

## DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# Tet Victory or Defeat?

*What made the great Communist offensive of 1968  
the key turning point of the entire Vietnam War?*



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# Teacher Introduction

## ★ *Using Primary Sources*

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,  
conflicting  
perspectives are  
among the truths  
of history.  
No single  
objective or  
universal account  
could ever put an  
end to this endless  
creative dialogue  
within and  
between the past  
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

#### **Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes**

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

### ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

#### **1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.**

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

#### **2. Have students do the worksheets.**

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

### 3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

### 4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

#### **The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):**

“Yes, Tet was a military victory for the United States and South Vietnam. Yet the media was right in that it was also a political defeat for them.”  
Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

#### **Excellent Essay**

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

#### **Good Essay**

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Fair Essay**

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Poor Essay**

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in "laundry list" style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

# Suggestions to the Student

## ★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

## ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

### 1. Read the one-page introductory essay.

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



### 2. Study the primary source documents for this lesson.

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

### 3. Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

### 4. As a class, debate the documents.

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

### 5. Do the final DBQ.

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

## ***Tet: Victory or Defeat?***

By 1954, France was ready to give up the fight for Vietnam. Communist-led nationalists had been fighting the French for control over what was then still France's colony. In 1954, the sides agreed to divide Vietnam into a Communist-controlled North Vietnam and a non-Communist South Vietnam. The division was to be temporary. North Vietnam did not give up its goal of taking over South Vietnam. By 1960, fighting heated up again, and this time the United States aided South Vietnam.

The United States only eased into the Vietnam conflict and never seemed ready to take it on with full force. Until 1965, only a few thousand U.S. servicemen were there. The hope was that South Vietnam's soldiers could do most of the fighting. Then, between 1965 and 1967, President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) steadily "Americanized" the war. By the end of 1967, nearly a half-million U.S. soldiers were fighting in Vietnam.

Their fight was not only with North Vietnamese regular forces, but also with the Communist-controlled National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam. NLF military forces, the "Vietcong," were strongest in rural areas, where they fought a guerrilla war of rapid hit-and-run engagements. This type of warfare made it hard to measure success by anything other than enemy soldiers killed (body counts). This was unsettling in itself, and often the counts were highly inflated. Over time, claims of success came to be mistrusted, creating a so-called "credibility gap." This gap was wide by late 1967, when in a major public relations effort, the United States said the war was being won and there was "light at the end of the tunnel."

This may partly explain why the Tet uprising was such a shock. Tet is a holiday celebrating the Vietnamese lunar new year. As it began, on January 30–31, 1968, the Communists launched massive attacks against every major city in South Vietnam. Their aim was to spark a popular uprising and cause South Vietnamese army units to switch sides. They also hoped to embarrass

the United States, forcing it into talks and giving the Communists a role in the South Vietnamese government. From a military standpoint, the Tet offensive was a failure for the Communists. No uprisings occurred. Most of the attacks were beaten back in a few days. The South Vietnamese army (ARVN) fought well in several engagements. No ARVN units switched sides. The Vietcong was nearly wiped out. Henceforth, the war would be a conventional one fought mainly by North Vietnamese army forces.

Yet Tet also triggered a huge political crisis in the United States. Why? First, the initial attacks were surprising and very violent. Many reporters were nearby when the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon was stormed. Fighting in the major cities of Saigon and Hue lasted weeks. News was sketchy from other provincial capitals where the Vietcong were quickly defeated. Meanwhile, news reports were filled with dramatic photos—such as a famous one of a Saigon police chief shooting a captured Vietcong fighter in cold blood. Lacking hard facts, reporters took up space with "news analysis" and foreboding that were little more than speculation and guesswork.

By early 1968, reporters had become deeply suspicious of official U.S. statements of success. They widely reported Tet as a huge disaster. In March, news stories suggested huge troop increases were planned to cope with Tet when in fact the offensive was already over. Doubts about President Johnson's credibility deepened. Protests against the war grew more bitter. Anti-war challenges by Democrats Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy were mounted against LBJ in what was an election year. Finally, on March 31, Johnson announced he would not run for reelection. A huge turning point in the war had been reached.

Why did the media get Tet so wrong? What lessons did and should it have learned from this episode? The sources with this lesson will help you begin to debate these questions.

## Tet Offensive Time Line

1960

- • • North Vietnam founds the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam.

1961–63

- • • The U.S. military buildup in South Vietnam begins, as President John F. Kennedy sends in combat advisors. By 1963, the U.S. has 16,000 servicemen there.

1964

- • • North Vietnamese torpedo boats attack a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. After an alleged second attack, Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution allowing all actions necessary to protect U.S. forces and defend Southeast Asia.

1965–66

- • • The sustained but limited U.S. bombing of North Vietnam begins. The first American combat troops arrive in South Vietnam. In October, anti-war protests are held in many American cities. U.S. troop levels top 184,000 by the end of 1965 and 389,000 by the end of 1966.

1967

- • • Nguyen Van Thieu is elected president of South Vietnam. In November, a U.S. public relations campaign claims “progress” in Vietnam. Officials say there is “light at the end of the tunnel.” U.S. troop levels reach 486,000 by year’s end.

1968

- • • **Jan. 21:** Several North Vietnamese divisions begin a siege of the Marine outpost at Khe Sanh in the far northern part of South Vietnam.

**Jan. 22:** General William Westmoreland, head of U.S. forces in Vietnam, tells NBC he expects a major enemy offensive around the Tet holidays.

**Jan. 30–31:** The Tet uprising begins when North Vietnamese regular army and Vietcong forces attack 35 of 44 provincial capitals and other district towns, as well as Saigon. Vietcong guerillas fight in the compound around the U.S. Embassy. After one week, fighting is still heavy in Hue and the Saigon suburbs, but the Communists have been pushed out of most other cities.

**Feb. 8:** Senator Robert F. Kennedy criticizes President Johnson’s Vietnam policy.

**Feb. 24.** Enemy forces are finally cleared out of Hue.

**Feb. 25:** Westmoreland says more troops may be needed.

**Feb. 27:** Walter Cronkite says in his CBS special report that the war cannot be won and the only way out is to negotiate.

**Feb. 28:** General Earl Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, presents a request for 206,000 more troops. These are for use worldwide, not just for Vietnam, and not to cope with the remaining Tet fighting.

**March 8:** Wheeler tells Westmoreland the requested troop increases will not be granted.

**March 10:** The *New York Times* headlines the 206,000 troop request as if it is still being considered and as if it is to help recover from Tet. On NBC, Frank McGee says the war is being lost.

**March 12:** Senator Eugene McCarthy wins a near victory—42% of the vote—in the Democratic New Hampshire primary.

**March 16:** Robert Kennedy announces his candidacy for president.

**March 31:** On TV, President Johnson announces a partial bombing pause, says he is ready to negotiate with North Vietnam, and announces he will not run for reelection.

## DOCUMENTS 1-3

## Visual Primary Source Documents 1-3

**Document 1****Document 2****Document 3**

Doc. 1. The National Archives • Doc. 2. The National Archives

Doc. 3. The National Archives

### Information on Documents 1-3

**Document 1** shows a youthful Vietcong fighter awaiting interrogation after his capture in the attacks on Saigon during the Tet holiday period, 1968. Photo by the U.S. Information Agency, Press and Publications Service.

**Document 2** is a scene showing soldiers during the battle of Hamo Village during the first days of the Tet offensive. Photo by the Department of Defense.

**Document 3.** This young widow carries a photograph of her missing husband at a mass funeral service for almost 400 men, women, and children massacred by the Vietcong in the city of Hue during Tet. In fact, by the mid-1970s, about 2,800 bodies of such victims had been found near Hue, with many hundreds still missing. Photo by the U.S. Information Agency, Press and Publications Service.