The Vietnam War and American Foreign Policy

The war in Vietnam was a defining moment in American history. This war has been described as the first defeat for the American military, the beginning of a process of disillusionment with institutions of authority, and the onset of a cataclysmic change in the way citizens think of (and relate to) politics. The Vietnam War stands as a sort of watershed event for American politics, foreign policy, culture and values for the second half of the 20th century in much the way that the Civil War was in the 1860's or the Great Depression in the 1930's.

The war had a similarly wide-ranging impact in Southeast Asia. The war altered the geopolitical balance of power in the region. It marked a turning point in western involvement in the region and has been hailed as one of the turning points in Asian history. It also set in motion a series of events that saw the emergence a murderous regime in Cambodia, the exodus of hundreds of thousand of people from Vietnam and Laos, and the military hostilities between Vietnam and China.

This course examines the factors that brought the United States into the conflict in Southeast Asia. On one level, the class sessions will look at the chain of events that shaped this period. In these sessions, we will try to develop an understanding of the events themselves, the forces that shaped these events, and the ripple effects they had across the world.

At a more important level, we will evaluate the process by which American foreign policy was formed, and the perceptions and misperceptions that shaped the making of this policy. In these classes we will examine the individuals, institutions and national interests that went into the mix of foreign policy formation. The underlying goal is a critical analysis of the forces that shape the making of American foreign policy.

Readings

The readings present historical information and analytic perspectives. Students are responsible for all of the assigned readings, even those not discussed in class. Readings should be completed before coming to class on the date indicated in the syllabus.

Texts. The following books will be used as texts for this course:

Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*
David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*
Robert McNamara, *Argument Without End*

Memoirs, First Person Accounts. There are also several novels/memoirs on the list:

Ward Just, *Reporting Vietnam*
Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*
Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*
Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*
Larry Gwin, *Baptism*

Additional. The following is recommended but not required:

Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*

Documents. A series of original documents will be distributed for class room discussion and for use in your term paper.

Grading
Grades for the course will be based on a mid-term examination, an interpretative paper, and class attendance and participation. The weight of each is as follows:

- Mid-term exam: 25%
- Interpretive Paper: 40%
- Occasional "daily" exercises: 15%
- Attendance, participation: 20%

**Tues Sep 12 Introduction: The War Nobody Won**

In this session, the instructors will present an overview of the course and outline their different perspectives on the war and American foreign policy.

**Texts:**

- Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, pp. 2-33 (handout)
- Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 2-59
  
  Ch. 1 ("The War Nobody Won")

**I. Truman, Eisenhower, and the Cold War**

**Thur Sep 14 Vietnamese Nationalism, Roosevelt, and World War II**

Vietnam has a long and complex history that is marked by a continuing struggle for national identity. This nationalist history came into full play during the struggle against the French and Japanese in the period up through the end of WWII. **Questions for this session:** What do we know about traditional patterns of Vietnamese social and economic organization? How were these patterns changed during the period of French colonial occupation? What factors were most important in the resurgence of Viet nationalism? How do we evaluate the actions of the Roosevelt administration and the USA at the end of WWII?

**Texts:**

- Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 60-175
  
  Ch. 2 ("Piety and Power")
  Ch. 3 ("The Heritage of Vietnamese Nationalism")
  Ch. 4 ("The War With the French")

**Documents:**

**Tues Sep 19 Truman and the Cold War: Korea, China, and Vietnam**

With the end of WWII and Roosevelt's death, all of the assumptions that had anchored American foreign policy seemed open to debate. Truman brought new men into his administration and this team struggled to craft a foreign policy for the post war world. In the space of a few years the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union had turned into a bitter "Cold War, the Marxist revolution in China had pushed America's ally-Chiang Kai-shek-to Taiwan, and a full-blown land war had erupted in Korea. **Questions for this session:** How did Truman's new "foreign policy team" change the American position on Indochina? What was the relationship between American policy toward SE Asia and the events occurring in China and Korea? What was the impact of the emotional statements by politicians such as Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy?
Thur Sep 21 Eisenhower and the American Dilemma: (1) The French Collapse

The Eisenhower administration crafted a policy toward SE Asia by steering between an American public little interested in the area and the challenges of the Cold War which, thought many in the administration, was driven by a tough Sino-Soviet alliance bent on world domination. The intensifying war against the French in Vietnam presented the administration a difficult choice as it faced difficult Cold War choices in Europe: Could the USA expect French support in Europe's NATO without a similar American commitment to the French actions in Indochina. **Questions for this session:** How did the administration's policy of "massive retaliation" shape policy and actions in SE Asia? In what ways did this Cold War mentality color America's policy debate over Vietnam? What were the factors that led to the collapse of French colonial power in Indochina? How important was China's involvement in Korea, Taiwan and Tibet to American policy?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 176-203

Ch. 5 ("The Light That Failed")

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Greene, *The Quiet American*

Tues Sep 26 Eisenhower and the American Dilemma: (2) Geneva and Diem

After the collapse of the French colonial position, several events would shape future American policy in Vietnam: The Geneva Conference and the emergence of Ngo Dinh Diem. The interaction of representatives from China, the Soviet Union and the USA at the conference set the stage for North Vietnam's political and military activity during the next decade. Similarly. American support for Ngo Dinh Diem would narrow the range of options for both Washington and Hanoi. **Questions for this session:** Were the agreements reached in Geneva beneficial for the revolutionary movement in Vietnam? How would Vietnamese Marxists see the actions of China and the Soviet Union? How would the Eisenhower administration see these same actions? Was Diem the only politician capable of heading a regime in the south?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 203-221

Ch. 5 ("The Light That Failed")

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam*
II. The Kennedy Years

Thur Sep 28 **The Best and the Brightest (1): Kennedy Takes Charge**

President Kennedy came into office with a "can do" team of top policy officials and a new sense of dynamism in both domestic and foreign policy arenas. Almost immediately the new team was confronted by problems in Cuba, Berlin, and Laos. President Kennedy and his team were shaken by these events and were afraid that they "had not done very well" in handling them. **Questions for this session:** How did this new team view the American position in Asia? How was it influenced by all of the events and views that came out of the 1950's? How much did the leading policy makers know about SE Asia?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 257-285

Ch. 7 ("Vietnam is the Place")

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, pp. 3-85

Ch. 1 (Intro.)
Ch. 2 (Bowles and Acheson)
Ch. 3 (Dean Rusk)
Ch. 4 (McGeorge Bundy)
Ch. 5 (Averill Harriman)

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam*

pp. 3-10 (Malcolm Browne, "Paddy War")

Tues Oct 3 **The Best and the Brightest (2): The Problem-Solvers' Dilemma**

In South Vietnam, the NLF was becoming increasingly active and government troops were more and more on the defensive end of local uprisings and terrorist attacks. Inside the Kennedy administration an intense competition was beginning to develop over the direction of American foreign policy. Tough men took contrary positions on these issues and jockeyed for the President's ear in a series of difficult policy discussions. **Questions for this session:** What issues were shaping this debate? Who were the primary advocates of the different positions? How informed was this debate about the actual events occurring in SE Asia? What was President Kennedy's role in this emerging debate?

Texts:

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, pp. 85-154

Ch. 6 (Laos and Kennedy)
Ch. 7 (Cold War, Vincent, Service, and China)
Ch. 8 (Lansdale, Ridgeway)

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:
Thur Oct 5 **In Retrospect (1): Americans and Vietnamese Talk About the War**

In 1997 and 1998, senior officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations met with top officials from Vietnam who had been involved in the war. They held an emotional series of meetings, compared their old conceptions and assumptions about the Vietnam War, and looked for those "missed opportunities" that might have shot-circuited the movement into a brutal war. **Questions for this session:** From the perspective of hindsight, how accurate were American and Vietnamese views of the situation in South Vietnam? Of each other? Of the other's motives and goals? How well did American policy makers understand SE Asian history? What do the answers to all of these questions tell you about the way that American foreign policy is formed?

**Texts:**

Robert McNamara, *Argument Without End*, pp. 1-98

- Ch. 1 ("Structure of the book")
- Ch. 2 ("Enemies: Washington and Hanoi's Mindsets, 1961")
- Ch. 3 ("1945-1960")

Tues Oct 10 **The Struggle for a Solution, 1962-3**

American foreign policy reached a crossroads in 1962-63. In Vietnam, the "battle of ApBac" marked a turning point in the debate over South Vietnamese military capabilities. The beginning of 1963 saw the debate within the Kennedy administration take on new intensity. Lines were drawn, sides were forming, the intensity of the arguments was increasing. In Vietnam itself, American "advisors" and officials were beginning to ask serious questions about the course of USA involvement. **Questions for this session:** What was the position of the State department? The military? The CIA? The military advisors themselves? How were the debates in Washington informed by these different views? Of the top Kennedy advisors, who was on which side in the debate?

**Texts:**

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, pp. 155-240

- Ch. 9 (Rostow/Taylor Mission)
- Ch. 10 (Harkins, Harriman)
- Ch. 11 (Harkins, Vann)
- Ch. 12 (McNamara)

Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, pp. 203-66 (handout)

Book III ("Battle of ApBac")
Documents:

Thur Oct 12 **Point of No Return: The Summer of ’63**

During the late spring and summer of 1963, the battles in Washington heated up at the same time as the military situation in Vietnam became more difficult. The Diem regime was increasingly unable to control either the military or political conflicts in South Vietnam, and resorted more and more coercive means of preserving itself. **Questions for this session:** Why was anti-Diem sentiment increasing in Vietnam and Washington? What was the position of the NLF? What were the different Kennedy advisors advocating?

Texts:

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, (pp. 241-81)

- Ch. 13 (Buddhist Crisis)
- Ch. 14 (Summer of ’63)

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam*

pp. 50-65 (David Halberstam, "They Can Win a War If Someone Shows Them How")

Tues Oct 17 **The End of Diem and Kennedy**

All of the issues and tensions that had divided American policy-makers came to a head in late 1963 with the debate over Diem's future. The tragic result was the assassination of Diem, the death of President Kennedy, and beginnings of the next phase of the military buildup. **Questions for this session:** Was Diem's removal and death inevitable? Did his removal help the situation in Vietnam? What was the position of the different Kennedy advisors on Diem's removal? How well were the options examined?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 286-327

- Ch. 8 ("The End of Diem")

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, pp. 282-301

- Ch. 15 (Coup against Diem)

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam*

pp. 36-49 (Stanley Karnow, "The Fall of the House of Ngo Dinh")

**Mid-Term Essay/Exam Due**

**III: The Johnson Years**

Thur Oct 19 **America's Deepening Involvement**
The death of Diem and Kennedy changed many of the assumptions about the war in both Washington and Hanoi. In Washington a new president who had almost entirely been "out of the loop" had to grapple with an increasingly intense situation in Vietnam. In Hanoi Diem's removal led to an important reevaluation of political and military policy. Of all of the Kennedy advisors, McNamara took on the most forceful role with the new president. During this same period-in 1964-two sets of events stand out: The Gulf of Tonkin incident and the American elections

Questions for this session: How did Diem's death change both the political and military situations in Vietnam? Did Johnson's view of the war differ from Kennedy's? With a new American president, how did the roles of the various groups of presidential advisors change? How did McNamara's changing role change the debate in Washington? How "real" was the Gulf of Tonkin incident and how did this incident play out in American politics? Why did it loom so large on the American political landscape? Were their options open to Johnson?

Texts:

Karnow, Vietnam, pp. 328-402
  Ch. 9 ("The Commitment Deepens")
  Ch. 10 ("Disorder and Decision")

Halberstam, The Best and The Brightest, pp. 302-459
  Ch. 16 (1964: LBJ, Rusk, Cold War)
  Ch. 17 (LBJ, McNamara, 2 Studies)
  Ch. 18 (McNaughton, Harriman, Davies)
  Ch. 19 (Gulf of Tonkin, Election)
  Ch. 20 (LBJ)

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Tim O'Brien, "On the Rainy River" (handout)

Just, Reporting Vietnam
  pp. 66-75 (U.S. News, "We Are Losing, Moral is Bad…")
  pp. 475-94 (Doris Kearns, "Who Was Lyndon Baines Johnson?")

Tues Oct 24 In Retrospect (2): Americans and Vietnameese Talk About the War

The 1997-98 conference shed important light on the events of the Kennedy/Johnson years that led to the escalation of the military effort by both Washington and Hanoi. Questions for this session. How well did McNamara understand both the historical background and the reality of the 1960's in Vietnam? (In 1998, did he understand it any better?) Is it possible that either Washington or Hanoi could have opted to pursue a different course of action? With what consequences?

Text:

Robert McNamara, Argument Without End, pp. 99-217
  Ch. 4 ("A Neutral Solution")
  Ch. 5 ("Escalation: 1961-65")

DUE: Draft of Section 2 of term paper

Thur Oct 26 Escalation and the Darkening Tunnel
1965-66 was a time of major military escalation on both the American and North Vietnamese sides. In 1965, military confrontations at Pleiku, Bien Hoa, and Ia Drang became pivotal events in shaping perceptions on both sides. At the same time, in the United States the day-by-day coverage of the war by the media was beginning to have ripple effects that led to a series of public debates, teach-ins, and policy discussions that were reflected in a growing tension over the war in Congress. **Questions for this session:** Of Johnson's major advisors, whose position was more important? Can you identify opposition voices? What were the military and political implications of the different American strategies such as the "enclave" theory and the "search and destroy" strategy?

**Texts:**

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 403-487

Ch. 11 ("LBJ Goes to War")
Ch. 12 ("Escalation")

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, pp. 460-610

Ch. 21 (War Games, Taylor)
Ch. 22 (Taylor on Escalation, Ball)
Ch. 23 (Late 1964, Decision to Bomb)
Ch. 24 (Westmorland)
Ch. 25 (1965, Search and Destroy)
Ch. 26 (1965, 2nd Escalation)
Ch. 27 (Guns v. Butter)

**Documents:**

First-Person Accounts:


Just, *Reporting Vietnam* (handout) (Roger Rappaport, "First campus teach-In, March 1965")
pp. 76-83 (Meg Greenfield, "After the Washington Teach-In")
pp. 118-132 (Jack Smith, "Death in the Ia Drang Valley")

**Tues Oct 31 Disorder at Home and in Asia**

By 1967 the war had escalated far beyond levels imaginable only months earlier. At home, protest groups were increasingly outspoken and President Johnson seemed increasingly frustrated as he looked for room to maneuver between foreign policy goals and domestic priorities. During this period, the media carved out for itself a new and unique position in American politics and became—perhaps for the first time—a truly independent "fourth estate" that reshaped the dialogue on the course of the war. **Questions for this session:** What was the relationship between the changing military activity in Vietnam and the growing voices of protest in the United States? Did the American protests have any impact on the course and outcome of the war? As the military escalation increased, what was the role of Johnson's civilian advisors?

**Texts:**

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 488-527

Ch. 13 ("Debate, Diplomacy, Doubt")

Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, pp. 611-665
Epilogue (1966-68)

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Caputo, A Rumor of War

Just, Reporting Vietnam

pp. 169-86 (Neil Sheehan, "Not a Dove, But No Longer a Hawk")
pp. 200-03 (Jonathon Randall, "US Marines Seize 3rd Hill...")
pp. 204-34 (Jonathon Schell, "An Account of the Destruction of Quang Ngai and Quang Tin")

Evening 6:30-8:30

Movie: Platoon

Reading: Jonathon Shay, "Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character" (Handout)

Thur Nov 2 In Retrospect (3): Americans and Vietnamese Talk About the War

During the 1997-98 conference, participants on both sides speculated on possible "missed opportunities." An especially important topic revolved around the inability of the two sides to establish channels through which they could discuss the possible "peace initiatives" launched by the other. Questions for this session: Why was it so difficult to find ways to talk? Was there any way to change? During the 1965-67 period in particular, can you identify a moment that might have stopped the seemingly inexorable movement toward a wider and wider war?

Texts:

Robert McNamara, Argument Without End, pp. 219-312
Ch. 6 ("Negotiating Initiatives, 1965-67: Why Did They Fail?")

Karnow, Vietnam, pp. 528-581
Ch. 14 ("Tet")

First-Person Accounts:

Just, Reporting Vietnam

pp. 302-313 (Dan Oberdorfer, "Tet!")
pp. 314-326 (Michael Herr, "Hell Sucks")
pp. 327-331 (John Wheeler, "Khe Sanh Under Siege")

IV. The Nixon Years

Tues Nov 7 Nixon's War

Direct American involvement in the war ground on for four more years. Nixon and Kissinger pushed several policies: "Vietnamization" of the war and negotiations with the Hanoi government. Questions for this session: Did either policy, as put forward by Nixon and Kissinger, have a chance
of success? How different were the Nixon policies from those of Johnson? Could the war have been ended earlier?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 582-627

Ch. 15 ("Nixon's War")

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*

Just, *Reporting Vietnam*

pp. 349-361 (Thomas Johnson, "The U.S. Negro in Vietnam")
pp. 396-400 (Wallace Terry, "Black Power in Vietnam")
pp. 413-427 (Seymour Hersh, "The My Lai Massacre")
pp. 463-466 (Stewart Alsop, "The American Class System")
pp. 467-474 (John Saar, "You Just Can't Hand Out Orders")
pp. 517-521 Karl Fleming, "The Homecoming of Chris Mead"

DUE: Draft of Section 3 of term paper

Thur Nov 9 The "Fall" of South Vietnam

After decades of battles and millions of deaths, the guns fell silent when Saigon "fell" to the NLF and North Vietnamese forces in 1975. Questions for this session: Why did "Vietnamization" fail? Could other South Vietnamese politicians or military leaders handled the situation any better?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 628-685

Ch. 16 ("The Peace That Never Was")

Documents:

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam*

pp. 522-539 (Donald Kirk, "Who Wants to be the Last American Killed in Vietnam?")
pp. 540-551 (Tom Buckley, "Portrait of an Aging Despot")
pp. 552-605 (Robert Shaplen, "Life in Saigon, Spring 1972")
pp. 606-612 (John Saar, "Report From the Inferno: The North Vietnamese Offensive")
pp. 613-628 (Peter Braestrup, "The South Vietnamese Army")
pp. 670-699 (John McCain, "How the POW's Fought Back")
pp. 706-709 (Paul Vogle, "A Flight From Hell: The Fall of Danang, 1975")
pp. 740-745 (Keyes Beech, "We Clawed for Our Lives: A Reporter Flees Saigon")
pp. 755-758 (Malcolm Browne, "….Saigon's Last Days"

Tues Nov 14 Lessons of War

Could it have been different? Given the political realities in Washington and Hanoi, were their alternatives? What lessons do you see for current American foreign policy?
Texts:

Robert McNamara, *Argument Without End*, pp. 313-98

Ch. 7 ("US Military Victory in Vietnam: A Dangerous Illusion?")
Ch. 8 (" Learning From Tragedy")

Mon Nov 17 *Term Paper Due* (2 copies)