

The Kaleidoscopic Approach

Researching and Writing Full-Spectrum Experiences of War with Texas Tech's Virtual Vietnam Archives

In teaching the Vietnam War—on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end and especially in Southern California, where I am based—I am most impressed by the diversity of student experiences and learning expectations compared with earlier generations of students. Thanks to Hollywood and a continuing stream of movies and television shows, there is a continuing “Vietnam mystique” that attracts students to Vietnam War classes; however, in the Southern California classroom, many students have diverse, personal connections to Vietnam and the conflict that transcend movie stereotypes. As teachers, we can use that initial curiosity—whatever prompts it—to challenge students to embrace a kaleidoscopic variety of experiences that range far beyond old assumed categories.

For teachers, one of the best ways to do this is to use online, digital archives that now contain millions of digitized documents and other materials, all searchable with a few keywords and clicks. Considering wars globally, one of the most remarkable developments to come out of fifty-plus years of peace and reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam has been the declassification of millions of military and civilian records in state archives and increased opportunities for former combatants, refugees, and others to travel, meet, and jointly examine the war from different angles. This was America's first television war, too, and besides preserved documents, photographs, and maps, we have worlds of other media, now digitized and archived, including television newsreels, 8mm home movies, captured documents, personal diaries, personal photography, satellite photography, and consultant reports.

Within these “worlds” of media, one can also find glimpses of a kaleidoscope of human experience that ranges far beyond combatants, leaders, and those caught in the crossfire. They include many other foreign groups, people of minority and highlander backgrounds, children, and many others. Tapping into this wider-ranging cast of actors is especially effective in classrooms, especially

in southern California, where my students are not just descendants of American war veterans or refugees but also include descendants of northern Vietnamese and Vietnamese Communist Party members, Amerasians, Hmong refugees, Vietnamese-Chinese, Cambodians, and other groups whose family histories and personal trajectories were shaped in some way by that war. With this diversity of student backgrounds and interests and this cornucopia of online sources, I teach my course on the war with two aims: the traditional one, for students to learn about pivotal moments, key documents, and major events of the war, and a challenge for them to more deeply examine one or some of the different human experiences across a broader spectrum of people touched by the war. They are asked to consider how particular experiences by people situated at particular moments of the war color and shape understandings of the war.

One of the best, most comprehensive online sources for supporting this kind of project is the Virtual Vietnam Archive, part of the Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.¹ The Vietnam Center started in 1989 as Texas Tech history professor James Reckner sought to collect materials from veterans and others to preserve their memories and experiences of the war. Over the years, the collection grew to include contributions from many former officials and veterans of the Republic of Vietnam and many different kinds of media. Since 1999, the Vietnam Center's Oral History Project has recorded, transcribed, and digitized hundreds of interviews, and in recent years the center has expanded its efforts in coordination with other institutions to catalogue and digitize captured documents. While the Vietnam Center is primarily focused on preserving the American experience of the war, it is widely consulted by researchers from Vietnamese institutions for its unique collections.

The Virtual Vietnam Archive (VVA) offers students in a Vietnam War class a valuable research portal into multiple worlds of war experiences, but as with any set of primary sources it requires some structured, step-by-step engagement for students to make sense of the possible sources they may find. The teacher has the role of guide, helping students "dive in" to focus on particular human experiences of the war. Teachers then guide students to research in an archive like the VVA, and then help them "zoom out" with their research findings to consider what these documents and unique perspectives tell us about major events or understandings of the war. This is the analytical gold we as history teachers should help students produce out of the raw ore that is the mix of available secondary and primary sources.

In order to achieve this effect with the VVA, I create two guiding parameters—choosing a role and an event—that are important for helping students find meaningful hits quickly so they can move on to analyzing the materials and writing about them. I start my assignment by asking students to choose a type of human experience or role to use as their lens for exploring human experiences of the war. Over a

1 Interested readers can access the Virtual Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/>.

weekend, students are asked to choose an experiential perspective of the war based on themes or roles such as nationality, occupation, gender, or ethnicity. Popular choices include female Vietnamese combatants, American intelligence officers, US soldiers, and South Vietnamese generals and military pilots—but a brief “tour” through the VVA’s collections (and a bit more scaffolding) can alert students to lesser known roles including nongovernment relief workers, peace activists, nurses, and contractors as well as the experiences of other ethnic groups and nationalities involved in the war, including Hmong, Cambodian, Korean, and Filipino people to name a few. Students are required in the first step of their research to find a digitized primary source in the VVA tied to this role.

Once students have settled on a role for their focus, the next step of the research challenge with the VVA is the most difficult. I ask that students choose a key event of the war and relate it to their chosen role. I provide students with a list of specific events tied to specific years. Popular choices include the 1968 Tet Offensive, the 1975 Fall of Saigon, and major turning points such as the 1965 entry of US ground forces or the 1959 decision of North Vietnam to send military units south. I provide students with a sample list of key events and years, and they match key discussions in lectures and other course materials. Students are encouraged to begin with course readings, lecture notes, and searching Wikipedia so they can develop a working idea of how to refine search terms before working with the VVA. For an example, a web search on “Korean soldiers Vietnam War” turns up the Wikipedia page “South Korea in the Vietnam War,” which includes mentions of military engagements in 1966 at Tuy Hoa and major policy changes for Korean troops who relocated to Danang following the 1968 Tet Offensive, where they moved into more noncombat roles.² Once a student has linked an event with their role, the final step in guiding research on the VVA is to help them perform advanced, refined searches. One of the easiest narrowing techniques that students can adapt quickly is putting a key term such as “Korean” or “Tuy Hoa” into the Item Title field. This tends to result in a more manageable set of sources, for example a 1968 Hanoi press release about National Liberation Front (NLF) forces “wiping out” a Korean company in Tuy Hoa Province. VVA entries also include complete bibliographic citations, so students can download a source and copy and paste a citation into their list of sources.³

These first two stages of work require the most guidance, but once a student has locked on to a role and an event, it’s possible to expand the research beyond the VVA and delve into analyzing sources and considering different forms of historical interpretation, some of the core aims of the class. Using the Korean example above, a student might compare and contrast Korean versus American perspectives on the war, or investigate more deeply the Vietnamese perspectives on Korea. Once the initial scaffolding work has been set, students are given wide range to reflect on their chosen subjects’ perspectives and to find other sources.

2 Wikipedia, “South Korea in the Vietnam War,” last modified November 17, 2024, accessed December 3, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea_in_the_Vietnam_War.

3 The citation for the press release is “S. Korean Company in Phu Yen Almost Wiped Out,” 2311502035, September 27, 1968, box 15, folder 02, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, accessed September 1, 2024, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2311502035>.

One key message that I try to communicate in my teaching and in this assignment is that the Vietnam War was a *global* war. It brought in civilians and combatants from many countries, and its effects were felt globally in many different ways. In the “good-case” scenarios, students work this out—and in the best-case scenarios, they wow me and draw my attention to sources and experiences I’d never have considered.

One student, for example, used the research assignment to follow up on a personal family story about a deceased grandpa from the Philippines who left behind a diary that included notes about spending a year in Vietnam in 1968. She started her research by searching about “Filipinos in the Vietnam War” and quickly found a Wikipedia page titled “Philippines–South Vietnam Relations.”⁴ Her grandfather was not a soldier but an engineer, and she worked out that he was a member of the noncombat teams belonging to the 1968 Philippine Civic Action Group (PHILCAG). Using the term “philcag” in the VVA, she then found photographs, press clippings, and reports—and this student “took off” in her writing about her grandfather, updating me weekly with reports from conversations with the family and relating her grandfather’s diary, detailing stories of sheltering from incoming rockets in 1968 at an American base where his team was assigned. My survey course was not enough to contain the student’s interests, and she continued the study in a senior thesis. And I’m happy to report that the student is now a history teacher at a California middle school!

Obviously, there is a wide range of student outcomes, but I think in general the pedagogical success of this assignment with respect to teaching the Vietnam War comes in helping students to appreciate that how we understand and interpret something as complex as a war requires paying close attention to the particulars. And analytically speaking, one of the hardest things for any historian to do in studying a war is to zoom in to appreciate unique individual experiences and then zoom out to explain what these experiences tell us about the significance of the war and its global legacies. The Virtual Vietnam Archive is a free, highly accessible resource, and it can be effectively added with instructional scaffolding to college or high school courses.

4 Wikipedia, “Philippines–South Vietnam Relations,” last modified November 10, 2024, accessed December 3, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippines%E2%80%93South_Vietnam_relations.

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