

# Rethinking the Teaching of the Vietnam War

BY *BILL BIGELOW*

THE UNITED NATIONS HAS DECLARED this the Decade of Peace. The troubling irony is that teaching for peace must begin with a study of war. Unless we look carefully at the dynamics of war and come to grips with the root causes of global conflicts, we have no way to convincingly propose solutions—no way to imagine peace.

Sadly, when it comes to probing the root causes of the Vietnam War, not a single major U.S. history text glances back beyond the 1950s. Why was the U.S. involved in Vietnam? As James Loewen points out in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, his critique of 12 best-selling high school history texts, “Most textbooks simply dodge the issue. Here is a representative analysis, from *American*

*Adventures*: ‘Later in the 1950s, war broke out in South Vietnam. This time the United States gave aid to the South Vietnamese government.’ ‘War broke out’—what could be simpler!’

The textbooks mirror the amnesia of U.S. policy makers. There is a startling encounter in the Vietnam War documentary *Hearts and Minds* between producer Peter Davis and Walt Rostow, former adviser to President Johnson. Davis wants Rostow to talk about why the United States got involved in Vietnam. Rostow is incredulous: “Are you really asking me this goddamn silly question?” That’s “pretty pedestrian stuff,” he complains. But Rostow finally answers: “The problem began in its present phase after the Sputnik, the launching of Sputnik, in 1957, October.”

Sputnik? 1957? At one blow, the former adviser erases years of history to imply that somehow the Soviet Union was behind it all.

The “present phase” caveat notwithstanding, Rostow ignores the World War II cooperation between the United States and the Viet Minh; Ho Chi Minh’s repeated requests that the U.S. acknowledge Vietnamese sovereignty; the U.S. refusal to recognize the 1945 Decla-

ration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; \$2 billion in U.S. military support for the restoration of French domination, including the near-use of nuclear weapons during the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu, according to the Army’s own history of the war; and the well-docu-

mented U.S. subversion of the 1954 Geneva peace accords. All occurred before the launching of Sputnik.

When teachers pattern our curricula after these kinds of nonexplanatory explanations, we mystify the origins not just of the war in Vietnam, but of everything we teach. Students need to learn to distinguish explanations from descriptions, like “war broke out,” or “chaos erupted.” Thinking about social events as having concrete causes, constantly asking “Why?” and “In whose interests?” need to become critical habits of the mind for us and for our students. It’s only through developing the tools of deep questioning that students can attempt to make sense of today’s global conflicts. However, especially when

---

*Students need to learn to distinguish explanations from descriptions, like “war broke out,” or “chaos erupted.”*

---

teaching complicated events like the war in Vietnam, bypassing explanation in favor of description can be seductive. After all, there's so much *stuff* about the war in Vietnam: so many films; so many novels, short stories, and poetry; so many veterans who can come in and speak to the class. These are all vital resources, but unless built on a foundation of causes for the war, using these can be more voyeuristic than educational.

## Roots of a War

A video I've found useful in prompting students to explore a bit of the history of Vietnam and the sources of U.S. involvement is the first episode of the PBS presentation *Vietnam: A Television History* [available in many libraries]. Called "Roots of a War," it offers an overview of Vietnamese resistance to French colonialism (which began in the mid-19th century) and to the Japanese occupation during World War II. My students find the video a bit dry, so in order for students not to feel overwhelmed by information, I pause it often to talk about key incidents and issues. Some of the images are powerful: Vietnamese men carrying white-clad Frenchmen on their backs, and French picture-postcards of the severed heads of Vietnamese resisters—cards that troops sent home to sweethearts in Paris, as the narrator tells us, inscribed, "With kisses from Hanoi." The goal of French colonialism is presented truthfully and starkly: "To transform Vietnam into a source of profit." The narrator explains, "Exports of rice stayed high even if it meant the peasants starved." Significantly, many of those who tell the story of colonialism and the struggle against it are Vietnamese. Instead of the nameless generic peasants of so many Hollywood Vietnam

War movies, here, at least in part, Vietnamese get to tell their own stories.

Toward the end of the episode, Dr. Tran Duy Hung recounts the Vietnamese independence celebration in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square following the Japanese defeat—and occurring on the very day of the formal Japanese surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, September 2, 1945: "I can say that the most moving moment was when President Ho Chi Minh climbed the steps, and the national anthem was sung. It was the first time that the national anthem of Vietnam was sung in an official ceremony. Uncle Ho then read the Declaration of Independence, which was a

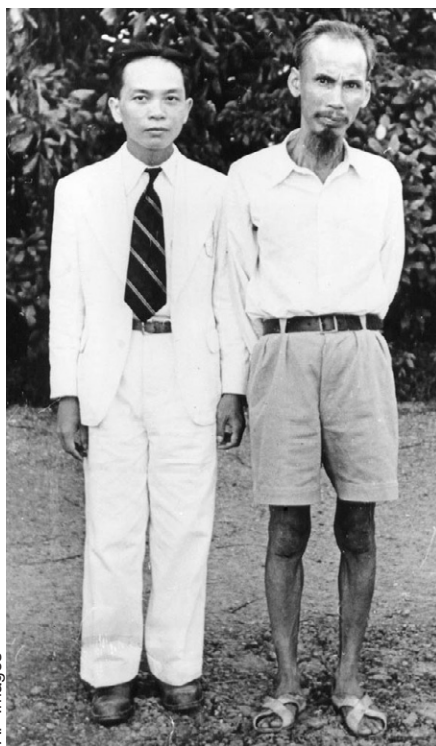
short document. As he was reading, Uncle Ho stopped and asked, 'Compatriots, can you hear me?' This simple question went into the hearts of everyone there. After a moment of silence, they all shouted, 'Yes, we hear you.' And I can say that we did not just shout with our mouths, but with all our hearts. The hearts of over 400,000 people standing in the square then."

Dr. Hung recalls that moments later, a small plane began circling overhead and swooped down over the crowd. When people recognized the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag, they cheered enthusiastically, believing its presence to be a kind of independence ratification.

The image of the 1945 crowd

in northern Vietnam applauding a U.S. military aircraft offers a poignant reminder of historical could-have-beens.

Although this is not the episode's conclusion, I stop the video at this point. How will the U.S. government respond? Will it recognize an independent Vietnam or stand by as France attempts to reconquer its lost colony? Will the United States even aid France in this effort? This



AP Images

*Ho Chi Minh, right, became president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Vo Nguyen Giap, left, was Minister of the Interior.*

is a choice-point that would influence the course of human history, and through role play I want to bring it to life in the classroom. Of course, I could simply tell them what happened, or give them materials to read. But a role play that brings to life the perspectives of key social groups, allows students to experience, rather than just hear about, aspects of this historical crossroads. As prelude, we read the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, available in the fine collection, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, edited by Marvin Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and H. Bruce Franklin [New York: Grove Press, 1985], as well as in *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, edited by Gareth Porter [New York: New American Library, 1981].

## Role-Playing a Historic Choice

I include here the two core roles of the role play: members of the Viet Minh and French government/business leaders. In teaching this period, I sometimes include other roles: U.S. corporate executives, labor activists, farmers, and British government officials deeply worried about their own colonial interests, as well as Vietnamese landlords allied with the French—this last, to reflect the class as well as anticolonial dimension of the Vietnamese independence movement.

Each group has been invited to a meeting with President Harry S. Truman—which, as students learn later, never took place—to present its position on the question of Vietnamese independence. I portray President Truman and chair the meeting. Members of each group must explain:

- How they were affected by World War II;
- Why the United States should care what happens in Vietnam, along with any responsibilities the U.S. might have (and in the case of the French, why the United States should care what happens in France);
- Whether the United States should feel threatened by communism in Vietnam, or in the case of the French leaders, France;
- What they want President Truman to do about the Vietnamese Declaration of

Independence—support it, ignore it, oppose it;

- And whether the United States government should grant loans to the French, and if it supports loans, what strings should be attached.

Obviously, the more knowledge students have about pre-1945 Vietnam, France, and World War II in general, as well as the principles of communism, the more sophisticated treatment they'll be able to give to their roles. [An excellent film on U.S. Communism is *Seeing Red*, produced by Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, available from New Day Films, and can be helpful.] However, even without a thorough backgrounding, the lesson works well to introduce the main issues in this important historical choice-point.

As in other role plays, to work students into their roles, I may ask them to create an individual persona by writing an interior monologue—one's inner thoughts—on their post-war hopes and fears. Students can read these to a partner, or share them in a small group.

In the meeting/debate, students-as-Viet Minh argue on behalf of national independence. They may remind Truman of the help that the Viet Minh gave to the Allies during World War II, denounce French colonialism, and recall the United States' own history in throwing off European colonialism.

The students-as-French counter that the would-be Vietnamese rulers are communists and therefore a threat to world peace. Like the Vietnamese, the French remind Truman that they too were World War II allies and are now in need of a helping hand. In order to revive a prosperous and capitalist France, they need access to the resources of Vietnam. Because the United States has an interest in a stable Europe, one that is non-communist and open for investment, they should support French efforts to regain control of Vietnam.

I play a cranky Truman, and poke at inconsistencies in students' arguments. I especially prod each side to question and criticize the other directly. [For suggestions on conducting a role play, see "Role Plays: Show, Don't Tell," in the Rethinking Schools publication *Rethinking Our*

*Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Vol. 1*, pp. 130-132. <http://rethinkingschools.org/publication/roc1/roc1.shtml>]

The structure of the meeting itself alerts students to the enormous power wielded by the United States government at the end of World War II, and that the government was maneuvering on a global playing field. As students come to see, U.S. policy makers did not decide the Vietnam question solely, if at all, on issues of morality, or even on issues related directly to Vietnam. As historian Gabriel Kolko writes in *The Roots of American Foreign Policy*, “even in 1945 the United States regarded Indo-China almost exclusively as the object of Great Power diplomacy and conflict. ... [A]t no time did the desires of the Vietnamese themselves assume a role in the shaping of United States policy.”

Following the whole-group debate, we shed our roles to debrief. I ask: What were some of the

points brought out in discussion that you agreed with? Do you think Truman ever met with Vietnamese representatives? What would a U.S. president take into account in making a decision like this? What did Truman decide? Which powerful groups might seek to influence Vietnam policy?

How should an important foreign policy question like this one be decided?

To discover what Truman did and why, we study a timeline drawn from a number of books on Vietnam, including the one by Kolko mentioned above, his *Anatomy of a War* [Pantheon, 1985], Marilyn Young’s *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* [HarperCollins, 1991], *The Pentagon Papers*

[Bantam, 1971], as well as excerpts from Chapter 18 of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* [HarperCollins, 2003]. It’s a complicated history involving not only the French and Vietnamese, but also Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist Chinese forces, the British, and the Japanese. What

---

*A role play that brings to life the perspectives of key social groups, allows students to experience, rather than just hear about, aspects of this historical crossroads.*

---



AP Images

*Marine commando forces of the U.S.-supported French Expeditionary Corps land in Vietnam on July 27, 1950.*

becomes clear is that at the close of World War II, the United States was in a position to end almost 100 years of French domination in Vietnam. The French government was desperate for U.S. aid and would not have defied an American decision to support Vietnamese independence. Nevertheless, U.S. leaders chose a different route, ultimately contributing about \$2 billion to the French effort to reconquer Vietnam.

While a separate set of decisions led to the commitment of U.S. troops in Vietnam, the trajectory was set in the period just after World War II. The insights students glean from this role play inform our study of Vietnam throughout the unit. Along with the timeline, just mentioned, which traces U.S. economic and military aid to France, we follow up with a point-by-point study of the 1954 Geneva agreement ending the war between the French and Vietnamese; and from the perspective of peasants and plantation laborers in southern Vietnam, students evaluate the 1960 revolutionary platform of the National Liberation Front. Students later read a number of quotations from scholars and politicians offering opinions on why we fought in Vietnam. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon assert in almost identical language that the United States was safeguarding freedom and democracy in South Vietnam. President Kennedy: “For the last decade we have been helping the South Vietnamese to maintain their independence.” Johnson: “We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.” Students ponder these platitudes: If it were truly interested in Vietnam’s “independence,” why did the U.S. government support French colonialism?

On April 7, 1965, President Johnson gave a major policy speech on Vietnam at Johns

Hopkins University. Here Johnson offered a detailed explanation for why the United States was fighting in Vietnam [included in *The Vietnam Reader*, edited by Marcus Raskin and Bernard Fall, pp. 343-350]. Embedded in the speech was his version of the origins of the war. As Johnson, I deliver large portions of the speech, and students as truth-seeking reporters pepper me with critical questions and arguments drawn from the role play and other readings and activities. Following this session, they write a critique of LBJ’s speech. Afterwards, we evaluate how several newspapers and journals—*The New York Times*, *The Oregonian*, *I.F. Stone’s Weekly*—actually covered President Johnson’s address.

None of the above is meant to suggest the outlines of a comprehensive curriculum on the Vietnam war. Here, I’ve concentrated on the need for engaging students in making explanations for the origins of U.S. government policy toward Vietnam. But policy choices had intimate implications for many people’s lives, and through novels, short stories, poetry, interviews, and their own imaginations, students need also to

explore the personal dimensions of diplomacy and political economy. And no study of the war would be complete without examining the dynamics of the massive movement to end that war. [The best film for this is *Sir! No Sir!*, available from [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org), which looks at the antiwar movement within the U.S. military.] Especially when confronted with the horrifying images of slaughtered children in a film like *Remember My Lai*, the chilling sobs of a young Vietnamese boy whose father has been killed, in *Hearts and Minds*, or the anguish of American and Vietnamese women in *Regret to Inform*, our students need to know that millions of people tried to put



Viet Minh and French officer in Hanoi, October 12, 1954. Following the Geneva Accords, the French withdrew from Vietnam.

AP Images

AP Images



Citizens of Hanoi, Vietnam, at a victory parade in October of 1954, after peace talks at Geneva led to the withdrawal of French colonial forces from all of Indochina. The United States had supported the French during the war.

a stop to the suffering—including U.S. soldiers themselves. And students should be encouraged to reflect deeply on which strategies for peace were most effective. Howard Zinn movingly describes this widespread opposition to the war in Chapter 18 of *A People’s History of the United States*.

Indeed there is an entire history of resistance to which students have been denied access. For example, let them read the brilliant critique of the war that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave at Riverside Church, on April 4, 1967, exactly a year before his death:

*What do the [Vietnamese] peasants think as we ally ourselves with the landlords and as we refuse to put any action into our many words concerning land reform? What do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe? Where are the roots of the independent Vietnam we claim to be building? Is it among these voiceless ones?*

Or let students listen to similar thoughts expressed more caustically in Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War,” or more satirically in Country Joe and the Fish’s “Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag.”

If we take the advice of the Walt Rostows and the textbook writers, and begin our study of the Vietnam war in the late 1950s, it’s impossible to think intelligently about the U.S. role. The presidents said we were protecting the independence of “South Vietnam.” Students need to travel back at least as far as 1945 to think critically about the invention of the country of South Vietnam that

was intended to justify its “protection.” The tens of thousands of U.S. deaths and the millions of Vietnamese deaths, along with the social and ecological devastation of Indochina require the harsh light of history to be viewed clearly.

If we are to give peace a chance, then we must think honestly about the roots of war. ■

**Bill Bigelow** (bbpdx@aol.com) is the curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.



This article was previously published in *Rethinking Schools* magazine. To order back issues of the magazine or to subscribe, visit [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org) or call 800-669-4192.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
www.rethinkingschools.org  
800-669-4192

**Teaching for Change**  
www.teachingforchange.org  
800-763-9131

# French Business/ Government Leader

Time: Fall/Winter, 1945-46

YOU ARE A FRENCH BUSINESS EXECUTIVE and high-ranking government leader. Times are very difficult in France. During World War II, thousands of your people were killed, many factories were destroyed, crops burned, and animals killed. This has left your economy almost in ruins.

Because of hard times, many workers and poor people have turned to the Communists. The Communist Party is now the largest political party in France. An important reason the Communists are so popular is because they played a leading role in the resistance to the Nazis. You believe that, ultimately, the Communists want to take over the property of the wealthy and have all factories run by the government. The French Communist Party denies this, but you don't believe them.

As you see it, unless the economy quickly gets better, the Communists will be elected to control the government. But how to rebuild the economy?

Before World War II, France had a number of colonies around the world, the most important in Indochina, which includes the country of Vietnam. France got most of its rubber from Vietnam—also much coal, tin, and tungsten.

French businesses owned plantations and made great profits selling rice to other countries in Asia. Your government also forced the Vietnamese to buy certain French products, such as Bordeaux wine, so French companies made profits that way as well.

But here's your problem. During the war, the Japanese took control of Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, organized

an army, the Viet Minh, to fight against the Japanese occupation. With Japan now defeated, the Viet Minh have declared Vietnam an independent country. However, as far as you are concerned, Vietnam is still French.

You are angry. The Viet Minh have already given some of the French-owned land to Vietnamese poor people—peasants. They have said that the wealth of Vietnam will now belong only to the Vietnamese.

If you can't take back your colony in Vietnam, French businesses will suffer tremendously. However, you don't have enough money to pay for a war against Ho Chi Minh. You need the support of a more powerful country to win back Vietnam from the Communists. The most powerful country in the world is the United States.

You also need the help of a stronger country to rebuild the cities, towns, and industries of France. You need loans and grants to buy American machinery and farm products like wheat and corn so you can get back on your feet. Remember, too, that if your economy doesn't begin to get stronger, the French Communists will probably win elections by offering the poor and workers some of the wealth of the rich.

But the United States needs you, too. They want to sell their extra products to you and to invest their extra money in French businesses. You might point out to the American president that, if the Communists come to power, they won't allow U.S. corporations to invest freely and take their profits back home. ■

# Viet Minh Member

Time: Fall/Winter, 1945-46

YOU ARE A MEMBER OF THE VIET MINH and a supporter of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This is the first all-Vietnamese government in almost a hundred years—since the French first took over your country.

You are from a peasant family in Vietnam. You grew up hating the French colonialists who controlled your country. The French say they brought “civilization” to Vietnam, but in your eyes they brought nothing but misery.

In order to force the Vietnamese to work for them, the French put taxes on all “huts,” as they called them, and on salt—an important ingredient in the Vietnamese diet. The only way you could get money to pay the hated taxes was to go to work for the French—on their railroads, in their mines, on their plantations. Conditions were hard. Many people died of injuries or diseases.

The French drafted your people to fight in their wars against other countries. Of course, you had no vote. The French provided few services; in Vietnam, they built more jails than schools and hospitals combined.

The French made fun of your music, your art, your religion. They even outlawed your village’s homemade rice wine and forced you to buy their stronger French wine. The French also required each village to purchase a certain amount of opium.

Angered by all these injustices, you joined Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh, an organization fighting

for the independence of Vietnam. Like Ho Chi Minh, you became a Communist, believing that everyone should share the wealth of Vietnam, not just a few foreigners and the rich Vietnamese landlords who do their dirty work.

In 1940, the Japanese invaded Vietnam and you switched from fighting the French to fighting the Japanese. During the war you helped the United States, providing them valuable information and rescuing pilots who had been shot down.

When the Japanese were defeated, the Viet Minh took control of the country and proclaimed independence. This independence has begun to make a real difference in many people’s lives. For the first time in Vietnam’s history, national elections were held. People could choose their own leaders, Communist or non-Communist.

A literacy program was launched that some say taught as many as two and a half million people to read and write. The Viet Minh took over much of the land that the French had stolen and gave it back to the peasants. The new government passed a law legalizing labor unions and strikes and proclaiming an eight-hour workday.

Your goal is freedom and independence for your country. But the French appear to want to take back Vietnam. They complain about Communists like Ho Chi Minh. You will fight to the death before your country is made a colony again. You hope the United States government will support you in this freedom struggle. ■