



THE VIETNAM WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS & LYNN NOVICK



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The Vietnam War, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 10-part, 18-hour documentary series, tells the epic story of one of the most consequential, divisive, and controversial events in American history as it has never before been told on film. Visceral and immersive, the series explores the human dimensions of the war through revelatory testimony of nearly 80 witnesses from all sides—Americans who fought in the war and others who opposed it, as well as combatants and civilians from North and South Vietnam.

Ten years in the making, the series includes rarely seen, digitally remastered archival footage from sources around the globe, photographs taken by some of the most celebrated photojournalists of the 20th century, historic television broadcasts, evocative home movies, and secret audio recordings from inside the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. *The Vietnam War* features more than 100 iconic musical recordings from the greatest artists of the era and haunting original music from Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross as well as the Silk Road Ensemble featuring Yo-Yo Ma.



American soldier looks over perimeter of FSB Hampton, March 14, 1969.

courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration

IN THE CLASSROOM

The themes explored in *The Vietnam War* offer an extraordinary educational opportunity for your classroom. The following topics and questions are designed to be used along with the “Educator’s Clips” (located on disc six) to help guide your class through an examination and discussion of the Vietnam War era. For complete lesson plans, please visit pbs.org/vietnamwar.

EDUCATOR’S DVD DESCRIPTION

Excerpt from Episode 1: “Déjà Vu” (1858–1961)

Introduction

The Vietnam War seemed to call everything into question—the value of honor and gallantry, the qualities of cruelty and mercy, the candor of the American government, and what it means to be a patriot. Those who lived through it have never been able to erase its memory and have never stopped arguing about what really happened, why everything went so wrong, who was to blame, and whether it was worth it. (08m20s)

Excerpts from Episode 3: “The River Styx” (January 1964–December 1965)

The Gulf of Tonkin

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is one of the most controversial and consequential events in American history. The international confrontation drew the United States more directly into the Vietnam War. In the immediate aftermath, Everett Alvarez, Jr., a US Navy pilot, was shot down over the Gulf of Tonkin and captured by the North Vietnamese. At the time of his capture, there was not yet a declaration of war, and the North Vietnamese did not immediately acknowledge his status as a “prisoner of war.” By the time of

his release (further detailed in the excerpt from Episode 9), Alvarez had been held captive for more than eight years. (07m40s)

Early Antiwar Movement

During the beginning stages of the Vietnam War, few Americans saw a reason to question the government’s assertion that the United States had vital interests 8,000 miles from home; nevertheless, a small and growing number of individuals opposed the war for a number of reasons. Some thought it unjust or immoral, believed it was unconstitutional, or simply thought that it was not in the national interest. Universities across the country began to hold teach-ins to open up communication between the people and the government. In spring 1965, the Students for a Democratic Society organized a demonstration at the White House, drawing 25,000 individuals who were part of the antiwar movement. (03m35s)



A female demonstrator offers a flower to military police on guard at the Pentagon, October 21, 1967.
courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Excerpt from Episode 4: “Resolve” (January 1966–June 1967)

Le Quan Cong and Duong Van Mai Elliott

Family members of Le Quan Cong, a Viet Cong soldier, suffered for their involvement in the revolution, but his mother encouraged them to continue on. In South Vietnam, Duong Van Mai Elliott, the daughter of a South Vietnamese government official, was brought up to believe that communists were brutal people who destroyed family and religion and had no allegiance to Vietnam, but she also knew close family members involved in the communist movement—leaving her with conflicting feelings. (03m45s)

Excerpt from Episode 5: “This Is What We Do” (July 1967–December 1967)

Con Thien

Marines recall their time at Con Thien (meaning Hill of Angels)—a United States Marine Corps combat base located in North Vietnam. (04m06s)

Excerpt from Episode 7: “The Veneer of Civilization” (June 1968–May 1969)

Post Tet

After the Tet Offensive, propaganda efforts led the North Vietnamese to believe that the Tet Offensive was a series of tremendous victories and that losses were insignificant—there were seldom any mentions of defeat. Casualty figures were never revealed, and few families received death notices from the government until after the war was over. Thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers were killed, and thousands more recruits were sent to replace them. Many leaders and other well-off families sent their children abroad so they could escape the draft—meaning the majority of draftees were poor people from the countryside. (04m44s)

Excerpt from Episode 8: “The History of the World” (April 1969–May 1970)

Moratorium

With morale plummeting in Vietnam and the American public growing weary of the war, the national Moratorium on October 15, 1969, was the largest outpouring of public dissent in American history. The children of several of the president’s closest aides and cabinet members took part, and Coretta Scott King,

the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., led thousands of silent demonstrators past the White House. President Nixon sought to seize back the initiative and went on national television to ask Americans to rally behind him, causing his approval ratings to soar. (06m46s)

Excerpt from Episode 9: “A Disrespectful Loyalty” (May 1970–March 1973)

POWs Return

In 1973, 591 American prisoners of war (POWs) held in Vietnam were released, following the Paris Peace Accords that ended the United States’ combat role in the Vietnam War. Among them was Everett Alvarez, a prisoner in Hanoi for more than eight years who had been captured in the Gulf of Tonkin. Another POW, Hal Kushner, was a flight surgeon who was captured after his helicopter crashed in 1967. After being held captive for more than five years, he was released, and recalls his emotional flight home. (05m09s)

Excerpt from Episode 10: “The Weight of Memory” (March 1973–Onward)

Bao Ninh Comes Home

Bao Ninh returned home to Hanoi after six years of fighting with the North Vietnamese Army. During that time he had had no contact with his family. In his family’s apartment building, six young men were drafted, and he was the only one to return. In his interview, Bao Ninh recalls that his family was overjoyed by his arrival home but did not make a scene out of respect for their neighbors who lost their children. (01m35s)



Viet Cong soldiers on the Ho Chi Minh trail.
courtesy of the Doug Niven Collection

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

Before watching the DVD, read the following statement to the class:

The Vietnam War seemed to call everything into question—the value of honor and gallantry; the qualities of cruelty and mercy; the candor of the American government; and what it means to be a patriot. And those who lived through it have never been able to erase its memory, have never stopped arguing about what really happened, why everything went so badly wrong, who was to blame—and whether it was all worth it.

Begin a general conversation by asking the following questions:

- What does the Vietnam War mean to you?
- Why is the Vietnam War still so divisive to many Americans?
- How did America get involved in Vietnam?
- Do you know anyone who served in the Vietnam War?
- What do you want to know about the Vietnam War?

Soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division near Saigon, January 1968.

courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration



POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS

After viewing the clips, you can lead your class through a number of thematic conversations. Remember that certain topics addressed in the film examine subjects about which students will likely disagree or may not have yet formed solid opinions. This calls for a learning environment that is open, tolerant, and comfortable for all students.

Journalism and Media

- Did the discrepancy between the media's reporting of the war and the government's official reporting affect Americans' opinions of the conflict? What about in the case of North and South Vietnam?
- Journalist Joe Galloway says, "You can't just be a neutral witness to something like war. It crawls down your throat." What is the expectation for objective reporting in a time like the Vietnam War? How do we continue to reconcile those thoughts with conflicts today?
- How can the government's need to maintain national security and the public's right to know the truth ever be reconciled? In the case of North Vietnam, citizens were not told the truth about the war. How did this lack of knowledge and government propaganda affect Vietnamese opinions of the war?
- What impact, if any, did the media have on the outcome of the war?
- One of the great turning points in the public's perceptions of the war was the release of the Pentagon Papers. How does Daniel Ellsberg and the release of the Pentagon Papers compare with Wikileaks? Edward Snowden? How do you evaluate the release of classified documents?
- How was America viewed by local Vietnamese journalists from the North and South?
- How is this documentary film different from other films on this subject?

Service and Leadership

- What does service mean to you?
- What motivated American men and women to serve in the Vietnam War?
- Why is there still debate regarding the events in the Gulf of Tonkin? How did leadership on all sides react to the incident and its aftermath?
- Teach-ins appeared on university campuses as a way to promote conversation about the war.

When the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) held a rally in Washington, DC, with 25,000 in attendance, how did President Johnson react? Did this change anything?

- How did President Johnson react to the assault on the American embassy in Saigon? How did this affect his leadership at this point in the Vietnam War? How did it affect the morale of the soldiers?



General William Westmoreland and President Lyndon B. Johnson, April 4, 1968.

courtesy of the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Audiovisual Archives



American soldier with his siblings before leaving for Vietnam, 1965.

courtesy of the Crocker Family

- Watching “Resolve”, you hear Le Quan Cong speak of how each of his siblings was killed in the war. Yet his mother encouraged her youngest son to join the fight. Why?
- When veterans returned, they were not celebrated, particularly in the years that immediately followed. How did the Vietnam Veterans Memorial help veterans and the public come to terms with the veterans’ service? For those who have visited it, what was your reaction to The Wall?
- How do we honor our veterans today?



American soldiers advance through rice paddies, October 10–11, 1966.

courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Perspective

- In what ways did the United States fail to understand the Vietnamese people and their history, culture, and government?
- How did some North Vietnamese learn that their family members were killed in combat? Why did it take so long for some families to be notified in the North?
- In the “Weight of Memory”, North Vietnamese soldier Bao Ninh describes his homecoming after being gone for six years with no contact with his family. What was the reaction when some soldiers returned after being away for so long? How did these long periods of service without communication affect the morale of the soldiers and of the North Vietnamese?
- How were the Vietnamese communists such an effective force, considering that they were fighting American troops with greater wealth and superior technology?
- How did the Vietnamese feelings change over the duration of the war—both the South and the North Vietnamese? As the war continued, what did they think about the American presence there?
- How were South Vietnamese soldiers treated when returning home from war?
- What were the costs of the Vietnam War? What happened in Vietnam after the war? To the economy in Vietnam? What are the continuing effects today?
- What did the United States and Vietnam gain by normalizing relations in 1995?
- How are visiting Vietnamese Americans viewed in Vietnam? Are they seen as Vietnamese, American, or something else? How does this affect their sense of identity and cultural belonging?



The Homefront

- How did political and societal changes—the civil rights movement, the women’s movement—of the 1960s serve as catalysts to the divergent views of the Vietnam War?
- What is patriotism? How can a democratic public be patriotic to the country and still hold the government accountable for its actions?

A student strike at Northwestern University. May 1970.

courtesy Northwestern University Archive

- Why is the Vietnam War so divisive to many Americans?
- How did the music of this time affect and reflect the feelings of those on the battlefield and at home?
- How did soldiers' letters, tapes, home movies, and personal photos contribute to Americans' understanding of the war?
- How did the anti-war movement change over time? Did the movement affect policy? Did it reflect public opinion or change it?
- How did the civil rights, women's rights, and environmental rights movements connect to the anti-war movement?

General Post-Viewing Questions

- After watching the clips, what did you learn about the war? What surprised you or did not surprise you?
- Has this film helped you understand the Vietnam War from different perspectives?
- What would you have done during the Vietnam War? Would you have supported or opposed it?
- If you were a draft-age young man, would you have joined the military and fought in Vietnam or gone into the National Guard or Reserves? Would you have been able to get a deferment? Or would you have refused to be drafted and risked the consequences to show your opposition to the war? If you were a young woman who knew a draft-age young man, what would you suggest he do?
- How does America apply the lessons that it learned in the Vietnam War to challenges facing us today?

**FOR COMPLETE LESSON PLANS AND ADDITIONAL CLASSROOM RESOURCES,
please visit pbs.org/vietnamwar**

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