the war. The first involves the case for why we should never have been involved in the first place. Many have agreed that involvement was obviously a mistake, but the issue of what specific factors should have stood out as red flags to the United States is worthy of some consideration. The second issue that is valuable to analysis includes what made the United States consider all the
Because of this, the United States was led to believe that helping the South Vietnamese people was the right thing to do. However, as more and more troops were sent to Vietnam, the situation became more complex. The United States was ultimately faced with the decision of whether or not to risk American lives in Vietnam. Finally, the discussion of what convinced the United States that enough was enough and the troops needed to be brought home from the war.

**Was it wrong to get involved in Vietnam?**

Journalists and government officials were the first two groups to attempt to evaluate America’s intervention in the conflict in Vietnam. Many have measured and assessed the amount of US involvement in Vietnam from 1950 up until troops were removed in 1975. As more and more troops were being sent to Vietnam, the discussion of why the United States was choosing to get so involved heated up.

Some like Grant Sharp and revisionist thinkers have argued that the United States was right to get involved in Vietnam. They assert that protecting the world from the spread of Communism was a just and moral cause. However, many historians who studied the war during and soon after 1975 have taken efforts to point out reasons why involvement was a poor choice. Some of their explanations involve poor foreign policy under Johnson and his advisors, misunderstandings about the South Vietnamese people, ignorance of the potential of the Vietcong army, and the concealing of information from the American public.

Grant Sharp served as Commander in Chief of the Pacific during the Vietnam conflict. His first-hand experience with the conflict prompted a passionate evaluation of events. Sharp is careful to point out the connection between Soviet Communists and the North Vietnamese. When he describes the resolution adopted by the communist party in 1959, he explains that Moscow worked with the North
Vietnamese along the way.¹ Remaining consistent with the policy of containment that is discussed among so many historians, Sharp calls attention to the fact that our dedication to a free South Vietnam and a stop to Communist aggression led us into the Vietnam war.² He acknowledges that public support for containing communism was strong in the beginning but voices frustration over the change in public sentiment as the war went forward.³

While many historians describe the war as a mistake that the Americans had little chance of winning, Sharp expressed that the United States could have succeeded in the war if more sound military strategies were used. In his book, Strategy for defeat: Vietnam in retrospect, Sharp focuses on the military strategy that was used during the war. He contends it was not the military air power that failed, it was the decision makers in Washington. If the air power had been used according to the “older-wiser voice of history”, the air forces would have been able to achieve victory in Asia. Sharp criticizes advisers for ignoring the traditional principles of military strategy and attempting to make military strategy nicer by “pussyfooting around with it”.⁴ He viewed political decision makers as being hesitant and naïve in their decision-making. Sharp argues that policy makers were more pre-occupied with the Soviet reaction to military action, than they were to ending the war.

From the title of his book The Making of a Quagmire one can tell that David Halberstam was opposed to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Like other

² Ibid, 25..
³ Ibid, 270.
historians of the time, Halberstam criticizes the fact that America acted without doing enough research into the situation. He points particularly to the lessons that should have been learned from the seven year war that the French had recently lost to the Vietnamese.\(^5\) By ignoring the lessons that could have been learned from the French, the US involved itself in a war it knew little about. A war in which it also had a limited number of options for solutions.\(^6\)

The war against France, according to Halberstam, was an attempt to push the white man out of the country. The French were defeated by the Vietnamese forces in 1954 and Halberstam implies that the U.S. should have taken a more careful inventory of the situation in Vietnam following the war. After the defeat of the French, North Vietnamese have a sense of pride and accomplishment. A government system was used where men gained power based on their ability and a system that was working. Halberstam points out that the government in the south on the other hand was weak. The south Vietnamese government was corrupt and a good political leader was very hard to find. The people in South Vietnam were tired of war and the government was disorganized with little authority. Halberstam argues that the United States had not focused on Vietnam enough to truly understand the limitations of involvement.\(^7\) By ignoring these aspects and others, the U.S became involved in a situation with little chance of success.

The 1972 book, *Fire in the Lake*, by Frances Fitzgerald presents a similar view of the motives of the United States while taking great care to present the

\(^4\) Ibid, 269.


\(^6\) Ibid,69.
Vietnamese view of events. She points out that the Vietnamese did make attempts to solve their own problems without the help of the Americans. The Vietnamese, Fitzgerald explains, were engaged in creating a modern nation in 1954. The United States entered into that attempt and struggled to control the ideological goals of that newly formed nation with no concern for the welfare of the Vietnamese people.

Fitzgerald explains that “While Americans saw themselves as building world order, many Vietnamese saw them merely as the producers of garbage from which they could build houses.”. In Fitzgerald’s analysis, American intervention might have been more effective if it focused more on domestic problems that effected the Vietnamese people and less on military strength. Fitzgerald further argues that the rational for the war was based on a fictional argument that the United States was defending “freedom and democracy”.

Much of Fitzgerald’s writing focuses on these misunderstandings between the two distinct cultures of the United States and Vietnam. Fitzgerald asserts that the differences between the cultures may have caused the United States to become involved in a situation that they did not truly understand. An overly optimistic view, according to Fitzgerald, played a major role in U.S. involvement in an area on the other side of the world. One major misunderstanding centered upon the American and Vietnamese view of “revolution”. The French and American forces that became involved in Vietnam saw revolution as a threat because of the possibility of communism spreading. Fitzgerald points out that the Vietnamese did not see

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7 Ibid, 36-38.
revolution as a violent break from the past but instead as a sometimes necessary "renewal".  

Fitzgerald reminds the reader that the problems in Asia would not have been as severe if the western world had not intervened in South Asia. Traditional Vietnamese society had a stable system, which centered on survival of the family and community. Wealth was not celebrated because it was seen as selfish, and private property did not truly exist. Vietnamese people had a system in place and a firmly established culture that had lasted many years before the French and American’s intervened.

Gabriel Kolko shared some of Fitzgerald’s more radical views on the Vietnam War. Kolko viewed the war as an attempt to push capitalist views on a third world country. In his book, Anatomy of a war: Vietnam, the United States and the modern historical experience, Kolko describes clearly sides with the Vietnamese in their struggle for a revolution. Kolko was himself involved in several anti-war movements and is closely tied to anti-war experts throughout the world. He criticizes the fact that much of the analysis of the Vietnam War focuses on the decisions made by leaders and advisors. In Kolko’s opinion, the efforts and desires of the people is worthy of much more consideration. Kolko makes it clear that he fully welcomed the success of the Communist party in Vietnam. He felt that it is disastrous and unnecessary for countries like the United States and USSR to push their guidance on developing nations.  

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Vietnam was about US imperialism against the class struggle and ideology of communist revolutionaries. According to Kolko, this imperialist desire is a major reason for the war in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{11}

While radical thinkers like Fitzgerald and Kolko strongly criticized America’s justification for the war, other historians attempted to present a “less radical” interpretation. After 1980, historians like George Herring, Fredrik Logevall, David Levy and David Kaiser presented some similar views on reasons why American involvement in the war was a poor decision. With new information available for analysis, historians have provided a more comprehensive interpretation of involvement in the war.

George C. Herring pointed out that he sought to tell a balanced view of the Vietnam War in his book \textit{America's Longest War}. Herring agreed that the controversy and passion associated with the Vietnam War prevented objective analysis of events. He explains that his analysis strays from focusing on specific personalities and acknowledges that there was no easy solution. As is important in any historical examination, Herring appreciates that choices that appeared logical and least damaging at the time are more easily judged as we look back on history. His attempt to objectively explain involvement in the Vietnam War is centered around the continuation of the containment policy.\textsuperscript{12}

Herring views Johnson’s decision to declare war as a reasonable culmination of the containment of Communism that began under Truman in the late 1940s.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 553.
Herring explains that the decision to become involved "...was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy, the policy of containment." Most Americans had accepted the policy of containing Communism for the past two decades and supported military efforts to accomplish that task. The decision to declare war in Vietnam was, therefore, consistent with foreign policy at the time. From Herring's point of view, the intervention of the United States into the tragic and costly war is not an isolated mistake. Involvement in this war should challenge Americans to question the policy of containment and reevaluate American attitudes toward the world.  

President Johnson's attempt to avoid a extensive involvement in Vietnam between 1963 and July 1965 are recognized by Herring and he views Johnson's policy as an attempt to add-on to Kennedy's program of foreign policy. He points out that the escalating crisis in South Asia "could not have been more unwelcome" to President Johnson. According to Herring, alternatives were carefully reviewed by Johnson and it seems that Johnson made the best choices that he could given very complicated situations.  

Herring defends some of the decisions made by Johnson by pointing out that Johnson's lack of experience with foreign policy caused him to rely greatly on his advisers. Under the advisement of Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and National Security adviser McGeorge Bundy, Johnson made many judgments out of trust. Herring does not exempt Johnson for his mistakes with

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13 Ibid  
misleading the American people during incidents like the Gulf Of Tonkin incident, but he does call attention to the importance of Johnson’s counsel. The validity of the information made available to Johnson by his advisers is called into question at some points during Herring’s analysis.

An example of the failure of advisers to provide Johnson with a complete picture of the situation in Vietnam is described in Herring’s description of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. On August 4th 1964 the sonar men on ships called the Maddox and Turner Joy reported that they were under attack in the Gulf of Tonkin. Herring points out that when the president met with his advisers on August 4th there was no question that an attack on the two ships had taken place. Word of this attack ultimately led Johnson to order retaliatory air strikes in North Vietnam. Later, however, no certain evidence could be found that an attack actually took place. Reports explained that weather conditions and mistaken readings by sonar men had caused the mistaken reports of torpedo attacks by enemy forces. The commander of the Maddox later admitted that he had no “visual sight” of an attack. In this situation Herring describes how Johnson relied on the certainty of his advisers that an attack had taken place and acted accordingly.

Surprisingly, Herring’s criticism of the men who advised Johnson during the Gulf of Tonkin incident is limited in some ways. Herring is careful to point out that although advisers like McNamara confirmed an attack that may never have taken place, they did not intend on misleading the president. Here Herring shows the complicated decisions that were made without directly attacking the motives of those involved. Herring carefully admits that “McNamara and his military advisers did not
knowingly lie about the alleged attacks, but they were obviously in a mood to retaliate and they seem to have selected from evidence available to them those parts that confirmed what they wanted to believe." Herring is careful to acknowledge mistakes in the way information was handled, without judging decision makers as villains. Johnson followed the information given to him by his advisors who should have taken more time to confirm that information.

Johnson is shown by as a careful decision-maker with some very difficult choices to make in Herring’s description. As Johnson cautiously attempted to avoid declaring war, problems in South Vietnam continued to worsen. When advisers told Johnson that he could continue to add forces in South Vietnam without going to congress, he reluctantly decided to do so. The early fear that declaration of war would bring about heavy criticism among Americans led Johnson to mislead the American people for a period of time. Herring describes this situation without passing judgment on Johnson by pointing out the significant implications that Johnson was attempting so hard to avoid.

Advisers like National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy continued to give Johnson reasons to intensify involvement in the Vietnam conflict with statements like “without new United States action, defeat appears inevitable—probably not in a matter of weeks of months, but within the next year or so.”. The United States was consistently pushed to take more and more action in Vietnam and Johnson attempted to do “enough, but not too much” in each situation. In doing so, Herring explains that

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sufficient time was not put into studying what would be *enough* to end the conflict. Herring argues that Johnson and his adviser’s efforts to do enough underestimated the enormity of the challenge. They did not anticipate the determination of the enemy and the ultimate toll that the conflict would take on America. Herring explains that “Johnson launched the war with only a dim perception of what lay ahead and with no firm mandate from the nation”.  

Even with this seemingly negative analysis of Johnson’s declaration of war, Herring implies that the war was an inevitable part of the containment policy.

Scholars like Logevall saw intervention in Vietnam as a mistake and a failure. He focused on the eighteen month period from August 1963 to February 1965 and examined what led to the war in Southeast Asia in his book, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the escalation of the war in Vietnam*. His research left him perplexed at the rigidity of the thought process surrounding the issue of Vietnam. Logevall argues that many people failed to truly consider other options to the use of military force in Vietnam. “the gross disparity between the amount of American contingency planning for military escalation and that for a possible diplomatic solution to the problem; huge stacks of reports on the former, barely a single folder on the latter.”  

His research implies that decisions regarding Vietnam were rushed while other avenues of action still remained available.

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16 Ibid, 141-142.  
17 Ibid, 144.  
He furthered questioned why many government officials failed to consider whether the South Vietnamese would truly be committed to the war effort. According to Logevall, those who knew about the problems with intervention and the commitment of the South Vietnamese failed to speak up. Some with knowledge of alternative options did not act quickly and challenge the administration in Washington. The lack of careful decision-making and failure by those who had important information to act played a role in what Logevall called “a failure, a mistake and, at worst, a crime”.19

Like Herring, David Levy points out that passion and emotions can impact and objective look at the events of Vietnam. Levy attempts to tell the story of the Vietnam war by presenting both sides of the story without showing bias. He acknowledges that although complete objectivity is not possible, the story of the Vietnam war could be told from both sides.20 The assertion is that we should understand the issues of the war without passing judgment. By the time The Debate Over Vietnam was written in 1995, Levy had hopes that enough time had passed since the “stormy and passionate days” that a full story could be told.21 The focus of this perspective is meant to increase tolerance by understanding the beliefs from those who supported participation in the war and those who opposed that involvement. Levy also takes care to point out that he did not feel people had hidden motives for their actions leading up to the war. He asserted that, with a few exceptions, most people are being honest about their motives. Levy explains how the study of the war

19 Ibid.
is worthwhile because it allows us to examine this significant event in a way that gives us "...a moment of critical and traumatic self-scrutiny". This self-examination, Levy argues, will help us to understand without passing judgment.

In his attempt to show both sides, Levy explains some flaws with the policies of a war in Vietnam. Although he describes the attempts made by presidents like Kennedy to weigh all information carefully, he points out problems that would make US victory difficult to achieve. Levy explains that as of 1964, South Vietnamese opposition to the war was intensifying. Intellectuals, politicians, Buddhist activists among others, were calling for diplomatic solutions and a possible settlement. In April 1964, Levy points out that 42% of the population in South Vietnam favored communists, 24% were neutral, and only 34% favored the US backed government. In time, Americans would see some of the problems and become uneasy with the situation.

Historian David Kaiser joined many previous historians in the belief that many decisions made by the administration were mistakes and errors were made. In American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the origins of the Vietnam War Kaiser, describes the Vietnam War as a "hopeless" and "mistaken" war. Where Herring implies that the war was inevitable as a part of the policy of containment, Kaiser admits that the war was "logical but not essential". Although people supported the idea of stopping Communist forces, there was no enthusiasm for a war in Vietnam. Kaiser points out that President Kennedy shared the same key advisers as Lyndon B.

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid, 33-45.
Johnson, yet he held a separate view from his advisers. Kennedy maintained that American intervention in Vietnam would not be supported by world allies, or the American people. According to Kaiser, Kennedy did not take his advisers advice about Vietnam intervention because he did not feel that it was a good choice. Kaiser implies that Kennedy chose not to become more deeply involved in the Vietnam conflict during the Cold War and Johnson could have done the same.

Much like Herring, Kaiser was critical of Lyndon B. Johnson's decision-making prior to and at the start of the war. Kaiser points out that Johnson did not have experience with international policy and perspective. This inexperience caused him to undertake war without considering the damage that it would do to American foreign policy. Kaiser argues that Johnson listened to his advisers without considering public opinion as Kennedy had done. According to Kaiser, advisers like McGeorge bundy, McNamara and Rusk had been prepared to go to war in Vietnam since 1961 and Johnson accepted their guidance without question. In doing so, well-substantiated doubts by some advisors were completely disregarded.24

Not everyone agreed that entry into the war was a bad decision. In the later years following the war, we see some historians examining the war with a revisionist view. As time has passed, we see some claiming that intervention into the war was necessarily a bad decision, but poor choices were made once the United States became involved were poor. In 1978, Guenter Lewy had pointed out that the motive

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to become involved in preventing the spread of Communism was a moral one.\textsuperscript{25} Others like Norman Podhoretz argued that the United States had a noble role of saving South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{26}

Michael Lind argued that the war was the correct decision at the time because it preserved our credibility in the Cold War. He criticizes the view of historian before him who had said that it was wrong to go in, and that we should have used unlimited military force once we got there. He argues that this view is water-down in a sense to satisfy the liberals who were not in favor of the war and also appeases the conservatives that were pro-military. Lind’s perspective focuses on the credibility of the United States and it’s need to show the power that it held against the rest of the world. Lind asserts that “It was necessary for the United States to escalate the war in the mid-1960s in order to defend the credibility of the US as a superpower.”.\textsuperscript{27} He goes on to say that it was also necessary for the United States to pull out forces after 1968 “in order to preserve the American domestic policy consensus in favor of the cold war on other fronts”. So although Lind did not feel that the US entrance into the war was a mistake, he saw other battles of the Cold War as of greater priority.\textsuperscript{28}

Issues that the revisionists discussed like moral motivation, saving the South Vietnamese from the evil Vietcong and the defense of the credibility of the United States were very influential in gaining support for the war. Although many have discussed “red flags” that should have stopped the United States from becoming

\textsuperscript{26} Norman Podhoretz, \textit{Why we were in Vietnam}, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 197.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid
involved, we cannot deny that the decisions were made. The reasons for those
decisions are valuable to the analysis of the war.

What Caused the United States to get involved in Vietnam?

As many look back on the Vietnam War, we can examine the reasons why it was a poor decision to become involved so heavily in a small territory in South Asia. We can point blame for the involvement in many directions as we mourn the loss of so many lives. It is also important, however, that we take a look at the reasons why many at the time felt that the war had to take place. Perhaps this will provide insight into the process that a government, and an American public go through as they prepare for war. No one can go back and change the destruction and tragedy of the Vietnam war, but a careful analysis for the reasons why we entered is valuable. As we look at our involvement in the war, we see many historians taking a critical view of the way our government handles foreign policy. Through analysis of what ultimately lead up to the war, perhaps we can prevent the same circumstances from leading us astray again.

In her book, *The March of the Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, Barbara Tuchman examines why decisions to go to war are made even after clear reasons are present as to why the war is counter-productive. She examines a trend throughout history where major world powers become involved in wars with disastrous outcomes. According to Tuchman, these follies that bring nations into battle occur
for a variety of reasons. She cites the Vietnam War as an example of a folly because of the continuous overreacting to the events that led up to the war.\textsuperscript{29}

Tuchman emphasizes that phrases like "threat to our national security", "vital interests" and "credibility" were used by government officials on many occasions throughout our involvement in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{30} She mentions that the second folly was a feeling of omnipotence which many historians have echoed in their analysis. Many explain an overly optimistic view of what America was capable of doing.\textsuperscript{31} Tuchman attributes much of this to the establishment of the United States as a world Superpower after WWII. The confidence gained from victory in such a significant war, left many Americans feeling secure in the fact that America could accomplish what it set out to do.

Historians who have examined reasons why we entered the war in Vietnam point to a few main reasons. The fact that government officials strongly discouraged new reporters from presenting a negative view of the war may have limited some of the negative information available. Additionally, many people feared communism and the government reinforced the idea that the war in Vietnam was essential to our national security. The fact that the North Vietnamese were terrorizing the south and needed to be stopped before more harm was done, made other Americans sympathetic to the cause.

David Halberstam presents the perspective of the news reporter and describes the conflict between news media and government officials before war was declared.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 375.
He points out that many government officials did not like the way in which news of the war was presented and, at times, attempted to censor news reports. In doing so, he adds an important element to the discussion of how we became involved in Vietnam. He points out that journalists investigating in Vietnam knew of the serious dangers with involvement and attempted to voice those concerns. When negative reports of the situation in Vietnam surfaced, American officials claimed that the noble effort of the Americans was being "badly hampered by irresponsible, astigmatic, and sensationalized reporting". Halberstam discusses the issue of the media in Vietnam and expresses that the relationship between the American officials and the American Press was different from the relationship that he had experienced in other areas of the world. According to Halberstam, reporters knew of the waste of efforts and resources in Vietnam, yet the American policy was still optimistic. At some points American officials argued that people who criticized the efforts were insulting those involved. When asked difficult questions about policies, Admirals like Harry Felt would ask "Why don’t you get on our team?" or as an Ambassador responded to one of Halberstam’s own questions “You’re always looking for the whole in the doughnut, Mr Halberstam". Halberstam shows that the Officials saw reporters as a nuisance to progress in some ways.

According to David Levy, the message given to the American people leading up to the war emphasized two purposes. These two points led many Americans to

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31 Ibid
34 Ibid, 71-73.
give their support to the initial war effort. First, there was a need to defend national security. The government emphasized that the fate of Vietnam had serious consequences for the security of the United States. According to this argument, the United States had a legitimate interest in the outcome of the conflict against the Communists in Vietnam. Secondly, it was reinforced that American ideals were needed to combat the evil of the Vietcong in North Vietnam. Levy, asserts that both of these purposes sounded worthwhile to many American people.

People were further swayed, Levy explained, by four basic fears relating to natural resources, geographic location, Eisenhower’s Domino theory, and morals. News circulated that Vietnam was rich in natural resources like various minerals and lumber. Many did not want to see those valuable resources end up in the hands of communists. Secondly, the location of Vietnam made it critical in obtaining important trade routes to areas in Asia. Some feared that communist control of those trade routes would be disastrous.

The third fear related to the “Domino theory” that was used to describe the possibility of communism spreading to areas surrounding Vietnam to as far as Australia. Levy explains that some forecasted that communism could soon spread farther into the Pacific if action wasn’t taken. This fear of communism was a frightening prospect for many and pushed them to support intervention. The fourth fear that Levy points out involved sources explaining torture and random terror by the Vietcong. He describes the 1964 government reports of 436 officials murdered by the

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Vietcong and 1,131 being kidnapped. Many felt that it was a moral duty to take action against such evil.\textsuperscript{36}

Like Halberstam, Some later historians have also taken time to look at the role that the media played in influencing American opinions on the war. Images shown on television and movies and information explained in newspapers have been discussed as sources that Americans relied upon for information about the war. Some contend that that way in which information was presented to the American people played a role in making the war more acceptable to some.

Levy points out that the first major combat film of the time \textit{The Green Berets} (1968) helped to reinforce the reasons for American intervention for millions of American people. The character of Sergeant Muldoon as played by John Wayne was particularly powerful. The film depicted the enemy as ruthless villains in Vietnam. The heroic Sergeant Muldoon responded to critical media questioning by responding that he was fighting to prevent “communist domination of the world”. Here Levy demonstrates the role of the media on public sentiments toward the conflict. He points out that the popular movie made $11 million dollars and gave Americans a valiant image of the fight in Vietnam.

It is clear that one of the contributing factors that made a war in Vietnam acceptable to the American public was the image created by war propaganda. Daniel C. Hallin explained that “television coverage of Vietnam dehumanized the enemy, drained him of all recognizable emotions and motives”. Hallin specifically cites that television reports depict them as vermin using terms like “Communist infested” or

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid 37.
"Vietcong infested."37 This dehumanization of the enemy helped to put Americans at ease that the decision to step into the war was the correct decision. Based on these images, the United States was taking part of a noble cause. The image was created of good vs. evil with the Vietcong and North Vietnamese clearly demonstrating evil.

Recent research by Norman Solomon has analyzed the deception of the government in his 2005 book *War Made Easy*. Solomon makes connections between several incidents of military involvement throughout United States where war was justified by the government. Solomon focuses on the types of propaganda presented by the government to gain public support for the war. Americans accept the fact that a war is necessary when what Solomon calls a “prowar spin” is presented with the facts.38 This spin is created by explaining that the United States would never want to go to war, our enemies are evil and inhuman, that the enemies are clearly the aggressors, and that not acting would cripple U.S. credibility among other things.

It is interesting to see how Solomon’s summation of the “prowar spin” can be tied to many of the issues that convinced the United States to become so heavily involved in Vietnam. Americans were told that there were few other options to contain Communism and that the evil North Vietnamese were infesting the south and something had to be done. Although some claimed that the North Vietnamese were simply attempting to build their nation, the government clearly presented them as aggressors who attacked and tortured the South Vietnamese. Failure to intervene in

such a conflict would show that the United States was soft on Communism and violations of basic human rights.

**What Convinced the United States to end efforts in Vietnam?**

Many Americans have expressed frustration over the fact that the war went on for such a long period of time. As the number of casualties grew with little progress being established, dissatisfaction with the war spread. Various factors contributed to the opposition to the war in Vietnam. Events like the Tet Offensive and invasion of Cambodia weakened American confidence, information about the actual events of the war became released with documents like the *Pentagon Papers* and the media presented a more negative view of the war. As growing numbers of Americans opposed the war, protests also occurred throughout the nation. Eventually, a culmination of various factors led to the removal of troops from Vietnam.

Early on, officials were enraged over those who spoke out against it. In regards to public approval toward the end of the war, in 1978 Admiral Grant Sharp makes heated comments about the role of the media. When discussing what led to the loss of the war, Sharp asks “What happened to public support? Were we subjected to a skillfully waged subversive propaganda campaign, aided and abetted by the media’s bombardment of sensationalism, rumors and half-truths about the Vietnam affair. A campaign that destroyed our national unity?” 39 His frustrations with the media and with decision-makers in Washington are expressed throughout his explanations.

When many Americans supported the war at the beginning of the effort, it was difficult to voice opposition. Some historians point out that those who did oppose the war, faced criticism as being anti-American. Challenges to the strength or intentions of the United States were not acceptable in many areas during the cold war period. This situation left some to remain quiet about their uneasiness over the escalating war.

The 1968 Tet offensive outraged many antiwar protestors and convinced others to join in the effort to end the war in Vietnam. The event brought the reality of the situation in Vietnam to light for some. After being told by the government that successes were being made in the South Asian nation, many were frustrated to learn that such a defeat could occur. The Tet offensive weakened the case that success was possible and added to the number of people who questioned government policies.

The invasion of Cambodia in 1970 led to a volatile situation among antiwar activists. The expansion of the war made antiwar protestors even more livid. Many are familiar with the tragedies with protests that occurred on college campuses like Kent State and Jackson State Universities. More than 100,000 protestors arrived in Washington on May 9th. The pressure from protestors and the American public led to the pulling out of troops from Cambodia, but the Hatfield-McGovern amendment that called for withdrawing US forces from Vietnam by the end of 1971 was voted down.

As problems like the Tet Offensive and invasion of Cambodia occurred over time and American uneasiness with the war grew. Lawson describes the impact of the Tet Offensive on public opinion in his book *The United States in the Vietnam*
War. The Tet Offensive caused what Lawson called a “credibility gap” between what the government was telling the people and what was actually happening in Vietnam. As more people learned of this “gap” they lost trust in the government. This was one step in the decline in support for the war effort. 40  

The invasion of Cambodia caused other serious problems for the government. Support for the government declined when the Vietcong took over half of Cambodia. This was seen as a reason to re-think the war effort and it made many choose to act out against the war. Lawson describes that the most violent anti-war protests took place after the invasion of Cambodia. Demonstrations took place on Colleges and Universities nationwide. He explains that the release of the Pentagon papers in mid-June 1971 increased Americans demand for peace in Vietnam. 41  

Lawson pays attention to point out the costs of the Vietnam war for the United States. He explains that the war costs 141 billion dollar and between 1963 and 1973 a total of 2,600,000 Americans fought in Vietnam. Lawson places some blame on Nixon and points out that if Nixon pulled troops out when he took office 15,000 deaths could have been prevented and 57 billion dollars could have been saved. He makes the point that it was not until Nixon’s re-election against the anti-war candidate George McGovern, that Nixon became eager to achieve peace. 42  

The negative image of the war effort is further painted with Lawson’s description of problems with the military effort that helps us to understand why many

41 Ibid, 115-119.
were so eager to remove the troops. His image of troops emphasized a power struggle between officers and enlisted men and the instability of frequent changes in leadership. Lawson also points out that at some points units would refuse or vote on whether or not they wanted to follow orders. His references to drug use among troops makes the situation described even more grim.\footnote{Ibid, 116.}

As Lawson describes the complicated situation for members of the military, he directs some of the blame for the declining situation on military leaders. He asserts that many military leaders continually asked for more troops and were determined that an increase in troops would bring victory. His startling description of the impacts of war remind us that civilians were greatly impacted by the war. Lawson's figures show that 7,500 went to prison for draft evasion during the war and 390,000 deserters were eventually caught and punished. Those people were given jail terms and other punishments within the military.\footnote{Ibid, 126.} Here Lawson points out the many dreadful consequences of the war that should not be forgotten with time.

The attempt to end the Vietnam War was an incredibly large social movement that involved many different groups. Mitchell K. Hall discussed this movement to some extent and points out that many of the protests begin at the local level. Some groups, like liberals, who opposed the war early on did not attack the idea of containment. Instead, they believed that a war in Vietnam took attention away from more worthwhile efforts in other areas of the world. Although they felt that Communism should not spread and human rights should be preserved, they disagreed
with support for South Vietnam’s government. \textsuperscript{45} Pacifists, on the other hand, did not approve of the policy of containment and felt that the United States was partly to blame for instability in the world. Leftists placed much of the blame on capitalism. The “New Left”, as it was called at the time, contributed to the antiwar movement as a student organized movement to expose capitalist inequalities. \textsuperscript{46}

The release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 also had a direct impact on public opinion. Daniel Ellsberg was vehemently opposed to continuing involvement in the war when we wrote \textit{Papers on the War} in 1972. Ellsberg’s own experiences visiting Vietnam, made him even more angry about the situation. In an attempt to generate opposition to the war, he asserts that “the killing we do is naked of any shred of legitimacy.”. According to Ellsberg, the conflict in Vietnam was an American war from the very start. He rejects the argument that our involvement was simply intervention in a Civil war and charges that the war is based on our own aggression. The violence that occurred in Vietnam, therefore, was held at the level of war because it was fueled with foreign money, military resources and manpower. Based on his interpretation of the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg views the Vietnam war as an attempt to determine for the Vietnamese “who should govern them, how they should live and which if them should die.”. Ellsberg argues that the war in Vietnam was not only a mistake but a “crime against peace”. \textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
Ellsberg referred to the "stalemate machine" throughout his book, which described a situation where American officials did not want to admit defeat. He voiced frustration over the lack of action to end the war, while so many in America opposed it. Ellsberg draws attention to specific actions that were taken by Americans to voice opposition to the war effort. Although, at the time of the book, there had been seven years of demonstrations, five years of resisting the draft, four years of general disillusionment with foreign policy decisions, and the unseating of an incumbent president, not much had changed. Ellsberg also points out the twenty-five year period of Vietnamese resistance throughout the U.S. involvement.48

With so much disapproval for the war effort, Ellsberg is troubled by the fact that Nixon and other government officials continue to prolong the effort. He draws attentions to the startling fact that in four years under President Johnson more bombs have been dropped in Asia than in WWII and Korea combined. Nixon continued with this trend and dropped even more bombs than the Johnson had done. As the war effort remained costly and tragic, Ellsberg argues that Nixon attempted to reduce the reports of U.S. casualties, U.S. ground presence, war costs and draft calls. This was, in Ellsberg’s view, part of a deliberate effort to take American attention away from the war so that it could remain a stalemate.49

As the war went on into the 1970s, the antiwar movement continued to grow. As stated earlier, the release of the Pentagon papers by Daniel Ellsberg gave people new reason to question the government. This new information, along with the

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49 Ibid, 36,39.
addition of protesters from Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) strengthened the Antiwar movement. Mitchell Hall also points out that advertising made a deliberate effort to oppose the war in ads and television commercials. By the early 1970s, we see groups from various different backgrounds in America agreeing on the fact that the war in Vietnam needed to end.  

The issue of the role that the media played in swaying public opinion to end the war has also been discussed among historians. Some like Martin F. Hertz and Harry Summers have argued that the media played a powerful role in American sentiments during the war. Summers points out a speech made by general Westmoreland where he admits the power of the press. Westmoreland claimed that when Walter Cronkite announced on television in 1968 that he thought the war might not be winnable, it destroyed American public support for the war. Westmoreland and other generals criticized some journalists that covered the war saying they were too young and did not have the experience to cover such a complicated conflict.

William Hammond contends with Westmoreland in his article *The Press in Vietnam as agent of defeat: A critical examination*, explains that very experienced journalists like Jim Lucas, Homer Bigart, Jack Foisie, Keyes Beech and Denis Warner had covered many wars and had the capacity to understand complex conflicts. He also noted that the average age for those who reported in Vietnam was 35.9 years.

50 Ibid, 16  
Hammond argues that American public opinion was shaped by complex analysis and not a simplified horror at the images on TV. Aspects like confidence in government, political views and opinions on communism were more likely to affect American people than television coverage. Hammond further points out that of the people who had television in 1968, only 25.3 million watched the news on any given evening.\textsuperscript{54} Interestingly, Hammond also mentions that most camera crews in Vietnam carried heavy equipment that could not actually be used in battle. This limited that number of gory images of combat action shown on television. The military further limited the tragic images of Vietnam by making an agreement with television networks to refrain from showing recognizable pictures of the American dead. This was meant to prevent families from seeing images of loved ones. With restrictions on what could be shown, the images presented of the war were limited.\textsuperscript{55}

The Tet Offensive in February 1968 caused press coverage to be more negative, but Hammond explains that a negative view of the war had already started among many Americans. Feelings of uncertainty over the war in Vietnam were more closely related to the number of casualties, according to Hammond. He pointed out that a similar correlation was present during the Korean war, when television was not truly a factor. Hammond contends that people formed opinions on American policy in Vietnam without being directly impacted by television.


Daniel Hallin attempted to explain that the coverage of the media was based, to a great extent on the views of political officials and the American people. Hallin and Hammond both seem to concur in the opinion that news coverage of the Vietnam War was not a cause of opposition to the war effort, but a reflection of opposition that already existed in America. He argues that what appeared on the news were not necessarily the views of television producers and reporters, but instead the expression of American opinions that had already been formed. Hallin’s research concludes that 49% of the media changed because the views of public officials changed. An additional 35% of the change was a result of antiwar activists, soldiers that experienced Vietnam first hand and the American public. This left only 16% of the influence to present a cynical view of the war on the reporters themselves.\(^5\)

Various factors helped to get American troops out of Vietnam in 1975. Events like the Tet Offensive and invasion of Cambodia played a major role in the amount of trust placed in the American government. American people spoke up and engaged in protests. The media eventually expressed anti-war opinions and advertising. As more and more people openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the situation in Vietnam, their voices became heard.

The years during and after the Vietnam War have contained much discussion as to what brought us into the war and what caused us to end our intervention. Although some have looked at the perspective of the Vietnamese, it seems that many have focused on the relationship between the American government, the American

media and the American public. The way in which the government and media presented information to the American public was an important element of understanding how the war progressed. In the beginning, the government controlled much of the information presented about the war. Based on what government officials presented to the American public, many found the war necessary as part of the containment policy. As events unfolded, however, many in the public became more uneasy and frustrated with involvement in the south Asian nation. The North Vietnamese turned out to be more powerful as an enemy than many people anticipated. The war dragged on as more and more people questioned government policies. Protests occurred after news of events like the Tet Offensive and the invasion of Cambodia by various groups. Dissatisfaction with the war eventually became so wide-spread that it became acceptable to criticize efforts. With time, decisions that had made sense at one time were under careful scrutiny. The American public and the media eventually pushed the government into making the decision to end out involvement in 1975.

Instead of pointing blame, it is important that we look at the lessons that we can learn from these events so that we can better handle events in the future. Many have pointed out the fact that American reasons to become involved in the war were simplified with catch phrases relating to the Cold War. It seems that American involvement in the war occurred without enough research into the situation. Decisions seemed to be based more on fear, than on careful political reasoning. The fear of communism, fear of attacks in America, and fear of political criticism pushed America into making the risky decision to become involved in the Vietnam War. It
appears as though a great amount of time and care needs to be taken to consider other options, before troops are committed in conflict. The research of historians like Herring, Hallins, Kolko, Halberstam and others provide us with an essential background of information on the events of Vietnam, but this is not where analysis of the war should end.

**Part II: Varying Perspectives of Those Who Were There**

Although many would like to attempt to forget the complicated nature of the Vietnam War, it is important that the discussion of the war continues. If people met together to discuss the Vietnam War in the 1960s or 70s, people would express passionate opinions about war policy. They might speak of friends of family members who were sent to fight and the stories that they had heard. Some might react to television reports or political speeches that they had seen. Discussion of Vietnam would reveal many perspectives about politics, morality, and loss. If students met together to discuss the Vietnam war in a high school classroom in 2008, they may identify the leaders, make connections to the Cold War, restate a few events and possibly locate Vietnam on a map. The passion and debate of such a complicated war is very difficult to convey to students. In order to understand war, we must be exposed to the perspectives of those who lived through the conflict. Using oral histories and letters from those who experienced the war, first hand, we can encourage students to think critically about the events of the Vietnam War era.

In his book, *Everything We Had*, Al Santoli points out that “It must always be remembered that the Vietnam War was a human ordeal and not an abstract heroic adventure as might be understood by Hollywood or a political speechwriter” He
continued, "If we as individuals and as a nation learned something of human value for having been in Southeast Asia, their sacrifice, we maintain, was not futile." It is essential that students learn about the history of Vietnam in order attain an understanding of what war is like, but also to honor those who served.

The number of people who lost their lives in Vietnam is staggering. With the addition of three names added in 2007 the total is now 58,256 names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall. Most who visit Washington, D.C. make a point to go to the wall. The wall can make for a very moving experience, however a visit to the wall may be lost on some of our younger generations. Students may soon see the wall as simply a list of names, if we do not provide them with adequate background knowledge about the men that are honored. Christian Appy points out that "superficial acknowledgements of the sacrifices and services of Veterans is offered as a sufficient response to our longest and most divisive war. Abstracted from history, veterans cannot be remembered or even honored; they can only be exploited." Simplifying the sacrifices of Vietnam Veterans as another group of heroes who gave their lives for our countries does not show appreciation the specific situations that faced soldiers in the Vietnam era.

One way to honor those who lost their lives in Vietnam is to learn from the veterans that are still around us today. Veterans who survived Vietnam have been shown in different ways since the Vietnam era. Some stereotypes have existed about Vietnam veterans in our society today. Although it may be simple to group veterans

58 http://www.thewall-usa.com/information.asp
in one category and make generalizations about them, we must remember that
Vietnam was a war fought by young men from across the country. The ongoing
conflict in Vietnam also lasted for over nineteen years. The actual time of service in
the war makes each experience even more distinct. There is no one story of the
Vietnam War. Men from different backgrounds found themselves in various different
situations. Men made difficult decisions, felt a range of emotions, and saw terrifying
images as they battled in Southeast Asia. One veteran, who Christian Appy
interviewed, commented that many did not seem to care about his experiences. "I
think it's a lot easier for Americans to feel bad about the guys that died than it is for
them to think about those of us who are still around. Those guys who died, their
stories died with them....I think a lot of people just want to bury the war." 60 No
matter what Americans feel about the policies of Vietnam, we cannot ignore the men
who fought there. Listening to the words of those who fought in Vietnam can serve to
remind us that war involves individual human beings.

Some instructors have questioned the effectiveness of oral histories and
interviews in the study of Vietnam. When using oral histories we must keep in mind
that those who reveal their experiences with Vietnam are in control of what they
chose to tell and not tell. Renate W. Prescott explains that interviews with Vietnam
Veterans can provide students with "unreliable" sources. He asserts that since each

59 Appy, 6.
60 Appy, Rap group notes 17 August 1984, 9.
person has a distinct memory of an event, the interpretations of veterans can be limited.\textsuperscript{61}

Patrick Hagopian emphasizes that Veterans may tend to adjust their stories to meet societal expectations. He explains that the stories of some veterans may be shaped by what the veterans believe their audience wishes to hear.\textsuperscript{62} Stories, like the ones Al Santoli provided in his book \textit{Everything We Had}, were not exactly what veterans had said about their war experiences. Hagopian reveals that Al Santoli broke down the stories before they were published.\textsuperscript{63} "Every oral history interview takes place in a context and against a background of mutual expectations on the part of the interviewers and the interviewee."\textsuperscript{64} Hagopian asserts that people who interview veterans might ask the same types of questions and veterans might be prepared with responses based on what they think the interviewer expects to hear.

While the points made by Prescott and Hagopian are true in the case of Vietnam Veterans, it is also true of any story that is told. Oral histories of Vietnam Veterans can be just as accurate as political speeches. When a political official is interviewed, similar expectations occur between the interviewer and interviewee, yet we find that information useful. Famous speeches are used consistently in classrooms to convey the message of a speaker. These sources are not without bias, yet they are effective.

\textsuperscript{61} Renate W. Prescott, "The Vietnam War and the Teaching and Writing of Oral History: The Reliability of the Narrator" \textit{The Oral History Review}, Vol. 26 No. 2 (Summer-Autumn, 1999) 54.


\textsuperscript{63} Hagopian, 597.

\textsuperscript{64} Hagopian, 600.
Using a combination of several different sources can provide an accurate image of the men who fought in Vietnam. Various interviews with veterans have led authors to opposing viewpoints about the Vietnam War. Some interpretations have characterized Vietnam Veterans as victims, while others have challenged that image. Sources used can not only give students a fuller picture of war, they can encourage students to use their critical thinking skills to analyze the background of the source. Students must be aware of the fact that different people can have various different experiences with the same event. Hagopian encouraged his students to think critically. “Listening critically thus meant, not devolving what was said or skeptically distancing oneself from the narrator, but being more fully attentive to his words.” By encouraging our students to look at perspectives from Vietnam critically, we may even give Vietnam veterans more credit.

When Mark Baker began his book, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women who fought there*, he found that using personal recommendations from those around them who he trusted, helped him to find veterans with accurate accounts of the war. Baker recalled being told that “The bullshit antennae are always out” by one of the veterans who helped advise him on who to talk to. He relied on those who other veterans had recommended to provide him insights into the experience of war. In doing this, he found that “[the veterans] seemed to feel obligated to relate their stories clearly and accurately for the sake of dead friends,

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65 Hagopian, 595.
66 Hagopian, 601.
dying ideals and a personal sense of worth and honesty." Baker spoke with people who wanted their story to be heard accurately. It is reasonable to assume that many Veterans would share that intention.

Although students can look through accounts chosen by an instructor, connections to the war can also be found within some students’ families. It stands to reason that some would chose not to speak about their role in the Vietnam War. Although students should never be encouraged to press for more information than family members are willing to provide, they may find that some are willing to share. Some may even be honored that someone is willing to listen to their story. While all students may not benefit equally from relatives stories, students could gain a lot simply from seeing their relative in a new light. All veterans who experienced Vietnam should be commended for the strength to survive such a situation. Students can help to provide them with respect by listening to their story.

Prescott cites an example of oral history research developed by one of his students who has an older brother who fought in Vietnam. As his student, Marianne, discussed the events of Vietnam with her brother and her family, the research became intensely personal. She found that her family simply wanted her to stop bringing up Vietnam and tensions developed. Marianne wanted to understand why her brother had acted differently when he returned from fighting in Vietnam. Although her research led to family issues, she was able to see her older brother’s perspective as a war veteran. Prescott points out that “she has validated her brother’s experience both in

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Vietnam and at home."  \(^{68}\) This validation can be very valuable if students are able to seek out veterans in their own families.

**Reasons For Fighting**

Many reasons can be given for why people fought in Vietnam. Although some men volunteered for military service most were drafted. Even those who went to Vietnam were obligated to fight, they held different views on why America was involved in Vietnam. This view was impacted by their backgrounds, personal opinions, time of service and various other factors. Many men felt obligated to serve their countries and protect the citizens living at home from Communism. They carried out family traditions of military service, proved their manhood, perhaps simply sought adventure. As the war went on, some men started to question the reasons for fighting. News of anti-war protests gave soldiers more and more to think about and they all had to come to their own conclusions about what they had become involved in.

One reason offered for why certain groups tended to fight has to do with social class. Some have contended that a disproportionate number of working class men received draft notices. Appy estimates that approximately 80% of those who fought in Vietnam came from working class and poor backgrounds. \(^{69}\) Appy’s research demonstrates a lack of options for working class men during the Vietnam War era.

Research in the working class area of Dorchester, Massachusetts revealed that Dorchester lost 42 men in Vietnam, while more affluent towns like Milton, Lexington

\(^{68}\) Prescott, 63.

and Wellesley lost 11 men in the same period. A study conducted in Illinois shows a similar trend as men whose family median income remained under $5,000 were four times more likely to die in Vietnam than those whose incomes exceeded $15,000.

Students who study the Vietnam War should be shown the complexities of the decisions that were made by individual soldiers. Often, curriculum focuses on the decisions made by public officials without discussing the individual choices that thousands of young men had to endure. Young men could deflect military service by going to college and earning a C average, or they could flee to Canada and have their families disown them. If drafted, a young man could take his chances or refuse the draft and face a long prison term. If a man chose to join the National Guard or Reserves, they may not face the dangers of the war. On the other hand, they could enlist and chose the branch or service where they would serve.

Middle class boys who volunteered felt similar pressure to join the service. One volunteer explained, “It was either go to college, a job, or the military. College was out of the question. We couldn’t afford it. And I couldn’t get a good job. So I enlisted.” A lack of resources and job opportunities led many young men in the direction of military service. Appy explained that, even as the economy improved, draft-age working class men had difficulty finding suitable employment. Many employers did not offer well-paid jobs to draft-age young men. Higher paid jobs required long periods of training, and employers did not want to invest time and

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70 Appy, 12.
71 Ibid.
73 Appy, 44.
training into workers that could be drafted.\textsuperscript{74} When the New York Times researched employment in Glens Falls, NY an eighteen year old Jerry Reynolds complained “You try to get a job and the first thing they ask you is if you fulfilled your military service.”\textsuperscript{75} Many young men like Jerry Reynolds, found their options limited and volunteered for military service in Vietnam.

For those who did not volunteer, the receipt of the draft notice in the mail was an experience that few of us could imagine. A letter arrived that said that they were obligated to risk their lives in a war on the other side of the world and there was little that they could do about it. As Mark Baker interviewed a veteran about the arrival of the notice we can begin to understand the complexity of the situation; “I wasn’t going to leave the country [for Canada], because the odds of coming back looked real slim…Spending two years in jail was as dumb as going to war, even less productive. I wasn’t going to shoot off a toe. I had friends who were starving themselves to be underweight for their physicals.”\textsuperscript{76} A Vietnam Veteran discussion group in 1982, revealed that one draftee felt that he had few options when he received his draft notice. “It was either go to Canada, go to prison, or go to the army. What choice did I have?”\textsuperscript{77} People would go to great lengths to get out of their service, yet many felt they had no option but to serve their country.

Letters written home from the war reveal that some felt that they had good reason to fight in Southeast Asia. Jack S. Swender from the U.S. Marines wrote that “…some people wonder why Americans are in Vietnam. The way I see the situation,\textsuperscript{74} Appy, 45.\textsuperscript{75} Ralph Blumenthal, “Glen Falls and the War” \textit{New York Times}, (July 1967) 4.\textsuperscript{76} Baker, 33.
I would rather fight to stop communism in South Vietnam than in Kincaid, Humbolt, Blue Mound, of Kansas City, and that is just about what it would end up being...the price for victory is high when life cannot be replaced, but I think it is for better to fight and die for freedom then to live under oppression and fear.”\(^78\) Here Jack Swender describes how his efforts are worthwhile because he needed to stop the spread of Communism. He took pride in the fact that his sacrifices would benefit his country. Swender would later be killed in action in combat.

A soldier in the U.S. Army named Herb Mock shows his sense of humor as he explains the actions of his fellow soldiers after battle. “We ended up fighting the rest of the night. We got three hundred and fifty or sixty of them. The next day you just found their bodies lying all over.” Mock notes the tendency of people to exaggerate their own contributions to the war when he explains, “General Westmoreland flew in. All the news outfits and everything. It was the most hilarious thing. As these son of a bitches came out there, the GIs started lying. The newsmen would walk up to just anybody and say ‘what did you do?’ ‘I single-handedly killed 300 thousand with my Bowie knife.’ And man, they’d write it up.”\(^79\) Herb Mock’s perspective shows that some soldiers did look for a way to gain fame while fighting in the war. Mock also provides his criticism of the news media and their tendency to report the inaccurate stories that they received.

As the war continued, some soldiers received the news that people protested the involvement in Vietnam in the United States. Stephen W. Pickett wrote to his

\(^77\) Appy, 44.
family from Vietnam before losing his life in action. “We were well informed here about the demonstrations by both sides. Even though I’m here, I still have an open mind—realizing, of course, that an immediate pullout or anything of the sort is out of the question. It would degrade the heroic deaths of those who never returned because it would mean going back on everything that we have done. There are many here who feel as I do, but we will continue to fight for the country in which we believe.”

Pickett assessed the situation in which he was involved and came to his own conclusions about the efforts of the United States in Vietnam.

While some thought about the interests and policies of the United States in Vietnam, other noted the delicate culture of the Vietnamese people. Darrell R. Lulling described this on August 26th, 1969 in a letter to his wife Jane “A very saddening thing is that most GIs do not understand the people and try to exploit them or reject them as lesser beings. Their culture is so very different, simple, yet they are beautiful people. The U.S. has come here to make Vietnam a modern western model of a country. In certain ways it is destroying the old way of life which I think is really a crime.” Darrell’s words provide a unique perspective. Students might be able to critically analyze this quote to think about what types of contact this soldier might have had with the Vietnamese. His perspective of the war may be very different to that of other soldiers.

79 Santoli, 85.
When Steven Plue wrote home, he provided a bitter perspective about his personal involvement in the war. In a letter that was written in 1970, Steven “Damn this war and everything that’s put us here. If I’m to die here, I only wish it were for something I believed in.” His words reveal a deep frustration with the fact that he was in danger of being killed for what, in his mind, was no good reason. The complication of the situation was echoed by Steve McKenna as he described the image of a fellow soldier dying “As I cradled his head, blood was everywhere, gushing from his chest wound and out his back. As he lay dying, he looked up at me with his big saucer like eyes…” It was at a time both personally and nationally people began to doubt the validity of the Vietnam conflict. So when someone was killed or wounded, it hurt because it all seemed such a colossal waste of time.” Quotes like these can help readers to envision the amount of uneasiness and anger associated with the situation of Vietnam.

When a stranger on an airplane purchased a drink for Steve Mckenna as he retuned home from his tour in Vietnam, he described his own interpretation of how Americans viewed the soldiers. He explains that the man who bought his drink “assumed that we were just doing our duty for mother and country. Or perhaps he thought that we were merely pawns on the chessboard, with no accounting for our actions. It didn’t matter in either case. We were much more than just that. We had used the dark side, pretending and convincing ourselves that everything we had done

82 Baker, v.
83 McKenna, 53.
was justified and right. Clearly many soldiers held varying views of why they had been sent to fight in Vietnam.

Men like Matthew Brennan described his personal experience of war in his book, Brennan's War. Brennan's words provide a unique story of a man who felt the need for the action of war. His words reveal an interesting situation of a soldier who made decisions most of us could never imagine. Matthew Brennan did not take pride in his work in the rear and felt that he was missing out on the true experiences of war. He admits that he was not proud of the time that he had spent in the rear, explaining, “the bullets and mortars had come close more than a few times, but I never felt a part of it...” He later got his chance to join the C Troups blue platoon in the cavalry who were “the men whose lives I had envied.” One would wonder why someone would envy the more dangerous jobs on the front lines, but for Brennan, that was what war was all about.

After surviving his service in the jungles of Vietnam, Brennan returned to Indiana where he enrolled in Indiana State University. Brennan found the way in which civilians in Indiana treated returning veterans perplexing. “Veterans were a curiosity in Indiana in 1968. We were not yet ignored, not yet called dope fiends and sociopaths, but no one cared about what we had been through, except other Vietnam Veterans.” After going through grueling battle and exhaustion in the jungles of Vietnam, Brennan discovered that few people had respect for what he had done, or even cared for that matter. He also could no understand why many on campus

84 Steve McKenna, AK-47: Crow Feed on a Razor Wire, 39.
86 Ibid.
questioned what brought the United States into the war in Indochina. At one point, an ISU history professor took the time to explain to him the immorality of the war in Vietnam. Brennan recalled that, “I had never questioned the reasons for war. I was an idealist who felt that Vietnam required our sacrifices because it was a just cause…” Brennan did not find the environment at ISU suitable for him anymore. “I missed the sharing, the genuine comradeship and the simple life and death choices of Vietnam.” It seems odd that someone would prefer the dangers of Vietnam to college life however; Brennan decided that he did not want to complete his time at ISU.

A man, who had served bravely in Vietnam in 1965, turned in the paperwork to drop his enrollment in college and walked two blocks to the recruiting station in town. It was there that he told the recruiter he would re-enlist if he could go straight to the action of the 1sr Air Cavalry. Arrangements were then made for Brennan to be sent back to the blood and danger of Vietnam, and Brennan described the recruiter confiding in him that “he was in the recruiting service to avoid being sent back to Vietnam. He could stay in America as long as he met his monthly quota of volunteers.” While some would do anything to stay out of Vietnam, Matthew Brennan was on his way back in 1969.

As men waited with him just before they were sent out, Brennan found it interesting that soldiers had to be accounted for every thirty minutes to prevent anyone from deserting. The irony struck him that a few years before in 1965,

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87 Brennan, 179.
88 Brennan, 179.
89 Ibid.
“soldiers had actually bribed replacement center personnel to be called for Vietnam more quickly.” A few years made a large difference in who was heading out to war and what experiences they would find there.

Complicated and Exhausting Experiences

At times war is glorified in video games for our current generation. Even when wars are taught in schools, we tend to emphasize victories in key battles and highlight important heroes. A more careful examination of war provides us with a series of very human experiences. Those involved in war experience anger, frustration, boredom, fear, confusion and a myriad of other emotions. Units that fought in Vietnam often suffered from a lack of interpreters, making connections with the Vietnamese around them even more difficult. Soldiers fought in a place that was completely unfamiliar around people who they did not understand. By examining the words of those who lived through battle of Vietnam we can stray from over-simplified heroic tales and see a fuller image of what human being actually lived through. Those who fought in Vietnam had to make difficult decisions in the face of terror and exhaustion.

Observers of the soldiers in Vietnam could not help but appreciate the hardships that they faced. Two men named Don Luce and John Sommer volunteered with the International Voluntary Services (IVS) to increase sweet potato production and assist in opening schools in Vietnam until 1967. These men documented what

90 Ibid.
91 Brennan, 181.
92 Luce and Sommer, 195.
they had seen in a book titled *Vietnam-The Unheard Voices*. They witnessed the frustration of soldiers' firsthand and felt empathy for the complex situation that the men encountered.

The soldier marches all day through the jungle, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. He is hot, sweaty, homesick and irritable. Suddenly there is a tunnel before him and he hears voices inside. What can he do? What would you do? You could shoot into the tunnel, and say 'come out with your hands over your head' but they wouldn’t understand you. If they were civilians, they would crowd deeper into the tunnel. If they were Vietcong soldiers, they would toss a grenade out. You could walk away, but you might get shot in the back...or you could toss a grenade into the tunnel. If they were Vietcong, all right. But if you found that you had killed two women and 3 children, what then?\(^{93}\)

This description helps us to understand that the right thing to do it not a clear cut decision. Soldiers who fought had to decide what was best for their country, their fellow soldiers and themselves. Reading this passage makes one question, what might I have done in this situation? The soldiers who fought in Vietnam were human beings just like we are and many needed to do what they could simply to survive.

The complicated nature of war is also evident when examining the uneasiness that soldiers faced when deciding who to trust. It is human to feel resentment and anger when trust is broken. The frustration of not knowing if the people you are working with and trying to help are going to try to kill you when given a chance is difficult to imagine. Douglass Anderson, who served in the US Marines, recalled, "When, for example, we would patrol an area of villages for a number of weeks and continue to lose men to booby traps, and the people in the villages who pretended not to know anything about these booby traps, walked the same trails that we did day

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\(^{93}\) Luce and Sommer, 201.
after day without stepping on them, it became obvious that these people were well-informed by the VC where the booby traps were." As trust between soldiers and the Vietnamese wavered, tensions rose.

Another soldier confided in Luce and Sommer that; “You can’t tell who’s who. One old woman came everyday and sold oranges. We used to buy an orange from her whether we wanted one or not. One day she pulled a grenade out from under the oranges and tossed it into a tent. Some of my buddies were killed and we killed her. A few days later we saw a kid down by the stream. We thought he had a gun and we shot him. But all he had was a fish pole. But what can you do? They all look alike.” A decision made in Vietnam was much more significant than most decisions we make on a daily basis. The decision to shoot a young boy with a pole may be one that would haunt someone for a lifetime.

In his book, *We Were Soldiers and Young*, Harold Moore recalled the bravery and perseverance of those who battled in the Ia Drang Valley, one of the first major battles of the Vietnam War. The battle would be declared “one of the war’s rare decisive battles” by historian Dave Richard Palmer. Many saw it as a sign that the United State was on the right track with the war effort. Moore’s careful description of the background and experiences of those who fought in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 provides insight into the mindset of soldier that served toward the beginning of the Vietnam War. “We were children of the 1950s and we went where we were sent because we loved our country. We were draftees, most of us, but we were proud of

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94 Al Santoli, 69.
95 Luce, and Sommer. *Vietnam-The Unheard Voices*. Ithaca: Cornell
the opportunity to serve that country just as our fathers had served in WWII and our older brothers in Korea." It was no movie. When it was over the dead did not get up and dust themselves off and walk away. The wounded did not wash away the red and go on with life, unhurt. Those who were, miraculously, unscratched were by no means untouched. Not one of us left Vietnam the same young man he was when he arrived." Here Moore shows the difference between the soldiers who fought toward earlier in the war as compared to those who fought later.

Thomas Bird was a rifleman who served from 1965-66. He describes men who became very close when fighting during his tour. "It wasn’t like later on in the war, when there was a constant turnover of individuals. We were friends of each others families, dined together, entertained together, argued together. The casualties taken in the war really got to us and uprooted us. That also incited fighting in a way that when someone was hit or killed, it made the others that much angrier, wanting revenge. They would just walk that much further into ambushes and traps." The closeness that men who fought with Bird illustrates a different type of war from the one experienced by men in later years. The deaths that Bird observed, no doubt affected him and his fellow soldiers to a degree that is difficult to imagine.

The amount of exhaustion and lack of comforts that men experienced in Vietnam adds to the full picture of the war. While men in the rear and at base camps did enjoy some comforts of home, men on the front lines suffered greatly on a daily

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University Press, 1969) 188.
97 Moore, xvi.
98 Santoli, 42.
basis. George L Godfrey taught high school in Wisconsin until he was drafted into the war in 1969. His experiences were nothing like he trained for when he studied to be a teacher. The following description of the conditions while “Humping in the Boonies” came from a letter that Godfrey wrote to his parents. “During the real heat of the day, the feeling can’t be described with one word. Sweat runs like I’ve never seen it before. The humidity clings like smoke and the air is heavy and hard to breathe. The entire body is sore from hours under the weight of the pack...Tempers grow short and the body is so weak it trembles under strain and the rest periods offer little relief.”

The very human emotions that Godfrey describes are easily understood when we consider what those days must have been like.

The physical exertion that men on the front lines endured is difficult to envision. One soldier described his daily routine of “…marching at 6 AM and it was now about 3 PM. We had been walking the whole time except for a 10 minute break to eat some C-rations. I was carrying three days worth of Cs—that’s about nine cans a say. We carried them in black socks strapped off our packs. I was also carrying C4 explosives, my M-16, about 16 clips of bullets and a couple of grenades, about forty pounds all together. Walking nine straight hours through mostly woods.”

Another soldier named Clinton Poley who had been a farm hand in Iowa before the war describes the pain coupled with the deaths around him “…I got hit in the chest and I hit the ground pretty hard. I got up and go shot in the hip, and went down again. Comer and I lost contact in the long grass. We had already lost our ammo bearer

100 Santoli, 37.
(PFC Charles H. Collier from mount Pleasant, Texas) who had been killed the day before. He was only eighteen and had been in Vietnam just few days.” 101 Men who watched those die around them could not take a few days to deal with the grief of death. The had to keep fighting each day knowing that each death could easily have been their own. Very few people are ever put into such a situation of anguish in their lifetime. The fact that men did not lose their minds and beg to go home is extremely notable.

Jack Hill from the U.S. Marines gives another description of the powerful feeling that he felt and what those frustrations led to when he explains “Our emotions were very low because we’d lost a lot of friends. The death rate was ridiculous for such an operation. So when we went through those hutches, we gave it to them, and whoever was in a hole was going to get it. And whatever was moving was going to move no more-especially after three days of blood and guts in the mud.” 102 Feelings like this are evident whenever warfare exists and using the sources from soldiers themselves helps the convey these emotions.

The frustrations do not end with those who fought. A perspective that takes analysis a step further involves a quotation taken from someone who realized the complicated nature of protesting the Vietnam War. Tobias Wolff expressed this frustration in Time Magazine as he said “If you protested the war, you couldn’t help worrying about the bafflement and pain you were causing those in danger, and their families. How did you make peace with the fact that, however unintentionally, you

101 Moore, 159.
were encouraging a hard, often murderous enemy who was doing his best to kill the boys you’d grown up with?" 103 People all across the United States had direct connections to the war in Vietnam. For many it was intensely personal. Those who protested felt that they did what was right however, even some like Wolff had to struggle with how to handle the situation.

Another notable lesson that we can learn from looking at sources from the men who fought in Vietnam is the fact that they lost out on the proud war stories that their fathers from WWII could tell. Even though many men played heroic roles and accomplished things that few other people could ever handle if given their position, they could not go home and proudly describe their battles. Some felt as though they put forth a great amount of effort and few would ever hear their stories. John Muir was a rifleman from the 2nd battalion of the 1st Marine Corps. He explained the tedious battle that he fought in Vietnam and frustration that occurred after the battle.

"After battling for over a month", John Muier said “It was a major battle...we did a fine job there. If it had happened in World War II, they still would be telling stories about it. But it happened in Vietnam, so nobody knows about it. They don’t even tell recruits about it today. Marines don’t talk about Vietnam. We lost. They never talk about losing. So it’s just wiped out, all of that’s off the slate, it doesn’t count. It makes you a little bitter." 104 Through use of oral and written histories from those who fought in Vietnam, perhaps more people can be recognized for their specific accomplishments.

**View of Medics and Nurses in Vietnam**

Medics and nurses went to Vietnam to help their fellow soldiers who had been injured. Their job was distinct from others in the army in many ways and their stories provide a unique glimpse into the experiences of war. As they tried to assist the men around them, they would be left with unimaginable images of gore and death. Their role in the war provides us with yet another perspective to consider.

One medic recalled his own issues as he attempted to deal with the deaths of soldiers around him. Medics had to somehow remove themselves from personally being affected by death. It seems as though that would be impossible in the situation that he describes.. “I remember the first guy I treated. A young guy, about 18 or 19. He had stepped on a Bouncing Betty, and it literally blew him apart. I remember running up and him saying ‘Doc, Doc, I’m going to live ain’t I?’ and me saying ‘sure babe,’ and then he died. I held his hand, and he died. I remember crying. I cried at the next one and cried at the next one. But it got to a point where I stopped crying, because I thought I’d either kill myself or go crazy if I felt for these guys.”

This medic cried as he dealt with the death of a man right in front of him. The men who experienced Vietnam were not G.I. Joe action figures, they were human beings in an unimaginable situation.

Memories of the Vietnam War also still haunt the more than 7,500 women who served. Most of the women served as nurses and their accounts of the events...

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106 Denenberg, 40.
of the war provide yet another description of trauma. Margaret Flatt published a poem about wondering where the soldiers that she treated ended up during the war.

*Where are they now?*

For weeks they hobbled and wheeled around me  
Healing from the wounds of war  
We fed, bathed, shaved, medicated,  
Stiched and unstiched their bodies  
We listened and counseled as pain poured from their souls  
If deemed healed in 30 days  
Back to battle they went,  
To kill or be killed  
To live whole or maimed  
There is pain in not knowing what happened to them  
There is relief in not knowing what happened to them

Flatt’s words emphasize the uncertainty that nurses faced as they wondered whether those they treated ended up making it out of Vietnam.

The haunting reminders of the war are more carefully depicted in a poem by an Army nurse named Dusty who published, *I went to Vietnam to heal*, in 1985.

*I Went to Vietnam to Heal*

I went to Vietnam to heal  
And came back home silently wounded.  
I went to Vietnam to heal  
And still awaken from nightmares  
About those we couldn’t save.  
I went to Vietnam to heal and came home  
To grieve for those we sent home blind, paralyzed, limbless, mindless.  
I went to Vietnam to heal and  
Discovered I am not God...

But I am not God, and so I go on

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Seeing the wounded when I hear a
Chopper, washing your blood from my hands,
Hearing your screams in my sleep, scrubbing
The smell of your burned bodies from my clothes,
Feeling your pain, which never eases
Fighting a war that never ends.\textsuperscript{108}

**Perspective From "The Rear"**

Many of the men who served in Vietnam served in the “rear”. These men provided military services that varied greatly from those who waded through rice paddies and into villages. Soldiers in the rear fixed and maintained equipment, they drove trucks and cooked food, others served as typists for officers.\textsuperscript{109} These men dealt with separation from their loved ones, deaths of those around them, and the dangers of violence reaching the base, however their living conditions often differed from the “grunts” on the front lines. Bruce E. Rodland, a native of Buffalo, New York wrote about his fortunate circumstances as a member of the rear in Vietnam in a letter home to his parents and sister. Rodland explained how he was “no longer splashing around in the rice paddies of climbing mountains! I have a ‘rear’ job…” he continued “I have my own room, with a real bed, mattress, sheets, blankets, pillow, electricity, curtain, a Vietnamese woman to wash all my clothes and iron them, and she cleans the room, polishes my boots and makes my bed.”\textsuperscript{110} Although fighting in the same war, those on the front lines in Vietnam could recall few of the luxuries that Rodland describes.


\textsuperscript{109} Stevens, 42.

\textsuperscript{110} Stevens, 44.
The description that Bruce Rodland provided in his letter, provides further insight to the differences in the Vietnam experience between guys in the front line and those in the rear. Many in the rear did do monotonous jobs with long hours and stress, however Rodland seemed extremely fortunate as he described “I go to work at 5pm and work until 1am. It’s a real good shift, as I can sleep as late as I want, goof off the rest of the day til time to work.” Others like Gary Tenpas worked as clerks in the rear. Tenpas had more regular hours and responsibilities. He described working from 6:30 in the morning to 6:30 at night completing paperwork for the company.

Gilbert L. Docken “I explained to you before what the situation is like here. It doesn’t seem like a war at all, just a big work camp. When you see the Medical Evacuation choppers unloading men they have carried in from the field dead and wounded you are reminded of the seriousness of it.”

As some felt relieved over their less dangerous job in the rear, others felt guilt that they had such comforts, while their fellow soldiers suffered so greatly. Charles E. Queen served as a weather service specialist in the Army from 1965-1966. A letter home to his wife conveyed the respect for those who fought and suffered on the front lines. “Dear, any soldier you see who is wearing the CIB and he has been to Vietnam, he deserves to have you take your hat off to him. The CIB is the Combat Infantry Badge. Whoever he is, he has earned it.”

Many men who fought in Vietnam had different jobs and they all had their own views about their position and the positions of others in the war.

111 Stevens, 44.
112 Stevens, 46.
113 Stevens, 45.
Families of Those Who Sacrificed Their Lives

The perspective of the families at home helps to provide a more complete picture of the experience of war. The average age for a G.I. in Vietnam was 19 years old.\textsuperscript{115} For the most part, mothers and fathers waited anxiously to hear from their young sons. Brothers and sisters wondered about their siblings who had been sent off to war. In some cases wives and small children were left behind to hope and pray that their loved ones would be ok.

General Harold Moore describes his correspondence with his wife in his book about his war experiences. Moore recalls hearing from his wife who described reading the paper after sending their children off to school. “The first paragraph of the story...said the battle was the bloodiest in Vietnam history. Then, in the next paragraph, he quoted my husband. I had to take a deep breath before I read the rest.”\textsuperscript{116} Few in the current generation can imagine having such a close connection with a war. Harold Moore’s wife read about the actions of her own husband fighting a war in a newspaper and then attempted to go on with her day to day life.

Early on in the war, family members became notified of the death of their loved ones when a yellow cab pulled up with a telegram. Bettey Jivens, the younger sister of Sgt. Jeremiah Jivens of Charlie Co. 1\textsuperscript{st} Battalion, 7\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry received word of her brother’s death at 4AM. “My mom collapsed completely as this stranger handed the telegram to us. How cold and inhuman, I thought.”\textsuperscript{117} The perspective of Betty Jivens is easy for many to understand. This is yet another aspect of the Vietnam

\textsuperscript{114} Stevens, 52.
\textsuperscript{115} Stevens, vi.
\textsuperscript{116} Moore, 201.
war to consider. A death on the battlefield can have huge implications for huge numbers of people. The people at home felt emotions of pain, bitterness, confusion, and uncertainty as the war continued in Vietnam.

Harold Moore recalled his wife Julie talking about those days as a time of fear. She recalled “A time when the mere sights of a yellow cab cruising through the neighborhood struck panic in hearts of wives and children of soldiers serving in Vietnam.” Julie Moore tried to comfort those whose lives had been destroyed. She attended almost all of the funerals of those killed in her husband’s battalion. Feelings of tension could even be expected among the wives of those who served in Vietnam. Julie Moore explains that “I was so fearful when I began calling on the widows that I would be very unwelcome because it was my husband who ordered their husbands into battle.” Frustration and the tension of the war experience can carry people in many different directions. However, the families of those who served under Harold Moore did not resent Julie. Julie was relieved when “They were so happy to see me and they were so proud of their husbands.” Women had to take comfort in the fact that their husbands died honorably while serving their country. Although many might have had the same fear and frustration over the war as their husbands did at later times.

Others did encounter feeling of hate when husbands died in Vietnam. When the wife of one of the battalion sergeant majors visited another wife she found “There was immense grief and bitterness. So immense, that one widow was bitter that her

117 Moore, 323.
118 Moore, 323.
119 Moore, 324.
husband had been killed and mine only wounded.”\(^{120}\) One can only imagine what goes through the mind of someone who has experienced such a loss.

The story of the impact that a soldier’s death has on his family is an integral part of the story of war. When news of Lt. John Geoghegan’s death reached his family, his wife Barbara was writing her 93\(^{rd}\) letter to her husband about their baby daughter Camille. The morning after Barbara got news of her husband’s death, she received the last letter that Lt. Geoghegan sent to her. It read “I had a chance to go on R and R, but my men are going into action. I cannot and will not leave now.”\(^{121}\) Her husband’s dedication to his unit led him to death in Vietnam.

One can barely attempt to imagine the pain and confusion Barbara faced as she tried to deal with the grief of her husband’s death. She recalled the memory of a recent letter in which Jack had written, “How about giving Cammie a little brother when I get back?” As she thought about that letter, she realized that there would be no more children. “I picked up my sleeping baby and hugged her hard, still not believing that an end had come to everything we had hoped and dreamed and planned.”\(^{122}\) Barbara’s life was shattered, yet she still had strength to carry on and build a life for her and her baby daughter. The strength of those who carried on after the news of their loved ones death is important to our knowledge of war. When war heroes are discussed, great consideration should be given to those who dealt with life after war deaths. Barbara Geoghegan remembered receiving boxes in the mail months after her husband’s death. She got back the chocolate chip cookies, and the camera that she

\(^{120}\) Moore, 324.
\(^{121}\) Moore, 325.
\(^{122}\) Moore, 333.
had sent to her husband and he never had the chance to enjoy. When his personal items were sent back, she found “a picture of the ‘little house’ in Connecticut to which he longed to return.” and a letter from his mother inside his wallet.\(^{123}\)

The Goeghegan family posted a letter in the Pelham Sun to thank those who expressed sympathy over their son’s death. Their words reveal a great deal about the feeling of loss over their only son. “we gathered what courage we could find and went to the funeral home. As we looked down at his dear face, we felt that the world had fallen in on us. He had fought in an action that was not termed a war; he had died thousands of miles from his beloved country; his blood and the blood of his men, whom he had loved so much, had now become part of the soil of Vietnam.”\(^{124}\) The family then went on to thank those who had been so gracious in helping them deal with their son’s death.

**Connections to the Local Community: Orleans County and Vietnam**

In many cases, one can only truly understand the situation of war when it is directly connected to the lives of people close to you. While researching this topic, information came from places one might least expect it. I was led to a science teacher, named Steve Mckenna, who teaches the same students as I do everyday. Steve is an outstanding teacher, a well-respected community member and a survivor of the front lines in Vietnam. When I approached Steve about his service, he graciously offered to answer any questions that I might have. He then, handed me short stories that he had written. As I read through the pages of his stories, I was first struck by how clearly he

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\(^{123}\) Moore, 335.

\(^{124}\) The Pelham Sun, Jan 13, 1966.
could convey images of the war. Vietnam research took on a more significant
meaning, when I pictured Steve McKenna fighting to survive in the jungle. Steve is a
teacher who compassionately taught generations of seventh grade science students at
Albion Middle School. He was the one who was the first to offer money when the
guidance office e-mailed us that students’ were in need of coats for the winter. It
seemed inconceivable that this man, who teaches upstairs in my building, has
experienced the horrors of war in Vietnam.

Students who study Vietnam can benefit greatly from learning about members
of their community who served and those who made the ultimate sacrifice. New
York State contributed 413,760 Vietnam veterans, of which 30,780 were from the
Rochester area.125 There were 81 Vietnam era veterans from Holley.126 Albion
contributed 200 veterans during the Vietnam era.127 Small, rural towns lost more men,
proportionately, than other areas in America during the Vietnam War.128 The
Rochester area suffered the loss of 280 local men.129 Of those men, 17 deaths came
from Orleans County.

A memorial in front of the Albion Middle School shows the names of local
men who sacrificed their lives. One of those men is Richard Engle. Among the 195
seniors in the 1966 Albion yearbook there is a picture of the attractive young man
above the name Richard Engle. He played baseball, football, participated in service
club, and served as homeroom vice president. Richard planned on attending

126 U.S. Census Bureau. P065. 1990 Summary tape file 3 (STF3)
127 Ibid.
128 Appy, 14.
Rochester Institute of Technology for Electrical Engineering. He ended up serving his country in Vietnam. Richard was killed in action on February 2nd 1968 at the age of 19 years old. It is important that we acknowledge the very personal sacrifices that local people like Richard Engle and his family made in the Vietnam War.

Information about local people can be a powerful connection for students in Orleans County. In order to completely understand the impacts of war, we must look further than casualty statistics and policy decisions. If students can see that men who visited the same restaurants and played on the same sports teams as they did became directly involved in a conflict on the other side of the world, they may better understand the human experience of war.

The Vietnam War is not something explained in a textbook, it is still alive in the local Veterans and their families. Looking through the pages of the 1964 Holley High School yearbook, you can see the face of a young man named Howard Bowen. He was known as “Howie” to his friends. Howard graduated from Holley high with 46 other seniors. He had future plans to become a farmer after graduation, but he would not live out his plans. Howard Bowen would be killed in action while serving in Vietnam. He was among eight men from Holley High School who would be killed while fighting in the conflict.

The Rochester Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial Walk in Highland Park mentions that Holley, NY lost more men in Vietnam per capita, than any other small town in

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129 www.vietnammemorial.org
130 Albion High School Yearbook, 1966.
131 Holley High School Yearbook, 1964.
132 www.vietnammemorial.org

63
the United States. It is devastating to think of the effects the loss of eight men has on a small town like Holley, NY. With graduating classes of around forty students, the loss of so many men no doubt touched the lives of most Holley residents in some way or another. George Fisher graduated two years before Bowen in 1962 with a graduating class of 41 students. Gary Bullock, David Case, Paul S. Mandracchia, Ronald Paul Sisson, Gary Lee Stymus and John Powers Davis also attended Holley School and would go on to give their lives in Vietnam. It would be unfortunate, if years from now, students in Holley did not understand the implications of the Vietnam War on their town.

When the Vietnam War is presented from the perspective of those who lived it, we see a truly complicated situation. It is important that we see the people who fought in Vietnam as human beings with various different personalities, who held different jobs and were forced to make various different decisions. Most men and women headed off to Southeast Asia with confusion and uncertainty of what to expect when they arrived. Anyone who has not experienced the trauma of a war zone will most likely never know exactly what the situation was like as the planes landed on the other side of the world.

Each person involved in the Vietnam War has a very different story. By taking time to read just a small portion of their stories, we see war as an incredibly complex experience. Men on the front lines dealt with fear, exhaustion, hunger, pain and unforgettable gory images of men dying around them. Men who held jobs in the rear

133 www.vietnammemorial.org
still dealt with loneliness, fear, and at some points, guilt as they watched the death toll rise. Women who helped to nurse the sick, dealt with the helplessness of watching patients die around them. Parents, wives, and children of soldiers eagerly waited for letters and dreaded news that they had lost someone who they held dear. Letters and interviews in the in the words of those who lived it, make the War more relevant. Those who fought are shown as sons, fathers, husbands, poets, classmates, comedians, and friends. Men who observed what happened around them and came to their own conclusions about what they saw. They dealt with situations in various ways and the deep emotions associated with war affected them all differently.

If nothing else, we can begin to see soldiers as people. As we relate to the human beings who fought, we can begin to question what we may have done during that time. How might we have dealt with the arrival of the draft notice? Stepping off the plane in the heat of the jungle? Watching someone familiar die in front of us? Watching someone unfamiliar die in front of us? Not knowing who to trust or what would come next? The brothers, fathers, sons and even daughters and wives, of Vietnam dealt with distinct situations that few of us could ever imagine. Readings from their perspectives give us just a small glimpse of a brutal and complicated war. Perhaps this glimpse will help us see more than just names on a memorial or uniforms in a Veterans Day parade. We cannot afford to forget that war involves experiences and sacrifices of human beings. We cannot over simply any war, especially one as complicated as Vietnam.
Component III: Using Vietnam Perspectives in the Classroom

Implications for Teaching
Various lessons could be constructed to teach the concepts of war in a social studies classroom. One of the most useful ways of assisting students in understanding the complexity of war is to allow them to construct their own conclusions about the war experience. The use of sources from those who lived during Vietnam will help students to analyze quotations and construct new knowledge about events. They can then see that the war brought about many questions and concerns with very few clear answers. The discussion that follows students' analysis of different Vietnam perspectives is extremely important. This is effective when it begins in small groups and develops into a class-wide discussion.

The ability to analyze a document and answer specific questions regarding that document is one that some students struggle with. By including the Vietnam information in a uniform structure, students are prepared for the types of document assessments that they will encounter at all levels. This lesson includes a format that had been used on New York State Regents exams for many years. As students gain knowledge about how complicated the war experience can be, they are also practicing the important skill of document analysis.

Students should also always be encouraged to use current technology to gain information. The use of a national web page about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will show students that Vietnam connections are continuing today. Just as they can get on the internet and blog about events in their lives, people can make comments about those who lost their lives in Vietnam. This web page should also promote affective outcomes as students view the personal devastation that the Vietnam War caused. The connection with personal emotions and feelings is an effective way to assist students in appreciating the effects of the war.

The following lessons are meant to help students see a broad picture of the Vietnam War. If students are able to relate to individuals who played a role in war, they are likely to understand the personal struggles that people faced. The more personal and complicated the war experience can be presented, the more likely students are to see a realistic view of the world.

Standards
These lessons address the following standards from the National Standards for United States History.
Era 9 Postwar United States (1945 to the early 1970s)/Standard 2
National Council for the Social Studies Standards addressed:
Time, Continuity and Change
People, Places and Environments
Individual Development and Identity


New York State skills addressed:
Standard One: History of the United States and New York/Commencement #2/ "discuss several...United States"

Standard One: History of the United States and New York/Commencement #2/"compare and...United States"

Standard Two: World History/Commencement #1/"analyze historic...different perspectives” and “analyze changing...World History”

Standard Two: World History/Commencement #2/"analyze evidence...influence perspective.”

Time
This lesson can take from three to four class periods. It is most beneficial if ample time is allotted for class discussion of perspectives on the Vietnam War. An extension of the lesson could also involve a visit to a local Vietnam memorial.

Student Objectives
1. Students examine events of the Vietnam conflict in chronological order and discuss some of the most controversial incidents that occurred.
2. The class will work to appreciate the complexity of the war experience by analyzing perspectives from various people who experienced the war in different ways.
3. Connections will be made to human losses of the war in the local community by searching the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial website.

Procedure
Day One:
A. Anticipatory Set
   1. Students are asked what they already know about the Vietnam conflict. Many students will likely mention movies involving the Vietnam conflict, or personal connections that they have to veterans. Encourage as many students as possible to brainstorm whatever they can think of about Vietnam.
2. A brief description can be provided about the geography of Vietnam. The events that began U.S. involvement in Vietnam will be explained to students and connections will be made between Vietnam and the Cold War.

B. Guided Practice
1. The class will then be handed a timeline of events relating to the war. (See pg. 70 for handout) A large timeline can also be written on the board so that students can follow along as a class. Students should also be reminded that the events provided on the worksheet are only a select few that occurred in the years and years that the war went on.
2. The class will then take time to look over the events of the war together one by one for a brief period of time.
3. Students will be asked to choose two events from the timeline to research. This can be done in class and then completed for homework that evening. The PBS Battlefield Vietnam Timeline http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index.html can be used for more details about specific events as well as various other websites. Students will use the information that they gather to fill in the information boxes about the two events.
4. Students will be encouraged to look for what, if anything, made events on the timeline controversial. The class will be told that each student will be presenting the information that they gather during the next class period so they must do a thorough job.

C. Closure
1. Students will be asked at the end of class to think about one thing that they did not know about Vietnam before they came to class that day and discuss the piece of information with a partner.
2. Random students will then be asked to share new pieces of information that had been discussed in that class period.
Directions: Choose two events from the following timeline to research using the internet or sources provided in class. You will then complete an information box for each event that you have chosen. Be prepared to discuss each event at the start of the next class.

**Events From Vietnam**

**September 2, 1945:**
Ho Chi Minh declares independence for Vietnam

**March 13, 1954:**
Siege of Dien Bien Phu begins

**May 7, 1954:**
Siege of Dien Bien Phu ends in French defeat

**July 20, 1954:**
Vietnam split into North and South Vietnam

**February 6, 1962:**
Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) created

**August 2, 1964:**
First Tonkin Gulf Incident

**August 4, 1964:**
Second Tonkin Gulf Incident

**August 7, 1964:**
Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

**March 2, 1965:**
First mission in Rolling Thunder Operation launched

**March 8-9, 1965:**
U.S. troops land in Da Nang, South Vietnam

**August 18-24, 1965:**
Operation Starlight

**November 14-26, 1965:**
Battle of Ia Drang

**January 20-April 1, 1968:**
Siege of Khe Sanh

**January 30-March 20th, 1968:**
Tet Offensive
March 16th, 1968:  
My Lai Massacre

April 30, 1970  
President Nixon announces that US troops will be sent into Cambodia

May 4, 1970:  
Kent State Incident

June 13, 1971:  
New York Times releases "Pentagon Papers"

January 27, 1973:  
Paris Peace Accords signed

March 29, 1973:  
U.S. Troops withdraw from Vietnam, marking the end of U.S. involvement

January 8, 1975:  
North Vietnam breaks Paris Peace Accords and invades South Vietnam  
Vietnam War ends  
(Timeline adapted from 10,000 Days of Thunder: A History of the Vietnam War, Philip Caputo, New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers)

---

Vietnam Event Information Box #1

Name of event: ____________________________ Date of event: ____________

Who was involved in the event you have chosen?:

__________________________________________________________________________

What specifically happened during this event?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Did this event cause any controversies, disputes or disagreements of any kind? ______ If yes, explain briefly:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

(Optional): If you can find an interesting picture or article relating to this event, please bring it to class

---

70
# Vietnam Event Information Box #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of event:________________________</th>
<th>Date of event:__________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who was involved in the event you have chosen?:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What specifically happened during this event?

|________________________________________|
|________________________________________|
|________________________________________|
|________________________________________|

Did this event cause any controversies, disputes or disagreements of any kind?____ If yes, explain briefly:

|________________________________________|
|________________________________________|
|________________________________________|

(Optional): If you can find an interesting picture or article relating to this event, please bring it to class
Day Two:
A. Anticipatory Set
1. Students will be asked to think about the question “What makes something controversial?”
2. As students answer, follow up questions can be given such as “what emotions are involved when something is controversial?”
3. The class will discuss how several events in history have been controversial and caused people to experience several emotions. It will be pointed out that when lives are being lost, emotions are even more intense.

B. Guided Practice
1. Students will be called up to the front of the room in the order of the timeline. Those who choose the first events on the timeline will present the information that they recorded in their information boxes first. They will explain who was involved in the event, what exactly happened, as well as if there was any controversy relating to the event. Students who found other interesting facts or pictures about the event will be asked to share as well. The class will be told that they must hold on to their timelines for later in the week.
2. The class will then discuss how various events can have a different impact on many different people. As this is explained, packets will be handed out with quotes from people who had various different experiences of Vietnam. (See pg. 75 for packet)
3. Students will be asked to count off and their number will determine the document number that they will focus on. There may be a need for some students to work in groups of two in a class with more than twenty students.
4. Students will be asked to read the quotation for the document number they have chosen and then answer the document questions. They will also be asked to write an emotion that the person who said the quotation might have been feeling somewhere on the page. (At this time, signs will be put around the room that say “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “unsure”, “agree”, and “strongly agree”.
5. After students take a few minutes to review their document, each student will be asked to tell the class the emotion that they had written.
6. Next, students will be asked to attempt to think from the perspective of the author of their document. Students are then told to think as a soldier, a president, a nurse, a military wife etc and respond to a statement from that perspective. They will respond by going to an area of the room. If they believe their author would “strongly agree” with the statement, they would stand in that area of the room. If the quote did not give them an impression of how their author might have felt, or if they are confused, they can go to the unsure area.
7. The following statement is then written on the board “It is a good idea for the United States to fight and remain in Vietnam”
8. Several students will end up in the “unsure” area of the classroom. The discussion can start by asking those students why they were “unsure” about their author’s response to the statement. This will reveal how confusing the emotions of the war might have been for some.

Students in the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” area of the room will then be asked why their author might have felt that way about being involved in Vietnam. The same discussion will then occur for those who stood in the “agree” and “strongly agree” areas.

9. As a class, the discussion will continue as to what different experiences people might have had with the events of Vietnam.

10. Students will then pair up with a student from the opposite side of the room (“agrees” with “disagrees”, “unsures” with “strongly disagree” etc.) They will explain their assigned quotation to their partner and the emotion involved. They will then work on the other questions in the packet. This may take the remaining part of the class. Some may need to complete the packet for homework.

Closure

1. The class will then be told that they have an assignment to think about for homework. After thinking about the documents they have read, students must be prepared to answer the question “What makes war so complicated?”. This is a very open ended question that will elicit many different responses. Students will be asked to write this question on the last page of their packet and jot down notes to answer the question. It could also be given as a brief writing assignment. Students will be asked to think about this question and discuss it with each other if they wish.
Complicated Perspectives on Vietnam

Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 1
Some men became drafted into military service for Vietnam while some volunteered. The soldier below explains why he enlisted in the military.

It was either go to college, a job or the military. College was out of the question. We couldn’t afford it. And I couldn’t get a good job.

--Volunteer for Vietnam War


1. According to this Volunteer, what was one reason why he enlisted?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 2
Some people went to great lengths to avoid service in Vietnam. The draftee below describes what he thought when he received the letter telling him that he would have to fight.

[Boxed passage]
I wasn’t going to leave the country [for Canada], because the odds of coming back looked real slim...Spending two years in jail was as dumb as going to war, even less productive. I wasn’t going to shoot off a toe. I had friends that were starving themselves to be underweight for their physicals.


2a. According to this draftee, what was one way men tried to get out of going to Vietnam?

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

2b. Based on this quotation, why would being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War be a confusing and stressful experience?

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 3

...some people wonder why Americans are in Vietnam. The way I see the situation, I would rather fight to stop Communism in Vietnam than in Kincaid, Humboldt, Blue Mound, or Kansas City, and that is just about what it would end up being...the price for victory is high when life can not be replaced, but I think it is far better to fight and die for freedom than to live under oppression and fear.

--Jack Swender, later killed in action in Vietnam


3a. According to Jack Swender, what was he fighting to stop in Vietnam?

________________________________________________________________________

3b. Based on this quotation, why did Swender feel that it was right to fight in Vietnam?

________________________________________________________________________
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 4

We were well informed here about demonstrations on both sides. Even though I'm here, I still have an open mind—realizing of course, that an immediate pullout or anything of the sort is out of the question. It would degrade the heroic deaths of those who never returned because it would mean going back on everything that we have done. There are many here who feel as I do, but we will continue to fight for the country in which we believe.

-- Stephen W. Pickett in a letter home to his family from Vietnam. Pickett was later killed in action.


4. According to Stephen Pickett, why would an immediate pullout of troops from Vietnam be out of the question?
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 5

A very saddening thing is that most GIs do not understand the people and try to exploit them or reject them as lesser beings. Their culture is so very different, simple, yet they are beautiful people. The U.S. has come here to make Vietnam a modern western model of a country. In certain ways it is destroying the old way of life which I think is really a crime.

-- Darrell R. Lulling, August 26th 1969

5. According to this quotation, what does Darrell Lulling think is a crime?
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 6

Damn this war and everything that’s put us here. If I’m to die here, I only wish it were for something I believed in.

-- Steven Plue’ in a letter home from Vietnam in 1970.


6. According to this quotation, what would Steven Plue regret if he were to die in Vietnam?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 7
In the statement below, Steve McKenna describes what it was like to watch a friend die in his arms.

As I cradled his head, blood was everywhere, gushing from his chest wound and out his back. As he lay dying, he looked up at me with his big saucer eyes...It was at a time both personally and nationally people began to doubt the validity of the Vietnam conflict. So when someone was killed or wounded, it hurt because it all seemed such a colossal waste of time.

-- Steve McKenna, Vietnam War Veteran
Source: Steve McKenna, AK-47: Crow Feed on a Razor Wire,(Unpublished) 53.

7. According to Steve McKenna, why did it hurt each time someone was killed or wounded?
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 8

We can't tell who's who. One old woman came everyday and sold oranges. We used to buy an orange from her whether we wanted one or not. One day she pulled a grenade out from under the oranges and tossed it into a tent. Some of my buddies were killed and we killed her. A few days later we saw a kid down by the stream. We thought he had a gun and we shot him. But all he had was a fish pole. But what can you do? They all look alike.

--Vietnam War Veteran


8a. According to this veteran, how did the old Vietnamese woman kill his buddies?

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

8b. Why might the soldiers have been suspicious that the kid by the stream had a gun?

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

8c. According to this quotation, why might the situation in Vietnam have been frustrating for the soldiers fighting?

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________
Document 9

During the real heat of the day, the feeling can’t be described with one word. Sweat runs like I’ve never seen it before. The humidity clings like smoke and the air is heavy and hard to breathe. The entire body is sore from hours under the weight of the pack...Tempers grow short and the body is so weak it trembles under strain and the rest periods offer little relief.

-- George L. Godfrey


9. According to Godfrey, what are two conditions in Vietnam that made life uncomfortable?
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 10

...marching at 6am and it was now 3pm. We had been walking the whole time except for a ten minute break to eat some C-rations. I was carrying three days worth of Cs—that’s about nine cans a day. We carried them in black socks strapped off our packs. I was also carrying C4 explosives, my M-16, about 16 clips of bullets and a couple of grenades, about forty pounds all together. Walking nine hours straight through mostly woods.

--Vietnam War Veteran


10a. According to this veteran, how long did he march through the woods of Vietnam in a day?

________________________________________________________________________________________

10b. According to this quotation, how much weight did this soldier carry on his back?

________________________________________________________________________________________
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 11

I have my own room, with a real bed, mattress, sheets, blankets, pillow, electricity, curtain, a Vietnamese woman to wash all my clothes and iron them, and she cleans the room, polishes my boots and makes my bed...I go to work at 5pm and work until 1am. It's a real good shift, as I can sleep as late as I want, goof off the rest of the day until it is time to work.

--Bruce E. Rodland, Vietnam Veteran who served in "the rear"


11a. According to this document, describe two things that made Mr. Rodland comfortable as he served in Vietnam.

_____________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________

11b. How might Mr. Rodland's experience in Vietnam be different from the experiences of others who served?

_____________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________

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 Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 12

If you protested the war, you couldn’t help worrying about the bafflement [confusion] and pain you were causing those in danger, and their families. How did you make peace with the fact that, however unintentionally, you were encouraging a hard, often murderous enemy who was doing his best to kill the boys you’d grown up with?

-- Tobias Wolff, quoted in Time Magazine


12a. According to Tobias Wolff, what might those who protested the war cause for those in danger and their families?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

12b. Why might some who protested the war cause pain for the soldiers who were fighting in Vietnam?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
...Why are we in South Vietnam?
We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American president has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence. And I intend to keep that promise.

We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance. Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another.

--Excerpt from a speech given by President Lyndon Johnson at Johns Hopkins University in on April 7, 1965

13. According to President Lyndon Johnson, give one reason why we were in South Vietnam.
I remember the first guy I treated. A young guy, about 18 or 19. He had stepped on a Bouncing Betty, and it literally blew him apart. I remember running up and him saying ‘Doc, Doc, I’m going to live ain’t I?’ and me saying ‘sure babe,’ and then he died. I held his hand, and he died. I remember crying. I cried at the next one and cried at the next one. But it got to a point where I stopped crying, because I thought I’d either kill myself of go crazy if I felt for these guys.

--Medic who served in Vietnam


14. What made this medic get to a point that he stopped crying while treating patients?
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 15

I Went to Vietnam to Heal
I went to Vietnam to heal
And came back home silently wounded.
I went to Vietnam to heal
And still awaken from nightmares
About those we couldn’t save.
I went to Vietnam to heal and came home
To grieve for those we sent home blind, paralyzed,
limbless, mindless.
I went to Vietnam to heal and
Discovered I am not God...

But I am not God, and so I go on
Seeing the wounded when I hear a
Chopper, washing your blood from my hands,
Hearing your screams in my sleep, scrubbing
The smell of your burned bodies from my clothes,
Feeling your pain, which never eases
Fighting a war that never ends.¹

--Dusty, an Army nurse in Vietnam

Source: Dusty, I came to Vietnam to heal, 1985 in Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of

15. According to this document, describe one way the war “silently wounded” this nurse
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 16
Barbara Geoghegan was one of many wives who received word that their husband was killed in Vietnam. She recalled the following after reading the last letter from her husband. The letter mentioned dreams of working on having another baby when he returned.

I picked up my sleeping baby and hugged her hard, still not believing that an end had come to everything we had hoped and dreamed and planned.

--Barbara Geoghegan


16. According to this quote, describe how Barbara Geoghegan felt after receiving the news of her husband’s death
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 17

We gathered what courage we could find and went to the funeral home. As we looked down on his dear face, we felt that the world had fallen in on us. He had fought in an action that was not termed a war; he had died thousands of miles from his beloved country; his blood and the blood of his men, whom he had loved so much, had now become part of the soil of Vietnam.

--Written by the parents of Jack Geoghegan to describe their sorrow at their son’s funeral


17a. According to this letter, how did the Geoghegan’s feel at their son’s funeral?

17b. What was one reason why the Geoghegan’s were so deeply saddened by their son’s death?
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 18
The following words were spoken by anchorman Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News on February 27, 1968. This was broadcast during the Tet Offensive.

To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemies' intentions, in case that is indeed the last big gasp before negotiations. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.

This is Walter Cronkite. Good night.

--Walter Cronkite, February, 27 1968
Source: YouTube-CBS News (Feb 27, 1968)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=i214f5-w19w

18a. When did Walter Cronkite make the statements above?

________________________________________________________________________

18b. According to Mr. Cronkite, what is the only rational way out?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Directions: Analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions that follow each document in the space provided.

Document 19

For the future of peace, precipitate [sudden] withdrawal would thus be a disaster of immense magnitude. A nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends. Our defeat and humiliation in Vietnam without question would promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest.

--President Richard Nixon’s “Silent Majority” speech on November 3, 1969

19. According to Richard Nixon, why would a sudden withdrawal from Vietnam be a disaster?
It was a major battle...we did a fine job there. If it had happened in World War II, they still would be telling stories about it. But it happened in Vietnam, so nobody knows about it. They don't even tell recruits about it today. Marines don't talk about Vietnam. We lost. They never talk about losing. So it's just wiped out, all of that's off the slate, it doesn't count. It makes you a little bitter.

-- John Muir, a rifleman from the 2nd battalion of the 1st Marine Corps. 1966.


20. What makes John Muir bitter about his experience in Vietnam?
Day Three:

Anticipatory Set:

1. The class will be asked to prepare their response to the question “What makes war so complicated?”. Volunteers would be taken to share their answer with the class and then random students would be called upon. Students should be assured that there are no incorrect answers to this open ended question. Students should provide varying responses.

2. If time permits, the class could then be shown teacher selected clips from the films listed at the end of the lesson plan. (All of these films are available through both Netflix and Blockbuster Direct for the instructor’s convenience. These clips can further illustrate the human experience of war.

3. The teacher could then point out that many of the students responded in different ways to the question “What makes war so complicated?”. They may have responded because they all think about things in different ways and have different perspectives. This is true because they are all human. It can then be pointed out that war impacts human being that experience things in different ways.

4. It can be emphasized that local people experienced the Vietnam War and held various different perspectives of what is was like and whether it was right or wrong. Anyone who lived through the time period had some type of experience with Vietnam. The war impacted human beings and it not something that is only in history books.

5. To emphasize the dramatic impact that it had on local people, the class will look at local people who gave their lives in Vietnam. Students work in a computer lab or complete the Veterans Wall Tour handout (see attached). Students will look for personal information about local people who lost their lives in Vietnam.

Closure:

1. The class will then be asked to write the names of the soldiers killed in Vietnam on their timeline from the beginning of the unit. Students will be asked to describe how the memorial website made them feel.

2. Once again, students will be asked to respond to the question “‘What makes war so complicated?”.
Veterans Memorial Wall Tour

Go to http://thewall-usa.com/

Use the "Search the wall" link at the top center to bring up a search menu.

Using the search boxes labeled "Home of Record" and "HomeState" type in the name of our town and nearby towns to find 2 local people that were killed in Vietnam.

Name: ____________________ Age: __________
Race: ________________ Sex: ______
Date of Birth: __________ From: _______________
Religion: __________________ Marital Status: __________

Get Additional information from INFO PAGE link:
When was this person killed? ________________ (this is listed as casualty was on...)
If described, how and where was this person killed? _____________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

Click on the link for Personal Comments and Pictures. Read through some of the comments if they are available.
If Comments were available, what are some things that people wrote?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How did the information about this person make you feel? ________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
| Name: ___________________________ |
| Age: ______ |
| Race: __________ |
| Sex: ______ |
| Date of Birth: __________ |
| From: _______________________ |
| Religion: ______________________ |
| Marital Status: __________________ |

**Get Additional information from INFO PAGE link:**

When was this person killed? ____________________________ (this is listed as “Casualty was on...”)

If described, how and where was this person killed? __________________________________________________________

**Click on the link for Personal Comments and Pictures. Read through some of the comments if they are available.**

If Comments were available, what are some things that people wrote?

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

How did the information about this person make you feel? _____________

---

Take note of the dates that these two soldiers died in Vietnam. Add their names and the dates of their deaths to the “Events From Vietnam” worksheet.

List two interesting pieces of information that you found while viewing the web page.

1. _____________

2. _____________
**Additional Teaching Resources**

**HELPFUL WEBPAGES:**

This site allows students the opportunity to search for fallen Vietnam veterans by name or hometown. Students can find out personal information about each soldier such as their age, race, sex, Date of birth, hometown, religion and marital status. Many of the soldiers have links to informational pages that provide even more information about their service in Vietnam. Students can also see information for soldiers who were killed on the specific day that they visit the website.

**Battlefield Vietnam Timeline** (http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index.html)
Students can click through events from 1954 to 1975. This websites includes key events and thumbnail pictures.

**Rochester Vietnam Veterans Memorial** (www.vietnarnmemorial.com)
Students from the Rochester, NY area can search for local veterans who were killed in Vietnam. The site also offers information about the specific role that the Rochester area played in the war. Information from this site can help Rochester students make a direct connection to war effort.

**HELPFUL FILMS:**
The following films allow students to see the war from various perspectives. All of these films can be attained through Netflix.com and Blockbuster

**Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam** was first telecast April 3, 1988, over the HBO cable service. Based on the book of the same name, the program is devoted to poignant recitations of letters to and from American participants of the Vietnam war. The letters are heard over images culled from news footage, home movies and still photography, with contemporary music added to put things in the proper historical context. (Summary adapted from www.Blockbuster.com)

**Choosing Sides: I Remember Vietnam(2005) NR** Seven Americans with distinctly different Vietnam War experiences tell their stories in this documentary. Through personal accounts and historic footage, the film chronicles the seven diverging paths that lead the storytellers to a Purple Heart, a dishonorable discharge, a jail cell, a protest march, a political debacle, a foreign land and a wheelchair. The film provides a revealing look at how war shapes and alters an individual's choices. (Summary from www.netflix.com)
**The Vietnam War (2007) NR** Using rare footage from the CBS News archives along with interviews with historians and combatants, this extensive History Channel presentation provides a thorough examination of one of the most controversial conflicts in U.S. history. From the arrival of U.S. advisers to Vietnam in 1959 to the emergency airlift from the American embassy in 1975, the program shines a light on the people and events that shaped the war. (Summary from www.netflix.com)

**Inside the Vietnam War (2008) NR** See the Vietnam War through the eyes of those who lived through it in this compelling documentary from National Geographic. Archival film, audio recordings and personal photographs accompany veterans' recollections of their own experiences. Summary adapted from www.netflix.com)

**Combat Vietnam: To Hell and Beyond (2000) NR** Featuring authentic footage from the bloody battlegrounds, this absorbing and enlightening three-hour documentary takes you into the core of the action to witness what it was like to be an American soldier in the Vietnam War. (Summary adapted from www.netflix.com)

**Vietnam: We Were Heroes 1st Cavalry Division Airmobile (2002) NR** This documentary series depicts the true stories of men who served in the United States military's deployments in Vietnam whose courage and sacrifice during the Vietnam War turned them into heroes. From those who were among the first to land to those who were among the last to leave, from those serving in airborne divisions to those working the logistics on the ground, lives were changed and heroes emerged during this harrowing time. (Summary adapted from www.netflix.com)

**Heart of Darkness: The Vietnam War Chronicles: 1945-1975 (2006) NR** Through rare footage and exclusive interviews, this comprehensive seven-part series explores the history of the Vietnam War, the longest military conflict in U.S. history, tracing the conflict's roots from 1945 to 1975. Episodes explore the defeat of the French Legionnaires, America's involvement and the turning tide of public opinion that prompted the eventual withdrawal of all troops from the region. (Summary adapted from www.netflix.com)
**Assessment-Expectations**

These lessons will appeal to various intelligences of Gardner's multiple intelligences. Students will be able to hear music, read about primary source perspectives, make use of visuals, and reflect on the human experience of the war. By adding video clips from the recommended movie list, students who have a visual intelligence can see a different view of war. Songs are also included in those clips to appeal to those who have a musical intelligence.

Students will also be able to use Kaplan's cooperative learning as they each complete a handout on the emotions of the war by using the information provided from other classmates in their group. The strategies that I have proposed will effectively allow students to use various levels of cooperative learning. They can work individually to construct their own knowledge, then work in pairs and finally discuss issues as a group. The use of group discussion will appeal to those who need to interact with their classmates in order to gain a full understanding of events.

The immediacy of first hand accounts allows students to feel a more direct connection to the events of Vietnam. Students can then construct their own knowledge of events. The conclusions that students draw at the end of this lesson will differ depending on their individual interpretations of what they read in class. My expectations are that students will gain an understanding of the complicated and human nature of the war experience once all of these strategies are used. I come to this conclusion because each of the individual strategies have proven to be effective in my own classroom. The combination of all these strategies, along with the powerful testimonials will effectively help students see the complicated nature of war.
Works Cited (for Components I &II on Pgs. 2-66)

Albion High School Yearbook, 1966.


Rochester Vietnam Veterans Memorial, [www.vietnammemorial.org](http://www.vietnammemorial.org)


U.S. Census Bureau. P065. 1990 Summary tape file 3 (STF3)


