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

The decisions made by Vietnam era presidents Johnson and Nixon reflect a variety of motivations for participation and subsequent withdrawal from the Vietnam War.

This lesson plan will involve a review of the slow process of withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, and the presidential decision-making that guided that process. Students will consider how public opinion influences the decision to withdraw from a conflict, and will analyze different strategies for withdrawal, debating whether those strategies would or would not succeed.
Potsdam Declaration

Ask students to read the text of Potsdam Declaration, the 1945 statement issued by the US, Great Britain, and China that called for the surrender of Japan, as an end to World War II. The text of the declaration is available here:

- What major events in the war in 1944 and 1945 preceded the issuance of the declaration?
- What was the Japanese response to the declaration?
- What major event(s) of the war followed the issuance of the declaration? What impact did this event(s) have on the course of the war?
- Do you think this statement played an important role in ending the war? Why or why not?

How Should War End?

Begin by asking students: What factors do you think should determine the end of a war, or the end of one nation’s involvement in a war? Why? This question is one that the nation’s leaders struggle with on a regular basis when the nation is at war.

With US’s dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the Soviet entry into the Pacific War in 1945, Japan formally surrendered to Allied forces in September of 1945 (see slide 1), marking an end to World War II in Asia (the European war had come to an end a few months earlier, with the surrender of German forces in May 1945). The text of the “instrument of surrender” indicates unconditional surrender and Japan’s compliance with all terms set forth by Allied forces in the Potsdam Declaration issued earlier the same year. Four years after the attack on Pearl Harbor drew the US into the war in 1941, the second World War was formally ended by clear-cut surrenders of Germany and Japan in 1945, and most American troops were quickly withdrawn from Europe and Asia.

In contrast, there were several factors that worked together to motivate the eventual withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam. One early factor was analysis suggesting that even
extensive bombing of North Vietnam was failing to set back North Vietnamese morale or war-making capabilities. During Operation Rolling Thunder, an extensive bombing campaign carried out by the US against North Vietnam from 1965 to 1968, the CIA issued numerous reports assessing whether the United States was achieving its goals. One such report from 1968 is excerpted on slide 2. Ask students to read the text on slide 2: If you were a leader at the time (like the president or the secretary of defense), what would you recommend as a course of action in response to this analysis? Why?

**Under President Nixon, the idea of “Vietnamization”**—training and expanding the South Vietnamese military for a bigger combat role in the war in order to permit the withdrawal of US troops—began to be discussed as a possible course of action in 1968. On slide 3, you can watch a clip of President Nixon’s address to the nation about the process of Vietnamization. In 1969, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger expressed his reservations on the course of the war in Vietnam, and the delicate nature of any move toward withdrawal, including Vietnamization. Ask students to read excerpts of this memo that are included on slide 4: What does Kissinger believe are some of the obstacles to Vietnamization?

**After several years of fighting, public opposition** to the war began to grow, as did congressional doubts about both the original impetus for US involvement and the possibility of any kind of definitive resolution. In 1968, news anchorman Walter Cronkite gave to the American public his thoughts on what the ultimate answer to the situation in Vietnam would have to be, which would be to negotiate “not as victors, but as an honorable people, who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could” (see the video clip included on slide 5). This was driven in response to the January 1968 Tet Offensive—an attack on South Vietnam (and US forces) carried out by North Vietnam that was widely covered by the media and led many to question the continued American presence in Vietnam. This was just one example of the shift in public attitudes toward the war. In 1971, Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield (see slide 6) gave a public address at Boston College in which he expressed strong doubts about the fate of the war in

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**The reported destruction of damage to trucks and watercraft was at a level considerably higher than that during the first quarter of 1968, as roads, waterways, and logistic facilities were subjected to more frequent interdiction. The North Vietnamese were able, however, to keep lines of communication open, and, despite the intensity of the interdiction campaign, the movement of men and supplies to South Vietnam was maintained at the highest levels observed since the Rolling Thunder campaign started.”**

- CIA Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam, April 1-June 30, 1968
After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, US troops were withdrawn from Vietnam, but the fate of the region was still uncertain. Many believe that President Nixon and his advisors worked to withdraw from the region with the assumption that there would be a “decent interval” in which the South Vietnamese government would continue to stand, but knowing it would be unlikely that it would continue to stand indefinitely. Fighting in South Vietnam increased gradually after 1973, and President Nixon grew unable to further respond to the situation in Vietnam when dealing with his own involvement in the Watergate scandal, in which there was a cover-up of a break in to the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee (Nixon eventually resigned in 1974 as a result of the scandal). South Vietnam’s President Nguyen Van Thieu appealed to the US for further economic and military support to aid in the ongoing fight against North Vietnam, but Congress grew increasingly hostile to then President Gerald Ford’s requests for funding. Eventually North Vietnam scaled up operations to the point where it was able to capture the then-capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, in April 1975.

The Iraq war launched in 2003 has prompted many comparisons to the Vietnam war, particularly in decisions made by our nation’s leaders. Watch an excerpt of the video clip included on slide 9 of the presentation, which is a recording of President Bush’s State of the Union address in 2007. Ask students, as they watch the piece, to make note of how Bush’s words and description of the ongoing strategy in Iraq compare to the televised address made by President Nixon in 1969 regarding Vietnamization. In what ways does Bush’s suggested process, which would move toward the goal of eventual withdrawal, seem similar or different to the process that was suggested by President Nixon in Vietnam? According to a national Gallup poll (see slide 10), by 2011, 75% of Americans approved of President Obama’s decision to withdraw all US troops from Iraq.

Controversy over U.S. intervention continues to shape debates over U.S. foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Watch the video of Senator Ted Kennedy’s speech at the National Press Club in January 2007 included on slide 11. Then watch the video of President George Bush’s speech at the Veterans for Foreign Wars headquarters in Missouri in August of 2007, included on slide 12. Ask students: What lessons has each leader respectively drawn from US involvement in Vietnam and the way that war was ended? Whose argument do you find more compelling or convincing? Why?

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

Fast-Forward to Iraq

Ask students to read the text of President Obama’s speech regarding the withdrawal of troops in Iraq, made in October 2011.

- What questions are you left wondering about (what does the speech leave unanswered)?
- What factors do you think would be critical in maintaining peace and stability in in the years to follow?

By 2014, fewer Americans supported the withdrawal from Iraq than in 2011, according to a national Gallup poll.

- What does the article state as possible reasons for the shift in approval ratings?
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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