

RETHINKING WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR



Two lessons excerpted from *The Most Dangerous Man in America Teaching Guide*.

Introduction

Wouldn't you go to jail to help end the war?
—Daniel Ellsberg

ASK YOUNG PEOPLE SIMPLE QUESTIONS about America's war in Vietnam. Why was the United States in Vietnam? For how long? Who was the enemy? Who won? Most, if not all, will struggle to find answers. They don't know. The information wasn't covered in their classes and is not in their textbooks. "We barely made it to World War II," they will report with a shrug.

The same young people often hear comparisons of current wars with the war in Vietnam. Like many Americans, they lack a frame of reference for making meaningful connections between contemporary wars and the lessons of Vietnam.

It's not surprising. Many Americans who lived through the war in Vietnam found they also lacked basic information necessary for a solid understanding of a war that demanded young men submit to a military draft, that resulted in the deaths of millions, that caused long-term ecological damage to Southeast Asia, and that led to deep social divisions.

Daniel Ellsberg was a leading Vietnam War strategist. While studying 7,000 pages of top secret documents he concluded that America's involvement in Vietnam was based on decades of lies. In a daring act of conscience, on Oct. 1,



© Black Star. Photo by Paul Stephanus.

Farmers next to their rice paddy that is being destroyed by the U.S. Army 1st Cavalry on June 1, 1967.

1969 Ellsberg began making copies of those documents—what became known as the Pentagon Papers—and eventually leaked them to members of Congress and to the *New York Times*. His action led directly to Watergate, President Richard M. Nixon’s resignation, and the end of the Vietnam War.

The pivotal story of the Vietnam War era, of individual courage within a burgeoning social justice movement, is told in the film *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*, nominated for the 2009 Academy Award for Best Documentary.

In the words of Daniel Ellsberg from his book *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, the Vietnam War era was a time of “crimes: war crimes, crimes against the peace, mass murder. Twenty years of crime under four presidents.”

A large-scale antiwar movement drew millions to America’s streets in protest. The movement inspired courageous individual acts of conscience and, in turn, individual acts of conscience inspired the growth of an anti-war movement.

And how was the war remembered by our country’s leaders?

Soon after the end of the war, President Ronald Reagan promised in a speech to veterans “that young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to let them win.”

Decades later, another president sent U.S. forces to invade Iraq in search of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed, countless others dislocated from ancestral homes, long-term ecological damage occurred to a beleaguered region, and the public depended upon leaked documents in order to gain access to the truth. That president, George W. Bush, drawing on what he called the “lessons of Vietnam” concluded that “we’ll succeed unless we quit.”

Bush’s successor, President Barack Obama, while accepting the Nobel Peace Prize claimed that “America has never fought a war against a democracy.”

All three men make painfully clear how U.S. leaders continue to abuse history to justify war.

© Bob Hsiang from *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*



“No Vietnamization!” antiwar march, New York.



© Julian Bond

Excerpt from *Vietnam*, an antiwar comic book by Julian Bond and T.G. Lewis. Published in 1967 after Bond was expelled from the Georgia House of Representatives for speaking out against the Vietnam War, in his role as SNCC spokesperson. Ideal for high school students. [Available online.](#)

Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith's film offers poignant lessons from Vietnam through the words, actions, and life experience of an American hero, Daniel Ellsberg. *The Most Dangerous Man in America* chronicles Ellsberg's journey from his early days as a Marine officer and then war strategist, to emergence as an activist trying to come to terms with a war he originally supported and helped shape. Ellsberg's experience parallels a journey that many others embarked upon during the 1960s and 1970s. The difference: Ellsberg was an insider, a man with access to top secret information who decided to risk the many privileges he enjoyed in order to do what he knew in his heart to be the right thing.

The Most Dangerous Man in America Teaching Guide provides eight lesson plans intended to enhance student understanding of the issues raised in this acclaimed documentary film. Using a variety of teaching strategies, including role play, critical reading, discussion, mock

trial, small group imaginative writing, and personal narrative, the curriculum provides students with an opportunity to consider some of Vietnam's lessons. One key lesson of *The Most Dangerous Man in America* is that we all have the potential to be "truth-tellers." Where some students may never have the opportunity to affect the course of history like Daniel Ellsberg, all will be in positions to make important decisions in the name of justice.

The *Teaching Guide* attempts to provide context to what *New York Times* writer Neil Sheehan called "the event" of late-20th-century history. We want students to appreciate the enormity of what Daniel Ellsberg saw and to help them grasp why someone would become a "whistleblower" and would risk prison to stop it. Ellsberg's history-making defiance may have been *the event*, but the activities in the guide invite students to see that all of us are constantly confronted with opportunities to act for justice. We hope students come to see all the potential

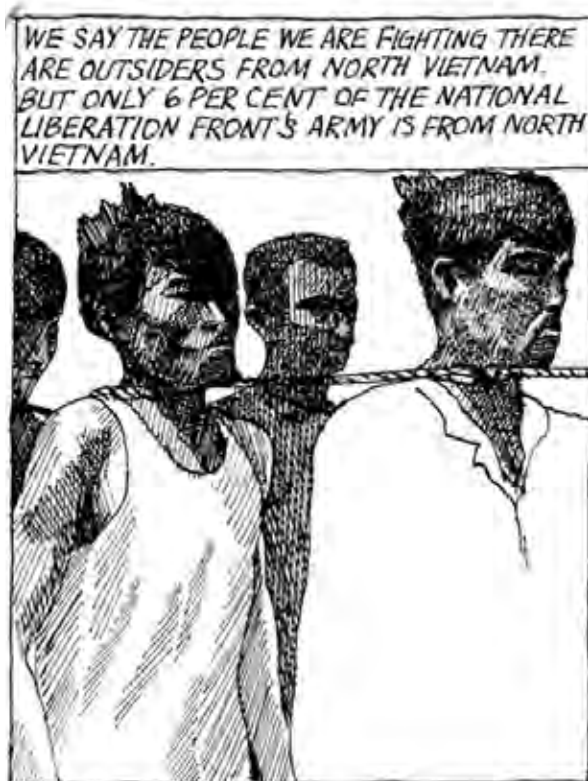
“events” that they can be a part of.

History is not the lifeless narration found in most standard textbooks, but a series of choices



made on a daily basis by people from all walks of life. We offer *The Most Dangerous Man in America Teaching Guide* as a curriculum of empowerment for young people trying to come to terms with a world that often feels out of their control. Daniel Ellsberg’s life story offers a poignant example of profound change and hopeful action in the face of a seemingly immovable power. The *Teaching Guide* offers students opportunities to connect with key historical choice-points that shaped the Vietnam War era, explore connections with contemporary equivalents and develop critical thinking skills necessary for informed citizens to make decisions about U.S. foreign policy, whistleblowing, “national security,” government transparency, freedom of the press and the public’s right to know.

Why was the United States in Vietnam? Why did the United States decide to abandon its World War II Asian ally in favor of the French colonialists? How did the United States get itself into the predicament of Vietnam? After directing years of armed conflict in Southeast Asia, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara finally asked that long overdue question when



he commissioned the RAND Corporation to create what would become the Pentagon Papers. He wanted to know how the United States had managed to get into a war that seemed to offer no exit. Ironically, the answer to McNamara's query eventually led to the end of the war.

Why did five U.S. presidents find it necessary to lie to their citizenry? Why was it so easy to do? Why is the war not examined in depth by every U.S. history teacher?

Daniel Ellsberg believed that if Americans knew the truth about the Vietnam War, they wouldn't support it. He became depressed when he found that the truth had no immediate bearing on the number of bombs rained upon Vietnamese civilians. But he pressed on until truth

prevailed. His actions led others to demand evidence from government officials. His actions grounded his words. As he faced a future behind bars, the truths he learned along his journey led him to respond to a news reporter's question with a question of his own: "Wouldn't you go to jail to end the war?"

As teachers, our aim should be to involve young people in the democratic practice of seeking truth, of demanding evidence, of digging deep for knowledge that is often hidden, in order to make informed, just choices. Daniel Ellsberg's actions along with the actions of so many others have kept a tradition of truth-telling alive. We want to ensure that this tradition gets passed on to our students.

What Do We Know About the Vietnam War?

Forming Essential Questions

THE VIETNAM WAR seems murky for many students. Not only are students unclear about basic facts—How long was the U.S. in Vietnam? Who was the enemy? Who won?—young people also report that they are unclear about the very nature of the conflict. Was Vietnam actually a war? Was it a civil war? Was it at all similar to the wars of today? In order to provide students with a clear context for understanding the actions of Daniel Ellsberg and the role of the Pentagon Papers, we need to address students’ confusion. Teachers can enhance students’ historical understanding by providing an opportunity for them to clarify what

they think they know, what they’ve heard (what seems to exist in popular culture), and by identifying essential questions to direct further learning.

Suggested Procedure

1. Organize students into small groups of four to five people per group.
2. Provide each small group with a large piece of butcher paper and a black magic marker.
3. Instruct students that they are to do the following in their small groups:



National Archives and Records Administration

Air Force planes bomb the southern panhandle of North Vietnam, June 14, 1966.



Antiwar march in Chicago on March 25, 1967 with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is talking to Al Raby of Chicago's Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO). On the other side of King is Jack Spiegel (with white armband) of the United Shoeworkers.

- a. Write down all they know, think they know, or have heard about the war in Vietnam. Students might need starting points for their brainstorm. The following questions can help guide student thinking and help make the task less overwhelming:
 - i. How long was the United States in Vietnam?
 - ii. Why was the United States in Vietnam?
 - iii. Who was the United States fighting?
 - iv. How did U.S. citizens feel about the war?
 - v. Who won?
 - b. After students complete "step a," using three different color markers, ask students to highlight the information that they feel certain about, the information that they have doubts about, and information that they don't know.
 - c. Final step: Ask students to articulate three questions they need to have answered in order for them to feel that they know basic information about the Vietnam War.
 - d. To better facilitate the small group work, assign students the following roles: facilitator/discussion leader; recorder; word finder (student who identifies words or terms that might be new, e.g., VC; Communists; guerillas); reporter (person who will share with large group).
4. Tape completed small group work, the butcher paper, on the classroom walls.
 5. Have students, in their small groups, walk around the room and read each piece of

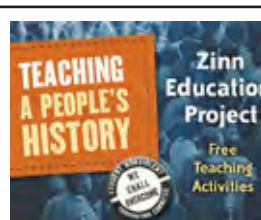
butcher paper—a variation of what is commonly referred to as a “gallery walk.” Assign each group a color of marker that hasn’t yet been used. For instance, group one will have red markers, group two will have green, etc. Students can then write comments, answers to questions, reactions, or additional questions on their classmates’ hanging work. Individual students should also have a piece of notebook paper and writing utensil so that they can write down comments and reflections. Ask students to look for: points of commonality; new information; statements they don’t understand; new questions.

6. Students return to their seats. The teacher leads large group discussion, a survey of student comments: What patterns do we see? What helpful comments, reactions, or questions did you receive from other groups? What can we say we know about the Vietnam War? What can we say we don’t know? What do we need to know? What conclusions can we reach?

7. Have students consider the questions that they and their classmates have written, ask students to think out loud together in response to the following: Given the questions that we came up with, what are the three most essential questions that we can create to help guide our learning about the Vietnam War?

In the past, we’ve found student questions will vary from “So how long was the U.S. in Vietnam?” to “Why is there so little common understanding of the war?” to “Who really was our enemy?” to “I’ve heard that no one really won the war and that we could have won, but politicians held the military back. Did anyone win? How did they win?” The more specific questions are, the better they can guide subsequent learning.

8. Ask students to write concluding remarks using a “3-2-1 protocol”: three things they learned; two things that surprised them; one brief personal reaction that tries to capture where they are in terms of their study of the Vietnam War.



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and Rick Goldsmith. It was developed to accompany the film, *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*. Contact the Zinn Education Project (www.zinnedproject.org) directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

Rethinking the Teaching of the Vietnam War

A version of this article appears in Bigelow, Bill. *A People's History for the Classroom*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools. 2008.

IN *THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA*, Daniel Ellsberg describes when, in 1969, he first read the earliest parts of what came to be called the Pentagon Papers:

Seeing the war from its beginning affected me more than I thought possible. It changed my whole sense of the legitimacy of the war. What I learned was that it was an American war from the start. President Truman financed the French to retake its former colony even though he knew the French were fighting a national movement that had the support of the people.

Despite the fact that the Pentagon Papers was released to the world in 1971, today's high school textbooks continue to ignore this early—and essential—history of the Vietnam War. Sadly, when it comes to probing the root causes of the Vietnam War, not a single major U.S. history textbook glances back beyond the 1950s. Why was the United States involved in Vietnam? As James Loewen points out in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, his critique of 12 best-selling high school history texts: “Most textbooks simply dodge the issue. Here is a representative analysis, from *American Adventures*: ‘Later in the 1950s, war broke out in



Citizens of Hanoi, Vietnam, at a victory parade in October of 1954, after peace talks at Geneva led to the withdrawal of French colonial forces from all of Indochina. The United States had supported the French during the war.

South Vietnam. This time the United States gave aid to the South Vietnamese government.’ ‘War broke out’—what could be simpler!”

Textbooks mirror the amnesia of U.S. policy makers. There is a startling encounter in the 1974 Vietnam War documentary *Hearts and Minds* between director Peter Davis and Walt Rostow, former adviser to President Johnson. Davis wants Rostow to talk about why the United States got involved in Vietnam. Rostow is incredulous: “Are you really asking me this goddamn silly question?” That’s “pretty pedestrian stuff,” he complains. But Rostow finally answers: “The problem began in its present phase after the *Sputnik*, the launching of *Sputnik*, in 1957, October.”

Sputnik? 1957? In one blow, the former adviser erases years of history to imply that somehow the Soviet Union was behind it all.

The “present phase” caveat notwithstanding, Rostow ignores the World War II cooperation between the United States and the Viet Minh; Ho Chi Minh’s repeated requests that the United States acknowledge Vietnamese sovereignty; the U.S. refusal to recognize the 1945 Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; \$2 billion in U.S. military support for the restoration of French domination, including the near use of nuclear weapons during the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu; and the well-documented U.S. subversion of the 1954 Geneva peace accords. All occurred before the launching of *Sputnik*, and all are documented in the Pentagon Papers.

When teachers pattern our curricula after these kinds of nonexplanatory explanations, we mystify the origins not just of the war in Vietnam, but of also everything we teach. Students need to learn to distinguish explanations from descriptions, like “war broke out” or “chaos erupted.” Thinking about social events as having concrete causes, constantly asking “Why?” and “In whose interests?” need to become critical habits of the

mind for us and for our students. It’s only through developing the tools of deep questioning that students can attempt to make sense of today’s global conflicts. However, especially when teaching complicated events like the war in Vietnam, bypassing explanation in favor of description can be seductive. After all, there’s so much *stuff* about the war in Vietnam: so many films, so many novels, short stories, and poetry, so many veterans who can come in and speak to the class. These are all vital resources, but unless built on a foundation of causes for the war, using these can be more voyeuristic than educational.

Roots of a War

A video I’ve found useful in prompting students to explore a bit of the history of Vietnam and the sources of U.S. involvement is the first episode of the PBS presentation *Vietnam: A Television History* [available in many libraries]. Called “Roots of a War,” it offers an overview of Vietnamese resistance to French colonialism (which began in the mid-19th century) and to the Japanese occupation during World War II. My students find the video a bit dry, so

Students need to learn to distinguish explanations from descriptions, like “war broke out,” or “chaos erupted.”

in order for students not to feel overwhelmed by information, I pause it often to talk about key incidents and issues. Some of the images are powerful: Vietnamese men carrying white-clad Frenchmen on their backs, and French picture postcards of the severed heads of Vietnamese resisters—cards that troops sent home to sweethearts in Paris, as the narrator tells us, inscribed “With kisses from Hanoi.” The goal of French colonialism is presented truthfully and starkly: “To transform Vietnam into a source of profit.” The narrator explains, “Exports of rice stayed high even if it meant the peasants starved.” Significantly, many of those who tell the story of colonialism and the struggle against it are Vietnamese. Instead of the nameless generic

peasants of so many Hollywood Vietnam War movies, here, at least in part, Vietnamese get to tell their own stories.

Toward the end of the film's segment, Dr. Tran Duy Hung recounts the Vietnamese independence celebration in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square following the Japanese defeat—and occurring on the very day of the formal Japanese surrender aboard the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, Sept. 2, 1945: "I can say that the most moving moment was when President Ho Chi Minh climbed the steps, and the national anthem was sung. It was the first time that the national anthem of Vietnam was sung in an official ceremony. Uncle Ho then read the Declaration of Independence, which was a short document. As he was reading, Uncle Ho stopped and asked, 'Compatriots, can you hear me?' This simple question went into the hearts of everyone there. After a moment of silence, they all shouted, 'Yes, we hear you.' And I can say that we did not just shout with our mouths, but with all our hearts. The hearts of over 400,000 people standing in the square then."

Dr. Hung recalls moments later, when a small plane began circling overhead and swooped down over the crowd. People recognized the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag, and they cheered enthusiastically, believing its presence to be a kind of independence ratification. The image of the 1945 crowd in northern Vietnam applauding a U.S. military aircraft offers a poignant reminder of a historical could-have-been. [See lesson on "choice-points" in *The Most Dangerous Man in America* teaching guide.]

Role-Playing a Historic Choice

Although this is not the episode's conclusion, I stop the video at this point. How will the U.S. government respond? Will it recognize an independent Vietnam or stand by as France attempts to reconquer its lost colony? Will the United States even aid France in this effort? This is a choice-point that would influence the course of human history, and through role play I want to bring it to life in the classroom. Of course, I could simply tell them what happened, or give them materials to read.

But a role play that brings to life the perspectives of key social groups allows students to experience, rather than just hear about aspects of this historical crossroads. As prelude, we read the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, included in this guide as a Student Handout and available online at [History Matters](#), in the fine collection *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, edited by Marvin Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and H. Bruce Franklin [New York: Grove/Atlantic Press, 1995], or in *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, edited by Gareth Porter [New York: New American Library, 1981].

I include here the two core roles of the role play: members of the Viet Minh, and French government/business leaders. In teaching this period, I sometimes include other roles: U.S. corporate executives, labor activists, farmers, and British government officials deeply worried about their own colonial interests, as well as Vietnamese landlords allied with the French—this last, to reflect the class as well as anticolonial dimension of the Vietnamese independence movement.



Ho Chi Minh, right, became president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Vo Nguyen Giap, left, was Minister of the Interior.

AP Images

Each group has been invited to a meeting with President Harry S. Truman—which, as students learn later, never took place—to present its position on the question of Vietnamese independence. I portray President Truman and chair the meeting. Members of each group must explain:

- How they were affected by World War II;
- Why the United States should care what happens in Vietnam, along with any responsibilities it might have (and in the case of the French, why the United States should care what happens in France);
- Whether the United States should feel threatened by communism in Vietnam or in France;
- What they want President Truman to do about the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence—support it, ignore it, oppose it;
- And whether the United States government should grant loans to the French, and if it supports loans, what strings should be attached.

Obviously, the more knowledge students have about pre-1945 Vietnam, France, and World War II in general, as well as the principles of communism, the more sophisticated treatment they'll be able to give to their roles. [An excellent film on U.S. Communism is *Seeing Red*, produced by Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, available from New Day Films, and can be helpful.] However, even without a thorough grounding, the lesson works well to introduce the main issues in this important historical choice-point.

As in other role plays, to work students into their roles, I may ask them to create an individual persona by writing an interior monologue—one's inner thoughts—on their postwar hopes and fears. Students can read these to a partner, or share them in a small group.

In the meeting/debate, students-as-Viet Minh argue on behalf of national independence. They may remind Truman of the help that the Viet Minh gave to the Allies during World War II, denounce French colonialism, and recall the United States' own history in throwing off European colonialism.



LBJ Library. Photo by Frank Wolfe.

General William Westmoreland briefs President Lyndon B. Johnson, advisors in Cabinet Room meeting (L-R:) Walt Rostow, General William Westmoreland, Nicholas Katzenbach, Secretary Dean Rusk, President Lyndon B. Johnson, Cyrus Vance, General Earle Wheeler.

The students-as-French counter that the would-be Vietnamese rulers are Communists and therefore a threat to world peace. Like the Vietnamese, the French remind Truman that they too were World War II allies and are now in need of a helping hand. In order to revive a prosperous and capitalist France, they need access to the resources of Vietnam. Because the United States has an interest in a stable Europe, one that is non-Communist and open for investment, they should support French efforts to regain control of Vietnam.

I play a cranky Truman, and poke at inconsistencies in students' arguments. I especially prod each side to question and criticize the other directly. [For suggestions on conducting a role play, see "Role Plays: Show, Don't Tell," in the Rethinking Schools publication *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Vol. 1*, pp. 130–132.]

At the close of World War II, the United States was in a position to end almost 100 years of French domination in Vietnam.

The structure of the meeting itself alerts students to the enormous power wielded by the U.S. government at the end of World War II, and that the government was maneuvering on a global playing field. As students come to see, U.S. policy makers did not decide the Vietnam question solely, if at all, on issues of morality, or even on issues related directly to Vietnam. As historian Gabriel Kolko writes in *The Roots of American Foreign Policy*, "even in 1945 the United States regarded Indo-China almost exclusively as the object of Great Power diplomacy and conflict. . . . [A]t no time did the desires of the Vietnamese themselves assume a role in the shaping of United States policy."

Following the whole-group debate, we shed our roles to debrief. I ask: What were some of the points brought out in discussion that you



President Harry S. Truman.

agreed with? Do you think Truman ever met with Vietnamese representatives? What would a U.S. president take into account in making a decision like this? What did Truman decide? Which powerful groups might seek to influence Vietnam policy? How should an important foreign policy question like this one be decided?

To discover what Truman did and why, we study a timeline drawn from a number of books on Vietnam, including the one by Kolko mentioned above, his *Anatomy of a War* [Pantheon, 1985], *The Pentagon Papers* [Bantam, 1971], and Marilyn Young's *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* [HarperCollins, 1991], as well as excerpts from Chapter 18 of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* [Harper-Collins, 2005]. It's a complicated history that involved not only the French and Vietnamese, but also Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Chinese forces, the British, and the Japanese. What becomes clear is that at the close of World War II, the United States was in a position to end almost 100 years of French domination in Vietnam. The

French government was desperate for U.S. aid and would not have defied an American decision to support Vietnamese independence. Nevertheless, U.S. leaders chose a different route, ultimately contributing about \$2 billion to the French effort to reconquer Vietnam.

Although a separate set of decisions led to the commitment of U.S. troops in Vietnam, the trajectory was set in the period just after World War II. The insights students glean from this role play inform our study of Vietnam throughout the unit.

Along with the timeline, just mentioned, which traces U.S. economic and military aid to France, we follow up with: a point-by-point study of the 1954 Geneva Agreement ending the war between the French and Vietnamese; and from the perspective of peasants

and plantation laborers in southern Vietnam, students evaluate the 1960 revolutionary platform of the National Liberation Front. Students later read a number of quotations from scholars and politicians offering opinions on why we fought in Vietnam. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and

*If it were truly interested
in Vietnam's "independence,"
why did the U.S. government
support French colonialism?*



AP Images

Marine commando forces of the U.S.-supported French Expeditionary Corps land in Vietnam on July 27, 1950.

Nixon assert in almost identical language that the United States was safeguarding freedom and democracy in South Vietnam. President Kennedy: “For the last decade we have been helping the South Vietnamese to maintain their independence.” Johnson: “We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.” Students ponder these platitudes: If it were truly interested in Vietnam’s “independence,” why did the U.S. government support French colonialism?

On April 7, 1965, President Johnson gave a major policy speech on Vietnam at Johns Hopkins University. Here, Johnson offered a detailed explanation for why the United States was fighting in Vietnam [included in *The Viet-Nam Reader*, edited by Marcus Raskin and Bernard Fall, pp. 343–350]. Embedded in the

speech was his version of the origins of the war. As Johnson, I deliver large portions of the speech, and students-as-truth-seeking-reporters pepper me with critical questions and arguments drawn from the role play and other readings and activities. Following this session, they write a critique of LBJ’s speech. Afterward, we evaluate how several newspapers and journals—the *New York Times*, the *Oregonian*, *I.F. Stone’s Weekly*—actually covered President Johnson’s address.

Beyond the Role Play

None of the above is meant to suggest the outlines of a comprehensive curriculum on the Vietnam War. Here, I’ve concentrated on the need for engaging students in making explanations for the origins of U.S. government policy toward

Vietnam. Policy choices had intimate implications for many people’s lives, and through novels, short stories, poetry, interviews, and their own imaginations, students need also to explore the

personal dimensions of diplomacy and political economy. And no study of the war would be complete without examining the dynamics of the massive movement to end that war. [The best film for this is *Sir! No Sir!*, available from www.sirnosir.com, which looks at the antiwar movement within the U.S. military.] Especially when confronted with the horrifying images of slaughtered children the film *Remember My Lai*, the chilling sobs of a young Vietnamese boy whose father has been killed in *Hearts and Minds*, or the anguish of American and Vietnamese women in *Regret to Inform*, our students need



AP Images

Viet Minh and French officer in Hanoi, October 12, 1954. Following the Geneva Accords, the French withdrew from Vietnam.

to know that millions of people tried to put a stop to the suffering—including U.S. soldiers themselves. Of course, that’s why *The Most Dangerous Man in America* is an essential resource: It shows the impact of courageously speaking truth to power, and highlights the vulnerability of the high and mighty. And students should be encouraged to reflect deeply on which strategies for peace were most effective. Howard Zinn movingly describes this widespread opposition to the war in Chapter 18 of *A People’s History of the United States*.

Indeed there is an entire history of resistance to which students have been denied access. For example, let them read the brilliant critique of the war that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, exactly a year before his death:



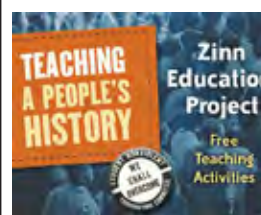
President Ho Chi Minh, 1950.

What do the [Vietnamese] peasants think as we ally ourselves with the landlords and as we refuse to put any action into our many words concerning land reform? What do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe? Where are the roots of the independent Vietnam we claim to be building? Is it among these voiceless ones?

Or let students listen to similar thoughts expressed more caustically in Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War,” or more satirically in Country Joe and the Fish’s “Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag.”

If we take the advice of the Walt Rostows and the textbook writers, and begin our study of the Vietnam War in the late 1950s, it’s impossible to think intelligently about the U.S. role. The presidents said we were protecting the independence of “South Vietnam.” As Daniel Ellsberg discovered when he first read the Pentagon Papers, we need to travel back at least as far as 1945 to think critically about the invention of the country of South

Vietnam that was intended to justify its “protection.” The tens of thousands of U.S. deaths and the millions of Vietnamese deaths, along with the social and ecological devastation of Indochina, require the harsh light of history to be viewed clearly.



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Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945)

All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.

The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: “All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.”

Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

In the field of politics, they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty.

They have enforced inhuman laws; they have set up three distinct political regimes in the North, the Center and the South of Vietnam in order to wreck our national unity and prevent our people from being united.

They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood.

They have fettered public opinion; they have practiced obscurantism against our people.

To weaken our race they have forced us to use opium and alcohol.

In the field of economics, they have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people, and devastated our land.

They have robbed us of our rice fields, our mines, our forests, and our raw materials. They have monopolized the issuing of bank-notes and the export trade.

They have invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty.

They have hampered the prospering of our national bourgeoisie; they have mercilessly exploited our workers.

In the autumn of 1940, when the Japanese Fascists violated Indochina’s territory to establish new bases in their fight against the Allies, the French imperialists went down on their bended knees and handed over our country to them.

Thus, from that date, our people were subjected to the double yoke of the French and the Japanese. Their sufferings and miseries increased. The result was that from the end of last year to the beginning of this year, from Quang Tri province to the North of Vietnam, more than two million of our fellow-citizens died from starvation. On March 9, the French troops were disarmed by the Japanese. The French colonialists either fled or surrendered showing that not only were they incapable of “protecting” us, but that, in the span of five years, they had twice sold our country to the Japanese.

On several occasions before March 9, the Vietminh League urged the French to ally themselves with it against the Japanese. Instead of agreeing to this proposal, the French colonialists so intensified their terrorist activities against the Vietminh

members that before fleeing they massacred a great number of our political prisoners detained at Yen Bay and Caobang.

Notwithstanding all this, our fellow-citizens have always manifested toward the French a tolerant and humane attitude. Even after the Japanese putsch of March 1945, the Vietminh League helped many Frenchmen to cross the frontier, rescued some of them from Japanese jails, and protected French lives and property.

From the autumn of 1940, our country had in fact ceased to be a French colony and had become a Japanese possession.

After the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies, our whole people rose to regain our national sovereignty and to found the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The truth is that we have wrested our independence from the Japanese and not from the French.

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland. Our people at the same time have overthrown the monarchic regime that has reigned supreme for dozens of centuries. In its place has been established the present Democratic Republic.

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we

break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligation that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland.

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country.

We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.

A people who have courageously opposed French domination for more than eight years, a people who have fought side by side with the Allies against the Fascists during these last years, such a people must be free and independent.

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

Source: Chi Minh, Ho. Selected Writings 1920-1969. University Press of the Pacific. 2001.

French Business/ Government Leader

Time: Fall/Winter, 1945–46

You are a French business executive and high-ranking government leader. Times are very difficult in France. During World War II, thousands of your people were killed, many factories were destroyed, crops burned, and animals killed. This has left your economy in ruins.

Because of hard times, many workers and poor people have turned to the Communists. The Communist Party is now the largest political party in France. An important reason the Communists are so popular is because they played a leading role in the resistance to the Nazis. You believe that, ultimately, the Communists want to take over the property of the wealthy and have all factories run by the government. The French Communist Party denies this, but you don't believe them.

As you see it, unless the economy quickly gets better, the Communists will be elected to control the government. But how to rebuild the economy?

Before World War II, France had a number of colonies around the world, the most important in Indochina, which includes the country of Vietnam. France got most of its rubber from Vietnam—also much coal, tin, and tungsten.

French businesses owned plantations and made great profits selling rice to other countries in Asia. Your government also forced the Vietnamese to buy certain French products, such as Bordeaux wine, so French companies made profits that way as well.

But here's your problem. During the war, the Japanese took control of Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, organized

an army, the Viet Minh, to fight against the Japanese occupation. With Japan now defeated, the Viet Minh have declared Vietnam an independent country. However, as far as you are concerned, Vietnam is still French.

You are angry. The Viet Minh have already given some of the French-owned land to Vietnamese poor people—peasants. They have said that the wealth of Vietnam will now belong only to the Vietnamese.

If you can't take back your colony in Vietnam, French businesses will suffer tremendously. However, you don't have enough money to pay for a war against Ho Chi Minh. You need the support of a more powerful country to win back Vietnam from the Communists. The most powerful country in the world is the United States.

You also need the help of a stronger country to rebuild the cities, towns, and industries of France. You need loans and grants to buy American machinery and farm products like wheat and corn so you can get back on your feet. Remember, too, that if your economy doesn't begin to get stronger, the French Communists will probably win elections by offering the poor and workers some of the wealth of the rich.

But the United States needs you, too. They want to sell their extra products to you and to invest their extra money in French businesses. You might point out to the American president that, if the Communists come to power, they won't allow U.S. corporations to invest freely and take their profits back home.

Viet Minh Member

Time: Fall/Winter, 1945–46

You are a member of the Viet Minh and a supporter of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This is the first all-Vietnamese government in almost a hundred years—since the French first took over your country.

You are from a peasant family in Vietnam. You grew up hating the French colonialists who controlled your country. The French say they brought “civilization” to Vietnam, but in your eyes they brought nothing but misery.

In order to force the Vietnamese to work for them, the French put taxes on all “huts,” as they called them, and on salt—an important ingredient in the Vietnamese diet. The only way you could get money to pay the hated taxes was to go to work for the French—on their railroads, in their mines, on their plantations. Conditions were hard. Many people died of injuries or diseases.

The French drafted your people to fight in their wars against other countries. Of course, you had no vote. The French provided few services; in Vietnam, they built more jails than schools and hospitals combined.

The French made fun of your music, your art, your religion. They even outlawed your village’s homemade rice wine and forced you to buy their stronger French wine. The French also required each village to purchase a certain amount of opium.

Angered by all these injustices, you joined Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh, an organization fighting for the independence of Vietnam. Like Ho Chi

Minh, you became a Communist, believing that everyone should share the wealth of Vietnam, not just a few foreigners and the rich Vietnamese landlords who do their dirty work.

In 1940, the Japanese invaded Vietnam and you switched from fighting the French to fighting the Japanese. During the war you helped the United States, providing them with valuable information and rescuing pilots who had been shot down.

When the Japanese were defeated, the Viet Minh took control of the country and proclaimed independence. This independence has begun to make a real difference in many people’s lives. For the first time in Vietnam’s history, national elections were held. People could choose their own leaders, Communist or non-Communist.

A literacy program was launched that some say taught as many as 2.5 million people to read and write. The Viet Minh took over much of the land that the French had stolen and gave it back to the peasants. The new government passed a law legalizing labor unions and strikes and proclaiming an eight-hour day.

Your goal is freedom and independence for your country. But the French appear to want to take back Vietnam. They complain about Communists like Ho Chi Minh. You will fight to the death before your country is made a colony again. You hope the United States government will support you in this freedom struggle.