DISCUSSION GUIDE

What Motivated US Involvement in Vietnam?

The policies and decisions on engaging in foreign conflict that are set by our nation’s leaders have far-reaching impacts.

A variety of complex motives guide the decision to participate in foreign conflicts. The decisions made by various presidents, from Truman to Nixon, regarding US involvement in Vietnam reflect a variety of motivations for participation in the war.

This lesson plan will involve a review of various presidents’ decision-making and foreign policy with respect to Vietnam and the greater Southeast Asia region. Students will analyze and debate the implications of presidents’ public speeches, and to consider whether any of the same factors were involved in the 2003 Iraq war.
Vietnamese Independence

Ask students to read the text of Viet Minh revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh’s Declaration of Independence speech from Ba Dinh Square (September 2, 1945).

Ask students to answer the following questions, either in writing or through class discussion:
- What claims does Ho Chi Minh make against the Japanese?
- What claims does Ho Chi Minh make against the French?
- Who do you think Ho Chi Minh’s intended audience was, and why?
- What do you think Ho Chi Minh’s intention was in citing the US Declaration of Independence as the first lines of his speech?
- If you were a US political leader in office at the time of this speech, what would you recommend as a course of action (or non-action) as a response to this speech? Why?
- Based on this speech, would you characterize Ho Chi Minh as a communist or a nationalist? What evidence in the text supports your argument?

Entering Vietnam

Begin by asking students: What would you say are valid reasons for getting involved in a war? What factors do you think should determine a nation’s withdrawal from a war? These are questions that presidents and their advisors struggle with on a regular basis.

From the mid-1800’s to World War II, France occupied Vietnam (as well as Cambodia and Laos) as a colonial state. During World War II, the Japanese marginalized the French and occupied Vietnam. In 1945, Viet Minh (Vietnam Independence League) leader Ho Chi Minh organized a revolution against the French as it sought to reestablish colonial rule with the defeat of the Japanese. This precipitated what is generally known as the First Indochina War, which continued from 1946 until 1954, when the French were defeated by the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. The subsequent signing of the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with the Viet Minh administering the northern region and the government under Emperor Bao Dai, who had been installed by the French in 1949, governing the southern region. The accords specified that an election was to take place in 1956 to unify the country according to popular vote.
In 1947, President Harry Truman put forth his Truman Doctrine, which established a precedent for US military assistance to non-communist nations under threat. This so-called “containment” doctrine suggested that if the US did not provide support to the governments of Greece and Turkey, those nations might lose the struggle against communism; US intervention was thus necessary to contain the spread of communism. This line of thinking influenced US foreign policy for years to come, with the idea that US intervention in foreign conflicts could be warranted if it seemed that communist forces threatened to expand in a particular region or sub-region—for example, when China came under communist leadership in 1949, fear of a possible communist bloc in the region arose. Listen to the audio clip included on slide 1, which is an excerpt from President Truman’s address to Congress regarding the Truman Doctrine. What language in the clip sets a precedent for US military assistance to non-communist nations? What language does the President use to convey the logic of his reasoning? Does this recording indicate that Truman gave any direct reason for pursuing action? Does this recording indicate that Truman gave any direct reason for pursuing action? Does this recording indicate that Truman gave any direct reason for pursuing action?

In 1954, the French were defeated in Indochina and a conference in Geneva was assembled to determine a means of restoring peace and order to the region. At this conference the Geneva Accords were signed, the result of which was a temporarily divided Vietnam with the Viet Minh occupying the northern region and Emperor Bao Dai installed by the French as leader of the southern region. By this time, Dwight D. Eisenhower had been elected president and his policy toward Vietnam (and in the Indochina region more broadly) continued to give strong consideration to the strategic importance of the region to US allies, with respect to both politics (a desire to prevent a communist bloc from forming in the region with China at the helm—commonly known as the “domino theory”) as well as economics (a desire to keep the region open for trade and extraction of resources). Ask students to read the excerpt on slide 2 from President Eisenhower’s press conference held in April 1954. Do you find the President’s arguments for US intervention in Vietnam convincing/valid? Why might Americans in 1954 have found Eisenhower’s logic reasonable?

In 1955, Emperor Bao Dai was ousted in favor of Ngo Dinh Diem, a Western-educated Catholic favored by the US, who would serve as the first president of South Vietnam (see slide 3). Diem’s rule saw the cancellation of the planned 1956 elections to reunify Vietnam, with the contention that South Vietnam had not been a signing party of the Geneva Accords, and thus it was not bound to its terms. In reality, Diem, and the US, feared that Ho Chi Minh’s popularity would translate to sure loss in any election. The Diem regime repressed suspected communists and the Buddhist majority, practices which contributed to the rise of the National Liberation Front, founded in 1960 in South Vietnam with the intention to overthrow the Diem government and reunite Vietnam (see slide 4). By the late 1950s, a new insurgency, this time directed against Diem’s regime, was gaining strength in South Vietnam, imperiling the regime and American policy in the region. This rising insurgency was a critical factor in spurring further American involvement in Vietnam.

President Kennedy was wary of further involvement in Vietnam, but ultimately he continued to escalate US involvement. In late 1961, President Kennedy began increasing the number of military advisers in Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese army. Despite previous backing of the US, Diem’s regime was seen as increasingly untenable and US officials in fact supported a coup against Diem, which ultimately led to his assassination in 1963 and the rise of a military junta under South Vietnamese General Duong Van Minh. Watch the clip of a September 1963 Walter Cronkite interview with President Kennedy included on slide 5. Ask students: What are the major points of Kennedy’s remarks? Based on this clip alone, do you find the President’s arguments for US involvement reasonable?

President Nixon was wary of further involvement in the Vietnam war. He believed that the US military was misused and that the American public was losing confidence in the war. Nixon campaigned on a need to change policy with respect to Vietnam (watch video in slide 8), but ultimately he continued to escalate US involvement in the country at a time when he was launching an invasion of another region by then authorizing an expansion of US involvement in the Vietnam war. Nixon’s words? How does he characterize the tone of his address? What might Americans in 1965 have found Nixon’s words convincing/valid? Why might Americans in 1965 have found Nixon’s words convincing/valid?

In 1969, President Richard Nixon announced the decision to withdraw American forces from Vietnam. In his address to the nation on August 15, 1969, Nixon stated his intention to “seek peace with honor” and end America’s role in Vietnam. Nixon’s words? How does he characterize the tone of his address? What might Americans in 1969 have found Nixon’s words convincing/valid? Why might Americans in 1969 have found Nixon’s words convincing/valid? What factors do you think should have been considered in determining the United States’ role in the Vietnam war? These are questions that presidents and their advisors have thought about for decades when making decisions associated with past conflicts. From the mid 1800’s to World War II, conflict, it is important to understand and evaluate political and military motivations and their consequences. Ask students to read the text of US Ambassador to Saigon Henry Cabot Lodge’s August 1963 telegram to the Department of State suggesting the various reasons to pursue a coup against Diem. Ask students to draft questions that might have been asked in response to Lodge’s telegram that would have guided a decision on the matter. What might Americans in 1963 have found Lodge’s telegram convincing/valid? Why might Americans in 1963 have found Lodge’s telegram convincing/valid? What factors do you think should have been considered in determining the United States’ role in the Vietnam war?
With President Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, Vice President Lyndon Johnson became president and took decisive steps toward waging full-fledged war in Vietnam. On August 2 and 4, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson received reports of attacks by North Vietnamese forces on the USS Maddox in the Vietnamese Gulf of Tonkin. Many have suggested that the incident, the details of which have come under dispute, merely served as an excuse to advance President Johnson’s policy toward Vietnam, an inclination toward proactive military action that would communicate that the US would stand up to any kind of aggression. Listen to the recording of President Johnson’s August 3 conversation with Secretary McNamara regarding a course of action in response to attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin, included on slide 6. What language stands out as Johnson’s primary reasoning for pursuing action? Does this recording indicate that Johnson gave any direct consideration to the threat of communism?


Facing increasing public dissent regarding US involvement in Vietnam, Johnson decided not to seek reelection in 1968, and in 1969 President Nixon was elected president and took office. Nixon campaigned on a need to change policy with respect to Vietnam (watch video in slide 8), with a promise for “honorable withdrawal.” Two years earlier, Nixon had claimed that “if the credibility of the United States is destroyed in Vietnam, it will be destroyed in Europe as well,” (see New York Times article in slide 9). Despite announcing a plan of "Vietnamization" in 1969, which would equip and train South Vietnam’s troops to take the place of US troops for phased withdrawal, President Nixon expanded US involvement in the region by then authorizing an invasion into Cambodia in 1970. Watch Nixon’s address to the nation regarding the Cambodian invasion from April 1970 included on slide 10. How would you characterize the tone of Nixon’s words? How does he explain his reasoning for launching an invasion of another country at a time when he was trying to wind down the war in Vietnam?

From 1947 until the end of the war, by the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, varying factors motivated US involvement, including (but not limited to): strategic concerns over the spread of communism; political concerns about impact of instability in the region for allies; desire for re-election and the broader protection of political interests; concerns about maintaining the credibility of the US and avoiding defeat. The complex motivations that guided US involvement in Vietnam over the course of two decades continue to guide decisions regarding involvement in foreign conflict today. Ask students to observe the political cartoon included on slide 11, from the Buffalo News. What motivation for the Iraq war is the author suggesting through this cartoon? What do you understand as having been the primary motivation for the initiation of that war? What possible motivations for entering into conflict, if any, would be valid and justified?

Because it is always a significant decision to commit forces to conflict, it is important to understand and evaluate political decisions associated with past conflicts.

POST VISIT ACTIVITY

Entering Iraq

Ask students to review the text of the joint resolution of Congress that authorized the use of force in Iraq in 2002.

- Ask students to summarize the sequence of events listed in the document that led up to the current justifications for the use of force
- Ask students to highlight every instance of the word “threat” or “threaten” used in the document. For each instance, would they consider that threat to be real or valid? Why or why not?
- What, if anything, in the document, reflects the legacy of Vietnam and controversy surrounding the decision making process to enter the war?

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING


Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

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.9-10.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.5
Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

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.11-12.3
Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5
Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8
Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

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 new source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge.

D2.Civ.9.9-12
Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2.Civ.10.9-12
Analyze the impact and appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

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.

D2.His.7.9-12
Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

D2.His.10.9-12
Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

D4.3.9-12
Present adaptations of arguments and explanations that feature evocative ideas and perspectives on issues and topics to reach a range of audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies and digital technologies.

D4.4.9-12
Critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.

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