America’s protracted presence in Vietnam began when President Eisenhower sent military “advisers” to help South Vietnam fight communist rebels in North Vietnam. American involvement was fueled by the cold war-induced illusion that if communism took hold in the rice paddies of Vietnam, all of Southeast Asia would follow. This “domino theory” coupled with an inability to understand the limitations of the American military in fighting a guerilla war, led to decades of expensive, divisive, and ultimately unsuccessful war in Vietnam.

The war was not a conflict between outsiders who were attempting to force communism down the throats of a democratic populace but a civil war between supporters of the anti-communist government in South Vietnam and the communist Viet Cong, who controlled much of the country’s rural regions. Both sides had powerful allies: Communist China and Soviet Union supplied the North, and the United States assisted anti-communist government in the South.

President Johnson dramatically escalated American involvement. Claiming an American ship had been attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin, he urged Congress to pass a resolution giving him power to “take all necessary measures.” The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution led to intensive bombing of North Vietnam. By 1965, 200,000 American troops were fighting in Vietnam; the following year, that figure doubled. The longest war in United States history would eventually claim 58,000 American lives.

Teacher Directions

1. To help students understand American involvement in the Vietnam War, share the following information.

   Four American presidents (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon) believed that if communism took hold in the rice paddies of Vietnam, then all of Southeast Asia would fall to communism. During World War II, the Japanese occupied Vietnam and in 1945, Ho Chi Minh established the country as a republic. In 1954, the country was portioned into North and South Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem became president of South Vietnam. Pro-communists, known as Viet Cong, wanted to overthrow Diem and re-make the country into a communist stronghold. China and Russia supported the Viet Cong; the United States and its allies supported South Vietnam. By 1965, President Johnson had sent nearly 200,000 American troops to the small country. The numbers of troops kept increasing.

Visit Freedom: A History of Us online at http://www.pbs.org/historyofus
As U.S. military bases worked feverishly to prepare troops to send overseas, many Americans protested our involvement. By the end of 1967, over 17,000 American soldiers, most in their teens and early twenties, had died. An anti-war march in Washington attracted 50,000 people, and 474,300 troops were then on Vietnam soil. In 1970, after Richard Nixon was elected president, efforts at creating a peace plan gained and lost momentum. Many states had to call out the National Guard when anti-Vietnam demonstrations erupted across the country, such as those at Kent State in northern Ohio and at the Ohio State University in Columbus. Finally, in 1973, a Vietnam peace agreement was signed. In 1975, the last Americans were evacuated from Vietnam, and communist forces took control of South Vietnam’s capital, Saigon, re-naming it Ho Chi Minh City.

2. Locate Vietnam on a classroom map. Explain that it is a small country about half the size of Texas.

3. Display the Transparency: Vietnam Quotes. In their student learning teams, students discuss the quotes using the following questions.
   - How is it possible that we dropped more bombs on Vietnam than on Germany and Japan combined during World War II?
   - What does it mean to fight a war that “couldn’t be won”?
   - How can a president decide a war is not really a war?

4. Make sure students understand the following points.
   Congress and President Johnson chose to refer to the conflict in Vietnam as an “involvement.” American bombing was protracted and massive, utilizing newly developed weapons such as defoliants. Approximately 58,000 Americans died from this war that was never officially declared a war by Congress.

**Teacher Directions**

**Activity One**

1. Distribute the Student Sheet: How to Do Oral History. Explain that for homework, each student will interview someone to find out about his or her experiences during the Vietnam War years. It could be a relative, neighbor, community leader, or other older adult. The interviewee does not need to be a veteran of the war; students can also learn about how people at home felt about the war, the anti-war movement, the draft, or other issues pertaining to the war.

2. Review with students the steps outlined on the Student Sheet for preparing for an interview, conducting the interview, and what to do after the interview. Students work with their team members to develop questions for an interview. Direct students to use the five Ws and H (who, what, where, when, why, and how) or use the following questions to help students get started.
• What were you doing during the Vietnam War?
• Did you or someone you know serve in Vietnam?
• Did you ever protest against the war in Vietnam? Why, or why not?
• Have your views changed since the war ended? If so, how?

3. Students share the results of their interview by writing a one-page summary of the interview. Students also share their results with teammates during the next class period.

**Note to the Teacher:** Rather than having students conduct oral history interviews as homework, the teacher could invite one or two Vietnam War veterans to speak to the class. Students work with teammates to prepare questions to ask the visitors.

**Activity Two**

1. Distribute the Student Sheet: *Understanding Vietnam*.

2. Divide the class into small learning teams. Working with teammates, students use the library, the Internet, *All The People* (Book 10 of *A History of US* by Joy Hakim), and other resources to answer one group of questions.

**Note to the Teacher:** If you have more than four student learning teams, some groups will answer the same questions.

3. Each team shares its results with the class.

**Teacher Directions**

1. Display the Transparency: *Young Soldier in Vietnam*. Read the quote about war to students. Ask students to study the photo, noting details about the soldier’s dress and posture. Ask students to consider how young men fighting overseas felt.

2. Distribute the Student Sheet: *Vietnam: A Memoir*. Explain that these excerpts are from a larger memoir written by a soldier stationed in Vietnam. Tell students that Lt. Col. Brandt took the photo of the young soldier viewed earlier in the lesson. Students read this first-person account and discuss the following questions.

   • What is the writer’s overall impression of his time in Vietnam?
   • How did the war affect the soldier Brandt is interviewing?
   • How did Brandt feel after returning home? In what ways is the war still with him?

3. Students write a letter to Lt. Col. Brandt in which they respond to his photographs and memories of the war.
Teacher Directions

1. Display the Transparency: *The Vietnam Memorial Wall*. Share with students the following background information.

   The building of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., known as “The Wall” helped heal some of the psychological scars left on veterans and civilians by this disastrous, deadly, and unpopular war. While nothing could bring back the 58,000 men and women who died in Vietnam, the wall has become a “wailing wall”—a place where veterans, friends, and family can come to mourn their own fallen heroes.

   The Wall is 246 feet long and ten feet high. It is made from black granite. Surrounding the park area are record books that list names, dates of death, and panel locations of veterans who died in the war. The $7 million cost of the project was raised entirely by private contributions.

   The wall was built after Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs created a non-profit organization to finance the creation of a Vietnam memorial. A contest was held to find a designer. Out of over fourteen hundred designs submitted, the entry of Maya Ying Lin, a native of Ohio and a student at Yale’s School of Architecture, was selected. About her design, Lin said, “I just imagined pointing one end to the Lincoln Memorial, one end to the Washington Memorial, and having the names be listed in chronological order (according to the dates of death.).” She added that “The names would become the memorial…It had to say that the losses were immense, the price was too high.”

   People from across the United States visit the wall to make rubbings, sometimes using colored chalk or charcoal to transfer the name of a loved one to a piece of paper. People leave gifts at the base of the wall. Not just flowers and wreaths, but special items to commemorate a person’s life and death. The National Park Service collects these items and saves them in a special archive. Several Vietnam veterans built a moving wall, a traveling replica of the original wall in Washington, D.C. It is displayed around the country so that those who are unable to travel to our nation’s capital can see it. The moving wall is 252 feet long and has 74 separate frames bearing the same names in the same order as the original wall.

2. Display the Transparency: *When Is a Wall Not A Wall?* Ask students the following questions:

   - How does the memorial help people move toward freedom? Freedom from what?
   - How would making a rubbing of a loved one’s name help heal people?
   - How would leaving a gift or memento at the wall help heal the memories of Vietnam?
   - What would you leave at the wall—whether you knew someone who died in Vietnam or not?
   - Have you seen the wall or the moving wall? Describe it for your classmates.

• What is the significance of the name “Garry Owen” to Vietnam veterans?

3. Distribute the Student Sheet: *Garry Owen*. Students read the lyrics to the song.

4. Students draw a picture of the wall showing what they would leave there in memory of the soldiers.

**Teacher Directions**

Use the following activities with your students.

**Geography** — Students study the location, climate, crops, and terrain of Vietnam. What is its population today? Who are its leaders? What political, social and economic problems does Vietnam face today?

**Science/Technology** — Students research modern weapons of war and give reports on their findings. Suggested topics: aircraft; chemical weapons; armaments; high-tech war tools; land mines.

**Language Arts** — Students read the Student Sheet: *Vietnam—A Memoir* and write a summary of the writer’s experiences.

**Health** — Students study the effects of the climate of Vietnam on humans, which may include the following problems: heat stroke; insects and insect-borne diseases like malaria; cleanliness; foot problems; mental health problems; intestinal problems.

**Language Arts** — Put the photograph of the young soldier on the overhead projector. Ask students to write a journal piece suggesting what he might be thinking. What is he missing? What might he fear?

**Art** — Students visit an old graveyard and do their own rubbings.

**Social Studies** — A number of schools have sponsored Vietnam Day to help students fully understand our involvement in Vietnam and its lingering effect on citizens of the United States. Many veterans groups are very willing to assist. At one school in Cincinnati, Ohio, a Huey helicopter even landed on the school lawn. And the students were “treated” to army rations for lunch!
Vietnam Quotes

“We rained more bombs, more terror on that country than...has ever been visited upon any place in the history of the world. We were fighting a war that couldn’t be won. The answer is not to try to win, the answer’s to try to get...out.”

One man’s recollection of the war in Vietnam

“When is a war not a war? When the President decides it isn’t, and Congress goes along.”

Kenneth Davis, *Don’t Know Much About History*
Imagine this young soldier’s war story.

“You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then. Not ever.”

Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*
VIETNAM: A MEMOIR

By
Lt. Col. Forrest G. Brandt, USAR (Ret.)

I can tell you that the two years I spent from 1967 to 1969 as a young lieutenant still haunt me. I am still haunted by the ugliness of war, of watching kids go to school surrounded by armed guards, coils of razor wire and sandbags, of looking at whole villages abandoned because the people were caught between two armies. I am still haunted by the memories of young soldiers wrapped in gauze with their eyes dimmed by massive amounts of morphine.

Lai Khe, Vietnam, December 1968: We caught a mail chopper (helicopter) to our base camp. Each dugout (tent area) was made from sun-faded canvas. Most dugouts were big enough to hold 3-4 troops and all their gear. There were plywood latrines and shower points, the latter consisting of a wood contraption that held a swinging bucketful of water and looked like a guillotine. I couldn’t imagine myself living like this for a week, much less for a complete year.

I was a Public Information Officer. I wrote stories about the war and the soldiers. I didn’t have to sit all night in ambush, or out alone at a listening post. I didn’t have to hump for days through the jungles and rivers. The troops had a right to be suspicious {of me}, but they warmed up quickly. “I’m thinking about my girl,” one of them said. Another one told me, “You’re out there and all the time you are thinking about the folks back home. You’re thinking, ‘I guess they’re just sitting down to dinner right now.’”

I saw one soldier sitting by himself lost in his thoughts. He gave his name, rank and hometown. His voice kept trailing off. I was taping an interview to send back to the States. Finally, he said, “Would you just make sure my parents know I’m ok? Mom—Dad—I don’t know when I’ll see you again. Tell Susan I love her. Make sure she knows I love her. I can’t seem to write.” With that, he turned away, and I could see and hear a long breath go out of him. His shoulders slumped, and his head dropped.
**Going Home:** Our plane landed. We cheered. I called home… I watched the evening news. I had no civilian clothes, so I put on clean khakis and my field jacket to meet friends for dinner. At the restaurant, I looked out of place, and I was uncomfortable. We left. Outside, a group of young people passed us. “You Nazi,” one of them said. “Baby killer,” said another. Then, someone spit on the back of my jacket.

I spent the night pacing…nightmares… I couldn’t remember where I was. Then I was saying good-bye to California… and I was beginning to understand that coming home was not going to be a ticker-tape, *Stars and Stripes Forever*, give-the-vet-a-hand experience.

I was trying to understand why soldiers were being harassed by protesters. I just wanted to go home, go back to Ohio State, and watch the Buckeyes beat Michigan.

And then again I thought of Vietnam. Thoughts of body bags and body counts. I remembered my friends who were still at Lai Khe. Tears came, dropping onto my First Division patch. “I am going home,” I thought. “Going home…going home…I am going home. Lord, I am going home.”

**May 4, 1970 Ohio State and Kent State:** The morning news said that the governor of Ohio had sent National Guard troops to two campuses –Ohio State in Columbus, Ohio and Kent State in Kent, Ohio. I lived near the OSU campus. I grabbed my camera….In front of the administration building stood two armies. One was in uniform. Fatigues, steel helmets, M-1 rifles, gas masks. Then there was the second army. A huge unarmed mob dressed in blue jeans, beads, tie-dyed shirts, and peace medallions. As the military line pushed forward, I understood. The Guard became Johnson, Nixon and the Establishment all rolled into one. “Pigs off campus,” the students yelled. “Pigs go home!” Tear-gas canisters were tossed into the crowd of protesters. Then panic. Screams, pushing, fleeing…. I slumped home. Later, I heard. “Four dead at Kent State.”
Understanding Vietnam

Directions: Working in teams, students answer the following questions. Students may use other research tools.

Team #1:
• Why did the United States believe it was important to send troops to Vietnam?
• Who ordered the first troops sent? When?
• When did the last troops return home?
• What president was blamed for escalating the war?
• How many Americans died in Vietnam?
• What kinds of weapons and machinery were used in this war?
• Who were the Viet Cong?

Team #2:
• Describe the climate and terrain of Vietnam.
• What kinds of bugs, snakes, and animals can be found there? Are any of them dangerous?
• How does rice grow? What is a rice paddy?
• What are some major cities in Vietnam?
• Where is Saigon? Is it a modern city? What is it called today?

Team #3:
• Read some of the memoirs of Lt. Col. Brandt.
  • Why do you think he wrote this memoir?
  • How does he describe living in a base camp during the Vietnam War?
  • List some of the hardships soldiers had to face.
  • How old were most of the soldiers sent to Vietnam?

Team #4:
• What happened at the Ohio State University on May 4, 1970?
• What happened at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio on May 4, 1970?
• Why did so many Americans oppose the war?
• Why were so many of those Americans students and younger people?
• What kind of welcome did Lt. Col. Brandt receive when he came home from the war?
• How do you think he felt?
THE VIETNAM MEMORIAL WALL

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Quick Facts:

- Completed: 1982
- Architect: Maya Ying Lin
- Size: 247 feet long by 10 feet high
- Cost: $7 Million from private donations
- Numbers of Names on The Wall: 58,000
- Numbers of Americans Who Donated Money: 275,000,000
When is a wall not a wall?
When it helps us heal.

The patch with the horse on it represents the Seventh Cavalry. The man on the right, above, is a Vietnam veteran who was a member of this division. The man on the left was a member of the “Big Red One” — the First Infantry Division. His patch is on the right, above. They greeted each other by saying, “Hey, Garry Owen, welcome home.”

“Garry Owen” is the title of an Irish song that General George Custer adopted in the 1800s to inspire his troops. When Vietnam veterans visit the wall, many call each other “Garry Owen.” How does such a greeting help people heal?
Garry Owen

When Vietnam veterans visit the Wall, they often greet one another by saying “Hey, Garry Owen!” The name comes from an Irish song that became a regimental march and eventually became the official song of the United States’ Seventh Cavalry.

Students can go to <http://www.naples.net/presents/7thcav/> to hear the music. Some of the stanzas are printed below.

We are the pride of the army
And a regiment of great renown
Our name’s on the pages of history
From sixty-six on down
If you think we stop or falter
While in the fray we’re gin’
Just watch the steps with our heads’
While our band plays “Garry Owen”

Then hurrah for our brave commanders
Who lead us into the fight
We’ll do or die in our country’s cause
And battle for the right.
And when the war is o’er,
And to our home we’re goin’
Just watch the step, with our heads erect
When our band plays, “Garry Owen.”
How to Do Oral History

Preparing for the Interview
1. Learn some background information about your topic.
2. Write three questions to ask your interviewee. Ask about the first-hand experiences of your interviewee. Ask questions that require more than a Yes or No answer. For example, ask “How did you feel about U.S. involvement in the war?” rather than “Were you against the war?”
3. Exchange questions with your partner and role play to make sure your questions are clear and easy to understand.

Conducting the Interview
1. If you have a tape recorder, use it to record your subject’s answers. This will enable you to take fewer notes and concentrate on your interviewee.
2. Bring your list of questions.
3. Bring extra paper to record your notes or write ideas for follow-up questions as the person is talking.
4. Use good manners: be on time; be prepared; be polite (say please and thank you and address people formally using Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss; introduce yourself and give your name, age, and the class and school you attend); be patient and allow the person time to answer questions; do not argue with or correct the person.
5. Jot down any follow up questions you want to ask as your interviewee speaks.

After the Interview
1. Listen to your tape and write down the most important parts of the person’s response. You may need to listen to the tape many times to transcribe (write down) what was said.
2. Analyze: Think about the accuracy of what your subject said. Did you hear contradictory information or indications that the person did not remember an event well? Did the person have a clear bias that might have influenced the way events were remembered?
3. Write a few sentences summarizing what your interviewee said.

Adapted from Using Oral History: Student Lesson from the Library of Congress