

Assignment Discovery Online Curriculum

Lesson title:

Opposing Views on the Vietnam War

Grade level:

9-12 (primarily 11-12, but with adaptation for younger students)

Subject area:

United States History/Government

Duration: Two class periods, assuming students do some or all of the reading as homework

Objectives:

Students will understand the following:

1. Richard Nixon's policies concerning the Vietnam War in 1969, including "Vietnamization."
2. The main arguments of Vietnam veteran John Kerry and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in 1971 in opposition to the continuation of the war.
3. The fact that civilians held a variety of opinions regarding the war, some agreeing more with Nixon and the official United States government position and some siding with Kerry, the VVAW, and other antiwar groups.

Materials

- Computers with Internet access (optional)
- Pens and paper
- Copies of the Classroom Activity Sheet: Comparing Arguments
- Copies of the Take-Home Activity Sheet: Interview Questions

Procedures:

1. Hold a 10-to-15-minute class discussion to review students' basic knowledge of the Vietnam War. Use the following questions as guidelines:
 - Who fought against whom in the Vietnam War?
 - Why did the United States become involved in Vietnam, and why did it increase its involvement into the 1970s?
 - What specific events marked the beginning of the United States' active military campaign against North Vietnam? (e.g., the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution)
 - What was the initial public sentiment in the United States regarding U.S. involvement in Vietnam?
 - What was President Johnson's attitude toward U.S. involvement in Vietnam? What was President Nixon's attitude toward the war?
 - How did the war change under President Nixon's administration?

- Was the Vietnam War overwhelmingly popular among American civilians? Why or why not?
2. Ask students to describe the things they know, or believe they know, about the ways in which the American public reacted to the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s. What are their impressions of this era? What images have they seen of the activities that went on within the United States during this time?
 3. Inform students that, while they have probably seen many media images of antiwar protests, not everyone was opposed to the war. Ask students if they know of any present-day leaders (such as George W. Bush) who as college students during the 1960s did not participate in such demonstrations. It's important for students to realize that, while antiwar sentiments were strong, some young people agreed with the policies of the United States government or felt ambivalent about the war and its protestors.
 4. Pass out copies of the Classroom Activity Sheet: Comparing Arguments. Have students, either individually or in pairs, go to the following Web sites to read about some of the reasons that Americans in the 1960s may have favored or opposed the Vietnam War. You may want to print these documents and have students complete this part of the lesson as homework.
 - Nixon's Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam -- "The Silent Majority" Speech, November 3, 1969: <http://www.vcepolitics.com/watergate/silent-majority-speech-1969.shtml>
 - Vietnam War Veteran John Kerry's Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22, 1971: <http://www.richmond.edu/~ebolt/history398/JohnKerryTestimony.html>
 5. As they go through these two documents, ask students to take notes to address the questions on the classroom activity sheet. Students will be answering the following questions on their activity sheets:
 - a. What did Nixon believe would be the consequences of immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam?
 - b. What specific events did Nixon cite to support his arguments against "precipitate troop withdrawal"?
 - c. What is meant by "Silent Majority"?
 - d. What did John Kerry believe about the alleged threat that North Vietnam posed to the United States?
 - e. What did John Kerry believe were the results of Nixon's policies as spelled out in the 1969 "Silent Majority" speech?
 - f. What did Nixon mean by "Vietnamization," and what did Kerry think of this policy?

6. Next, divide the class into pairs, if you haven't already done so. Ask each pair of students to pretend they're good friends who are 18-year-old U.S. citizens in 1971. They're both well educated and aware of major news events (including important political speeches), and they've each given a good deal of thought to how the United States government should handle the Vietnam situation. They've also both received draft notifications and have been called to active duty in Vietnam. One student should pretend that he or she is in favor of the war, and the other should be opposed to the war. Have them work together to write a conversation they might have when discussing their reactions to being drafted. The dialogues should address (1) what each person thinks about the war and (2) how each person justifies his or her opinions about the war. Each side must provide specific examples and rationales to support his or her claims either in favor of or against U.S. participation in the war. Students should be sure to use specific examples from the Web documents they've read. For example, the war supporter should cite some of the reasons Nixon presented in his speech.
7. As a homework assignment, have students conduct the survey on the Take-Home Activity Sheet: Interview Questions. When they've completed their surveys, ask them to share their results with the class and discuss the significance of their findings. Did most of the people they interviewed favor or oppose the war, or was there an even split between the two viewpoints? Did any interviewees state that they were “sort of” opposed to the war or describe drastic changes in their opinions over the course of the war? What reasons did people give for their opinions? Why do students think these people held these opinions? Students can compare their interview results with the ones recorded at Brown University's “The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History of 1968,” <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/issues/vietnam.html>

Adaptation for younger students:

The primary source documents used in this lesson are best suited for older high school students, but advanced ninth and tenth graders may be able to read and comprehend the documents and the corresponding questions. If you feel that your students are not yet ready for the reading level of these documents, or if you teach middle school or early high school, begin this lesson by summarizing the basic facts of Vietnam (who, when, why, etc.). Then discuss with students the opposing viewpoints to the war, using images of protestors, old newspaper headlines or opinion columns that exemplify divergent public opinion, or excerpts from Nixon's “Silent Majority” speech and Kerry's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. As a main activity, have students use the take-home activity sheet to interview their parents, relatives, or neighbors, about the war, and then have them discuss their findings with the class.

Questions:

1. Summarize the reasons that one individual might have been strongly opposed to the Vietnam War while another person from the same family or circle of friends may have supported the war.
2. Describe the media images you've seen concerning attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Hypothesize why the media has tended to showcase the antiwar demonstrators more than people who argued in favor of the war.
3. Discuss the ways in which public perceptions of the Vietnam War changed between 1964 (the time of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) and 1969 (the year in which Nixon was inaugurated). Then discuss the ways in which Nixon's policies may have affected public perceptions of the war.
4. Summarize John Kerry's and President Nixon's arguments for and against immediate troop withdrawal from Vietnam.
5. The Persian Gulf War of the early 1990s was widely hailed as a success. Public support for the war was strong because military involvement extended only as long as the government promised and because there was a clear enemy in Saddam Hussein. Compare and contrast the public attitude toward the Vietnam War with that toward Desert Storm. Then consider what the legacy of the Vietnam War is. What has Vietnam taught us?
6. Debate whether it's necessary and fair to require men over the age of 18 to register for the draft. Should women also be required to register? Is the draft a fair way to recruit people during a time of war? Was the draft a fair method of selecting people to fight in Vietnam?

Evaluation

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson. Students should carefully read the documents and answer the corresponding questions, and they should work cooperatively with their partners to write the dialogues.

Three points: active participation in class discussion; cooperative and efficient work with partner; thorough completion of the classroom and take-home activity sheets; clear and thoughtful written dialogue that expresses the opinion that the person the student is role-playing might have held during the war, including several examples to support the dialogue

Two points: some participation in classroom discussion; adequate work with partner; failure to complete some of the questions on the classroom and take-home activity sheets

or to show a thorough understanding in the student's answers; completion of dialogue with some errors and with an insufficient number of examples to support it

One point: minimal effort in class discussion; poor work with partner; failure to convey an understanding of the material; incomplete classroom and take-home activity sheet; failure to write a clear and thoughtful dialogue with examples to support that dialogue

Extension ideas:

Further Primary Sources

Expand the lesson by having students use the Internet or library resources to find additional primary sources expressing antiwar and pro-war opinions. You could have them do this before they write the dialogues and ask them to include information in the dialogues from a greater number of sources. Two Web sites they can look at are PBS Vietnam Online Reflections, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/reflect/index.html>, and The Vietnam War Internet Project, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/shwv/shwvhome.html>.

Public Perceptions and the Media

Have students use the Internet or library resources to find news articles about a current or recent international conflict in which the United States is involved. Ask each student or group of students to summarize at least five articles about this conflict and to analyze each article's "angle" to determine the impression they think it gives the reader. For example, many articles leave the reader feeling that the United States government is doing a good job or is providing a humanitarian service to another country, while other articles might portray the U.S. government in a less favorable light. Discuss students' findings. How does the media tend to portray the conflict? Why do students think this is the case? Do they think the media plays an important role in the public perception of war and United States foreign policy? What role might the media have played in public perceptions of the Vietnam War? To take this extension activity one step further, have students find articles or Web sites pertaining to the role of the media in the Vietnam War, and ask them to compare the media's portrayal of the Vietnam War with its portrayal of the current conflict they've studied.

Suggested Reading:

Richard Nixon: American Politician

Rachel Barron. Morgan Reynolds, 1999.

Learn more about the life of Richard Nixon in this readable biography, illustrated with photographs. The book gives equal weight to the different phases of his life—his youth, his lengthy political career, and his life after elected office—shedding light on this intelligent, complicated, and controversial man.

The Vietnam War (Causes and Consequences)

David Wright. Steck-Vaughn, 1996.

Many books have been written about the Vietnam War in all its aspects. This slim volume clearly and succinctly traces the history of the Vietnamese people and the events leading to the war as well as its aftermath. Photographs, maps, and generous side-bar information help round out the portrait of an unpopular and unforgettable war.

Vocabulary:

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Definition: The congressional resolution of August 1964 that gave the president broad war powers with relation to North Vietnam and served as the legal basis for the Johnson administration to commit ground troops to Vietnam.

Context: The United States government formulated the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** after having allegedly been fired at on two separate days by North Vietnam, although the second attack has never been confirmed.

My Lai massacre

Definition: A notorious incident in which United States troops massacred at least 100 and perhaps as many as 200 civilians in the hamlet of My Lai.

Context: When the American public began to hear about the **My Lai massacre**, antiwar sentiment swelled, as many were horrified to hear about the United States' role in so many civilian deaths.

precipitate withdrawal

Definition: President Nixon's term to describe the immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. He used the word precipitate to imply that an immediate withdrawal would be rash and reckless.

Context: President Nixon felt that a “**precipitate withdrawal**” of American troops from Vietnam would be a mistake. He proposed to make the withdrawal much more gradual, in step with his “Vietnamization” policy.

Viet Cong

Definition: Communist-trained South Vietnamese rebels.

Context: During the Vietnam War, United States soldiers frequently had trouble distinguishing between the friendly South Vietnamese and the **Viet Cong**.

Vietnamization

Definition: Nixon's policy of building up the South Vietnamese army in order to allow American troops to begin withdrawing from Vietnam.

Context: In his "Silent Majority" speech of 1969, President Nixon expressed his support for a policy of "**Vietnamization**" and announced his authorization of substantial increases in training and equipment to the South Vietnamese.

Academic standards:**Grade level:**

9-12

Subject area:

United States History

Standard:

Understands how the Cold War and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.

Benchmark:

Understands U.S. foreign policy from the Truman administration to the Johnson administration (e.g., American policies toward independence movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East; U.S. policy regarding the British mandate over Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel; President Kennedy's response to the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis; how the Korean War affected the premises of U.S. foreign policy; and the Kennedy-Johnson response to anticolonial movements in Africa).

Grade level:

9-12

Subject area:

United States History

Standard:

Understands how the Cold War and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.

Benchmark: Understands the political elements of the Vietnam War (e.g., the constitutional issues involved in the Vietnam War and the legacy of the war).

Grade level:

9-12

Subject area:

United States History

Standard:

Understands how the Cold War and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.

Benchmark:

Understands the social issues that resulted from U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (e.g., the composition of American forces recruited in the war; why the Vietnam War contributed to a generational conflict; and the concomitant lack of respect for traditional authority figures).

Credit:

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Comparing Arguments

Go to the following Web sites to read two opposing arguments on what the United States should have done about its involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As you go through the documents, take notes to answer the questions below:

- Vietnam War Veteran John Kerry’s Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22, 1971:

<<http://www.richmond.edu/~ebolt/history398/JohnKerryTestimony.html>>

- Nixon’s Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam—“The Silent Majority” Speech, November 3, 1969: <<http://www.vcepolitics.com/watergate/silent-majority-speech-1969.shtml>>

1. What did Nixon believe would be the consequences of immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam?

2. What specific events did Nixon cite to support his arguments against “precipitate troop withdrawal”?

3. What is meant by “Silent Majority”?

4. What did John Kerry believe about the alleged threat that North Vietnam posed to the United States?

5. What did John Kerry believe were the results of Nixon’s policies as spelled out in the 1969 “Silent Majority” speech?

6. What did Nixon mean by “Vietnamization,” and what did Kerry think of this policy?

Interview Questions

Interview your parents, your grandparents, or other adults who remember the Vietnam War to find out what they thought about the United States' involvement in this conflict. The people you interview don't have to have lived in the United States during the war, as long as they were aware of the situation in Vietnam and were old enough to develop opinions about it. Pose the following interview questions, and add one or two of your own. When you return to class, you will present your findings to your classmates and hold a discussion on the survey results.

1. Where were you living in 1969?
2. What did you think about the Vietnam War in 1969? Why did you have this opinion about the war?
3. What did you think of Richard Nixon in 1969? Why did you have this opinion?
4. What is your opinion of the Vietnam War today? Has your opinion changed much since 1969? Why or why not?