What Has Been the Ongoing Toll of Service in Vietnam?

The ongoing toll of service in Vietnam that continues to affect veterans—Agent Orange exposure, PTSD, homelessness—has, through citizens’ advocacy, ushered in greater federal benefits and care for veterans than had been in the case in the past.

This lesson plan will involve a review of the different issues that have impacted Vietnam veterans and veterans of more recent conflicts after their periods of service have ended. Students will debate the obligation of the government to provide care for such issues, and reach out to policymakers in their communities to advocate for what care they think should be provided for veterans.
Debate Agent Orange

Ask students to read the following 1984 New York Times article titled “Veterans Speak Out Against Agent Orange.” Then ask students to consider the following questions, either through class discussion or in writing:

1.) What does the article, and what do the quoted veterans, state as the longstanding impacts of the herbicide Agent Orange?

2.) What additional problems or issues do you think veterans might face upon completing service and returning to life at home?

3.) Veteran Bobby Seal is quoted in the article as referring to the “military-industrial complex.” What does this term refer to, and has its influence changed since the Vietnam era?

4.) If you were the judge overseeing the case, how do you think you would rule? Why?

Lasting Effects of War

Begin by asking students: What obligation do you think the government has to its veterans after their period of service has ended? Why? Though individual periods of deployment may be short, the effects of service may stay with veterans for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps the most publicized cause of ongoing health issues in Vietnam veterans is exposure to Agent Orange, which resulted in myriad diseases and birth defects that are carried forward in the children of those exposed. Agent Orange was a chemical compound developed by Dow Chemical to serve as a defoliant—meaning it would kill crops and other vegetation in the areas where sprayed (see slide 1)—that would aid in rapidly and effectively clearing areas of the Vietnamese countryside that might provide cover to enemy troops and feed the people. In spite of some initial research that suggested the use of the chemical compound could create health problems for those exposed, the defoliant was used widely in Vietnam. Those who were exposed to Agent Orange may end up developing a range of health problems, including...
Parkinson’s disease, Hodgkin’s disease, prostate cancer, respiratory cancer, and more. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter authorized the first Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) study of Agent Orange, to evaluate the effects of the chemical compound on the pilots who sprayed it. After a decade of lawsuits filed by veterans for compensation to cover medical treatment needed as a result of Agent Orange exposure, the Agent Orange Act was established in 1991 to allow the VA to declare a range of diseases as probable effects of Agent Orange exposure, and thus veterans could pursue services in relation to those diseases.

Watch the news report included on slide 2, which features veterans speaking to the long-term effects of their exposure to Agent Orange. What additional effects does Agent Orange exposure have, beyond the diseases and cancers that directly impact veterans? Do you think the government has an obligation to provide compensation for the children of Vietnam veterans who may suffer medical problems that are passed along genetically? Why or why not? Do you think a defoliant such as Agent Orange is a legitimate weapon to use in war? In addition to affecting the children of Vietnam veterans, Agent Orange exposure has had widespread effects on generations of Vietnamese, both those living on land that still contains Agent Orange, and those who are children of people originally exposed during the war (see slides 3 and 4). Many Vietnamese children have been born with irreversible birth defects that can be traced to Agent Orange. What obligation does the United States have to help these people?

There are other effects of service that continue when veterans have returned home. Some veterans may have trouble finding work due to physical or mental health problems, which can ultimately lead some to become homeless. Ask students to look at the infographic on slide 5, which shows the number of homeless veterans in each state. How many homeless veterans are there in your state? What percentage of the national total does your state represent? What message does the political cartoon on slide 6 send? War impacts nearly all veterans, even some of those who return home.

In addition to possible health problems resulting from Agent Orange exposure, some Vietnam veterans, as well as veterans of other wars, suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). In 1970 Dr. James Lifton, a famous psychiatrist at the time, first testified to Congress about the effects of “Post-Vietnam Syndrome,” a condition he was seeing among patients who were veterans of the war. Eventually this syndrome as coined by Lifton came to be known as PTSD. Ask students to look at the image on slide 7, which shows an item from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection (http://www.vvmf.org/items/). What obstacles do you think PTSD might create for a veteran looking to return to civilian life? What obligation do you think the government has to respond to veterans with PTSD? Ask students to observe the chart on slide 8, which shows the rise in PTSD. What does the chart tell us about PTSD across different eras of service? The National Center for PTSD estimates that 30% of Vietnam veterans have PTSD, and 10–20% of veterans of more recent wars suffer from PTSD.
Some health consequences faced by veterans are specific to the wars in which they served. For veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, exposure to chemical smoke at burn pits (as seen on slide 9)—a military practice to dispose of waste—is starting to take its toll on veterans’ health. The Department of Veterans Affairs has stated that studies on the health impacts of exposure to the chemical smoke of burn pits are currently limited. This means that veterans suffering from related health problems, like reduced lung function, cannot receive the full funding they may need to cover their medical care.

In particular because the effects of service do not end when a soldier returns home, it is important to recognize veterans’ service to the nation.

Have students work together in small groups to create a list of interview questions to ask a veteran of a recent conflict (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) about his or her life after returning home. Then have the small groups research the social services available to veterans in their communities. Using the list of questions and research done, ask each student to find a veteran to interview, either in person, by email, or over the phone. You can contact your local chapter of Vietnam Veterans for America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, or other veterans groups for a list of interview questions to ask a veteran of a recent conflict (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.).

Discuss as a class what the students learned from their interviews and what suggestions they might have to make the lives of veterans easier, and have them write emails to their congressmen or women about their suggestions.

Interview a Veteran

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING


STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2
Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7
Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Standards

D1.1.9-12
Explain how a question reflects an enduring issue in the field.

D1.4.9-12
Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge.

D2.Civ.2.9-12
Analyze the role of citizens in the US political system, with attention to various theories of democracy, changes in American’s participation over time, and alternative models from other countries, past and present.

D2.Civ.13.9-12
Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.

D2.His.2.9-12
Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.

D2.His.5.9-12
Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.

D4.7.9-12
Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.