

THE VIETNAM WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS AND LYNN NOVICK

Educational Themes Descriptions, Key Words

Teacher's guide to the [lesson series](https://edsitement.neh.gov/vietnam-war-lesson-guide) compiled on EDSITEment
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/vietnam-war-lesson-guide>

THEME 1: FORCES THAT FUELED THE WAR: COLONIALISM, IMPERIALISM, NATIONALISM, EXCEPTIONALISM, AND THE COLD WAR—THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- Why did the US feel compelled to take over for the French in Indochina?
- What responsibilities do nations have in helping provide for a peaceful world order?

Key Words: The Roots of Vietnam/Foreign Policy/French Colonialism/French Indochina/

Theme Overview

Why Vietnam? What were the root causes of the war from a geopolitical perspective? From a bi-polar perspective? Through a Cold War lens? The Vietnam War is generally understood as a manifestation of post-WWII Cold War geopolitics, but lessons will examine it in the broader story of imperialism, post-colonialism, and emerging nationalism, as it played out in the complex history of Vietnam. The war was fought during a time of a vast buildup of nuclear arms, and its history cannot be understood outside of the global tensions between the U.S. and its communist enemies in the U.S.S.R. and China and an arms race that threatened to destroy the world.

Possible Content Topics

Colonialism/imperialism

- US stance on colonialism
- French pacification program
- French Indochina War
- Facing an unknown new world order

Cold War Politics

- US seeks allies in Asia toward end of war
- Chinese Revolution/China testing atomic bomb
- Korean War
- The Domino Theory
- Threat of nuclear war
- McCarthyism
- Cuban Missile Crisis

Bi-polar politics

- NATO

- Warsaw Pact
- Marshall Plan
- Containment Policy
- Truman Doctrine

Nationalism

Exceptionalism

THEME 2: POPULAR BELIEFS AND MISCONCEPTIONS – ALL SIDES

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did preconceptions and misunderstandings affect the Vietnamese and the United States war efforts?
- Why is it important for a nation to fully understand its adversaries?

Key Words: Ho Chi Minh/Vietnamese Declaration of Independence/President Truman/containment/war of liberation/American colonialism

Theme Overview

Lessons will explore the degree of understanding and the many misunderstandings Americans has about Vietnam, it's people and it's struggles. What were the understandings and misunderstandings of the nature of the enemy? What were the major beliefs on all sides about what type of war was being waged? A civil war or a war of liberation or a war to promote or curtail communism? How do those who lived through the Vietnam Era view that crucial period in American history today? What perceptions do today's students have regarding the Vietnam War Era? Upon what are these perceptions based?

Possible Content Topics to be explored in the educational materials -

- Ho Chi Minh: Nationalist or Communist?
 - Background on HCM and his political development
 - Writings and leadership; appeal to Wilson at Versailles Conference
 - Relationship with OSS and their aid to him at end of WWII
 - Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence speech 9/2/1945
 - His dedication to the independence of his country
 - His letters to President Truman
- US political/cultural misunderstandings of the Vietnam and the Vietnamese people? (US government officials; US general public)
 - Americans misunderstanding of SV and NV people, their governments, Diem their culture, their values
 - Difficulty of terrain and climate for Americans
 - Elephant grass, triple canopy, leaches, monsoons
 - Misunderstanding over American role in the war (war of liberation? Rebellion? Containment?)
 - Misunderstanding/dispute over how to fight the war

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- Misunderstanding of NVA and VC's view on casualties
 - Misunderstanding of Vietnamese leaders
 - Language barriers
 - Vietnamese (N&S) perceptions and misunderstandings of the American soldier and America's mission.
 - US: another brand of colonialism?
 - Language barriers
 - Civil War or War of Liberation
 - Communism v. Democracy (or anti-communism)
 - Fighting against the American brand of colonialism
 - The role of religion & nationalism
 - Vietnamese and American families split on defining the war
 - For the American military, who is friend and who is foe?
 - At times, SV seemed to be at war with itself
 - Current reflections/perceptions of the war/era overall by Americans? Vietnamese?
 - Drug use by American soldier
 - The power of Hollywood film and social media
 - America's misunderstanding of the returning American soldier
 - Hero or war criminal?
 - The disconnect for returning American soldiers
 - The undetected/misunderstood psychological effect on the soldier
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THEME 3: LEADERSHIP AND DECISION MAKING – ALL SIDES

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How effective were decisions made by American and Vietnamese leaders towards achieving their respective goals?
- How can government leaders decide the best course of action during a time of war?

Key Words: Truman/Eisenhower/Kennedy/Johnson/Nixon/Domino Theory/Strategic Hamlet/napalm/defoliants/ Robert McNamara/bombing campaigns/Gulf of Tonkin/

Theme Overview

Lessons will explore the different political, military and other motivations that influenced the decisions of five U.S. presidents and take a close-up look at American leadership and politics. What is good policy vs. good politics? How did American anti-communism influence policy makers regarding U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia? Lessons will also examine the motivations that influenced decisions by North and South Vietnam leadership. Who were the main players on each side? What were the decisions they made and what factors influenced those decisions? What alternatives were available to leaders of all sides?

Possible Content Topics to be explored in the educational materials –

- Five US presidents (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon) actions during the Vietnam War

- **Truman:** “Loss of China”; Truman Doctrine; Marshall Plan; Korean War; help French or Ho Chi Minh?
- **Eisenhower:** Korean War, support of Diem, Domino Theory, Cuba Policy
- **JFK:** Cuban Missile Crisis (threat of escalating tensions), Berlin, Flexible Response, Support of Diem, Green Berets (response to guerrilla tactics), Advisors in South Vietnam, Strategic Hamlet Program, authorization of napalm & defoliants), 1964 Election ...”these people hate us...but can’t give up a piece of territory like that and get people to elect me.” Diem: Coup.
- **LBJ:** Decision to keep JFK’s Advisors, winning 1964 election; Gulf of Tonkin/Resolution; Graduated response, LBJ Tapes—LBJ’s psychological state (ex. 1965: “I don’t know how to back out now...”), Bombing Campaigns-controversial: ex. Calling in napalm while talking peace! micromanagement, refused to listen to RMcN’s growing doubts; refused to mine harbors; making false assumptions re: NV, troop escalations; replaces Gen. Westmoreland with Gen. Abrams; decision not to run in 1968
- **Nixon:** “Secret Plan” to End VN War & 1968 Election, Interference with SV/Thieu re: attending Peace Talks-Nov. 2, 1968>>helped Nixon win-at what cost?; the influence of Henry Kissinger; Vietnamization: surrender without saying so, secret strategy, “siege mentality,” 1972 Election, Cambodian Invasion, China Policy-visit to China, Détente; Nixon dictating how the war was to end; Nixon ordered bombing to keep ARVN from going down before election!
- US Officials /Politicians
 - McNamara: Vow to fight Communism, 1965-“Fork in the Road Memo”- face saving settlement OR use overwhelming military power—bombing and massive forces—to bring NV to bargaining table; Metrics of war, Stats & charts v. understanding feelings of VNese people, began to have doubts by end of ’67: urged LBJ to freeze troop levels & bombing effort.
 - General Westmoreland: Measuring victory by body count—War of Attrition, Deceiving the press, 1964: “We’re on 5-yr. line.” manipulated statistics; wanted an all-out offensive (enemy planning the same)
 - General Abrams: called Vietnamization “a slow surrender”
- 1968 Election
 - Robert F. Kennedy: 1968: “the center cannot hold.” Assass’d June 1968.
 - Eugene McCarthy: Almost beat LBJ in NH Primary.
 - Hubert Humphrey: Summer 1968: broke with LBJ: said, “Stop bombing!”>>>5 days before election, LBJ stopped all bombing.
- 1972 Election
 - George McGovern:” End the War” (1972)
 - Nixon campaign effort to discredit McGovern
 - Ambassador Graham Martin: Fateful decisions re: Fall of Saigon—resolute Cold Warrior: refused to evacuate (His son died in VN);
- North Vietnam and Viet Cong political and military leaders
 - Ho Chi Minh: clever: cult of personality to VNese people; Believed in war of attrition
 - Lê Duẩn: How to control war and win! Felt ‘Americans will become weary.’ “North will not count costs.” New Plan: The General Uprising.
 - Vo Nguyen Giap: Master of siege tactics, guerilla warfare; designed Tet Off;’ Great General at end of war.
 - Le Duc Tho: politically shrewd
- South Vietnam Government and military:
 - Ngo Dinh Diem: corruption, purge, reliance on Brother Nhu & Madame Nhu

- Role and impact of Nhu and Madame Nhu (wife)
 - Nguyen Cao Ky: former head of SV Air Force,
 - Nguyen Van Thieu: dependent on US military support to stay in power
- Students will examine several political cartoons depicting the decisions of various leaders and identify the event and artist's message, its symbols and caricatures, and provide their opinion on the artist's overall message.
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THEME 4: WHO FOUGHT IN THE VIETNAM WAR? – ALL SIDES

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- Why did the motivations of American and Vietnamese soldiers change over the duration of the Vietnam War?
- How do societies decide who is best suited to fight a war?

Key words: Race/Diversity/racial tension/ragging/reasons for fighting/duty/honor/civil rights movement

Theme Overview

The Vietnam War offers a powerful lens for examining issues of class, race, and ethnicity during an especially volatile time in American history. The armed services were filled by members of the largest generation in American history, but the military did not represent a true cross section of that generation, with disproportionate representation among troops from working class and poor backgrounds.

Possible Content Topics

U.S. and its political allies

- Other countries: South Vietnam, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, Thailand
- Other groups: Montagnards, Hmong

North Vietnam and its political allies

- Other countries: Soviet Union, Peoples Republic of China, North Korea, Cuba
- Other groups: Viet Cong, Viet Minh, Pathet Lao, Khmer Rouge

American soldier – in the early years of the war

- Varied motivations for serving and going to war
- Tradition of military and service
- Varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds
- Conscientious objectors – serving as battlefield medics

American soldiers—Changing their impression as war progressed

- Enlisted and draftee personnel
- Declining morale and extreme actions

African Americans

- Racial attitudes between whites and blacks prevailed behind the lines

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- Controversy over Casualties and Civil Rights
- The experience of African Americans during the war as a “a microcosm of American society”

Women

Hispanics

- Hispanics saw serving as patriotic duty and an opportunity to advance social standing
- Anti-war sentiment grew in Hispanic communities even among families of those who served

South Vietnam

- Nature of the AVRN soldier
- Viet Cong – goals, tactics, and purpose in the overall strategy

North Vietnam (NVA):

- Impression of America’s role/participation in the war
- View on casualties/sacrifice

Pathet Lao, Khmer Rouge

Level and support from Soviet Union and China

THEME 5: HOW THE WAR WAS FOUGHT—ALL SIDES—STRATEGIC AND PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did the United States and the Vietnamese understandings about the each other impact their war efforts at different times during the war?
- Why is it important for a military and a society to adjust to the fluid situations they are subjected to during a war?

Key Words: Bravery/Heroism/Limits of American Power/Know Thy Enemy/Rolling Thunder/Agent Orange/napalm/B-52/AK-47/M-16/Tet Offensive/war of attrition

Theme Overview

Initially, the US strategy was to fight a conventional war, but this war had no conventional front line. The US started with a strategy of fighting a limited war and discovering it would be an incremental war. The Vietnamese enemy fought primarily a guerilla war (tenacity and resourcefulness), and showed that they were willing to pay a heavy sacrifice, America was not prepared to fight this kind of war militarily or politically. Problems resulted from this for the US: the strategies/tactics were not static, but evolved over the duration. Military preparedness and political messaging had to adjust to the fluid conditions. All this amidst the overarching threat of heightened tensions in an atmosphere of nuclear weapons. Lessons will explore these conditions and the ethical questions on the war’s conduct from the perspectives of soldiers, leaders, and civilians on both sides. The atrocities and dehumanization and racially charged language that dehumanized the enemy. What does it mean to take another life, and how does that ethical equation change when the life that is taken is for a cause one does not believe in? When does one sacrifice for the greater good? How can we understand and live with loss?

Possible Content Topics

Geneva Accords Rules of Engagement and its impact on conducting the war

1954 Geneva Conference and its impact on conducting the war

Limited war and the difficulty in limiting one's participation in a war

- US strategy 1954 to 1964: original intent an escalation
- US strategy 1964 to 1969: increased escalation amid political limitations
- US strategy 1970 to 1975 an ungraceful exit.

Conventional warfare

- Implementing a draft - 1964
- Massive troop numbers, overwhelming use of force
- Establishing base camps
- Bombing missions
- Search and destroy missions

Technology used in the war

Guerrilla warfare - "chose the place and time of battle."

Resourcefulness of North Vietnam

War metrics (stats on everything and the perceived turning point when enemy body count exceeds the ability to supply more troops.)

"Mission creep" the circumstances of and political implications

Vietnamization (and other US strategies focused on South Vietnam)

Dehumanizing the enemy/Atrocity of war (sensitive area... need to proceed with caution)

Use of insurgents

ARVN

Black Market

Paris Peace Talks

- Purpose and goals
- Interconnectedness with the on-going war
 - 1968 Getting nowhere: bombing or no bombing
 - Nov. 2, 1968: Pres. Thieu said SV would not attend peace talks.
- Fighting over shape of table re: Paris Peace Talks-1968
- Maneuvering by Nixon and Kissinger before 1972 election
- Christmas Bombing-1972

Fall of Saigon

POWs, their status and treatment, survival methods; aftermath

THEME 6: PROPAGANDA, TRUTH AND THE MEDIA

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did the discrepancy between the media's reporting of the war and the government's official reporting affect Americans opinions of the war?

- How can the government's need to maintain national security and the public's right to know the truth ever be reconciled?

Key Words: Investigative journalism/ Vietnamization/television war/Battle of Ap Bac/Buddhist Crisis/Walter Cronkite/Mired in Stalemate/My Lai/Pentagon Papers/

Theme Overview

The "images" of the Vietnam War and the messages sent by the news media and how they influenced the public perceptions about the war. Media and press relations: how the media served the government in the execution of the war, then how the media questioned the government's execution of the war. Lessons explore key questions: Is it ever acceptable for a government to lie to its citizens? Is it always acceptable for the media to reveal the truth? What is the most appropriate way to balance the public right to information against national security? Lessons will also examine the confusion over patriotism and loyalty to the nation vs patriotism and loyalty to the government. The impact of the media's portrayal of the Vietnam soldier, the veteran and key events during the war. How the younger journalists and younger politicians began to question the motives and goals of the war and influenced policy makers to consider alternatives to continuing the war. Americans felt from the war.

Possible Content Topics

First televised war

- Collection of news reports on Vietnam during key periods
- Nightly news reports from major networks
- Key print media articles and essays
- Government media reporting

Changes in the news media and the way war is covered

First Amendment

Pentagon Papers

The need for secrecy

- Concerns over national security vis-a-vis Cold War, Domino Theory, Containment Policy, etc.
- Keeping early US involvement and participation classified
- Continuing to withhold information from the public about level of involvement and escalation

Lies, deception, obfuscation

- Truman secretly Truman pledges \$23 million in aid to the French
- Neil Sheehan
- Body counts, their purpose, propaganda, and lack of accuracy
- Rand Report (by McNamara's top deputies)
- LBJ's Secret White House tapes
- Media's misrepresentation of outcome of TET Offensive
- CIA's Phoenix Program
- Nixon's interference with the Paris Peace Talks during 1968 election
- Nixon's Secret White House tapes
- My Lai 1968-1971
- Nixon: Cambodian Invasion
- Nixon: fear mongering—students are horrible people

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- Nixon tapes: Deceptions, dictating when war would end

Paris Peace Talks

Christmas Bombing-1972

Peace with Honor speech

Watergate

Pentagon Papers

Understanding/misunderstanding of the US soldier and veteran

Propaganda rhetoric for and against the war—both sides

War coverage today

Government's relationship with the media today

THEME 7: THE WAR AT HOME – ALL SIDES

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did the political and societal changes of the 1960s serve as a catalyst to the divergent views of the Vietnam War?
- How can a democratic public be patriotic to the country and still hold the government accountable for its actions?

Key Words: Protest Movements/patriotism/Great Society/Silent Majority/Vietnam Veterans against the War/1960s/sex, drugs, and rock and roll/protest movement/moratorium to end the war/Kent State/Cambodian Invasion/Chicago Democratic National Convention/Generation Gap

Theme Overview

Lessons will explore how the war affected domestic politics, the civil rights movement, the elections, popular culture. The explosive change in American culture, generational conflict and changing attitudes. How the war affected both N & S Vietnamese? What went through the minds of the families at home as their sons and daughters went off to war? How did the war divide families, while they were at war? When they came home, either dead or alive? The anti-war movement addressing the question: Should citizens have the right to protest against government policies with which they disagree? The role of anti-war protesters as agents of democracy or unpatriotic? The ways the anti-war protests incited public discussion/conflict on the Vietnam War; In contrast, the negative public perception of the anti-war movement against what anti-war protesters were saying and the democratic principles upon which they were speaking and protesting. The effects, if any, on the U.S. policy? On the enemy? How music (both supportive and critical) played a role in explaining the war to the public. What did the music say and how did it say it? Who was saying it? What was the impact on the public and America's view of the war?

Possible Content Topics

Containing communism and stopping the "Red Tide", preventing the Domino Theory, etc.

The 1950s and 1960s: an explosive transformation in American culture

- music, art, drama, sex, drugs, lifestyles

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- Loyalty/patriotism vs moral conscience and questioning authority

Political discussion vs. polarization

- Patriotic duty
- Johnson's Great Society (not the program, but his supporters)
- Nixon's "Silent Majority"

Moral duty

Generation Gap

What is appropriate protest—and what is not? (Demonstrations, closing down college campuses, Use of violence, waving VC flag)

- How anti-war protests incited public discussion about the war
- The confusion over patriotism and loyalty to the nation with patriotism and loyalty to the government.
- The negative public perception of the anti-war movement against what anti-war protesters were saying and the democratic principles upon which they were speaking and protesting.
- Early protests against Johnson's escalation of the war
- Impact of the draft on the country and the anti-war movement
- Chicago Democratic National Convention
- Moratorium against the war-1969
- Draft dodgers
- Jane Fonda and her trip to Hanoi

Kent State

Jackson State

The war at home for the families on both sides of those who served

American public's lack of personal sacrifice compared to WWII and the sacrifice of the Vietnamese families

- Family divisions—both sides
- Individual stories from both Vietnamese and Americans