Table of Contents

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview

This teaching unit, *The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma,* introduces students to the key individuals and events, through the use of primary source documents, that played a role in America's entry into, escalation of, and final withdrawal from the war in Vietnam. Using the presidencies of Harry S. Truman through Gerald R. Ford as its historical and conceptual framework, the unit attempts to impress upon students the continuous and escalating investment each of these chief executives made in Vietnam, the aggregate of which resulted in the death of over 58,000 Americans, as well as the physical and emotional wounding of hundreds of thousands more. The history of American involvement in Vietnam is traced through the following five lesson plans, each of which not only examine the individuals and events germane to each of these specific presidencies, but also illustrate one of five different lesson plan frameworks representing both brain-based and sequential curricular models.

Lesson One traces the roots of French colonialism in Indochina, illustrates the mistreatment of the Vietnamese people at the hands of the French, and examines the role this played in the rise of the nationalist movement, Communist party, and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. The reaction of President Harry S. Truman to developments in Vietnam and the rise of Ho Chi Minh is examined as well. This lesson is designed using Robert Sternberg's theory of triarchic intelligence as its conceptual framework.

Lesson Two examines President Dwight D. Eisenhower's role in laying the political groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam, in particular his support for Ngo Dinh Diem and promulgation of the "Domino Theory." Madeline Hunter's mastery learning model provides the foundation for the lesson's curricular design.

Lesson Three analyzes the role President John F. Kennedy played in laying the military groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam. The subject of analysis also includes the shifting current of both public opinion and JFK regarding American involvement in Vietnam as well as support for the Diem government. The curricular framework for this lesson is based on Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning model.

Lesson Four explores the escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam under the presidential watch of Lyndon B. Johnson, from the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964 to LBJ's withdrawal from the presidential race in 1968. The 5-E instructional approach provides the basis for the design of this lesson plan.

Lesson Five examines the events and developments, including implementation of the Vietnamization policy, signing of the Paris Accords, and fall of Saigon, that led to America's withdrawal from and eventual end of the war in Vietnam, all of which took place during the presidency of Richard M. Nixon and, upon his resignation, Gerald R. Ford. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences serves as the guiding curricular force in the design of this lesson.

II. Unit Context

The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma may be placed in the United States history curriculum in a number of logical places within the existing scope and sequence, ranging from the post-World War II or "Origins of the Cold War" period to the 1960s and 1970s. Regardless of where this unit is placed in the curriculum, a review of late nineteenth-century imperialism

as well as the key events and lessons learned from the Korean War are both strongly recommended to assist in the study and understanding of the Vietnam War. In its entirety, this unit is designed for a two to three week period of time. However, it can be adapted to focus student attention on a specific document or set of documents, allowing teachers to integrate individual lessons or activities into the existing curriculum with little modification. Another option available to teachers, to conserve class time, is to assign individual activities to different groups, who are then responsible for examining the primary documents and reporting their findings to the entire class.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma provides documentary materials and learning activities relating to the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 9, Standard 2C:** *The student understands the foreign and domestic consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam,* to include each of the following elaborated standards: Assess the Vietnam policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations and the shifts of public opinion about the war; Explain the composition of the American forces recruited to fight the war; Evaluate how Vietnamese and Americans experienced the war and how the war continued to affect postwar politics and culture; Explain the provisions of the Paris Accord of 1973 and evaluate the role of the Nixon administration; and Analyze the constitutional issues involved in the war and explore the legacy of the Vietnam war. In addition, the unit also addresses each of the five Historical Thinking Standards outlined in Part 1, Chapter 2 of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*. Each lesson provides primary source materials that challenge students to think chronologically, comprehend a variety of historical sources, engage in historical analysis and interpretation, conduct historical research, and engage in historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To examine primary documents that trace French colonial involvement in Indochina from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, to help understand the political and military situation that existed in Vietnam.
2. To identify the role and contribution of Ho Chi Minh in achieving independence for Vietnam through analysis of his writings.
3. To compare, contrast, and evaluate the role the following presidents played in America's involvement in Vietnam: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, and Gerald R. Ford.
4. To identify, examine, and evaluate the events, issues, policies, and decisions, revealed through a variety of historical sources, that led to the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam.
5. To trace the evolution of public support for American involvement in Vietnam and determine those factors that played a role in shaping it.
6. To identify, examine, and evaluate the events, issues, policies, and decisions, revealed through a variety of historical sources, that led to America's withdrawal from, and eventual end of, the war in Vietnam.

V. Historical Background

Vietnam traces its origins to the clans of Viet peoples who dwelled in the region extending from present-day Shanghai down the Red River Delta to the Mekong River Delta. The history of the Vietnamese people traces back over 2,200 years, with the first record of the Viet people found in the writings of Chinese historians. It is not until 1858, however, that France, which was exploring new trade routes to China, laid claim to Indochina. Within a short period of time, Vietnam became one of France's most profitable colonies of the late nineteenth century. French economic success in Indochina, however, came at a large cost to the Vietnamese people who were subjected to harsh and exploitive treatment at the hands of their French rulers. It is in this setting that the national independence movement took hold in Vietnam, in particular with the rise of Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh, born Nguyen Tat Thanh in 1890 and later known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, quickly became one of the leading Vietnamese nationalist figures of the early twentieth century. After joining the French Communist Party in Paris in 1920, Ho Chi Minh organized the Indochinese Communist Party a decade later. This was followed in 1941 with the founding of the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoii, or Vietnamese Independence League (Viet Minh).

During World War II, Ho and the Viet Minh gained invaluable military and political support for their campaign to oust Japanese and Vichy French forces who had assumed control of Vietnam. They were so successful in their efforts that by the time of the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Viet Minh represented the strongest political force in Vietnam. The next month, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. France, however, was not about to relinquish its nearly century long colonial hold on Vietnam, and within a year a war between French and Viet Minh forces ensued. The First Indochina War, as it became known, would last for eight years. It came to a rather abrupt end in 1954 following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, a remote outpost in northwest Vietnam, and the signing of the Geneva Peace Accords later that summer.

By 1954, the United States was assuming 75 percent of the French cost for the First Indochina War in Vietnam. Therefore, when delegates from nine nations, to include Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, France, Laos, the People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States, met in Geneva during the summer of 1954 to discuss ending the conflict in Indochina, Americans were deeply vested in the outcome.

An awkward peace treaty at best, the Geneva Peace Accords called for the temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel. In addition, national elections were to be held two years later, for the purpose of reunification. Beginning in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower pledged his support to Ngo Dinh Diem, Prime Minister (and later President) of the Republic of Vietnam, who had a fragile power base consisting of Catholics, French-trained urban elites, and landlords. From the beginning, Diem proved to be a controversial figure. A Catholic leader of a Buddhist country, Diem found his authority challenged from the start. He faced serious opposition not only from various religious sects within South Vietnam, but also from the Binh Xuyen, which controlled Saigon's crime syndicate. In addition, many within the military, especially among the officers' corps, also posed a threat to the stability of the new Diem government. Diem paid little attention to the countryside. He became more and more isolated from the people and preferred to rely on his family as his closest advisors. As a result, this discontent in the countryside was organized first by remnants of the Viet Minh, then in December 1960 by a new revolutionary organization, the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong.

Despite these potential obstacles, Diem continued to secure his power base in South Vietnam, first by winning a controversial election for President in 1955, and then by establishing the Republic of Vietnam as an independent nation that same year. The following year, with the support of the Untied States, Diem refused to hold nationwide elections in Vietnam as called for in the Geneva Accords. Instead, Diem continued to build upon his political base of power while at the same time increasing his attacks on political opponents, including the Viet Minh.

Through it all, President Eisenhower, the architect of the "Domino Theory," remained supportive of Diem, pouring nearly $200 million in military aid into South Vietnam during his tenure in office. By the end of his term, Eisenhower had solidly laid the political groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam.

John F. Kennedy's election in 1960 represented yet another shift in twentieth-century American foreign policy. Perhaps the most critical pendulum swing in regard to U.S. policy in Vietnam was the amount and type of support Washington provided to Ngo Dinh Diem. As part of JFK's "flexible response" approach to confronting international crises, the president quickly sought to increase military and economic aid to South Vietnam. Included in the young president's plan was a marked increase in the number of American advisors being sent to South Vietnam. These advisors included U.S. Army troops who became involved in both conventional and unconventional operations. The most elite of these military forces was the Green Berets, an Army Special Forces unit that was commissioned by the president to provide both military and medical assistance to the people of South Vietnam.

Despite President Kennedy's efforts to bolster Diem's position in South Vietnam, the situation deteriorated. Diem's government had increasingly become a family-based, authoritarian regime without any legitimacy in the countryside, which represented 80 percent of the total population. By 1963, Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, had become controversial figures, having raided South Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas and used military troops to suppress demonstrators in Saigon. As a result, Americans witnessed on the evening news a number of Buddhist riots and self-immolations. The sight of a monk engulfed in flames was a symbol for the corruptness and inefficacy that became synonymous with the Diem regime. Although his advisors were deeply divided over the issue, it became clear to Kennedy that serious changes were in order; in particular, the overthrow of the Diem government began to emerge as the only option available to achieve their objectives in South Vietnam.

Therefore, President Kennedy pledged that while the United States would not take an active role in any coup, it would do nothing to prevent such an event from taking place. As a result, on November 1, 1963, a group of South Vietnamese military leaders successfully overthrew the Diem government, assassinating both Diem and his brother Nhu. Three weeks later, Kennedy would face an assassin's bullet as well, but not before the shift in America's Vietnam strategy had been solidified. By the time JFK's fate was sealed in Dallas, there were a total of sixteen thousand American military advisors stationed in the jungles of Vietnam.

Following the assassination of President Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson continued to increase America's commitment in Vietnam. The political situation in South Vietnam, however, required serious modification of the strategy Johnson had inherited from JFK. It became clear that the generals who succeeded Diem were even less effective than he in ruling the nation. In addition, the Viet Cong—with North Vietnamese assistance—was becoming so powerful that Johnson either had to send in ground combat troops or pull out of Vietnam. Without American intervention, the Viet Cong would have won the war by early 1966. The catalyst, therefore, that allowed LBJ to redefine America's foreign policy in Vietnam occurred in early August

1964, when the American vessel USS *Maddox*, on patrol in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. This was followed by another highly disputed report of a subsequent attack days later against the *Maddox* and its escort ship, the *C. Turner Joy*. In response, President Johnson successfully petitioned Congress to pass what has become known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which bestowed upon the President expansive war powers.

Shortly thereafter, Johnson ordered the sustained bombing of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troop targets, following an assault against two U.S. military installations in South Vietnam in which eight U.S. troops died. This 1965 bombing campaign became known as Operation Rolling Thunder and even included military targets within North Vietnam. Coupled with the intense bombing campaign was the introduction of the first U.S. combat troops in Vietnam, sent to Da Nang on March 7, 1965. Within three months, the government confirmed that U.S. troops were engaged in combat missions of their own, not of a supporting or advisory nature.

At the same time, LBJ was still attempting to win the support of the Vietnamese people by initiating yet another pacification campaign reportedly designed to rebuild the rural economy of South Vietnam while also undercutting the political strength of the Viet Cong in the countryside. In 1965, President Johnson was also busily attempting to initiate peace talks with North Vietnam, with an offer of economic aid to both North and South Vietnam. Although his initial attempts would prove unsuccessful, Johnson did open the dialogue with North Vietnam that would years later lead to the Paris peace talks.

However, President Johnson's "prolonged limited war" in Vietnam continued on. Opting for a middle ground approach, LBJ began the gradual escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1965 by authorizing an increase in U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam by an unprecedented 100,000. The increase in troop levels would continue throughout the remainder of Johnson's presidency, so that by the end of his tenure in office over a half a million American troops were serving in South Vietnam.

Despite President Johnson's planning and calculating, the events of 1968 could not have been anticipated. In January, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched an offensive during Tet, the Lunar New Year, in which over 80,000 troops attacked nearly all major cities in South Vietnam. Even the U.S. embassy in Saigon came under attack. Although it was a major military defeat for the Communist forces, which lost half of their attacking force and greatly weakened the Viet Cong's insurgent base, the Tet Offensive ironically was a great psychological victory. Within days, America public support for involvement in Vietnam—which was already waning—plummeted even further; while at the same time the anti-war movement and public criticism of the government reached new levels. It is in this climate that President Johnson, after declining General Westmoreland's request for 200,000 additional troops, finally succeeded in initiating peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam, which commenced on May 3, 1968. Perhaps the greatest surprise event of 1968 was LBJ's announcement that he would not seek re-election, instead committing himself to bringing about an end to the war in Vietnam.

In addition to handing over a war in Vietnam that had escalated to unprecedented levels, President Lyndon Baines Johnson also provided his successor, Richard M. Nixon, with two key elements that Nixon would use to bring about an end to America's longest war. First, Johnson had initiated secret peace talks with North Vietnam in Paris during the spring of 1968. In June of that year, LBJ and Nguyen Van Thieu, South Vietnam's President, also implemented the initial stages of a new program that would mobilize more South Vietnamese troops to assume a greater combat role in the war.

Nixon would bring both of these developments to fruition. He embarked on this mission by authorizing the first troop withdrawal, twenty five thousand total, in the history of the Vietnam War, following a meeting at Midway with President Thieu in June 1969. Troop reductions would continue throughout Nixon's presidency, with former American bases and military equipment being transferred to South Vietnamese control. Although he implemented the program months earlier, in November 1969 Nixon publicly unveiled the specifics of his new strategy in Vietnam, which he referred to as "Vietnamization." Nixon expedited the transfer of combat operations from American to South Vietnamese troops that was initiated under LBJ, with overall American troop levels in Vietnam dropping from over half a million in 1969 to 156,000 just two years later. The equipment turned over was vast, including one million M-16 rifles and five hundred aircraft, making the Republic of Vietnam's air force the fourth largest in the world.

The transition, however, was plagued by problems and controversies. First, the U.S. Army was confronted with a series of problems, including racial tensions, drug abuse, low troop morale, and a growing anxiety on the part of many troops not to be the last soldier killed in Vietnam, known as the "last-casualty" syndrome. In addition, many questioned the purpose of certain battles, such as "Hamburger Hill" in May of 1969, in which the U.S. military suffered a number of casualties in its victory over a North Vietnamese Regiment that previously occupied the hill, only to abandon it shortly thereafter. The military missions conducted by American and South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia in April of 1970 in order to disrupt Communist supply routes into South Vietnam and buy time for Vietnamization, however, became the most controversial event of Nixon's first term. Public protest over this military excursion eventually led to a confrontation between student protesters and National Guard troops at Kent State University in Ohio, in which four students were killed on May 4, 1970. United States military involvement in Cambodia also led Congress to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as well as to bar any further military operation in Cambodia.

Renewed bombings of North Vietnam as well as the mining of Haiphong Harbor marked the beginning of 1972 followed by a North Vietnamese assault, known as the "Easter Offensive," in March. By fall of that year, however, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese representatives Xuan Thuy and Le Duc Tho were hurriedly finishing the preliminary draft of a peace treaty. When negotiations broke down, Nixon ordered the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, raids which became known as the "Christmas Bombings," as a means of bringing Hanoi back to the negotiating table.

Finally, eight years after the first combat troops were sent to Da Nang, the United States and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Agreement on January 27, 1973. Although the Paris Accords did not end the conflict in Vietnam, it did result in the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam as well as the return of American prisoners of war by April of that year. Despite the continued funneling of money to the Thieu government ($7 billion was sent between 1973 and 1975) the South Vietnamese military suffered from too many military mistakes and setbacks as well as from critical shortages of fuel, spare parts to repair military equipment, and ammunition. Many South Vietnamese believed they had been abandoned by the United States. At the same time, the North Vietnamese military also increased the intensity of their offensive. The end came with the resignation of President Thieu on April 21, 1975, followed by the evacuation of U.S. personnel from South Vietnam, and the fall of Saigon to Communist troops on April 30, 1975, officially ending the Second Indochina War.

Map of Vietnam
1966