

# Vietnam and Beyond: The Historic Resistance

by Mike Benbow and Robin Pickering

In the 1960s, while the United States intensified its military intervention in Vietnam, the domestic anti-war movement grew in both size and seriousness. Poor and minority citizens were among the first to recognize that the goals of the United States government in Vietnam were contrary to their own goal of social justice within United States society. Disenfranchised by literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation, many were still seeking true democracy within the United States. The alleged fight for democracy and freedom in Vietnam seemed a cruel reminder to those still fighting for voting rights and equality within their own nation that their government did not hold these priorities. Many also noted that because of college deferments and the lack of economic and educational opportunity within poor neighborhoods, poor members of United States society were disproportionately being sent to fight and die in Vietnam. Some criticized the lack of a defined goal; others criticized what they believed to be the true imperialist goal of the United States government to control Vietnam's rich natural resources and to maintain a secure and stable chain of military bases in East Asia to both protect United States interests and isolate Communist China.

Almost unanimously, protesters decried the damage and horror wrought upon the Vietnamese people and landscape. Though each individual had different reasons and goals for protesting the war in Vietnam, the resistance movement steadily gained power and unity and was influential in bringing United States intervention in Vietnam to an end. The documents in this chapter are necessary supplements to our classroom discussions about Vietnam. They illustrate poignant arguments against fighting the war in Vietnam, provide examples of different forms of resistance, and bring a balanced perspective to the overall discussion of the war. While examining these documents, students can debate what it means to be an active and responsible citizen in a democracy, as well as the efficacy of United States military and political actions in Vietnam.

## Document-Based Questions

### MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY

1. Why might African Americans not be eager to fight in the Vietnam War?
2. With which of the five reasons presented in this document do you most agree? Why?
3. What was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party? What were its goals?

### MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

1. For what reasons did Dr. Martin Luther King oppose the Vietnam War?
2. What did Dr. King mean when he said, “We must rapidly begin . . . the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society”? Why did he feel that such a shift was so crucial to the success and progress of the United States?
3. Explain the sentence “A time comes when silence is betrayal” and what it means in the context of Dr. King’s speech.

### STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE

1. For what reasons did the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) oppose the war in Vietnam? Which reason, if any, did you find most convincing or relevant? Why?
2. What was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee? What was its role in both the civil-rights movement and the antiwar movement?
3. If you had been alive during the antiwar movement, might you have been tempted to join SNCC? Explain.

### BOB DYLAN

1. What lyrics did you find most effective? Why?
2. What role did music play in the Vietnam War—both for the soldiers and those involved in the antiwar movement? What songs were especially influential?

3. Who are the “Masters of War” in this song? What is the significance of that title?

### **MUHAMMAD ALI**

1. Why did Muhammad Ali refuse to participate in the Vietnam War? For what reasons did Ali say he would willingly enter war?
2. Was it fair and just that he lost his boxing title?
3. Would you go to war if you were drafted by the United States military? Would the nature and cause of the war influence your decision? Why, or why not?

### **JONATHAN SCHELL**

1. How did the people of Ben Suc feel about being moved into the camps?
2. Why do you think they were placed in the camp? Was this a just or unjust action by the United States?
3. What was the purpose of demolition teams? Were they necessary to the war effort?

### **LARRY COLBURN**

1. What happened in the small village of My Lai? What reason did Larry Colburn give for the actions of the soldiers responsible for the massacre? Does it justify their actions? Why, or why not?
2. What would you do if you were in Colburn’s situation? Explain.
3. Should military personnel follow all orders? Or should individuals be able to determine which orders to follow? What kind of military would we have if soldiers didn’t follow all orders? What legal precedents have been established regarding the issue of “following orders” as a defense against war crimes?

**HAYWOOD T. “THE KID” KIRKLAND**

1. Why might the military try to dehumanize the enemy?
2. What would be the hardest thing about coming home from Vietnam for Kirkland? Why?
3. Do you think other veterans felt the same way that Haywood did? Why, or why not?

**LOUNG UNG**

1. According to this document, what was it like to live under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia?
2. Can you think of any past or contemporary governments with similar policies and ideologies to the Khmer Rouge?
3. Which groups and/or individuals “disappeared”? Why? Explain the statement, “Disappearance mixed hope with horror. It was psychologically unbearable.”

**TIM O'BRIEN**

1. What do you believe Tim O'Brien was trying to convey with this piece? How did it make you feel?
2. O'Brien repeats many of the same phrases and images throughout this piece. Why? Is the device effective?
3. Who did Tim kill? How was Tim affected by killing him? What do you think would be the hardest part about killing another human being?

**MARIA HERRERA-SOBEK**

1. Compare the two poems. What do they have in common? How are they different? What lines were most effective? How and why?
2. Maria Herrera-Sobek uses color in her imagery in the poem “Untitled.” Why?
3. Who/what do these poems criticize? Who/what do these poems praise?

4. Are these poems hopeful or cynical? Why?

### DANIEL ELLSBERG

1. For what reasons did Daniel Ellsberg leak the Pentagon Papers? Do you agree with Ellsberg's decision to make secret documents public? Why, or why not?
2. Under what circumstances should a government official leak information to the public?
3. What information in the Pentagon Papers would the government not want the American public to know about and why?

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 18, "Vietnam and Beyond: The Historic Resistance"

After reading Chapter 18 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points:

1. The war in Vietnam was wrong for several reasons: it was fought for imperialist purposes, it ravaged the civilians and landscape of Vietnam, funds were diverted to military ventures rather than support programs for the poor, and American soldiers were sent to fight and die in a war that had no moral justification.
2. The people of the United States had a responsibility to curb the actions of their government in Vietnam.
3. Because United States policymakers understood neither the Vietnamese struggle nor the mood of Americans at home, their actions eventually alienated the civilian population and encouraged antiwar resistance.
4. Many African Americans and other disenfranchised people did not want to fight a war to allegedly promote freedom in Vietnam when it still eluded them at home.
5. Racial conflict, so prevalent within American society, permeated the military as well.

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 18, “Vietnam and Beyond: The Historic Resistance,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 18, “The Impossible Victory: Vietnam”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 18 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. The United States, like the colonial powers before it, wished to control the valuable natural resources of Vietnam, such as rice, tin, rubber, and oil.
7. The success of the National Liberation Front (NLF) was due to the fact that it brought significant and much-needed social change; the Viet Cong recognized and understood the needs of the peasantry and provided land and improvements in daily life.
8. Civil-rights leaders recognized and illustrated the connection between the war in Vietnam and the “war” on workers and the poor in United States society.
9. Opposition and resistance to the Vietnam War was so widespread throughout United States society that it eventually became an influential factor in ending the war.
10. The greatest technological and military power in the world was defeated by a third-world nation of well-organized and passionate peasants.

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 18, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. How do these voices illustrate the ways the Vietnam War affected poor Americans?
2. How have journalists changed the nature of war? How does journalism coverage of Vietnam compare with the journalistic coverage of the War in Iraq?

3. Some people have argued that racism played a big role in the Vietnam War. Do you believe racism was a key element in the Vietnam War? Why, or why not?
4. How would you compare and contrast the documents of Schell, Ung, and Colburn? How do you think their experiences compare and contrast with those of an ordinary Vietnamese citizen during the war?
5. The issue of responsibility for the actions of one's government as well as one-self is raised within these selections. Who is responsible for the actions of the United States government? For the actions of individual soldiers? For bringing war to an end?
6. Which groups and individuals are represented in these voices? Which groups or individuals are missing from this selection?
7. The current war in Iraq has been a divisive issue within the United States. Which arguments in *Voices* could also be used to protest the war in Iraq? Have those arguments been successful? (What is "successful"?)
8. The selections in Chapter 18 cover a variety of media—songs, poetry, fictional and non-fictional literature, essays, speeches, and so forth. How is the basic message of each entry enforced or shaped by the medium through which it is expressed? Do you feel that one medium was more powerful than the others during this time period? How and why? Which of these media do you believe is used most commonly by resistance movements today? Why?
9. What is the responsibility of the news media during times of war? Is the contemporary news media fulfilling that responsibility?
10. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in "Main Points in *Voices*"?
11. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? Why?

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 18 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on how

the materials in both chapters helped students formulate and articulate their answers.

12. In looking at Chapter 18 in both *Voices* and *A People's History*, what United States actions alienated the civilian population of Vietnam?
13. What was the aim of the Vietminh in Vietnam? What was the aim of the United States?
14. How were United States soldiers affected by their experiences in the Vietnam War? What actions did they take to bring it to an end?
15. In *A People's History*, Howard Zinn discusses the many different elements in United States society that opposed the war. Which of these elements are reflected in *Voices*? Which are not represented?
16. Zinn argues that the anti-war movement in the United States was instrumental in bringing the Vietnam War to an end. Do you agree? Why, or why not?
17. Senator Ted Kennedy and others have called the invasion of Iraq "another Vietnam." Why? What similarities and differences do you see in the two conflicts? Do you agree or disagree with the comparison? Explain.
18. What evidence do you find in both *Voices* and *A People's History* that soldiers, leaders, and the United States public were encouraged to dehumanize the Vietnamese population? Do you believe this was necessary? What is the outcome of dehumanization? Do you feel dehumanization is still a large part of contemporary warfare? Explain.
19. What was the United States strategy in Vietnam? What were the strengths and weaknesses of this strategy? Why was it ultimately unsuccessful?
20. Why is Chapter 18 in *A People's History*, entitled "'The Impossible Victory'"? Why was victory impossible? For whom?
21. How would you describe the FBI's treatment of the antiwar protesters? Do you think such treatment was justified? Explain. How does the federal government respond to antiwar protesters in the early twenty-first century? Are there any comparisons between the two responses?
22. What is guerrilla warfare? What other examples of guerrilla warfare are evident in United States history?



23. What specific actions did the NLF and Vietminh take to gain support of the Vietnamese civilian population?

## Evaluation Tools

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Interview someone who experienced the Vietnam War—a soldier, a protester, a supporter, and the like—and write a paper that describes what you learned and share it with the class.
2. Locate a primary voice of resistance not included in Chapter 18 of *Voices* that would be beneficial to further your understanding of the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement. What new information does this voice provide? How does it build on the other voices in the chapter? What does it contribute to your overall understanding of the Vietnam War?
3. Research the role of the news media in Vietnam. Compare news coverage of the war in Vietnam to that of the current war in Iraq. What words, phrases, scenarios are similar and different?
4. Find five images of the Vietnam War that you feel illustrate the struggle and write a paper that explains why you chose those specific images.
5. Research and write an essay about the Vietminh and the National Liberation Front—their strategy, goals, methods by which they gained the support of Vietnamese civilians, leaders, experience, and so on.
6. Read *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. Then answer the following questions: What more did you learn from reading the entire book versus reading the singular passage in *Voices*? While the book is considered a work of fiction, what do you believe is fictional about this story and what is nonfiction? Does its truth or fiction affect the power of O'Brien's message? How does this book change your understanding of the Vietnam War?

7. Research and write a biography on a specific personality that influenced the Vietnam War—Ho Chi Minh, Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Diem, Robert McNamara, and the like.
8. The War in Vietnam has had a lasting effect on United States society, and especially on the nation of Vietnam. Research the conditions that exist in Vietnam today and the effects of the war.
9. Research the history of draft resistance within the United States through the present day.
10. What was the Khmer Rouge? How did United States involvement in Vietnam influence its rise to power? What could be done to stop the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror? What would happen to people who might speak out against it? What is the responsibility of the international community in protecting citizens from their own governments?
11. There are many different views regarding Ho Chi Minh. Compare and contrast the ways this significant figure is represented in three different sources.
12. Watch the movie *Fog of War*. Who was Robert McNamara, and what role did he play in the Vietnam War? Why do you think McNamara agreed to be interviewed for this film? What new information did McNamara bring to light in this movie as well as in his 1995 book *In Retrospect*? What do you think he meant by the title of his book?

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Take a position for or against the Vietnam War, using strong evidence from your reading to support your position.
2. What is the domino theory? How did it influence United States involvement in Vietnam?
3. Explain the events leading up to United States intervention in Vietnam and how those events influenced the struggle between the Vietnamese and United States military.
4. What different groups made up the antiwar movement? What different grievances did they have regarding United States policy in Vietnam?

5. Discuss the controversy of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Do you feel that it is an appropriate and effective memorial? Why, or why not?
6. How did journalists affect the outcome of the Vietnam War? What is the responsibility of the news media during times of war? Are the contemporary news media fulfilling that responsibility?
7. Discuss at least three mistakes the United States government made in Vietnam that resulted in defeat.
8. Thousands of Americans fled the country to avoid being drafted. Do citizens have the right and/or responsibility to break a law that they believe is unjust? Why, or why not?
9. Howard Zinn refers to “the gap between the internal government discussion about Vietnam and the reality that was well understood by those in Washington” (*Voices*, p. 450). What does this mean? Using evidence from *Voices* and *A People's History*, discuss this “gap.”
10. Ellsberg states, “I was not wrong, either, to hope that exposing secrets five presidents had withheld and the lies they told might have benefits for our democracy that were worthy of the risks.” Do you agree or disagree? What other individuals have taken similar actions? Why?
11. Is the selective-service system, or draft, necessary for the safety of a nation during times of war?
12. Define patriotism. Are the voices of resistance included in this chapter those of patriots?

### **SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES**

1. Write a story from the point of view of a United States soldier in Vietnam that addresses the soldier's goals and experience. Write a story from the point of view of a Vietnamese civilian or NLF guerrilla that does the same.
2. Create a political cartoon that clearly illustrates one of the arguments for or against the war in Vietnam.
3. Assign different roles to students and conduct a debate regarding the Vietnam War and other social issues of the 1960s. (Which characters should be represented could be an interesting class discussion.)

4. Compose a song or poem that expresses an emotion associated with the Vietnam War.
5. Stage a debate on the following topic: There are strong parallels between United States intervention in Vietnam and intervention in Iraq.