Vietnam Unit Lesson #3

The Vietnam War: Why Did We Fight?

**Focus Statement:**

The Vietnam War is one of the most significant aspects of modern United States history. During the 1960s the American military became actively involved in fighting in order to support a pro-U.S. government in Vietnam, and communist Vietnamese forces fought back for independence. Many soldiers from all over the world died in this war. Over 50,000 American men died in the Vietnam War, and over 3,000,000 Vietnamese, including civilians, died. In the United States, problems on the home front developed as protestors and the government clashed over the continuance and purpose of the war. After 10 years of U.S. combat forces being stationed in Vietnam, the war finally ended in 1975, but not before the deadly costs of a desolated Vietnam and a politically torn U.S. home front. During and since this period, many U.S. citizens sought answers. Why did we enter the war? Why did our men fight? Who were chief proponents for war? Why did we have the draft? To such questions there are several perspectives – political, social, and economic – as well as public and personal experiences. Through interviews with former U.S. soldiers who fought in Vietnam and who have willingly shared their stories, students as historians can learn about the Vietnam War.

This lesson will enable students to engage in historical thinking and content knowledge acquisition organized under the Vital Theme and Narrative of Conflict and Cooperation. First, this lesson will require students to read the transcript of an oral history interview with a Vietnam veteran. Analyzing this interview will require the students to examine history by looking beyond present-mindedness and gaining an understanding of what the war was really like for a Vietnam soldier. Second, students will grasp the essence of draft riots and other governmental affairs involving unhappy citizens on the U.S. home front as students look deeper into the Vietnam situation beyond the aspect of military engagement.

**Vital Theme:** Conflict and Cooperation

**Habit of Mind:** Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.

Understand how things happen and how things change, how human intentions matter, but also how their consequences are shaped by the means of carrying them out, in a tangle of purpose and process.

**Objectives**

Identify reasons for U.S. governmental involvement in the Vietnam War.
Identify reasons given for the involvement of American soldiers who decided to join the effort.
Identify prominent advisors who participated in the cause, including their thoughts and efforts.
Relate aspects of the soldier’s experiences to one’s own life experiences.

**National History Standards:**

USH Era 9 Standard 2C Assess the Vietnam policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations and the shifts of public opinion about the war [analyze multiple causation].

USH Era 9 Standard 2C Explain the composition of the American forces recruited to fight the war [interrogate historical data].

Historical Thinking Standard 3B Consider multiple perspectives.

Historical Thinking Standard 4B Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.

**Procedures**

1) To begin class, display a picture of the Vietnam War. Have the students answer questions relating to the following photo in a classroom discussion. (5 minutes)

- Select three adjectives that describe the image.
- What does this picture show you about the situation American soldiers faced in Vietnam?
- Speculate why you think these men became soldiers.
- What does the quote reveal about the lasting influences of the Vietnam War?

“A Quarter Century After the Fall of Saigon, the Long Divisive Struggle in Indochina Still Lingers in the American Fabric.” (Greenway)
2) Next, display the image of President Johnson and ask students the following questions:

- What action seems to be taking place in this photo?
- Who might the various individuals in the photo be?
- How may the man on the left have impacted the lives of American soldiers?
- Describe the other men in the photo. What reasons may they have had for joining the military?

3) Provide students with content information pertaining to the United States’ increased involvement in Vietnam.

- United States Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Vietnam- Provided ten million dollars of military equipment to the French in their effort to combat Viet Minh forces.
- 3,200 Advisors in Vietnam by 1961
- Johnson becomes President in 1963 (Commander in Chief)
- Advisors pushed to upgrade and modernize the South Vietnamese army.
- Advisors assisted the South Vietnamese military in…
  - combat planning and operations
  - training
  - intelligence
4) Using the draft-card photo, ask students such questions as: Were these young men willing to fight in the Vietnam War? Why or why not?

- What action seems to be taking place in this image? What information helps you understand this photo?
- Compare and contrast the young men in the photo with American soldiers stationed in Vietnam. How are they similar? How are they different?
- How might a Vietnam veteran respond if shown this photo?

5) Have the students read an interview of a Vietnam War veteran, emphasizing reasons why he decided to go to war, what made him fight, what made him continue to fight, and what such experiences did to him as a person, a soldier, and a citizen of the United States. Through the remainder of this lesson, students will be asked to analyze key reasons why Vietnam veterans chose to go to war when they did. Ask students to consider what led these soldiers to draw such conclusions, perhaps involving home life, beliefs or values, through their understanding of the interview they’ve read.
• Utilize relevant portions of the David Hack interview and emphasize Hack’s decisions and reactions to specific experiences he faced.

6) Assign the class to write their ideas about the interview they read on a piece of paper to turn in for class. Have them write a 2 paragraph essay addressing the following questions.

• Why may have soldiers decided to go to war?
• What kept soldiers fighting during the war?
• How would you, the student, react if put in the same situation?

7) Discuss the value of such a source to learning and understanding important aspects of U.S. history. How might this oral history interview compare with other sources you might encounter regarding recollections of US involvement in Vietnam?

Method of Assessment:

Ask students to write two to three paragraphs about the interview and images utilized in class. Their writing assignment should compare reasons why citizens decided to go to war, why citizens decided to avoid the draft, and why the United States government increased its involvement in the Vietnam War.

Sources, Materials and Accommodations:

Images


David Hack Interview

