Teaching the Vietnam War: An Examination of History, Policy, and Impact

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Introduction

The study of the politics of the Vietnam War raises some interesting dilemmas for both teachers and students. Opinions differ about the importance of the war to the politics and history of the United States. Many books are available concerning the American involvement in the Vietnam war, but most accounts differ from book to book. The relevance of the Vietnam experience needs to be discussed in a broader perspective. Certainly, the Vietnam war was different than any war fought previously by the United States of America.

Recently, a professor at a southern university defined war as having winners and losers (cf. Emerson, 1976). She then asked her 150-student government class to identify the winner of the Vietnam war. Because no one could provide an answer, her second question concerned the last time American troops were used in a foreign country. The answer the professor was expecting was the Christmas 1989 invasion of Panama. No one made the correct identification. The only student who hazarded a response suggested that the last use of troops was in Nicaragua! If students have difficulty remembering what happened a few months in the past, they are likely to conceive of the Vietnam war as ancient history. Yet, the war provides lessons that future decision makers need to learn.

One dilemma for teachers is choice among subject matter. American policies are important, but other factors need examination as well. Should a combination of both American and Vietnamese politics (North and South) be considered? What about those who stayed home, protested, or went to Canada? The material can be overwhelming.

Instructors also need to identify appropriate techniques for conveying the information in the course. The classic lecture-discussion format is only one possible approach. The war itself has generated a large number of significant publications and motion pictures which can be used to illustrate major themes and concepts. An equally important source is veterans who served during the Vietnam conflict. Veterans can contribute to a clearer understanding of the Vietnam experience.

Structure of the Class

We have developed a course on the Vietnam War designed to deal with several dilemmas. The course was taught in 1989 and 1990. We plan to teach it again in 1991. In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the Vietnam war and its aftermath, our course focuses on three major aspects of the experience: history, policy, and impact.

History

The United States intervened in Vietnam with little information about the country or its people (Center for Social Studies Education, 1988). This lack of historical perspective contributed to our policy failures in Vietnam (Williams, 1987). We believe that knowledge of the historical background of the Vietnam War is essential for a critical understanding of the role the United States plays in world politics. Some of our students may serve in political decision making capacities in later life. Without a clear comprehension of the causes of U.S. involvement, decision makers are likely to make the same mistakes as previous policy analysts.

The historical segment of the course concentrates on three important aspects of Vietnamese history. These aspects include the structure of Vietnamese society, Vietnamese response to repeated invasions, and the profound influence of Ho Chi Minh on Vietnamese nationalism.

In our lectures, we emphasize the centrality of the village to Vietnamese society. Councils of elders furnished leadership and exercised control over the life of the village. Because the village economy was agricultural, the elders usually were the largest landholders. The Chinese invaded Vietnam in 208 B.C. This invasion altered, to some degree, the dominance of the village. The Chinese imposed centralization in the form of an imperial court and an educated mandarinate. The Vietnamese successfully freed themselves from Chinese rule in 979 A.D., but retained Confucian philosophy and Chinese political structure. However, the village maintained its powerful role in Vietnamese society (Center for Social Studies Education, 1988; FitzGerald, 1973; Karrow, 1983).

We also highlight the importance of repeated invasion to Vietnamese society. Vietnamese militarism is a direct response to multiple invasions by foreign powers (Gibson, 1984; Karrow, 1983). Resistance to Chinese rule activated Vietnamese nationalism (Center for Social Studies Education, 1988). After Vietnamese warlords evicted the Chinese, Vietnam consolidated control of its own empire. France disrupted the empire in 1856 (Harrison, 1989). France again imposed centralization, disrupting village control networks and supplanting the Emperor and mandarinate (Boettcher, 1985; Harrison, 1989). During World War II, the Vietnamese were "subjected to a Franco-Japanese double yoke" (Williams et al., 1989, p. 33). The disruption of French control provided an opportunity for Vietnamese nationalists who sought to expel foreign influences (Williams et al., 1989).

By 1945 the dominant force for Vietnamese nationalism was the Vietnamese Communist Party (Beresford, 1988; Fitzgerald, 1972). Through a combination of charismatic leadership, political acumen, and outright political violence, Ho Chi Minh successfully centralized the nationalist movement (Fitzgerald, 1972; Karrow, 1983). When the Japanese lost World War II, the ensuing power vacuum in Indochina attracted both China and France.

France re-established its colonial claim through a series of negotiations with the victorious allies (Patti, 1980). The Allied decision which allowed France to return to Vietnam produced a nine-year war between the Vietnamese nationalists and the French Army (Boettcher, 1985). The United States funded a large portion of this war. French involvement ended in 1954 with their loss at continued on page 14
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Dienbienphu (Roy, 1965). Given this history, Vietnamese antipathy to American intervention is understandable.

This background provides the student a framework and context for the American war in Vietnam. The primary technique we use to present this material is lecture and discussion. However, several videos are available which deal with many of these historical events. Some of the most useful include the early segments of the 13-part Stanley Karnow (1983) series, Vietnam: A Television History, and the six-part series, The Ten-Thousand Day War. Some care should be exercised, however, in using the Karnow (1983) material because the early segments of the series tend to over-emphasize the North Vietnamese point of view.

Policy

The course also presents the policy backdrop to direct U.S. involvement. The ultimate failures in Vietnam were political, not military (Berman, 1982; Osborn, Clark, Kaufman, and Lute, 1987). We pay considerable attention to the impact of World War II on U.S. decision makers. Virtually all of the American leadership in the Truman to Nixon administrations served in U.S. government or in the U.S. armed forces during the Second World War. All remembered the 1938 Munich pact dismembering Czechoslovakia. As a result, none of these decision makers believed in appeasement of aggressors. American policy makers reacted strongly toward Soviet expansionism in the context of the Cold War. The Berlin Blockade in 1948, the ascendence of the Communists in China in 1949, and the invasion of South Korea by North Korea in 1950 reinforced these attitudes (Gibbons, 1986a; Osborn et al., 1987; Patti, 1980).

Our approach to American policy making identifies five major decision points in U.S. involvement. These turning points are the 1954 Geneva Accords, the 1963 assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, the 1965 decision to escalate, the 1968 Tet Offensive, and the 1972-1973 Paris Peace Talks.

The Geneva Accords were significant because they marked the transfer of the war effort from France to the United States. Despite the prospect for free elections, the U.S. chose to repudiate the Accords. Instead, the U.S. attempted to set up a stable South Vietnamese government under newly-appointed prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem (Boettcher, 1985; Capps, 1982; Gibbons, 1986a; Herring, 1986; Karnow, 1983).

The U.S. commitment to President Diem involved the American government deeply in South Vietnamese politics. Nevertheless, President Diem’s inability to tolerate religious and political dissent led the U.S. to acquiesce to a military coup. The deaths of President Diem and his brother Nhu during the coup committed U.S. policy to the many unstable governments which followed Diem (Hammer, 1987; Karnow, 1983).

The introduction of U.S. ground troops into Vietnam occurred in 1965. This escalation was not as the result of clear-cut policy commitments to winning in Vietnam, but as a response to U.S. domestic complications occurring during 1964 and 1965. Lyndon Johnson did not want to sacrifice his Great Society programs to the war effort, nor did he want to “lose Vietnam.” Johnson chose an expedient course of incrementally escalating the war while minimizing the size of U.S. commitment. Johnson’s decisions committed the U.S. only partially to a war which the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong viewed as total (Berman, 1982; FitzGerald, 1972; Gibbons, 1986b, 1989; Gibson, 1984; Sheehan, 1989).

By 1968, the gap between the perception and the reality of U.S. war efforts had become unmanageable. The Tet Offensive ended the increasingly difficult balancing act. The offensive undermined public support for U.S. policy decisions. Ironically, the assaults on urban centers were a military disaster for the North Vietnamese. The Tet Offensive helped to expand the U.S. anti-war movement and turned the American press against the war. These shifts caused U.S. decision makers to begin the slow withdrawal from Vietnam (Gibson, 1984; Herring, 1986; Karnow, 1983; Palmer, 1984).

The Paris Peace Accords signed in January 1973 ended the American military presence in Vietnam. American air strikes during the spring of 1972 and during December 1972 prompted the North Vietnamese to sign the treaty. Despite this victory, the treaty removed American troops from South Vietnam while allowing North Vietnamese troops to remain. This concession directly contributed to the fall of South Vietnam in 1975 (Herring, 1986; Karnow, 1983).

Our emphasis on cold war philosophy and key decision points provides the student with a perspective for judging the American war effort in Vietnam. The primary method of dissemination is lecture and discussion; however, in this segment of the course, veterans and those who participated in the protest movement present much of the material. Most communities have both veterans and protestors. A course on Vietnam can make use of these individuals. For example, two former military offices present our material on military decision making.

Impact

The Vietnam experience had a profound influence on the veteran and on American society. Several factors magnified the impact on veterans. First, the typical age of the World War II veteran was 26. The average age of the Vietnam veteran was 19. There is a substantial difference in maturity between the two ages. Second, during World War II and Korea, the typical soldier went to the theater of war as part of a unit and returned the same way. Moreover, most troops went by ship and spent up to a month at sea. By contrast, once the U.S. met initial troop ceilings in Vietnam most soldiers went to and came home from Vietnam as individuals. They arrived and departed by plane. The soldier could go from the jungles of Vietnam to their hometown in less than 48 hours. In short, Vietnam veterans had no transition and no support to ease their reintegration into U.S. society. Third, upon returning to the U.S., the soldier did not receive a hero’s welcome. In fact, for many protestors, the soldier became the visible symbol of the war. For all three reasons, many Vietnam veterans suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Broyles, 1986; Capps, 1982; Emerson, 1976; Klein, 1984; Kovic, 1976; MacPherson, 1984; O’Brien, 1990).

One of the important goals of our course is to provide an outreach to veterans. The course offers a supportive forum in which Vietnam veterans can share their experiences if they so choose. For our class, the Birmingham Vietnam Veterans Center brings in a group of Vietnam veterans who are suffering from PTSD. These discussions can be painful for all participants, yet the rewards are great. Watching the reintegration of veterans into society was an unexpected reward for us.

We also ask representatives of the state Vietnam Veterans of America, nurses, Red Cross volunteers, and U.S.O. workers who served in Vietnam to speak. Women played a significant role in Vietnam. The names of eight nurses who died in Vietnam are on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., but the names of female civilians who died in Vietnam are not. In fact, records of these volunteers are not even complete.

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We have also located one Medal of Honor recipient and the author of a book based on his experiences in Vietnam. Both have spoken during the 1990 class. What surprises the students in our films are available for use in or out of class. During the first class went to Vietnam would be willing to go again. Others who speak this year. Our students have helped us identify other potential speakers.

The class has received the 1990 Distinguished Credit Program Award from the Association of Continuing Higher Education (ACHE), Region VII. The ACHE award was presented for innovative design, uniqueness of audience, topics covered, and use of outside resources. The class has been satisfying, gut-wrenching, and rewarding to assemble and teach. The class takes energy included with this article is a copy of the syllabus and a suggested reading list. The structure of this class is adaptable for high school classes or to any level of college.

Anyone who is going to teach this type of class may contact the authors of this article. We will be glad to share our experiences with you.

Appendix. Syllabus—The Vietnam Era: History, Policy and Impact

Class: Two hours each session, twice a week.


Procedures and Evaluations: This course will consist of a series of films, lectures and discussions on the Vietnam era aimed at highlighting or clarifying material in the assigned readings. The lectures will deviate from the assigned material and the students should be aware of contrasts between the books and the lectures. Attendance will be taken in most classes. Students are to see six of nine films. The Anderson Platoon, 84 Charlie Mopic, and The Killing Fields are required films. The other films are to be viewed outside of class: two from the 1970s selection of films and one from the 1980s selection of films.

Assignment:

Class 1: Introductory. Video: Dear America

I. History
Class 2 Early Vietnamese Society. Boettcher, Chapters 1 and 2.
Class 3 Aggressors, Oppressors and Uncle Ho. Boettcher, Chapter 3.
Class 5 Sending Men to War. Guest Speaker: The Drill Instructor.

II. Policy
Class 7 Political Decision Making. Boettcher, Chapter 7.
Class 8 Political Decision Making.
Class 12 TEST II—Essay. Film: Go Tell the Spartans (1978)

III. Impact
Class 14 The Platoon Leader, Guest Speaker. Film: Coming Home (1978)
Class 15 The Platoon Master Sergeant and Author. Guest Speaker. Book: Memories
Class 17 The Medal of Honor Recipient. Guest Speaker.
Class 18 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Commentary. Guest Panel.

Note: This syllabus and subject of lectures changes depending on available speakers.

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Significance of Ratifying Conventions

A talk show host invites his audience to join him in a time machine back to the 18th Century where he interviews thirteen Founders, one from each state, on their perspective of their state's ratifying convention. The role playing activity focuses attention on some topics of the Federalist/Antifederalist debates; each state's political, economic, cultural and social conditions and their impact on the ratification convention; and the significance of the conventions.

This activity is a good teaching tool to complete a unit on the Constitutional underpinnings of the American government and political system in a secondary level (10-12) government/political science/citizenship class. It is based on Ratifying the Constitution, edited by Michael Gillespie, Duke University, and Michael Lienesch, University of North Carolina; University of Kansas Press, 1989.

The lesson plan can be ordered prepaid for $6.50 (includes shipping costs) from:

Mary M. Thomas
President
Advanced Placement Government and Politics
Woodrow Wilson High School
Beckley, WV 25801

(Home address: P.O. Box 444, Beaver, WV 25813)

Commentary on Curricula
What I Learned About Politics on Campus
by Kara Kinney, Class of 1990
Syracuse University

In the fall of 1986, I agreed to meet with a handful of students and a Policy Studies professor to discuss undergraduate education at Syracuse University. I had no idea that four years later I would be referred to as "founding member and president of Undergraduates for a Better Education." I'm still trying to sort out exactly what happened and how it affected me. It's true that, in the beginning, I was idealistic and had hopes for great improvement at the university. It's also true that the more I learned about how the university works, the less confident I felt that anything could be accomplished by an energetic, but somewhat naive group of students. At this point, I'm wavering between "Wow, I was president of a national student organization!" and "Higher education is a mess and it will always be a mess and what good did any of it do?" In spite of this indecision about what I actually accomplished, I have little doubt about what I learned.

Structural problems do largely account for a university's shortcomings. Many of our proposals for change were met with an administrator's explanation of logistical problems. At first, we were convinced that our ideas were being brushed away with excuses. I finally began to realize that there are serious structural problems in university communities which prevent even small changes from being made. One dean told us early on, "You fix one problem, you get twenty more." I didn't really believe him at the time. Now I do. Also, there are structural problems in motivating students to take steps toward improvement. It's not easy to find a student who will complain about an incompetent professor who teaches a ridiculously easy course.

It is also true that we discovered that no one person runs the university. What was also interesting, however, is how many people think they're running it. Administrators and faculty who convinced us they were critical in some decision making process sometimes turned out to be irrelevant. What is heartening is that there seems to be a consensus among the people at the top administrative level as to who really counts.

While I agree that we learned about cooperation, conflict and building coalitions, I feel that it is difficult for a fledgling organization to distinguish between having allies and becoming coopted. We were repeatedly encouraged by faculty, administrators and student leaders to remain independent. We were warned that becoming affiliated may limit our ability to act in certain situations. Because of this, we were very wary of joining forces with others. In addition, we underestimated our own abilities and did not recognize the need for allies until projects were well under way. Since we were doing everything for the first time, we couldn't anticipate what we required. In either case, this lesson was a difficult one to learn.

I also agree that the national conferences helped us on campus. It is difficult to measure exactly what gains we may have made. One thing that is certain is that students, faculty and administrators were noticeably more interested in what we would do next.

I cannot emphasize enough how important research and managerial skills were in the founding and development of our organization. In a classroom situation, a professor can shout "What's your evidence?" a hundred times and students will still think they can fake it. When we first met with administrators to discuss a

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