The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War occupies a special place in U.S. history and foreign relations. For decades, it was known as America's longest war, the only war the United States ever lost, a war that shattered Americans' faith in their government and spawned a culture of protests that divided one generation from another. More recently, it has become the conflict against which the U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya are most often compared and contrasted. In this course, we will examine the history of the Vietnam War both in its own context and as part of ongoing debates about U.S. foreign policy and military interventions. In addition to considering the war from the U.S. perspective, we will also read texts that offer insights into the Vietnamese experience. We will cover a wide range of genres and disciplines, including official documents written by Robert McNamara, George Ball, and Daniel Ellsberg; historical scholarship by Leslie Gelb, David Hunt, and Marilyn Young; and novels, films, and poetry of Eugene Burdick, Norman Mailer, Yusef Komunyaka, and Tim O'Brien.

Books and Readings

Please purchase the following books by any means you prefer (Amazon, Strand Bookstore, Shakespeare Books, Book Culture, etc.). All other readings can be found on the Course Documents section of Blackboard.

- George Herring, *America’s Longest War*
- William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American*
- David Hunt, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution*
- Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*
- Yusef Komunyaka, *Dien Cai Dau*
- Dang Thuy Tram, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*
- Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Manual Of Style*

Assignments and Grading

Over the course of the semester, you will write 2 formal essays in which you explore a specific question about the Vietnam War through an analysis of one or more texts on the syllabus. Be sure to choose topics and texts that interest and intrigue you. Essays will be graded for the form as well as the content of their analysis.

In addition, you will write 5 response papers (1 for each unit) of 250-500 words, which you will post to Blackboard’s Discussion Forum. These responses are designed to function as preparation for class discussion as well as brainstorming for your essays. While you are welcome to include personal reflections in your responses, you must organize your comments around a pointed analysis of the assigned text, which should include quotes from and references to specific passages in the text.

For the final assignment, you will construct a descriptive timeline including both the standard historical markers and other cultural and political developments of the period.
This course is a seminar. Your regular participation in our discussions is key. You are expected to come to class prepared with questions and comments on the day’s reading.

Response Papers: (25%)
Essay 1: 4-6 pages (25%)
Essay 2: 6-8 pages (25%)
Final Timeline: (10%)
Participation: (15%)

Attendance Policy: You are allowed 3 unexcused absences, no questions asked. Except for extenuating circumstances, additional absences will be penalized.

Late Papers: Unless you have made other arrangements with me, late papers will be penalized.

On Plagiarism and Academic Integrity: A description of Gallatin’s academic integrity policy, including plagiarism and its consequences, can be found at the following link: http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html

Laptop and Technology Policy: You are permitted, though not encouraged, to bring a laptop or other computer device to class in order to take notes on class discussion. You are not permitted to surf the web during class. Please turn your cell phones to vibrate and do not text during class.

Jan. 24: Course Introduction: Why Study the Vietnam War?

Prelude to War:

Jan. 26: Intro: Background on the Cold War/Vietnam War
-Andrew Rotter, “Chronicle of a War Foretold: The United States and Vietnam, 1945-1954” [course docs]
-Herring, chapter 1

Jan. 31: -Lederer and Burdick, The Ugly American (pgs. 1-42) [book]
-Michael Latham, “Redirecting the Revolution?: The USA and the Failure of Nation Building in South Vietnam” [course docs]

Feb. 2: Lederer and Burdick, The Ugly American (pgs. 43-190)

Feb 7: Lederer and Burdick, The Ugly American (pgs. 191-285)

Feb 9: Hunt, Vietnam’s Southern Revolution (chs. 1-3) [book]
[Assign Essay 1]

Feb. 14: Truong Nhu Tang, A Viet Cong Memoir (chs. 1, 2, 9, 14)
Escalation:


Feb. 21: **Essay 1 Due**
Johnson’s War and the Logic of Escalation:
- Herring, chapter 4
- George Ball, “A Light That Failed,” 1964 Dissent Memo
- Optional: Gurman, “Revising the Vietnam Balance Sheet” [course docs]

Feb. 23: - Lyndon Johnson, *Vantage Point* (ch. 11)
- Table of Troop Numbers [course docs]

Feb. 28: - Herring, chapter 5
Marilyn Young, “Bombing Civilians From the Twentieth Century to Today” [course docs]

Mar 1: - National Day of Action for Education
Noam Chomsky, “The Function of the University in a Time of Crisis” [course docs]
Columbia Student Protest film (screening)

Mar 6: *Hearts and Minds* (screening)

Mar 8: *Hearts and Minds* (discussion)

Mar. 13: **SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS**

Mar. 15: **SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS**

The Soldier’s Perspective:


Mar 27: *Sir! No Sir!* (film discussion)
Guest speaker
Herring, chapter 6

- Hunt, chapter 6

Apr. 3: - *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* (171-end)
Christina Schwenkel, “Contested Truths: Museums and Regimes of Representation and Objectivity”

Apr. 5:  
*Winter Soldier* (film discussion)  
-Herring, chapter 7

**Protests:**

Apr. 10:  
[Assign Essay 2]

Apr. 12:  
Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (Book I, Part 1, #s 1-2; Book I, Part 2; Book II, Part 1, #s1-2; Part XI) (pgs. 3-10, 53-79, 219-230, 288) [course docs]  
-“Why Are We in Vietnam?” last chapter [course docs]

Apr. 17:  
Katherine Kinney, “Hanoi Jane and Other Treasons: Women and the Editing of the 1960s”

Apr. 19:  
The Pentagon Papers:  
Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics”  
[Assign Timeline]

**The End and Legacy of the War**

Apr. 24:  
-Herring, chapter 8

Apr 26:  
Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (chs. 21, 22, 24)

May 1:  
- Hà Dang, “What is doimoi? From where did it start?”  
- Do Nguyen Phuong, “Economic growth coupled with social advancement and justice”  
- Linh Dinh, “Eating Fried Chicken”  
[course docs]  
**Essay 2 Due**

May 3:  
-Marilyn Young, “Counterinsurgency: Now and Forever” [course docs]  
-Obama’s West Point Speech, Dec. 1, 2009 [course docs]  
**Timeline Due**