

History
UNFOLDING

VIETNAM

OUR LONGEST WAR: PART 1



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 1

Introduction

Vietnam's Long Shadow

The Vietnam War divided Americans more deeply than anything had before, except for the Civil War that split the nation in two. And like the Civil War, Vietnam left a legacy of bitterness that has lived on long after the battlefields have faded from sight and memory in the forests, fields and villages where the battles took place.

The conflict began with an attempt by France to re-establish control over its colony in Southeast Asia at the end of World War II. But the fight was against a communist, as well as an anti-colonial, uprising. In the context of the Cold War, with the Korean stalemate only recently in place, the U.S. viewed the distant conflict as the latest thrust of a worldwide foe. But was it? Certainly, Vietnam was far removed from the central foreign policy concerns of the day. This made it hard to justify the enormous effort it would have taken to defeat Ho Chi Minh's forces decisively. Instead the U.S. eased in to a struggle it never seemed fully to comprehend. By 1968, a half million U.S. soldiers were in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive was the turning point in the build-up and also a turning point in America's way of viewing the war. The first part of our two-part booklet set on Vietnam takes the story up to that turning point.

France and Vietnam

The illustrations here focus on traditional Vietnamese society and Ho Chi Minh's struggle with France for control of that society. U.S. financial support for the French could not rescue this colonial venture. It also made it hard for the U.S. to avoid being portrayed as a new colonialist itself in the American war that began later.

The U.S. Eases In

The division of Vietnam in 1954 left Ho Chi Minh in control of the North and non-communist Vietnamese in control of the South. When Ho started his drive against South Vietnam, the U.S. came to the South's aid. It did this slowly and without a clear strategy. From the start, it had to deal with a South Vietnamese regime unable to command real loyalty from its people.

Escalation and Deception

This lesson looks at the nature of the war the U.S. fought as it escalated its involvement rapidly from 1965 to early in 1968. Considering America's enormous military power, General Westmoreland's war of attrition, along with U.S. air power, seemed at first unbeatable.

Tet: Victory and Defeat

In Tet, the communists hoped-for general uprising never materialized. Instead, the South Vietnamese Vietcong was practically wiped out. Henceforth, the war would be conducted much more directly by North Vietnamese forces. Yet in spite of the North's defeat, Tet also burst the bubble of official U.S. over-confidence. It brought on a political crisis at home that would, in the end, doom the U.S. effort in Vietnam.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 1***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand the role of the French in the earliest phase of the Vietnam War.
2. Students will understand the role of the Cold War in leading U.S. officials to become involved in Vietnam

France and Vietnam

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

By the start of World War II, Vietnam had been a colony of France for about 100 years. Vietnam was a traditional Asian nation of small villages and peasants such as those shown here. The villages were the heart of Vietnamese society, a society the French never really fully understood. During World War II, Japan briefly conquered Vietnam at a point when France had been overrun by the Nazis. However, the chaos of war also gave the Vietnamese communist Ho Chi Minh the chance he needed to organize his Viet Minh fighters for a struggle to win their independence. Was Ho's main goal to impose communism on Vietnam or simply to free his country from the French? For a while, this was not clear.

Illustration 2

Ho Chi Minh actually helped the U.S. during World War II in its fight against Japan. But with the start of the Cold War, Ho's communist beliefs turned U.S. leaders against him. They soon began to support the French in their drive to reconquer Vietnam. In 1949, communist rebels under Mao Tse-tung, shown here with Ho, took power in China. The Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb that year. Then in 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea. All this added to U.S. fears about the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. U.S. aid to the French in Vietnam rose rapidly. Soon, the United States was financing most of the war. This cartoon reflects the irritation many Americans felt at France's lack of gratitude for the U.S. assistance it had come to depend on.

Illustration 3

The war continued to go badly for the French. In 1954, they finally gave up, agreeing at a conference in Geneva to withdraw their troops and accept a divided Vietnam. Ho's forces would control the North, while the South was in the hands of non-communist Vietnamese, many of whom had backed the French. America would soon begin to aid South Vietnam in a new war against the communists. The map illustrates some of the geographical factors that would make that war so difficult to fight. Unlike Korea, Vietnam is not a peninsula. The land to its west gave the North a long semi-protected supply line—the famous “Ho Chi Minh Trail.” And a fear of bringing nearby China into the war would continually lead the U.S. to hesitate about extending the war beyond South Vietnam's borders.

Lesson 1—France and Vietnam

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



The Granger Collection, New York

Discussing the Illustrations

1. In the 1800s, the nation of France took control of Vietnam as a colony in its overseas empire. What other nations in the region did France also control?
2. France and Vietnam could not have been more different. From the main photo here and from what you know about Vietnam and France, can you explain some of the key differences?
3. In the 1940s, in World War II, France lost control of Vietnam. Can you explain why?
4. During the war, the man on the left organized a resistance movement against the Japanese. For a time the U.S. helped him do this. Can you identify him?
5. After the war, the French hoped to return to Vietnam. But Ho Chi Minh wanted to free Vietnam from French control. He also wanted to give his nation an entirely new kind of political system. It was mainly this aim that turned the U.S. from a supporter of his to an opponent. Can you explain?

Follow-up Activities

1. Historian Spencer C. Tucker has written, “If any war in modern history demonstrates the need to study history, it is the Vietnam conflict.” Learn more about Vietnam’s history. Create a time line of that history over the centuries. You may want to give added emphasis to the 20th century. Keep in mind that you are creating the time line to help give perspective to the conflict that occurred there between 1945 and 1975. Therefore, the events you highlight on the timeline should be those that played a major role in Vietnamese history. Give a presentation to the class on your timeline.
2. Read more about Vietnam under French colonial rule. Write an essay in which you address these three questions: What influence did the French have on Vietnamese society and culture? In general, how did the Vietnamese feel about their French overseers? Did the French adequately understand the Vietnamese people and their culture?