How do Americans Understand the Wars Their Nation Fights?

Discussion Guide

Wars usually take place far from American soil in places that few Americans understand.

Americans are thus dependent on others, such as the government, the news media, and the entertainment industry, to help them understand why the nation is at war, the progress of the war, and the outcomes and implications.

This lesson plan will involve a review of how information on war has been reported over the course of the 20th century. Students will analyze and debate the validity of information coming from different news sources, from Vietnam to today, and discuss the role of a free press.
Understanding War Today

Ask students to find and bring to class one recent news article or video (within the past year) that reports on some aspect of either the war in Afghanistan or Iraq, or the US’s involvement in the conflict in Syria/Iraq. Encourage students to look at a variety of news outlets such as: The New York Times; USA Today; Al Jazeera; Stars and Stripes; The Nation; The Guardian, etc.

Divide students into groups based on the conflict of their chosen article. Ask students to discuss within their groups:

- What information they can learn about the wars from the article/video they’ve chosen?
- What steps were necessary for the journalist to be able to gather that information?
- To what extent is the report dependent on the military or the government for its information?
- Is there any additional information the reader is left wondering about?

The Media and War

Americans rely heavily on the news media for information about the nation’s wars. Begin by asking students what they believe to be the role of the media in society: Is it to keep citizens informed? Is it to tell the truth at any cost? Is it to influence change? Is it to confirm what we already believe? Can it play several roles at once?

Across much of American history, the U.S. government exercised little control over the ability of the news media to report on military operations. But during the First and Second World Wars, the United States placed new restrictions on the flow of information. During the Second World War, for example, the newly established Office of Censorship circulated a “Code of Wartime Practices for the American Press,” which prohibited journalists from reporting any information—everything from details about troop movements to weather reports to industrial production figures—that might have value to the enemy.

The government also established the Office of War Information (OWI), which produced propaganda aimed at bolstering morale on the home front, encouraging Americans to accept sacrifices, and shaping the way Americans understood the motives underlying the nation’s war effort. The OWI was probably most
famous for its newsreels (which would accompany feature films) but also produced posters, advertisements, brochures, and books. View 2-3 minutes of the newsreel included in the presentation. Discuss with students: What is the tone of the newsreel? What is the message you would take away from this newsreel regarding this particular battle? How were the images and video for the newsreel obtained?

**View a 2-3 minute selection of the Why Vietnam? program** – a piece of government propaganda similar to the newsreels produced during the Second World War -- included on slide 2 of the presentation. (Optional activity: break students up into groups, assigning each group a portion of the program to watch. Have each group then summarize to the class its respective portion.) This film outlines for the American public US policy in Vietnam, with statements from President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Although independent media covered the war intensely (especially after 1964), such government-produced material may have helped generate strong popular support for the war in its early months. As time passed, however, independent media, including the major television networks and newspapers such as The New York Times and Washington Post, presented a more accurate and balanced view of the war. Critics charged that the news media went too far, casting too negative a view of the war and straying too far from the outlook of senior government officials. But one reason for the media’s sometimes-critical view of the war, especially after 1968, was the government’s dwindling credibility. Daily press briefings given by the U.S. military command in Saigon were referred to by reporters as the “Five O’Clock Follies,” as the information given was often limited, trivial, or even misleading.

**Americans also learned about the Vietnam War from photographs**, including some of the most iconic war images in American history, taken by photographers for the New York Times, the Associated Press, and other major news media organizations. Examine the series of photos included as slides 3-6 in the presentation. In the first, former Marine Eddie Adams served as a photographer for the Associated Press in Vietnam and took this now iconic photo of South Vietnamese police chief General Nguyen Ngoc Loan killing Viet Cong suspect Nguyen Van Lem in Saigon in 1968. The image appeared in The New York Times, and American citizens were able to see the brutality of war, and perhaps in some cases formed a new view of South Vietnam.

Following is another iconic image, taken by LIFE magazine’s Larry Burrows, of wounded Marine Gunnery Sgt. Jeremiah Purdie, center, reaching toward a stricken soldier after a firefight south of the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam in 1966. The standard practice among the news media was not to publish graphic images of the wounded or dead, and the “reality” of this image meant that it wasn’t published until 1971, five years after it was taken.

The news media had always covered antiwar activities during other periods of American history, but the unprecedented scale of dissent during the Vietnam War meant that the subject received extensive coverage. This iconic image depicts high schooler Mary Ann Vecchio screaming as she kneels over Kent State student Jeffrey Miller’s body during a
Americans' opinions about the war were shaped not just by news reports and photographs but also by editorials. While many media remained supportive of the war, some major news organizations became increasingly critical as time passed. In February 1968, CBS News aired on television a special report on the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. At the end of the report, renowned anchorman Walter Cronkite read a brief editorial suggesting that the United States was mired in a stalemate. Play the video clip from the CBS report included in the presentation. Ask students: what is Cronkite suggesting as a course of action for the US in Vietnam? It is claimed that after President Johnson watched the report, he said “If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America.” In March of 1968, Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection.

In 1971, the Pentagon Papers were published in The New York Times. This report contained a history of the US role in Indochina from World War II until May 1968, a report which was classified as “top secret” by the federal government. After the third daily installment appeared in the Times, the Department of Justice obtained a temporary restraining order against further publication of the classified material, contending that further publication of the material would cause “immediate and irreparable harm” to national defense interests. But the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Times, allowing the newspaper to go ahead with publishing government secrets. The publication of the Pentagon Papers was a landmark event in the nature of war reporting, with the public being able to read an internal government analysis of the decisions that had led the United States to war in Vietnam.

Following the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense adopted new rules to assure much tighter control over the activities of journalists in war zones. During the Gulf War of 1991, for example, coverage of the war was restricted to reporting pools accompanying carefully selected military units, and pool reporters had to agree to submit their reports to military censors for review. In the presentation, you see an iconic image from the Gulf War in which Sergeant Ken Kozakiewicz weeps as he learns that the body bag next to him contains the body of his friend Andy Alaniz, who had been killed by friendly fire. David C. Turnley of the Detroit Free Press managed to take this photo despite the Pentagon’s ban on taking images of soldiers’ deaths and coffins. Gulf War correspondent Chris Hedges of The New York Times has said “Our success was due in part to the understanding of many soldiers of what the role of a free press is in a democracy. These men and women violated orders in order to allow us to do our job.”

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, reporters were embedded within the military, living with soldiers and sometimes going on missions. This system meant that reporters could sometimes get close to the front lines and cover spectacular stories, but it also meant that the military exercised tight control over where reporters could go and what they could see. As a result, many journalists saw the reports of embedded

Optional Activities

Have students read Johnson's address to the nation from VVMF's Vietnam timeline and analyze why Johnson decided not to seek office.

Have students read excerpts of the Pentagon Papers from VVMF's Vietnam timeline. Then divide students into two groups and have one group argue for the publication of the Pentagon Papers and the other group argue against its publication.
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Negative view of the war and straying too far from the outlook of senior government officials has impacted the way that wars are reported, and reminds us all of our civic responsibility to speak to this moment in the conflict without the prior intervention of the military in telling the story.

Independent media, including the major television networks and newspapers, has been especially intense (especially after 1964), such government-produced material may have helped some reporters and photographers have attempted to operate on their own, free of the military's control. In documenting the war in Syria, freelance photographer James Foley was kidnapped in 2012 by unidentified organized forces. In August of 2014, video footage was released of Foley being beheaded as a response to American military intervention against ISIS/Da'esh. Nearly two-thirds of the journalists killed in combat or crossfire in 2014 were freelancers. Discuss with students: Why are reporters sometimes driven to take great risks? What kinds of reporting are most likely to provide information of greatest interest and importance to the American public? What is the government's appropriate responsibility in controlling or shaping information about war?

The US government exercises far more control over reporting on military operations in the twenty-first century than it did half a century ago in Vietnam. This has impacted the way that wars are reported, and reminds us all of our civic responsibility to remain informed about what is happening on both a national and international level.

Comparing Sources

Ask students to select a current armed conflict with US involvement (for example: the war in Iraq/Syria, the war in Afghanistan, the Mexican drug war). Ask each student to research a key event in the timeline of his or her chosen armed conflict and find reports from three different news sources on that key event. Have students consider the following questions:

1.) Which source gives the greatest detail of information?
2.) Which source would you consider most trustworthy, and why?
3.) What appears to be the purpose of the report?
4.) What do you know about the author of the report?

Here you see an iconic image of Operation Red Dawn, in which former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was captured by US forces. This image became particularly iconic because the man seen in it was an Iraqi civilian translator working with US forces — this image was taken with the translator's own phone and he has been able to speak to this moment in the conflict without the prior intervention of the military in telling this story. The translator has suggested that the release of the photo raised the ire of top-level military officials.

To escape the limits of embedded reporting and get a fuller sense of war, some reporters and photographers have attempted to operate on their own, free of the military’s control. In documenting the war in Syria, freelance photographer James Foley was kidnapped in 2012 by unidentified organized forces. In August of 2014, video footage was released of Foley being beheaded as a response to American military intervention against ISIS/Da'esh. Nearly two-thirds of the journalists killed in combat or crossfire in

Further Suggested Reading


negative a view of the war and straying too far from the outlook of senior government balanced view of the war. Critics charged that the news media went too far, casting too intensely (especially after 1964), such government-produced material may have helped public US policy in Vietnam, with statements from President Lyndon Johnson and World War -- included on slide 2 of the presentation. (Optional activity: break students up a piece of government propaganda similar to the newsreels produced during the Second military's control. In documenting the war in Syria, freelance photographer James Foley against ISIS/Da'esh. Nearly two-thirds of the journalists killed in combat or crossfire in viewer critique as being controlled or incomplete? What is the message you would take away from this newsreel regarding this particular story. The translator has suggested that the release of the photo raised the ire of particularly iconic because the man seen in it was an Iraqi civilian translator working with among the news media was not to publish graphic images of the wounded or dead, and published government secrets. The publication of the that further publication of the material would cause Watergate report, a Washington Post investigative series that revealed that he would not seek reelection. Endorsed by the National Council for Social Studies www.socialstudies.org