

## Teaching The Vietnam War

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Sam, the daughter of the young man killed in Vietnam in Bobbie Ann Mason's novel, *In Country*, read books about Vietnam and pestered her uncle about what Vietnam was really like, but when her uncle Emmet's friend asked her what she had learned from the books, Sam replied "Nothing. They're just dull history books." She remembered that they didn't even have pictures.<sup>1</sup>

Most college students would probably identify with Sam and most would prefer a film course to a course with those dull history books without pictures. From what the two previous articles, students have not only an alternative perspective through films but several other alternatives as well.

Marc Gilbert has provided several possibilities to consider in his presentation and his forthcoming book will be used by many teachers who offer a course on the Vietnam War.

At the present, however, Richard Welch's suggestions about the use of film to teach the Vietnam War are more intriguing because there is a problem with film courses and it is similar to the problem of all courses; namely, what do you select and what do you leave out? In the case of films, the selection must be made from a large field. Jack Colldeweih has counted

more than 134 Vietnam war related films that were produced between 1965 and 1989 and, in order to make discussion of them manageable, has divided them into several categories. For example, in the category of "prelude" films, or films depicting Vietnam before America committed its ground troops, Colldeweih lists such films as *A Yank in Indochina* (1952), *The Quiet American* (1957), *Five Gates to Hell* (1959), *The Ugly American* (1963), and *A Yank in Vietnam* (1963). In the category of engagement or combat films, he cites, among others, *The Anderson Platoon* (1966), *A Face of War* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), and *Casualties of War* (1989). Although he mentions other categories, such as the homefront films and the POW-MIA films, the point has been made that there is a more-than sufficient supply of films to be used in a course on the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup>

Colldeweigh's essay, and Richard Welch's article, encourage the reader to think about the films and which to use if they were teaching a course on the Vietnam War. The number for a ten week course should be limited to no more than five feature films, and films clips from classic World War I and World War II films, and excerpts from books by Bernard Dick, Russell Earl Shain, Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, and Gilbert Adair would also be used.<sup>3</sup> Although Dr. Welch argues that the 1980s Vietnam War films are more repetitious than elucidating, a

former assistant editor of the (London) *Times Literary Supplement*, George Szamuely, has an analysis of four films in an article in *Commentary* magazine that convincingly argues that recent Vietnam War films might serve as equally valuable learning experience for today's student as some of the older films discussed by Dr. Welch. Looking at the movies directed by Oliver Stone, John Irvin, Lionel Chetwynd, and Stanley Kubrick and noting that they all dealt in some manner with the corruption of innocence, a theme that is a popular Hollywood analysis for almost anything, Szamuely writes:

In *Platoon* some of the men are corrupted by the war but have a chance to redeem themselves, and incidentally their country, by turning against it. In *The Hanoi Hilton* and *Hamburger Hill* the men remain uncorrupted, it is rather the people back home who in various ways fail them. But there is no chance of any redemption in *Full Metal Jacket*, since not only are the men incorrigible killers but once in Vietnam they bring evil and corruption with them, laying waste to entire cities, if not with firepower then with thievery and prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

These two themes, the American soldier in Vietnam as a social orphan whose evil relatives back home not only neglect him but are ashamed of him and the G. I. "in Country" who is a moral pariah, provide at least two avenues of approach to a Vietnam War course.

The examination of the popular songs of the 1960s suggests another path to investigate. The lyrics of Arlo Guthrie,<sup>5</sup> Tom

Paxton,<sup>6</sup> Sgt. Barry Sadler,<sup>7</sup> and Phil Ochs<sup>8</sup> can easily serve as an introduction to the changing attitudes in the United States about the war. Students should be cautioned, however, that some historians reject the claim that antiwar protest songs were either commercially successful or influential before 1970.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, popular song lyrics, mixed with the prose and poetry of the decade, could provide an index to the attitudes of the 1960s.

Until this point the comments have been based upon the assumption that a course should be taught on the Vietnam War. However, there are some in our profession who will question the need for an entire course on the Vietnam War. We need to address that question, if only briefly.

Should we teach a course on the Vietnam War? Of course we could simply say that we want to teach the war because we are interested in it. There are probably some who teach a Vietnam course as personal therapy, but most who teach a course in the Vietnam War likely also believe that they are serving a higher purpose than mere self-satisfaction; those teachers feel that they have a moral obligation to explain Vietnam to the present generation of students. Most Vietnam War courses, therefore, are value laden, and both conservative and radical historians apparently believe that there are several moral and political lessons to be learned about the Vietnam War.



This can make a course on the Vietnam War less an explanation of history and more an exercise in didacticism. Historians are in danger of doing in the last decade of this century what Southern historians did at the end of the last century; attempting to win in their books and in the classrooms what they failed to win 25 years before. Historians are creating a cottage industry of Vietnam War myth-makers and the myths that they weave are already in use as a guide for present foreign policy-makers, spin-control experts, and popular culture manufacturers. So, the question does become critical. It is not simply shall courses be taught on Vietnam, but what kind of a course should be taught?

Should the Vietnamese side of this war be neglected? Should presentations be so culture-bound that the history of the culture of Southeast Asia and the impact that the war had on that region be ignored? Should perhaps concentration be placed on the technological and strategic side of the war, paying close attention to the testing and development of new and more sophisticated American weaponry? Perhaps emphasis should be placed on the role played by the media in the war. Did television really lose the war? The evidence seems to indicate that was not the case, that in many ways the television medium was, until the Tet offensive, almost as limited in its coverage as the media has been in the Grenada,

Panama, and Desert Storm operations of the past decade. The major difference apparently has been that the last two administrations, learning the "lessons" of Vietnam, found ways to control the press and television crews while the Johnson administration in the 1960s did not need to exert control over the television crews because the very cumbersomeness and lack of sophistication of their equipment restricted their mobility and opportunities to be in on the action.<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps the military, technological, journalistic, and psychological aspects of the war should be neglected and the historian should simply look at the effect of the Vietnam on the American homefront. How much damage did the war do to the social welfare programs of Johnson; was it impossible to have a budget including both guns and butter? In what ways did the war provide a stimulus to the economy; in what ways was that stimulus perhaps a false one? When and how did public support for the war begin to erode and what explanations can be given for the changes in public opinion. And, what was the nature of the protest against the war and how important was its influence upon the next decade of public perceptions of the government and its policies?

These, then, are a few questions that might be raised about which Vietnamese War we should teach.

There is another question, however, that is as important. At Armstrong State College a course on the Vietnam War would be directed at a very select audience consisting of history majors, liberal arts students who need to add an upper division elective, and a few interested non-students. The overwhelming majority of the students at Armstrong would not take such a course. On the other hand, all students must take an American history course and most of those students choose to take the course which surveys American history since the Civil War. This course may well be the only exposure the students will have to the Vietnam War.

Once more the question is crucial: if a professor decides to teach a section on the Vietnam War in the American history survey, how much time should be given to and what should be emphasized in that section?

In the survey course this instructor usually has about fifteen days allotted for classes to examine events since 1941, and that means that only one day is usually allotted for a discussion of Vietnam. At one time an outside reading was assigned, such as James Thomson's article on the bureaucratic decision-making process in Washington in the years between 1961 and 1966, and the students would be asked to come to class prepared for a short test and discussion of the article. Thomson's article, which first appeared in 1968,

served as an excellent springboard for discussion when it to was assigned to the students in the 1970s, but in the 1980s most of the students needed background information before they could discuss the article with any skill. Thompson's article and any other outside reading are no longer assigned; the students do not know the basic facts about the Vietnam War that are necessary. Today most of the students were not even in grade school when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, and many would not be able to distinguish between Pleiku and Pol Pot. Most of what they do know about Vietnam has been culled from contemporary television, with a heavy dose of *Vietnam: The Thousand Day War*,<sup>11</sup> and from Hollywood and made-for-television films. For these reasons, this instructor has distilled into one 30 minute presentation a "thumb-nail" sketch of American involvement in Indochina, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the commitment of ground troops in 1965, the increasing protest movement, the Tet offensive in 1968, the "incursion" into Cambodia, and the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. The last 20 minutes of the "Vietnam" day is set aside for questions, answers, and observations. Very likely most college teachers of American history surveys probably teach Vietnam in a similar manner and they are no more satisfied than this author with the way in which the Vietnam War is shortchanged. Yet taking additional



days to discuss Vietnam cannot be justified if that means reducing the number of days that other things are discussed such as the World War II demobilization efforts, the Korea War, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement. Thus there is a possibility that at least in American survey courses the Vietnam War might once more become a casualty. This must be guarded against but it must also be realized that not all casualties are fatal.