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, and culture and values for the second half of the 20th century in much the way as the Civil War in the 1860's or the Great Depression in the 1930's.

In 2012, the impact of the Vietnam War continues to ripple across American foreign policy. Nowhere are these ripples felt more than in the discussions about the United States’ current war in SouthWest Asia. In the wake of 9/11, American foreign policy and military actions have been shaped by the “ghost of Vietnam,” military analysts and academic specialists argue the “lessons of Vietnam” as they discuss contemporary American policy, and candidates for public office debate both the war in SE and SW Asia and what we have learned from this past.

This course examines the factors that brought the United States into the conflict in Southeast Asia and evaluates how these same factors play out in the current era. On one level, the class sessions will look at the chain of events that shaped this earlier period. In these sessions, we will try to develop an understanding of the events themselves, the forces that shaped them, and their impact as they rippled across the world.

At a deeper 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 sessions we will examine the individuals, institutions and national interests that went into the mix of foreign policy formation.

Most importantly, we will ask whether many of these same dynamics were at work as the United States moved toward its wars in the first decade of the 21st century, think about how the prosecution of America's current wars has been informed by the lessons of the Vietnam era, and look at how both civilian and military decision processes have (or have not) been changed during the intervening decades.

The underlying goal is a critical analysis of the forces that shaped the making of American foreign policy and an examination of how these forces continue to shape events today.
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:

- Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*
- Larry Gwin, *Baptism*
- Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn*

...and a series of short first person newspaper and fiction accounts

**Documents.**

  
  Available at [www.cia.gov/csi/books/vietnam/prcfacc.html](http://www.cia.gov/csi/books/vietnam/prcfacc.html)

- *The Pentagon Papers* (online and handouts)
  

**Journal Assignments**

A daily “journal assignment” (distributed at end of one class, due at beginning of next) is expected for each class session. These assignments will:
(a) Outline the instructors’ sense of the important questions in the next session’s readings; (b) Get you to put on paper your impressions of the important themes in these readings; and (c) Push you to integrate the “Vietnam lessons” with current American military actions.

NOTE: Some additional short articles (i.e., articles NOT on the reading list) will sometimes be distributed with these Journal Assignments and these articles will be part of the “required reading” for the course.

**Grading**

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

- Mid-term exam 30%
- Final Paper 30%
- Daily Journal Assignments, film reviews 25%
- Attendance, participation 15%
The Vietnam War and American Foreign Policy

**Tues Mar 27**

**Introduction: The War Nobody Won**

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

**Texts:**

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 2-35
Ch. 1 (“The War Nobody Won”)

Allawi, Ali, *The Occupation of Iraq*, Prologue (handout)

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

**Thur Mar 29**

**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”) (scan for background)
Ch. 3 (“The Heritage of Vietnamese Nationalism”) (scan for background)
Ch. 4 (“The War With the French”) (read more carefully)

**FILM: Thursday Evening  6:55 pm**

*Movie: Indochine* (Bouliou 104….Auditorium)
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 war-time 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?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 176-203
Ch. 5 (“The Light That Failed”)

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. 203-221
Ch. 5 (“The Light That Failed”)

First-Person accounts:

Greene, *The Quiet American* (the entire novel)

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. 222-256
Ch. 6 (“America’s Mandarin”)

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam* (handout)
pp. 1-2 (Time, “Death at Intemission Time”)

II. The Kennedy Years

**Thur Apr 12** 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 (Bowel and Acheson)
Ch. 3 (Dean Rusk)
Ch. 4 (McGeorge Bundy)
Ch. 5 (Averill Harriman)

First-Person Accounts

Just *Reporting Vietnam* (handout)
pp. 3-10 (Malcolm Browne, “Paddy War”)

**Tues Apr 17** 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)

**First-Person Accounts:**

*Just, Reporting Vietnam* (handout)  
pp. 11-17 (Homer Bigart, “A Very Real War in Vietnam”)  
pp. 18-28 (Bernard Fall, “Master of the Red Jab”)

**Thur Apr 19**

**IN RETROSPECT (1): Americans and Vietnamese Talk About the War**

In 1967 and 1968, a quarter century after the war, senior officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations met with top officials from Vietnam who had been involved in the war. These old guys 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 short-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 Apr 24**

**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”)

First-Person Accounts:

Halberstam, “One Very Hot Day” (handout)

**Wed  Apr 25**

*Wednesday evening 6:55 pm*

_movie: Fog of War_ (Bouliou 104.....Auditorium)

**Thur  Apr 26**

**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)

Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers* (pp. 1-17)

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam* (handout)
pp. 50-65 (David Halberstam, “They Can Win a War If Someone Shows Them How”)

**Tues May 1**

**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)

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam* (handout)  
pp. 36-49 (Stanley Karnow, “The Fall of the House of Ngo Dinh”)

Thur May 3

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**Mid-Term Essay/Exam Due**

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III: The Johnson Years

Tues May 8  
**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 standout: 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 alter the debate in Washington? How “real” was the Gulf of Tonkin incident and how did this incident play out in American politics? Why did the incident 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)

First-Person Accounts:

Tim O’Brien, “On the Rainy River” (handout)
James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (selections) (handout)

**Thur May 10**

**IN RETROSPECT (2): Americans and Vietnamese Talk About the War**

The 1997-98 “old guys 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?) What difference did it make? 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”)

**Tues May 15**

**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 Lai 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 (Westmoreland)
Ch. 25 (1965, Search and Destroy)
Ch. 26 (1965, 2nd Escalation)
Ch. 27 (Guns v. Butter)
First-Person Accounts:

Harold Moore, *We Were Soldiers, Once and Young*. (Intro, Joe Galloway)
Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (selections) (handout)
Gwin, *Baptism*

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**Tuesday Evening 6:55 pm**

*Movie: Platoon* (Boulou 104...Auditorium)

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

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**Thur May 17**

**Disorder at Home and in Asia**

By 1967 the war had escalated far beyond levels thought possible 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)

**First-Person Accounts:**

Tim O'Brien, "If I Die in a Combat Zone" (selection) (handout)
Ron Kovic, *Born on the 4th of July*, (selection) (handout)
Just, *Reporting Vietnam* (handout)

Roger Rappaport, "First campus teach-in, March 1965"
pp. 76-83 (Meg Greenfield, "After the Washington Teach-In")
pp. 118-122 (Jack Smith, "Death in the Ia Drang Valley")
IN RETROSPECT (3): Americans and Vietnamese Talk About the War

During the 1997-98 old guy 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* (handout)
pp. 302-313 (Dan Oberdorfer, "Tet")

IV. The Nixon Years

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")

First-Person Accounts:

Just, *Reporting Vietnam* (handout)
pp. 413-427 (Seymour Hersh, "The My Lai Massacre")
pp. 755-758 (Malcolm Browne, "...Saigon’s Last Days"

Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (Ch. 14) (handout)
John Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley*, Ch. 19 (handout)
V. Vietnam and American Foreign Policy

Lessons of War: Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan (1)

How similar are these wars? How similar are the processes that led to
the war, the perceptions that shaped their execution? Obviously SW
Asia is different than Vietnam....geographically, politically and
culturally. But are their other areas where the similarities outweigh the
differences? And, if so, is it possible to analyze and evaluate these
similarities? Is it possible to learn the lessons of these wars?

Texts:

Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 628-685
    Ch. 16 ("The Peace That Never Was")

Col. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency
Lessons from Malay and Vietnam:* (selections)

Robert McNamara, *Argument Without End*, pp. 313-98
    Ch. 7 ("US Military Victory in Vietnam: A Dangerous Illusion?")
    Ch. 8 ("Learning From Tragedy")

First-Person Accounts:

Anne Auger, "A Piece of My Heart" (handout)

Lessons of War: Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan (2)

Texts:

David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, pp. 15-20, 558-567 (handout)
    Introduction
    Ch. 61 ("The Middle Eastern Question")

Term Paper Due

(3 copies)

Syll2012