

Handout
The Vietnam War

Supplemental piece to Vietnam Letters and Naked In Da Nang

Who cares about Vietnam?

For a student today, the Vietnam War is ancient history. It is almost as remote as World War I was for the soldiers who fought in Vietnam. With everything happening in the world today, it is hard to believe that anyone could still care about what happened almost 40 years ago. But what happened 40 years ago changed America dramatically – and shaped the way we function as a society, the way we treat our soldiers, the way young people and adults talk to each other, and the way America's politicians interact with the military and vice versa. Some of those changes were good. Some weren't so good.

You have watched the DVD “*Vietnam: A Nation Remembers*.” It gave you an overview of the geo-political forces that shaped the Vietnam conflict. It also touched on those who were caught in the middle...America's soldiers. The DVD was written for the first national Operation Welcome Home celebration, which took place in Las Vegas in November 2005. The DVD has two purposes: to briefly tell the history of the Vietnam conflict – and to urge people to honor the men and women who served in Southeast Asia. The DVD was written by the same two people who wrote *Naked In Da Nang*.

The Vietnam War may be one of the most over-analyzed conflicts in history. You can read about it from every perspective. You can watch movies that glorify the conflict or demonize our soldiers or spotlight the horrors of war...and even a few that paint a balanced picture of the GIs, the politics, and the impact.

You are about to read two books that will help you understand *not* the politics of the war, but its impact on average people very much like you. The two young men whose experiences are chronicled in *Naked In Da Nang* and *Vietnam Letters* were not “GI Joes.” They did not relish the idea of leaving their families and traveling to a hostile country. They certainly did not have any desire to kill or be killed. Both of the young men in these two books volunteered to serve America; one as an officer in the Air Force, one as an enlisted man in the Army. Both had and have mixed emotions about the war and about the way their government initiated, fought and ended it. Both men are proud of their service but troubled by the American response to those who came home from that distant place.

Like ALL the young men and women who went to Vietnam – and like you, yourself – Allen Paul and Mike Jackson had hopes and dreams and plans. For 58,000 young Americans, those hopes, dreams and plans ended in a country called Vietnam. For Paul and Jackson, their experiences would influence the rest of their lives and lead them into careers that ultimately allowed them to put the lessons they learned in Vietnam to good use – Allen Paul as a State Senator and Mike Jackson as an Air Force officer and, later, a veteran's advocate.

The stories you are about to read can help you understand why people serve in the military, what it is like to serve in combat, and how the world may change but the emotions, concerns, dreams and fears of young people have many similarities from era to era.

As you read these two books, think about how YOU would feel in the situations outlined by the authors. What emotions are they conveying? How would YOU react in a similar situation? Why do you think the authors published these books? Do you know anyone who is currently serving in the military? Do the stories you are reading relate in any way to their experiences in the 'here and now'?

Before you begin reading, you should know some of the background of the Vietnam War. Someday you may be in a position where you will be called on to make a decision about your life or the lives of others with regard to conflict resolution. Someday you may be a leader who must decide how to respond to tough situations where your reaction may have life or death consequences. The more you know about yesterday's wars and the individuals shaped by them, the better equipped you will be to prevent future wars.

Vietnam and America

The Vietnam War was the longest war in American history and the most unpopular American war of the 20th century. **It resulted in the loss of over 58,000 American lives.** It was the first war to come into American living rooms on the evening news, and the only conflict that resulted in what is arguably considered defeat for America. The war caused turmoil on the home front, as anti-war protests became a feature of American life. Americans appeared to be divided into two camps--pro-war hawks and anti-war doves. In reality, there were precious few, if any, "pro war" individuals. The least "pro war" of all were the GIs themselves. After all, they were the people who were sent overseas to fight...and sometimes die on behalf of the war effort. Although they were accused of being everything from "baby killers" to fascists, they were, in reality, simply doing the work they were paid to do by the government that made the ultimate decisions on where they went, who they fought and when they came home. Still, the GIs became the most visible symbol of the conflict...and one of its most enduring casualties.

The questions raised by the Vietnam War have not faded with time. Even today, many Americans still ask: Was the American effort in Vietnam a mistake, a badly executed blunder, a necessary war; or was it a noble cause, or an idealistic effort to forestall the spread of Communism and protect South Vietnam from a totalitarian regime?

Did our military leaders underestimate the resolve and resiliency of the North Vietnamese? Did our politicians tie the hands of the military by second guessing every action and by refusing to press for unconditional surrender? Was America's role in Vietnam that of an interloper in a civil war – or a free nation helping another free nation defend against an invading force?

And what did America learn from the Vietnam experience? Are we applying those lessons to our modern conflicts...or just repeating the same old mistakes?

Before the Americans

Most wars start because someone has land, and someone else wants it. After World War II, France and England wanted to protect their colonial empires. England was anxious to control Burma, Malaya, and India. France wanted to rule the region then known as Indochina (now known as Vietnam).

Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had been a French colony since the late 19th century. During World War II, however, Japan had occupied French Indochina. After Japan's defeat, France tried to re-establish control, but met opposition from the Viet Minh, Vietnamese Nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh.

Under Franklin Roosevelt, the United States sought to bring an end to European colonialism. But President Harry Truman (Roosevelt's VP, who took office after FDR's death in 1945), was concerned about America's naval and air bases in Asia. The U.S. allowed France to return to Indochina to re-assert its authority in Southeast Asia. The result: the French Indochina War.

From the beginning, American intelligence officers knew that France would have a tough time reclaiming Indochina. The French refused to listen to American intelligence. To them, the idea of primitive Asian rebels standing up to a technologically advanced Western nation was preposterous.

Although Truman allowed the French to return to Indochina, he was not yet ready to give the French arms, transportation, and economic assistance. It was not until the Communist threat became an issue that the United States would take an active role supporting the French. The fall of China, the Korean War, and the impact of a Communist agenda in the United States would lead policymakers to see the French War in Vietnam not as a colonial war, but as a war against international communism.

Beginning in 1950, the United States started to underwrite the French war effort. For four years, the United States provided \$2 billion. The French command, frustrated by a hit-and-run guerrilla war, devised a trap. The idea was to use a French garrison as bait, have the enemy surround it, and mass their forces. Then, the French would strike and crush the enemy and gain a major political and psychological victory.

The French built their positions in a valley and left the high ground to their adversaries. An American asked what would happen if the enemy had artillery. A French officer assured him that they had no artillery, and even if they did, they would not know how to use it. Yet, as the journalist David Halberstam noted, "They *did* have artillery and they *did* know how to use it."

The Beginning

On May 7, 1954, a ragtag army of 50,000 Vietnamese Communists defeated the remnants of an elite French force at a network of bases at Dienbienphu in northwestern Vietnam. The French, fighting to restore their Indochinese empire, planned to strike at their adversaries from a network of eight bases (surrounded by barbed wire and minefields) that they had built at Dienbienphu. The Viet Minh bombarded these bases with artillery from the surrounding hillsides. Heavy rains made it impossible to bomb the Vietnamese installations or to supply the garrisons. The French, trapped, were reduced to eating rats and pleading for American air support. Despite support from Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower was not willing to commit American air support without support from Britain, Congress, and the chiefs of staff.

Despite American financial support, amounting to about three-quarters of France's war costs,

250,000 veteran French troops were unable to crush the Viet Minh. Altogether, France had 100,000 men dead, wounded, or missing trying to re-establish its colonial empire. In 1954, after French forces were defeated at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, a peace conference was held in Geneva Switzerland. At the conference, the French and the Vietnamese agreed to divide Vietnam temporarily into a non-Communist South and a Communist North, pending reunification following elections scheduled for 1956.

Those elections never took place. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, with U.S. backing, refused to participate in the elections for fear of an overwhelming victory by Ho Chi Minh.

In 1955, the first U.S. military advisers arrived in Vietnam. President Dwight D. Eisenhower justified this decision on the basis of the domino theory--that if South Vietnam fell to Communism, other allies in the region would do likewise. "You have a row of dominoes set up," he said, "you knock the first one, and others will fall." President Eisenhower felt that with U.S. help, South Vietnam could maintain its independence.

In 1957, North Vietnamese guerilla fighters known as the Viet Cong began attacks on the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1959, Hanoi approved armed struggle against Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in Saigon.

America Jumps In

John F. Kennedy arrived in the White House by a far slimmer margin of victory than he had hoped, narrowly defeating Richard Nixon by a mere 100,000 votes. Kennedy came into office planning to increase defense spending and upgrading and modernizing America's military. Kennedy was committed to finding an alternative to nuclear weapons. His answer was counterinsurgency. He wanted to use air power and special forces, such as the Green Berets, to fight guerrilla wars.

Kennedy's foreign policy was based on two major premises. The first was a belief in "monolithic communism"--the idea that all communist movements were orchestrated from Moscow. The second was the domino theory--that should a single strategic country turn communist, surrounding countries were sure to follow.

Remember that, in the early 1960s, one third of the world was communist and another third was non-aligned. The differences between Communism and Capitalism were dramatic and clearly defined. Americans were fearful of an ideology that was the complete opposite of the United States' focus on less government, individual rights and responsibilities, and an economy that functioned based on the will of the people.

In Cuba, Kennedy faced a test run for Vietnam. Kennedy and the American CIA completely misread the Cuban people. They were convinced that there was serious anti-Castro sentiment on the island and that an invasion sponsored by the United States would rally the average Cuban to revolt. The Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 was no surprise to the Cubans, who had been alerted by pro-Castro forces who had infiltrated the resistance movements and by Soviet operatives. The invasion force, made up mostly of Cuban exiles who had been

trained in the United States was easily repelled by Castro and company. Because the operation was covert, the U.S. did not supply the back-up needed and most of the invaders felt that they were abandoned by the U.S. in their hour of need. The Kennedy administration was deeply embarrassed by the failure of the invasion...and the "cold war" between Communism and Capitalism grew darker and chillier.

It was during Kennedy's presidency that the United States made a fateful new commitment to Vietnam. The administration sent in 18,000 advisors. It authorized the use of napalm (jellied gasoline), defoliants, free fire zones, and jet planes.

The government's efforts, however, weren't working. By July 1963, Washington faced a major crisis in Vietnam. Buddhist priests had begun to set themselves on fire to protest corruption in the South Vietnamese government. The American response was to help engineer the overthrow of the South Vietnamese president. In 1963, South Vietnamese generals overthrew the Diem government and murdered President Diem. President Kennedy sanctioned Diem's overthrow, partly out of fear that Diem might strike a deal to create a neutralist coalition government including Communists, as had occurred in Laos in 1962. Dean Rusk, Kennedy's secretary of state, remarked, "This kind of neutralism...is tantamount to surrender."

Following Kennedy's assassination in November of 1963, President Lyndon Johnson was reluctant to commit the United States to fight in South Vietnam. "I just don't think it's worth fighting for," he told McGeorge Bundy, his national security adviser. The president feared looking like a weakling, and he was convinced that his dream of a Great Society would be destroyed if he backed down on the communist challenge in Asia. Each step in deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam made it harder to change directions.

President Johnson campaigned in the 1964 election with the promise not to escalate the war. Indeed, Johnson's campaign painted opponent Barry Goldwater as a pro-war hawk who would lead America to the brink of nuclear annihilation. "We are not about to send American boys...to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves," Johnson promised. But following reports that the North Vietnamese had attacked an American destroyer off the Vietnamese coast, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, giving Johnson power to "take all necessary measures."

In February 1965, Viet Cong units operating independently attacked a South Vietnamese garrison near Pleiku, killing eight Americans. Convinced that the communists were escalating the war, Johnson began the bombing campaign against North Vietnam that would last for 2 ½ years. He also sent the first U.S. ground combat troops to Vietnam.

Johnson justified the use of ground forces by stating that it would be brief, just six months. But the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were able to match our troop build-up and neutralize the American soldiers. In North Vietnam, 200,000 young men came of draft age each year. It was very easy for our enemy to replenish its manpower. By April 1967, we had a force of 470,000 men in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh wisely understood that he had the sheer manpower and resolve to outlast American troops and technology. He also understood that America would lose patience with an endless war. Vietnam had known little else and was infinitely patient. "You can kill ten of our men for every one we kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and we will win," he said.

Can't Bomb An Outhouse...

One of the issues that plagued the American military during the Johnson administration was the President's refusal to allow the military to do its job. Instead, Johnson insisted on approving all bombing targets and overseeing all aspects of the conflict from the oval office. He once bragged that the Air Force "can't bomb an outhouse without my permission."

In fact, bombing targets were so carefully regulated that GIs who discovered potential weapons caches or enemy strongholds could not deviate from the planned target...even if the planned target was simply a thicket of trees filled with nothing more sinister than "communist monkeys."

In 1968 the situation took a turn for the worse for the United States. In the past, the North Vietnamese had fought in dense jungles. During the Tet Offensive of early 1968, however, they fought in the cities.

The offensive took place during the Vietnamese holiday known as "Tet" – and during what had been agreed to by both sides as a "three day cease fire." America's adherence to following strict "rules of engagement" was tested by an enemy who felt that one of the "rules of war" was that there were no rules!

Communist guerrillas and North Vietnamese army regulars blew up a Saigon radio station and attacked the American Embassy, the presidential palace, police stations, and army barracks. Tet, in which more than 100 cities and villages in the South were overrun, convinced many policymakers that the cost of winning the war, if it could be won at all, was out of proportion to U.S. national interests in Vietnam. The former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who had assured Johnson in 1965 that he was "entirely right" on Vietnam, now stated, "I do not think we can do what we wish to do in Vietnam." Two months after the Tet Offensive, Johnson halted American bombing in most of North Vietnam and called for negotiations.

As a result of the Tet Offensive, Lyndon Johnson's political career was destroyed. Senator Eugene McCarthy, who picked up more than 40 percent of the vote, challenged Johnson in the Democratic presidential primary. Johnson knew he was beaten and withdrew from the race. Johnson was not invited to attend either the 1968 or 1972 Democratic presidential conventions.

The Tet offensive had an enormous psychological impact on Americans at home, convincing many Americans that further pursuit of the war was fruitless. A Gallup Poll reported that 50 percent of those surveyed disapproved of President Johnson's handling of the war, while only 35 percent approved. 1968 would prove to be one of the most tumultuous years in American history, as students escalated their protests of the war, and assassin's bullets felled both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Many Americans wondered if we would soon find ourselves in the midst of our own civil war!

When the Tet offensive ended in late February, after the last communist units were expelled from Vietnam's ancient imperial city of Hue, an estimated 33,249 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had been killed, along with 3,470 South Vietnamese and Americans. It was an eerily accurate reflection of Ho Chi Minh's promise that even if America only lost one man for every ten North Vietnamese, the Communists would still prevail.

In the 1968 election, Republican Richard Nixon claimed to have a plan to end the war in Vietnam, but it still took him five years to disengage the United States from Vietnam. Indeed, Richard Nixon presided over as many years of war in Indochina as did Johnson. About a third of the Americans who died in combat were killed during the Nixon presidency.

Nixon's approach to "peace with honor," involved reducing American casualties by having South Vietnamese soldiers take over more of the fighting--a process he called "Vietnamization"-- and defusing anti-war protests by ending the military draft. Nixon provided the South Vietnamese army with new training and improved weapons and tried to frighten the North Vietnamese to the peace table by demonstrating his willingness to bomb urban areas and mine harbors. He also hoped to orchestrate Soviet and Chinese pressure on North Vietnam.

Following his election, President Nixon began to withdraw American troops from Vietnam in June 1969 and replaced the military draft with a lottery in December of that year. In December 1972, the United States began large-scale bombing of North Vietnam after peace talks reached an impasse. The so-called Christmas bombings led Congressional Democrats to call for an end of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

In late January 1973, the United States, South Vietnam, the Viet Cong, and North Vietnam signed a cease-fire agreement, under which the United States agreed to withdraw from South Vietnam without any comparable commitment from North Vietnam. Historians still do not agree whether President Nixon believed that the accords gave South Vietnam a real chance to survive as an independent nation, or whether he viewed the agreement as a face-saving device that gave the United States a way to withdraw from the war "with honor."

The United States won every battle it fought against the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, inflicting terrible casualties on them. Yet, it ultimately lost the war because the public no longer believed that the conflict was worth the cost.

The Fall of Saigon

In the fall of 1974, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam abruptly ordered his commanders to pull out of the central highlands and northern coast. His intention was to consolidate his forces in a more defensible territory. However, the order was given so hastily, with so little preparation or planning, that the retreat turned into an uncontrollable panic. Consequently, North Vietnamese forces were able to advance against little resistance. On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese soldiers captured Saigon, bringing the Vietnam War to an end.

Conclusion

The Vietnam conflict tore America apart. It pitted one generation against another and young people in uniform against young people wearing tie-dyed t-shirts and carrying protest signs. It shaped American politics and policies for decades after the end of the war. And, in fact, it continues to influence America even today. The 2004 Presidential campaign featured a Democrat Vietnam Veteran candidate. The 2008 campaign featured a Republican Vietnam

Veteran. The mistakes and lessons of Vietnam continue to loom large in the American consciousness.

From the time that Eisenhower committed the first advisors in 1955 until the Fall of Saigon in 1975, America spent 20 years anxiously watching events unfold in Southeast Asia. Children who were in third grade when the word "Vietnam" crept into the American lexicon would be 30 years old before the conflict finally came to a less than satisfying conclusion. As you read the books by Allen Paul and Mike Jackson, think about how the Vietnam conflict hung over their heads for years. Do you have a similar feeling about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Or is it different because there is no draft today? Consider these things as you read the two books. Place yourself in the author's position and imagine how world events might impact your life no matter how far removed they may seem at the time.