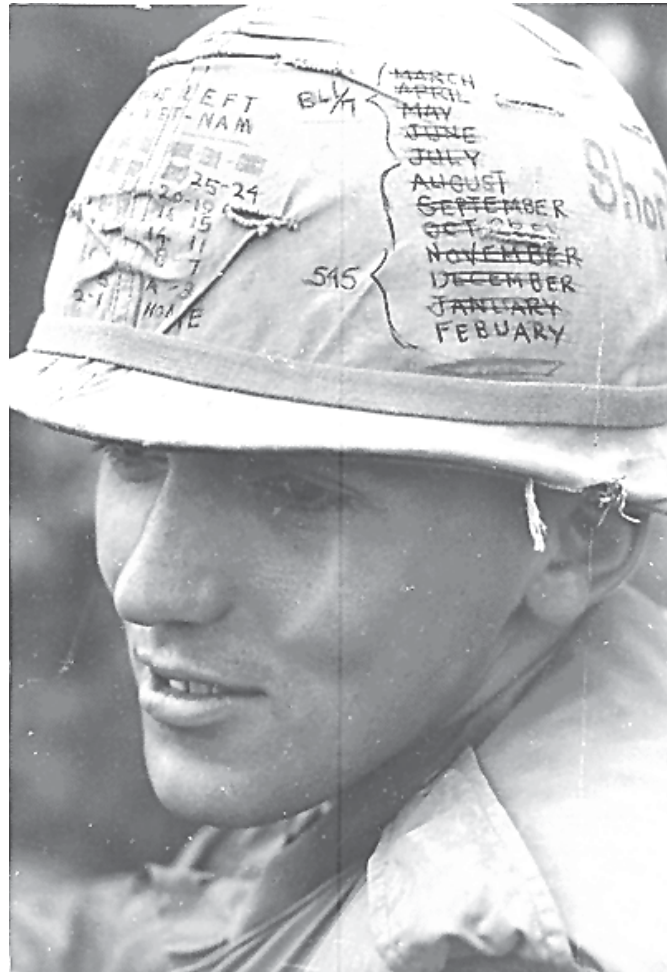


# The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma

A Unit of Study for Grades 10–12

D. ANTONIO CANTU

SANDY CANTU



---

Organization of American Historians  
and the  
National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Introduction

Approach and Rationale . . . . .	1
Content and Organization . . . . .	1

## Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview . . . . .	3
II. Unit Context . . . . .	3
III. Correlation with the National Standards for United States History . . . . .	4
IV. Unit Objectives . . . . .	4
V. Historical Background . . . . .	5

Dramatic Moment . . . . .	10
---------------------------	----

## Lessons

Lesson One: Colonization: French Involvement in Vietnam . . . . .	12
Lesson Two: Laying the Political Groundwork . . . . .	24
Lesson Three: Americanization: Laying the Military Groundwork . . . . .	42
Lesson Four: Escalation: Increased U.S. Involvement . . . . .	74
Lesson Five: Vietnamization: Paradigm Shift and the End . . . . .	109

Selected Bibliography . . . . .	148
---------------------------------	-----

---

## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. Unit Overview

This teaching unit, *The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma*, introduces students to the key individuals and events, through the use of primary source documents, that played a role in America's entry into, escalation of, and final withdrawal from the war in Vietnam. Using the presidencies of Harry S. Truman through Gerald R. Ford as its historical and conceptual framework, the unit attempts to impress upon students the continuous and escalating investment each of these chief executives made in Vietnam, the aggregate of which resulted in the death of over 58,000 Americans, as well as the physical and emotional wounding of hundreds of thousands more. The history of American involvement in Vietnam is traced through the following five lesson plans, each of which not only examine the individuals and events germane to each of these specific presidencies, but also illustrate one of five different lesson plan frameworks representing both brain-based and sequential curricular models.

**Lesson One** traces the roots of French colonialism in Indochina, illustrates the mistreatment of the Vietnamese people at the hands of the French, and examines the role this played in the rise of the nationalist movement, Communist party, and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. The reaction of President Harry S. Truman to developments in Vietnam and the rise of Ho Chi Minh is examined as well. This lesson is designed using Robert Sternberg's theory of triarchic intelligence as its conceptual framework.

**Lesson Two** examines President Dwight D. Eisenhower's role in laying the political groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam, in particular his support for Ngo Dinh Diem and promulgation of the "Domino Theory." Madeline Hunter's mastery learning model provides the foundation for the lesson's curricular design.

**Lesson Three** analyzes the role President John F. Kennedy played in laying the military groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam. The subject of analysis also includes the shifting current of both public opinion and JFK regarding American involvement in Vietnam as well as support for the Diem government. The curricular framework for this lesson is based on Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning model.

**Lesson Four** explores the escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam under the presidential watch of Lyndon B. Johnson, from the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964 to LBJ's withdrawal from the presidential race in 1968. The 5-E instructional approach provides the basis for the design of this lesson plan.

**Lesson Five** examines the events and developments, including implementation of the Vietnamization policy, signing of the Paris Accords, and fall of Saigon, that led to America's withdrawal from and eventual end of the war in Vietnam, all of which took place during the presidency of Richard M. Nixon and, upon his resignation, Gerald R. Ford. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences serves as the guiding curricular force in the design of this lesson.

### II. Unit Context

*The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma* may be placed in the United States history curriculum in a number of logical places within the existing scope and sequence, ranging from the post-World War II or "Origins of the Cold War" period to the 1960s and 1970s. Regardless of where this unit is placed in the curriculum, a review of late nineteenth-century imperialism

as well as the key events and lessons learned from the Korean War are both strongly recommended to assist in the study and understanding of the Vietnam War. In its entirety, this unit is designed for a two to three week period of time. However, it can be adapted to focus student attention on a specific document or set of documents, allowing teachers to integrate individual lessons or activities into the existing curriculum with little modification. Another option available to teachers, to conserve class time, is to assign individual activities to different groups, who are then responsible for examining the primary documents and reporting their findings to the entire class.

### III. Correlation to National History Standards

*The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma* provides documentary materials and learning activities relating to the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 9, Standard 2C**: *The student understands the foreign and domestic consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam*, to include each of the following elaborated standards: Assess the Vietnam policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations and the shifts of public opinion about the war; Explain the composition of the American forces recruited to fight the war; Evaluate how Vietnamese and Americans experienced the war and how the war continued to affect postwar politics and culture; Explain the provisions of the Paris Accord of 1973 and evaluate the role of the Nixon administration; and Analyze the constitutional issues involved in the war and explore the legacy of the Vietnam war. In addition, the unit also addresses each of the five Historical Thinking Standards outlined in Part 1, Chapter 2 of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*. Each lesson provides primary source materials that challenge students to think chronologically, comprehend a variety of historical sources, engage in historical analysis and interpretation, conduct historical research, and engage in historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

### IV. Unit Objectives

1. To examine primary documents that trace French colonial involvement in Indochina from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, to help understand the political and military situation that existed in Vietnam.
2. To identify the role and contribution of Ho Chi Minh in achieving independence for Vietnam through analysis of his writings.
3. To compare, contrast, and evaluate the role the following presidents played in America's involvement in Vietnam: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, and Gerald R. Ford.
4. To identify, examine, and evaluate the events, issues, policies, and decisions, revealed through a variety of historical sources, that led to the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam.
5. To trace the evolution of public support for American involvement in Vietnam and determine those factors that played a role in shaping it.
6. To identify, examine, and evaluate the events, issues, policies, and decisions, revealed through a variety of historical sources, that led to America's withdrawal from, and eventual end of, the war in Vietnam.

## V. Historical Background

Vietnam traces its origins to the clans of Viet peoples who dwelled in the region extending from present-day Shanghai down the Red River Delta to the Mekong River Delta. The history of the Vietnamese people traces back over 2,200 years, with the first record of the Viet people found in the writings of Chinese historians. It is not until 1858, however, that France, which was exploring new trade routes to China, laid claim to Indochina. Within a short period of time, Vietnam became one of France's most profitable colonies of the late nineteenth century. French economic success in Indochina, however, came at a large cost to the Vietnamese people who were subjected to harsh and exploitive treatment at the hands of their French rulers. It is in this setting that the national independence movement took hold in Vietnam, in particular with the rise of Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh, born Nguyen Tat Thanh in 1890 and later known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, quickly became one of the leading Vietnamese nationalist figures of the early twentieth century. After joining the French Communist Party in Paris in 1920, Ho Chi Minh organized the Indochinese Communist Party a decade later. This was followed in 1941 with the founding of the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, or Vietnamese Independence League (Viet Minh).

During World War II, Ho and the Viet Minh gained invaluable military and political support for their campaign to oust Japanese and Vichy French forces who had assumed control of Vietnam. They were so successful in their efforts that by the time of the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Viet Minh represented the strongest political force in Vietnam. The next month, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. France, however, was not about to relinquish its nearly century long colonial hold on Vietnam, and within a year a war between French and Viet Minh forces ensued. The First Indochina War, as it became known, would last for eight years. It came to a rather abrupt end in 1954 following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, a remote outpost in northwest Vietnam, and the signing of the Geneva Peace Accords later that summer.

By 1954, the United States was assuming 75 percent of the French cost for the First Indochina War in Vietnam. Therefore, when delegates from nine nations, to include Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, France, Laos, the People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States, met in Geneva during the summer of 1954 to discuss ending the conflict in Indochina, Americans were deeply vested in the outcome.

An awkward peace treaty at best, the Geneva Peace Accords called for the temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. In addition, national elections were to be held two years later, for the purpose of reunification. Beginning in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower pledged his support to Ngo Dinh Diem, Prime Minister (and later President) of the Republic of Vietnam, who had a fragile power base consisting of Catholics, French-trained urban elites, and landlords. From the beginning, Diem proved to be a controversial figure. A Catholic leader of a Buddhist country, Diem found his authority challenged from the start. He faced serious opposition not only from various religious sects within South Vietnam, but also from the Binh Xuyen, which controlled Saigon's crime syndicate. In addition, many within the military, especially among the officers' corps, also posed a threat to the stability of the new Diem government. Diem paid little attention to the countryside. He became more and more isolated from the people and preferred to rely on his family as his closest advisors. As a result, this discontent in the countryside was organized first by remnants of the Viet Minh, then in December 1960 by a new revolutionary organization, the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong.