

Researching the Viet Nam War Inside Viet Nam: U.S. Student Teachers Explore War Myths

Robert E. Vadas

“There is no other country in the world where there is such a large gap between the sophisticated understanding of some professional historians and the basic education given by teachers.”—Marc Ferro¹

It is time for social studies teachers to engage students in a review of the rift between historical reality and mythology about Viet Nam, especially in light of recent comparisons that many have made between the Viet Nam War and the current situation in Iraq. Few teachers dealt with Viet Nam at the time of the war, and those who did had limited resources. Frances Fitzgerald reported that the few texts even mentioning Viet Nam “floundered” in their discussions of the war with omissions or inaccurate reports.² James Loewen seconded that interpretation, adding that public school texts try to avoid controversy and ignore key Vietnamese geographical, historical and cultural issues when they cover the war.³ The reasons for this have been identified as: the war’s controversial nature; the lack of credible information in textbooks and other resources;⁴ a lack of class time; and administrations opting to keep controversy out of classrooms.⁵

Though the war has slowly been integrated into school curricula, objective and comprehensive resources are still limited and continue to neglect key issues and lessons of the war.⁶ Results of pre-tests taken by my social studies

pre-service student teachers confirm this. Most have never heard of My Lai and fewer than six percent can accurately relate basic facts of the incident. Students cannot state when the war started, or who was involved, and they are unaware of key cultural, historical, or political facts about Viet Nam. They are vaguely aware that the United States lost in Viet Nam, but do not know why. They keep their hands down in solemn unity when asked how many were given a thorough review of Viet Nam in their high schools (see Table 1). Yet these same students can engage in critical review of the Holocaust, the Great Depression, or whether Truman should have dropped the A-Bomb on Japan. Why is there such a vacuum of knowledge about an era that

is significantly closer chronologically to the present than World War II or the Civil War? The answer is that Americans remain unable to resolve painful controversies while schools neglect the cultural and historical dimensions of an event like the Viet Nam War. Resistance on a national scale to including multicultural perceptions and methodologies in school curricula represent a continuation of long-standing ethnocentric and xenophobic pressures on public schools.

The Viet Nam Travel Program: Exploring War Myths

“The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.”

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Table 1: Students’ Identification of the Depth of Their High School Viet Nam War Coverage

In your High School, the Viet Nam War was covered:	No.	%
a. Extensively and thoroughly	8	5%
b. In a pretty thorough way	6	10%
c. We went over it, but only briefly	48	30%
d. We barely covered it, or not at all	88	55%

Total No.= 150 (surveys taken 2002–2007)



Farmers tend to their rice outside of Song My village in My Lai hamlet, Viet Nam, in 2004. (Courtesy of R. Vadas)

To expose students to the historical and cultural realities of a war that has defied understanding, I developed a travel program to Viet Nam, believing that it would bring to life concepts taught in history and social studies methods courses. If students better understand the process of mythmaking, they can then transfer this conceptual process to other significant events.

“The Viet Nam Travel Program” has been in operation since 1999 to the present time. The program requires students to take seminars prior to leaving. Students are matched with Vietnamese professors to assist in understanding the many cultural and logistical realities and to direct students toward resources for their research. The students stay in Ho Chi Minh City in homes of Vietnamese hosts while spending their first week traveling to various sites accompanied by Vietnamese professors and students. Included are the tunnels at Cu Chi, Mekong waterways near My Tho and Ben Tre, and Tay Ninh with its exotic Cao Dai Temple as well as the mystically beautiful Buddhist pagoda atop a jungle-covered mountainside of Nui Ba Den. The culmination is a 12-day trip

that initially winds through the Central Highlands where many of Viet Nam’s 54 ethnic groups live. After visiting the Cat Tien forest preserve, students hike battlefields and Ho Chi Minh trail remnants along the Laos and Kampuchean borders near Dak To. The students then go off on an amazing 10-hour trip across the tops of the fog and mist covered mountains to the coast. Twisting slowly on narrow roads alongside ox-carts and water buffalo, through dense jungles and lands devastated by defoliation, students visit coffee, rubber, and cashew plantations that have sprouted on lands cleared by Agent Orange.

An emotional part of the trip arrives when students set foot on the deceptively peaceful paths of My Lai hamlet. A profound understanding of deep cultural differences develops when expectations of meeting with hostility are instead met with warm and tearful hospitality from survivors of the infamous My Lai massacre. Students are generally reflective and openly confused as they walk the dirt paths dissecting rice fields and village dwellings. Numerous monuments to the 504 slain villagers from that frightful day in 1968 dot the otherwise peaceful scene

and greet students with grim reminders of unimaginable horror. “I would hate anyone forever who did this to my family...” say several dazed students who wonder how these villagers could be so friendly to Americans. This is, for many of them, their first experience with Buddhism and the concept of unconditional forgiveness. A swirling mix of emotions ... guilt, sorrow, horror, sympathy, and respect race through students as they are greeted with warm smiles from survivors of the massacre.

The students discuss various subjects with diverse groups of people including war veterans, survivors of the infamous “Tiger Cages,” ARVN veterans, “reeducation” center survivors, students, teachers, and workers. Few classrooms can give a social studies student teacher a more profound life-impacting experience than sitting cross-legged with a one-armed survivor of seven years of war in the tunnels of Cu Chi sipping tea or snake wine while uttering numerous ceremonial shouts of “Yo!”

Students visualize the war as they walk along cratered paddies and remnants of forests targeted by B-52 raids, talk to teary-eyed grandmothers who lost two, three, even four or five sons and daughters during the war, and see first hand the horrifying effects of Agent Orange. Near Dak To they cross a perilous and seemingly ancient wooden bridge high over a river to an ethnic village near Hill 875. Amidst scattered U.S. helmets and discarded artillery shell casings, students walk through the village and interact with children viewing themselves for the very first time on video camera screens. At dusk, fires break out in the surrounding hills as a result of illegal logging and slash and burning of the few remaining forests, explains the local guide, Do Hunyl. Hunyl is an ethnic B’Nai who grew up in the forests of the Central Highlands. When war came to the Highlands in the mid-1960s he served in an ARVN “Mike” force as a scout and reconnaissance specialist. Hunyl tells American students to “Look at the destruction of the forests ... much from Agent Orange ... but much also since the end of the war. Vietnamese

were brought in to populate this area and work the land as farmers.... We have lost something irreplaceable! It saddens me, it tears at my heart...the jungles of my youth, are now gone.”⁷

What surprises students is the willingness of the Vietnamese to engage in open discussions. Images of “communist dictatorships” and people living in fear give way to better understandings of people who are enjoying an economic boom that has dramatically raised the standard of living and view their war with America as but a short, terrible event in their thousand-year struggle for independence.

Student Reflections

Post-trip responses indicated significant changes in the preconceptions students had before the trip. One myth students cited was how U.S. media referred to the Viet Nam forces opposing the U.S. simply as “communist” troops. Jon Veley, now a social studies teacher in Rochester, New York, wrote that “I was shocked to discover that most PLA and PAVN soldiers were not communist, but rather simple peasants fighting for their own lands.” Sara Rice, now teaching in North Carolina, was asked by friends and family, “Aren’t you scared to go over there? ... They are communists you know?” Her experience greatly differed from her expectations, “... you don’t even realize the country is communist until you see propaganda posters of Ho Chi Minh ... it’s ... just their sense of nationalism. The Vietnamese feelings for Ho are real and can be compared to our perception of George Washington.”⁸

Another persistent myth is that the United States military fought a “limited” war and, that had the American politicians left the war to the military, the outcome would be dramatically different. Student reflections surrounding this issue shed significant historical light onto this topic. Greg Naylor, now a teacher in Virginia, considers himself a conservative Republican who always “believed the fight in Vietnam was a just cause against communist aggression.” After this program, Greg wrote, “We



Dr. Vadas (far right) poses with students from SUNY Potsdam and Clarkson University and a Vietnamese student (far left) near the Mnong village of M’Drak, located in Dac Lac province in the Central Highlands, Viet Nam, in January 2000. (Courtesy of Trinh Thi Kim Loan)

had no business there.” He continued, “... as for other previous misconceptions of mine, no matter what others may still claim, the United States military did most certainly try to win the war. There is ... no doubt ... B-52 craters are still everywhere ... the mass destruction.... Agent Orange still affects Vietnamese today. We spared no expense on the materials we used over there. The fact is, we tried everything save nuclear weapons to win that war.” Graduate student Jesse Cussworth also wrote that, “... although the idea of fighting with one hand tied ... did occur to some degree ... the U.S. was simply unable to get the Vietnamese ... to accept defeat.”

Jon Veley was inspired to reflect on a question that had bothered him prior to the trip. “How could the most powerful nation on Earth be defeated by a tiny third world nation somewhere off in the Pacific?” Jon’s answer came after visiting My, a PAVN veteran and professor, at the university in Ho Chi Minh City. “It became clear to me why we lost that war, and why we never stood a chance of ... victory.” Jon was fascinated by My’s unswerving perseverance, being the lone survivor of his 500-man battalion that endured a three-month journey down the Ho Chi Minh trail. Matt Bohlke

added that, “... after visiting Viet Nam, I was shocked to see the war from the Vietnamese side ... I ... learned that the tenacity of the Vietnamese would have meant that the U.S. would have lost the war regardless of how they fought ...”

A summary of the results of collective research done by students on the mythology of the Viet Nam War can be found in Table 2.

Despite the destruction, the students were impressed by the friendliness shown to them by the Vietnamese they met. Sara Rice said: “... I did not once encounter a Vietnamese who has shown animosity toward me because I am ... an American.... I wondered, if the roles were reversed, would the same hospitality be given toward the Vietnamese ...?” Canadian social studies student Jordan Reid concurred, adding, “the level of tranquility there is unbelievable.” Kasha, now a secondary social studies teacher in Gouverneur, New York, wrote that “I was surprised at how friendly and free the Vietnamese appear to be ... in that they seem to live their lives oblivious to government efforts to get them to do this or that.”

Students were also exposed to Vietnamese literature, which gave them further insights into the myths and reali-

ties of Viet Nam. Craig Bogart, now a secondary social studies teacher in Colton, New York, wrote, “After reading Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*, one might have looked at the North Vietnamese simply as the other side or the enemy in the Viet Nam War. This book works to change that dramatically.”⁹ He added, “the sheer humanity that is enclosed in *The Sorrow of War* makes it a very effective piece of literature. There exists everything from the wartime teenage romance, to the brutalities of war, to ... a war veteran who feels he can only escape his ghosts by confronting them on paper.”

After reading Duong Thu Huong’s *Novel Without a Name*, Alyssa Freeland, now a secondary social studies teacher at South Jefferson Central School in

northwestern New York, wrote how it “... served to open my eyes to a number of issues, which I had never seriously considered ... Most literature I have read regarding the Viet Nam War is based on the American perspective ... both at home and at the front. What we are taught in schools focuses on the same principles and defenses for American involvement in Viet Nam. I saw this novel as an opportunity to discover the other side of this conflict.”¹⁰ So moved was Alyssa, by her experiences in Viet Nam that she successfully organized her own trip with 10 of her social studies students to Viet Nam in April 2006.

Students also reflected on other universal concepts such as culture, tragedy, philosophy, and basic understandings

of human nature. Trisha Wickwire, now teaching in Saranac Lake, New York, researched Viet Nam’s Cham and Cao Dai cultures and stated “these cultures can be used for case studies described in the Core Curricula Guidelines ... as example of the loss of minority cultures to assimilation.”¹¹ Junko Shiozako, a Japanese exchange student, wrote that she “... saw tragedy in the Viet Nam War as I went to museums and to universities to engage Vietnamese professors who had fought in the war. The pictures in the museum reminded me of my hometown of Hiroshima with such terribly injured people and burned fields. ... Vietnamese, Americans, and Japanese all have terrible memories of war ... it’s all a blur to me ... the waste, the burned flesh, the

Table 2: Myths Researched, Key Questions and Resources

Myth	Key Questions	Samples of Resources Used	Research Results
After the French defeat and 1954 Geneva Accords, Communists opposed free elections and reunification.	What was the true origin of the war? What inspired Ho Chi Minh to first sign the accords then wage a war to reunify Viet Nam?	Copy of Geneva Accords found at: www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/genevacc.htm George Moss, <i>Vietnam An American Ordeal</i> (1984), 87; Stanley Karnow, <i>Vietnam: A History</i> (1983), 226.	The 1954 Geneva Accords actually created two temporary “regroupment zones” and called for free elections to unify the country, which Ngo Dinh Diem, with US support, rejected. US officials and Diem feared that Ho would win any free election. Diem initiated a war against the Viet Minh in the South while resistance to Diem slowly evolved into the development of the NLF in 1959.
US fought a “limited” war (“one hand tied behind its back”) in Viet Nam	What level of military effort did the US and its allies put forth in Viet Nam? Should that have been enough to win?	George Moss, <i>Vietnam: An American Ordeal</i> (1984), 206-07, 428-29; Robert E. Vadas, <i>Cultures In Conflict: The Viet Nam War</i> (2002), 26, 30-31, 232.	Department of Defense (DOD) stats reveal that only 3.6% of requested air and artillery strikes were refused for political considerations during the war, only slightly higher than World War II percentages. US dropped 2 1/2 times more tonnage of bombs than was dropped in all of World War II.
Black men were fighting Yellow men for White men	What do official stats on US casualties reveal about who actually did the fighting and dying in Viet Nam?	US Department of Defense statistics on US military casualties 1994-5; 1998, 2002. www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-lists/ Robert E. Vadas, <i>Cultures In Conflict: The Viet Nam War</i> (2002), 231.	DOD casualty figures reveal that 14% of those killed in action were Black, while Blacks represented 11% of US population at the time. Working class men were 58% more likely to die in Viet Nam than middle or upper class men.
The American anti-war movement helped lose the war for the US.	Should a nation be completely unified for war as the only description of “patriotism”? What really inspired Vietnamese resistance to US policies?	Stanley Karnow, <i>Vietnam: A History</i> (1983), 17-21; Robert E. Vadas, <i>Cultures In Conflict: The Viet Nam War</i> (2002), Greenwood Press, Conn. (focus on story of Col. Tran Dzoan Toi, p. 191)	PAVN accounts reveal awareness of US and world anti-war movements. However, Vietnamese resolve to fight (Tranh Dau) relied on centuries old nationalistic determination, with or without anti-war efforts in US. Also, the US anti-war movement did not develop until after 13-14 years of unsuccessful US support of the Southern government (1967-8)
The media in America helped lose the war for the U.S.	Should the press report potentially morale lowering photos; and/or news reports during war? Why did US lose in Viet Nam?	George D. Moss, <i>Vietnam: An American Ordeal</i> (1998), 305-306; Robert S. McNamara, <i>In Retrospect</i> (1995), 320-330.	The media supported the war for more than a decade without the US military being able to succeed. Some media turned against the war only after the ‘68 Tet offensive when most Americans had already turned against the war.
Viet Nam-era vets are highly unstable and likely to “lose it”	What do statistics reveal about veterans’ rates of divorce, suicide, unemployment, drug and alcohol use, and post-traumatic stress?	Richard A. Kulka, <i>Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study</i> (1990); Ronald C. Kessler (et al), “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the National Comorbidity” (1995)	Although many veterans did suffer from psychological traumas after their return most veterans were ultimately able to live productive lives. Divorce, drug use and alcohol rates are only slightly above the national average for men their age.

RESOURCES

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Remember My Lai. Frontline: Kevin Sim, 1989. Personal reflections of soldiers and Vietnamese survivors.

Heaven and Earth. Alcor Films: Oliver Stone, 1993. A Vietnamese woman's personal journey.

Three Seasons. October Films (Viet Nam): Mike Bui, 1998. Contemporary issues in Ho Chi Minh City.

Long Time Coming. Kartemquin and Longshot Films: Jerry Blumenthal, Peter Gilbert, and Gordon Quinn, 1998.

Joint U.S. and Vietnamese veteran bike tour from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City in January 1998.

Kontum Diary. Echo Productions: Paul Reed, 1998. A U.S. veteran travels to the Central Highlands to meet a soldier of the PAVN unit he fought in 1968. 

senseless consequence of human nature. When will it end?" By chance, Junko's mother had left Hiroshima early that terrible morning to visit her grandmother in the countryside. Upon her arrival they saw the cloud that gave birth to the nuclear age.

Colin Murray, who began his Peace Corps service in Africa in January 2006, recalled how his discussions with his father, a Viet Nam veteran, always left him wanting a deeper explanation of what he went through and how it impacted his life. He wrote, "Personally, I thought about my father at many of the different places that we visited...I tried to think about what his experiences were like." Scott Lamora, also the son of a Viet Nam War veteran, wrote, "... it was so moving to actually go to the places I have been learning about for over 12 years of my life ... it was truly amazing ... to see how beautiful it is now ... gives you two sides of the spectrum."

Two students who served in the armed forces compared their experiences. Brad,

a Viet Nam War veteran studying to become a social studies teacher, contrasted his stories about Viet Nam with his classmate, Jerry, an Iraq War veteran 30 years his junior. As students listened to these two veterans, they added their own input after reading an article written by Lewis M. Simons, a veteran reporter who visited Viet Nam in 1967, and Iraq in 2005. In a summary of the comparisons between the two wars, Simons commented: "having spent decades covering war and its aftermath around the world, I have just been through an eerily reminiscent experience in Iraq."¹²

Notes

1. Marc Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 225.
2. Frances Fitzgerald, as cited in D. B. Fleming and R. Nurse, "The War in Recent U.S. History Textbooks," *Social Education* 52, no. 1 (January 1988): 27-28.
3. James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 241-248.
4. J.S. Starr, "Teaching The Vietnam War," *Social Education* 52, no. 1 (January 1988): 23-24.
5. Fleming and Nurse, *ibid.*
6. Starr, *ibid.*

7. See Robert E. Vadas, *Conflict in Cultures: The Viet Nam War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), 189. The B'Nai, or, Ba Na, are a Mon-Khmer speaking people of about 140,000 living mostly near Kon Tum and in Bin Ninh Province in Central Viet Nam.
8. Sara Rice, written personal communication (April 2005). After her first trip to Viet Nam with the program in January 2004, Sara returned with the tour in January 2005, and remained to do her social studies student teaching in a Ho Chi Minh City middle school.
9. Craig Bogart, written personal communication (January 2004), discussing Boa Ninh. *The Sorrow of War* (New York: Riverhead Press, 1996).
10. Alyssa Freeland, written personal communication (January 2004) referring to Duong Thu Huong, *A Novel Without A Name* (New York: Morrow, 1995).
11. Trisha Wickwire, written personal communication (May 2005). Trisha did her student teaching in Quito, Ecuador after her trip to Viet Nam with the program in January 2005.
12. Lewis M. Simons, "A Tale of Two Wars," *The National Post National Weekly Edition*, September 5-11, 2005: 19.

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