

**The Vietnam Wars – HIS 399**  
**West Chester University – Spring 2007**  
**Sec. 02**  
**TTh 12:30-1:45**  
**Main Hall 403**

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**Required textbooks:**

William J. Duiker. *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 1995.

George C. Herring. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. Fourth edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002.

Robert J. McMahon, editor. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*. Third edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.

“Historians are not ones who know, they are ones who search.” – Lucien Febvre

**Overview:**

The history of the Vietnam Wars constitutes an endless debate. Thirty-two years after the last shots of the war rang out there is little closure about the war. Historians of all nationalities involved, and of all political stripes, argue as incessantly now as commentators did three decades ago about the war's causes, its character, its legacies, and just about every single one of its other attributes. While lives are no longer on the line in Vietnam pending the outcome of these discussions, many of the potential lessons the war has to offer possess much value for all involved in the current war on terror in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Insurgency, hearts and minds, pacification and even terrorism, are all terms that many Americans first encountered in Southeast Asia. Vietnam raised important questions which the United States continues to struggle in answering. What is the media's role during wartime? How much authority does the president possess to pursue administration aims? How much of a part should the United States play in other parts of the world? Is dissent unpatriotic? Are Americans ethnocentric? Imperialists?

I wish I could tell each of you that this course begins to answer the preceding questions, but I cannot tell a lie. It will not. It will, however, acquaint us with the war and the mountain of scholarship devoted to the conflict. This course will also provoke discussion about the many issues raised by the war and perhaps do what the study of history does, help us to make the connections between now and then which can aid us in thoughtfully addressing the difficulties of our own time.

This course covers the wars in Vietnam in the broadest possible sense. It acknowledges Vietnamese history and culture extends far back in time beyond the arrival of Americans. It examines how Vietnamese reacted to the arrival of French colonizers in the nineteenth century and places the struggle within a global context. It presents twentieth century developments in Vietnam from a variety of perspectives, never losing sight of how Vietnamese viewed and reacted to what transpired in their nation. Finally, it attempts to explain the causation of American intervention in Vietnam along with the ramifications of this event politically, economically, socially and culturally. This order is a tall one, I know. Nonetheless, it is the only approach fitting for a war that proved to be the longest one in American history, and a struggle that lasted even longer for the Vietnamese.

**Objectives:**

This course will help students hone skills necessary not only to a historian, but vital to anybody operating in other professions. Students will interpret written, video and audio sources to construct persuasive arguments that advance their conclusions. They will work with primary sources and analyze secondary sources. They will communicate their findings in writing and orally, and they will listen and respond respectfully to the ideas offered by others.

Students should begin reading the texts by Duiker and Herring immediately, progressing through each book as appropriate for discussions throughout the semester. They should consult both works, in addition to the relevant essays in McMahon's compilation, in order to complete the necessary written assignments, but also to participate actively in class meetings. Finally, students should consult the website set up by PBS as we view parts of the documentary film *Vietnam: A Television History* over the course of the semester.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/index.html>

**Requirements:**

6 Position Paper responses, mid-term and final essay, attendance/participation

**Evaluation:**

Position papers avg. + Essay 1 + Essay 2 + attend.-part. avg./4=grade (Example 75+80+90+80/4=81% - B-)

**Attendance/participation – Dailies:**

Dailies enable us to focus our thoughts on the material discussed during each session and often draw from the documents in *Major Problems*. These exercises provide me with a concrete way of measuring student attendance and participation that eliminates the subjectivity on all sides. They provide me with regular feedback and create an opportunity for everybody to be engaged throughout the semester. Each response receives full (√), partial (-) credit, or 0 credit.

This aspect of the course should not create undue stress as it is geared to generate discussion and provide students with a surefire way to amass as much as one quarter of their final grade. In total, we will have at least 20 of these questions over the course of the semester (class meets 28 times). At the end of the semester, your average from this exercise will be slotted in to the above formula and constitute one quarter of your final grade. Missing a couple of classes will not unduly destroy one's grade in this area, but excessive absenteeism will have a negative impact as missed dailies equate to zeroes. Students must be present in class when

starters are assigned to respond to them. **These questions cannot be made up since they generate your attendance/participation grade.**

**Extra credit:**

As insurance against missed class time students have ample opportunities throughout the semester to submit extra credit work. These chances include: actively participating in class discussions; attending various events/lectures around campus and submitting a one page reflection about their experience; reviewing movies about the Vietnam War. Besides participating in class, students can complete any three bonus activities over the course of the semester. These efforts are awarded with a  $\checkmark$ , and I use them as one measure to resolve students who are fence sitting between grades at the end of a semester (Example – an 83%, B- can be turned into a B).

**Syllabus Statement:**

We at West Chester University wish to make accommodations for persons with disabilities. Please make your needs known to me, the history department and/or the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at x3217. Provide sufficient notice to all staff in order to make possible whatever accommodations are necessary. The University and its faculty members desire to comply with the ADA of 1990.

**Semester schedule:**

**Internet links referenced last checked, up and running, on 11 January 2007. Bring your copy of *Major Problems* to each of our meetings as we will regularly use it.**

16 January: Overview of course, syllabus. As George Herring indicates in *America's Longest War*, *Newsweek* called American involvement in Vietnam "strange," citing that, "There are no songs written about it and the chances that there will be seem remote" (169). To find out how wrong that prediction proved, as the man said, listen to the music. (If interested in reading lyrics, for many of the songs on this compilation they can be found at [http://www.k-state.edu/english/nelp/vietnam\\_music.html](http://www.k-state.edu/english/nelp/vietnam_music.html))

18 January: *The Vietnam Experience*; Overview of War

23 January: **Position paper due: Identify the value of these songs for understanding the Vietnam War. Some of the issues you might address: If you made this soundtrack, what songs would you put on it? Which would you omit? What songs would you add that I left off? Are there any themes that are most dominant in these songs? What are some of the other themes you detect? What perspectives on the war do these songs account for? Are there any that you can think of that are missing? Which of these songs remain popular today? Which do not? Why? Why do you think the Vietnam War inspired such a surge of popular music? Are there any recent examples of songs that reference Vietnam? How do these songs compare/contrast with popular music concerning the War on Terror/Operation Iraqi Freedom? Do you think popular music in America has become more or less politically oriented? Why?**

25 January: Film: *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*

30 January: **No Class**

1 February: **Position Paper due:** *Dear America* introduces us to Vietnam for the first time through the letters written by the Americans who went there, often learning about the country, and the war, for the first time themselves in piecemeal fashion. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this film for teaching us about Vietnam? What do we learn from it? What do we not? Which of the letters read provide the best understanding for what it was like to serve “in country?” What was the war like for the men and women who served in it based on this film? How does this film compare to what you have read and are reading about the war? How does it compare to movies that you have watched (*Platoon, Hamburger Hill, Full Metal Jacket, Apocalypse Now, When We Were Soldiers*, etc. – for movies see <http://srufaculty.sru.edu/derrick.pitard/vietnamfilms.htm>) How does the experience of “grunts” in Vietnam compare to the experience of soldiers today in Iraq and in Afghanistan? (For additional “letters” see pp. 233-4 in *Major Problems*)

6 February: As *Major Problems* states, the Vietnam War was America’s longest war and its most divisive to date. Based on your reading of the overviews of the war in chapter 1 of *Major Problems*, and of the article by Vietnam War historian Robert Buzzanco at <http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html> **Position Paper: Agree or disagree with Michael Lind’s contention that America’s intervention in Vietnam should be judged both as necessary and justifiable.**

8 February: **Position Paper: Identify the three most important attributes of traditional Vietnamese culture as shaped by history and geography.**

13 February: **Position Paper: Assume the position of an early twentieth century Vietnamese and write a persuasive argument in favor the approach to colonialism advocated by either Phan Chu Trinh or Phan Boi Chau.**

15 February: Film: *Roots of A War* **Position Paper: Write a memo to United States President Harry S. Truman arguing whether the United States should support the French reconquest of Indochina.**

20 February: **Position Paper: Identify the three most crucial lessons offered by the Franco-Vietnamese War.**

22 February: Film: *America’s Mandarin* **Position Paper: Argue whether economics, geo-strategy, or idealism played the greatest role in determining American involvement in Southeast Asia?**

27 February: **Position Paper: President Dwight David Eisenhower’s handling of Vietnam is deservedly labeled a tragedy by David L. Anderson (*Major Problems*, 101-12)**

**1 March: Position Paper: Write a memo for President John F. Kennedy identifying the primary cause for the war in Vietnam – instigation from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or the repressive measures of RVN President Ngo Dinh Diem.**

**6 March: Position Paper: The evidence suggests the President John Fitzgerald Kennedy would have withdrawn American support from the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) if he were not assassinated in November 1963.**

**8 March: Midterm essay due. Write a review that focuses on chapters 3 & 4 in William Duiker's *Sacred War* and chapters 2 – 4 in George Herring's *America's Longest War*. Reviews are strictly limited to five pages, double spaced, 12 font. Follow the guidelines for reviewing books at the end of this syllabus. Do feel free to incorporate any relevant material from *Major Problems*. Goal here is to evaluate each author's treatment of the material, strengths and weaknesses of each one. I will gladly offer feedback to any students that want it. Feel free to provide me with rough drafts to read, hard copy only, no later than on 6 March. This assignment constitutes ¼ of your final grade.**

**20 March: Film: *LBJ Goes to War***

**22 March: Position Paper: Agree or disagree with Fredrik Logevall's contention that the Americanization of the Vietnam War strikes one as "unnecessary and avoidable" (*Major Problems*, 189-204).**

**27 March: Film: *America Takes Charge* Position Paper: Agree or disagree with Harry G. Summers Jr.'s view that America fought the wrong war in Vietnam and another strategy would have brought victory (*Major Problems*, 220-23).**

**29 March: Position Paper: Based on the essays in *Major Problems* by Christian Appy and Gerard J. deGroot, write a memo to United States Army General William Childs Westmoreland indicating how America might better prepare its soldiers for success in Vietnam.**

**3 April: Film: *America's Enemy* Position Paper: Agree or disagree with the contention that Vietnamese acted as submissive puppets of either Beijing or Moscow throughout the course of the war.**

**5 April: No Class – (I'm scheduled to chair a panel in Boston on this day for the Popular Culture Association regarding fictional representations of the Vietnam War. Panels across the board concerning the war look great and I am sure I'll bring back some useful insights for our own class).**

**10 April: Film: *Tet 1968* Position Paper: Agree or disagree with Robert Buzzanco's argument that the Tet Offensive constituted a "crippling defeat for the United States" (*Major Problems*, 336-43).**

12 April: Film: *Vietnamizing the War* **Position Paper: Based on the essays of Gabriel Kolko and Bui Diem, argue whether or not the Republic of Vietnam could have evolved into a viable state (*Major Problems*, 365-84).**

17 April: Film: *Cambodia and Laos* **Position Paper: Explain why or why not Lewis Sorley is convincing in arguing that post-Tet constituted a “better war” for the United States (*Major Problems*, 419-25)**

19 April: Film: *Peace is at Hand* **Position Paper: Agree or disagree with Melvin Small’s argument that President Richard Milhous Nixon’s search for peace remained “flawed” (*Major Problems*, 405-19).**

24 April: Film: *Homefront USA* **Position Paper: Agree or disagree with Adam Garfinkle’s proposition that the antiwar movement served a counterproductive purpose (*Major Problems*, 467-73).**

26 April: Film: *The End of the Tunnel* **Position Paper: Support or refute Larry Berman’s contention that the United States “betrayed” the Republic of Vietnam (*Major Problems*, 492-00)**

30 April (1975) end of RVN

1 May: **Final essay distributed. Position Paper: Identify the most critical legacies of the Vietnam War for the United States and for Vietnam.**

For one reason or another, either the university or I have deemed that we will not have class on several occasions during the course of the semester.

**No class**☹: Tuesday, **30 January**; Tuesday and Thursday **13 and 15 March**; and Thursday **5 April**.

**Final meeting time:**

Tuesday 8 May, 10:30a-12:30p

**Essay information:**

It is rare in the real world for one to be required to take an exam. It is even more unique for one to be pressed to remember a particular piece of trivia from a mostly long forgotten college history class. Much more common are the times when individuals must stake a position of something and defend it by utilizing evidence, logic and persuasive writing. Of course, these are some of the skills that professional historians employ daily.

There are no exams in this class as a lot of history is encompassed in the Vietnam War (almost one tenth of our entire nation’s history!). Still don’t believe me, peruse the fine biography posted by professor Edwin Moises at <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/bibliography.html> to get some idea of the voluminous literature devoted to the conflict, as well as some idea of all that we have yet

to learn. It is a waste of valuable student energy to memorize everything, usually for only long enough to take a test and move on. If you enjoy regurgitating material verbatim to satisfy a professor's ego, this class is not for you. If you are interested in thinking critically about the past, however, sifting through evidence and perspectives and trying to make some sense out of things stick around.

The Final essay will be distributed one week prior to its due date. I will read any drafts that students want to show me before the final submission time and provide feedback. I know students are most interested in required length. These things generally run in the vicinity of five double spaced pages, although I am far more interested in what you say than in how long it takes you to say it. Each of these exercises will generate ¼ of your grade for this class. **Students must attend class when each of the two essays is due in my hands. Late essays cannot be accepted.**

### **Position Papers:**

The point of these assignments is to engage students actively with their reading over the course of the semester, and to frame our discussion for each meeting. The rules are simple, out of the twenty-two questions listed, do six of them (For what it is worth, I recommend doing one every two weeks to avoid burning out). **Everybody must do the first two.** Students sign up for each question (five per class) so it is imperative to be present on those days when one will be called on to enlighten the rest of us with their view. **You must be present to turn in your Position Papers, if absent when scheduled, you must do another one as a make-up. Each time one of these needs to be rescheduled after the fact, a 10% grade reduction will result. If scheduled and you know you will miss ahead of time, we'll see what we can do to fix things, but I make no guarantees. Schedule wisely as we are counting on you for your contribution to class.** In total, the average grade you receive for these mini-papers (5 paragraph, no more than two double spaced pages) constitutes ¼ of your grade. For a good model of a 5 paragraph essay, see [http://www.englishdiscourse.org/5\\_paragraph\\_essay\\_format.html](http://www.englishdiscourse.org/5_paragraph_essay_format.html)

### **Historical Pause:**

"...even the brightest young men and women, like their mothers and fathers, tend to think that what they see on film is true, or at least roughly close to true." – Tom Nichols, Naval War College

"...all historical narratives are interpretations, and all contain biases of selection, presentation, voice, and argument." – Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, authors of *American Destiny*

The point of this exercise is to reinforce these observations and to provoke students to think critically about our media's appropriation of American history in the movies, on television and in video games. Of course, completing these optional assignments also enable students to amass insurance in the event of semester end fence-sitting.

Students can focus on any movie, video game or television program that roots its narrative in some aspect of the Vietnam War. Recent examples include movies such as *Fog of War*, *The US vs John Lennon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *84 Charlie MoPic*, *1969*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, while video games include those like the *Battlefields of Vietnam* series. There are hundreds of options out there to choose from as students, who are regularly brought into classes

like this one kicking and screaming nevertheless rush to see Mel Gibson play the lead in *When We Were Soldiers* and stand in line waiting for their chance to simulate the Battle of Khe Sanh. Only requirement here, it must deal with the Vietnam War (off the list then, are films like *Alexander* that deal with world history and fictional accounts such as *The Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings*).

Once students decide on their piece to review, they should watch the movie or play the game, and learn all they can about it. Is it more history or entertainment? What do reviewers have to say? What do historians have to say? Is there anything to learn here that eludes teachers in the classroom? Is the thing controversial? Why? Is the controversy justified? Does the work alter our ideas about the event/person it portrays? How so? Who should see this movie/play this game (students? Teachers? Adults? – why?) What side does the work portray? Are there other sides? Why are some vantage points privileged and others minimized?

Those are examples of some of the questions students should deal with – some will apply, some will not, students might devise others of their own. These papers should be no longer than two pages in length double spaced (again, think five paragraph model) and should contain a minimal summary (no more than a paragraph). The bulk of the review should consist of what students have to say regarding the movie/game's relationship to the Vietnam War. For a start on movie ideas, see <http://srufaculty.sru.edu/derrick.pitard/vietnamfilms.htm>

### **Reviewing Books (courtesy Temple University History Department)**

A book review is an essay whose purpose is to comment on a particular work or a series of works bearing upon a single subject or related subjects. The most important element about a book review to remember is that it is a **commentary**, not merely a summary. You should devote relatively little space to surveying the contents. Simply present a brief outline or synopsis, indicating the general topic, the chronological scope, the major emphasis (political, economic, intellectual, etc.) and which, if any, aspects of the subject are totally ignored. The bulk of your review, therefore, should concentrate on your evaluation of the way the author(s) handled the issues discussed. What is (are) the overall thesis(es) -- the points of view or conclusion? what are your reactions? Did the book(s) enhance your understanding of the issues? Be as direct as possible. Remember, you are the expert.

In framing your review, you should provide some information on the author(s). What are his or her relevant qualifications and background (or lack thereof) for writing on this subject? What were his or her reasons for writing this book? (Often the preface contains such information) What evidence is cited, and has new documentation become available? If so, identify the new documentation. Or, does the book present a novel interpretation based on previously available documents, or does it provide a new literary or dramatic account of a subject already treated by others? Your conclusions and assessments regarding these aspects, of course, will affect your comparative evaluations of the works. You should also consider the time during which the book was written and, if evident, the author's values and biases. For example, in all likelihood a biography of Senator Joseph McCarthy written by a conservative Republican journalist in 1954 will differ from a biography written by a neo-Marxist academic in 1974.

It will probably be necessary to refer to specific portions of the books to illustrate your statements and conclusions, but it is generally not advisable to quote extensively from it. When reviewing more than one book, choose aspects of the subject that are sufficiently broad to cover all of them and compare the books from these particular perspectives. Do not try to make more points than can be accomplished thoroughly in your review. It is better to make a few points well than many points poorly. Once you have decided on the central points you intend to make, treat each one as a separate section of your review. Each section should explain the one point, supporting it with your own arguments and with brief examples from the book(s) under review and drawing conclusions as to the meaning and importance of the point.

Your review should conclude with your personal critique. Refer back to your introductory paragraph(s). What is your ultimate judgment of the style, format, contents, and historical value of each book? Has each author achieved the purpose, explicit or implicit, for writing the book? Has he or she persuasively argued the thesis to your satisfaction? Why or why not? Compare the evidence cited and argumentation used to support the respective conclusions. Has the book challenged you intellectually, increasing your knowledge, raising new questions, and/or presenting the material in a novel, even provocative manner? Or does the author simply rehash what everyone already knows? Would you recommend any or all of these books, and at what level -- secondary, undergraduate, graduate? What book on this subject still needs to be written?

**The Vietnam War – A Semester’s Soundtrack**  
**A compact disc produced solely for educational purposes.**

1. *Warrior* (Steve Earle, *The Revolution Starts Now*, Artemis, 2004).
2. *Fightin’ Side of Me* (Merle Haggard, *The Fightin’ Side of Me*, Fuse Entertainment, [1970] 2004).
3. *Goodnight Saigon* (Billy Joel, *The Nylon Curtain*, Sony, 1982).
4. *The War in Vietnam* (Five Blind Boys of Alabama, *This is Gospel Volume 3*, Calvin Records, 2006).
5. *War* (Edwin Starr, *Steal This Record*, Universal Music Enterprises - UMT, [1970] 2004).
6. *Handsome Johnny* (Richie Havens, *Steal This Record*, UMT, 2004).
7. *Vietnam* (Jimmy Cliff, *Wonderful World Beautiful People*, Castle Pie, [1970] 1999).
8. *Eve of Destruction* (Barry McGuire, *Steal This Record*, UMT, [1965] 2004).
9. *Waist Deep in the Big Muddy* (Pete Seeger, *Headlines and Footnotes*, Smithsonian Folkway Recordings, [1963] 1998).
10. *Masters of War* (Pearl Jam, *Sounds For A New Beginning*, Philadelphia Partnership, 2001; Bob Dylan, composer, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, 1963).
11. *Give Peace A Chance* (John Lennon, *The John Lennon Collection*, Capitol Records, [1969] 1989).
12. *I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag* (“Country” Joe McDonald, *The Vietnam Experience*, Ragbaby Records, [1967] 1986).

13. ***Okie From Muskogee*** (Merle Haggard, *Platoon* Soundtrack, Atlantic Records, [1969] 1986).
14. ***Fortunate Son*** (John Fogerty, *The Long Road Home*, Fantasy Records, [Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1969] 2005).
15. ***Draft Dodger Rag*** (Phil Ochs, *Farewells and Fantasies*, Rhino, [1965] 1997).
16. ***For What It's Worth*** (Buffalo Springfield, *Forrest Gump* Soundtrack, Sony [1967] 2001).
17. ***Ohio*** (Neil Young, *Decade*, Reprise, [Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, 1970] 1977).
18. ***What's Going On*** (Marvin Gaye, *Steal This Record*, UMT, [1971] 2004).
19. ***Still in Saigon*** (Charlie Daniels, *The Hits*, Sony Music, [1981] 2006).
20. ***Ruby Don't Take Your Love To Town*** (Kenny Rogers, *The Collection*, Carlton, [1969] 1998).
21. ***Drive On*** (Johnny Cash, *American Recordings*, Lost Highway, 1994).
22. ***Imagine*** (Neil Young, *America: A Tribute to Heroes*, Blackwood Music Inc., 2001; John Lennon, composer, *Imagine*, 1971).