

HIST 388

The U.S. and the Vietnam War

Spring 2019 | University of Oregon | 229 McKenzie Hall
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:00-1:20

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Graduate Employees

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Course Description


It's January, 1968. For weeks North Vietnamese Army troops have been secretly streaming across South Vietnam's border and taking up positions around U.S. military bases. Their orders are to "crack the sky, shake the earth." And when the Vietnamese New Year celebration of Tet begins at the end of the month, they will be part of the largest coordinated attack in what they call the American War.

When that attack begins, Walter Cronkite, arguably the most trusted journalist in America, will declare the Vietnam War unwinnable and implore U.S. politicians to seek a negotiated peace.

In August of that same year, student activists who believe the government isn't doing enough to end the war will riot at the Democratic Party's convention in Chicago. They will be beaten up and arrested by Chicago's police force. In response, a radical faction of the Students for a Democratic Society announce that the Antiwar Movement has to adopt more radical and violent tactics to convince politicians to end the war. They call themselves The Weathermen and say that peaceful marches are too passive; it's time "to bring the war home."

In cities like Oakland, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago, the Black Panthers, a militant civil rights organization, are comparing themselves to North Vietnamese revolutionaries and arguing that just as members of the National Liberation Front have armed themselves in order to resist American colonialism abroad, they too must arm themselves to resist American colonialism at home.

As all these images suggest, the Vietnam War took place on several fronts, not just in the rice fields and jungles of Southeast Asia. The war was fought in American universities, on American city streets, in antiwar marches, and Civil Rights demonstrations. This class examines all these different theatres of war and attempts to understand how a small conflict that started in a small Southeast Asian country that most Americans couldn't find on a map turned into a global war that ultimately transformed American society, politics, and culture. How did the Vietnam War come to loom so large in the American consciousness? How did Americans interpret U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia and how did those



U.S. helicopters protect South Vietnamese troops northwest of Saigon, 1965. This photo was taken by Horst Fass. He would earn two Pulitzer Prizes for his coverage of the war.



National Liberation Front soldier, 1972.

interpretations shape the Antiwar Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Conservative Movement? How was Vietnam portrayed in popular culture and how did those portrayals shape American diplomacy and politics throughout the latter twentieth century? These are the central questions this course asks.

In asking these questions, this course attempts to use the history of the Vietnam War to give students a better understanding of present-day America. We will think about the ways that the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been shaped by the legacy of Vietnam. We will talk about how the Vietnam-era antiwar movement continues to shape the contemporary antiwar movement. We will compare statements made by Black Panthers about anticolonial struggle to statements made by Black Lives Matter activists. And we will examine the ways that popular culture remembers (and misremembers) the war and how these memories have been used (and misused) by politicians. Ultimately, this class encourages students to think historically, critically, and creatively about contemporary America, its problems, and how those problems might be solved.

Learning Objectives

Students who take this course can expect:

- A better understanding of how the Vietnam War reshaped American culture, society, and politics from roughly 1955 to the present;
- A better understanding of Vietnamese society, politics, and anti-colonial struggle;
- A better understanding of how the Vietnam War exposed social, racial, and economic divides in American society and how anti-Vietnam War activism shaped and was shaped by struggles for social, racial, and economic equality;
- To engage in critical discussions about America's present-day problems and think about how history can help us better understand and creatively address those problems;
- To hone their reading and interpretive skills through classroom discussions and careful readings of primary and secondary sources;
- To hone their writing skills through a research assignment and two take-home exams.



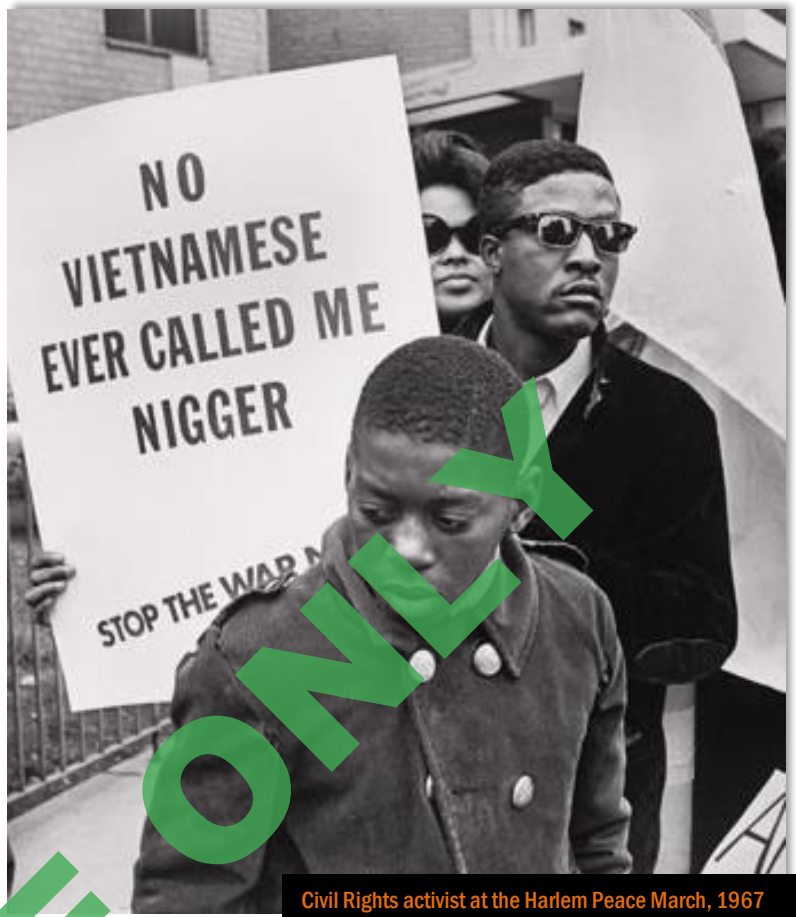
Students for a Democratic Society poster for "Days of Rage," October, 1969.

Class Format

This class is organized thematically rather than chronologically. This approach allows us to examine the Vietnam War from a variety of different angles and experiment with different methodological approaches. We will begin by looking at the history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle in Southeast Asia. Next, we will look at the way the war reshaped social life in America, focusing on the Civil Rights Movement, the Antiwar Movement, and the conservative movement. Finally, we will examine the way the Vietnam War has been portrayed and remembered in popular culture.

This class meets twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays. While most class meetings will revolve around lectures, those lectures are designed to be interactive. I will regularly ask you to comment on pictures, film clips, or texts. So come to lecture prepared to talk, discuss ideas and themes, and interact with your fellow classmates.

Class meetings on April 25th, May 16th, and June 6th will be dedicated to discussions of readings. Please consult the course schedule below for specific reading assignments and come to class on those days prepared to discuss the assigned readings.



Civil Rights activist at the Harlem Peace March, 1967

Required Texts

The following books are required for this course. They are available for purchase at the U of O Bookstore:

Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986);

Mark Rudd, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009);

Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Course Website

This course uses the Canvas system and you can access the course website via your Canvas front page. The course website contains this syllabus, assignment guidelines, the questions for the take-home midterm and final (when posted), and lecture slides. Please submit all written work online, via the course website. Your Graduate Teaching Fellow and I will comment on and grade your written work directly in the Canvas system.



Actress Jane Fonda alongside a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun, 1972. This picture earned Fonda the nickname, "Hanoi Jane."

Assignments

The major writing assignment for this class is a **ten to twelve** page research essay. Students may choose one of two options for the research essay:

Option 1: The Vietnam War in Popular Culture

Watch a minimum of **three** movies made in the Vietnam Era or about the Vietnam War and then, using information from lectures and a **minimum of two books**, write an essay that critically assesses the way your chosen films interpret the meanings of the Vietnam War. You will want to pick a very specific topic. You might, for instance, examine the way that Native Americans become stand-ins for Vietnamese soldiers in 1960s Westerns. Or you could explore the ways that race is dealt with in movies about American soldiers. Or you might watch Reagan-era action films and discuss how filmmakers in the 1980s attempted to reinterpret the outcomes of the Vietnam War. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to encourage you to think about how popular culture has interpreted the meaning of Vietnam and examine the political consequences of those interpretations.

Option 2: Oral History Project

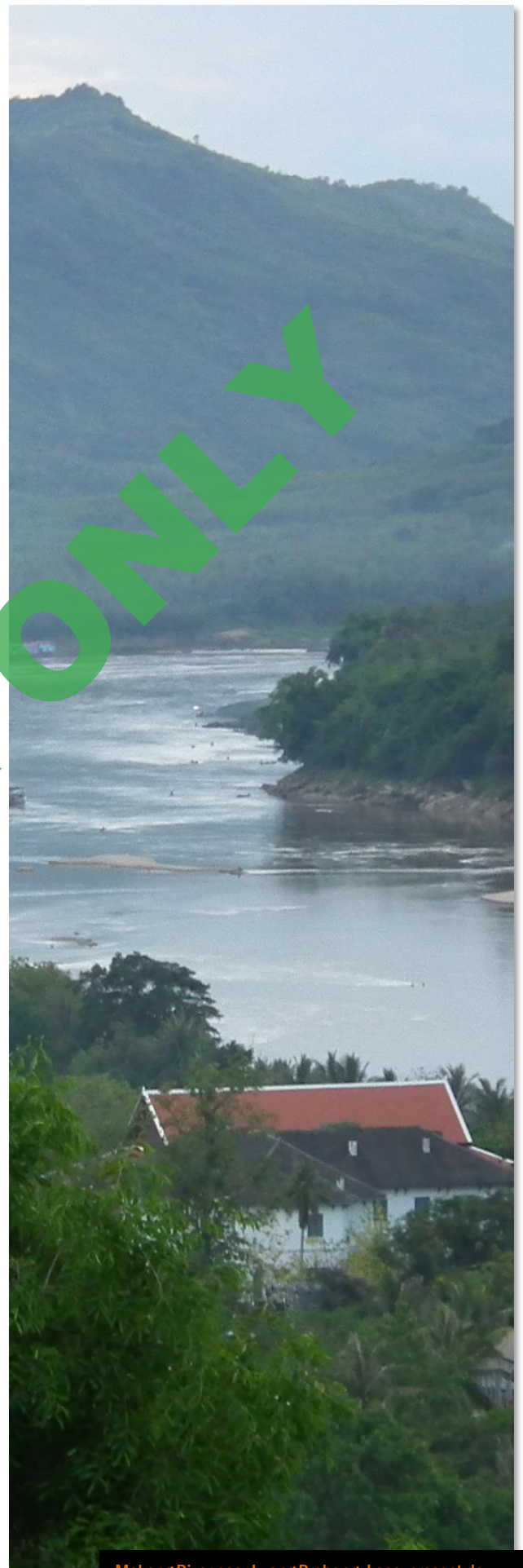
Interview a Vietnam Veteran, a Vietnam-era antiwar activist, a Vietnam War refugee, or a Vietnam-era Civil Rights activist about their experiences in the 1960s and/or 1970s and then, using a **minimum of two books**, write an essay that situates your interviewee's experiences in a larger historical context. You will want to be as specific as possible. You might, for instance, write an essay that uses an interview with a Vietnam veteran to explore the racial and/or socioeconomic makeup of the Vietnam-era military. Or you might choose to explore the strategy and tactics of antiwar protesters. The specific topic you choose, will, of course, be largely determined by your interviewee's experiences and what s/he is comfortable talking about. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to encourage you to understand how the Vietnam War shaped and reshaped the lives of individuals.

More specific assignment details, guidelines, and suggestions to help you get started will be distributed during the **first week** of the quarter. A research proposal (basically a **one- to two-paragraph** statement that states which project you've chosen, the **major questions** you will ask in the course of your research, and how you plan on **answering those questions**) is due by **12:00 p.m. (noon) on April 18th**. The final draft of your research paper is due by **12:00 p.m. (noon) on May 23rd**.

You must also **complete a take-home midterm** and a (non-cumulative) take-home final. **Both the midterm and final** will be a combination of short-answer questions and a **longer essay** that will ask you to synthesize material presented in class and test your comprehension of lectures and readings. The take-home midterm is due by **12:00 p.m. (noon) on May 7th** and the take-home final is due by **10:00 a.m. on June 14th**. Questions for both the midterm and final will be distributed approximately one week before the due dates.

Finally, participation is a part of your grade. Your comments and questions in lectures and performance during book discussions will be used to determine your final participation grade.

You must complete every assignment to receive a passing grade in the class.



Mekong River near Luang Prabang, Laos, present day.

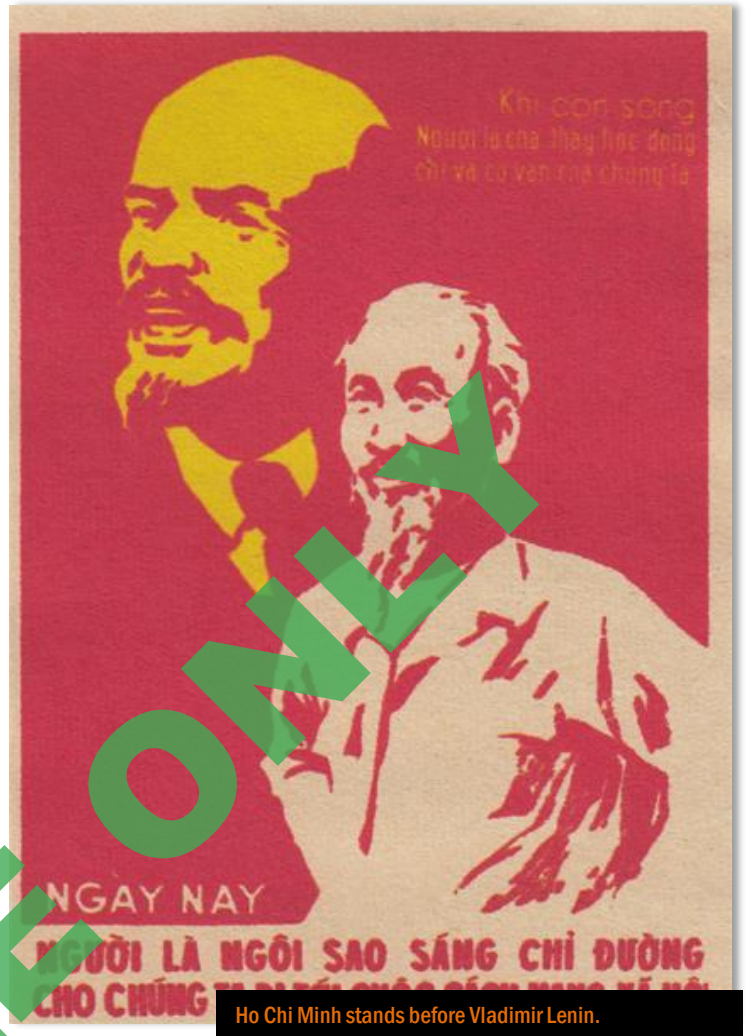
Grading

Grades on each assignment as well as your final grade for the course will be given in points. Here is the point-value of each assignment as well as a breakdown of how each assignment will be used in calculating your final grade:

Participation	150 points (15%)
Take-Home Midterm	250 points (25%)
Take-Home Final	250 points (25%)
Research Paper Proposal	50 points (5%)
Final Research Paper	300 points (30%)

The following table will be use to translate your point score into your final letter grade:

A+	100-99%
A	98-94
A-	93-90
B+	89-87
B	86-84
B-	83-80
C+	79-77
C	76-74
C-	73-70
D+	69-67
D	66-64
D-	63-61
F	60-0



Ho Chi Minh stands before Vladimir Lenin.

Grading Guidelines

Your GE and I will follow the guidelines established by the History Department in evaluating your work:

A+: Work of unusual distinction;

A: Work that distinguishes itself by the excellence of its grasp of the material and the precision and insight of its argument;

B: Work that satisfies the main criteria of the assignment, and demonstrates command of the material, but does not achieve the level of excellence that characterizes work of A quality;

C: Work that demonstrates a rudimentary grasp of the material and satisfies at least some of the assigned criteria reasonably well;

D: Work that demonstrates a poor grasp of the material and/or is executed with little regard for college standards;

F: Work that is weak in every aspect, demonstrating a basic misunderstanding of the material and/or is regard for the assigned question.

For more information on the History Department's grading guidelines, please see:

<http://history.oregon.edu/undergraduate/>



Vietnam Vets Against the War lead an antiwar demonstration, c. 1970.



Vietnam War Memorial, Washington, D.C., present day.

Late Work

Late assignments will automatically be deducted half a letter grade (hence, a “B” will become a “B-” or a “C+” will become a “C”). An additional half-letter will then be deducted every 24 hours thereafter.

Academic Dishonesty

Any form of plagiarism or academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and students suspected of academic misconduct may face disciplinary action, as outlined in the Students’ Code of Conduct:

<https://uodot.uoregon.edu/StudentConductandCommunityStandards/AcademicMisconduct.aspx>

It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with University policies regarding plagiarism and what constitutes academic misconduct:

<http://library.uoregon.edu/guides/plagiarism/students/index.html>

Please come see me or your GE if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or academic misconduct or if you are unsure how to properly cite a source.

Instructor Contact

I am here to help you. I encourage you to come see me during my scheduled office hours or, if you can’t make those, let me know and I’m happy to find another time to meet. You can come see me to talk about any of the material covered in class, a reading you didn’t quite understand, or if there’s some aspect of history you’d like to know more about. I’m also more than happy to read early drafts of your paper and make suggestions for improvements. Or, you can just stop by just to chat. Email is the best way to get ahold of me. I will respond to all student emails within 24 hours.

PART I | Colonialism, Anti-colonialism, and Vietnam



National Liberation Front soldier, c. 1970.

Week 1

- April 2: Centuries of Struggle:
From Chinese to French Rule in Vietnam
- April 4: "The Colony of Economic Interest"
The French Empire in Southeast Asia

Week 2

- April 9: "They Have Risen Up, United as One Man"
The Indochina War
- April 11: "The Wrong War, In the Wrong Place, At the Wrong Time"
Ho Chi Minh, JFK, and the Beginning of the "American War"

Week 3

- April 16: Hearts and Minds:
LBJ's War in Vietnam
- April 18: "I Ain't No Fortunate Son:"
The American Soldier's Experience

RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSAL DUE BY 12:00 p.m. (noon)

Week 4

- April 23: "Nothing More Precious than Independence and Liberty"
The Vietnamese Soldier's Experience
- April 25: Class Discussion
READ: Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*.

PART II | “Bring the War Home”



Antiwar march, c. 1972.

Week 5

- April 30: Winter Soldiers:
Vietnam Vets Against the War
- May 2: “Put Down Your Books, Pick Up Your Gun, We’re Gonna’ Have a Whole Lot of Fun:”
The Music of the Antiwar Movement

Week 6

- May 7: “My Enemy is the White People, Not the Viet Cong”
The Black Panthers, AIM, and the Militarization of the Civil Rights Movement
- MIDTERM DUE BY 12:00 p.m. (noon)**
- May 9: “We Don’t Burn No Draft Cards Down on Main Street:”
Vietnam and the Conservative Reaction

Week 7

- May 14: “You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows:”
SDS, The Weathermen, and Kent State
- May 16: Class Discussion
READ: Rudd, *Underground*.

PART III | The Vietnam War in Myth and Memory



Scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, 1979

Week 8

- May 21: Guest Speaker
- May 23: "Charlie Don't Surf"
Portrayals of Vietnam in American Popular Culture

FINAL PAPER DUE BY 12:00 p.m. (noon)

Week 9

- May 28: The End of Victory Culture
Cowboys, Indians, and the Vietnam War
- May 30: "Do We Get to Win This Time?"
Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Remembering Vietnam in Reagan's America

Week 10

- June 4: "Hanoi Jane:"
Myths of Betrayal in the Antiwar Movement
- June 6: Class Discussion
READ: Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*

FINAL DUE BY 10 a.m., Friday, June 14th