The policies and decisions on whether to engage in foreign conflict that are set by our nation’s leaders have far-reaching impacts. The legislative mechanisms by which the US became involved in Vietnam continue to impact discussions of war today.

This lesson plan will involve a review of the most iconic news reports associated with the Vietnam War. Students will analyze and debate the effect of evolving types of information coming from the news media over the course of the war, and consider how and what types of information about current military conflicts are related to the public through the news media.
Going to War

1.) Break students into groups and have each group research one event or action commonly thought to have led to the War of 1812, with students documenting:
   - When did it occur?
   - Who did it involve?
   - What was the central issue of the event/action?
   - What do you think your opinion on this event/action would have been if you were an American citizen at the time?
   - Restrictions on trade and the Orders in Council
   - Impressment and the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair
   - British support of Native American resistance and the Battle of Tippecanoe
   - Possible reference to use: [http://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-1812](http://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-1812)

2.) Ask student groups to read President Madison’s statement to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Great Britain. Ask them to highlight the language that refers to the event/action/issue their group has been assigned.

3.) Ask student groups to read the text of the declaration of war against Great Britain in 1812 and discuss:
   - What does the document authorize the President to do?
   - What can be understood from reading this document about the role of Congress in making decisions on war?

Reasons for War

Ask students: When was the last time the US made a declaration of war? Students may answer with Afghanistan, Iraq, etc., but in fact the last time the US formally declared war was in 1941, with the onset of World War II. Our founders intended for war to be initiated through a specific procedure, but that hasn’t always been the case, particularly in the last 50+ years.

View slides 1-2 in the presentation. The Constitution addresses how war should be initiated—in Article I, Section 8, the text states that “Congress shall have the Power to declare War.” This indicates that the authority to initiate war lies with Congress—how has this legislative authority played out in the 20th century?
How Has Vietnam Impacted the Way War is Initiated?

In 1964, a series of events with some familiar elements unfolded and ultimately resulted in US armed intervention in a foreign conflict. 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 used the lessons of the Munich Conference as an analogy ("Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression.")

On August 7, 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Ask students to read the excerpt from the resolution included on slide 7. What words stand out to you? Do you see the word “war” anywhere? Through this resolution, President Johnson was able to commit large numbers of additional troops to Vietnam without receiving a formal declaration of war from Congress, and some have interpreted this as being an unconstitutional way to initiate war at a full scale, or an overexpansion of executive authority as commander-in-chief.

As the war progressed, from 1964 onward, Americans became increasingly disillusioned with the war in Vietnam. Only an average of 40% of Americans approved Johnson’s handling of the war in Vietnam in 1968 (Gallup), and the approval rating increased to only 54% when Nixon announced a withdrawal of some troops in 1969 (Gallup).

(Slides 8 and 9) In mid-1970, Nixon authorized an invasion of Cambodia, purportedly to secure the border with Vietnam as a preemptive measure in the move toward Vietnamization (to expand South Vietnam’s role in the war while reducing the US’s role). This action was authorized without the approval of Congress and the American public learned about it after the fact through a speech by President Nixon on April 30, 1970. Unrest grew among the public (protests at Kent State against the invasion of Cambodia led to killing of 4 students by National Guard) and Congress responded by passing the Cooper-Church amendment, which immediately ended US operations outside the Vietnam borders.

As a measure to check executive power in committing forces and, arguably, as a way to reconcile the mistake that was made in passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, on November 7, 1973, the War Powers Resolution passed by Congress became law. The War Powers Resolution requires the President to notify Congress within 48 hours upon sending US forces into military action, and it forbids military personnel from remaining in a state of conflict for more than 60 days without authorization from Congress for a formal declaration of war.

Ask students to read the excerpt from the War Powers Resolution included on slide 10. Do you think this new resolution is constitutional or unconstitutional? The Constitution names the President as the Commander-in-Chief of all armed forces, and yet it also gives the power to declare war to Congress. The War Powers Resolution is still in effect today and is intended to guide decisions on the initiation of war.
In 1964, a series of events with some familiar elements. In slide 3, you see an image from the Japanese attack the Munich Conference as an analogy. "Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace, because..."

Policy toward Vietnam, an inclination toward proactive military action that used the lessons of which have come under dispute, merely served as an excuse to advance President Johnson's... Many have suggested that the incident, the details... Congress passed a resolution formally declaring war against Japan.

"...seem to maintain the founders' intentions regarding the initiation of war? On December 8, 2001, Congress passed Public Law 107-40. Read the excerpt from PL 107-40 included on slide 13. How does this statement compare with the statement read earlier from the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution? Would you interpret this law as being in keeping with the War Powers Resolution?"

In September of 2014, President Obama authorized limited airstrikes against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as Da'esh) as part of a "counterterrorism strategy," using the language of PL 107-40 as justification for military action. A CBS news poll has indicated that six in ten Americans believe that US military intervention in Syria requires congressional approval. (Optional activity: Ask students to read the following Washington Post article. What does the author of the article suggest as the reason(s) for the strikes not having received formal approval from Congress? How might some of those reasons relate to the precedent of Vietnam?)

View the video on slide 15 of President Obama's speech at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 2012. What does President Obama state should be the prerequisites to entering war? How do his words reflect a reference to the Vietnam War? Do you think the US has learned its lessons from Vietnam? Is executive authority being expanded once again, or is the presidency simply continuing on the path set by Lyndon Johnson?

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.

What Qualifies as War?

Divide students into groups and assign each group an example of prolonged US military intervention since Vietnam that is not commonly referred to as war:

- Operations in Grenada (1983)
- Operations in Panama (1989-1990)
- Operations in Libya (2011)

Ask each group to identify and explain:

- The impetus for US military involvement;
- The legal justifications used (was the War Powers Resolution invoked, or were other resolutions authorizing military force passed?);
- The public perception of the conflict (via public opinion polls and/or news articles of the time period).

Declaring War in a Post-Vietnam World

Ask students to respond to the following statement, either through discussion or through writing, with evidence from the above lessons and above research used as support:

"It has become more difficult to initiate war in the US since the Vietnam War."

Agree or disagree, and provide concrete historical support for your argument.

FURTHER READING


In 1964, a series of events with some familiar elements unfolded. 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 over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

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

D1.5.9-12
Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple viewpoints represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.

D2.Civ.3.9-12
Analyze the impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements on the maintenance of national and international order.

D2.Civ.4.9-12
Explain how the US Constitution establishes a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits that have changed over time and that are still contested.

D2.His.16.9-12
Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

In slide 3, you see an image from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. Before this attack, American citizens largely lived in the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the tragic and seemingly unanticipated event galvanized the American public.

Congress concerning the attack and the prospect of war against Japan. What language does...