Historical Background

In 1954 North Vietnam defeated the French colonial administration and set out to unify Vietnam under a single communist regime. The North Vietnamese, and their southern allies called the Viet Cong, modeled their new regime largely after that of the Soviet Union. South Vietnam, with the help of the United States, fought to prevent the implementation and spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

The United States occupied Vietnam in small numbers starting in the 1950s. President John F. Kennedy continued to support Eisenhower’s “domino theory” and increased America’s involvement in South Vietnam. However, the U.S. did not send combat troops into Vietnam until 1965. The conflict in Vietnam aroused fears surrounding communism that manifested during the Cold War. Vietnam represented a strategic battle against the spread of communism for the United States. America’s involvement in the Vietnam War proved to be controversial and the outcome of the War is still a topic of debate today. The draft and civil rights issues during the 1960s caused American citizens to question the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Many believed that America needed to shift its focus on the social injustices at home. Propaganda and public demonstrations became a tool to both support and protest the war effort.

By the time America pulled out of the war effort in 1973, over 3 million people died and South Vietnam found themselves deserted and weak. North Vietnam succeeded in creating a communist regime less than two years after the end of the Vietnam War. With the exception of Cambodia and Loas, communism failed to spread throughout Southeast Asia as America feared.

Suggestions for Teachers

Before starting the lesson on the Vietnam War, provide students with a visual representation of the location of North and South Vietnam.

Using the primary sources in the following pages, define key figures and events of the Vietnam War. Prompt students to connect the events and controversies surrounding communism and the war effort with the rhetoric and events of the Cold War.

Using these primary sources, students will gain insight into both the American and Vietnamese prospective of the war and communism.

The last page of primary sources can be used to debate the effectiveness of America’s occupation in Vietnam as well as the results of the Vietnam War on a global scale.
NORTH AND SOUTH VIETNAM

Vietnam: A Country Study [1943]

Students can browse *Vietnam: A Country Study* for images like the ones above. Images within this work depict life in Vietnam before and after the War. Students can gain insight into Vietnam’s struggle for independence from France and their relationship with the United States. The book also contains informational text that covers the Tet Offensive, Nixon and Vietnamization, the bombing of Cambodia, and the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Additional Links

- Political cartoons depicting controversies of the Vietnam War
- Stories from Vietnam Veterans
- Airmen in the Vietnam War
- Oral interviews with Vietnam Veterans
- The Vietnam War: One Veteran’s Experience
- PBS Battlefield: Vietnam
- Songs about the Vietnam War: DaNang Lullaby & Jolly Green
WAR EXPERIENCE

B Battery, 7/11 Artillery, 105 mm howitzers fire mission, FSB Maury [1968]

Larry Schwab was drafted while interning as a medical student. Click here to read about his struggle to participate in a war he did not fully support while also saving the lives of his fellow soldiers.

Poem: "What? Why?" [?] 

This poem was written by Nurse Captain, Rhona Marie Knox Prescott, during the Vietnam War. Have students discuss what this letter can tell us about some veterans’ experiences during the war. How might being a nurse in Vietnam influence your attitude towards the war? How might her gender and status during the war effect her outlook?

Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson standing among group of Vietnamese soldiers and Americans during a visit to Saigon, South Vietnam [1962]

Marion Anthony Marshall was a navigation pilot and POW during the Vietnam War. Click here for insight into his experience as an African American in the military.
War Experience

Diary of William M. Barner, ca. [1966-1967]

Students can navigate their way through William M. Barner’s emotions and reactions to the Vietnam War and his struggle to cope with life back home.

Memoir: “We Regret to Inform You” [1966]

The following memoir was written by Lieutenant Commander Larry Michael Jordan’s wife regarding the day she found out about her husband’s death in Vietnam.

Silent Night” Christmas menu and pamphlet [?]

Soldier sketching [1961-1975]

Carl Fordahl was an illustrator and combat artist during the war. Students can browse some of Fordahl’s sketches here. Have students use the images for creative writing prompts or primary source analysis. How does the imagery in the sketches change over time? What information can we gather from Fordahl’s sketches regarding his time in Vietnam?
Protest and Controversy

Anti-Vietnam war protest and demonstration in front of the White House in support of singer Eartha Kitt [1968]

Let the people vote on war [1970]

Crowd of people holding candles, including African Americans, at a march at night to the White House, lead by Coretta Scott King as part of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam which took place on October 15, 1969 [1969]

Large crowd at a National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam direct action demonstration, Washington, D.C [1967]
The End of the Vietnam War

Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, half-length portrait, standing behind a podium, speaking at a press conference [1975]


Cambodia: A Country Study [1987]

The following passages describe the bombing of Cambodia in 1973 by the United States. The book contains more information on Cambodia, communism, and the effect of the Vietnam War.

For another resource on the bombings in Cambodia click here.
CITATIONS

Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is July 5th, 2017.


O’Halloran, Thomas J., photographer. “Crowd of people holding candles, including African Americans, at a march at night to the White House, lead by Coretta Scott King as part of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam which took place on October 15, 1969” Film negative. October 15. 1969. From the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.06480/


