DISCUSSION GUIDE

What Was the Legacy of the War in Vietnam?

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

The economic, political, and cultural impact of the war could be seen in Vietnam and on the Vietnamese for several decades following the end of American involvement.

This lesson plan will involve a review of the aftermath of the war in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Students will analyze and debate the terms of the Paris Peace Accords, review ongoing impacts to the region’s foreign relations and economic development, and analyze the current state of US-Vietnam relations and the issues that are guiding that relationship.
PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY

Paris Peace Accords

Divide students into three groups and ask each group to read a selection of chapters from the agreement of the Paris Peace Accords, signed in January 1973 to end hostilities in Vietnam:

Chapters I – III: Vietnamese people’s fundamental rights; Cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of troops; Return of captured military personnel and foreign civilians, and detained Vietnamese civilian personnel.

Chapters IV – VI: Exercise of South Vietnamese people’s right to self-determination; Reunification of Vietnam and the relationship between North and South Vietnam; Join military commissions, the International Commission of Control and Supervision, the International Conference.

Chapters VII – IX: Regarding Cambodia and Laos; Relationship between the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; Other provisions.

Ask each group to analyze:

- What questions these chapters leave unanswered
- Whether the terms of the respective chapters seem fair to all parties
- What US reservations about the terms of the respective chapters might have been
- What North Vietnamese reservations about the terms might have been.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Aftermath of War

When the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973 to end the fighting in Vietnam, both North and South had been plagued by vast economic problems due to decades of war that had destroyed agricultural land and damaged the nations’ limited industrial facilities, and nearly 3 million Vietnamese civilians had lost their lives over the course of the war. While the Accords called for reconciliation between North and South Vietnam, and within South Vietnam, a genuine settlement proved difficult. In 1975, after the rapid capture of several cities by the North Vietnamese government, the North Vietnamese took control of Saigon. About a year later, North and South Vietnam were reunited under communist control to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (see slides 1 and 2).
What Was the Legacy of the War in Vietnam?

In neighboring Cambodia, the time following the end of US involvement marked a what would you ask? included on slide 3, which is an interview with a Vietnamese-American who was detained with few possessions by boat—and thus the term “boat people” came to be used to refer to the wave of Vietnamese refugees who went to the US and other countries following

In neighboring Cambodia, the time following the end of US involvement marked a stunningly tragic period in the nation’s history. Khmer Rouge, a communist movement formed in 1951, captured the capital city of Phnom Penh in April 1975. In slide 4, you see the head of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot, leading his troops. Under Pol Pot’s brutal dictatorship, as many as 2 million Cambodians lost their lives through executions or poor health brought about by a plan under which city residents were moved to collective farms and often forced to work to the point of exhaustion or even death. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and removed the Khmer Rouge from power (see slide 5), but the devastation to the country was far reaching. Provoked by Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge was backed by China), China then invaded Vietnam in 1979, which led to further conflict within Vietnamese borders.

Grim events also unfolded in neighboring Laos. During the course of the Vietnam War, Laos had been subject to sustained bombing, as the US attempted to destroy North Vietnamese strongholds in the nation. In 1973, a ceasefire treaty was signed between warring factions in Laos, which stipulated that a coalition government would be formed between the parties supporting the monarchy of Laos and the Pathet Lao (see slide 6), the communist party of the nation. The coalition government was short lived: after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Pathet Lao seized power in Laos. At that point, the Hmong people, an ethnic minority in Laos who had been recruited by the US during the war to gather intelligence and carry out military operations on the ground, were either exiled to Thailand or placed in labor and reeducation camps. Many Hmong refugees now live in the US, totaling over 200,000.

More than 130,000 Vietnamese were evacuated during the Fall of Saigon. The years of strife and instability that followed the end of US involvement led many others to flee and seek refuge in other countries, many escaping with few possessions by boat—and thus the term “boat people” came to be used to refer to the wave of Vietnamese refugees who went to the US and other countries following

Vietnam under communist control witnessed innumerable executions of those who had worked against North Vietnam during the war, along with the establishment of “reeducation camps,” essentially prison camps where former government workers of South Vietnam were forced into labor and compelled to adopt a communist perspective. Watch a portion or all of the video clip included on slide 3, which is an interview with a Vietnamese-American who was detained in a reeducation camp following the war. Ask students: What is your impression of life in a reeducation camp from this perspective? If you could ask Dr. Ninh a follow up question, what would you ask?

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the war (see slide 7). Over two decades, approximately 2 million people from the region emigrated to other nations, often settling in the US, Canada, and Europe.

**By the late 1980’s** Vietnam gradually ended its occupation of Cambodia as part of efforts to rejoin the international community and seek opportunities for trade to bolster the struggling Vietnamese economy. In a further effort to heal the wounds of the war, Vietnam began assisting more greatly in the search for MIA remains of American soldiers during this period, which resulted in many families’ ability to bring closure to years of uncertainty.

**In 1994, the US embargo** on Vietnam was officially lifted, and the following year diplomatic relations were reestablished with the installation of a US embassy in Vietnam and a Vietnamese embassy in Washington, DC. In 2000, then President Clinton made a historic visit to Vietnam, the first time an American president had set foot in Vietnam in decades (see slide 8). Since then, the US and Vietnam have established mutual trade. Ask students to analyze the graph on slide 9. What information does the graph tell us about Vietnam today? As US-Vietnam trade has grown over the past decade, so has the GDP, or Gross Domestic Product, of Vietnam. GDP is generally considered an indicator of a country’s economic wellbeing.

Despite a normalization of relations between the US and Vietnam, the effects of the war continue to impact the Vietnamese people and environment. The use of Agent Orange by the US to defoliate jungles has created irreversible damage to areas of the Vietnamese landscape (see slide 10), and has impacted generations of Vietnamese who continue to suffer from physical defects as a result of exposure to Agent Orange in the land. In addition, there remains unexploded ordnance in the region that continues to be a hazard for civilians. From 2001 to 2011, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund ran a program to clear mines from Vietnam and provide assistance and support to mine victims.

**Because it is always a significant decision to commit forces to conflict, as well as a decision that can significantly impact all nations involved for decades to come, it is important to understand and evaluate political decisions associated with past conflicts.**

**POST-VISIT ACTIVITY**

**Viewing Vietnam Today**

Ask students to read a variety of recent news articles and op-eds (see below for examples) regarding the current state of US-Vietnam relations and answer the following questions:

“Past as prologue: America partially lifts an arms embargo against a former foe”. The Economist


“US to provide 6 patrol ships to Vietnam as ties strengthen”, Thanh Nien News

- What are the primary issues driving current US policy toward Vietnam?
- What issues are identified by the Vietnamese as areas that need reform?
- What kind of reference (if any) is made to the Vietnam War?
- How does Vietnam’s relationship with China continue to play a role in US policy toward Vietnam?

**FURTHER SUGGESTED READING**

*When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution. Revised ed.*

*A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War.*
STANDARDS ADDRESSED

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

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6
Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

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.11-12.5
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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9
Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Standards

D.1.1.9-12
Explain how a question reflect an enduring issue in the field

D2.Geo.8.9-12
Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.

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

D2.His.12.9-12
Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

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

PHOTO CREDITS

Page 4: Pol Pot, Associated Press
Page 7: President Clinton and Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong talk under a bust of Ho Chi Minh, Associated Press

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