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Video Production

WAR IN INDOCHINA

Teachers' Notes

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War in Indochina

Historical background

The war in Vietnam, formerly part of French Indochina was at various periods an anti-colonial war, a civil war and a war between the ideologies of capitalism and communism, involving directly or indirectly the USA, the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China. It was also the stage for the 'first television war', a conflict where public opinion had an impact on the outcome of the war.

By the 1890s Cambodia and Laos together with Cochin China, Annam and Tonkin, were part of the French Empire. For the next 60 years they were known as French Indochina. The French maintained a system where the indigenous economy remained agrarian and primarily served the needs of France. France was like many colonial powers with its administration based on exploitation and repression. The peasants were burdened with taxes and struggled to eke out a living on land controlled by the French or their Vietnamese supporters. While the French created some industry, built schools, hospitals, roads, railways and ports, the mass of the people gained few benefits.

Anti-French rebellions, especially in Vietnam, were dealt with harshly. By the outbreak of World War II, there was a growing nationalist movement in Vietnam, which drew its inspiration from both past revolutionary attempts and in the ideology of communism. In Ho Chi Minh, the people found a leader who became symbolic with the struggle for an independent Vietnam.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Capitalism, communism, ideology, plantations, agrarian economy, nationalism
2. Map Study: Locate the regions of Indochina on a map of S E Asia
3. Outline the methods used by France to establish authority in Indochina
4. Discussion: How did resistance to French rule develop in the early part of the twentieth century? What form did this resistance take?
5. Film Study: What were the positive and negative effects of French rule in Indochina?

The Emergence of Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh was born in Central Vietnam in May 1890. He left Vietnam in 1911 and eventually settled in France where he joined the French Communist Party and was influenced by Lenin's ideas on colonialism. Ho moved to China in 1924, where he established the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam in 1925. In 1930 Ho united a number of factions to form the Indochinese Communist Party. Following the invasion of France by Nazi Germany in 1940, Japan was given the opportunity to move into Indochina.

In 1941 Ho, Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap founded the Vietminh, and Giap began the task of building a formidable guerrilla army. Ho realised that if he was to gain the support of the USA, the Communist Party would need to change to a United Front. Ho also emphasised that he was a nationalist first and a communist second.

Following the surrender of Japan in 1945, Giap's troops entered Hanoi on August 17 1945. Bao Dai, the puppet emperor abdicated. On September 2 1945, Ho proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However this situation was short lived as the Allies had agreed that Vietnam should be temporarily occupied by the Nationalist Chinese forces in the north and British forces in the south. While the Chinese withdrew in February 1946, the British launched a crackdown on the Vietminh and secured the southern part of Vietnam for the French.

Ho entered into negotiations with the French and an uneasy compromise was reached on March 6 1946, which allowed the Vietnamese controlled territory in the north to be a free state in the French Union of Indochinese States, while Cochinchina would be separate and its future decided later by a referendum. Further discussions failed to satisfy both sides and by late 1946 conflict was inevitable. On November 23 1946, French aircraft and naval vessels bombarded the port of Haiphong. Open warfare erupted in December 1946, marking the beginning of the First Indochina War.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Vietminh, referendum, guerrilla warfare, republic, compromise
2. Construct a timeline of the political career of Ho Chi Minh
3. Outline the reasons why Ho Chi Minh was able to attract the support of many Vietnamese.
4. Discussion: Could a non violent independence campaign have succeeded against the French?
5. Debate: 'Ho was a nationalist first and a communist second'
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about Ho Chi Minh as a revolutionary leader?

The First Indochina War

Following the Elysee Agreement between Bao Dai and the French in June 1948, there were now two governments claiming to represent Vietnam. There was Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic which was recognised and aided by the Soviet Union, and later by China under Mao Zedong in 1949. Also there was Bao Dai's French sponsored government based in Saigon and recognised and aided by the USA and Britain. Following the attack by the French on Haiphong in November 1946, the Vietminh retreated into the jungle north of Hanoi and made preparations for guerrilla warfare. As the Vietminh were heavily outnumbered they tended to avoid major conflicts and used 'hit-and-run' tactics.

By 1950 Giap had formed an army of over 100 000 men, complete with modern weapons. The French had an army of 100 000 troops and the support of 300 000 Vietnamese troops.

Giap changed from guerrilla tactics to major attacks on French positions in 1951 and suffered heavy casualties, forcing him to again change tactics.

Giap believed it was necessary to defeat the French in a decisive battle. Dien Bien Phu was chosen for this battle as he knew the French would defend their position in order to stop the Vietminh getting access to Laos. General Navarre parachuted 12 000 French troops into Dien Bien Phu and occupied the base. Giap had secretly assembled a vast army of 60 000 men and 200 heavy artillery pieces on the hills surrounding the French garrison. Giap aided by Chinese advisers did not launch an all out attack against the French, but instead used his artillery to bombard the French troops and had his forces dig tunnels towards the French perimeter. Giap finally attacked the French in mid March 1954. The French were besieged for 55 days and were cut off from supplies. On May 7 1954, the surviving French forces were forced to surrender. The loss at Dien Bien Phu broke the will of the French in Vietnam.

The future of Vietnam was determined at the Geneva Conference in May 1954. Vietnam was divided temporarily along the 17th parallel, with the North under Ho Chi Minh and the South under Ngo Dinh Diem. The date for elections to unify the country was fixed for July 1956, although few observers believed that the Geneva Agreement would end the conflict. Diem refused to accept the terms of the agreement and the USA made it clear they would support the anti-communist Diem.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Elysee Agreement, 'hit-and-run', guerrilla, Geneva Agreement, 17th parallel
2. Explain the meaning behind 'the elephant fights the grasshopper'
3. Research the tactics used, and the advantages held, by both the French and the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu
4. Discussion: Why did the USA refuse to send troops to assist the French against the Vietminh in 1954?
5. Debate: The Geneva Agreement was doomed to fail
6. What does the film reveal about the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its importance to the success of the Vietminh?

The Second Indochina War from 1954 to the assassination of Diem

Two Vietnams had emerged from the Geneva Conference but President Eisenhower was determined that South Vietnam was not going to be the next 'domino' to fall to communism. While the Geneva Conference was in progress the USA persuaded the French to have Bao Dai appoint Ngo Dinh Diem, a devout Catholic and strong anti-communist, as Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam.

Diem was appointed President of South Vietnam in October 1955. The US hoped that Diem would win the support of the people and initiate land reform programs.

However Diem's government favoured the landowners at the expense of the peasants, unlike the Vietminh who redistributed land to the peasants. Supporters of the Vietminh were executed, or 're educated' in prison camps. Diem also refused to allow the elections for unification to take place. Communist guerrillas in the South, now known as the Vietcong, began a terror campaign against Diem's officials after 1959. The National Liberation Front, a broad coalition of communist supporters, was also established. John F Kennedy became President of the United States in January 1961 and extended US support for South Vietnam. He increased the number of US military advisers to 16 000 by 1963 and built up the size of the South Vietnamese Army to 170 000.

In 1962 Diem initiated the 'strategic hamlet' program, removing peasants away from areas where the NLF was strong. This program was both unpopular with the peasants and failed in achieving its aim of undermining the Vietcong. Diem's anti-Buddhist policies, which led to a number of monks burning themselves to death, increased his unpopularity. Kennedy realised that Diem had become too unpopular to defeat the Vietcong and tacit approval was given to a plot to overthrow Diem. The assassination of Diem and his brother Nhu on November 2 1963, was greeted with enthusiasm by the people. Three weeks later President Kennedy was also assassinated. The new military government under General Duong Van Minh tried to improve relations with those who had opposed Diem, while the new American president, Lyndon Johnson sought a more aggressive war against the communists.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: 'Domino theory', National Liberation Front (NLF), Vietcong, ARVN, NVA, 'strategic hamlets'
2. Outline the aims and methods of the NLF.
3. Research the extent to which US 'military advisers' were purely advisers
4. Explain why the USA had major concerns with Diem's regime by the late 1950s.
5. Discuss: Why did the USA support the regime of President Diem yet give tacit approval for his overthrow?
6. Film Study: In what ways was President Diem responsible for his own downfall?

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

The US Government had planned to develop the ARVN to a level where it could defeat the Vietcong. However US advisers found it difficult to instil in these forces the necessary will to win. This situation was not helped by the fact that there were ten changes of government in South Vietnam between November 1963 and June 1965.

The Vietcong on the other hand had high morale, a firm belief in their cause and superior tactics. By mid 1964, North Vietnamese troops were mobilised for action in the South. Effective anti-aircraft defences and underground facilities were constructed around Hanoi and Haiphong. The Vietcong also increased their numbers to 170 000. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was upgraded into an effective supply route.

President Johnson realised that direct US intervention was needed to avoid a communist takeover of South Vietnam. In July 1964 Johnson approved secret South Vietnamese commando raids in the Gulf of Tonkin. On August 2, the US destroyer *Maddox* on a surveillance mission off the coast of North Vietnam was fired upon by North Vietnamese gunboats. Two days later the *Maddox*, and another destroyer *Turner Joy*, were alleged to have been attacked off the coast of North Vietnam, although it is doubtful if the attack took place. Congress accepted an attack had taken place and adopted Johnson's proposal, passing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on August 7, 1964. Johnson used this resolution as the legal basis for increasing US involvement in Vietnam.

Throughout November and December 1964, the Vietcong launched a number of successful attacks in the South. On March 2 1965, the US launched a massive bombing program over North Vietnam. This was the start of *Operation Rolling Thunder*. This was now America's war. By the end of 1965 the US had 200 000 combat troops in Vietnam.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Tonkin Gulf Resolution, *Operation Rolling Thunder*
2. Research the reasons why South Vietnam appeared to be more unstable by 1964
3. Debate: President Johnson was justified in using any means possible to get the approval of Congress for US involvement in the war
4. Discussion: Why was *Operation Rolling Thunder* so controversial?
5. Film Study: From your study of the film, what impact did the Tonkin Gulf Incident have in escalating the conflict in Indochina?

Strategies and tactics

President Johnson had hoped that *Operation Rolling Thunder* would end the war within a few months, but it lasted three and a half years. During this period more bombs were dropped on North Vietnam than had been dropped in the whole of World War II. General Westmoreland, the commander of US forces in Vietnam now tried more aggressive tactics. He applied the strategy of 'search and destroy', where US forces would seek out enemy forces operating in the South. Westmoreland believed his forces would overwhelm the enemy as they were much better equipped and had air support.

When the US and ARVN forces did come in contact with the enemy they were often able to inflict heavy casualties, achieving a favourable 'kill ratio'. However the enemy, who travelled lightly, often simply disappeared into the jungle or made use of a complex system of tunnels. The frustration at the enemy eluding them often resulted in villages being destroyed on suspicion, in what was referred to as 'Zippo raids'.

While the communists were prepared to accept heavier losses to achieve their aims, they modified their tactics and avoided pitched battles, concentrating more on 'hit-and-run' raids and ambushes. If they were involved in larger conflicts, they kept in close proximity to the enemy as this made it difficult for the US forces to use air strikes.

The communists were also experts in making booby traps, such as 'Punji' stake traps, trip wires with exploding grenades and pressure mines, all of which were cheap and easy to make and the cause of many casualties. The Vietcong also targeted cities in the South with assassinations and bombings.

The US and ARVN forces sprayed chemicals to kill vegetation that could assist the communists. Crops were also destroyed to hamper guerrilla forces with food supplies, although this also punished the peasants. 'Agent Orange' was the most commonly used defoliant and was later found to have serious side effects for many who came into contact with it. Napalm was also dropped by aircraft on targeted villages with devastating effect, showering the surrounding areas with burning petroleum jelly.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: 'Search and destroy', 'kill ratio', 'Zippo raids', 'punji' stakes, defoliants, 'Agent Orange', napalm
2. Outline the strengths and weaknesses of 'search-and-destroy' tactics.
3. Research the types and impact of booby traps used by the Vietcong
4. How effective were the guerrilla tactics used by the Vietcong?
5. Debate: The use of napalm should have been outlawed in the Vietnam War
6. What does the film reveal about the hardships endured by the peasants during the war? Why was South Vietnamese Government unable to win the support of the peasants?

The Tet Offensive, 1968

By 1968 there were 600 000 US troops in Vietnam but there still did not appear to be an end in sight to the conflict. The Vietcong now abandoned their guerrilla tactics and faced the US and the ARVN in a series of more conventional battles. The first action was the siege of the firebase at Khe Sanh on January 20 1968, when the NVA launched a furious bombardment. With the help of B-52s pounding enemy positions in nearby hills, the US forces were able to hold their position. It cost the communists 10 000 lives.

On January 31 1968, at the time of the Lunar New Year, 70 000 communist forces launched a surprise attack on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam. The Tet Offensive was the culmination of much planning by the Vietcong, who hoped that the population in the South would rise up against the government. In most of these areas the communists were crushed by superior US and ARVN firepower. The greatest impact was on television viewers in the USA, who were able to see scenes of their own embassy in the middle of Saigon, occupied by the Vietcong for six hours. By early March the Tet Offensive was over with the Vietcong having lost over 50 000 of their forces, the ARVN 11 000 and the US 2000. Many people in the US became more sceptical of claims that the war was being won. The shooting of a Vietcong suspect on the spot by the Chief of Police in Saigon, made many Americans question just what they were defending in Vietnam.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Firebase, Lunar New Year, Tet
2. Research General Giap's objectives in launching the Tet Offensive.
3. Discussion: In military terms why was the Tet Offensive a big risk for the Vietcong?
4. Debate: How could the US support a country where a Chief of Police could shoot a suspect without a trial?
5. Film study: What did the Tet Offensive reveal about the organisation, tactics and morale of the communist forces?

The Anti-War Movement

Up to 1965, most of the press and population supported the US Government in this conflict. However an increasing number of people in the USA became convinced that they were not really threatened by the communists in Vietnam, and began to question whether it was worth the lives of young Americans. The cost of the war also meant that many social problems could not be dealt with. A visit to North Vietnam by Harrison Salisbury from *The New York Times* showed that contrary to government claims, bombing had occurred in civilian areas in the North. This helped create a credibility gap. The 'television war' also showed the horror of the conflict to Americans on a daily basis.

The growth of protest songs was in evidence at the Woodstock Festival. Huge protest marches against the war took place in the USA IN 1969, 1970 and 1971. The shooting of four students at Kent State University, Ohio, sparked protests throughout the USA. The revelation that the CIA set up *Operation Phoenix*, in order to 'neutralise' suspects, was a further attack on the credibility of the government, as was the escalation of the war into Cambodia. The emerging facts in the early 1970s about the My Lai Massacre of March 1968, was a further blow to the credibility of the US Government.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: *Operation Phoenix*, Woodstock, My Lai
2. Research the visit of Harrison Salisbury to North Vietnam in December 1966
3. Discussion: To what extent was the political impact of the attack on the US embassy more important than the military result?
4. Debate: The My Lai Massacre severely undermined the credibility of the government
5. From your viewing of the film, what impact did the anti-war movement have on the progress of the war?

Nixon, Vietnamisation and the end of the war in Vietnam

Richard Nixon won the US presidential elections in 1968, in the same year that peace talks with North Vietnam began in Paris. He promised that he would 'de-Americanise' the Vietnam War.

In June 1969 Nixon introduced a strategy of 'Vietnamisation', whereby US troops would gradually leave Vietnam and the South Vietnamese army, supplied with US weapons and the support of the US air force, would do more of the fighting. Nixon's other initiative was to negotiate secretly with North Vietnam. Nixon's National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger began talks with North Vietnam's chief negotiator Le Duc Tho in August 1969. The status of the government of South Vietnam was an obstacle to the talks throughout 1970 and 1971, with neither side willing to compromise. By April 1969, the number of US troops in Vietnam was at its peak of 550 000. In June Nixon announced a decrease of 25 000, followed by a further decrease of 35 000 in September.

Both sides were striving to gain a dominant position on the battlefield to gain the upper hand at the bargaining table. Nixon escalated the conflict when the US invaded Cambodia in April 1970, and in February 1971, US and ARVN forces launched an invasion of Laos to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Nixon had hoped that the invasion of Cambodia would force North Vietnam to be more flexible in negotiations. In March 1972 the North Vietnamese launched a major invasion of South Vietnam. 120 000 North Vietnamese troops were involved and major battles continued up to June. US airpower was vital in saving the South Vietnamese Government. While the communists suffered heavy casualties, the government in the South was weakened and the groundwork prepared for a peace settlement that was more favourable to the communists. At this stage there were only 70 000 US troops remaining in Vietnam.

Kissinger and Le Duc Tho agreed to terms in October 1972, but they were unacceptable to President Thieu of South Vietnam. Talks dragged on until December when Nixon commenced *Operation Linebacker Two*, an intensive bombing campaign on Hanoi and Haiphong, designed to force the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table.

A ceasefire was finally signed in Paris on January 27 1973. Nixon was now able to withdraw remaining US troops and claim that he had achieved his goal of 'peace with honour'. President Thieu complained that the US had broken their promise to provide enough military support to his government and it fell to the North Vietnamese in April 1975.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Vietnamisation, *Operation Linebacker Two*, 'peace with honour'
2. Research: Was South Vietnam in a strong position to win the war after the withdrawal of the USA?
3. Discussion: What were the strengths and weaknesses of the 1973 Paris ceasefire?
4. Discuss the statement by President Nixon: 'We have finally achieved peace with honour'
5. Debate: The USA and South Vietnam lost the war because they were unable to win the 'hearts and minds' of the South Vietnamese peasants?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about President Nixon and his strategies to bring an end to US participation in the war?

Pol Pot and Cambodia

Cambodia has often been referred to as a sideshow to the conflict in Vietnam. Since the Geneva Conference of 1954, Cambodia had assumed a role of neutrality to events in Vietnam. While Prince Norodom Sihanouk had accepted US aid in the late fifties, he later renounced this aid and broke off diplomatic relations in 1965. Sihanouk also did not resist the route of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Cambodia and also ignored the 'secret' US bombing of Vietcong bases in Cambodia in 1969 and 1970. Cambodia was involved in a civil war early in 1970 as North Vietnamese troops sided with the Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk was overthrown by his Prime Minister, Lon Nol, who had the support of the US.

Following the peace agreement between the US and North Vietnam in 1973, the war in Cambodia intensified with the Khmer Rouge ending their relationship with North Vietnam and rejecting any peace negotiations. US bombing continued to devastate the country and destroy the economy. The Khmer Rouge began their final attack on Phnom Penh in January 1975 and Lon Nol fled the country. On April 17 1975 the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh and forced the people out of the city. This marked the beginning of Year Zero. Cambodia, now known as Democratic Kampuchea, was cut off from the rest of the world as the Pol Pot regime sought to create a harsh and primitive agrarian regime. Family life was abolished and educated Cambodians and others deemed unsuitable, were butchered in the 'killing fields' of the country. Estimates of the death toll range from one to three million people.

Tension between Cambodia and Vietnam continued after 1973 with both territorial disputes and ideological differences. Border clashes took place in 1977 and 1978, culminating in 100 000 Vietnamese forces invading Cambodia on December 25, 1978. The Khmer Rouge retreated from Phnom Penh and a Vietnamese endorsed government under a former Khmer Rouge official, Heng Samrin, took power on January 7, 1979. Vietnamese troops remained in Cambodia for another ten years.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Khmer Rouge, 'killing fields', Year Zero
2. Outline the reasons why Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978
3. Research the way in which Cambodia was 'cleansed' during the regime of Pol Pot
4. Discussion: To what extent was Cambodia really neutral under Prince Sihanouk?
5. Discuss the following opinion: 'Pol Pot wants to guide Cambodia in the way that he thinks is best for Cambodia, that is to say, the worst. Pol Pot is mad, you know, like Hitler' (Prince Norodom Sihanouk)
6. How does the film enhance your understanding of Pol Pot and the 'killing fields'?