

Regret to Inform Teaching Guide

Dear Teachers,

When my young husband and childhood sweetheart was killed in Vietnam on February 29, 1968, I did not know that his death not only destroyed our lives together but it would set me on a course of deep questioning and discovery.



It took me 20 years to begin the exploration that resulted in the film *Regret to Inform*. When I began writing in 1988, I knew that I wanted to look at war through the eyes of women, because almost everything I knew about war is through men's experience — surely valid, but only one point of view. Most of what I learned about war when I was in school was the stories of significant battles. Everything I had been taught was from the American point of view. Everywhere I went in the United States and Vietnam, widows wanted to become a voice for peace, asking, "What can I do to help end war? In Vietnam, I heard again and again, "If people could just come here and see what war does, they'd never want to do it again." My hope in making *Regret to Inform* is that by understanding these women's stories from both sides, viewers will begin to see that the enemy is war itself.

With this teaching guide, I invite you to use *Regret to Inform* to explore the Vietnam War with your students. The film and the guide give young people a different way to begin thinking about war in general, and the Vietnam War in particular. This teaching guide evolved with the input of a dynamic group of educators and activists who helped shape both the direction and content of the guide. We are delighted that Bill Bigelow, a member of this group, has written the curriculum, drawing from his experiences with *Rethinking Schools* and of teaching high school social studies students. The activities in this curriculum provide many ways to engage your students — through experiential activities, discussion, writing and thinking — across disciplines including social studies and language arts.



We encourage you to share your reactions to the film with us, and tell us how the activities worked in your classroom and any other ideas you have. We hope to build from this guide to a more comprehensive curriculum that explores the larger issues of war and peace. Please visit our website at www.regrettoinform.org for more information and to share your thoughts.

Since I first began this project in 1988 my hope was to open a dialogue with students and teachers around the country. I want to thank each and every teacher who will discuss the disturbing, emotional, challenging issues raised by this film. My deepest respect and gratitude goes to you, teachers who are committed to the work of helping to open the hearts and minds of young people to the critical issues of the time. There is no work that is more important, and I hope that my film helps you with your work.

Sincerely,

Barbara Sonneborn
Producer, Director *Regret to Inform*

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Introduction

This teaching guide begins with a Pre-Viewing Activity in which students “meet” the women they will be seeing in the film. Additional lessons involve viewing the film and choosing from several different writing and discussion options. Reproducible classroom handouts are also included. For teachers who are exploring the Vietnam War in greater depth, the “Further Teaching Ideas” section provides more suggestions for classroom activities.

Students who have learned about the history associated with the Vietnam War will have a greater depth of understanding in doing the activities in this guide. We include a synopsis of Howard Zinn’s chapter, *The Impossible Victory* here. There is more detailed historical information, as well as suggested literature, available on the project website at www.regrettoinform.org/education

We invite you to view the film and read through all the possible activities before choosing what is most appropriate for you and your students.

Synopsis of Howard Zinn chapter *The Impossible Victory*

The *Regret to Inform* Teaching Guide suggests a variety of experiential activities for use with the film *Regret to Inform*. These activities will mean more to students if they are combined with readings about the history of the Vietnam War. We recommend an excellent chapter on the war, *The Impossible Victory*, from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. A synopsis of the chapter follows. You can read and download the complete chapter at our website www.regrettoinform.org/education. The website also includes historical information from different Vietnamese perspectives.

SYNOPSIS

This chapter by Howard Zinn, *The Impossible Victory*, from his book *A People's History of the United States*, offers teachers and students a brief but vivid history of the Vietnam War. With direct quotations from government officials, soldiers, anti-war activists and civil rights leaders forming the core of the story, the Vietnam War becomes a living history that will capture the interest and passions of students.

The Impossible Victory begins with the short period in which Vietnam was free of foreign domination in 1945 and ends in 1975 with the ultimate failure of the United States, a military giant backed with modern technology, to impose its will on a poor, largely peasant, country. Zinn describes how and why the United States moved in early to prevent the unification of Vietnam, establishing South Vietnam as an American sphere with Ngo Dinh Diem as head of the government in Saigon. He traces the opposition in the countryside that grew alongside this U.S. involvement, beginning as an incipient guerrilla movement which solidified with the formation of the mass-based National Liberation Front in 1960. The NLF was an alternative to the U.S.-imposed Saigon government, enacting significant social changes, like land reform and promising greater self control for the peasants.

The chapter carefully chronicles the U.S. military effort in Vietnam, including a full description of the Gulf of Tonkin episode in 1964 and the lies told about it to the American public by their highest officials; the steady escalation of the war, the cover-ups, and continuing deception; the bombing of North Vietnam and the massive human suffering it caused; the massacres of civilians and the role of the CIA and American advisors in the brutality. Zinn uses abundant quotes from participants to reveal the truths behind the events described.

Alongside the history of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the resistance among the Vietnamese the chapter also traces the history of the antiwar movement in the United States. From its early appearance from within the civil rights movement to its mushrooming strength in the late 1960s and early seventies, the antiwar effort and its success in changing the course of history unfolds. Zinn discusses the release of the *Pentagon Papers* and the activities of clergy, students, civil rights leaders, soldiers and veterans in the antiwar effort. The chapter also covers the attack on protesters by the National Guardsmen at Kent State University which resulted in the deaths of four students, as well as the general student strike that occurred in its aftermath.

Readers will be drawn into the history of the Vietnam War through Professor Zinn's dramatic telling of it. The courage of individuals, the motives of governments, and the suffering and moral dilemmas of war will come alive for students and deepen their understanding of *Regret to Inform* and the accompanying classroom activities.

This synopsis was written by
Nancy Carlsson-Paige.

Regret to Inform: Meeting the Women

Barbara Sonneborn made *Regret to Inform* because she wants to end war. “I want people to look war in the face and ask themselves, ‘Am I going to allow this to happen ever again?’ I want people to so deeply realize the humanity of other human beings that they won’t be able to kill them.”

It’s an aim that filmmakers and teachers ought to share. How can we encourage people to consistently attempt to put themselves in the positions of others around the world? How can we help nurture an empathy so profound that war is unthinkable?

Ultimately, this kind of empathy is not merely the product of imagination, but of sweeping social and economic changes. But it can begin anywhere and everywhere, classrooms included.

This first lesson in the *Regret to Inform* teaching guide invites students to “become” many of the women portrayed in the film. These are women whose lives were savaged by the Vietnam War — known more aptly in Vietnam as the American War. Here, students assume the personas of American and Vietnamese women through quotes, and then introduce themselves to one another as they complete questionnaires. It’s a pre-viewing activity that seeks to acquaint students with some of the individuals and issues they will encounter in the film. It leaves them curious and eager to see the women whom they “met” in class.

- 1 Copies of *Regret to Inform: The Women*.** Cut up the descriptions of the individual women so that there are enough to allow each student to portray one of the women. (There are only twelve of these, so there will be some duplication, with two or more students representing the same woman. This won’t be a problem in the activity.)
- 2 Copies of *Regret to Inform: Meeting the Women* —** enough for each student to have his or her own copy.
- 3 Adhesive name labels —** enough so that each student can have one.

Suggested Procedure

1. Begin by telling students that they are going to watch a film called *Regret to Inform* about a number of American and Vietnamese women, and how each was affected by the war in Vietnam.

Introduce the pre-viewing activity by explaining that the film was made by Barbara Sonneborn, whose husband and childhood sweetheart was killed in Vietnam in 1968. Tell them that before the class watches the film, every student will assume the identity of one of the women.

Some teachers may be reluctant to ask their male students to portray women. Emphasize to students that you are not expecting, nor do you want, for them to “act” like women. The aim is empathy, not performance. My experience is that if presented properly, male students quickly lose their self-consciousness about this activity.

2. Distribute one of the women’s descriptions to each student. Give sufficient time so that they can read these carefully. Tell them that their goal is to commit as much of what is in each of the descriptions to memory, so that when they meet with one another they will not need to constantly refer to the written “roles”.

One way to help students internalize the information in these descriptions is to ask them to write briefly from their individ-

ual’s point of view. For example: Write a paragraph describing how you were affected by the war in Vietnam.

3. Distribute the adhesive name labels. Have students write the name of their individual on the labels and affix them so that these will be visible as they circulate throughout the classroom.

4. Distribute the handout ***Regret to Inform: Meeting the Women***, to each student. Review the questions with the class. Tell students that they will circulate around the classroom, meeting other women and trying to find someone who can help answer one of the six questions on the handout. Emphasize that they will need to find a different woman for each question, so once they have concluded a conversation with an individual, they should move on. Encourage them to answer each question as fully as they are able to. Tell them that it’s not a race, so there is no need to rush. Also, emphasize that they are not to copy information off of each other’s role, but to acquire knowledge about one another from conversation. Note that not all the students-as-women will need to meet one another, but they will be able to meet a substantial number.

5. Begin the activity. Monitor discussions to ensure that people are really listening to one another and not treating it as a contest to see who can finish first. I like to participate in the activity as a student, and assign myself one of the women to portray.

6. After it appears that most students have completed answering the questions on their **Meeting the Women** sheets, call time and have them return to their seats. I find that after an out-of-their-seats activity like this, it helps to focus the class by having them stand back and reflect in writing.

Questions to write from might include:

- What general statements can you make about how these women were affected by the war in Vietnam?
- What questions are you left with? What would you like to know more about?

7. In a whole-class discussion, review their answers to each of the six questions on the handout and conclude by discussing the two previous questions. A couple of additional questions:

- How does it appear that the Vietnam War is in many ways still continuing?
- What differences did you notice in how the American and Vietnamese women talked about the effects of the war?

The aim of discussion at this point is to raise issues and questions. Students will have a richer discussion after they have seen the film.

Note: Should it be helpful at any point during this activity, pictures of the women who appear in *Regret to Inform*, along with their names, are posted on the web at www.pbs.org/pov/regret/bg_meet.html.

Note

Regret to Inform: The Women



Barbara Sonneborn (American):

Bār-bah-rah Sōhn-ah-born

“On my 24th birthday, I got the news that my husband, Jeff [Gurvitz] had been killed in Vietnam. He was trying to rescue his wounded radio operator during a mortar attack. We had been sweethearts from the time I was fourteen. For years I tried to put the war behind me. One morning, the twentieth anniversary of his death, I woke up and I knew I had to go to Vietnam. I didn’t know what I’d find there; I just knew I had to go. I feel good about my life now; I’m married to a man I love deeply. Yet Jeff’s death and my feelings about the war are still not resolved for me.”

“I remember before Jeff left, we talked about how afraid I was that he would get killed. We never talked about the fact that he would have to kill people, maybe even a child. I realized that we hadn’t ever talked honestly about what war means.”

From a letter Sonneborn wrote her husband years after he died: “Do people ever stop to think that somebody has to prepare these bodies to be shipped back to their families? Perhaps for the undertaker it’s rather cold and impersonal. But what merciless human being took your wedding ring off and didn’t wash it before it was put into some envelope to be sent to me so that when it arrived, it was encrusted with mud and blood, along with your dog tags, all of which were bloody and filthy. I couldn’t believe ‘they’ sent that stuff back to me without washing it. I remember sitting on the floor and opening up that package, the personal effects of Jeffrey Gurvitz — rings, watch, wallet, my letters to you . . . But the stuff that was personally on your body, covered in blood, that’s what drove me crazy. Your last lifeblood soaked into the ground in Vietnam, Jeff. That land, with your blood in it, belongs a little bit to you.”

April Burns (American):

Ay’-pril Būrnz

“We met in a Biology class. I was an art and dance major, so I reluctantly went into this class and I saw this young man sitting, and I thought . . . that’s him, hmm, yes. It was real fast and very strong. It was falling in love as I had always imagined it to be.”

“I received [a letter from my husband, Bill] after he died [fighting in Vietnam], after I knew he . . . he was killed. One day I went out and there was this letter. Then I thought, ‘Well maybe he’s not dead! Oh, they made a mistake — you know — this is proof.’ Then I read the date on it and I realized . . .”

Later, “I received this wallet in the mail, in a package . . . with some letters in it that I had written to my husband and a few other things. And when I . . . when I received it, it had mud on it . . . it had mud on it. And, that was the closest I felt I could get to him physically. Something I got to at least smell the earth of Vietnam and get some sort of feeling of what he might have experienced — what he was surrounded with.”

Lula Bia (American):

Lóo-lah Byé-ah

“My husband was a rodeo bull rider. I would go along with him; we’d go to all the reservation rodeos. So we just kind of got close together. He was very proud of being an American. And being a Navajo Indian even made . . . made him prouder. I was really glad that he could do his duty for his country.”

“I only received three letters . . . and he said that he didn’t really want to say anything about what was going on. He didn’t want to depress me or worry me and so he said he would just try to tell me how he was doing, how the weather was, that’s all he would write. He said he wouldn’t write about anything else. I don’t know what he meant, but he must have meant something ‘cause that’s what it said and I often wondered about that. I often wondered about — what did he have to do?”

“They didn’t find his body, they sent just the remains of his body and they identified it, his body by his dental plates, and the remains were just put in a plastic bag and his uniform was on top of it.”

“I still have hope . . . maybe, somewhere he’s . . . he’s alive there.”

Barbara Sonneborn



Norma Banks**Norma Banks (American):***Nórma Bánk*

My husband, Michael, “refused to talk about [his experiences in the Vietnam War] for three or four years after we were married and it was only at me insisting to know just what it was like. I was real curious about what it was like. He really did not like the idea of having to kill, but he didn’t have very, you know, any choice.”

“It started off with his joints; they bothered him. Then as time went on, he just wasn’t well. He started suspecting that it might have been Agent Orange. And he would just say, ‘Well, if you’re living in the swamps, then you know, Norma, eventually it’s going to get to me.’ They would always want him to describe what he felt, and he would say it’s pain but it’s not like a pain of a stab wound or a puncture. He felt that it was on the inside and it would feel like things just creeping, in his blood, creeping just all over him.”

“He would just break, break out from the bottom of his feet, just all over his body, and he just itched 24 hours a day, all day, every day.”

“I just felt so bad for him, ‘cause there was really nothing you could do. He would fall asleep, but he could never sleep very long, he would just jump up . . . and then, it might wake me up and I could just rub his back and then it would be enough to get him back to sleep again.”

“One night Michael got a real bad bout and he vomited and there was all this black stuff and, that was blood.”

“Sometimes the effects of a war don’t happen right away.”

**Phan Ngoc Dung (Vietnamese):***Fáhn Nyúk Zúng*

“My husband often said that once our country gained independence, life would surely become normal for us.”

“Of course, in the United States, sisters, mothers, and wives also feel pain when children and husbands are lost in war. But we lived in the country where the war was going on. The death and destruction were horrible, so painful. We hope that there will never be war again, not anywhere, so that nobody, especially women and children, will have to endure that pain, that misery, ever again. It is very, very painful.”

“The city police force, under the American advisors, came to search my house and arrested my husband, my sister, and my daughter. My daughter was just over three years old. . . .”

“We were all put in different rooms and tortured separately. When I saw my daughter, she said to me, ‘Mother, I saw father. He couldn’t walk. Someone had to help him — he was limping.’ That was my daughter’s last image of her father.”

Diane Van Renselaar (American):*Dí-yán Ván Rén-se-lahr*

“He went over to fly. He was very patriotic. He’d spent his life playing football, and a navy attack squadron is like a flying football team. He was a member of the team and he couldn’t let the team down.”

“I don’t think he wanted to be an aggressor. And I think he was unwillingly cast in that role the moment that he started flying those missions over North Vietnam, and I think he knew it. I don’t think he articulated it to himself, but he knew that that was not something that he, that he wanted to do, even though he was following orders.”

“Is your husband a hero? Is he a murderer? What is he? Did he kill people over there? Yes, he probably did. ‘And were these people a threat to his country?’ No, they were not. I don’t see my husband as a murderer, but at the same time we have to look at it for what it is and . . . it is murder and is it justifiable?”



Grace Castillo (American):

Gréys Kas-tée-yo

My husband, David, “insisted on going [to Vietnam]. You know he had this crazy notion that he always wanted his son to be proud of him. And I would tell him: ‘He is proud of you.’ One day he came home, and said, ‘I enlisted.’”

“I was asleep and . . . it was like a dream, and I saw David, and he was walking and there was a field or a jungle or something, lots of shrubbery. And I kept trying to tell him, ‘Don’t go. Don’t go any further, stay away.’ And then there was an explosion.”

“I dropped my son off at preschool, went to work and that dream haunted me all day. So that night, there’s a telegram and the telegram read, ‘This is to inform you that your husband, Private First Class David Reeves Castillo, had been wounded.’ And it tells me that they’ve amputated the left leg above the knee, removed the right eye, he’s still in a coma and he has shrap-metal in the brain. And I contacted my physician, and he told me, ‘Grace, pray . . . pray he dies.’”

Dr. Nguyen My Hien (Vietnamese):

Wín Mé Hén

“The bomb dropped on top of the house, trapping my husband in the shelter. After the bombing, the people on the ground heard his cries for help. But the debris was so heavy, it took hours to reach him, and he was already dead. And to think, as a doctor I saved so many lives, but I couldn’t save his . . .”

“Once I had a dream that my husband came home, and he asked me, ‘Why are you so sad, darling? Why do you keep crying?’ I asked him what he wanted me to do. He said, ‘You must stop crying and go on with your life.’”

“Because of the war here in Vietnam we got used to being without our husbands. We just have to go on with our lives and make the best of it. That is our strength and courage as Vietnamese women.”

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan (Vietnamese/American):

Wín Nyúk Swán

I was born in the south of Vietnam and lost my first husband in the war. I left Vietnam in 1974 with my second husband, an American soldier.

One day, during a bombing when I was a teenager in Vietnam, “I was trying to run for my life, then I walk by my neighbor, an old man. He tries to reach to get water, and his legs were wiggling up, and he calls for help — help him to get out. I can’t stop to help him. I pretend that I never heard his voice, crying for help.”

“I decide who live and who die. I’m going to live; my neighbor die. My girlfriend was hiding with me and she wounded. And we don’t have a lot of food left. I took her portion, because I’m going to live. She badly wounded — she going to die — so I took her food for me. I’m fourteen-years-old, why do I have to force to make the decision like that? I don’t even trust my 24 year-old son with a lawn mower sometime, but I have to decide who gonna live, who going to die.”

Today, “I look at my husband. He has a scar on the face. I don’t have a scar. It’s so deep. Sometimes my pain comes up . . . right and sometimes my pain comes up wrong. Sometimes it comes up and it makes me think positive, and sometimes it comes up it just make me go into this stage that I don’t want to talk to anybody. I was so cold. I shut down everything.”

“In Vietnam, my neighbor’s husband died. My neighbor’s son died too. Sometime you ashamed to cry, because what makes my pain greater than my neighbor?”



Nguyen Ngoc Xuan



Charlotte Begay (American):

Shár-laht Beh-gáy

“My husband’s name was Calvin Harvey . . . He wanted to be patriotic. He wanted to help. But once he saw all of the killing of all the group, the Vietnamese, just looking like him — just about the same skin color, the same height — I think that really made him think, ‘What is he doing here?’”

When he came home from Vietnam, “he would just be physically there and not really concentrating on what you’re saying and the conversation would be so brief and then he’d say: ‘Oh, I gotta go now.’”

“And it was December, by Christmas, that he came home again all just — and it was snowing and it was cold. He came home, he says: ‘. . . I’m drunk again.’ And we just sat there talking about it, and then, too, in his condition he couldn’t really think about it. He says: ‘No, I really mean it. I’m gonna stop,’ he says. There was too many promises. Seems like that it’s never gonna happen and so I sat there all night outside just warming up his vehicle. And I just walked back in. The next day was Christmas day. I said, ‘I’m sorry. I think that I can’t handle it anymore. You have to go your way and I’ll go mine.’”

“I think it was good that we broke up because it had gotten to the point where he wanted to commit suicide.”

Tran Nghia (Vietnamese):

Tcháhn Nee-áh

“I have lived in war since my childhood. I grew up and married, but life was still hard. My husband died in the war. One child died from sickness. My other child was shot early one morning. After the Americans left, I returned to bury him. All the younger women had to run and hide. They were afraid of being raped.”

“When I was young, I had hatred in order to defend my country and my people. Now there are not many days left in my life and there is peace. I can see that we are all the same, people there and people here. But if the war had not ended, the younger generation would be fighting just as I did.”



Phan Ngoc Dung and her late husband

Nguyen Thi Hong (Vietnamese):

Wín Tée Hówng

“The Americans ambushed and captured me, and handed me over to the South Vietnamese army. They tortured me mercilessly. They hung me upside down from the ceiling by my ankles, and tied my big toes to a pole. They passed electrodes through the tips of each of my fingers, and through both my nipples. The cruelty that we experienced was longer than a river, higher than a mountain, deeper than an ocean.”

“I was walking on this road once and the [U.S.] planes came over, drenching me with Agent Orange. Lots of us were sprayed several times. We have many health problems. I have terrible arthritis and strange skin problems. Many people here have died young of cancer — sick suddenly, then dead. Lots of deformed babies. Lots.”

To filmmaker Barbara Sonneborn: “I am deeply touched by your visit and by your concern. I would like to send with you all the beautiful scenes that happened today. And please take them home to your people. And I hope there will be a good result — to help Vietnam heal the wounds of war. But the road from here to there is very difficult. But please try. And not just for us, you do that for yourself. And it will make us feel better that you tried.”

Regret to Inform: Meeting the Women

1 Find an American woman who carries physical or emotional scars from the war. Who is the woman? What are the scars? What caused them?

2 Find a Vietnamese woman who carries physical or emotional scars from the war. Who is the woman? What are the scars? What caused them?

3 If you are an American woman, find a Vietnamese woman; if you are a Vietnamese woman, find an American woman. Who is the woman? Compare how she was affected by the war with how you were affected.

4 Find a woman who would like to ask her husband something about the war in Vietnam. Who is the woman? What might she want to ask him?

5 Find a woman whose husband apparently fought in the war voluntarily. Who is the woman? Why did her husband fight? What happened to him?


6 Find a woman who you think was changed by the war in Vietnam. Who is the woman? How was she changed?

Watching *Regret to Inform*

The former Commander of U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, once commented on the people he said he had gone to help: “Well, the Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful; life is cheap in the Orient. And as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.” Attitudes like his numbed many Americans to the enormity of suffering in Southeast Asia, and simultaneously prevented many U.S. citizens from imagining viable Asian societies that didn’t need our “help.”

Regret to Inform foregrounds the humanity of Vietnamese women as it pairs their war-produced anguish — as well as their hopes — with those of American women. It demolishes caricatures of the unfeeling Asian that Westmoreland proposed years ago, but that still linger in American culture. *Regret to Inform* highlights common issues shared by U.S. and Vietnamese women, but resists the temptation to suggest a sameness of experience between the wives of American servicemen and their Asian counterparts.

The weaving together of American and Vietnamese stories in *Regret to Inform* offers students an intimate portrait of war. The activities described on the next page encourage students to draw on the film’s words and images to probe deeper into the women’s lives. Students watch the video, select from a number of imaginative writing choices, share their writing, and reflect on the layers of meaning they discover.

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- 1** A copy of the video, *Regret to Inform*.

2 A class set of the map of Vietnam, charting Barbara Sonneborn’s journey to Que Son, where her husband, Jeff Gurvitz, was killed.

3 A class set of *Regret to Inform*: Writing Choices.

4 A class set of *Regret to Inform*: Film Quotes.

5 A class set of “Two Women” to use as a writing prompt with students.

Materials Needed

Suggested Procedure

1. Review some of the issues and questions that were raised by students in the discussion of the women that each of them portrayed and met in the first activity.

2. Early in *Regret to Inform*, filmmaker Barbara Sonneborn says that, “For me, Vietnam is the land of my imagination.” Ask students what they know about Vietnam. What does the word “Vietnam” conjure up for them? Is it a place, a culture, a people — or is it merely a war? How do they imagine the land of Vietnam?

3. Tell students that they will be writing poems and interior monologues from *Regret to Inform*, so as they watch they should take notes on:

- images that have an impact on them,
- choices that individuals in the film confronted, and
- things people say that strike them.

[“Interior monologues” are simply what we imagine a particular individual may have been thinking at a particular moment. The best of these will be provoked by students reflecting on vexing choices that individuals faced or on possible reactions to incidents that had a powerful emotional impact on someone.]

4. Distribute the map of Vietnam and indicate that in the film Sonneborn travels from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) to Que Son, where her husband was killed.

5. If possible, have students watch the video in one sitting. *Regret to Inform* does not bombard viewers with facts. Its power as a teaching tool derives from its images and stories, and is cumulative as these are revealed.

6. The film will affect students differently. It’s a good idea to pause before launching a discussion or beginning the writing assignments suggested here. You might simply ask students to turn to someone else and talk about how the film made them feel. Or they might list words that come into their heads to describe the film or their reactions to it.

Ask students about the individuals, images or situations that made an impression on them. At this point the aim is simply to allow students to share their initial reactions. You might list these on the board or overhead, as each student comment may eventually trigger writing ideas.

Another possibility is to ask students about the questions that the film leaves them with, as these will be of continuing importance as students further explore the causes and effects of the U.S. war in Vietnam.

7. My preference is to ask students to write before launching a full discussion of *Regret to Inform*, as the writing will almost always deepen their insights. If you prefer to discuss the video first, see point #12 below for some ideas on discussion questions.

8. Distribute the student handout, **Regret to Inform: Writing Choices**. Read over the interior monologue suggestions with students. Ask them to look back over the list of images and situations that the class generated immediately after watching the video. Ask the class if there are any additional writing possibilities suggested by any of these.

9. Distribute the dialogue poem, “Two Women” [reproduced here from *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, Rethinking Schools, 1994.] Ask for two female students to volunteer as readers, and have them read the poem aloud back and forth, dialogue style. Afterwards, ask what situations in the video the poem reminds them of. On the Writing Choices handout, indicate some of the dialogue poem suggestions, and encourage students to think about writing from one of these, or another that they might imagine.

10. Finally, before they begin writing — the **Writing Choices** handouts offer students three choices, interior monologue, dialogue poem, or conversation — distribute **Regret to Inform: Film Quotes**. These might suggest further writing possibilities. Quotes like, “If you weren’t dead, you weren’t safe,” by Troung Thi Huoc, or Nguyen Ngoc Xuan’s comment that after the attack on her house, “nothing is black or white. It’s all grey, just like the smoke,” might suggest poem possibilities to students. The handout will be helpful as students think back over the film as well as to refer to during their discussion.

Writing Follow-up/Discussion

11. If you decide to have students share their writing with one another before discussing the film further, circle the students for a read-around. It's important that everyone be able to see one another. As they listen to each other's pieces, ask students to take notes on themes and images that recur in their writing.

12. The following are some possible discussion questions on their writing and on the film. To answer a number of these questions will require more historical context than is provided in the film. Ask students what else they would need to know in order to be more confident of their answers.

- From our writing, what aspects of *Regret to Inform* made the deepest impression on us?
- Did the film make us think differently about the Vietnamese people? How?
- The Vietnamese call it The American War. What are all the ways in which it was, and is, The American War? What are the implications of people in the U.S. calling it the Vietnam War? How does that influence how people here think about the war?
- When Barbara Sonneborn introduces why she chose to make *Regret to Inform*, she says, "The same unanswered questions that drew me to Vietnam made me want to meet other women who had lost their husbands as I had. Maybe by hearing their stories I could understand my own more deeply." What do you think she learned from journeying to Vietnam and from making the film? How did it change her?
- What do we learn from the widows that we might not have learned from their husbands, had they survived to tell their own "war stories"? (This question is in the *Regret to Inform* Television Race Initiative Facilitators Guide.)
- Barbara Sonneborn's husband, Jeff Gurvitz, and other veterans said that they went to Vietnam to serve their country. Do you think they served their country?
- What are some of the different reasons that American men chose to go to Vietnam? What do you think of these choices?



Nguyen Ngoc Xuan and Barbara Sonneborn

- Who or what do you think is responsible for Jeff's death?
- Diane Van Renselaar asks whether or not her husband was a murderer. What do you think? Were all combatants on all sides of the war murderers? Was Nguyen Thi Hong, the woman who fought with the National Liberation Front in the area where Jeff Gurvitz was killed, a murderer?
- Le Thi Ngot says that her son asked her, "Why did my father die?" What should she tell him? What should American mothers tell their children who ask the same question?
- At the end of the film, Nguyen Thi Hong says that we are on the road to healing, but that it is very difficult. What does it mean to heal the wounds of the war?
- In the film, Norma Banks says, "It isn't just the war is here and it's over. It starts when it ends." In what ways did the war begin after it ended?



Nguyen Thi Hong and Barbara Sonneborn light incense at Que Son to honor all those who lost their lives on both sides of the war.

- What did you see or hear in the film that leaves you hopeful? For example, how have people changed in positive ways following their experiences with the war?
- How is what you see and hear in *Regret to Inform* different from what you had learned about the Vietnam War up to this point?
- Does anything in the film remind you of other things you've studied this year? Does it remind you of anything else that's going on in the world today?
- Talk about why you think the United States could or could not be drawn into another war like Vietnam.

Regret to Inform: Writing Choices

INTERIOR MONOLOGUES

Put yourself in the position of someone portrayed in *Regret to Inform*. Write a detailed first-person reflection from one of these individual's perspectives. Some writing possibilities include:

Barbara Sonneborn, when she learns that her husband and childhood sweetheart, Jeff Gurvitz, has been killed.

Barbara Sonneborn, after she has learned Jeff has died, deciding whether or not to listen to the tape that he made in Vietnam.

April Burns, thinking about smashing the hand of her husband, Bill, so that he would not be able to go to Vietnam.

Grace Castillo's son, thinking about his dead father who went to Vietnam because "he always wanted his son to be proud of him."

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, deciding whether or not she wants to return to Vietnam as Barbara Sonneborn's translator.

Jeff Gurvitz, thinking about whether or not he will go to fight in Vietnam.

Diane Van Renselaar, after her husband returns to Vietnam having just told her that "he felt his number was coming up."

Truong Thi Le, sitting before an American filmmaker, telling her how the American soldiers killed nine members of her family.

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, thinking back over her life, asking herself whether or not she is a "bad person" or a "good person."

Grace Castillo, after her doctor told her to pray for her husband to die, because of the severity of his injuries.

April Burns, when she receives the package in the mail with her husband's wallet, with mud on it.

Norma Banks, as she rubs her husband's back to ease his pain from Agent Orange poisoning.

Le Thi Ngot, a Vietnamese woman whose husband was killed in the war, as her son asks, "Why did my father die?"

Diane Van Renselaar, thinking about the questions about her husband that she poses in the film: Is he a hero? Is he a murderer?

Barbara Sonneborn, as she walks around the region where her husband was killed.

Nguyen Thi Hong, when she learns that an American, Barbara Sonneborn, will be coming to see where her husband was killed. This is the area where Thi Hong's National Liberation Front unit was active during the American war.

Barbara Sonneborn, as she prepares to show this film to a group of American men who fought in Vietnam. Or, as she prepares to show this film for the first time in Vietnam.

Lula Bia, wondering why her husband would not write about what he was doing in Vietnam – wondering, "What did he have to do?"

Phan Ngoc Dung, when she is told to collaborate with the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, or her daughter and mother will be buried alive.

Any of the women interviewed in the film — American or Vietnamese — as she tries to compose a letter to her dead husband.

Any of the women interviewed in the film, visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. (Remember that the wall memorializes only the Americans who died in Vietnam.)

DIALOGUE POEMS

Use the poem “Two Women” as a model for two-voice poems written from the perspectives of people in *Regret to Inform*. Some possible pairings include:

- Barbara and Jeff
- Xuan and Barbara
- NLF commander, Nguyen Thi Hong, and Barbara
- Any woman portrayed in the film and her husband
- Any American woman and any Vietnamese woman in the film.
- A U.S. high school student and a Vietnamese high school student today.

Another imaginative writing choice

In *Regret to Inform*, Barbara Sonneborn says that “I remember before Jeff left, we talked about how afraid I was that he would get killed. We never talked about the fact that he would have to kill people, maybe even a child. I realized that we hadn’t ever talked honestly about what war means.”

Imagine and write that honest conversation about war between Barbara and her husband Jeff. Or, if you prefer, between any of the women in the film and her husband.

“Two Women”

This poem was written by a working class Chilean woman in 1973, shortly after Chile’s socialist president, Salvador Allende, was overthrown. A U.S. missionary translated the work and brought it with her when she was forced to leave Chile. This is to be read by two people, one reading the bold-faced type and one reading the regular type.

I am a woman.

I am a woman.

I am a woman born of a woman whose man owned a factory.

I am a woman born of a woman whose man labored in a factory.

I am a woman whose man wore silk suits, who constantly watched his weight.

I am a woman whose man wore tattered clothing, whose heart was constantly strangled by hunger.

I am a woman who watched two babies grow into beautiful children.

I am a woman who watched two babies die because there was no milk.

I am a woman who watched twins grow into popular college students with summers abroad.

I am a woman who watched three children grow, but with bellies stretched from no food.

But then there was a man;

But then there was a man;

And he talked about the peasants getting richer by my family getting poorer.

And he told me of days that would be better and he made the days better.

We had to eat rice.

We had rice.

We had to eat beans!

We had beans.

My children were no longer given summer visas to Europe.

My children no longer cried themselves to sleep.

And I felt like a peasant.

And I felt like a woman.

A peasant with a dull, hard, unexciting life.

Like a woman with a life that sometimes allowed a song.

And I saw a man.

And I saw a man.

And together we began to plot with the hope of the return to freedom.

I saw his heart begin to beat with hope of freedom, at last.

Someday, the return to freedom.

Someday freedom.

And then,

But then,

One day,

One day,

There were planes overhead and guns firing close by.

There were planes overhead and guns firing in the distance.

I gathered my children and went home.

I gathered my children and ran.

And the guns moved farther and farther away.

But the guns moved closer and closer.

And then, they announced that freedom had been restored!

And then they came, young boys really.

They came into my home along with my man.

They came and found my man.

Those men whose money was almost gone.

They found all of the men whose lives were almost their own.

And we all had drinks to celebrate.

And they shot them all.

The most wonderful martinis.

They shot my man.

And then they asked us to dance.

And they came for me.

Me.

For me, the woman.

And my sisters.

For my sisters.

And then they took us.

Then they took us.

They took us to dinner at a small private club.

They stripped from us the dignity we had gained.

And they treated us to beef.

And then they raped us.

It was one course after another.

One after another they came after us.

We nearly burst we were so full.

Lunging, plunging – sisters bleeding, sisters dying.

It was magnificent to be free again!

It was hardly a relief to have survived.

The beans have almost disappeared now.

The beans have disappeared.

The rice – I've replaced it with chicken or steak.

The rice, I cannot find it.

And the parties continue night after night to make up for all the time wasted.

And my silent tears are joined once more by the midnight cries of my children.

And I feel like a woman again.

They say, I am a woman.

The period of rice and beans for the poor woman in the poem occurs after the election of the socialist, Salvador Allende, as president of Chile. Allende was elected in 1970. He was overthrown in a military coup in September 1973 after a long period of destabilization launched by the wealthy classes and supported by the US government and US corporations such as International Telephone and Telegraph. Along with thousands of others, Allende was killed by the military. The coup, under the leadership of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, launched a period of severe hardship for the working and peasant classes.

From *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*; www.rethinkingschools.org

Regret to Inform: Film Quotes

Diane Van Renselaar:

He went over to fly. He was very patriotic. He'd spent his life playing football, and a navy attack squadron is like a flying football team. He was a member of the team and he couldn't let the team down.

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan:

I am fourteen at that time, and that's when the war actually touched my life. The bombs were dropping in my house. And everything we have, all the memories from my grandmother, my grandfather, everything go up to smoke and turn to ashes. I was confused. Why are they burning down my house, my neighbor's house? It's very confused to me. Then everything from there on, nothing is black or white. It's all grey, just like the smoke.

Barbara Sonneborn:

We call it the Vietnam War, but Xuan and everyone else I meet here call it the American War.

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan:

Until this day, when I run across an American man who was in Vietnam during the war, I look and see if I can find that eye again. Because he look — he has the horrified look in his eye as much as I do.

Barbara Sonneborn:

I remember before Jeff left, we talked about how afraid I was that he would get killed. We never talked about the fact that he would have to kill people, maybe

even a child. I realized that we hadn't ever talked honestly about what war means.

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan:

I decide who live and who die. I'm going to live; my neighbor die. My girlfriend was hiding with me and she wounded. And we don't have a lot of food left. I took her portion, because I'm going to live. She badly wounded — she going to die — so I took her food for me. I'm fourteen-years-old, why do I have to force to make the decision like that? I don't even trust my 24 year-old son with a lawn mower sometime, but I have to decide who gonna live, who going to die.

Charlotte Begay:

He wanted to be patriotic. He wanted to help. But once he saw all of the killing of all the group, the Vietnamese, just looking like him — just about the same skin color, the same height — I think that really made him think, "What is he doing here?"

Troung Thi Huoc:

My sister had a newborn baby. And it wasn't safe to stay in the house. So she had to take the baby and mingle in with the dead bodies. Like a ghost, she came out from under those corpses, but then she feared the planes would shoot her. If you weren't dead, you weren't safe.

Phan Thi Thuan:

All I remember is after the shooting — after the killing — if the wind blew the tree, they chopped down the tree. If the

cow moved, the cow got shot. And the chicken, duck, pig — anything alive was murdered.

Nguyen Thi Hong:

The Americans ambushed and captured me, and handed me over to the South Vietnamese army. They tortured me mercilessly. They hung me upside down from the ceiling by my ankles, and tied my big toes to a pole. They passed electrodes through the tips of each of my fingers, and through both my nipples. The cruelty that we experienced was longer than a river, higher than a mountain, deeper than an ocean.

Phan Ngoc Dung:

Of course, in the United States sisters, mothers and wives also feel pain when children and husbands are lost in war. But we lived in the country where the war was going on. The death and destruction were so horrible, so painful. We hope that there will never be war again, not anywhere, so that nobody, especially women and children, will have to endure that pain, that misery, ever again. It is very, very painful.

Jeff Gurvitz:

I tried to tell you in my letters how detached I feel from the whole situation. It's as if I were . . . it's as if I were a bystander at my own life, calmly watching myself do things that I never expected or desired to do, and merely marking time in a life which is too short to mark time in.

THE DREAMS

Barbara Sonneborn:

Last night I spent the whole night dreaming of countless horrible ways that Jeff might have been killed. Ways that other widows had told me their husbands died.

Lula Bia:

I would always dream about him. I couldn't really see him. His face would be turned.

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan:

I only see the arm, but the arm is really long . . . reaching out.

Grace Castillo:

I kept trying to tell him, "Don't go. Don't go any further, stay away."

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan:

I tried to reach out too and touch it, but I can't . . .

Grace Castillo:

And then there was an explosion.

Dr. Nguyen My Hien:

Once I had a dream that my husband came home, and he asked me "Why are you so sad darling? Why do you keep crying?" I asked him what he wanted me to do. He said, "You must stop crying and go on with your life."

Norma Banks:

It isn't just the war is here and it's over. It starts when it ends.

Le Thi Ngot:

My son would ask me why his father did not return. When he got older he would ask, "Why did my father die?" I couldn't find the answer for my son. All I could do is hold him and cry. I also want to ask you, if the children — sons and daughters in America — do they ask their mother, "Why didn't my father come home?"

Diane Van Renselaar:

Is your husband a hero? Is he a murderer? What is he? Did he kill people over there? Yes, he probably did. And were these people a threat to his country? No, they were not. I don't see my husband as a murderer, but at the same time we have to look at it for what it is and . . . it is murder and is it justifiable?

Tran Nghia:

When I was young, I had hatred in order to defend my country and my people. Now there are not many days left in my life and there is peace. I can see that we are all the same, people there and people here. But if the war had not ended, the younger generation would be fighting just as I did.

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan:

In Vietnam, my neighbor's husband died. My neighbor's son died too. Sometime you ashamed to cry, because what makes my pain greater than my neighbor?

Barbara Sonneborn:

When I got home I came to the Vietnam Memorial Wall. I stand here on a rainy morning and try to comprehend the loss behind each name. The woman next to me is weeping. She tells me that her husband's name should be on this wall. He left his soul in Vietnam she said, but it took seven years for his body to catch up. He went out to the garage one day and shot himself. He left a note that said, "I love you sweetheart, but I just can't take the flashbacks anymore."

For all who have suffered from war,
for all the lives lost...

They say:

Our deaths are not ours:

They are yours;

They will mean what you make them.

Archibald MacLeish,

"The Young Dead Soldiers." © 1948, 1976
Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Company

Map of Vietnam



Further Teaching Ideas

We encourage you to develop additional lessons to supplement *Regret to Inform*, and to share these with other teachers on the website at www.regrettoinform.org. Below are the outlines for some follow-up activities.

- **Additional questions.** If you decide to show this film as an introduction to a longer unit on Vietnam, use it to generate a list of questions that students want to pursue about the war. Use these questions to guide your inquiry.
- **Letter writing.** Have students read the letters that Barbara Sonneborn wrote Jeff Gurvitz twenty years after he was killed. Allow them to write a letter to a loved one who has died. Sonneborn's letters are posted on the web at www.pbs.org/pov/regret/bg_barb.html.
- **Agent Orange.** Norma Banks' husband died of the effects of Agent Orange poisoning. As she says in the film, "Sometimes the effects of a war don't happen right away." Encourage students to research the lingering effects of Agent Orange — on Vietnam vets, and on the people and environment of Vietnam. Ask students to think of how they might be able to make a difference on this issue.
- **Land mines.** Land mines continue to maim and kill in Southeast Asia — indeed the area where Jeff Gurvitz was killed is still infested with mines. Encourage students to learn more about the global movement to ban landmines and about solidarity efforts to help rid regions of mines. See the excellent video, *Arms for the Poor*, available from the Teaching for Change catalog, www.teachingforchange.org.
- **Herbicides/defoliation.** Encourage students to research the use of herbicides in the escalating war in Colombia. As of the writing of this guide in early 2001, the United States government is providing Colombia with large amounts of broad-spectrum herbicides — poisons which kill anything that's green — to spray over vast stretches of the countryside, including fragile rainforests. The alleged aim is to stamp out coca production in the country.
- **Memorial.** Tell students that they have been given the task of constructing a memorial to the women — both Vietnamese and American — who were affected by the war between the United States and Vietnam. Have them work in small groups to design this memorial.

- **Trial.** Organize a trial to address the “crime” of the killing of Jeff Gurvitz: *Who killed Jeff Gurvitz?* If we are to prevent future Jeffs from dying, then this is a vital question. Assign students to represent various “defendants”: **the U.S. government**, for ordering Jeff to war; **the schools Jeff attended**, for not teaching him the history of the war, which might have led him to question the U.S. role there; **Jeff himself**, for choosing to go into the armed forces even though he knew that he might have to kill or be killed in a war he didn’t necessarily agree with or even understand; **the “Viet Cong,”** for attacking Jeff’s unit; **Racism**, for being a key attitudinal “virus” that infected American consciousness and allowed for, if not caused, the war; **the Capitalist System** — the first factor listed by historian Marilyn Young in summarizing the origins of the war. As she writes, “[T]he war grew out of the necessities of maintaining a global capitalist system, of the daily specifics of decision making, of the requirements — individual and national — for ‘credibility’ as defined by men who played zero sum games against a demonized communist Other. And for these reasons so many died.”

In attempting to make explanations for social injustice, students often seek to personalize blame. Thus it’s especially important in trial activities such as this that at least one “defendant” role should prompt students to think systemically. Even when individuals do perpetrate crimes against humanity, students need to inquire into the broader social forces that help explain individuals’ actions. In the trial, the teacher plays the prosecutor and students in small groups, the defendants.

[For a model of this kind of a trial role play, that also includes a “system” role, see “The Trial of Columbus,” pp. 87-94 in *Rethinking Columbus*, Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, eds. 2nd edition, Rethinking Schools, 1998.]

- **Children’s books.** Have students write and illustrate children’s books on one or more of the women’s stories in *Regret to Inform* or other aspects of the war. Help them make arrangements to take these to elementary schools to read to the children there and to lead discussions. Obviously, many of these stories may be inappropriate for small children. Nonetheless, I’ve found that the attempt to write children’s books on difficult subjects helps students decide what is most essential and to explain themselves clearly.

- **Metaphorical drawings.** Students can use imagery and language from the film, and/or from their own writing on the film, to construct metaphorical drawings. For example, Diane Van Renselaar says that her husband imagined a navy attack squadron as a “flying football team.” Nguyen Thi Hong says that “The cruelty that we experienced was longer than a river, higher than a mountain, deeper than an ocean.” Both these descriptions could become metaphorical drawings. Also ask students what pictures enter their minds as they think back to the film — these could spark ideas for metaphorical drawings.

- **Research the “enemy.”** Have students assess the tenacity of the U.S. government’s Vietnamese “enemy” by reading from source documents — for example, the 1945 Declaration of Independence of Vietnam, speeches of Ho Chi Minh, documents on the National Liberation Front. An excellent source for these is *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, edited by Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and H. Bruce Franklin [Grove Press, 1985.] See also Barbara Sonneborn’s moving description of her visit to Que Son, where Jeff was killed, available on the web, at www.pbs.org/pov/regret/bg_barb.html. This letter is titled “Khe Sanh.”
- **Interviews.** Encourage students to use the film to generate interview questions to ask of Vietnam veterans or of others who are old enough to remember the war. Have them conduct and write-up the interviews.

- **Research/“Friendly fire” as metaphor.**

After Barbara Sonneborn completed *Regret to Inform*, she received a phone call from someone who had been with her husband Jeff when he was killed. She learned that contrary to what she had been told by the U.S. military, Jeff was not killed by North Vietnamese fire, but by “friendly fire” — a U.S. mortar attack that fell short of its target. Sonneborn writes, “I was deeply shaken by this news. Why wasn’t I told?” Students digging deeper into the phenomenon of *friendly fire* — a macabre oxymoron — will uncover important aspects about the nature of the war. For example, many U.S. officers were killed in fragging incidents, an intentional form of “friendly fire.” Sonneborn urges us to think about the lie that she was told about her husband’s death as an example of “the series of lies” told to justify and continue the war. Read Sonneborn’s description of when she learned that she had been lied to for almost thirty years about the cause of her husband’s death, on the web at www.regrettoinform.org/education.

In the film *Hearts and Minds*, Daniel Ellsberg, of *The Pentagon Papers* fame, states that every American president, from Truman through Nixon, lied about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He catalogs the variety of these lies, and remarks that it was a tribute to Americans that their leaders felt that they had to lie in order to sell the war — but it was unfortunate that it was so easy for them to get away with it.

Divide students into five groups representing each of the presidents Ellsberg claimed lied to the American people: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Have students research Ellsberg’s claim. Each group should attempt to discover the truthfulness or duplicity of American policymakers during these five administrations.

Credits and Acknowledgements

This teaching guide was inspired by Barbara Sonneborn, producer and director of *Regret to Inform*, written by Bill Bigelow and developed by Simone Bloom Nathan and Anne Kaplan of Media Education Consultants. Graphic design by Elles Gianocostas. Cover design by Shannon Hastings.

Special thanks to the following members of the advisory group who provided input into the planning and content for the guide:

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American Friends Service Committee
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This teaching guide is a project of the WarWidows International Peace Alliance. To learn more about the organization, visit www.warwidows.org Many thanks to Janet Cole, Tina Cheplick, Daven Gee, Jessica Salsbury and Nguyen Ngoc Xuan of *Regret to Inform* and the WarWidows International Peace Alliance for their contributions to this guide. For a complete list of film credits for *Regret to Inform*, visit www.regrettoinform.org.

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