

The Vietnam War Era's Impact on American Society

By

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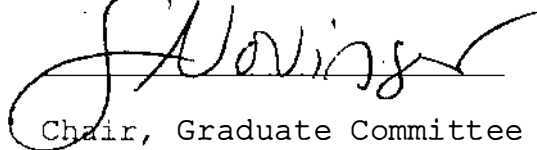
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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at the Vietnam War and the impact it had on American society. The paper first takes a brief look at what other historians have written about Vietnam and the scholarship that currently exists on the topic. My original scholarship focuses on the TET offensive and the impact the media had on the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson. Even though the United States was victorious during the TET offensive, it proved to the American public that the Viet Cong would not concede defeat and at that critical point public opinion changed and support for the War waned dramatically. Finally, this thesis looks at teaching the Vietnam War to high school students. I created a Professional Portfolio of resources, utilizing Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, usable in the classroom to enhance student learning.

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## Chapter One: Historiography

"To history has been given the task of judging the past, of instructing men for the benefit of future years. The present attempt does not inspire to such a lofty undertaking. It merely wishes to show how things happened in their own right."<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Leopold Von Ranke, about the history of the Latin and Teutonic people, also rings true to the Vietnam War in American history. Many have passed judgment on the quagmire into which Vietnam turned, but as historians say, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. It is sometimes easy to look past events and question the intentions of those in office that made the decision to send troops to Vietnam. Nearly thirty-five years have passed since the last troops came home in 1974 and historians are beginning to tackle the difficult task of analyzing the Vietnam War and its impact on American culture. There have been a number of different historical interpretations of Vietnam and this paper will attempt to place the Vietnam War in a historical context by focusing on what historians have written about Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup> David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

In order to look at what historians have written Vietnam, it is imperative to investigate some of the causes of the war. The Vietnam War was arguably the most divisive war in American history. Many remained supportive of the military's attempt to save South Vietnam from the communist North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh; however, there were other individuals who believed the United States had no business being in Vietnam. The American government believed Southeast Asia was the key to containing communism and defeating the Soviet Union. American involvement in Vietnam can be traced back to the 1950s when Vietnam was still under French control. The United States realized even then how significant Southeast Asia was in hopes of containing communism and winning the Cold War. China had recently fallen to communism and the U.S. wanted to ensure that the rest of Asia remained democratic and pro-West. Because of everything that had occurred in Vietnam the United States decided to send troops to Vietnam in 1962.<sup>2</sup>

The Vietnam War can be viewed as an extension of the policies employed in Southeast Asia from the end of WWII to the 1970s when American troops were finally brought home. President Lyndon B. Johnson moved away from the policies of his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, and decided to use

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

military force where Kennedy and the administration before him believed military action was not warranted.<sup>3</sup> Kennedy knew he did not have the support from American allies in Europe and that dissuaded from taking action, Johnson felt he needed to use military force, believing Vietnam was the key to containing communism. Johnson believed he had to act because he feared if he appeased North Vietnam, the problem faced by the British and the French during WWII would be problems faced by America this time around.<sup>4</sup>

The Vietnam War was controversial, but even individuals opposed to the War believed the United States would be victorious. North Vietnam was a small country that would be unable to compete with the superior military force of the United States. The U.S. miscalculated a number of things however, and the Viet Cong proved to be a much tougher opponent than initially expected. They were able to recruit new members much easier and quicker than the U.S. anticipated, which meant even as body counts for the Viet Cong increased the dead were quickly replaced by new recruits. In addition, the United States was unable to strike a major blow to the Viet Cong's military strength because the Viet Cong launched their biggest offensive

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 486.

three years into the War, the TET offensive of 1968. Public support suffered at home because it was becoming increasingly clear that the war was going to be drawn out longer than anyone had anticipated. Losing public support at home was a major downfall of the Vietnam War because troops going overseas were now facing a disgruntled American public that looked at them as baby killers.<sup>5</sup>

Many people have argued the U.S. was simply fighting to illustrate its dominance to the rest of the world, especially after the stalemate in the Korean War in the 1950s. After years of fighting in Southeast Asia however, the U.S. was unable to claim victory, and it was apparent on the home front that the country was ready for peace. The American people were simply tired of their brothers being sent to their death for a losing war; which was made quite clear to newly elected President Richard Nixon; the American people were ready for peace. It would take until 1974 before American troops were finally brought home. Nixon pledged to de-escalate the war when he took office, but instead sent troops into Cambodia, something he promised not to do, but the dark days of the Vietnam War were finally over.<sup>6</sup> This paper will now take an in-depth

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 490-491.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 492.

look at what historians have had to say about the Vietnam War and its implications American culture.

The first area to be discussed is the impact the Vietnam War had on foreign policy before, during, and after the War. Vietnam had a profound impact on American foreign policy for years before actual involvement in Southeast Asia, and its impact on foreign policy is still being felt today. One could make the argument that no other war in American history has had as significant an impact on how the United States perceived its place as a global power. Vietnam has made American Presidents rethink sending troops into combat without the support of the American people, and without support from the United Nations.

A key player in American foreign policy during the Vietnam War was Senator William Fulbright, who was the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Historian William Berman took an in-depth look at the policies of Fulbright. The aim of his book was to illustrate the impact the Vietnam War had on Fulbright, and to bring into the larger context of how the War affected his decisions regarding American foreign policy. Fulbright had never been in favor of Johnson's decision to send troops to Vietnam during the early 1960s, however, his thinking underwent a metamorphosis and he became one of the

most influential individuals in the antiwar movement.<sup>7</sup>

Berman's focus is on what caused this shift in Fulbright's thinking. In 1966 Fulbright became apprehensive about America's role as a global power; he believed there were more pressing issues facing the country, such as striking some sort of balance between the economy and the American political system, hoping that big business and government could co-exist. Berman illustrated how Fulbright believed that Vietnam was dictating too much of American foreign policy.

According to Berman:

"Hence, he (Fulbright) urged policy makers to come to terms with that reality by avoiding fruitless military interventions that did little other than squander and to waste valuable human and economic resources at home and abroad."<sup>8</sup>

Berman showed how Fulbright, as a political realist, had his views changed by what was occurring in Vietnam.

Historian Randall Bennett Woods also centered his view of Cold War foreign policy on the ideas of William Fulbright. He illustrates Fulbright's insistence that U.S. foreign policy was becoming far too militaristic. The United States was at a crossroads as a global super power, and Fulbright believed Vietnam illustrated that American

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<sup>7</sup> William Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

foreign policy was beginning a downward spiral. Woods shows how Fulbright spoke out against the Vietnam War in 1966, hoping to educate the American public. He further depicts how Fulbright believed the U.S. would be better off allowing nations to follow nationalistic goals instead of pushing democracy on a people that was not interested in living in a democracy. America would benefit greatly from accepting China and Vietnam as communist nations and by using diplomacy to arrange a compromise.<sup>9</sup> Fulbright believed that like many great nations that over extended themselves in their foreign policies; the United States was on a decline making the same mistakes nations like Britain and France had made in the past, which would lead to the decline of the United States as a major superpower.

When looking at foreign policy it is also imperative to explore some of the works written shortly after the Vietnam War to capture how Americans were thinking at the end of the War. Historian Simon Serfaty offers insight into Cold War foreign policy and how it was applied to Vietnam. He argues that Americans were looking to limit involvement abroad in the 1960s believing that America was intervening in outside affairs too frequently. Americans

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<sup>9</sup> Randall Bennett Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 124-126.

were also becoming skeptical of the government during the 1960s, no longer did individuals take what the government said as the truth; people were beginning to question their leaders openly. Serfaty illustrates how individuals displayed more activism against policies they believed were hurting the country.<sup>10</sup>

In recent years American foreign policy has been affected by what happened in Vietnam during the 1960s and early 1970s. Richard Melanson looks at how America has searched for a new foreign policy since the end of the War. The negative publicity that surrounded the Vietnam caused future Presidents to have to convince Congress and the public to trust their new foreign policies. Trust is not easily earned and because of Vietnam, many in the public sphere have been apprehensive of new government policies. During the Reagan administration many of the policies revolved around the idea of creating trust with America. Reagan was in office during the waning years of the Cold War so he could still use anti-communist rhetoric, but he had tread lightly, he knew that he had to stay away from any foreign policies that would remind the American public of Vietnam. According to Melanson "By ridiculing rival

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Serfaty, *The Elusive Enemy: American Foreign Policy since World War II* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 16-18.

governments and lavishing praise on the American people, Reagan was able to pursue an essentially cautious foreign policy that largely replaced deeds with words."<sup>11</sup> Reagan was unable to use decisive force because Americans were tired of war.

Melanson illustrated how difficult it was for President Bill Clinton, who inherited a number of foreign relation problems, including problems with North Korea, Somalia, and Russia. The problems in Somalia proved to be the toughest because they reminded many Americans of Vietnam. There were differences, the U.S. was no longer looking to contain communism as it had during the 1960s, but the military was deployed to fight a battle in which many believed America had no business being involved. Even with Vietnam well in the past, Presidents have faced pressure based on foreign policy decisions because they do not want to make a mistake and get the U.S. military involved in the next Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

The affect Vietnam had on foreign policy has been an important avenue of research but historians have also looked at how the Vietnam War impacted life in America. Vietnam altered the way Americans viewed the role of the

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<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Melanson, *American Foreign Policy Since the Vietnam War: The Search for Consensus from Nixon to Clinton* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 296.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

military and how it should be used in foreign conflicts. The antiwar movement brought many issues to the people and united a large number of college students behind one cause, ending the War and bringing American soldiers home. The War also had a dramatic impact on the lives of the soldiers sent to fight in a War they were not necessarily supporting. People began to rethink the idea of the draft and how it affected thousands of lives.

The antiwar movement during the Vietnam War was the largest and longest antiwar campaign, spanning roughly from 1965-1972. Historian Melvin Small believes that Americans felt they were performing their patriotic duty by protesting the War. Americans had a civic responsibility to speak out against the injustices of the Vietnam War. According to Small, "although never able to create enough pressure on decision makers to end the U.S involvement in the War, it served as a major constraint on their abilities to escalate."<sup>13</sup> One of the major aims of the antiwar movement was to keep pressure on Congress in hopes of deescalating the War.

Small also focused on how the antiwar movement became a mass movement. Individuals in every walk of life were

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<sup>13</sup> Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Wilmington, Delaware: A scholarly Resource Inc. Imprint, 2002), 1.

opposed to the War. It seemed antiwar sentiments encompassed every aspect of daily life for many Americans. Small shows how women, African Americans, and even former soldiers were becoming part of the fight to end the War. This put pressure on the Johnson administration to discredit the antiwar movement in hopes of regaining some public support. Johnson used the CIA in an attempt to link the antiwar movement to communists living in the Soviet Union. He believed the antiwar was being financed by communists living outside of the country; they were not, and unable to provide this link Johnson could not fully discredit the movement. The antiwar movement actually gained strength during the time they were being investigated by the CIA.<sup>14</sup> Small did a masterful job of illustrating how the antiwar movement put a great deal of pressure on the Johnson administration.

It is also important to look at the impact the Vietnam War had on the lives of the soldiers who were sent into battle. Historian John Helmer has taken an in-depth look at Vietnam and the soldiers that were sent to Southeast Asia. Vietnam, more so than any other War, left a lasting impression on those who were a part of the combat. Many veterans fell victim to substance abuse problems when they

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 60-64.

came home; many of these individuals were looking for ways to cope with the horrible things they saw during combat. Helmer alludes to the fact that the military tolerated marijuana use as long as it did not affect a soldier's performance. However, during the Vietnam War heroine use became rather heavy among soldiers. He points out that close to 10 percent of those in drug treatment after the War were veterans.<sup>15</sup> While this is not an astronomical figure, it demonstrates how drug use in Vietnam led to problems for soldiers when they returned home.

Helmer also discussed the role of Vietnam veterans in the antiwar movement when they returned from combat. The main aim of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) was to gain enough media publicity to attract new members. In gaining media attention they were able to attract other soldiers to speak out against the War. Helmer also illustrated how veterans were not only looking for an immediate end to the War, but also for changes in the political system that would keep another Vietnam from ever occurring in the future.<sup>16</sup> His work helped show how many veterans really felt about the Vietnam War.

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<sup>15</sup> John Helmer, *Bringing the War Home: The American Soldier in Vietnam and After* (New York, NY: The Free Press: A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co. , Inc., 1974), 84.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Historians have also looked at the African American experience in the Vietnam War. Many people believed the Vietnam War offered African Americans the opportunity to join the military and fight side by side with white soldiers. African Americans would then have the chance to break many of the stereotypes that had plagued them, including the idea that they lacked discipline and intelligence. Fighting in the same units as white soldiers would give African Americans the chance to prove their equality. Historian James Westheider believes this was not the case and has chronicled a number of racial incidents that plagued the military from 1968-1973.<sup>17</sup>

Westheider illustrated the violence that was taking place by discussing a racially charged riot that occurred on Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The riot, initiated by African American and Hispanic soldiers, was symptomatic of the racial problems that were plaguing many military installations at home and abroad. On military bases all over the country there was racial tension waiting to explode. Westheider believes this stemmed from the black power movement and many African Americans feeling out of place and threatened by white soldiers, so they in turn

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<sup>17</sup> James E. Westheider, *Fighting on two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 3.

created groups based on race pride and solidarity.<sup>18</sup> There were a number of different factors that contributed to this racial violence. The biggest being the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the behavior exhibited by many whites after this tragic event. African Americans were incensed with rage by the behavior of white soldiers upon hearing of King's assassination. This was not the only factor but it played a significant role in the racial tension present on many military bases. Measuring the effect of combat on soldiers in Vietnam can be a difficult task. Clearly, Vietnam has had some impact on the lives of these soldiers, which can be measured by the number of veterans that have been treated for drug problems. Historians have attempted to put these soldiers' stories into a coherent discourse of the Vietnam War, and on a whole they have succeeded.

Vietnam has had a profound impact on American culture. The Vietnam War was engrained into the minds of most Americans because of the extensive media coverage of the War. Vietnam was covered more than any other War and Americans were seeing footage from the War for the first time in American history. Historian Chester Pach, Jr. tackled the difficult issue of the media's role in the Vietnam War. He believes the media did a better job of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

representing the War for what it truly was "a confused, fragmented, and questionable endeavor."<sup>19</sup> Pach believes many intellectuals were being overly critical of the media because this was the first war the media had tried to tackle, and in his opinion they did an acceptable job. The media allowed individuals to draw their own connections based on the footage they were seeing. Pach admits this information was biased and the public was not being told everything but the media still gave a picture of the War the public had never seen before.<sup>20</sup>

Pach did a masterful job of illustrating how the media affected individuals' perceptions of the War whether they knew it did or not. It would be difficult to get an accurate number of people who would admit how television coverage affected their beliefs on the War, but there seems to be a correlation with the increase of War protestors and the increased news coverage after the TET offensive. Whether people were willing to admit it or not television coverage of the Vietnam War affected their perceptions of the War.<sup>21</sup>

American culture has been scarred by the events of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War had a dramatic effect on the

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<sup>19</sup> Chester Pach, Jr. David Farber, *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 91.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

way Americans viewed their place in the world. After WWII most Americans believed the United States had a divine obligation to spread democracy throughout the world. Historian Fred Turner illustrates how this sense of purpose was shattered by the Vietnam War. Vietnam left many Americans questioning whether or not the country should be involved in so many foreign conflicts. Young Americans, mostly college students, were infuriated because they believed the rich waged the WAR and the poor fought it. This discontent led to the largest antiwar movement in American history and caused a great cultural divide.<sup>22</sup>

Turner felt the United States was close to collapse in 1968 because of the TET offensive, the assassination of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy; the American way of life was facing a direct attack.<sup>23</sup> Turner shows how Americans became apprehensive of their leaders during the 1960s, feeling they were being misled. This had a direct affect on how Americans perceived themselves, no longer was America an untouchable superpower, and for many Americans this was difficult to comprehend. Turner describes American sentiment during the 1960s as being cautiously optimistic,

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<sup>22</sup> Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York, NY: Anchor Books: Doubleday, 1994), 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

but at the same time damaged from the events of the Vietnam War.<sup>24</sup>

Intellectuals have also had a great deal to say about the Vietnam War. President Kennedy made sure he had the best minds of his time at his disposal, and many of these individuals changed their views because of the Vietnam War. Historian Robert R. Tomes believes Vietnam transformed the way intellectuals viewed the world. Tomes feels that Vietnam split the way people think into two, there was no longer a consensus as there had been in previous wars.

According to Tomes

"To the nation's most active minds, Vietnam was not only a specific policy matter but much more. It was a symbolic and historic event which, taken as a whole, revealed the essence of American ideals and the capacity of American ideas."<sup>25</sup>

The Cold War was a crusade against communism and for many intellectuals this was the good fight, however, as Vietnam became more drawn out than any one anticipated their thinking also began to change.

Tomes believes this change in thinking brought about the end of the liberalism of the 1950s and 1960s and introduced America to the neo-conservatism still present today. In the 1960s liberals were viewed as idealistic

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>25</sup> Robert R. Tomes, *Apocalypse Thén: American Intellectual and the Vietnam War, 1954-1975* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998), 2-3.

antiwar activists, believing that the United States was overstepping its bounds. Thinking like this started intellectuals on a crusade to prove that the War was wrong and spent much of their energy on the antiwar movement. After the War was over the idealism of the 1960s was clearly gone and replaced with a neo-conservative view of America. In this America, there would be no more crusades like Vietnam; therefore, liberalism was dead in the intellectual realm.<sup>26</sup> Tomes offers an interesting take on how Vietnam changed intellectual thinking during the years following the Vietnam War. The neo-conservatism Tomes spoke of is still being felt today.

Many writers chose to focus solely on the American experience in Vietnam failing to consider how the War affected the lives of those living in Vietnam. Many individuals have also failed to look at why the Viet Cong was victorious; instead, they focused on American ineptitude. Historian William J. Duiker explored the other side of the coin, focusing on the impact of the War had on the Vietnamese, and how they are still coping with the results of the War, similar to how many Americans are still learning to cope with the event of Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> He focused a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 233-234.

<sup>27</sup> William Duiker, Ed. Kenton Clymer, *The Vietnam War: Its History, Literature and Music* (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1998), 42.

great deal of attention to the idea that the North Vietnamese did not learn the right lessons from the War in Vietnam. They became arrogant, feeling invincible, after the War. The North Vietnamese only needed to look at what happened to the United States after WWII, for a lesson in what not to do. The U.S. believed they had to spread democracy throughout the world, which later led to defeat in Vietnam. Duiker contends that North Vietnam should have taken a lesson from the U.S. and focused more attention to nation building instead of looking to form military alliances.<sup>28</sup> Duiker brings up a number of interesting points but at time makes assertions that are not fully supported. Comparing North Vietnam after the Vietnam War to the United States after WWII is quite difficult especially when looking at the size of both countries. The U.S. also fought WWII on foreign soil where as North Vietnam was bombed heavily for over a decade. Nation building may have helped to stabilize North Vietnam but they did not have the infrastructure in place to turn their country into an economic super power, in many ways they were like a third world country after the war.

Historians such as Howard Zinn have taken up the task of trying to make sense of the Vietnam War and have began

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 44.

to offer a different perspective on the War. Zinn is arguably the most respected writer in this school of thought, attempting to explain why Vietnam was an impossible victory for the United States. He believes the United States lost the War not only in the Mekong Valley, but in the Mississippi Valley as well. While Zinn did not break any new ground with this idea he does, however, offer the reader a new idea; that the government admitted for the first time that public opinion had a profound affect on Presidents Johnson and Nixon, and caused them to scrap plans to escalate the War.<sup>29</sup> Zinn illustrated how the voice of minorities went a long way toward ending the War, believing that it was important for them to garner some credit in shaping public opinion and policy.

American filmmakers have also done a number of major movies on the Vietnam War. These films have had different themes but all were looking to bring meaning to the War and attempting to make sense of a War that was difficult to understand. Many filmmakers borrowed from what they had viewed on nightly newscasts to help construct their opinion of what was happening in the War. They later drew on these images to aid them in creating a backdrop for their films,

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<sup>29</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 14920-Present* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1995), 491-492.

and ultimately helped shape a national consciousness of the Vietnam War. It is also critical to look at what film critics and cinema professors have had to say about the Vietnam War in American film.

The film, *The Night of the Living Dead*, produced in 1968 by George Romero, was a film that represented the horrors of the Vietnam War. Sumiko Higashi, former cinema Professor at SUNY Brockport, has attempted to tackle this difficult comparison. She contends that the movie has hidden meaning, and one can ascertain from the movie what was happening in the late 1960s. The movie was made right after the TET offensive and the U.S. military was on the proverbial ropes, and winning the War seemed impossible. *The Night of the Living Dead* signified the struggle of America to win the War in Vietnam and the chaotic experience that was occurring at home. While there was no Vietnamese in the movie it is still clear the filmmaker is making reference to the events in Vietnam, mainly the helplessness many soldiers felt when they were deployed into combat.<sup>30</sup>

One of the first films to tackle the difficult theme of the Vietnam War was *The Deer Hunter*, directed by Michael

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<sup>30</sup> Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, Ed., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 183.

Cimino in 1978. Professor of Cinema Studies, Leonard Quart, believes this movie introduced Americans to the idea that there were supermen fighting in Vietnam. By illustrating the main character, Michael Vronsky's will and heroism the director is able to show the American soldier as a guiltless victim of the War he is fighting; at the same time making the Viet Cong into the savage enemy that must be conquered.<sup>31</sup> Quart shows how the movie depicts Vietnam as a slaughterhouse, but at the end of the War, the Americans were not responsible for anything that occurred. The American soldier is placed on a pedestal in this movie and is capable of doing no wrong.

One of the most influential movies on the Vietnam War was *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola in 1979. Frank Tomasulo, Professor of cinema at Ithaca College, looked at this movie as being both a pro-war and antiwar film. Tomasulo believes that Coppola had both messages present in this movie because it shows that there was both a national ambivalence towards the War and a covering up of this ambivalence.<sup>32</sup> He also refers to a brawl in the movie at a USO show, to illustrate that there was no clear political direction in Washington.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 147.

According to Tomasulo

"By subordinating content to style and foregrounding aesthetic ambiguity and richness, the director secondarized the ideological implications of a deeply political question- the Vietnam War."<sup>33</sup>

Tomasulo shows how Coppola was effective in conveying his message of the War through his movie. *Apocalypse Now* offers the viewer a trip inside the Vietnam War many never heard about, while at the same time raising some important questions pertaining to the politics of the War.

The movie *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone in 1986, offers another interesting perspective of the Vietnam War. Cinema Professor at Tufts University, Clyde Taylor, has focused his attention on the colonial subtext to the movie. Taylor chose to look at the relationship between black and white soldiers in the movie, and believes that black soldiers were forced to behave in particular ways. They were to be good soldiers, who never questioned their commanding officers. Looking at the movie, however, one can see the characters of King and Junior, both black, looked more acceptable based on their recognition of western values.<sup>34</sup> Junior is accepted because he is in the line with the thinking of Barnes, who is the commanding officer, whereas, King is not as highly regarded because he

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 174.

is more in line with the thinking of Elias, whose character is in direct conflict with Barnes. Taylor asserts that if a black man were cast as Charlie Sheen's character, he would have been demonized at the end of the movie for killing Barnes. However, it was justifiable by viewers because he was white.<sup>35</sup> The average movie watcher will not look this deeply at the movie, but it does raise some important questions about race relations during the Vietnam War.

The final film to be looked at is one of the most popular movies made about Vietnam, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, produced in 1985. Professor of Popular Culture at the University of Kentucky, Gregory Waller attempted to make sense of the movie as it pertained to the Vietnam War. Rambo offers America another attempt to fight in Vietnam, this time the United States gets to win. Losing has never been an accepted part of the American psyche and Rambo offered America the chance to regain some of its lost pride. Rambo's character, the lone hero, sent behind enemy lines, also proves that one superb American soldier can take down the enemy, while at the same time, accomplishing his mission, rescuing American POWs.<sup>36</sup> Waller

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 115.

illustrates how Rambo's mission provides Americans with the revenge many have wanted since the end of the Vietnam War. Americans may have wanted the War to be over but they also wanted to be victorious and this provided the nation an opportunity to feel like the War was won.

Hollywood has played a vital role in interpreting the meaning of the Vietnam War to the American public. This only looked at a few of the movies that have dealt with the Vietnam War, and provides general understanding of what filmmakers were trying to convey the American public. While movies covered different themes they were all attempting to make to bring understanding to the American people, and for some filmmakers their movies reflected their personal beliefs and how they perceived the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War was a dilemma in American history. Making sense of what happened in Vietnam could take thousands of pages, and one could spend their life trying. Looking at what a number of historians have said will allow one to make conclusions based on their research. The Vietnam War is relatively fresh in the American mind and it may take many more years for new studies to be completed. I believe there will be a great deal more written on the Vietnam War simply because as time has passed the war has

remained a difficult topic to discuss. There needs to be more studies done on long-term impact of the war on veterans. The Vietnam War left more veterans in rehabilitation than any other war, and now as these people are getting older the story behind their drug use in Vietnam may start to be studied. Vietnam impacted every facet of American life. One can make this assumption by looking at the variety of research written about Vietnam.

## Chapter Two: The TET Offensive

Many Americans have judged the Vietnam War, but it is often uncomplicated to critique only when fully aware of the mistakes made. It is easy for people to question those in office who sent troops to Vietnam in the first place. President Lyndon B. Johnson has been arguably the most scrutinized public servant over his role in the Vietnam War. Many individuals, termed "the Doves", were upset when Johnson escalated American combat aims, believing the Republic of South Vietnam should be taking a larger role in the fighting. On the other hand, "the Hawks" believed Johnson was too soft with his Vietnam policies. They wanted a concentrated War, believing the United States could easily defeat North Vietnam. While the debate between the Hawks and the Doves raged, Johnson attempted to satisfy both camps and for most of his term in office, he succeeded. A majority of people supported the War effort and Johnson had the support of Congress. One year, 1968, would change that and forever alter the American consciousness in respect to the Vietnam War.

A series of coordinated attacks on January 31, 1968 began a division that pervaded through almost every facet of American society. The TET offensive, planned around the

Vietnamese holiday, was by most accounts a victory for the United States and the South Vietnamese, but North Vietnam scored a crucial triumph. For the first time members of Congress openly questioned President Johnson and his Vietnam policies. At the same time, the evening news horrified Americans with images they saw on the nightly newscast. The Viet Cong, even while losing most of the battles, was able to use the TET offensive as a major psychological turning point in the War. President Johnson began to lose public approval soon after the attacks on January 31<sup>st</sup>. TET solidified the North Vietnamese as a worthy adversary and convinced many Americans that the War could not be won. It is critical to look at the military response to the TET offensive to understand if it could have been handled differently. This paper will focus on the TET offensive and its impact on the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson as well as the media's role in shaping public opinion in the United States.

In understanding the TET offensive from the point of view of the United States military, it is important to take a brief look at how the Lao Dong party of North Vietnam interpreted the battles of the TET offensive. They came out with their initial assessments of the attacks in the beginning of March and believed TET was an unprecedented

success. They were able to inflict heavier losses on the allied forces than in any other battles leading up to that point in the War. The Viet Cong also believed they weakened American morale because of the intense fighting and the heavy casualties they were able to inflict on the allied forces.<sup>37</sup> The North believed they were able to infiltrate the nerve centers of the allied forces particularly in Saigon and Hue. Staging coordinated attacks allowed the North, in their analysis, to replenish supply lines and take back regions in the countryside secured by the allied forces. Finally, they believed that their fighting force became much more mature during the offensive and new military leadership was stepping forward.<sup>38</sup> Even with all of this success, the Lao Dong Party did see a number of important issues that were not resolved by the New Year offensive.

An inability to initiate a movement of the masses to rise up against the allied forces and join the side of the Communists was a major concern to North Vietnam. Staging a mass movement of the peasantry in the countryside was a major aim of TET and failing to accomplish this diminished the perceived military success they were aiming to achieve.

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<sup>37</sup> George Katsiaficas, *Vietnam Documents: American and Vietnamese Views of the War*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe., 1992), 102.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

They believed this was more of a planning problem because many in the military believed there was no clear strategy in place to convince the South Vietnamese to rise up and join the North.<sup>39</sup> An inability to communicate the messages of the Lao Dong Party in a coordinated manner was another major obstacle; if they could pass along their political message in a more efficient manner, they could gain more support and converts from the South.

The Lao Dong Party also failed to replenish their troops and supplies quickly enough to sustain the offensive into a new phase of continued attacks throughout the spring. Even while North Vietnam believed TET was a major military success, they still failed accomplish some of their major goals, and if they were going to turn the tide of the War to their favor in 1968, they would have to accomplish all of these ambitions.<sup>40</sup> Interpreting the North Vietnamese reaction to the TET offensive one could be led to believe that the United States was badly beaten; the United States, however, had a much different interpretation of the same event.

Many military officials looked at the TET offensive as a clear victory for the Allied forces. These battles were

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 104.

not even debatable, as far as General William Westmoreland was concerned. Many of the initial reports submitted had the allied forces killing roughly five Viet Cong soldiers for every one slain American Soldier. One major flaw in this logic is the fact that the United States numbers were often inflated because they could not find the bodies of their counterpart, in part because of the guerrilla warfare the North Vietnamese employed, and because often there were no bodies left to count after air strikes incinerated the Viet Cong. Optimism after the initial battles was rather high because of these high kill rates.<sup>41</sup>In most cases the North Vietnamese were driven out of cities after two to three days of fighting, but the fighting was the most intense and bloody fighting that had taken place up to that point in the War. Both sides suffered more casualties during the TET offensive than in any other period of the War up to that point in 1968.

The most intense fighting took place around and in the cities of Saigon and Hue. The allied units responded quickly but they were not prepared for urban combat. The Viet Cong was almost able to overrun the entire city of Hue before the allied forces reacted, but in the end, the

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<sup>41</sup> David M. Barrett, *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: a Documentary Collection*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 576-577.

allied forces fought admirably and were able to defeat the Viet Cong, and the cities of Hue and Saigon began to return to normal by the middle of March 1968.<sup>42</sup> When all of the reports were submitted after the offensive, the final fatality rates had five thousand Viet Cong dead versus five hundred allied soldiers killed. While this was clearly a victory for the allied forces, the US raised serious questions regarding military readiness and intelligence gathering.

Washington was much more shocked by the TET offensive than the military people overseeing things in Vietnam. They had received no warning in the days leading up to the January 31<sup>st</sup> attack, they had only been informed that the enemy was planning something around the TET holiday but were given no specifics.<sup>43</sup> General Westmoreland failed to keep Washington informed of what was happening in the days before the first attacks, but was not entirely at fault. He knew there were going to be attacks and that they were being coordinated around the TET holiday but his intelligence failed to locate where the attacks were going to take place. Problems relaying intelligence when the attacks first began also left the military confused for

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<sup>42</sup> James J. Wirtz, *The TET Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 231.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235.

much of the first twenty-four hours of the offensive. Information was delayed getting from the battle sights back to the military command center, and many of the first reports were unreliable, which left the command with little to report to Washington. After the initial wave, the military stabilized its efforts and the intelligence subsequently improved, from that point on it was much more reliable.<sup>44</sup>

One conclusion drawn from the intelligence gathered before TET and the response to the first attacks is that General Westmoreland knew an attack was coming; however, he was not prepared to handle the timing of the initial battles. What is unclear is why he did not have the allied forces better prepared to fight? The allied forces were able to defeat the North but it seems as if Westmoreland failed to gauge the resolve of the enemy.<sup>45</sup> It also looks as if Westmoreland and his commanders failed to anticipate the intensity, scope, and nature of the offensive. Given the information the allied forces were able to get from the Viet Cong, the troops should have been better equipped to deal with an offensive that's main goal was to turn the tide of the war in favor of the North. The United States

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. , 235.

<sup>45</sup> Barrett, p. 571.

military was victorious to an extent but the TET offensive brought some troubling revelations to the forefront. TET proved to be some of the most intense fighting of the War, and it came at a time when the administration was reassuring Americans that the war was winnable. President Johnson had some difficult questions in front of him and the attacks that started on January 31, 1968 would forever alter his legacy in American history. Johnson was one of the most active Presidents in terms of passing legislation. His Great Society offered people hope for the future, especially in the area of race relations, but Lyndon Johnson will forever be remembered for Vietnam.

The United States, like North Vietnam, believed 1968 could be a critical turning point in the War. Going into 1968, President Johnson was given every indication that there was a light at the end of the tunnel concerning ending the war in Vietnam. The TET offensive came as a surprise to those in the White House, who had not been notified by the military commanders in Vietnam that an attack was imminent. While the initial attacks came as a surprise there was still determination in the White House that the War could still be won. The initial reports clearly backed this belief that the allied forces were winning the TET offensive. One major point of contention

arose when the TET offensive began and President Johnson began losing support of the public and in Congress.

President Johnson was faced with problems on two fronts. He no longer had to worry just about what North Vietnam was doing but he also had to regain mass support for his war effort. According to Johnson:

In one way or another in the days ahead, we have to rally our country so that the enemy comes to believe that we will insist on even handed applications of rules of international law . . . like the armistice agreements in Korea and the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962.<sup>46</sup>

Johnson was astute at gauging the public response to what was happening in Vietnam and after TET it was clear many Americans had become tired of the War. The United States would need a renewed war effort if it was to bring a successful conclusion to the Vietnam War. Johnson arranged for General Westmoreland to give daily addresses to the media about how the allied forces were thwarting the Viet Cong attacks and would ultimately come out of the War victorious.<sup>47</sup> This was all taking place in early February just after the offensive began, and Johnson was still disinclined to commit to a policy change in Vietnam.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. , 578.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. , 580.

President Johnson was unwilling to show any sign of weakness or retreat. He was convinced that the United States needed to surge forward to show the Viet Cong that the United States would not back down because of the new offensive. On February 9, 1968 in addressing his cabinet, Johnson made it clear that as the Viet Cong changed their tactics the United States and the allied forces would change their tactics as well. In his mind, the allied forces would continue to match the Viet Cong; if they added fifteen thousand more men, the allied forces would match them. He also started to show signs of discontent with the South Vietnamese Government and its President Nguyen Van Thieu. Johnson believed the United States was so entrenched in South East Asia that the South Vietnamese should do what the United States asked of it, and if that meant lowering the draft age to eighteen like the United States, they should do it with no questions asked.<sup>48</sup>

President Johnson was unwilling to budge on his stance in Vietnam even as discontent continued to grow at home. In early February he still believed the War could be won. He was willing to appear in front of Congress to ask for more support of his programs and to quiet the discontent that was emerging. Johnson toyed with the idea extending

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 598.

tour of duties, asking for an extra hundred million dollars of military aid for South Vietnam, and lifting the gold standard to cover some of the cost of the War. He was not wavering yet, but he had yet to see the worst of his problems on the domestic front.<sup>49</sup> President Johnson did make a major move by replacing defense secretary Robert McNamara with Clark Clifford. He feared that McNamara had become too soft because he began to change his stance on the Vietnam War and the policies Johnson should follow. Clifford, on the other hand, brought a new voice and a different perspective in Vietnam.

McNamara would not be the only person close to Johnson who changed their position on Vietnam; as 1968 wore on many advisors close to the President also believed that there needed to be a policy change. Optimism slowly drifted to despair in early February when the Viet Cong attacked Saigon. They directed a major attack on the presidential palace and even as the allied forces drove them back, the damage to Saigon was as extensive as the damage to Hue. President Johnson believed this was bad in the respect that the American people were seeing many of these images each night on the news, making it difficult to spin the idea that the allied troops were winning the War. Congress was

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 578.

close behind in their disapproval for the direction of the War. Members of Congress were openly criticizing the President on Vietnam for the first time. Senator Robert Byrd, angered by the poor intelligence prior to TET, believed the United States was unprepared for the attacks, a point few would dispute. He believed the Viet Cong had been underestimated and that their morale and vitality had never been higher.<sup>50</sup> Even Clifford and Walter Rostow, a special assistant for National Security Affairs, were struggling for answers. They believed the battles over the next few months would be even closer and they were unsure of the Viet Cong's military capabilities.<sup>51</sup> Johnson was getting mixed messages from members of his staff and needed to take a much clearer path in Vietnam. He played the middle far too often; being the consummate politician he was attempting to gain a consensus among his staff, but by March that was a difficult task.

The middle of March proved to be a major turning point for President Johnson. TET created a split in Johnson's inner circle. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Rostow, and Westmoreland, who represented the military's position, believed the United States had a clear advantage after TET

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 583.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 642.

and should continue to attack the Viet Cong. On the other side Clark Clifford and Averell Harriman, former Governor of New York and an Ambassador at-large, believed the United States could not win the War. The North Vietnamese had been fighting for decades and showed no signs of weakening.<sup>52</sup> According to historian George C. Herring:

"Although he seems to have leaned toward the Rusk-Rostow position emotionally, the president refused to adopt either position. He was unwilling to escalate the war to break the military stalemate or to make concessions to break the diplomatic deadlock."<sup>53</sup>

Johnson needed to make the difficult decisions instead of looking for a consensus among his advisors. He was looking at the situation and it was as if all of the Hawks that had been behind his War effort were now turning into Doves.

By the middle of March even the "wise men", a group of cold warriors including Dean Acheson, McGeorge Bundy, and Averell Harriman, were advising the President to get out of Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> Westmoreland promised a light at the end of the tunnel, but as 1968 drew on it became clear that no end to the War was in sight. Clifford estimated that the United States would have to commit one million more troops to Vietnam, bringing the total to roughly one and a half

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<sup>52</sup> George C. Herring, *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War 1945-1975*, (Lawrence, KA: The University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Decent Into Vietnam*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), p. 598.

million soldiers in combat to win the War. These kinds of estimates were becoming a reality and they would not be acceptable in the eyes of the American public or Congress. President Johnson was again in a difficult spot because he has Westmoreland asking for two-hundred thousand more soldiers and his advisors were telling him they could not give him that many troops. Public opinion was plummeting daily and Johnson would have to do something to quell the anti-war protestors.<sup>55</sup>

While the public was dismayed by what they had been witnessing on television, Congress was beginning to believe Johnson had been deceiving them all along in respect to the strength of the Viet Cong. Congress believed it was simple: after three years of fighting and five-hundred thousand troops, the Viet Cong were still capable of attacking one hundred cities and towns throughout the country simultaneously.<sup>56</sup> This was the biggest victory of the TET offensive. Because of the ability of North Vietnam to hurt the morale of the American people, President Johnson no longer had free rein in Vietnam. Congress wanted to see results and wanted assurances that the War was winding down. As far as many people were concerned,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 573.

Johnson had no clear objective and no plan to win the war. He was even losing credit within the Democratic Party.<sup>57</sup> Much of the support he got on Vietnam was coming from the Republicans. President Johnson faced a major political challenge from two Democrats who were going to run for the party's nomination, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy.

It was becoming increasingly clear by the middle of March 1968 that Johnson was losing his grip on the Democratic Party. Senator McCarthy joined the Presidential Race and, to many in the Party, he was a more appealing choice than Johnson and some were willing to move on without him. After the New Hampshire primary, Senator Robert Kennedy also decided to seek the Presidential nomination. Kennedy was unwilling to cause dissent within the Party but he believed that had already happened and his running would not make the situation worse. With two tough opponents, President Johnson was backed into a corner politically.<sup>58</sup>

Both Kennedy and McCarthy were running on campaign platforms designed to get the United States out of Vietnam. Johnson was going to have to run as the pro-war candidate if he planned to run for reelection. He was going to have

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 589.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 591.

to be a Hawk in a party that had turned into the Dove party. Many on Johnson's side advised him to back off his stance in Vietnam; he should be looking to gain peace with dignity and should prepare to halt the bombing.<sup>59</sup> Making this kind of policy change could give Johnson a chance to survive politically, but it was not something he was willing to do immediately.

Johnson believed Hanoi would perceive a halt in the bombing as weakness and that would give the United States little negotiating strength. Looking at the pentagon papers, it seems as if Johnson wanted to give Westmoreland everything he needed to continue the War, but it was becoming painfully clear that Westmoreland would never be given everything he needed and it would be a great burden on the American people. Clifford was able to persuade Johnson to step back and look at the effect TET had on the American public and consider what things would be like if he asked congress for 500,000 more men to further escalate the war. Politically speaking, Johnson had little he could do to change the public's perception of him and his administration. Once again, Johnson needed to make a difficult decision instead of waiting for a consensus among

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<sup>59</sup> Barrett. , p.688.

his advisors, and Johnson quickly realized in March that his advisors would not be able to find a middle ground.<sup>60</sup>

Despite all of the debate within his cabinet, Johnson did become the pro-war candidate. Throughout most of March he stuck by his pledge that the United States would not appease the Viet Cong, would not "cut and run" leaving the South Vietnamese to fend for themselves.<sup>61</sup> By clinging to his pro-war stance Johnson caused a great divide in American society. While this was taking place, racial violence became an increasing problem, as well as the growing social divide between American youths and their elders. Vietnam was everything and that was going to have to change for Johnson to win reelection.<sup>62</sup> By the end of March Johnson realized that change was necessary not only in Vietnam but on the domestic front as well. On March 31, 1968 Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection nor would he accept his party's nomination to run again.

In his speech to the American public Johnson talked of peace in Vietnam and for the first time was willing to sit down with Hanoi to begin peace negotiations. He maintained that the TET offensive was a failure, the government of

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<sup>60</sup> Mann., p. 596.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 596.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 595.

South Vietnam was stronger than ever, and the offensive failed to produce any general uprisings. He did concede, however, that there was no point in delaying peace talks any longer. Johnson believed that a America divided could not stand, and he needed to work to bridge the divisions that had been created by Vietnam. Many believed this was a major policy change for Johnson, but the move was made mainly to calm things on the domestic front.<sup>63</sup> Herring believed the move put Johnson in a worse position than before because he was now a lame duck President leaving his advisors more divided than ever. Johnson's announcement not to seek reelection was fueled in some respects because he no longer knew whose opinion he could count on. It would be difficult to accomplish anything with Hanoi because he would not be in office next year.

Congress was also left wondering if Johnson was sincere in his pledge for peace in Vietnam. On April 1, 1968 United States bombers flew 100 bombing missions over North Vietnam, nearly twice the daily average. Many in Congress were left asking about the move towards peace when it seemed like the bombing increased. By October, Johnson had shown that he had been serious about getting out of Vietnam, but he was still looking to get the United States

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<sup>63</sup> Herring, p. 102.

out with some sense of pride, not as a defeated nation.<sup>64</sup> President Johnson ended the year pushing for peace but could not arrange a deal before he left office; the final clean up in Vietnam would be left to President elect Richard M. Nixon.

Media coverage of the TET Offensive had a profound impact on public opinion. Americans were more informed about Vietnam than any other war in American history. The increased media coverage offered Americans images from the War that allowed them to form their own opinions. It is imperative to look at how the media interpreted the TET Offensive and how they shaped public opinion on the War.

In the first few years of the War, the media was an important tool for the Johnson administration. According to historian William Hammond,

"Although prone at times to believe the worst of officialdom, the American news media both reflected and reinforced that trend, replaying official statements on the value of the war and supporting the soldiers in the field if not always his generals."<sup>65</sup>

The television networks made it clear that they were spreading the official word of the United States government. TET changed all of that, once President Johnson lost approval in Congress the media soon followed;

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<sup>64</sup> Barrett, , p. 798.

<sup>65</sup> William M. Hammond, "The Press in Vietnam as Agents of Defeat: A Critical Examination," *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Jun, 1989), p. 321.

seizing the opportunity to be critical of the White House and the escalation of the War. Much of the media coverage after TET was negative in nature, however, Hammond illustrated that public opinion had already begun to shift before TET.<sup>66</sup> Johnson was also wary of addressing the public immediately after TET because of how the people reacted to the battles. The brutality of the battles was enough to change public opinion quickly and Johnson was unsure how to swing public opinion back behind a renewed War effort. The media did not give him any chance because the news reporting during TET was powerful.<sup>67</sup> It was difficult to find an antiwar bias on television or in the newspaper prior to TET.

There seems to be a consensus of when President Johnson truly lost the American public's support. On February 27, 1968 Walter Cronkite spoke to the people at the end of his nightly news telecast and said the United States would be better off negotiating out of Vietnam, not as victors, but as a people who did the best they could.<sup>68</sup> President Johnson knew from that moment that he had lost the support of the average American citizen. Cronkite

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>67</sup> David Culbert, "Televisions Visual Impact on Decision Making in the USA, 1968: The TET Offensive and Chicago's Democratic National Convention," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33 No. 3 (Jul., 1998), p. 434.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 430.

carried that much power over the American people. He was the voice of the people because he kept them abreast of all the new developments in Vietnam and around the country. In many respects, Walter Cronkite was trusted more than the President was because the people heard from him each night.

Some have argued that the media was part of the problem in Vietnam because they only showed the results of a battle, not what led up to that point. After TET, much of what was on television was negative and it caused the American public to give up on the War effort. The images were too difficult for many Americans to cope with, which led many to come out in protest of the war.<sup>69</sup> The media had an effect on public opinion, but it is difficult to gauge how much influence the media had over the people because all of the studies completed are debatable in one way or another. In addition, much of what aired on the news was edited and few violent images were shown to the public. They were more likely to see violence in the popular shows of the era, like Gunsmoke or Kojak. Regardless, one piece of footage had incredible power and could change American opinion rather quickly.

The Loan execution became a microcosm for the TET offensive and the entire Vietnam War. Historian David

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<sup>69</sup>Hammond, p.312.

Culbert asserts, "It made vivid and particularized, in ways most people could not easily articulate, the frustrating, confusing sense that the war was no longer between good guys and bad guys."<sup>70</sup> People who were looking for a reason to speak out against the War had one after this aired on television. The media, however, just reported the footage; they failed to look at the particulars of the execution. Saigon was in a state of martial law and the man executed was breaking a number of rules that could result in death. He was armed, and wearing civilian clothes, both against the rules of martial law, and they also knew his name, Nguyen Tan Dat, an alias for Hans Son. He was also a member of the Viet Cong. What grabbed the viewer was the man was defenseless and shot by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a high-ranking member of the South Vietnamese government.<sup>71</sup> It was impossible to explain to the American public that this was not common practice; it was engrained in the minds of those who saw it, and many of them began losing faith in the American military effort. It would seem that Americans should be more upset over the loss of American lives, but the execution evoked strong feelings in those who witnessed it on television or saw pictures in the newspaper. The

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<sup>70</sup> Culbert, p. 428.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 421.

Loan execution represented the brutality of the War and proved to many Americans that the cost of fighting in Vietnam was just too great.

The Vietnam War was the American public's first true look at war and its aftermath and effect on a culture. Images of violence and death became a nightly occurrence and, in many instances, people chose to speak out about what they were witnessing. Whereas in other Wars the government was able to use the media to spread its message and propaganda, Vietnam changed the landscape of the media because journalists were more apt to be critical of military policy than in the past because they were concerned with the direction of the country. The Vietnam War could have continued for an undetermined amount of time had the media not shined a light on what was happening thousands of miles away.

### **Chapter Three: Introduction to the Portfolio**

The Vietnam War will always have an auspicious place in American history. As such, it is a War where the people in leadership positions were highly scrutinized for their decisions. Because of this, there are a number of great teaching resources available to help explain public discontent with government officials. A key skill high school students must learn is to decipher material on their own, and the sources presented give them a chance to accomplish this task.

My research focused on how Vietnam impacted many different sectors of American society. Students can look at sources dealing with domestic ramifications of the War, as well as the foreign policy decisions made during the War. The antiwar movement made a great impact on decision making after the TET offensive and it is important to study how things changed after 1968 and how the peace movement helped end the War.

Out of the numerous ways to provide this information, I have decided to create a Professional Portfolio. In the portfolio, I will organize a list of resources that one could use when they are teaching the Vietnam War in their classroom. There are many resources available for

educators, but they are not always easily accessible. This project will look to take some of the resources a teacher can use in their teaching and put it in one place.

Annotating websites is useful because a teacher can get an idea of what site they might want to use without having to search a myriad different websites. A Professional Portfolio also offers a number of different projects already designed that are adaptable for use in any classroom.

Designing a Professional Portfolio should have a major impact on my teaching. Being able to find useful information and resources to use for daily lesson plans is a critical skill every teacher needs to possess. This type of activity shows that a teacher has an ability to teach a topic from many different perspectives, which always has a positive impact on student learning. Students must be able to differentiate between opposing perspectives and form an ability to pull out the information they need to strengthen their arguments and opinions. It is also critical for students to learn to question the decisions made by those in power, not to be disrespectful, but to realize that their opinions matter, especially when they are researched based. This portfolio will give students the option to use primary sources from the 1960s that are organized in

locations that are more central so that the research is, to an extent, teacher driven. There are times that allowing students to research a topic blindly will be beneficial, but many times high school students need guidance.

There would also be the option of setting up a workshop to present a portfolio and discuss how it is useful in a variety of classrooms. Teachers would benefit from this because they may find new ways to delve into a topic instead of the way they have done so in the past. It is also important for educators to share ideas, to disseminate new ideas, and the topic does not become stale. Workshops are also useful because teachers are able to get feedback from other teachers so they can make changes if some content may not be appropriate or if a different approach would be beneficial.

This type of teaching portfolio addresses all of the New York State teaching standards as the topic covers American History, Geography, Government, and World History. A topic this big, with this many resources available allows a great deal of flexibility for educators. One way to assess student learning would be to design a pre-teaching survey about Vietnam that covers basics of the conflict, and then have the students take a similar test after the unit has been taught. This type of activity will allow the

teacher to see what sections of the unit were stronger and where changes need to be implemented in the future to enhance student learning. The teacher could also have the students answer a survey after the unit describing what they have learned and what they found most interesting. One could also look at the scores on AP exams as proof of student learning in advanced classes as well as performance on the United States History NYS Regents exam.

Professional Portfolio

**The Vietnam War Era's Impact on  
American Society**

A Collection of Resources for  
Teaching the Vietnam War

Compiled by: Anthony Scott

### **Web-Based Resources**

- I. Primary Sources on the Web that focus on major events and people from the Vietnam War Era
  - II. Music during the Vietnam Era
  - III. Pictures from the Vietnam Era
  - IV. Movies and Short Video accounts of the Vietnam War
  - V: The March to War: Documents from the Vietnam War
  - VI: The North Vietnamese Perspective

## I. Primary Sources on the Web that focus on major events and people from the Vietnam War Era

- [http://members.tripod.com/rationalrevolution0/war/collection\\_of\\_letters\\_by\\_ho\\_chi\\_.htm](http://members.tripod.com/rationalrevolution0/war/collection_of_letters_by_ho_chi_.htm)

This is a collection of letters written by Ho Chi Minh. They could be used as an introduction to key figures of the Vietnam War. Because it is important to understand key figures of the War, students could look at the writings of Ho Chi Minh to get an accurate picture of what his thoughts and beliefs were. When looking at the Vietnam War it is important to realize that Ho Chi Minh had reached out to the United States in the 1950s. If the United States had agreed to recognize the Vietnamese right to form their own country, the Vietnam War may have been avoided. The United States chose to stay out of the French and Vietnamese conflict publicly, while at the same time shipping weapons and money to help the French.

- <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/01/17/164233>

This is a link to a video of Martin Luther King Jr. discussing the United States involvement in Vietnam. Students can watch this video to get a sense of what key public figures in the United States thought about the Vietnam War. Vietnam was really the first war that had been played out in the media and for the first time people were speaking out against the government in an attempt to stop the War.

- <http://www.vietvet.org/thewall.htm>

This site has some great reflections of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. It would be a great introduction to how the country has memorialized the Vietnam War. Student's can learn from how others have memorialized the most controversial war in American history. The Wall in Washington D.C. has also had a controversial history and students can get a sense of that by looking at images of the wall and reading individuals response to what they see.

- <http://thewall-usa.com/>

This is another link to the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington. You can type in casualties of War and they tell you how they died and how long they served in Vietnam. This site has some great images of the wall that would be great to use in the classroom. It is another great link if you are looking to discuss Vietnam Veteran Memorials. It also has very helpful links that could be useful if you are looking for literature dealing with the War. This website also has links to journal articles and books that discuss teaching the Vietnam War which could be helpful in planning a unit on the Vietnam War.

- <http://www.vietnampix.com/fire.htm>

This website has some great pictures from the War, as well as from the antiwar movement. This site could be very useful in the classroom because of its scope and coverage

of the war. Students could compare and contrast images of the War from different years to try and get a sense of how things were changing in the country. The public's perception of the Vietnam War changed a great deal from the beginning of the War until the end and students can really get a sense of that through these pictures. They will also have to have background information on the War, so this could be used towards the end of a unit to really get an idea of how much information the students have learned.

- <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/subtitles.cfm?titleID=71>

This site offers short excerpts about important people and events during the Vietnam War. Students could use them as a starting point for their own research. This is another site that could be used for students to get a better understanding of who the key people of the Vietnam War were and what impact they made during the War.

- <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/hochi.htm>

This site offers a nice background of Ho Chi Minh's education and worldly experience. He spent a lot of time in France studying and that is where he was introduced to socialism and other political ideologies.

- [www.learningcurve.gov.uk/coldwar/g6/cs2/s4.htm](http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/coldwar/g6/cs2/s4.htm)

This site has some great primary sources already formatted for a DBQ exercise. Sources deal with the impact of the

TET Offensive on the Vietnam War. This site is convenient because the teacher can guide the research they want their student's to focus on while studying Vietnam and the TET Offensive.

- [www.turnerlearning.com/.../vietnam/viet\\_dis.html](http://www.turnerlearning.com/.../vietnam/viet_dis.html)

This is another great site full of resources set up for research projects and further investigation. There are links to videos and questions to answer when students are done watching the videos.

- [http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Content/Vietnam\\_Conflict.html](http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Content/Vietnam_Conflict.html)

This is another great site that offers a detailed background of the United States involvement in Vietnam and also takes an in-depth look at the antiwar movement.

- [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Narrative.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Narrative.html)

This site is called the "Sixties Project" and offers a number of personal narratives from people who grew up during the 1960s. Personal narratives offer an excellent supply of primary source material because these are people that actually lived through the Vietnam War and are sharing their account of what happened.

## II. Music during the Vietnam Era

- <http://www.jwsrockgarden.com/jw02vvaw.htm#preface>

This website offers an overview of how music influenced the antiwar movement and does a nice job of offering song lyrics that share the themes of the antiwar movement. The site offers a number of songs written during the era and also adds the lyrics, so you could have the students read the lyrics before they hear the song.

- <http://www.ichiban1.org/html/music.htm>

This site offers a different way of looking at how music reflected American society during the 1960s. The site shows the top 10 songs for each year of the 1960s and could be used to show how over time the negative effects of the War spilled into music and other parts of American culture. Students could listen to the songs from earlier in the decade and compare them to the music composed later in the decade. The site also offers a number of movie reviews of films about Vietnam.

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJV44YV69z0>

This is a video of Buffalo Springfield's "Something's Happening Here", a song that truly epitomizes the way many Americans felt during the Vietnam War. It also illustrates how artists and citizens alike were beginning to question what they were being told. This could be used as a warm-up

exercise where students have to write about the way the War was affecting American society.

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVi-DXOfnAM>

This is another great video that could be used to discuss the state of American society during the Vietnam War. This could be powerful to use with high school students because the kids involved in the Kent State shootings were young when they were killed by National Guard members trying to break up a rally.

- <http://members.tripod.com/~ffhiker/index-3.html>

This site offers a list of the 40 best songs during the Vietnam Era. It also lists the song lyrics which could be helpful if you were to have students analyze the meaning behind the songs. Music is a major way of memorializing important social events and the Vietnam War Era was known for the music that seemed to truly define a generation.

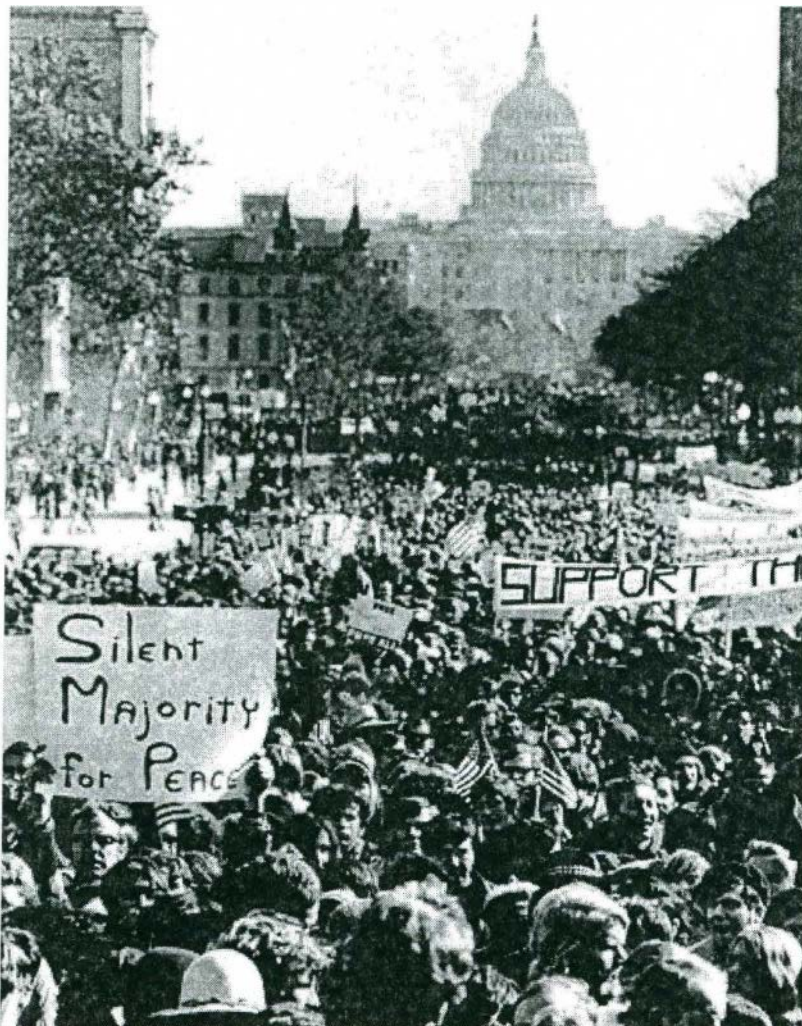
- <http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/fishlm/folksongs/americansongs.htm>

This site takes a look at how music impacted the soldiers and also offers examples of songs from the time period. Lydia Fish looks at how the songs could be used as a tool to understand how soldiers were dealing with the War.

### III. Pictures from the Vietnam Era

- <http://www.squidoo.com/winningvietnam>

This site offers some pictures from the War and takes a look at what it would have taken to actually win the War. The use of photographs from the Vietnam Era allows students to develop empathy for those who fought by having them look at images from the War.





MTI / Zsolt Szigetváry

Pictures like these could be used as an example of what peace demonstrations looked like during the Vietnam War, and students could write an interactive journal topic based on what they see and how they perceive the antiwar movement.



MALDEN B. HODGE



WILLIAM E. SCHREIBER



These images could be used to show the reality of the antiwar movement and the despair that it caused so many Americans. The Shooting at Kent State proved to be a tragic reminder that the violence of the Vietnam War would not be exclusive the Southeast Asia.



This is one of the more famous images of the Vietnam War. It showed how devastating the fighting was on the North Vietnamese civilians that were caught in the middle of the War and the numerous daily bombing missions. Images such as these show how both countries were affected by the intense combat and that many Vietnamese were innocent casualties of the War.



Another famous image from the War this was a public execution that happened to be caught on camera by journalists covering the War.



This photograph could be used to show what combat looked like. This was taken during the TET offensive, a surprise attack planned around the Vietnamese TET holiday on January 31, 1968.

#### IV. Movies and Short Video accounts of the Vietnam War

- [http://www.metacafe.com/watch/139017/the\\_vietnam\\_conflict/](http://www.metacafe.com/watch/139017/the_vietnam_conflict/)

This website offers a short compilation of footage from the Vietnam War that could be used to give the students an idea of what combat looked like. It is set to music and could be used as an introductory lesson that captures the students' attention and gets them to think about the War and the impact the fighting had on the soldiers.

- <http://members.aol.com/warlib/10viet.htm>

This website gives a detailed list of movies that have been related to the Vietnam War. Students could choose from the list and do a review that they present to the class. The teacher could also shorten the list with movies that are appropriate and assign them to students. There have been countless films made about Vietnam and students could get a real sense of what Vietnam was like from some of these movies. While they may take artistic license in many instances, they still give a sense of what the War meant to the people making the film. Film is another way of memorializing the Vietnam War and in many ways it gives a great indicator of how people were affected by the War with the message they convey on the screen. Movies like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* show the savage side of the War effort and the mental anguish many of the soldiers faced while they were in Vietnam. Other movies like *Deer Hunter*

and *Born on the Fourth of July* convey similar messages but also focus on the aftermath of the War and what it was like for soldiers to come home from Vietnam and the difficulties veterans faced as they attempted to resume the lives they left.

- <http://link.history.com/services/player/bcpid1287040704?bclid=1295293363&bctid=1327153774>

This site offers a short video of fighting during the TET offensive. It has some first hand accounts and provides some good information about TET. The TET offensive was one of the defining moments of the Vietnam War and it is critical for students to build an understanding of what TET was and the impact the fighting had on support for the War effort at home.

- <http://link.history.com/services/player/bcpid1287040704?bclid=1295293363&bctid=1327153768>

This video offers a brief look at the My Lai Massacre that occurred during the Vietnam War. It can be used to show how War affects the innocent civilians as well as the soldiers fighting in it. The My Lai massacre was an incomprehensible act that shows that even the innocent suffers during time of War.

- <http://link.history.com/services/player/bcpid1287040704?bclid=1295293363&bctid=1327153770>

This is a good compilation discussing the release of the Pentagon Papers and the downfall of the Johnson Presidency. This would be useful to show the class when talking about the extreme pressure President Johnson was under to end the War in Vietnam and how it ultimately led to him not seeking reelection. The Pentagon Papers offer an in-depth look at President Johnson's decision making during the Vietnam War and offers an excellent opportunity to scrutinize his decisions; while at the same time one can get a sense of how much scrutiny the President was under, and how split his Cabinet and advisors had become throughout the course of the War-- making decisions that much more difficult.

## V: The March to War: Documents from the Vietnam War

- <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/04/documents/x.html>

The policy of containment introduced by George Kennan in 1947 was the defining policy in regard to dealing with the spread of Communism. In this article, which Kennan published anonymously, he discussed his view of the Soviet Union and the idea that communism would spread into weaker countries and pose a major threat to democracy around the world. This is an important document for students to read before a unit on Vietnam because it will help them understand why the United States believed it was necessary to intervene in Southeast Asia. The United States could not afford to allow the North Vietnamese to take control of the South because the policy of containment and the Domino Theory believed that would be the beginning of a much larger problem which could spread through all of Southeast Asia and possibly further.

- <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/tonkin-g.htm>

The Avalon Project offers students' the opportunity to study the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This resolution has been quite controversial because it became fairly clear that the United States embellished the supposed attacks to garner the support needed from Congress to increase troops in Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution is important to look at because it gave the United States the needed cause

to go into Vietnam. Without the attack in the Tonkin Gulf, their may not have been enough information to convince Congress to send troops into Southeast Asia.

- <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/warpower.htm>

This link is to the War Powers Act of 1973. This legislation was passed by Congress as a direct result of what they deemed was a misuse of power by the Executive Branch. Teachers could use this document in a thematic essay about the power of the Executive branch or in a DBQ about the Vietnam War and some of the lasting changes made because of the legacy of Vietnam. The War Powers Act made it much more difficult for the President to send troops abroad to intervene in foreign affairs.

- <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/intdip/usmulti/usmu003.htm>

This link is to the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact) which was signed in 1954. Students must understand United States involvement in Vietnam started in 1954 when the French were fighting against the North Vietnamese. The United States was concerned that losing any sovereign nation in Southeast Asia to Communism would be a blow to Democracy around the world and would start a domino effect of countries succumbing to communism.

- <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/intdip/indoch/inch008.htm>

The Avalon Project has a number of links set up with primary source documents that provide an excellent place to set up DBQ or thematic essays. This link illustrates the United States involvement in Vietnam started in the early 1950s, when the United States recognized the Republic of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as French colonies. At this time Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese were looking to be recognized by the United States as a free and sovereign nation, something the U.S. failed to do.

- <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>

Students can read an excerpt from the Pentagon papers to get a better understanding for the United States foreign policy during the Vietnam War. These were classified documents that were leaked to the New York Times by Daniel Ellsberg, an officer in the state department. There are links to four volumes of the report and offer a vivid look at how the Vietnam War started in the 1940s when the United States aided the French, while claiming to stay out of their colonial struggle with North Vietnam. These documents show the struggle that President Johnson had as he realized that the War was not winnable, but at the same time there was no way to turn back and concede defeat-- or admit that the War was a stalemate. Reading these papers can gain a sense of the intense pressure he was under and how it later resulted in him not seeking re-election. This

collection offers a comprehensive look at the Vietnam War from the White House's perspective. They had no intention of publishing these documents and it is safe to assume that many in Washington wish they had never been leaked.

- <http://vietnam.vassar.edu/abstracts.html>

This is another site with a number of links to primary sources relevant to the Vietnam War. Links include documents on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, as well as discussions between key figures during the Vietnam War.

## VI: The North Vietnamese Perspective

- <http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index.html>

This timeline gives students the chance to explore the extent of the North Vietnamese struggle to gain their independence from the French. It is useful because it breaks the War up into different categories that would make it easy for students to navigate to see how North Vietnam was being affected by the War during different periods. Another link on this site breaks down what guerilla warfare was and how it was employed by the Viet Cong. There is quite a bit of information that is focused on the United States involvement in Vietnam, but students can also focus on how that affected North Vietnam. There is a section that discusses the Air War, which can illustrate how much destruction took place on the tiny country of North Vietnam.

- <http://www.vietnampix.com/popvc.htm>

This site offers a brief description of what the Viet Cong was and how they were organized. When looking at the Vietnam War it is critical for students to know against whom the United States was fighting and for what, exactly, they were fighting.

- <http://vietnam.vassar.edu/docnlf.html>

This is arguably one of the most useful documents discussing the aims of the National Liberation Front (NLF) or the Viet Cong. The document spells out the aims of the NLF so students can get a true sense for what the Viet Cong was fighting and why they were trying to unite all of Vietnam under one Government. Reading the document gives one a clear sense of the NLF's discontent with Western ideas and their reasoning for unifying Vietnam. From their goals, one can assume that they did not want a true communist state because they were advocating for freedom of press, freedom of opinion, and the freedom of trade; things they deemed as essential democratic principles. However, the United States was unwilling to accept any of these ideas because there was the underlying fear that communism was spreading in Southeast Asia and North Vietnam was a threat to democracy around the world.

## Project Summary

The Vietnam War was arguably the most controversial war in American history. The Civil War was fought by a divided country with different visions for what the United States should be, and in many ways Vietnam was similar in its divisiveness. Because the Vietnam War caused such a great divide, there are many different ways to present material to students so they get a balanced view of the War. Presenting a balanced look at the War is probably the most important part of teaching the Vietnam War because it allows students to form their own opinions based on primary source materials.

The media coverage of the Vietnam War has left countless resources for teachers to utilize in their classrooms. There are a number of ways to design virtual tours of memorials to give students a vantage point they might not get to see on their own. Teachers can set up virtual tours of memorials from different cities so students can compare and contrast the different ways the War has been remembered. Vietnam memorials offer a great resource for student reflection as they offer a different view of American combat than other Wars have in the past. The memorial in Washington D.C. was designed amidst a great

deal of controversy because it was viewed as not necessarily morbid, but not with the same sense of accomplishment as many other memorials had in the past. "The Wall", as it has come to be known, offers a visitor an introspective look at the Vietnam War because of the images they see as they tour the memorial. Virtual tours can give students a sense of what it meant to lose a family member and the toll it took on Americans as a whole. Being able to see your reflection in the wall gives people a sense of belonging when they look at the Wall they are not simply looking at names.

The Vietnam Memorial in Rochester also offers a unique way of remembering those that lost their lives in Vietnam. It has a distinctive design that should get high school students thinking about what it must have been like to be sent to Vietnam. Before the trip you could set up a simulation where students are drafted to fight in a fictional war and have them write a reflection essay before and after their trip to the memorial. This could be effective because, on the memorial, it displays from where and when the soldiers graduated and many of the soldiers from the Rochester area that died in Vietnam were recently graduated from high school. As teachers, one of the most difficult things to impart on our students is empathy, and

this exercise could give students a newfound perspective of the Vietnam War.

Another great way to encourage student reflection is using pictures from the era being studied. Vietnam has been one of the most scrutinized Wars in history and there are thousands of pictures that could be used in the classroom. The photography can be used as an introduction to certain issues regarding Vietnam, such as the antiwar movement. Students can set up an interactive journal where they chronicle their thoughts about the images and how they would fit those images into the larger context of the 1960s. Interactive journals encourage reflection and empathy because you are asking students to put themselves into the pictures and describe what they are feeling.

There are a number of websites that have detailed outlines of events that occurred during the Vietnam War. Many of them have primary sources already displayed so students could use them in research projects and papers. Teachers could also use these sites as a review activity or could even set up a DBQ or thematic essay using some of these sources. There are many different ways one could set up a DBQ about Vietnam. They could choose to focus on the antiwar movement, or the focus could be on the impact on

American society. One could also focus some of the study on the impact the War had on the country of Vietnam.

This project will also help teachers find different ways to introduce students to the Vietnam War. Howard Gardner has done a great deal of research on multiple intelligences and has illustrated how students learn in different ways. This portfolio gives educators numerous ways to approach the Vietnam that will appeal to many different learning styles. Students who learn better visually would benefit from working with photographs from the Vietnam Era as a way of understanding the cultural impact of the War. Using film in the classroom can also help reach these students because it will appeal to their visual learning style and could be used as a hook to get them interested in the topic. There are also timelines with important events that might be useful for someone who is a spatial learner and wants to know the order of events.

The beauty of using web-based materials to teach the Vietnam War is it provides many different ways educators can approach the controversial time period in which Vietnam took place. The use of primary sources in the classroom can help give students an idea of the impact the Vietnam War had on American culture.

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