History 381: America and Vietnam

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Office Hours: T 9-10 am / TH 3-5 pm (or by appointment)  Fall 2006

Texts:

• Marilyn Young, The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*
• Robert McMahon, Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War (3rd ed.)*
• Philip Caputo, Rumor of War*
• Wallace Terry, Bloods*
• James Olson and Randy Roberts, My Lai: A Brief History with Documents*
• Le Ly Hayslip, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*
• Lynda Van Devanter, Home Before Morning*

All texts are available at the bookstore. The * indicates the text is also on reserve in the library.

Requirements:

• Class participation 10 percent
• Reading essay (750 words) 15 percent
• Memoir paper (1500 words) 30 percent
• Mid-term exam 15 percent
• Final exam 30 percent

Class participation will include regular attendance, informed discussion, and the My Lai presentation. Significant progress will receive appropriate recognition.

Deadlines:

• September 26: Reading essay (required)
• October 10: Mid-term exam
• October 26: Reading essay (optional)
• November 28: Memoir paper (required)
• December 12: Memoir rewrite (optional)
• December ??: Final exam

Late work will result in substantial penalties (one full letter grade per day). Academic misconduct will lead to severe sanctions in full accordance with university policy.
Topics and Readings (due that day):

Week One: August 28-September 1

Course Introduction

The Roots of Revolution
Due: Young, chapter 1; McMahon, chapter 2
Discussion: 1) What regional, cultural, and political divisions were evident in Vietnam prior to the arrival of the French and the Americans? 2) Was Ho Chi Minh a communist, a nationalist, or some combination of the two? 3) What is the best explanation for the emergence and success of the Vietminh by 1945?

Week Two: September 4-8

Roosevelt, Truman, and the Return of the French
Due: Young, chapter 2; McMahon, chapter 3
Discussion: 1) Why did the U.S. return Vietnam to France after World War II? 2) Why was France unable to defeat North Vietnam?

Eisenhower and the Rise of Diem
Due: Young, chapters 3-4; McMahon, chapter 4
Discussion: Did Eisenhower act with “tragic irresponsibility”? Why or why not?

Week Three: September 11-15

Kennedy and the Fall of Diem
Due: Young, chapters 5-6; McMahon, chapter 5; begin Caputo, Rumor of War
Discussion: Would Kennedy have withdrawn from Vietnam if he had lived?

Johnson and the Decision to Escalate
Due: Young, chapter 7; McMahon, chapter 6; continue Caputo, Rumor of War
Discussion: 1) What was the main reason Johnson chose to escalate the war in 1965? 2) Were there plausible alternatives that he could and should have pursued?

Week Four: September 18-22

Tactics on Trial: The Battle of Ia Drang
Due: Young, chapters 8-9; McMahon, chapter 7; Death in the Ia Drang Valley (packet)
Discussion: 1) Why did the U.S. choose the tactics that it did? 2) What were the consequences (intended and otherwise) of the tactics selected?

Two Days in October (1967)
Due: Continue Caputo, Rumor of War
Week Five: September 25-29

**Men at War (I)**
Due: Reading essay (required); McMahon, chapter 8 (documents #1-3)
Discussion: 1) What was the most significant burden faced by soldiers in Vietnam? 2) What passage in Caputo most affected you? Why?

**The Working-Class War**
Due: McMahon, chapter 13 (document #6); begin Terry, Bloods, introduction, 1-30, 89-129, 143-154, 186-199, 219-265
Discussion: How and why was it a working-class war?

Week Six: October 2-6

**Men at War (II)**
Due: Terry, Bloods (see above)
Discussion: 1) How and why was the experience of black soldiers often different from the experience of white soldiers? 2) What incident most affected you? Why?

**The War at Home (I)**
Due: Young, chapter 10; McMahon, chapter 13 (documents #1-5 and essay #1)
Discussion: What was the most significant dilemma or division faced by the antiwar movement?

Week Seven: October 9-13

**Mid-Term Exam**

**The Tet Offensive**
Due: Young, chapter 11; McMahon, chapter 10
Discussion: 1) How was Tet the turning-point in the war? 2) Was Tet a defeat or a victory for the U.S.? 3) What was the role of the media?

Week Eight: October 16-20

**Vietnam and 1968 in America**
Due: McMahon, chapter 10 (document #9); begin Hayslip, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places
Discussion: 1) Why was 1968 a year of crisis in America? 2) What were the ramifications of the conservative triumph in 1968?

**Guest Speaker (TBA)**
Due: Continue Hayslip, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places
Discussion: [based on speaker]

Week Nine: October 23-27
My Lai (I)
Due: **Oral presentation** (handout); continue Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*

My Lai (II)
Due: **Reading essay** (optional); *A Quiet War Over the Past* (packet); continue Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*
Discussion: 1) Who was “culpable” for what happened? 2) Was Calley a murderer or a scapegoat? 3) Was My Lai an aberration or symptom of the war?

Week Ten: October 30-November 3

The Vietnamese at War
Due: Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*; *Suffer the Little Children* (packet)
Discussion: 1) How did the war affect the Vietnamese? 2) What incident from Hayslip’s life during the war most affected you? Why?

Nixon and the “Vietnamization” of the War
Due: Young, chapter 12; McMahon, chapter 8 (documents #6-8 and essay #2) and chapter 12
Discussion: Was “Vietnamization” a sound strategy? Why or why not?

Week Eleven: November 6-10

The War at Home (II)
Due: *The Moratorium and the New Mobe* (packet); McMahon, chapter 13 (documents #8-9 and essays #2-3); begin Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 9-208
Discussion: 1) Why was the antiwar movement more unpopular than ever by 1971 even though most Americans now opposed the war? 2) What was the most significant impact of the antiwar movement?

Women at War
Due: Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 9-208; McMahon, chapter 15 (document #8)
Discussion: 1) How was the experience of American women different from that of American men? 2) What incident from Van Devanter’s life during the war most affected you? Why?

Week Twelve: November 13-17

Nixon, Kissinger, and the Paris Peace Conference
Due: Young, chapter 13; McMahon, chapter 14 (documents #1-2 and essays #1-2); *The South Vietnamese Retreat* (packet); begin Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 209-326
Discussion: Were Nixon and Kissinger able to achieve “peace with honor” in Vietnam?

Coming Home
Due: Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, 209-326; O’Brien, “Speaking of Courage” (packet); McMahon, chapter 13 (document #7) and chapter 15 (document #6)
Discussion: 1) How and why were veterans mistreated after they returned home? 2) What post-war incidents from Van Devanter and O’Brien most affected you? 3) How and why were the experiences of male and female veterans both similar and different?
Week Thirteen (University Holiday)

Week Fourteen: November 27-December 1

History and Myth: The Vietnam War in American Film
Due: Memoir paper (required)
Discussion: 1) Do popular films accurately portray the Vietnam War? 2) Is it possible for films to present history accurately?

The POW/MIA Experience and Controversy
Due: Terry, Bloods, 130-142 and 266-291; Of Soldiers Lost, The Mystery of the Tomb, and Arlington Yields to Science (packet)
Discussion: 1) Why has the POW/MIA issue remained so controversial? 2) Was there a conspiracy to conceal the existence of POWs left behind in Indochina? 3) What incident from Bloods most affected you? Why?

Week Fifteen: December 4-8

The “End” of the War
Due: Young, chapter 14; McMahon, chapter 14 (documents #3-8); We Clawed for Our Lives! (packet)
Discussion: Why was North Vietnam ultimately triumphant?

America and Vietnam Since 1975
Due: Young, chapter 15; assorted articles (packet, 30-39)
Discussion: 1) Is the U.S. responsible for what happened in Southeast Asia after 1975? Why or why not? 2) What are Hayslip’s perceptions when she returns? 3) How has Vietnam changed (or not changed) since 1975?

Week Sixteen: December 11-15

Dear America: Letters from Vietnam
Due: Memoir rewrite (optional)

The “Lessons” of Vietnam: History, Politics, and Tactics
Due: Young, epilogue; McMahon, chapters 1 and 15 (except for documents #6-8)
Discussion: 1) What is the most important “lesson” of Vietnam? Why? 2) Was the Vietnam War worth the cost?

For changes and updates, please consult the ERes course page. The discussion questions serve as a general guide to reading assignments and class participation.