

Public Opinion and the Vietnam War

Lesson Video: Grades 9-12

Overview

Teacher: Liz Morrison
Grade: 9
School: Parkway South High School
Location: Manchester, Missouri

NCSS Standards-Based Themes: Time, Continuity, and Change; Science, Technology, and Society; Civic Ideals and Practices

Content Standards: History, Civics

Video Summary

“In order to win a war, you must win the hearts and minds of the people.” With this quote, Liz Morrison introduces her students to the Vietnam War, the controversy over U.S. involvement in the war, and the trajectory of public opinion over the course of the war.

Using data cards and a timeline of the war’s key events, Ms. Morrison begins the lesson by asking students to predict public opinion at different points during the war on an approval/disapproval continuum. Then students study the events of the war more closely by interviewing people who lived through the war and watching evening news footage that was aired at the time. Students also examine public opinion by analyzing Gallup Polls conducted between December 1965 and February 1968. Students look for trends in polling data—for example, in President Johnson’s approval ratings and in the percentage of Americans who believed the United States was making a mistake by sending its troops to Vietnam. Finally, Ms. Morrison plays music that was written in response to the war and asks students to interpret the lyrics and consider the influence popular music has on public opinion. As the lesson concludes, students compare what they’ve learned about the war to their initial predictions of public approval and disapproval.

Standards

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for high school students:

II. Time, Continuity, and Change

Apply key concepts such as time, chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity; systematically employ processes of critical historical inquiry to reconstruct and reinterpret the past, such as using a variety of sources and checking their credibility, validating and weighing evidence for claims, and searching for causality.

Standards, cont'd.

VIII. Science, Technology, and Society

Analyze how science and technology influence the core values, beliefs, and attitudes of society, and how core values, beliefs, and attitudes of society shape scientific and technological change.

X. Civic Ideals and Practices

Locate, access, analyze, organize, synthesize, evaluate, and apply information about selected public issues—identifying, describing, and evaluating multiple points of view; practice forms of civic discussion and participation consistent with the ideals of citizens in a democratic republic.

Content Standards: History, Civics

About the Class

Classroom Profile

“My goal was to get students not only to think about the events that shape world history, but to see the people involved as individuals faced with choices, challenges, and consequences. And I wanted students to see how the choices that were made affected public opinion—to go back in time and see events in their context.” —Liz Morrison

Liz Morrison teaches ninth-grade world history at Parkway South High School in Manchester, Missouri. A former farming town, Manchester is a newly developed suburban community located about 20 miles west of St. Louis. Most residents commute to the city, working for local industries like Anheuser Busch, Merit, and Chrysler.

Parkway South High School opened in 1976. Its enrollment is now 2,200 students. The school reflects the demographics of the surrounding community (predominantly middle class, Caucasian), but Parkway is also one of the few remaining schools in the state to participate in the Voluntary Transfer Program initially developed in the early 1970s to end desegregation. Roughly 17 percent of the students are minorities who commute from St. Louis by bus.

Throughout the year, the unifying theme in Ms. Morrison’s class was “Why We Fight: Challenges, Choices, and Consequences.” She began the year in the post–Civil War era, with a unit on Reconstruction. Then the class moved on to units on westward expansion, immigration, the world wars, and the Depression. At the beginning of the unit on the Cold War, the class explored McCarthyism, the Korean War, and the causes of the Vietnam War. So by the time the class began the lesson shown in “Public Opinion and the Vietnam War,” students were familiar with the events surrounding some of the largest and bloodiest battles of the twentieth century.

In each unit, Ms. Morrison focused both on the events in world history and their impact on the American people. For example, in an effort to get students to understand the popular opinion surrounding the events of World War II, Ms. Morrison had the class watch movies like *Saving Private Ryan*. She also invited local veterans of the Battle of the Bulge to talk to students about what it was like to be in a war. Interviews with their parents and grandparents

Year at a Glance
Reconstruction
Westward Expansion
Immigration and Industrialization
World War I and Imperialism
The Depression
World War II
The Cold War
The Civil Rights Movement
Contemporary America

About the Class, cont'd.

helped students develop a better understanding of the impact of the Vietnam War on the American psyche, the military draft system, the role of the media in the 1960s, and how public opinion changed over the course of the war. In fact, the diversity of opinion among students in the class was reflective of the changing opinions during the war.

Because the military had only recently been integrated at the time of the Vietnam War, Ms. Morrison used this lesson to segue into the next unit on the civil rights movement, emphasizing the integration of the military as the first step in the integration of America.

Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

Content: The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War remains one of the most controversial events in American history, so much so that there is no one source that is considered objective, no one description that can be agreed on by everyone. Students and teachers will need to consult a variety of references, keeping in mind the background, motives, and assumptions of the authors. However, the following is a very brief explanation of the role of the United States in the war, followed by some of the major events covered in the lesson.

In 1954, French Indochina was divided into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. By 1964, the United States was involved in a conflict in Vietnam that was viewed by some as a war of liberation against colonial powers, and by others as a war to contain the spread of communism. America supported the government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in its fight against Ho Chi Minh's communist government in North Vietnam and his allies (the Viet Cong) in the south. More than 500,000 Americans fought in the war between 1965 and 1973, when U.S. involvement officially ended.

Tonkin Gulf Resolution (August 7, 1964): On August 2, 1964, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly fired at the *USS Maddox*, a destroyer positioned in the international waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. A second attack allegedly occurred against the *USS C Turner Joy* on August 4. These events are referred to as the Tonkin Gulf Incident. In response, President Lyndon Johnson ordered air strikes against the North Vietnamese and asked Congress for authority to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." After two days of debate, Congress passed the resolution overwhelmingly, and in doing so, shifted the power to determine United States actions in Vietnam from Congress to the president. The two dissenting senators argued that the framers of the Constitution gave that power to Congress alone.

As a result of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, President Johnson sent the first ground troops to Vietnam in 1965, launching the beginning of full-scale U.S. involvement in the war. Whether the U.S. destroyers were ever under attack, and if so, whether the alleged attacks were provoked, remain points of debate. In 1970, Senator Robert Dole led the effort to repeal the Tonkin Gulf Resolution; Congress repealed the resolution in 1971.

Australian Troops Leave for Vietnam (May 26, 1965): On May 26, 1965, 800 Australian troops left for Vietnam and were joined by troops from New Zealand in an effort to contain communism in Southeast Asia. Australia and New Zealand's involvement underscore the perceived threat of communism at the time and the fear of its spread (the "domino effect") in the Pacific region. Over the course of the war, 47,424 Australian troops served. Other than France, who withdrew from the war in the 1950s, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia were the only countries who sent troops to Vietnam. Australia also instituted the draft, and some Australians—like their American counterparts—protested the war. The last Australian troops withdrew in 1972.

Battle Near Dak To (November 3–22, 1967): This was one of the bloodiest battles of the war. It took place in the central highlands near Dak To and involved 6,000 North Vietnamese troops and 4,500 American troops. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) withdrew after losing 1,455 troops; 285 American soldiers were killed and 985 were wounded. At the time, the United States was reported to have "won" the battle, but some war scholars argue that the goal of the NVA was not to kill but to wound enemy soldiers, since it takes more resources to care for the wounded than for the dead.

About the Class, cont'd.

Tet Offensive (began January 30, 1968): Named for the traditional Vietnamese lunar New Year celebration during which the offensive took place, this surprise attack on U.S. and South Vietnamese forces was the largest launched by the Viet Cong. It came as a surprise because Tet was traditionally a time of cease-fire. During the offensive, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces attacked cities and provinces in South Vietnam, including its capital, Saigon. Within days, American forces retaliated and recaptured most areas. The Tet Offensive was considered a military victory for the United States, but it took a huge political and psychological toll on the nation. Americans watched news coverage of Viet Cong guerrillas breaching the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon, and bloody American soldiers fighting in Hue. These shocking images dramatically contradicted optimistic claims by General William Westmoreland that the war would soon be over. Coverage of the Tet Offensive ultimately weakened public confidence in United States involvement in Vietnam.

My Lai Massacre (March 16, 1968): My Lai village, located in the South Vietnamese district of Son My, was a heavily mined area of Viet Cong entrenchment. In February and early March of 1968, members of the U.S. Charlie Company had been maimed and killed in that area. Under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, an American infantry battalion killed between 200 and 500 Vietnamese civilians. When news of the massacre reached the American public in November of 1969, it shocked an already divided nation. Lieutenant Calley was ultimately convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. He was released on parole in 1974.

Teaching Strategy: Testing Predictions Against Different Sources

High school students are ready and often eager to express their opinions and participate in discussions about provocative topics. Asking students to make a prediction at the beginning of a lesson can draw them into the content. Predictions are generally one of the most effective kinds of classroom “activators” because they instantly give students an investment in the outcome of the lesson. Students want to know “how they did” with their predictions. Using a variety of sources to test students’ predictions enables teachers to teach history through a variety of viewpoints, and helps students identify cultural biases in historical accounts. Ms. Morrison used the following sources and teaching devices to engage her ninth-grade students in the lesson:

- data cards to explain key events
- opinion spectrums (students line up along a continuum to illustrate the range of opinions)
- video clips of news footage
- music that reflected the political climate
- interviews with people who remember the war
- opinion poll results

Watching the Video

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- How do you activate students' interest? How do you help students understand complex issues?
- What issues would you cover when teaching high school students about the Vietnam War?
- What sources would you use to present multiple points of view about the Vietnam War?
- How do you ensure objectivity in your presentation, and when is it appropriate (if ever) to share your personal opinions with students?

Watch the Video

As you watch "Public Opinion and the Vietnam War," take notes on Ms. Morrison's instructional strategies, particularly how she prepares for and uses a variety of sources. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

Reflecting on the Video

Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you about the classroom climate, background, preparation, strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- What do you think were the goals of this lesson?
- Which strategies were most effective in reaching those goals?
- How is this class different from yours? How would you introduce your own students to a controversial event in history? How would you present dissenting opinions?

Watching the Video, cont'd.

Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Ms. Morrison's lesson.



Predicting Public Opinion: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately six minutes into the video. Watch for about five minutes.

Using data cards, students examine key events in the Vietnam War and then predict the public's response to each event. After each group presents its predictions, the class watches a television news clip from the war to consider its effect on public opinion.

- What are students learning by predicting public opinion and placing the events on a continuum? How does this learning link to the standards?
- What evidence do you see of student engagement in what they're watching?
- What evidence do you see that students are learning from watching?



Conducting Interviews About the Vietnam War: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately 13 minutes into the video. Watch for about four minutes.

Ms. Morrison asks students to interview family members or others about the key events that occurred and the personal memories they have of the Vietnam War.

- What do students learn by interviewing people who remember the Vietnam War?
- How is this learning different from what occurs when students get their information from other types of sources?
- What are the benefits of having students conduct these interviews? What do their findings add to the lesson?
- How do the interviews affect the students' initial predictions about public opinion?
- What are some of the cautions that students should be made aware of before they conduct interviews and analyze their data?

Connecting to Your Teaching

Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

- What complex issue are you currently teaching?
- How could you use public opinion data to study this issue?
- Which of the strategies highlighted in the video would be most effective with your students, and why?
- What are some other strategies you can employ to teach about events in recent history?

Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- Ask your students to research the soldier's perspective of the Vietnam War, using a variety of Internet resources. Ask students to first identify the competing perspectives on the war, and then to compare them to the experiences of the different soldiers they study.
- Chose an event or historical figure in your curriculum that was commemorated with a memorial or monument (for example, the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or the Bunker Hill Monument). Ask students to analyze the purpose and impact of the memorial. Or, ask students to design their own memorial that reflects popular opinion during the era they are studying.
- Ask students to research polling data for a historical event. They should consider how polls are conducted, how data is gathered, and how results are interpreted. Students may also develop and conduct their own poll around a school or community issue.
- Ask students to explore the impact of the Vietnam War on a fictional family that they create. Have students play the roles of soldier, soldier's parents, his siblings, his wife and children, and his closest friends. Using actual historical data (for example, news accounts, battle histories, music, photographs, and so on), have students express their feelings about the war in letters, speeches, essays, songs, or artwork. Going further, students can fashion this material into a play.

Resources

Print Resources for Students

Denenberg, Barry. *Voices From Vietnam*. New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 1997.

Wright, David K. *Causes and Consequences of the Vietnam War*. Causes and Consequences. New York: Raintree/Steck Vaughn, 1995.

Zeinert, Karen. *The Valiant Women of the Vietnam War*. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press, 2000.

Print Resources for Teachers

Evans, Ronald W., and David Warren Saxe, eds. *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues*. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 93. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996.

Gilbert, Marc Jason, ed. *The Vietnam War: Teaching Approaches and Resources*. Contributions in Military Studies, no. 109. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.

Kutler, Stanley I. *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*. New York: Charles Scribners Sons/Reference, 1996.

McCloud, Bill. *What Should We Tell Our Children About Vietnam?* New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1992.

Web Resources for Students

The Gallup Organization: FAQs: <http://www.gallup.com/help/FAQs/?ID=2>

This site offers comprehensive explanations of the Gallup Organization's polling, survey, and citing system.

Vietnam: A Soldier's Perspective: <http://www.macombo.k12.mi.us/wq/gb2fr.htm>

This Web quest link provides reference material for a wealth of online resources concerning the Vietnam War.

Web Resources for Teachers

Educational Resource Information Center: http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed411175.html

As a resource center, ERIC directs teachers to links on specific topics, such as the Vietnam War.

The Library of Congress and American Memory: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html>

An extension of the American Memory Collection, this site features lesson plans and teaching material on the subject of oral history.

Opposing Views of Vietnam: <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/vietnam>

Discovery.com presents a variety of approaches to teaching the Vietnam War in high school, including lesson plans and discussion questions.

Notes
