

TEACHING THE AMERICAN-INDOCHINA WAR:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIMENT

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This paper is a description and analysis of a course on the American-Indochina war offered at West Georgia College. While aspects of the course may be particular to that institution, the methodology and resources used there may be useful for similar courses elsewhere, with focus not only on Indochina, but also on analogous United States involvement in Central America and other parts of the world.

Genesis of the Course

West Georgia College is a 6,000+ student graduate and undergraduate unit of the state university system of Georgia. In the spring quarter of 1984, for the first time, West Georgia offered a course exclusively on the history of the American-Indochina War.¹ It covered not only Vietnam, but also Cambodia during the 1970 American invasion as well as Laos, possibly the most heavily bombed country in world history.² It was taught in interdisciplinary fashion, similar to the way in which West Georgia previously had taught a course on World War II.

Instruction was given by six professors representing the academic fields of military history, political science, sociology, United States diplomatic history, French history, and East Asian history: interdisciplinary, but heavily loaded with historians. While consensus had to be reached among the six professors on the choice of an overall text, each had leeway to include lectures, readings, exam questions, and movies reflective of his or her particular point of view. As Robert Elegant, who reported on Southeast Asia for twenty years, has written in the British magazine *Encounter*: "Vietnam was determined not only on the battlefield, but on the printed page, and above all, on the television screen."³ The educational objective of this interdisciplinary approach was to expose each student, by the end of the academic quarter, to a variety of scholarly and media perspectives on the war's causation, course, and historical significance.

In the time between the conception of the course in the fall of 1983 and its being offered in the spring 1984 quarter, administrators created an interdisciplinary organization for the course and the means for its widest appeal to students. Instructors for the course began to meet on a monthly basis in the fall of 1983 to coordinate preparation. As with the interdisciplinary World War II course, the Dean of West Georgia College had authorized generous funding for the procurement of audio-visual materials. Because of the volume and vagaries of the audio-visual equipment involved, the class was held in the campus television station with a technician in attendance.

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To maximize attendance, the Indochina class, like the World War II course, was crosslisted for registration in the history, political science, and sociology departments.⁴ Another device to attract students was scheduling the class one night a week for four-and-a-half hours per session for eleven weeks. This schedule attracted graduate students who were public school teachers who could commute long distances not more than one night a week. A four-and-a-half-hour class seemed pedagogically unsound but multidisciplinary lectures and visual material diversified each session. Enrollment of nearly forty in an upper-division course was good by West Georgia College standards.

The Course Itself

The faculty who were selected by the history department chairman to participate in this course represented a diversity not only of disciplines but also of political perspectives. The military historian previously taught at National Defense University, received funding from the politically-conservative Heritage Foundation, and served as military adviser to Georgia's "New Right" Congressman Newt Gingrich. The military historian introduced the class to classic "just war" theory and offered a history of the United States military in the twentieth century. In contrast, the political science professor was a military-cadet-turned-conscientious-objector during the Indochina war. His pacifism had led him to a career as an anti-draft counsellor and to a legal conviction, subsequently overturned with compensatory damages, for participating in an antiwar protest in Washington, D.C. The sociology professor had completed a tour of duty in Vietnam as a medical technician and later did graduate and post-doctoral study of military socialization patterns, specializing in such customs as "ragging," the violent attacks of enlisted men upon officers. His academic study and his personal reminiscences of Vietnam enlivened the course in one stimulating lecture. The East Asian history professor had published a history of protest against American usage of chemical weaponry in Indochina.⁵ He, the United States diplomatic historian, and the French historian were characterized as "mainstream liberals" by the military historian who was responsible for organizing the course. This wide array of disciplines and ideologies guaranteed intellectual excitement for the eleven weeks of the course.

Eleven class meetings of four-and-one-half each were held. Readings in the Stanley Karnow text Vietnam: A History were assigned on each topic.⁶ Each night's activities broke down as follows:

NIGHT ONE:

General introduction to class by coordinator (military historian); East Asianist's introduction, screening, and discussion of travelogue/documentary Vietnam: An American Journey; and East Asianist's lecture on Indochinese geography, climate, ethnicity, and early modern history up to arrival of French.

NIGHT TWO:

French historian lectured on French involvement in Indochina and the 1946-54 French-Indochinese war; he screened and led discussion of The First Vietnam War (1946-54), program two of Public Broadcasting System's Vietnam series.

NIGHT THREE:

United States diplomatic historian lectured about the roots of American involvement in Indochina war; he screened and led discussion of America's Mandarin (1954-63) and LBJ Goes to War (1964-65), programs three and four of PBS series.

NIGHT FOUR:

Political scientist lectured on NLF/DRV forces and role of ideology as a motivating factor; he screened and led discussion of America Takes Charge (1965-67) and America's Enemy (1954-67), programs five and six of PBS series.

NIGHT FIVE:

Midterm exam collectively prepared and graded by teaching team.

NIGHT SIX:

Military historian discussed "Tet" and screened and led discussion of Tet 1968, program seven of PBS series.

NIGHT SEVEN:

The home front. Political scientist recounted his experiences with the military and as a conscientious objector; led discussion of those themes; and military historian presented opposing viewpoint. East Asianist lectured on domestic opposition to the American-Indochina war with respect to shifting attitudes within Congress; he and political scientist screened and led discussion of documentary film The War at Home.

NIGHT EIGHT:

Military historian and East Asianist screened and led discussion of Cambodia and Laos, program nine of PBS series.

NIGHT NINE:

Sociologist lectured on socialization patterns within the United States military; he screened and led discussion of Peace Is at Hand (1968-77), program ten of PBS series.

NIGHT TEN:

Screening of Legacies, program thirteen of PBS series; discussion by entire faculty and students under supervision of military historian.

NIGHT ELEVEN:

Final examination collectively prepared and graded by teaching team.

On each evening, the "extremists" among the professors squared off with each other, as did students of equally diverse and often shifting opinions. A summary of several nights of class discussion suggests some of the excitement generated by this interdisciplinary approach:

NIGHT ONE: East Asianist lectured on Indochinese geography, climate, and ethnicity, and screened the travelogue Vietnam: An American Journey. This movie depicted a journey of Americans in the early 1980s on the scenic

highway between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In addition to the topography, much footage was devoted to alleged "evidence" of US/ARVN bombing and human "destruction." Reference also was made to the 1967 Bertrand Russell International War Crimes Tribunal that cited the United States for committing "atrocities." No sooner was the film finished than the military historian took the podium and criticized what he saw as the "bias" and "one-sidedness" of the International War Crimes Tribunal. He described unpublicized NLF and DRV destruction and killing in Hue during "Tet." After hearing these interpretations, students not only questioned their professors, but argued with each other and began to clarify their own viewpoints and prejudices.

NIGHT SEVEN: Topic: The home front. The political scientist gave personal reminiscences of his experiences with the military and his stateside antiwar activism. He and the East Asianist traced shifting attitudes in Congress from the 1964 Tonkin Gulf authorization for intervention in Indochina all the way up to the 1974 Edward Kennedy amendment that barred the use of Defense Department funds in Southeast Asia. After presentations by the two professors, the movie The War at Home was screened--a documentary about the ideational transformation of Madison, Wisconsin, in the 1960s due to the Indochina conflict. Because the film was made in a college setting, it seemed to hold a special interest for our college students.

After both lectures and the film, students energetically debated such questions as: How did the general social and moral climate of the 1960s provide fertile ground for the antiwar movement? How was the antiwar movement indebted to the methods and aims of the civil rights movement? What is the meaning of the phrase "credibility gap?" Were antiwar organizations effective in producing governmental responsiveness and change, or were they merely outlets for individual existential protest? Why did many Indochina veterans join the peace movement, to the point of even tossing their medals on the White House lawn? What new strengths did these veterans bring to the peace movement? Could the events of the Vietnam era happen again? The evening ended with a discussion of President Reagan's mining of Nicaragua's harbors, with the military historian defending the act, and the political scientist and "liberals" citing World Court condemnation of the act as an unacceptable alternative to peaceful negotiations.

NIGHT EIGHT: The military historian and East Asianist introduced and screened the PBS film Cambodia and Laos. In subsequent discussion, the military historian defended the "legality" of the 1970 United States invasion of Cambodia on the grounds of the right of American troops to defend themselves, and on the grounds that other outsiders, the DRV, were also present in Cambodia. Students and "liberal" faculty challenged the right of the United States to arrogate unto itself the decision to intervene in a sovereign state with international sanction. The discussion of that evening, and subsequent evenings, ended with all sides drawing analogies to current events in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

A Personal Evaluation of the Experiment

In my opinion, we faculty erred in not soliciting formal and detailed student evaluations of the course. We did receive informal student comments and peer evaluations. Based on these two types of input, certain generalizations can be drawn regarding the relative success of the course.

The military historian who coordinated the course was acclaimed--by students and faculty alike--for both indefatigably expressing his own viewpoint and allowing other faculty and students equal time. From my viewpoint, among his most critical tasks was achieving consensus among faculty on textbook and movie selection. This may be an inherent weakness in the interdisciplinary approach. The lowest common denominator on which all faculty could agree was the Karnow text and the related PBS series Vietnam: A Television History. The Karnow text was chosen because it fit with the PBS programs.

As Karnow is somewhat weak on the Nixon years, on the air war, and on government officials' and upper military officers' reminiscences, my personal choice of texts would have been George Herring's highly interpretative America's Longest War (1979, second ed., 1985) and Peter Poole's survey Eight Presidents and Indochina (1978).⁷ I also would have included written, filmed, and recorded audio commentary by ordinary soldiers, P.O.W.'s, and non-military stateside protestors.⁸ Such selections were impossible in 1984 given the diversity of opinion among the instructors.

Nevertheless, each instructor had the opportunity for latitude within his own presentations. Each could choose which (if any) PBS program he wished to screen, plus other written, filmed, or audio materials reflecting his particular point of view. Although no additional full-length books could be assigned, further readings were suggested by instructors during lectures. Of the thirteen PBS programs, only nine were actually chosen by professors to be shown (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 13). Thus students received a lowest common denominator overview from Karnow and portions of the PBS series, plus divergent views of the war from each individual professor's presentation.

The organizers of the class already know that the course succeeded in communicating the intensity of emotion and divergent viewpoints that still characterize American debate over the Indochina war. Most students came away more convinced than before of the complexity of an historical problem and more respectful toward and better informed about divergent historical analyses of Indochina and even of Central America. Perhaps an even better way to attain these objectives the next time the class is offered would be to give each student at the beginning of the course a bibliography of additional readings to be referred to by individual professors. In that way each student could further delve into problems that continue to intrigue him or her both during and after the course.

We also have yet to find out if there was any derivative impact of the intellectual excitement generated in the Indochina course in terms of subsequent student enrollment in other courses, such as political science, United States diplomatic history, Asian studies, or religious studies. Were students sufficiently inspired by the Indochina class to want to expand their knowledge through additional coursework? Was there any derivative impact on student participation in such extracurricular activities as the college debating team or campus political organizations?

A question that the organizers of the course are still debating is whether this was an interdisciplinary course as much as it was a multi-argued course. Were arguments resolved, or were students simply faced with different partisans re-arguing old issues without any resolution in sight? Students and faculty departed the course with a consensus on a single issue: the undeniability of human suffering and material loss caused by United

States involvement in Indochina. It would be difficult to cite any other historical point that the instructors agreed as objectively true.

One shortcoming that may have derived from this larger failure to agree on objectives was the lack of a substantial mechanism for testing student learning. The methods for evaluating student performance were experimental and improvable. Midterm and final exams were cooperatively constructed and graded in the sense that, for each exam, each instructor contributed ten objective questions and one essay question pertaining to his specific presentations and assignments. The objective questions were graded by a teaching assistant, and the essays individually by the professor who had assigned them. There was no consensus by the instructors on the proper answers to questions. Clearly, "hunting for the right answer to give to a specific professor" is a pedagogically unsound way to test. It was additionally inappropriate in that it was the major task asked of each student in the course.

While exams could be prepared and corrected in this divided fashion, no provision at all was made in the course for students to write summaries at home of the visual materials they had experienced in class. Such summaries would have been especially useful value clarification exercises following the controversial movies. But which instructor would have corrected them? In the case of majors and minors, would it have been the professor representing the student's department? What about students whose major or minor departments were not represented on the teaching team? Nor was time allocated for student research projects. Again, which instructor would have approved the topics and guided and graded the students?

Hopefully, the next time this course is offered, a mechanism can be worked out for students to clarify their thoughts through take-home writing and research assignments, and more substantive mechanisms can be devised for testing student learning from the course.

In summation, the goal of the faculty who organized the course was to give each student an appreciation for the complexity of America's longest war, and information about one of the cataclysmic events in American history, whose aftershocks may reverberate in American society into the twenty-first century. This goal was basically achieved. The interaction among faculty brought on by a team-teaching approach was a source of personal pleasure and learning for my colleagues and for myself. I would be most grateful for specific criticisms and suggestions for improving the course.

NOTES

¹The term "American-Indochina War" is used because what is commonly referred to as the "Vietnam War" transcended the borders of Vietnam. The war in Indochina had been going on long before Americans became actively involved in fighting the Viet Cong (NLF) and the North Vietnamese (DRV). One can date the conflict from the 1930s, July 1940, 1946, or even 1954. It did not end when the United States left Vietnam in 1973 and Thailand in 1976.

²Letter: Major Earl H. Tilford, Jr., Department of the Air Force, Headquarters Air University, to the author, January 7, 1985. Fundamentally, the United States bombed part of the territory of Laos, but not the people. Most bombs fell on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, well away from the populated

Mekong Valley region. Cf. Fred Branfman, Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

³Robert Elegant quoted in John Corry, "TV: The Tet Offensive in Vietnam," New York Times, November 8, 1983, C15.

⁴Students in each of these departments could thereby fulfill major or minor requirements. In history and sociology, the course was crosslisted on both graduate and undergraduate levels. All students would share the same in-class experience. Graduate students, however, had to write additional essays on the midterm and final exams.

⁵Jonathan Goldstein, "Indochina War on Campus: The Summit/Spicerack Controversy at the University of Pennsylvania, 1965-67," Annals of the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (1983), 78-99.

⁶Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: Viking, 1983).

⁷George Herring, America's Longest War. The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 (New York: Wiley, 1979; second edition, 1985); Peter Poole, Eight Presidents and Indochina (Malabar, Florida: Krieger, 1978).

⁸For titles of fiction and movies, see the following papers that were presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Los Angeles, April 5, 1984, as part of a panel on "Teaching the Vietnam War": Sandy Taylor, "Vietnam through a Different Lens: Fiction, Memoirs and History;" Terry Anderson, "Popular Music and the Vietnam War;" and David Culbert, "Vietnam on Film and Television." See also: Martin Novelli, "Teaching the Vietnam War with Film (and Literature)," paper presented at Duquesne History Forum, Pittsburgh, November 8, 1984, as part of a panel on "Teaching the Vietnam War."

Apart from these excellent and as yet unpublished items, there exists an extensive published historiographical, bibliographical, and pedagogical literature on the American-Indochina war. On pedagogy, see Joe P. Dunn, "Teaching Vietnam as History," Teaching History (Fall 1981), 50-59. On historiography of the war, see Joe P. Dunn, "In Search of Lessons: The Development of a Vietnam Historiography," Parameters, 9, no. 4 (December 1979), 28-40; George Herring, "American Strategy in Vietnam: The Postwar Debate," Military Affairs, 46, no. 2 (April 1982), 57-63; and "Perspectives on Vietnam-Three Review Articles," Journal of Asian Studies, 44, no. 2 (February 1985), 337-357. The latter review contained Ngo Vinh Long's "The New Vietnam Scholarship;" Edwin Moise's "Recent-Accounts of the Vietnam War;" and Samuel Popkin's "Colonialism and the Ideological Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution." For general bibliographies on the war, see James Fetzer, "The United States and the Vietnam War: A Selected Bibliography," American-East Asian Relations Newsletter, 4, no. 3 (December 1984), 47-52; Joe P. Dunn, "The Vietnam Bookshelf Enters the 1980s," Naval War College Review, 34, no. 5 (September-October 1981), 107-113; and "Background Books Vietnam," The Wilson Quarterly, 7, no. 3 (Summer 1983), 136-39. An example of a specialized published bibliography is Joe Dunn, "The POW Chronicles: A Bibliographic Review," Armed Forces and Society, 9, no. 3 (Spring 1983), 495-514. The Project on the Vietnam Generation Report periodically lists newly-issued American-indochina war literature. The Report is available from Project on the Vietnam Generation, National Museum of American History, Room A 1040, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.