Vietnam Unit Lesson #8

The Politics of the Vietnam War

Focus Statement: This lesson examines the manner in which domestic politics had an impact on the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was a conflict often characterized by the political decisions that oversaw it. During the course of the conflict, there was controversy involving how the war was being handled by the government and eventually why American troops were still fighting. The presidencies of both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were wrought with controversy over how the government was handling the situation. Incidents such as the seemingly disastrous Tet Offensive and the secret bombing of Cambodia only led to the American people becoming more wary of the government and its justifications for war.

In addition to building students’ ability to empathize with individuals from the past, the habit of mind “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” serves as a way of thinking about the complexities of politics in wartime. Every war, Vietnam included, is a study in causation. One action or decision always leads to some type of action or decision by the opposing party. It is important to teach students how this process works during a war. The Vital Theme and Narrative is “Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas, and Institutions.” The Vietnam War was a war of different values and beliefs. The belief in the Domino Theory and the fear of communism were some of the chief reasons for U.S. involvement. The U.S. was concerned about the spread of communism from the Soviet Union and this fear led to many of the decisions that were carried out during this time period. Students should come away from this lesson with knowledge about the politics and the key events that led to political backlash during the Vietnam War.

Vital Theme and Narrative: Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas, and Institutions

Habit of Mind: 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.

Perceive past events as they were experienced by individuals at the time, develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.

Central Question: What impact did United States Presidents and politics have on the Vietnam War?

Objectives:

1. Explain the political climate during the Vietnam War.
2. Describe the impact that President Johnson and President Nixon had on war.
3. Assess the role that politics played in the Vietnam War on the American side.

National History Standard Era 9 2C Assess the Vietnam policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations and the shifts of public opinion about the war [analyze multiple causation].
Historical Thinking Standard 2A Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility.

Historical Thinking Standard 3C Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the importance of ideas.

**Procedures**

1. **Introductory Activity**
   At the beginning of class, the students will write down three facts that they know about politics in regard to Vietnam. After sharing their ideas with a partner, each group will report one fact to the class.

2. **The Presidency in the Vietnam War**
   A. Show students a political cartoon dealing with the escalation in the Vietnam War and use an analysis guide that asks the following questions:
      1. What year was the cartoon drawn? What do you know about what events have taken place prior to this cartoon being drawn?
      2. Who is the cartoonist and where did the cartoon appear? What do you know about the individual and/or about the perspective of the newspaper in which the cartoon first appeared?
      3. What elements of symbolism appear in the cartoon?
      4. What messages are being communicated?
      5. Imagine you had to explain this cartoon to a friend. Write at least three sentences that would help your friend understand the context and central message of the cartoon.

      Students will then be asked to share what message they think the cartoon is trying to communicate.

   B. Play two telephone conversations in which the Tonkin incident and the Vietnam War are discussed. The first one is between President Lyndon Johnson and FBI Assistant Director Cartha DeLoach. The other telephone conversation is between President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. ([http://www.presidentialtimeline.org/html/educators/educators.php?pid=mm](http://www.presidentialtimeline.org/html/educators/educators.php?pid=mm)).
      Ask students the following questions:
      1. In what year did each conversation take place?
      2. What do you know about this time period that helps you understand the context of the conversation?
      3. What central ideas are being discussed? Why are these ideas important? What are the consequences of these conversations?

   C. Next hand out a sheet that contains Johnson and Nixon’s highest and lowest approval ratings (along with other Presidents since 1938 for comparison sake). As students to review the sheet. Ask them to consider if the ratings are consistent with their expectations or if they were surprised and why.
D. Politics of the Vietnam War
   1. Utilize direct instruction that explains key political decisions that were made during the Vietnam War.
   2. Describe major events that led to the American people’s distrust of the government and the executive branch. (See attached notes).

E. Method of Assessment
   Distribute a May 15, 1972 Herblock political cartoon, “Fourth Year of the ‘Plan to End the War.’” Utilizing primary sources and content information provided in class, students should imagine they are preparing to attend a public discussion focusing on the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. Students are to determine if they support or oppose the position articulated in the political cartoon and then prepare a 3 minute statement explaining their viewpoint. In addition to addressing the content in the cartoon and how it relates to the context of 1972, students should demonstrate an ability to place themselves within the time period as they support or reject the decisions made by President Nixon during this time period.

F. Materials Needed for Lesson
   a. Escalation political cartoon
   b. Four year plan political cartoon
   c. President approval ratings sheet
   d. Internet access for telephone messages
   e. Content Outline
   f. Assessment prompt

G. Sources
Suggested visual materials:

2. Political cartoon: Herb Block, “Fourth Year of the ‘Plan to End the War’”
Approval Highs and Lows

President Bush's job approval has tied its low mark in *Washington Post-ABC News* polling. Few other presidents have experienced such negative ratings since 1938 and only one has been so consistently on the negative side. But none reached the peak Bush hit one month after 9/11. For more on Bush, check out Peter Baker's analysis on *The Trail*.

Here's a look at the highs and lows each president has experienced since 1938:

**Presidential Job Approval: The Highs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>% saying &quot;approve&quot;</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>Oct. 9, 2001</td>
<td>92% One month after the terrorist attacks of September 11, President Bush achieved the highest approval rating of any president since modern polling began.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
<td>Mar. 4, 1991</td>
<td>90% With the ground war in Iraq less than a week old, the public was near-unanimous in its support for the president.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry S. Truman</td>
<td>June 5, 1945</td>
<td>87% Another president buoyed by wartime success, Truman reached a peak on the eve of V-E Day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt</td>
<td>Jan. 13 and 31, 1942</td>
<td>84% FDR had widespread support in these Gallup polls, among the first conducted after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyndon Johnson</td>
<td>Mar. 5, 1964</td>
<td>80% Johnson hit his highest approval rating in early 1964, but did not dip below 70 percent approval until a year later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwight D. Eisenhower</td>
<td>Dec. 19, 1956</td>
<td>78% Ike's approval peaked in the post-war good times of 1956, also Elvis Presley's breakthrough year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Carter</td>
<td>Mar. 21, 1977</td>
<td>75% Carter earned his highest approval rating two months after taking office. After a late-March approval rating of 72 percent, he never again topped 70 percent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>Mar. 31 and Apr. 22, 1981</td>
<td>73% Reagan's approval rating also peaked shortly after taking office, though he nearly reached a high again in mid-1986.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald R. Ford</td>
<td>Aug. 19, 1974</td>
<td>71% Not long after this, the first measure of Ford's approval rating, he pardoned Nixon and disapproval of his job performance rose 25 percentage points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>Jan. 30, 1998</td>
<td>69% About a week after the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, Clinton's approval rating topped out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>Nov. 17, 1969 and Jan. 29, 1973</td>
<td>67% Nixon notched his highest approval rating twice: in the first year of his term and as ceasefire was declared in Vietnam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Presidential Job Approval: The Lows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Date Details</th>
<th>% saying &quot;disapprove&quot;</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harry S. Truman</td>
<td>Jan. 11, 1952</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>Though not statistically different from Nixon's 66 percent, Truman clocked this lowest rating ever recorded during the Korean War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>Aug. 5, 1974</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>Just days before leaving office, Nixon received one of the most negative job approval ratings recorded thus far.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>May 15, 2006, Jan. 19, 2007 and June 21, 2007</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Bush's disapproval rating has been above 50 percent for the past two years. No president since Truman has had such sustained negative ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
<td>Aug. 4, 1992</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>Three months before losing his bid for re-election, Bush's disapproval rating peaked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Carter</td>
<td>July 2, 1979</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>1979 was not Carter's best year, just a few months after being attacked by a killer rabbit, his disapproval peaked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>Jan. 22, 1983</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>Reagan's low point hit two years into his first term, just days before a State of the Union speech outlining his plan for bringing the nation out of economic trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyndon Johnson</td>
<td>Aug. 12, 1968</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>A few months after deciding not to seek a second term as president, Johnson's disapproval rating rose above 50 percent for the first time during his tenure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>Jan. 4, 1995, Aug.-Oct. 1994 and Aug. 8, 1993</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>Disapproval of Clinton's job performance reached a peak three times: as Newt Gingrich's Republican majority took over the House, during the Paula Jones scandal and as the debate surrounding universal health care heated up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald R. Ford</td>
<td>Apr. 21, 1975 and Nov. 24, 1975</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>Ford never regained popularity after pardoning Nixon, but even at his lowest, around four in 10 approved of the job he was doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt</td>
<td>Nov. 12, 1938</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>FDR's worst rating occurred as the country was still climbing out of economic depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwight D. Eisenhower</td>
<td>Apr. 1, 1958</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>I like Ike indeed! Even at his worst, just one-third of Americans disapproved of the job Eisenhower was doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John F. Kennedy</td>
<td>Sept. 17, 1963 and Nov. 13, 1963</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>With approval ratings near sixty percent, Kennedy's worst was never very bad. His worst rating at 30 percent disapproval occurred twice in the last months of his presidency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Direct Instruction

1) Domino Theory
   a) The theory that if one country becomes communist, then the surrounding countries would become communist as well.
   b) It was this mindset that led to many of the decisions that the United States made during the Cold War with the Soviet Union (including the Vietnam War).

2) Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
   a) The U.S. Congress passed this in 8/10/1964. It gave President Johnson the full authority to use the military in Southeast Asia, without declaring war. It allowed for Johnson to continue escalating the conflict with legal authority.

3) The Tet Offensive
   a) It was massive operation organized by the People’s Army of Vietnam (the northern army). They used more than 80,000 Vietcong troops striking more than 100 towns and cities, including 36 of 44 provincial capitals, and the national capital throughout 1968. Although the Tet Offensive ended in failure, it shattered the American peoples’ views on the war, who thought that the Communists were not capable of such as large scale attack, based on what the government had been telling them. It began to shift the way that people trusted their politicians and how they viewed the war.

4) My Lai Massacre
   a) Estimates vary on both sides, but between 347-500 South Vietnamese citizens were killed, with most being unarmed civilians.
   b) Some of the victims were raped and several bodies were found completely mutilated.
   c) BBC News described the incident and stated that “Soldiers went berserk, gunning down unarmed men, women, children and babies. Families which huddled together for safety in huts or bunkers were shown no mercy. Those who emerged with hands held high were murdered. ... Elsewhere in the village, other atrocities were in progress. Women were gang raped; Vietnamese who had bowed to greet the Americans were beaten with fists and tortured, clubbed with rifle butts and stabbed with bayonets.”

5) The Nixon Doctrine
   a) President Nixon conducted a press conference in 7/25/1969 to discuss the United States’ foreign policy plan of the time. He stated:
      i) “First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments.”
      ii) “Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.”
      iii) “Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.”

6) Bombing of Cambodia
   a) Nixon wrote to Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia in 1969 and stated that the U.S. acknowledged "the sovereignty, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia."
   b) Regardless of what was written, bombings were conducted on Cambodia due to the fact that the Communists used this area as a base. The bombings were hidden from the American public for a long time.
   c) When the bombings became well known, public outrage followed.