The majority of Americans gain their understanding of their country’s wars through the news media.

Since Vietnam, there has been an evolution in what types of stories from the front make it to major news outlets. 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 stories 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.
PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY

News from the Vietnam Era

Divide students into two groups, assigning each group archival news coverage related to Vietnam from two different periods: the approximate first half of American involvement (1964-1968) and the second half of American involvement (1969-1973). The best databases for searching for both national and local archived news articles are LexisNexis and Proquest. Check to see if your school library has a subscription to either. If not, you can request a limited-time free trial for your school so that your students can research articles.

Ask each student to find and read just one article, from any national or regional newspaper, from within the group/time period he/she has been assigned. Individually, ask each student to reflect on: 1) what the topic of the article is and 2) whether it could be construed as critical of the war or not.

Then, as a class, discuss and analyze the range of topics covered by the articles chosen by the students, as well as students’ interpretations of tone. Are there comparisons that can be made in national v. regional news coverage? Are there differences in news coverage from group 1 (1964-1968) to group 2 (1969-1973)? Can any kind of overall conclusions be made about news coverage across the span of the war, from the articles chosen?

IN THE CLASSROOM

Reporting War

Begin by asking students: What types of information do you think news outlets have a responsibility to report to the public? Why?

In large part, particularly in the early years of the Vietnam War, news reports focused on major military developments as the war progressed, such as the March 1965 New York Times article featured on slide 1 that details the deployment of Marines to Da Nang. In late 1966 and early 1967, Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times was the first reporter from a major news publication who travelled to North Vietnam to capture in-depth reports. The result was a series on the damage of US bombing to civilian areas in North Vietnam. Read aloud the excerpt of Salisbury’s article included on slide 2. Ask students: Would you interpret the language of the headline and lede as being critical of the war or any particular group? Why or why not? Is the tone of the story fair and appropriate to the topics under discussion?

January - February 1968 marked the Tet Offensive, a series of attacks by North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam. With this major blow, which involved heavy US casualties, came a shift in attention of major news
outlets toward a perspective alternate to the standard information shared by the Department of Defense. For example, the 1968 article from the Chicago Tribune included on slide 3 features the headlines “South Vietnamese Caught Napping.” Does this perhaps mean America’s ally was not as prepared as official views might state. The article, however, is quick to deflect blame from American troops—“Despite warnings from the United States military command that large scale attacks were imminent.” Read the article with the class and ask students: Would you interpret the article as (overall) being critical of the war or any particular group(s)? Why or why not? Is the tone fair and appropriate to the subject?

Former Marine Eddie Adams served as a photographer for the Associated Press in Vietnam and took the iconic photo on slide 4 of South Vietnamese police chief General Nguyen Ngoc Loan killing NLF/Viet Cong suspect Nguyen Van Lem in Saigon in 1968. The image appeared in The New York Times, and it was condemned by legislation in Congress. Why not? Is the tone fair and appropriate to the topics under discussion?

In November 1969 Los Angeles Times article included on slide 5 showcases the growth in news reports on the war that focused on topics outside of military developments as relayed by officials—like public opposition in response to President Nixon’s address to the nation on the war. Similarly, on slide 6 is a Chicago Tribune report of a well-publicized demonstration organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War in 1971, in which veterans returned their service medals at the steps of the Capitol.

One news story which similarly gave a new perspective to the progress of the war was the reporting of the 1968 My Lai massacre, which was the mass killing of South Vietnamese civilians by US Army soldiers. The image on slide 7, taken by US Army photographer Ronald Haeberle, shows some of the civilian casualties of the My Lai massacre. This iconic image, which was first published in 1969 in The Plain Dealer, a newspaper based in Cleveland, Ohio, has come to be among those most associated with the war. The photos published in The Plain Dealer were eventually used as key evidence by the US Army to investigate the incident.

In 1969, President Nixon authorized the incursion against Cambodia, directed at locations that were believed to be strongholds of North Vietnam. These strikes were not authorized by Congress, leading critics to charge that the strikes were illegal under U.S. law. News of the secret strikes were first reported by correspondent William Beecher, whose breaking story is featured on slide 8. Read the text of the article included on the slide. Would you characterize the information given and language used as providing a fair perspective? Why or why not?

Later on in the course of the war, the landmark story that would come to represent a new era of reporting was the release of the Pentagon Papers, a study commissioned by the Pentagon to examine the origins of US involvement in Vietnam. The Pentagon Papers were not intended to be shared with the public, in part because many of its conclusions suggested that the war’s escalation and continuation were unnecessary and false. The Pentagon Papers were not authorized by Congress, leading critics to charge that the strikes were illegal under U.S. law. News of the secret strikes were first reported by correspondent William Beecher, whose breaking story is featured on slide 8. Read the text of the article included on the slide. Would you characterize the information given and language used as providing a fair perspective? Why or why not?
questioned by many leaders, sometimes in spite of public language to the contrary. Do you think the Pentagon Papers, which came to the attention of the New York Times through an illegal leak by a disgruntled official (see slide 9), should or should not have been released for public knowledge through the news media? Why or why not? Why do you think the Supreme Court ruled that the New York Times and, later, the Washington Post were allowed to publish this material?

The news stories of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in many ways followed in the footsteps of Vietnam, with coverage of both major military milestones as well as reporting on incidents of misconduct by the military. Because of a perception that media reporting had become too negative and undercut support for the war in Vietnam, greater control over reporting was exercised by the military in later conflicts. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, reporters were embedded within the military, living with soldiers and sometimes going on missions. The public now had an expectation of frontline coverage, and the military’s system of embedded reporting provided to journalists that frontline coverage. Many journalists, however, saw the reports of embedded journalists as providing only a microscopic and tightly managed view of reality. For example, during the first two weeks of the invasion of Iraq, three out of four sources quoted in news reports were military officials, and military successes were emphasized.

Among the major stories of the war in Iraq were the invasion of Baghdad in 2003 (slide 10) and the capture of Saddam Hussein (slide 11). In slide 11, 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 and share with media outlets 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.

Perhaps the most noteworthy news stories to emerge out of the Iraq war were reports on cases of torture and abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison run by US-led forces in Iraq. Watch the 2004 news report on Abu Ghraib prison torture and investigation included on slide 12. Ask students: What is your reaction to this incident? Would you characterize the information given and language used as providing a balanced perspective? Why or why not? Is the tone of the reporting fair to the subject at hand?

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.

**POST-VISIT ACTIVITY**

**War in Today’s News**

Ask students to find and read one news story or report on US military involvement in Iraq and Syria against ISIS/Da’esh. Through either writing or discussion, ask students to evaluate for their chosen article:

- What are the main points of the article?
- What types of sources are used (military officials or documents, civilian interviews, etc.)?
- Is social media involved in any way, in either the reporting or distribution? Could this report have been made in the 20th century?
- Does the report make any reference to the media’s coverage of the situation—the reliance of ISIS/Da’esh on the media? If so, describe.
- Do you think the report gives a fair perspective of the situation? Why or why not?