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Footnotes

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This issue of Footnotes provides the text of a presentation by Walter McDougall to a group of 42 teachers from 16 states at our annual History Institute for Teachers, held on May 6-7. This weekend-long program featured a series of talks and workshops on the Vietnam War by a distinguished group of scholars, including George Herring, author of *The Longest War*; David Eisenhower, author of *Eisenhower: At War and coauthor of a forthcoming book on 1968*; Bruce Kuklick, the Nichols Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania; Lloyd Gardner, the Beard Professor of History at Rutgers University; Adam Garfinkle, author of *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*; Douglas Pike, Research Director of The Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University; and Paul Dickler, a history teacher at Neshaminy High School and a senior fellow of FPRI's Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education. Walter McDougall is director of FPRI's History Academy, editor of *Orbis*, Alloy-Ansin Professor of International Relations at the University of Pennsylvania, and a Vietnam veteran. For a copy of the conference report and related items, send an email message to fpri@fpri.org or call 215- 732-3774, ext. 201.

In your conference packet you should have the op-ed which the *New York Times* asked me to write on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. In it I explain how many years after my Vietnam service I was finally nudged by an ex-student and his wife (the Barnetts), both faculty members at the Agnes Irwin School to deliver a lecture there on the Vietnam War, a published version of which is also in your packet. It proved to be a catharsis, allowed me to view the war objectively, as history, for the first time, and so inspired me to offer a seminar at Penn on Vietnam, the syllabus of which is also in your packet.

But even though I, like so many veterans, repressed my own feelings of anger, fear, self-pity, and alienation from hawks and doves alike, I also can see now how all the history books I have written over the years were inspired, subconsciously at first, by a need to come to grips with the Vietnam war: why it happened, why it was waged so destructively yet ineffectively, and why its end was as disastrous as its beginning and middle. I say that the end, too, was disastrous because not only did 2 million South Vietnamese have to flee after 1975, but the 77 million people within Vietnam still live in oppression and poverty. Contrary to what we were told in the '60s and '70s, the Communists were on the wrong side of history after all. That is why my first suggestion is that we try increasingly to teach the Vietnam War, and the entire Cold War, not only as an American triumph and tragedy, obsessed with our own nation's angst, but from the perspective of all the peoples who were caught in the middle.

Still, I appreciate how hard it must be to provide students in a high school survey course with more than just skeleton coverage of America's longest and most divisive war, especially when debate still rages about so many aspects of it. In my seminar I have the luxury of 42 hours of class time, a lengthy reading list, and the Stanley Karnow television history, with which to provide copious background information and multiple interpretations, and still leave plenty of time for classroom debate and discussion. You may not have any of those luxuries.

But let me suggest two possible strategies. The first is to set the broad stage as quickly as possible, then zoom in and amplify specific revealing aspects of the war. Concentrate on the experiences of one or more soldiers (preferably a Viet Cong as well as American), one or more specific battles such as the Ia Drang Valley in 1965, Tet '68, and the 1972 North Vietnamese offensive, to demonstrate how the war changed its nature. Or one could focus on a few specific decisions such as the overthrow of Diem, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Johnson's March 1968 withdrawal speech, or Nixon's decision to pursue Vietnamization and detente. A few well-chosen turning points can suffice to illuminate most, if not all, of the major themes, dilemmas, and ironies of the war at home and abroad.

A second and opposite strategy is to lay out the broad setting and time line of the war, and then get even broader, by placing the Vietnam war within its many larger contexts, so that its historical significance becomes crystal clear, and students can appreciate that the war caused passionate divisions precisely because people on all sides believed themselves to be morally or pragmatically right, from their own points of view. I'll even go out on a limb and say that no one expresses the moral crack-up over the war better than Henry Kissinger in the two chapters on Vietnam in his book *Diplomacy*.

What are the broader historical contexts in which the Vietnam War can make sense to students? In the interest of time I'm just going to list them, but will be happy to elaborate later about any you wish to discuss.

First, the Vietnam War was a Cold War episode, and can be understood, or critiqued, in the context of the unplanned and highly problematical extension of the Containment strategy to Asia following the Communist victory in China and outbreak of the Korean War.

Second, as a battle within the Cold War, Vietnam can be analyzed through the context of Great Power relations among the U.S., Soviet Union, and China. And to examine the war in this way leads to some surprising insights because of the growing Sino-Soviet split.

Third, the Vietnam War can be placed in the context of decolonization and the rise of Asian nationalism. Roosevelt made it clear during World War II that he considered the age of imperialism to be at an end, but all subsequent U.S. administrations fretted over what, and who, would fill the power vacuums created by the European retreat. Likewise, new research on the early biography of Ho Chi Minh, or Nguyen the Patriot as he first called himself, reveals that his rise to heroic leader was by no means inevitable, and that the customary debate over whether he was more a nationalist or a Communist is simplistic.

Indeed, a fourth context in which one can place Vietnam is the changing American attitude toward revolutions in general. Though born in an anti-colonial rebellion, the U.S. quickly became suspicious of revolutions, first because of the French Revolution's bloody descent into terror and conquest. In the 19th century, Americans expressed sympathy for the Latin American rebellions and Revolutions of 1848, but did not consider them our business. Finally, in 1898, the Cuban revolution drew the U.S. into the war with Spain that ended with America suppressing revolution in the Philippines. The chaotic Mexican and Chinese revolutions of 1911, then of course the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, turned most Americans hostile to violent revolution as a mechanism for political change.

Fifth, in military terms, the Vietnam War should be placed within the context of that new and frustrating Atomic Age phenomenon, the Limited War. Given that Korea wrecked the Truman Administration, how could LBJ have walked down the same path? Limited war raises all sorts of conundrums, such as how to define victory, how to justify the costs to the public, and how to end a war once it has started? If you have time in class to discuss the Korean War and MacArthur/Truman conflict, this context will work well for students. An excellent critique of limited war in Vietnam is Harry Summers' book, *On Strategy*.

Sixth, the Vietnam War can be presented as a brutal example of Guerilla War, with all the practical and moral dilemmas that raises. Nothing, in my experience, is more effective at getting students' attention than asking them to imagine themselves, at age 19 or 20, drafted into the army, given 16 weeks of rudimentary training, shipped half way around the world, dumped in a torrid and terrifying jungle surrounded by strange Asian peasants, and then told, "O.K. men, go find the Commies and kill 'em!" It is easy to score points by dwelling on American atrocities, but even more poignant is to explore why atrocities and brutality, on both sides, were inevitable in Vietnam and to cast the blame on the leaders who put ignorant, frightened boys in that situation.

Seventh, Vietnam can be placed in the context of national decision-making, a sort of political science approach. What options did advisers place before Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, and why did the national security apparatus almost rule out both withdrawal and a victory strategy in Vietnam? A useful source here is Leslie Gelb's *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, in which he describes what he calls "the dynamics of Option B."

An eighth context, which I used in my book *Promised Land, Crusader State*, is the technocratic, social scientific tradition of U.S. foreign relations, which stressed state-building, economic takeoff, democratization, and the winning of hearts and minds as the way to defeat Communist insurgencies in the Third World. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations waged Vietnam as a liberal, Great Society war, in the belief that American technology and management were invincible. We associate all that with Walt Rostow and Robert McNamara, but what I call global meliorism had many roots, from American missionary activity in the 19th century to Herbert Hoover's faith that the way to fight Communism was with bread not with guns, to the Marshall Plan model and Truman's Point Four program for foreign aid, and above all, the technocratic mentality fostered by the nuclear and space age, as I explored in my book *The Heavens and the Earth*. Lyndon Johnson said that American foreign policy always reflects domestic policy, and for once I think he was right.

Ninth, students today can certainly relate to Vietnam War as a Media War, which means not only the eroding effect of battle footage and weekly casualty counts, but also the use made by propaganda images, most famously the photo of the point-blank execution of the Viet Cong assassin after Tet '68. But Peter Braestrup's book *The Big Story* also makes clear that prior to Tet the American media were generally supportive of the war, and argues that the real story is how Johnson lost the media thanks to his own credibility gap. But I have just become apprised of another book, *The Military and the Media*, whose author William V. Kennedy does fault American reportage on Vietnam, not for bias, but sheer ignorance of the realities of military operations and South Vietnamese politics.

And that leads, finally, to a tenth context, American domestic politics—and not only the antiwar movement and its internal splits, but the split in the Democratic party, the George Wallace insurgency, Nixon's Southern and Silent Majority strategies, and the growing Congressional counterattack against the Imperial Presidency that climaxed during and after Watergate. Indeed, you cannot understand how the Vietnam War ended, and why it ended when it did, without Watergate, and you cannot explain Nixon's two electoral victories and ultimate downfall except in the context of the war abroad and at home.

Now all those contexts are enough to set the head spinning. But choosing two or three of them can endow the war with historical meaning and present-day relevance, and most importantly, kindle students' appetites to explore the other contexts as well.

Thank you.

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