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THE WAY WE SAW IT

VIETNAM

OUR LONGEST WAR: PART 1

IN ILLUSTRATION AND ART

A Teacher's
Resource Booklet
with Lesson Plans and Reproducible
Student Activity Assignments



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CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802
Culver City, CA 90232
United States of America

(310) 839-2436
(800) 421-4246

Fax: (800) 944-5432
Fax: (310) 839-2249

<http://mindsparks.com>
access@mindsparks.com

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Introduction

Vietnam's Long Shadow

The Vietnam War divided Americans more deeply than anything had before, except for the Civil War that split the nation in two. And like the Civil War, Vietnam left a legacy of bitterness that has lived on long after the battlefields have faded from sight and memory in the forests, fields and villages where the battles took place.

The conflict began with an attempt by France to re-establish control over its colony in Southeast Asia at the end of World War II. But the fight was against a communist, as well as an anti-colonial, uprising. In the context of the Cold War, with the Korean stalemate only recently in place, the U.S. viewed the distant conflict as the latest thrust of a worldwide foe. But was it? Certainly, Vietnam was far removed from the central foreign policy concerns of the day. This made it hard to justify the enormous effort it would have taken to defeat Ho Chi Minh's forces decisively. Instead the U.S. eased in to a struggle it never seemed fully to comprehend. By 1968, a half million U.S. soldiers were in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive was the turning point in the build-up and also a turning point in America's way of viewing the war. The first part of our two-part booklet set on Vietnam takes the story up to that turning point.

France and Vietnam

The illustrations here focus on traditional Vietnamese society and Ho Chi Minh's struggle with France for control of that society. U.S. financial support for the French could not rescue this colonial venture. It also made it hard for the U.S. to avoid being portrayed as a new colonialist itself in the American war that began later.

The U.S. Eases In

The division of Vietnam in 1954 left Ho Chi Minh in control of the North and non-communist Vietnamese in control of the South. When Ho started his drive against South Vietnam, the U.S. came to the South's aid. It did this slowly and without a clear strategy. From the start, it had to deal with a South Vietnamese regime unable to command real loyalty from its people.

Escalation and Deception

This lesson looks at the nature of the war the U.S. fought as it escalated its involvement rapidly from 1965 to early in 1968. Considering America's enormous military power, General Westmoreland's war of attrition, along with U.S. air power, seemed at first unbeatable.

Tet: Victory and Defeat

In Tet, the communists hoped-for general uprising never materialized. Instead, the South Vietnamese Vietcong was practically wiped out. Henceforth, the war would be conducted much more directly by North Vietnamese forces. Yet in spite of the North's defeat, Tet also burst the bubble of official U.S. over-confidence. It brought on a political crisis at home that would, in the end, doom the U.S. effort in Vietnam.

Using Photos, Cartoons and Other Visuals to Teach History

Most textbooks today are full of colorful visuals. But all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. But only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use this Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

CD-ROM WITH IMAGES The ImageXaminer allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions. The CD-ROM also includes a folder containing all of the discussion questions and follow-up questions in pdf format. All of the images are also in pdf format, should you wish to create overhead transparencies.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS FOR EACH ILLUSTRATION

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the images in the ImageXaminer. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small group or all-class activities.

Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 1

**OBJECTIVES
FOR THIS LESSON:**

1. Students will understand the role of the French in the earliest phase of the Vietnam War.
 2. Students will understand the role of the Cold War in leading U.S. officials to become involved in Vietnam
-

France and Vietnam

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS:

Illustration 1

By the start of World War II, Vietnam had been a colony of France for about 100 years. Vietnam was a traditional Asian nation of small villages and peasants such as those shown here. The villages were the heart of Vietnamese society, a society the French never really fully understood. During World War II, Japan briefly conquered Vietnam at a point when France had been overrun by the Nazis. However, the chaos of war also gave the Vietnamese communist Ho Chi Minh the chance he needed to organize his Viet Minh fighters for a struggle to win their independence. Was Ho's main goal to impose communism on Vietnam or simply to free his country from the French? For a while, this was not clear.

Illustration 2

Ho Chi Minh actually helped the U.S. during World War II in its fight against Japan. But with the start of the Cold War, Ho's communist beliefs turned U.S. leaders against him. They soon began to support the French in their drive to reconquer Vietnam. In 1949, communist rebels under Mao Tse-tung, shown here with Ho, took power in China. The Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb that year. Then in 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea. All this added to U.S. fears about the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. U.S. aid to the French in Vietnam rose rapidly. Soon, the United States was financing most of the war. This cartoon reflects the irritation many Americans felt at France's lack of gratitude for the U.S. assistance it had come to depend on.

Illustration 3

The war continued to go badly for the French. In 1954, they finally gave up, agreeing at a conference in Geneva to withdraw their troops and accept a divided Vietnam. Ho's forces would control the North, while the South was in the hands of non-communist Vietnamese, many of whom had backed the French. America would soon begin to aid South Vietnam in a new war against the communists. The map illustrates some of the geographical factors that would make that war so difficult to fight. Unlike Korea, Vietnam is not a peninsula. The land to its west gave the North a long semi-protected supply line — the famous “Ho Chi Minh Trail.” And a fear of bringing nearby China into the war would continually lead the U.S. to hesitate about extending the war beyond South Vietnam's borders.

Lesson 1 — France and Vietnam

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



The Granger Collection, New York

Discussing the Illustration

1. In the 1800s, the nation of France took control of Vietnam as a colony in its overseas empire. What other nations in the region did France also control?
2. France and Vietnam could not have been more different. From the main photo here and from what you know about Vietnam and France, can you explain some of the key differences?
3. In the 1940s, in World War II, France lost control of Vietnam. Can you explain why?
4. During the war, the man on the left organized a resistance movement against the Japanese. For a time the U.S. helped him do this. Can you identify him?
5. After the war, the French hoped to return to Vietnam. But Ho Chi Minh wanted to free Vietnam from French control. He also wanted to give his nation an entirely new kind of political system. It was mainly this aim that turned the U.S. from a supporter of his to an opponent. Can you explain?

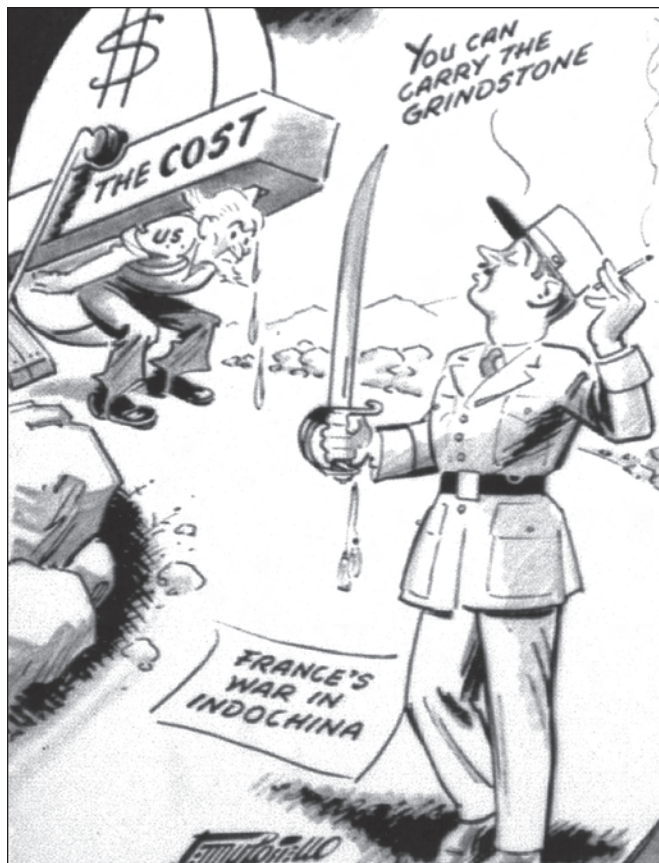
Follow-up Activities

1. Historian Spencer C. Tucker has written, "If any war in modern history demonstrates the need to study history, it is the Vietnam conflict." Learn more about Vietnam's history. Create a timeline of that history over the centuries. You may want to give added emphasis to the 20th century. Keep in mind that you are creating the timeline to help give perspective to the conflict that occurred there between 1945 and 1975. Therefore, the events you highlight on the timeline should be those that played a major role in Vietnamese history. Give a presentation to the class on your timeline.
2. Read more about Vietnam under French colonial rule. Write an essay in which you address these three questions: What influence did the French have on Vietnamese society and culture? In general, how did the Vietnamese feel about their French overseers? Did the French adequately understand the Vietnamese people and their culture?

Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

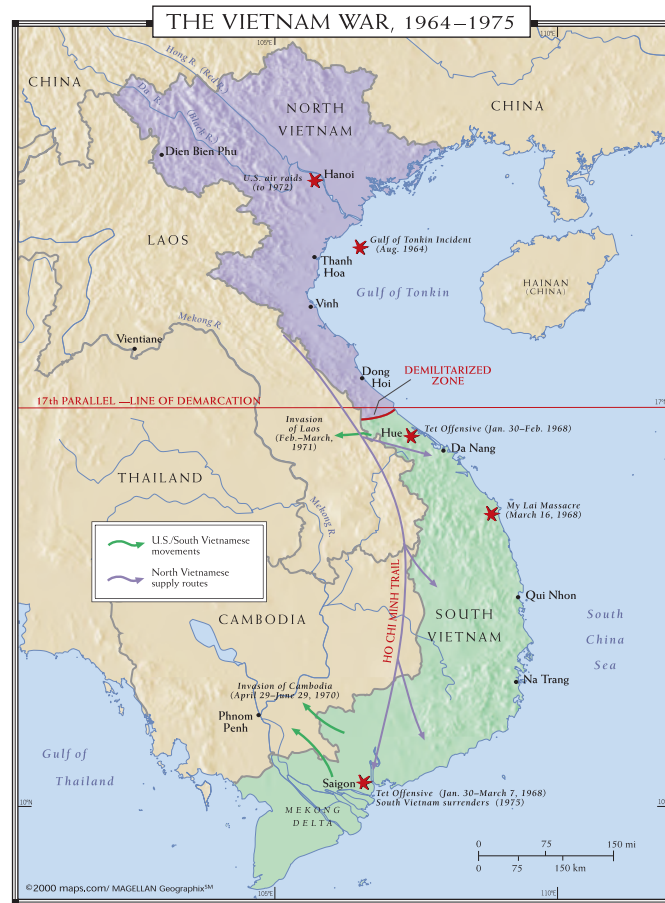
1. In 1949 official U.S. concern about Ho Chi Minh increased enormously, in part because of a big event elsewhere in Asia. That event involved the man meeting with Ho in the photograph on the left. Can you identify this man and explain what happened that led the U.S. to become much more concerned about Ho Chi Minh and his resistance movement?
2. The French were already fighting Ho Chi Minh and his resistance group, known as the Viet Minh. The U.S. soon began to increase its aid to the French rapidly. By the early 1950s, the U.S. was paying a huge share of the cost of this war. U.S. officials justified this expense with what came to be known as the “domino theory.” Can you explain this term? Were U.S. officials correct in accepting this theory. Why or why not?
3. France’s war in Vietnam soon seemed to be turning more and more into an American war. That’s the point of this cartoon. How does the cartoonist show this? Does the cartoonist think the French appreciated the help they got from the U.S.? Explain.

Follow-up Activities

1. After World War II, Ho Chi Minh appealed to the U.S. to support his drive for independence. But the U.S. backed the French, in part because of Ho’s embrace of communism. Over the years, historians have debated whether Ho was a communist first or mainly a nationalistic Vietnamese patriot. Read more about Ho Chi Minh, and write an essay defending your opinion regarding this question. In your essay, be sure to deal with U.S. rejection of Ho’s requests for support following World War II and whether or not the U.S. acted wisely.
2. This cartoon reflects the irritation many Americans felt in the early 1950s at what they saw as France’s lack of gratitude for U.S. support in Vietnam. Read more about the “Indochina War,” as the conflict between France and the Viet Minh was called. Based on what you learn, write a letter to the editor of the newspaper in which this cartoon appeared. Voice your views about the cartoon and the issue with which it is dealing.

Lesson 1 — France and Vietnam

Illustration 3



© 2000 Maps.com/MAGELLAN Geographixsm

Discussing the Illustration

1. This map deals with the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1975. But it may be helpful to study it now. In 1954 the French accepted a cease-fire agreement in Geneva, Switzerland. These “Geneva Accords” temporarily divided Vietnam into North and South. Which half of Vietnam did Ho Chi Minh and the communists control?
2. France turned Vietnam over to Vietnamese officials who opposed the communists. National elections called for by the Geneva Accord were supposed to unite the nation in 1956. But those elections did not occur. That is mainly because the U.S. and the South Vietnamese government were against holding them. Why do you suppose they were against holding these elections?
3. Most historians would say that the geography of Vietnam and its region gave the communists some big advantages in their fight against both France and the U.S. Use the map to explain what these historians mean. Do you agree or disagree with them? Why?

Follow-up Activities

1. Small Group Activity: The Vietnam War was similar to the Korean War in many respects. For example, both took place in small Asian nations. Both began as civil wars between a communist northern half of the nation heavily backed by the Soviet Union and an American-backed southern half. Read more about the Korean War and find a map showing the course of that war. Then give a class presentation using the two maps. Title your presentation “The U.S. in Asia: The Cold War and the Limits of American Power.” In your presentation, give a general overview of both wars. Then, using the two maps, discuss the geographical similarities and differences between the two nations. As a class, list all of the ways in which these similarities and differences may have helped or hurt each side in these conflicts and the U.S. forces involved in the fighting.

Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 1

**OBJECTIVES
FOR THIS LESSON:**

1. Students will better understand the gradual nature of the growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Accords.
 2. Students will debate the wisdom of becoming involved in Vietnam given the deep divisions in that society.
-

The U.S. Eases In

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS:

Illustration 1

In the late 1950s, Ngo Dinh Diem, a strong anti-communist, was South Vietnam's president. U.S. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy gave Diem a good deal of support. But his dictatorial style angered many Vietnamese. In 1959, Ho Chi Minh called on his supporters in South Vietnam to step up their armed rebellion. He also began sending his own troops south to help reunite Vietnam under his leadership. Over time, China and especially the Soviet Union would give massive aid to Ho and to the communist rebels in the South. After 1961, Kennedy sent more U.S. advisers to Vietnam to counter this growing threat. Moreover, these advisers took an increasingly active role in the fighting, as the photo on the right suggests. By November 1963, shortly before Kennedy was assassinated, there were about 16,700 Americans in Vietnam.

Illustration 2

Diem and Vice President Lyndon Johnson are in the 1961 photo on the left. Diem's heavy-handed measures continued to upset many in the countryside. At his direction, lands given the peasants by the Viet Minh were returned to their wealthy owners. Later, with U.S. help, Diem forcibly moved many villagers into so-called "strategic hamlets," such as the one shown here. The goal was to limit communist influence in the villages and protect the peasants from night attacks by the Vietcong (as Ho's South Vietnamese rebel supporters were called). This forcible resettlement from their ancestral homes deeply offended many peasants.

Illustration 3

Diem's father had been an official during the days of French rule. Diem was a Catholic educated at French schools, but most Vietnamese were Buddhists. Diem was seen as insensitive to the Buddhists, whose leaders soon began demonstrating against him. In 1963, South Vietnamese forces killed a number of these demonstrators. Soon after, several Buddhists set themselves on fire in protest. These suicides, seen on TV, shocked the American public. U.S. officials soon began looking for ways to replace Diem. That fall, the U.S. gave its secret approval to a coup attempt by some South Vietnamese generals. In that coup, Diem was assassinated.

Lesson 2 — The U.S. Eases In

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. In the photo on the left are the two presidents who first sent U.S. troops to Vietnam. Can you identify each and give the years of their presidencies?
2. The first U.S. soldiers were called military “advisers.” In fact, they were often directly involved in military operations. A photo here shows some of them supervising one South Vietnamese mission against the Vietcong in 1962. The Vietcong were the reason U.S. officials felt a need to send troops to Vietnam in the late 1950s. Can you explain?
3. In his inaugural address, JFK said the U.S. was prepared to “pay any price, bear any burden, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty.” What general conditions in the world in 1961 led Kennedy to make this promise?
4. Some historians say that Kennedy was too hasty in sending soldiers to Vietnam in part because of sweeping promises like the one he made in his inaugural address. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Follow-up Activities

1. John F. Kennedy received a letter from a woman whose brother had been killed in Vietnam. Her two older brothers had served in World War II and the Korean War. Part of her letter compared Vietnam with those two wars in this way:

They were wars that our country were fighting, and everyone here knew that our sons and brothers were giving their lives for their country. I can't help but feel that giving one's life for one's country is one thing, but being sent to a country where half our country never even heard of and being shot at without even a chance to shoot back is another thing. ... It seems to me that if we are going to have our boys over there, that we should send enough to have a chance — or else stay home. Those fellows are just sitting ducks in those darn helicopters. If a war is worth fighting — isn't it worth fighting to win? ..."

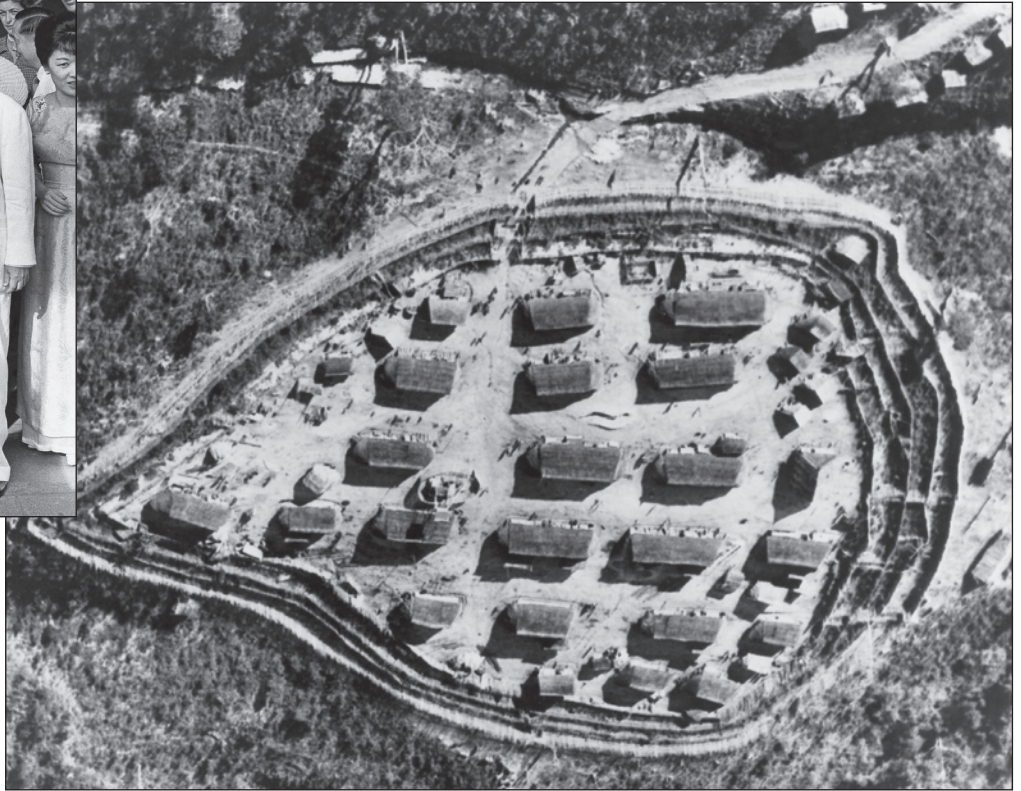
Pretend you are John F. Kennedy. Write a letter back to this woman responding to what she says here.

Lesson 2 — The U.S. Eases In

Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. Until 1963, South Vietnam was led by President Ngo Dinh Diem. He is shown here greeting the U.S. vice president in 1961. Can you name that vice president?
2. President Diem was a harsh ruler who quickly became very unpopular in his country. Diem was a Catholic, and he came from a family that had long served the French when they ruled Vietnam. Why do you think these two factors made it hard for him to become a popular leader in that country?
3. The Vietcong soon took control of many villages. Sometimes this was because the villagers supported them. Often it was because they assassinated local officials and used terror to force the villagers to submit to them. With U.S. help, Diem began to set up so-called “strategic hamlets,” one of which is shown here. The goal was to protect the villagers, but the strategic hamlet program was deeply resented. From the photo and what you know of Vietnam, can you guess why? What else do you know about the strategic hamlet program?

Follow-up Activities

1. Imagine you are Vice President Johnson and you have to prepare a report for President Kennedy on the meeting with Diem shown here. Write a report, but try to give it as factual a basis as you can. Read more about Johnson and his views on Vietnam in the early 1960s, and read about Diem and his views of his American backers. If possible, find whatever you can about this May 13, 1961 meeting. Now write a report to the President Kennedy on your meeting.
2. Read more about the strategic hamlet program during the early days of the Vietnam War. Use this photo as the central focus of the editorial page of a newspaper. You are in charge of the page and must write the editorial that will appear next to this photo. It's up to you to decide whether your editorial will criticize the whole idea of strategic hamlets, support the idea fully or simply raise questions about it. But make sure you use facts from the research, and back up your opinion with sound reasoning.

Lesson 2 — The U.S. Eases In

Illustration 3

Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Discussing the Illustration

1. As a Catholic, Diem represented a small, often wealthy, share of South Vietnam's population. Most Vietnamese were Buddhists, and many of them resented the privileges given to Catholics. In the summer of 1963, a number of Buddhist monks chose to protest Diem's rule in an especially horrible way. Can you explain what these monks did?
2. Photos like the one on the left, as well as TV coverage, shocked the world. In America, such scenes were especially jarring. Why do you think such images would have been especially unsettling in the U.S. in the early 1960s?
3. U.S. support for Diem began to slip. In the fall of 1963, Kennedy gave his approval to the South Vietnamese military to stage a coup against Diem. What does this mean? What happened to Diem in this coup?
4. Did U.S. officials have a moral right to approve a coup against Diem? Why or why not? Was the decision to approve the coup politically wise? Why or why not?

Follow-up Activities

1. Imagine it's the summer of 1963 and you are a reporter for a U.S. newspaper covering the Buddhist protests in Saigon against Diem. Earlier in the day you witnessed this monk committing suicide by setting himself on fire. Now it is evening and you need to write an article on what you saw that day. Write your report about the suicide, but be sure also to put the story into the larger context of what is happening in Vietnam. Also offer your own thoughts as to how this event might affect U.S. policy towards the government in South Vietnam.
- 2 **Small Group Activity:** Some historians say that by late 1963, President Kennedy was worried about U.S. involvement in Vietnam and might have soon decided to end it. Other historians disagree. Learn more about this debate. You do not have to decide which view is correct. Instead, focus your discussion on this question: Is it even possible for historians to settle this controversy, once and for all? Share your group's views about this with the rest of the class.

Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 1

**OBJECTIVES
FOR THIS LESSON:**

1. Students will better understand the uniquely challenging nature of the U.S. war in Vietnam.
 2. Students will debate the wisdom of U.S. strategy in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968 and of the way that strategy was explained to the public.
-

Escalation and Deception

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS:

Illustration 1

Diem's assassination led to even greater unrest in South Vietnam over the next few years. With the communists on the verge of victory in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson began a huge increase in U.S. involvement in Vietnam. U.S. ground troops were dispatched to the South, and the bombing of North Vietnam began. By the end of 1965, 80,000 U.S. troops were in Vietnam. That escalated to a peak of 543,000 in 1969. Americans found themselves in a very different kind of war. There was no traditional "front." Enemy forces seemed to be all around them and often seemed to disappear into countryside and jungle at will. The Vietcong depended on "hit and run" tactics and their political dominance in many of the villages to make up for their smaller numbers and less-advanced weaponry.

Illustration 2

Johnson put his hopes on superior U.S. military technology. This huge superiority, however, led to over-confidence and a belief that the war could be won through a limited, gradually escalated use of air and ground forces. Bombing was massive, yet many targets were kept off limits. For most of the war, U.S. troops were not allowed to enter neighboring Laos and Cambodia to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply routes directly. As this cartoon suggests, U.S. officials believed the Trail could be cut through bombing alone. This proved to be wishful thinking. Originally just a series of foot paths, the Ho Chi Minh Trail by 1967 was a complex network of roads and supply bases, well camouflaged, defended by anti-aircraft guns and under constant repair.

Illustration 3

General William Westmoreland took command of U.S. forces in Vietnam in 1964. He used the first U.S. ground troops in Vietnam to protect air bases. But he quickly expanded to a "search and destroy" approach, in which troops would seek out the enemy, attack and then retreat or fall back to base. It was a strategy of attrition. In previous wars progress had been measured by enemy territory captured. In Vietnam, progress came to be measured by how many enemy soldiers had been killed — that is, by so-called "body counts." And indeed the U.S. was killing huge numbers of the enemy. But was that in fact a good measure of success?

Lesson 3 — Escalation and Deception

Illustration 1



The National Archives



The National Archives

Discussing the Illustration

1. Kennedy was assassinated in November of 1963. Under his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, the unrest in Vietnam continued to build, and the war went badly. Beginning in 1965, a major change in U.S. military involvement took place. Briefly, what was this change, and why did U.S. officials say it was necessary?
2. As tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers poured into Vietnam, they found themselves in a very different kind of war from others the U.S. had fought. As opposed to fighting along a “front,” for example, U.S. troops were much more often in fighting situations such as the one faced by the two soldiers in the photo on the right. From what you know of the fighting in Vietnam, can you explain this distinction between Vietnam and other wars?
3. The war was, in part, a civil war. This often put U.S. troops at a big disadvantage when confronting enemy soldiers such as the young prisoner on the left. From what you know of Vietnam, can you describe the nature of this disadvantage?

Follow-up Activities

1. The photo on the right shows an American medic looking back worriedly while treating a lieutenant whose leg has been badly burned by an exploding Vietcong white phosphorous booby trap. The photo is from 1966. Imagine you are the medic. It is later in the evening on the day this photo was taken. Write a letter home to your family telling them how things are with you in Vietnam. Explain what you were doing earlier that day when this photo was taken. Be sure to give your thoughts on the overall conduct of the war, what you think you’re fighting for and so on.
2. Interview a Vietnam War veteran from your city or town. Your local VFW post can help you locate a veteran who would be willing to do this. Write a report about this veteran’s experience in Vietnam. Be sure your report places this veteran’s experience into the larger context of the war. Finally, see if this veteran would be willing to give a talk to the class on his or her experiences. Use parts of your report to help introduce the veteran to your class.

Lesson 3 — Escalation and Deception

Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



The National Archives

Discussing the Illustration

1. Congress never officially declared war on North Vietnam. The closest it got was in 1964 when it passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. What was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution?
2. Soon after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, in early 1965, President Johnson began regular bombing attacks against North Vietnam and its supply lines from Laos into South Vietnam, the so-called "Ho Chi Minh Trail." U.S. officials at first seemed confident this would force North Vietnam to give up. From the photo here and from what you know of U.S. military technology as compared to that of the North Vietnamese, can you explain why they were so confident?
3. How does the U.S. editorial cartoon on the left help to convey this sense of confidence?
4. From 1965 until the end of 1972, the U.S. dropped nearly 8 million tons of bombs, four times the tonnage dropped during World War II. Why do you think this bombing failed to achieve victory?

Follow-up Activities

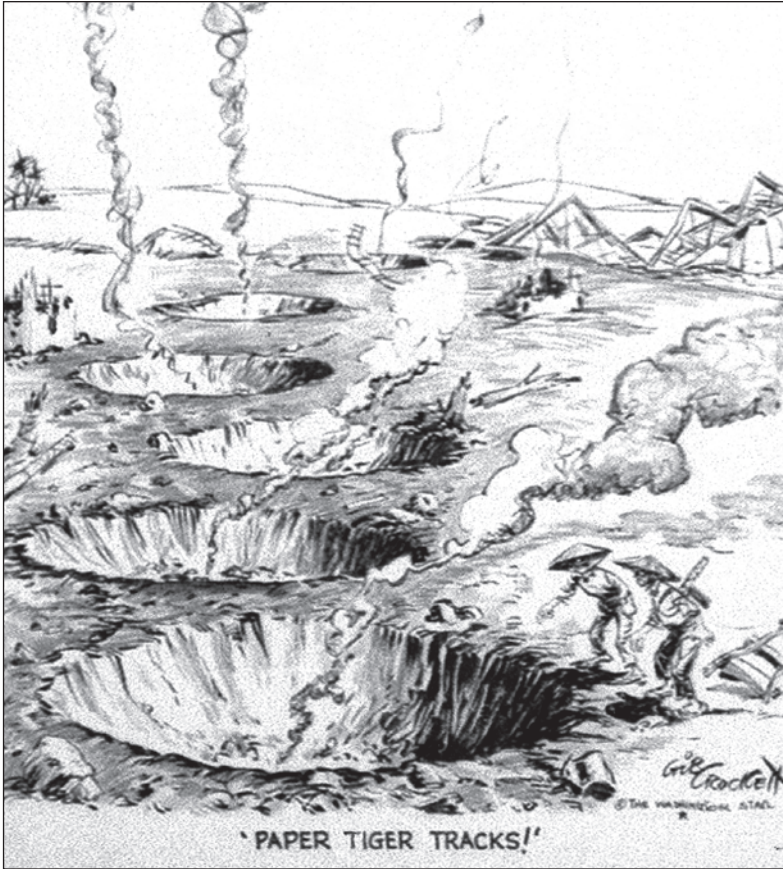
1. Small Group Activity: Retired General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, who led coalition forces in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, also led an infantry battalion in Vietnam. In the *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era*, General Schwarzkopf said this:

I am absolutely convinced that we would have won had we bombed the North and mined Haiphong harbor. But the U.S. strategy was a classic piecemeal commitment where we trickled in forces a little bit at a time. Washington believed that if we killed more of them than they killed of us, they'd give up and not want to fight anymore. We fought it locally. We never really fought the war strategically. We never took the war to the North.

As a group, learn more about General Schwarzkopf's views and more about what he meant about not bombing the North and not mining Haiphong harbor. Present your findings in class and lead a debate on the general's statement. Focus the debate around this question: Could the U.S. have won the war in 1965?

Lesson 3 — Escalation and Deception

Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. The general on the right in the photo took command of U.S. forces in Vietnam in 1964. He would remain in that post until 1968. Can you name him?
2. Well into 1967, U.S. confidence remained high regarding the likely effect of its air power. This cartoon from February 1966 expresses exactly this kind of confidence. At the time, China had at times ridiculed the U.S. as a “paper tiger.” How does the cartoon use this expression ironically to express its confidence in U.S. strategy?
3. Meanwhile, on the ground, General Westmoreland favored a strategy of attrition, also often known as “search and destroy.” Can you explain this strategy?
4. “Search and destroy” has been described as a strategy for fighting a conventional war in Vietnam’s very unconventional circumstances. What do you suppose this means? Can you think of some other U.S. military strategy that might have worked better than this one did?

Follow-up Activities

2. Small Group Activity: The years 1965–1968 saw the “Americanization” of the war, during which time the United States gave up the role of mainly advising and aiding the South Vietnamese army and instead took over much of the war effort directly. As a group, create a bulletin board timeline display of these years called “The Americanization of the War: 1965–68.” Mark each major point at which the U.S. escalated its involvement in the war. Find photos of the war during this time and of the key military and political figures involved in it. Then write paragraphs for these scenes and other photos explaining as much of the timeline as you can. Give a presentation explaining the display to the rest of the class.
2. As a class, debate this statement:

Under Vietnam’s conditions, a “war of attrition” meant that success was measured almost entirely in numbers of enemy killed — the infamous “body counts.” This undermined support for the war at home in a major way.

Vietnam, Our Longest War: Part 1

**OBJECTIVES
FOR THIS LESSON:**

1. Students will understand why the Tet Offensive was a military defeat for the Vietnamese communists but a political victory for them.
 2. Students will better understand how important a turning point the Tet Offensive was.
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Tet: Victory and Defeat

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS:

Illustration 1

All through 1967, U.S. officials said we were winning the war. Then came January 31, 1968, the eve of Tet, the holiday celebrating the Vietnamese New Year. On that day, the communists launched massive attacks against every major city in South Vietnam. The photo on the left shows a medic helping a wounded soldier during this fighting. On the right, South Vietnamese refugees flee across a river escaping the communist assault on the city of Hue. Militarily, the Tet offensive was actually a total failure for the communists. The attacks were quickly repelled. The Vietcong suffered extremely heavy losses. The communists had called for an uprising of the entire population. This never happened. Back in America, however, people saw Tet differently.

Illustration 2

During Tet, an incident took place that would shock Americans already growing uneasy about the war. In March 1968, U.S. soldiers murdered almost all the villagers of My Lai, including women and children. My Lai has rightly been called an atrocity, and it discredited the U.S. in the eyes of many — including the artist who drew the editorial cartoon on the left. Some also claim, however, that it was an exception that went against all the codes of U.S. military conduct. Meanwhile, they point out, the Vietnamese communists routinely murdered civilians suspected of working with the South Vietnamese government or the U.S. During Tet, for example, the communists massacred 3,000 civilians in the city of Hue. The photo on the right is of a young woman mourning her husband killed by the communists during the fighting in that city.

Illustration 3

In America, the Tet Offensive was reported as a disaster for the U.S. In part, the extensive fighting in Tet may have dashed the high hopes raised by all the earlier official U.S. reports of progress. Deep doubts about President Johnson's credibility spread, and protests against the war grew increasingly bitter. In March, Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection. The tension climaxed that summer at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. There, student protesters clashed with Chicago police before a nationwide TV audience. Suddenly, it seemed to millions that the Vietnam War was beginning to tear the society apart.

Lesson 4 — Tet: Victory and Defeat

Illustration 1



The National Archives



The National Archives

Discussing the Illustration

1. In January 1968, Americans suddenly saw scenes like these on TV and in the newspapers reporting a big turning point in the war — the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive actually lasted several weeks. Can you explain what it was and why it is given this name?
2. On the left, a medic treats a wounded soldier during the fighting in the city of Hue. On the right, South Vietnamese refugees flee across a river to escape the communist assault on Hue. What can photos like this show you about the war in Vietnam? What do they leave out in any effort to understand the war?
3. The Tet Offensive was actually a military disaster for the communists, given what they hoped it would accomplish. From what you know of this episode, can you explain why?
4. Nevertheless Tet was also a political success for the communists — in large part because of the kind of turning point it was seen as by millions of Americans. Can you explain?

Follow-up Activities

1. In his 1976 book *A Soldier Reports*, General William Westmoreland writes the following about the Tet offensive:

“Militarily, the offensive was foredoomed to failure, destined to be over everywhere, except in Saigon and Hue and at Khe Sanh, in a day or so. ... No one to my knowledge foresaw that, in terms of public opinion, press and television would transform what was undeniably a catastrophic military defeat for the enemy into a presumed debacle for Americans and South Vietnamese, an attitude that still lingers to this day.”

Respond to this excerpt of the general's in a 2–3 page report, focusing on the following questions: Do you agree with General Westmoreland that Tet was a “catastrophic military defeat for the enemy”? Do you agree that the press and television shaped a largely negative view of Tet by the American public? Has the conventional wisdom about Tet changed since General Westmoreland wrote these words in 1976?

Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. Many Americans were outraged when news reports of an atrocity during the Tet Offensive became known late in 1968. The atrocity involved U.S. soldiers in the village of My Lai. What do you know about this episode in My Lai in March of 1968?
2. The cartoon here is about My Lai (it is incorrectly named “Song My” on the wall in the cartoon). The cartoon appeared just after Thanksgiving 1968. What is your reaction to the cartoon and its caption?
3. Meanwhile, during Tet, the communists massacred 3,000 people in the city of Hue. The photo on the right is of a young woman mourning her husband, who was killed by the communists in Hue. Some people say what the communists did in Hue was no worse than My Lai. Others disagree. They say My Lai was unusual and went against all the rules and codes of conduct for U.S. soldiers, whereas what happened in Hue was typical of the way the communists used terror as a purposeful part of their overall strategy. With which view do you agree more? Why?



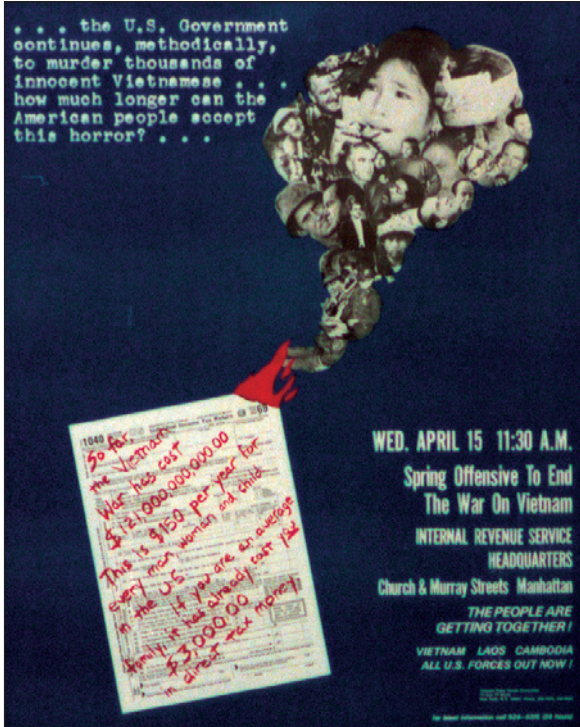
The National Archives

Follow-up Activities

1. The photo on the right shows a widow mourning her dead husband, killed in Hue by the Vietcong during Tet. Imagine this woman is shortly approached by an American newspaper reporter with questions about her husband, herself, the war and the fierce fighting in Hue. First think of the reporter and the questions you would want to ask this woman. Then think of how the woman might have answered those questions. Now, create your own dialogue of this interview.
2. In 2001, stories about Senator Bob Kerrey suggested that he may have been involved in another incident like My Lai. To learn about it, read at least these two articles: “What Happened in Thanh Phong,” by Gregory L. Vistica, in the *New York Times Magazine* (April 29, 2001); and for a different view, “Bob Kerrey, War Criminal?,” by Gabriel Schoenfeld in *Commentary* (July-August, 2001). Write an essay summarizing the significance, as you see it, of the points raised in both articles.

Lesson 4 — Tet: Victory and Defeat

Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the LBJ Library

Discussing the Illustration

1. In 1966 and 1967, Americans, especially college students, began to protest against the war in growing numbers. However, overall public support for the war remained strong into 1968, in part because of reports that kept promising “light at the end of the tunnel.” What do you think officials meant by this phrase, and why might it have kept support for the war high?
2. The Tet Offensive was a huge shock in part because of these glowing U.S. predictions of an approaching victory. After Tet, the already bitter tone of organized protests grew even harsher. How does the poster on the left suggest the bitterness of that tone? Do you think this bitter condemnation of U.S. policy was justified? Why or why not?
3. Criticism of the war became intense, in large part because of Tet. Reacting to it, on March 31, 1968 President Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection; the photo shows his televised press conference where he made the announcement. Why do you think this decision so stunned the nation?

Follow-up Activities

1. Small Group Activity: Historian William Manchester called 1968 “the year that everything went wrong.” Create a bulletin board display on the year 1968. Use photos, cartoons, poster art and newspaper or magazine articles from the time for this display. The display should focus on the war and its effects on American society. But you should also include some other matters, such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, which also added to the sense that something was tearing at the fabric of American society.
2. Small Group Activity: Learn more about Lyndon Johnson’s decision not to run for reelection in 1968. Now pretend you are the editorial department of a newspaper. Use the headline in the photo here as the headline for a front page of your own design reporting fully on this historic event. Include photos, along with articles on events in Vietnam, on college campuses, in the primaries then under way, etc. Make this front page as realistic as you can.

Answers to Factual Questions

(Answers provided only to questions
requiring a single correct answer)

Lesson 1

- Illustration 1** Question 1: Cambodia and Laos
Question 3: France was weakened by the Nazi conquest, etc.
Question 4: Ho Chi Minh
Question 5: Ho was a communist.

- Illustration 2** Question 1: Mao Tse-tung; his communist forces took over China in 1949.
Question 2: The theory that the fall of one Southeast Asian nation to communism would lead to the fall of many others.

- Illustration 3** Question 1: North

Lesson 2

- Illustration 1** Question 1: Dwight Eisenhower, 1953-1961; John F. Kennedy, 1961-1963
Question 2: The Vietcong were the South Vietnamese communist rebels backed by North Vietnam. In the late 1950s, they stepped up operations against Diem's regime.

- Illustration 2** Question 1: Lyndon B. Johnson
Question 2: Vietnam is mainly Buddhist; it never supported French rule, etc.

- Illustration 3** Question 1: They burned themselves to death in protest.
Question 3: A coup is the illegal overthrow of a government. Diem was killed in this coup.

Lesson 3

- Illustration 1** Question 1: The U.S. said stepped up North Vietnamese and Vietcong attacks required the introduction of tens of thousands of U.S. ground troops and a regular bombing campaign against the North.

- Illustration 2** Question 1: In response to an alleged North Vietnamese attack on some U.S. Naval vessels, it gave the president authority to take whatever military measures were needed to defend U.S. forces in Vietnam.

- Illustration 3** Question 1: William Westmoreland
Question 3: The aim was to flush out the enemy with the idea of destroying as much of his forces as possible.

Lesson 4

- Illustration 1** Question 1: A huge uprising by the Vietcong in South Vietnam's cities, named for Vietnam's new year holiday
Question 3: The popular uprising they hoped for never took place, and their offensive was quickly defeated.
Question 4: Americans were shocked by the extent of the offensive and saw it as a sign of communist strength.

- Illustration 2** Question 1 U.S. soldiers massacred hundreds of innocent civilians in the village.

- Illustration 3** (no fact questions)