Primary Sources on the Impact of the Vietnam War on African Americans

African Americans’ experience during the Vietnam War was somewhat distinct from that of other ethnic groups. An inordinate number of the soldiers who fought and died in Vietnam were black. Although they represented only 11 percent of the U.S. population, they made up 12 to 15 percent of the U.S. Army and an even higher percent of combat troops. In 1965, nearly one fourth of all U.S. deaths in Vietnam were of black soldiers. In addition, the Vietnam War coincided with a vigorous and increasingly angry civil rights movement in the United States. The lack of equality and democracy for African Americans at home left many wondering why they were fighting a war for South Vietnamese freedom. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of African Americans during the Vietnam War.

“There was another guy in our unit who had made it known that he was a card-carrying Ku Klux Klan member. That pissed a lot of us off, ’cause we had gotten real tight. We didn’t have racial incidents like what was happening in the rear area, ’cause we had to depend on each other. We were always in the bush.

“Well, we got out into a fire fight, and Mr. Ku Klux Klan got his little ass trapped. We were goin’ across the rice paddies, and Charlie [a member of the Viet Cong] just start shootin’. And he jumped in the rice paddy while everybody else kind of backtracked.

“So we laid down a base of fire to cover him. But he was just immobile. He froze. And a brother went out there and got him and dragged him back. Later on, he said that action had changed his perception of what black people were about.”


“You know, they decorated me [awarded me for bravery] in Vietnam. Two Bronze Stars. The whiteys did. I was wounded three times. The officers, the generals, and whoever came out to the hospital to see you. They respected you and pat you on the back. They said, ‘You brave. And you courageous. You America’s finest. America’s best.’ Back in the States the same officers that pat me on the back wouldn’t even speak to me. . . .

“The racial incidents didn’t happen in the field. Just when we went to the back. It wasn’t so much that they were against us. It was just that we felt that we were being taken advantage of, ’cause it seemed like more blacks in the field than in the rear.

“In the rear we saw a bunch of rebel [Confederate] flags. They didn’t mean nothing by the rebel flag. It was just saying we for the South. It didn’t mean that they hated blacks. But after you in the field, you took the flags very personally.”

“I am the Minister of Information of the Black Panther Party, and I am speaking to you now for the Party, but I want to put a personal note into this because I know that you niggers have your minds all messed up about Black organizations, or you wouldn’t be the flunkies [people who carry out unimportant jobs for someone] for the White organization—the U.S.A.—for whom you have picked up the gun. The Black Panther Party has picked up the gun too, but not to fight against the heroic Vietnamese people, but rather to wage a war of liberation against the very same pigs whom you are helping to run their vicious game on the entire world, including upon your own people. Dig [understand] it. I wonder, can you dig it? . . .

“The struggle of our people for freedom has progressed to the form where all of us must take a stand either for or against the freedom of our people. You are either with your people or against them. You are either part of the solution or part of the problem. . . .

“While you are over there in Vietnam, the pigs are murdering our people, oppressing them, and the jails and prisons of America are filling up with political prisoners. These political prisoners are your own Black Brothers and Sisters. . . .

“We appeal to you Brothers to come to the aid of your people. Either quit the army, now, or start destroying it from the inside. Anything else is a compromise and a form of treason against your own people. Stop killing the Vietnamese people.”

—Eldridge Cleaver, “To My Black Brothers in Vietnam,”  
The Black Panther, January 31, 1970

“When I went to Quantico [a Marine Corps Base in Virginia], my being black, they gave me the black squad, the squad with most of the blacks, especially the militant blacks. And they started hippin’ me. I mean I was against racism. I didn’t even call it racism. I called it prejudice. They hipped me to [made me aware of] terms like ‘exploitation’ and ‘oppression.’ And by becoming an illustrator, it gave you more time to think. And I was around people who thought. People who read books. I would read black history where the white guys were going off on novels or playing rock music. So then one day, I just told them I was black. I didn’t call them blanco [white], they didn’t have to call me Negro. That’s what started to get me in trouble. I became a target. Somebody to watch.

“Well, there was this riot on base, and I got busted. It started over some white guys using a bunch of profanity in front of some sisters. I was found guilty of attack on an unidentified Marine. Five months in jail, five months without pay. . . . In jail they didn’t want us to read our books, draw any pictures, or do anything intellectually stimulating or what they thought is black. They would come in my cell and harass me.”

The Vietnam War produced some of the largest mass protests in U.S. history. Led mostly by students, anti-war protests grew steadily beginning in the early 1960s. Many young Americans felt the Vietnam War draft violated their basic rights. They questioned why an 18-year-old was deemed ready to be drafted but not to vote. Some burned their draft cards or fled to Canada to avoid the draft. Others opposed the war because they believed the true motivations for U.S. involvement were economic interests or imperialism. Protesters felt the United States had no right to fight someone else’s civil war. They also viewed the use of tactics such as saturation bombing, killing civilians, and using toxic chemicals like napalm as immoral. Protesters occupied university buildings, defied the police in sit-ins, marched with signs, and sometimes rioted in the streets. During an anti-war rally at Kent State University in Ohio, four students died at the hands of National Guardsmen. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of the anti-war protesters.

“The war was an extraordinarily obvious violation of everything that I had been led to expect from the country I was a part of. I grew up in the family of a World War II veteran, watching ‘Victory at Sea’ [a documentary series on World War II] on television, and the message was quite clear that Americans fought for freedom, justice, and the rights of people everywhere to choose their own destiny. I even once wanted to go to West Point [the United States Military Academy]. But when my generation’s war showed up it turned out to be a propping up of petty dictators so they could keep a good portion of their population in servitude.”  
—draft resister David Harris, quoted in Kim Willenson,  

“That was a time, I think, that forced every potential soldier into a real dilemma of selfhood. Who am I? Am I the kind of person who does that, or am I not? I felt personally, having made a decision [to go to prison for resisting the draft] and carried it through, that I got a lot more closure if you will on the Vietnam experience than most of my contemporaries who didn’t go to Vietnam or to prison.”  
—draft resister David Harris, quoted in Kim Willenson,  

“Well, it was funny. I was there on the very first marches and we were all beatniks [members of the Beat generation], Commies [members of the Communist Party], and hippies and weirdos and whatever. And then during the period when it [the protest movement] sort of cleaned up its own act we were joined by nuns and priests and housewives. But I never had any doubts that what I was doing [protesting against the war in Vietnam] was correct.”  
—folk singer Joan Baez, quoted in Kim Willenson,  
“I didn’t believe in killing. I came from no organized religious background, but my mother is so opposed to killing she’s been a vegetarian since she was fifteen. My father died when I was seven, so I was raised in a pretty pacifist home. I didn’t have toy guns or anything. When I was about sixteen, somebody came home in a box, a very early casualty. He was a friend of the neighbors. You’re fifteen, you see all the guys who are eighteen going off, it’s a lot of pressure to spend your teenage years under.

“I decided I didn’t want to go to Vietnam while I was still in high school in San Diego, I kept getting drafted, and I kept appealing my classification as a C.O. [conscientious objector] and physically unfit from the residual effects of polio. I was called four times and each time I refused induction. In 1968 Selective Service said they were turning over my records to the FBI. In early ’69 the FBI came to the music store where I was working in La Jolla to arrest me. They gave me a few days. In the four years I was fighting the draft, all the time I was planning to go to jail. By chance, I’d read a pamphlet on how bad jail life was for C.O.’s, so I decided on Canada.”


“A vast throng of Americans, predominantly youthful and constituting the largest mass march in the nation’s capital, demonstrated peacefully in the heart of the city today, demanding a rapid withdrawal of United States troops from Vietnam . . . [and] aerial photographs would later show that the crowd had exceeded 300,000. . . .

“At dusk, after the mass demonstration had ended, a small segment of the crowd, members of radical splinter groups, moved across Constitution Avenue to the Labor and Justice Department buildings, where they burned United States flags, threw paint bombs and other missiles and were repelled by tear gas released by police.

“There were a number of arrests and minor injuries, mostly the result of the tear gas.”

—*New York Times*, November 16, 1969

“My perspective is a pacifist perspective. I don’t have any favorite wars. As a Quaker, we give up the right to take other people’s lives. So my work started before Vietnam and continues long after. When I was approached by some boat people [Vietnamese people who fled by boat] in 1979 about human rights conditions in Vietnam which were bad and terrible, it wasn’t surprising to me, because I feel as though we really fertilized the ground for more violence. The Japanese did it. The Chinese did it. The French did it. And we did it. I think we had a massive share in creating chaos. The Vietnamese people are suffering and, of course that was proven with the exodus of the boat people. Vietnam is not an open society. It’s a totalitarian state. It saddens one. On the other hand I would not retract anything I did in the sixties. We had no business being there.”

Primary Sources on the Impact of the Vietnam War on Military Personnel in Favor of the War

For many members of the U.S. military, the war in Vietnam was like the war against Germany in the 1940s. In Europe, U.S. soldiers had fought against Nazism. In Vietnam, the fight was against communist repression. As the war went on, military leaders felt continual frustration over what they saw as poor decision-making by U.S. politicians. They believed that if the military, rather than politicians, ran the war, an invasion of North Vietnam could succeed. In addition, the way the liberal media in the United States covered the war appalled many military personnel. It distressed them that news reports focused on a small number of atrocities that U.S. military personnel committed rather than on the bravery they exhibited in combat. Those who had courageously answered the government’s call to serve often felt anger or disappointment at the lack of understanding of and recognition for their efforts. They blamed the American public for not supporting U.S. troops in the field. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thought, and emotions of members of military personnel in favor of the war.

“Press and television had created an aura not of victory but of defeat, which, coupled with the vocal antiwar elements, profoundly influenced timid officials in Washington. It was like two boxers in a ring, one having the other on the ropes, close to a knock-out, when the apparent winner’s second inexplicably throws in the towel.”

—General William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 1976

“We did a fine job there. If it happened in World War II, they still would be telling stories about it. But it happened in Vietnam, so nobody knows about it. They don’t even tell recruits about it today. Marines don’t talk about Vietnam. We lost. They never talk about losing. So it’s just wiped out, all of that’s off the slate, it doesn’t count. It makes you a little bitter.”


“Being the only son in my family, I did not have to accept the orders to Vietnam. I accepted the orders because I wanted to see what the war was all about. And I thought that if we were there, then it must be right. We have to stop communism before it gets to America.”

“But I consider it an honor to have served in Vietnam. Even though . . . I think everybody’s son and daughter should have served equally. No, there was no excuse for some things that happened over there. But I’ve never regretted going into the Air Force or going to Vietnam. . . .

“The gist of it is that I’m so glad they’re finally recognizing that there were women over there. And that the women saw as much as they guys did, but in a different way. This should finally end the idea that a woman is supposed to give and give and give, and make everything nice-nice, and be an Earth Mother and console everyone all the time without receiving emotional support themselves. Because if you believe women don’t need to be replenished you’re a fool. That kind of thinking is just a bunch of garbage.”


“I think they [the Viet Cong] should be eliminated. And they would have been if we had fought the war in such a manner that we could have won the war. I mean total all-out war. Not nuclear war. We could have done it with land forces. I would have invaded Hanoi so many times, they would have thought we were walking on water. . .

“The people in Washington setting policy didn’t know what transpired over there. They were listening to certain people who didn’t really know what we were dealing with. That’s why we had all those stupid restrictions. Don’t fight across this side of the DMZ [demilitarized zone], don’t fire at women unless they fire at you, don’t fire across this area unless you smile first or unless somebody shoots at you. If they attack you and run across this area, you could not go back over there and take them out. If only we could have fought it in a way that we had been taught to fight.

“But personally speaking, to me, we made a dent, even though the South did fall. Maybe we did not stop the Communist take-over, but at least I know that I did something to say hey, you bastards, you shouldn’t do that. And personally I feel good about it. People like Jane Fonda won’t buy that, because they went over there and actually spent time with the people that were killing Americans. That’s why I feel that I shouldn’t spend $4 to see her at the box office.”

Primary Sources on the Impact of the Vietnam War on Military Personnel Opposed to the War

Members of the military have questioned no U.S. war more deeply than the Vietnam War. U.S. soldiers who went to Vietnam were concerned about the worldwide communist threat and wanted to do their part to defend Southeast Asia. But over time, many found the war increasingly disturbing. Ultimately, some concluded it was wrong. These soldiers questioned U.S. support for the corrupt South Vietnamese government and the South Vietnamese army, which fought with little passion. Indeed, those in combat discovered that many South Vietnamese opposed the U.S. war effort. Seemingly friendly women and children assisted the Viet Cong by helping kill U.S. soldiers. Moreover, U.S. military methods—napalm bombings, search-and-destroy missions, killing of civilians, and destruction of villages—proved demoralizing and ineffective. As anti-war protests intensified in the United States in 1968, many soldiers wondered why they should fight a war that much of their nation did not support. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of members of military personnel opposed to the war.

“All of a sudden, this Vietnamese came runnin’ after me, telling me not to shoot: ‘Don’t shoot. Don’t shoot.’ See, we didn’t go in the village and look. We would just shoot first. Like you didn’t go into a room to see who was in there first. You fired and go in. So in case there was somebody there, you want to kill them first. And we was just gonna run in, shoot through the walls. ’Cause it was nothin’ to shoot through the walls of a bamboo hut. . . .

“So he ran out in front of me. I mean he’s runnin’ into my line of fire. I almost killed him. But I’m thinking, what the hell is wrong? So then we went into the hut, and it was all these women and children huddled together. I was gettin’ ready to wipe them off the planet. In this one hut. I tell you, man, my knees got weak. I dropped down, and that’s when I cried. First time I cried in the ’Nam. I realized what I would have done. I almost killed all them people. . . .

“I was in Washington during the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. But I didn’t participate. I saw all these veterans runnin’ around there with all these jungle boots on, all these uniforms. I didn’t want to do that. It just gave me a bad feeling. Plus some of them were braggin’ about the war. Like it was hip. See, I don’t think the war was a good thing. And there’s no memorial to Cam Ne, to My Lai [both Vietnamese civilian villages massacred by U.S. troops]. To all those children that was napalmed and villages that were burned unnecessarily.”

“Back in the villes again. Somebody said it was an operation with a name. But it had its own name: Dangling the Bait. Drifting from village to village, every other night digging deep new fighting holes, every day patrolling through other villes, along raw ridges. Inviting an enemy attack much as a worm seeks to attract fish: mindlessly, at someone else’s urging, for someone else’s reason.”


“I spent three and a half years in Vietnam and I spent another three and a half years working on the war when I was in Washington, not counting when I was assistant secretary of state. Seven years of my life. I got shot at. I believed in the process at first. I saw it wouldn’t work. I have no quarrel with America’s objective out there. It was a valid objective.

“But the latter-day hawks [supporters of war], who win the Tet offensive every time they go to a seminar in the 1980s, by and large are people who weren’t there and have no right to criticize those of us who spent years fighting that war and trying to make it work. It’s easy to be a hawk in the 1980s and win the war at a dinner party or in a lecture. [Journalist] George Will with his pompous and arrogant attacks on people who he thinks didn’t stand up for America—where was he when a lot of us got shot at? And where were [politicians] Dick Perle and Richard Burt and Pat Buchanan and David Stockman and [writer] Norman Podhoretz—or Rambo [actor] Sylvester Stallone, for that matter? Stallone was teaching English at a school for the children of the rich in Geneva, Switzerland. Stockman was hiding out in Pat Moynihan’s garage at Harvard as a divinity student. Yet they have made it appear that the war was lost by the people who were in fact the ones who had the courage to say ‘There’s something wrong here. It isn’t working.’

“These are the guys who go around saying ‘If only we would’ve been tough we could have held on, and you guys wimped out’; that the press and the Congress lost us the war. This is the Nixon argument. And it’s utter nonsense.”


“When I came to Vietnam, I thought we were helping another country to develop a nation. About three or four months later I found out that wasn’t the case. In high school and in the papers I had been hearing about Indochina, but I couldn’t find Indochina on the map. I didn’t know anything about the country, about the people.

“We weren’t gaining any ground. We would fight for a hill all day, spend two days or two nights there, and then abandon the hill. Then maybe two, three months later, we would have to come back and retake the same piece of territory.

“I’ve talked to chaplains, talked to preachers about Vietnam. And no one could give me a satisfactory explanation of what happened overseas.

“I keep looking for the explanation. I can’t find it. I can’t find it.”

Primary Sources on the Impact of the Vietnam War on Politicians in Favor of the War

In the early 1960s, most U.S. politicians supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam. They saw such action as a means of checking the spread of communism and protecting U.S. security. They viewed Ho Chi Minh, the communist and nationalist leader of North Vietnam, as a Cold War enemy. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson asked Congress for authorization to escalate U.S. involvement. More than 500 legislators voted in favor of his request; only two opposed it. However, political support for the war waned as many began to feel it increasingly evident that the government of South Vietnam was corrupt, ruthless, and lacking the support of its people. Declining public support also limited what the U.S. government could do in Vietnam. Politicians in favor of the war argued that college students, draft dodgers, and liberal members of the media who criticized U.S. efforts in the war forced the U.S. government to compromise in its efforts to win. They argued that the United States could have won the war if it had committed itself fully to the effort. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of politicians in favor of the war.

“Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike. Burma, Thailand, India, Japan, the Philippines, and obviously Laos and Cambodia are among those whose security would be threatened if the red tide of communism overflowed into Vietnam.”

—Senator John Kennedy, speaking at a conference about Vietnam, June 1956

“You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is . . . that it will go over very quickly.”

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower, speaking about the strategic importance of Indochina at a press conference, April 1954

“The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination . . . or the United States, inevitably, must surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores.”

—Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, after visiting Saigon, May 1961
“No commander in chief could meet face to face with these soldiers without asking himself: What is it they are doing there? . . . They are there to keep aggression from succeeding. They are there to stop one nation from taking over another nation by force. They are there to help people who do not want to have an ideology pushed down their throats and imposed upon them. They are there because somewhere, and at some place, the free nations of the world must say again to the militant disciples of Asian communism: This far and no further. The time is now, and the place is Vietnam.”

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, in a broadcast to the American people, October 1966

“We should declare war on North Vietnam . . . . We could pave the whole country and put parking strips on it, and still be home by Christmas.”

—Ronald Reagan, Fresno Bee, October 10, 1965

“I did not envisage 1975 as inevitable and I don’t think historians will treat the ending [in which North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam] in ’75 as inevitable. I think they will say what the London Economist said, that we snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. The South Vietnamese defeated the North Vietnamese in 1972 with the help of U.S. air and naval power. And I think there’s a fair chance that they would have continued to be all right if they’d had the aid that was promised to them. If we hadn’t walked away, South Vietnam might very well have been another South Korea [which maintained its independence].”


“I think in both Vietnam and Korea we committed military forces without an intention to win, and indeed with a feeling that we could achieve some of our objectives simply by having some men there who would participate in limited kinds of activity, but in the case of Korea told not to win, and in the case of Vietnam clearly without the intention of applying the degree of force necessary to win. That’s a very terrible thing to do to military people—to ask them to go into extreme danger, but in effect to have a decision made that it’s not important enough for us to win.”

Primary Sources on the Impact of the Vietnam War on Politicians Opposed to the War

In the early 1960s, most U.S. politicians supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam. They saw such action as a means of checking the spread of communism and protecting U.S. security. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson asked Congress for authorization to escalate U.S. involvement. More than 500 legislators voted in favor of his request; only two opposed it. But as the war escalated, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese showed they had the capability of launching attacks on targets throughout South Vietnam and withstanding massive losses in the process. Furthermore, it became clear that the rulers of South Vietnam were corrupt. Some politicians began to question the morality of U.S. involvement in the war. They argued that the war was doing more harm than good to ordinary Vietnamese people. And they doubted that winning the war was even possible. These politicians viewed the Vietnam War as a civil war, not the start of a communist takeover of the entire region. They felt it unethical to send young Americans thousands of miles to fight in someone else’s war—especially a war that the South Vietnamese seemed unwilling to fight themselves. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of politicians opposed to the war.

“I do not intend to remain silent in the face of what I regard as a policy of madness which sooner or later will envelop American youth by the millions in a war without end. . . . Our deepening involvement in Vietnam represents the most tragic diplomatic and moral failure in our national experience. . . . We seem bent upon saving the Vietnamese from Ho Chi Minh, even if we have to kill them and demolish their country to do it.”

—Senator George McGovern, in a speech to the U.S. Senate, April 25, 1967

“Vietnam is a military problem. Vietnam is a political problem; and as the war goes on it has become more clearly a moral problem.”


“Most Americans today feel that Vietnam was a mistake. Millions of young people at the time thought it was a mistake. They had candlelight parades around the White House which you could watch from this window. Our confidence in our leaders was shaken considerably, and so the American people will demand a much clearer and more convincing presentation of the need for military action than they have before. And from that standpoint I think that the experience was a very valuable one.”

“I thought we were undertaking something where we could not succeed. I had known a good deal about the French experience in Vietnam, since I had been a legal adviser to the French government. And I had a feeling that for us to be drawn into this mire would mean extending our resources in a futile effort to try to accomplish something of which we weren’t capable. And in the process not only would we lose a lot of American lives, but we would distract our country in an endeavor which was very peripheral to American interests.

“And that’s why I told President Kennedy at the very beginning, that if we went down this road it would be a great catastrophe—that we’d have three hundred thousand men in the rice paddies and jungles of Vietnam in five years’ time. I was quite wrong. It was five hundred fifty thousand in about three years’ time.”


(Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and dealt death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation: The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” April 4, 1967

“Our charges of aggression against North Vietnam will be greeted by considerable snickering abroad. So, too, will the pious phrases about defending freedom in South Vietnam. There is no freedom in South Vietnam. . . . We are defending a clique of military generals and their merchant friends who live well in Saigon, and who need a constantly increasing American military force to protect their privileged position. . . . We have threatened war where no direct threat to American security is at stake. . . . A war in Asia should be recognized as being unthinkable. . . . We cannot justify the shedding of American blood in that kind of war in Southeast Asia.”

—Senator Wayne Morse, in a speech to the U.S. Senate, August 5, 1964
Primary Sources on the Impact of the Vietnam War on the South Vietnamese

During the war, the people of South Vietnam were caught between two powerful forces. On one side were Vietnamese Communists, called the Viet Cong, who fought passionately to achieve national independence from foreign influence and to install a communist government under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. On the other side were the U.S. military and South Vietnamese government, who wanted to stop the spread of communism in South Vietnam. With the war raging all around them, the South Vietnamese faced the difficult choice of which side to support. Meanwhile, they confronted a continuous barrage of bombs, the presence of well-armed and frustrated U.S. soldiers, an unstable and corrupt South Vietnamese government, and an economy dependent on the U.S. presence in the area. The long war resulted in heavy casualties as well as enormous misery and hardship for most of the people of South Vietnam. The primary-source documents that follow reveal some of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of the South Vietnamese.

“By the end of the Vietnam war, 7 million tons of bombs had been dropped on Vietnam, more than twice the total bombs dropped on Europe and Asia in World War II—almost one 500-pound bomb for every human being in Vietnam.”

—Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States, 1980

“As the Communists withdrew from Quangngai last Monday, United States jet bombers pounded the hills into which they were headed.

“Many Vietnamese—one estimate is as high as 500—were killed by the strikes. The American contention is that they were Viet Cong soldiers. But three out of four patients seeking treatment in a Vietnamese hospital afterward for burns from napalm, or jellied gasoline, were village women.”

—New York Times, June 6, 1965

“On March 16, 1968, a company of American soldiers went into the hamlet of My Lai 4, in Quang Ngai province. They rounded up the inhabitants, including old people and women with infants in their arms. These people were ordered into a ditch, where they were methodically shot to death by American soldiers.

“[Journalist Seymour Hersh described the response to this event:] ‘When Army investigators reached the barren area in November, 1969, in connection with the My Lai probe in the United States, they found mass graves at three sites, as well as a ditch full of bodies. It was estimated that between 450 and 500 people—most of them women, children and old men—had been slain and buried there.’

“Several officers in the My Lai massacre were put on trial, but only Lieutenant William Calley was found guilty. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but his sentence was reduced twice; he served three years . . . under house arrest . . . and then was paroled.”

—Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States, 1980
“The single most demoralizing event for us was Kissinger’s ‘peace is at hand’ remark, which was on TV and in Stars and Stripes [U.S. military newspaper] headlines. It meant the Americans were out, the whole war machinery stopping, and the tanks rolling in. As long as you didn’t have the Americans there, you didn’t have anything. Because the Vietnamese weren’t fighting, and they certainly weren’t going to fight without the weapons. Everybody said, ‘Maybe they will come back.’ Nobody thought the Americans were leaving were good. And maybe other Free World troops would come in. We were so used to having somebody there. The withdrawal was very traumatic for our society. Sixty percent of the civilian employment revolved around the Americans. People got mean then.”


“The sense of helplessness and dependency felt by so many Vietnamese was shaped in large measure by experiences that taught them they were in the grip of forces beyond their control. For the common people, the war was a dreadful random infliction that on any given day or night could disrupt their lives, destroy their homes, wound their loved ones, or kill them outright. For many Vietnamese, life became so nasty, brutish, and short that it is somehow surprising the society held together as long as it did.”


“Also on the American side there was not enough patience. It’s like what you are doing in Central America. You always want to make a democratic country. But how can you teach democracy to a people who are not politically educated, to a people who do not understand what is freedom? It always made for confused relations with the French and Americans. The French wanted to keep their colony. Why didn’t the French do what the British did with their colonies—or what the Americans did with the Philippines [support self-government]? You Americans came and told the Vietnamese that it was legal in the country to be against the policy of the government, that you can be in the opposition. The Communists used that to push the people to say and demand more. The Americans built a politically confused situation in South Vietnam.”

Brainstorming Lyrics for a Song About the Vietnam War

Use the image on Placard 21A and the information on Student Handout 21A to complete the spoke diagram below. For each of the five areas represented on the diagram, record at least three details about the impact of the war on the group you are studying. Add more ideas after examining the images on Transparencies 21B, 21C, and 21D.
With your partner, write a song about the Vietnam War from the perspective of the group you studied. Your song should be written for an audience that knows very little about how the Vietnam War affected the group you represent.

1 Use the ideas you wrote on Student Handout 21B to compose the lyrics to your song. Start by turning the words or phrases you noted on the diagram into lines of a song. For example, if you wrote “angry and confused” under the category “What I Feel,” you could turn that detail into the line, “The killing in Vietnam makes me angry and confused, so angry and confused.”

2 Write a rough draft of your song. It should be at least 15 lines in length.

3 Make sure you have included the following elements in your song:
   • an appropriate title
   • at least two phrases from Student Handout 21A
   • language that vividly captures the ways the group has been affected by the Vietnam War

4 Type or write your final draft neatly in ink.
Fighting soldiers from the sky
Fearless men who jump and die
Men who mean just what they say
The brave men of the Green Berets

Silver wings upon their chests
These are men, America’s best
One hundred men will test today
But only three win the Green Beret

Trained to live off nature’s land
Trained in combat, hand to hand
Men who fight by night and day
Courage peak from the Green Berets

Silver wings upon their chests
These are men, America’s best
One hundred men will test today
But only three win the Green Beret

Back at home, a young wife waits
Her Green Beret has met his fate
He has died for those oppressed
Leaving her his last request

Put silver wings on my son’s chest
Make him one of America’s best
He’ll be a man they’ll test one day
Have him win the Green Beret
Lyrics to “Bring ’Em Home”

If you love your Uncle Sam
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Stop the war in Vietnam
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
45,000 dead and gone
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Uncle Sam is in the wrong
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home

GIs fight, GIs die
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Some get rich while Nixon lies
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
In Chicago and Vietnam
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
They’re tryin’ to get us to be the man
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home

We wanna end the war right now
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Don’t take a genius to figure out how
Just bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Let ’em fly, let ’em float
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Pack ’em all up in a big #@! boat
Just bring ’em home, bring ’em home

Buddy, I got news for you
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
I got better things to do
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
We’re going down to Houston town
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
To turn this murderin’ system around
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home

They said it was a freedom fight
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Well, you know that’s about just half right
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
There’s just one big fallacy
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
It’s our own GIs that wanna be free
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home

Well, the generals would like us all to pray
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
But it looks like marchin’ is the only way
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
If they tell us that’s not the way
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
We’ll give ’em all one big FTA
Bring ’em home, bring ’em home
Overview

This Experiential Exercise introduces students to the nuclear arms race that took place between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Students learn about three developments in nuclear proliferation: the bombs used during World War II, the Poseidon and Trident submarines used early in the Cold War, and the combined Soviet and U.S. nuclear arsenal at the height of the Cold War. By engaging in a footrace, witnessing a demonstration representing the totality of nuclear firepower during the Cold War, and forming a human bar graph to represent the arms race, students will better understand the motives behind the nuclear arms race and the scale and effects of rapid, large-scale nuclear proliferation.

Procedures at a Glance

- Before class, acquire 6,000 popcorn kernels and a large metal container. Use the diagram at right to move desks aside to make space for students to form a human bar graph. Post dates of the arms race on the board or the wall.
- In class, have students take their seats. Tell them they will participate in a three-tiered activity to learn about the nuclear arms race that took place between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.
- First, ask two students to race heel to toe from one side of the classroom to the other, and discuss the concept of an arms race.
- Next, drop the appropriate number of popcorn kernels into the metal container to represent the firepower of bombs used in World War II, a Poseidon submarine, a Trident submarine, and the combined Soviet and U.S. nuclear arsenal in the 1980s.
- Discuss students’ reactions to the demonstration.
- Finally, have students each represent 5,000 nuclear warheads and create a human bar graph showing nuclear arms buildup from 1946 to 1988.
- Discuss students’ reactions to the human bar graph.
- Afterward, have students read Student Handout 22A.
- Project Transparency 22A and hold a class discussion connecting students’ experience to history.