

# The Continuing Impact of the Vietnam Era

Thursdays 10-12:00, Sept. 28 to Dec. 7

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With lectures by [Distinguished Professor Bev Seckinger](#)



In our ten weeks together, we will look back over the half century since the US withdrawal from Vietnam to consider the era's impact on our lives and our country. We will discuss the experiences of those who fought in Vietnam and the refugees who immigrated to the US. We will also consider the experiences of those on the left and right who were radicalized by the war, Nixon's election and resignation, the antiwar movement, and feelings that the government lost the war. We will explore these views with oral histories and documentaries.

Lee Teter's *Reflections*  
["Vietnamese Diaspora in the US"](#)  
["Kent State and the War that Never Ended"](#)

## Course Readings and Resources

This draft of the syllabus includes links to sources that are mostly publicly accessible. I will finalize the syllabus over the summer. I welcome your suggestions and criticisms. If you sign up for the course, I will provide you with online access to weekly packets of readings that require subscription and primary texts that require library access. I will also include suggested background resources. We will use documentaries, recollections, personal essays, and archives to discuss the experiences of veterans, antiwar activists, and the Vietnamese who fought in, lived through, and fled the war. Some of these materials are rather graphic, as I note in trigger warnings on those materials.

- To prepare for the course, you may find it useful to view [Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Vietnam documentary](#), which is available on [DailyMotion](#) and [Docur](#) and also for rent on [YouTube](#) or with a donation to [PBS](#). Burns and Novick's documentary will provide a resource for our ongoing reflections on how our individual historical experiences connect with our national narratives, as discussed in [this analysis](#) of Burns and Novick's attempt to negotiate competing views and this [conservative reaction](#) to that effort.

## Preliminary Course Outline

### 1) Vietnam generations (9/28)

The Vietnam War ended up turning many Americans against their government, but when the war began, most Americans agreed that the US should defend democracy. [JFK gathered the "best and brightest,"](#) who were confident the US would not repeat the defeat suffered by France. To answer the question of ["What Was the Vietnam War About?"](#), we will note a wide range of views, including Chomsky's [critique of American imperialism](#) and [the hardliners who agreed with Goldwater](#) that the military could bomb North Vietnam into submission if not overridden by bureaucrats. We will explore the Vietnam War as ["The Baby Bomer War"](#) and take note of [the antiwar movement](#), postwar [conservative reactions](#), and [Vietnamese immigration](#). We will further consider Vietnamese perspectives in our next class.



- After our introductory overview, we will be joined in our second hour by Professor Seckinger, who will set up our discussions of documentaries. Professor Seckinger will discuss the basics of documentaries using two chapters from Jacob Bricca's [How Documentaries Work](#). The [chapters are available here](#) with the password **vietnam** because they are copyrighted. For our cases in point, Professor Seckinger will use the first segment of Burns and Novick's Vietnam documentary, ["Déjà Vu"](#) and her own [Laramie Inside Out, How Matthew Shepard's murder changed Laramie, WY](#) (2004).

## 2) Who served and who lost in Vietnam (10/5)

We will use [vets' oral histories](#) to explore the trauma that arose from fighting an "[invisible enemy.](#)" We will particularly focus on the experiences of two of the best-known Vietnam veteran authors with [a recollection](#) of [W.D. Erhardt](#) and the first chapter of [Tim O'Brien's \*The Things They Carried\*](#) (1990). [75% of the combat troops were working class](#) or just plain poor. Many were [Blacks who often had to fight racism](#). We will then turn to the trauma of the Vietnamese people and [Vietnamese perspectives on the war](#). We will take note of how the Vietnamese remember the fighting, including [those who remained in Việt Nam](#) and [those for whom it is but a distant memory](#) that many [return to with feelings of loss](#) and betrayal. We will return to these themes in later classes.



"How not to win hearts and minds"

- "[The Weight of Memory](#)" (:55), the final segment from Burns and Novick's documentary, will provide us with a chance to connect our memories with those of US veterans and others trying to make sense of the war. [Vietnam War: The Face of the Enemy](#) (2:16) documents the war from the perspective of those who fought against the US. It has a trigger warning because some may object to its perspective.



## 3) 1968 (10/12)

In 1967 General Westmoreland assured Americans that the [light at the end of the tunnel](#) was in view. By the end of 1968, most Americans had decided the war was a mistake. [Many veterans agreed](#). The "[year that shattered America](#)" began with [the Tet Offensive](#) sweeping across South Vietnam bringing the highest casualties in the war. [Johnson changed direction](#): he ceased bombing North Vietnam and [announced he would not run](#) for reelection. The [assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy](#) ended [the optimism of the early 60s](#) and [intensified the radicalism](#) that arose with uprisings in Paris, Prague, and elsewhere. The [mass demonstrations](#) that overwhelmed the Democratic National Convention helped elect Richard Nixon, who positioned himself as the spokesman for "[the silent majority,](#)" which became a frame for [authoritarian populism](#).

- The dehumanizing violence of the war is graphically documented in [The Year of the Pig](#) (1968), which differs from previous documentaries because it has a random quality to the juxtaposition of unnarrated segments. We will also take note of Burns and Novick's "[Things Fall Apart,](#)" the segment of Vietnam on 1968.

## 4) The living room war (10/19)

Watching the "[first television war](#)" in the living room on one of the three networks was quite unlike the ways we access the news today, though the [live coverage of Tet](#) and other battles was actually [less restricted](#) than in later wars. In the 60s and 70s, newspapers were also far more influential than they are today, as evident in the impact of [The Pentagon Papers](#), which along with the [Washington Post's](#) coverage of Watergate [were instrumental in convincing many Americans](#) that they could not trust their government—or [the media](#).

- To explore impact of television and print journalism, we will consider [Vietnam and TV News](#) and [Dateline Saigon](#), which focuses on Pulitzer Prize winners, which can be viewed on Amazon Prime or on Apple TV+.

*Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America—not on the battlefields of Vietnam.* Marshall McLuhan, 1975



This image was photostopped.

## 5) The antiwar movement and the new left (10/26)

From the assumption the "[personal is political,](#)" the [counterculture](#) combined [flower power](#) with militant activism. We will take note of major demonstrations such as the [March on the Pentagon](#). [Resistance to the war shaped the New Left](#), including [Black rights](#) and [women's liberation](#) movements in the late 60s. [Malcolm X viewed the war](#) as an outgrowth of American imperialism, and [Martin Luther King](#) also [came out against the war](#). We will focus much of our discussion of



the impact of antiwar activism on [the baby-boom generation](#). We will note the generational framing of the Students for a Democratic Society's influential [Port Huron Statement](#) and discuss [reflections of antiwar activists](#) and [others who came of age in the 1960s](#).

- A noted antiwar documentary is Davis's [Hearts and Minds](#). We will also consider the [antiwar segments](#) from Burns and Novick's *Vietnam*. The [third part of the British documentary](#) *The Vietnam War* provides an overview of the antiwar movement, Nixon's escalation of the war, "Vietnamization," and the collapse of South Vietnam



## 6) The new right's view that the US was "stabbed in the back" in Vietnam (11/2)

The radicalism of the late 60s and 70s fractured the GOP as well as the Democrats. The defeat of establishment Republican Nelson Rockefeller by [Barry Goldwater was pivotal](#) to the emergence of the New Right, and to the [political career of Ronald Reagan](#). Goldwater's [Conscience of a Conservative](#) (1960) repudiated civil rights reforms and the sort of welfare programs that LBJ would expand in his Great Society initiatives. Goldwater's loss to Johnson was the most consequential campaign defeat in US history. The campaign [forged a hard-right coalition](#) around a [paranoid style](#) that appealed to hawks, gun advocates, Christian nationalists, white supremacists, and other [antigovernment groups](#). After the fall of South Vietnam, disgruntled vets, other supporters of the war, and those repelled by the libertine lifestyle of the 60s [fused the modern right](#) around a belief that veterans had been 'stabbed in the back' by the media, antiwar activists, and government bureaucrats. These views have also shaped [the broader history of the Republican Party](#).

- Ronald Reagan's campaign speech for Goldwater ["A Time for Choosing"](#) is a "brilliant libertarian speech" that served as a ["defining statement of modern conservatism."](#)

## 7) The impact of the war on those who served (11/9) **Veterans Day 11/11**



Many US vets returned with [undiagnosed posttraumatic stress](#) to a divided country where most agreed their sacrifices had been a mistake, with some accusing them of being [baby killers](#). After considering [oral histories](#) as prompts to our collective memories, we will take note of the research that shows that the memories of the [experiences of veterans who fought uniformed soldiers are less traumatizing](#) than those who fought in wars where civilians were viewed as guerrillas. Memories of how veterans were treated are also shaped by [perceptions of the wars they fought in](#). We will then pivot from recollections of the times to the health of veterans today. [Vietnam veterans suffer from serious health problems](#) fifty years later. The [racism faced by Black veterans](#) did not end when they returned, as documented in Wallace Terry's [Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War, An Oral History](#) (1985).

- *Vietnam Remembered* is made of graphic interviews with vets who are haunted by [memories of combat and the deaths of their comrades](#)

## 8) The impact of the war on those who fled Vietnam (11/16)



[Migration Policy Institute Resources](#)

The [memories and "rememories"](#) of those who fled Vietnam have fed [the wellspring of our national memory](#) and the ways we draw on it to understand later developments such as the US defeat in Afghanistan. The [refugee crisis after the war](#) became one of the [largest in the last half century](#), with 140,000 Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees arriving in the US in the first wave and hundreds of thousands more [as the diaspora continued](#). 1.4 million Vietnamese immigrated to the US to become part of the [fastest-growing ethnic group in America](#). We will note some of the most acclaimed [writings of the Vietnamese diaspora](#) and then consider how some Vietnamese Americans have come to join other immigrants in [supporting Donald Trump](#), which led to some insurrectionists flying the flag of South Vietnam over the US capitol on January 6, 2021.

- [The Last Days in Vietnam](#) provides glimpses of the experiences of Vietnamese who fled the fall of South Vietnam, and [the First Story Project](#) provides accounts of arrivals in the US. [Getting Here: Journeys from Vietnam](#) is comprised of interviews of Vietnamese Americans who fled after the defeat of the South Vietnam.

### 9) Recollecting when we believed we could change the world (11/30)

In our last two classes, we will reflect upon the continuing impact of the Vietnam era on our individual and national lives. The radicalism of the Vietnam era [remains powerfully relevant](#), for some us. Some of the radicals of the times believed that change would come from mind expansion, and activists believed that poverty, racism, and sexism could be eliminated by changing the government, living in harmony with the land, and instituting programs to support and protect those with less power. Others reacted against the progressivism of the 60s to commit to defeating communism and defending traditional ideals, including [defending “classical liberalism” against “left liberalism.”](#) Many of us have moved on from the idealism of this era, perhaps looking back on the “[Me Decade](#)” as a time of adolescent indulgence. As an example [those who have lived by the radical ideals of the Vietnam era](#), we will take note of [how the era changed how we think about our lives](#). As a case in point, we will take note of those who still live on [communes](#).



- Professor Seckinger will join us in our second hour to discuss her [Hippie Family Values](#) documentary on a group of [60s radicals who are now raising grandchildren on the commune they created](#).

### 10) What are the lessons to be learned from the Vietnam era (12/7)

[Most discussions of the lessons of Vietnam](#) focus less on moral considerations than on how the US lost the war. The primary architect of US strategic thinking, Robert McNamara, acknowledged that “[we were wrong, terribly wrong](#)” in Vietnam, though he added that “we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities.” Noam Chomsky has argued that [such acknowledgments of failings in Vietnam are a way to sustain the ideological and economic purposes that the US sought to advance](#) by making war on the Vietnamese people, which is how he characterizes the Vietnam War. Chomsky has critiqued the war [on moral grounds](#) for fifty years. Commentators on the right as well as the left have noted the [parallels with Afghanistan and Iraq](#). The wars have been discussed as failed efforts to move beyond the “[Vietnam syndrome](#)”—the [presumed hesitancy to use America’s military force because doing so would create bad press](#). Few commentators look past such strategic analyses to consider the [devastation of Vietnam](#) and moral questions about whether the [war crimes](#) committed by the US in Vietnam were a key part of the US strategy rather than isolated incidents.

We will use these conflicted views in our final discussion, though we will not focus on the lessons of Vietnam for international strategic thinking but as prompts to reflect upon how we understand the morality of our political lives as individuals and as a nation. What have we been willing to compromise, what are our abiding values, and how can we sustain them in the ways we live today? These are the sorts of questions I hope to talk about with you in our final class.

We will conclude our reflections on the lessons to be learned from the war and its aftermath by taking note of the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Vietnam War, held on Vietnam Veterans Day, March 29, 2023 to honor the 3 million servicemen and women who served in Vietnam. [Vietnam Veterans Day](#) was established by President Obama in 2012:

*As a grateful Nation, we honor more than 58,000 patriots—their names etched in black granite—who sacrificed all they had and all they would ever know. We draw inspiration from the heroes who suffered unspeakably as prisoners of war, yet who returned home with their heads held high. We pledge to keep faith with those who were wounded and still carry the scars of war, seen and unseen. With more than 1,600 of our service members still among the missing, we*



*pledge as a Nation to do everything in our power to bring these patriots home.*