

# The Overreach of the American Empire in the War for Vietnam

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“All politics are local”  
–Tip O’Neil

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## **Overview**

Sixty-four deaths may not sound like a lot of people to die as a result of any war; after all, over the course of the Vietnam War a calculated 58,220 died overall. Nonetheless, 64 was the greatest number of students who died from any one high school throughout the Vietnam conflict, and that school is where I now teach, exactly 50 years later.

In 1965, Thomas Alva Edison High School sat near 8th and Lehigh in the North Philadelphia corridor that housed many of the poorest and most disenfranchised people of the city. Sadly, in many ways that has not changed, even while the neighborhood has transformed to a predominantly Latino community and the school has been abandoned for a new campus at 151 West Luzerne Street, forming a square city block corralled by Front Street, Hunting Park, American Street and Luzerne. Curiously enough, the campus, now named Thomas Alva Edison High School and John C. Fareira Skills Center, sits between two graveyards on Luzerne and Front Street and an animal “kill” shelter on Hunting Park Avenue. Nearby are other schools, but also is the refuse of the city: a junkyard of accident-paralyzed automobiles, a scrap metal processing plant, and the hulking carcass of a former feeder school to Edison, the Roberto Clemente Middle School building, along 5th Street, and the abandoned industrial train tracks that once trekked through the area in order to transfer materials from the Northeast to the South.

The school today does not hold a monopoly on the children of the area, as it once did, and far fewer students are needed to join in military services as there once were when the war seduced an 18-year-olds’ service on Friday and sent him halfway around the globe over the weekend to fight in Vietnam by Monday. Nonetheless, there is a substantial ROTC presence in the high school, which maintains a place for kids seeking discipline, physical training, patriotism, and honor, but now a spot in the Army, Navy, Air Force or Marines reserves a coveted role for anyone, not just the high school students who go here.

Approximately 74% of the students at Edison come from Spanish-speaking families today, and 23% identify as African American. Of the nearly 1400 students who attend Edison HS, 28.6% retain a physical, intellectual, or developmental learning disability, accommodated by a host of Special Education teachers and support staff. While there is one English for Speakers of Other Languages Director, there is an entire department of TESOL staff for the 28.1% of the students who require second language services. While most students at Edison draw on family roots in Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic. There are several students from China at Edison HS, and a few families from Central America, as well as one family from Haiti. In the school year spanning 2014-15, 100% of Edison students came from economically disadvantaged households, ([webapps.philasd.org/school\\_profile/view/5020](http://webapps.philasd.org/school_profile/view/5020)) qualifying for free breakfast and lunch, as well as some snacks if they participate in the Education Works or other after school service programs.

## **Objectives**

The goal of this unit is to explain a history of the United States involvement with Vietnam in personal terms: through nonfiction memoir, fiction, and poetry, as the dream that a memory is. The dreams of memory, however, must be grounded in factual evidence, and I have attempted to understand some of the reality of the time, and in particular the facts about recruitment, then as now, into the military, for the ostensible purpose of keeping our country safe, as well as a kind of moral imperative to expand our empire. Just as we felt a manifest destiny to expand westward across our own nation, there appears in the evidence a need, and in fact a kind of moral justification, even fervor, for spreading our message of Democracy. We seemed bent upon our beliefs even when we could not justify that message to ourselves as a nation, for just as the military was advocating freedom for the South Vietnamese abroad we had enacted a Civil Rights bill in 1964, and that bill did not yet represent real freedom for African Americans, or any other non-white people, in the United States.

By the end of this unit students should be able to understand three overt reasons for the war, according to a series of speeches by American presidents: rebuffing the advance of Communism, controlling trade and resources in Southeast Asia, and upholding our promise to the South Vietnamese, and in fact when it came down to it our reputation as a world power and potential empire. Furthermore, they should be able to analyze these primary sources from the conflict in order to do so, as well as assess the validity of these claims in light of what we can see through an examination of the film “The Fog of War”. We ask if the military and social goals of stopping Communism in Southeast Asia were accomplished. Furthermore, did United States citizens benefit in any way from 58,220 casualties and over 300,000 wounded? ([www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#intro](http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#intro)) It may seem rhetorical to ask if Edison High School benefited from the war, at any time; while there may be no definite answer of yes or no to these grave questions (though some would claim there are), we can explore how the American empire had to assess the effect war had upon soldiers like those who left Edison and many other schools, bound for an adventure as chess pieces in a geopolitical game of strategy and ultimately impacting how the American public perceives its relationship to war efforts forever after. The exercises in the activities section can provoke the next generation to know something of the time and learn enough history not to be doomed to repeat it; students can

also compare present-day official statements about the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc., etc., the list goes on. Perhaps there will always be an example with which to compare these presidential statements.

Another objective for this unit is to see into the Vietnam War from the perspective of soldiers' writings, which are filled with equal parts emotional response and detached analysis. In contrast to military directions and directives that seem absent of emotion, they can both leave readers feeling appalled with shock, dismayed and even horrified. This split between analytical distance and emotional proximity, essentially imbalanced like a seesaw with all the weight on one side, can in turn act like a catapult, dropping hard upon the ground any impartiality left on the upraised side when the weight of military service, on the opposite side, is released chaotically into unpredictable emotional territory. This seesaw/catapult effect leaves many veterans of Vietnam and other military service feeling devastated by the collapse of purposefulness following their service, just as the nations in which they fought have been left, dropped from America's focus, to the ground, and abandoned. Vietnam, following the "end" of the war, continues to rebuild, continues to exist as a physical place, as does America, but at what cost? How have we been changed through trauma, and how do we recall the events of that trauma in order to make sense of it today? In Tim O'Brien's short story *The Things They Carried* students are encouraged to compare their own emotional baggage to the list of itemized possessions particular to an American soldier in Vietnam. Students should weigh, in a sense, what they carry with themselves wherever they go, as well as measure the difference between his narration and the actual experience of trauma at the gravitas of his burden.

A third objective of the unit is to analyze the selective service documents of the time compared with those of today in order to study the language and factual expectations of the selective service system in the United States and abroad. In this manner, students will become challenged to consider the dilemma facing 18-year-olds of the Vietnam era, in particular the students at Edison HS in North Philadelphia, where I teach. Edison High School, then located at 8th Street & Lehigh Avenue, lost 64 students during the conflict---more soldiers than any other high school in the nation during the period. In part, it is the reality of history to which students should most be made aware, in order for the awe to be transformed into empathy, and the empathy into an embrace of the reality that war is greater than any one man, and even one place; instead, it is an effect of "man's inhumanity to man" (coined by 18<sup>th</sup> century poet Robert Burns). and perhaps a fact of the human condition. We will study archival photographs of draft card burnings, among other documentation in order to critique the portrayal of the war in the media.

A fourth goal of the unit is to expose students to the poetry of the period and the experience in emotional terms, in order that students may see how in that concise art form, it was, as the title of W.D. Ehrhart's poem goes, "Beautiful Wreckage":

What if none of it happened the way I said?  
Would it all be a lie?  
Would the wreckage be suddenly beautiful?  
Would the dead rise up and walk? ([www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/237244](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/237244))

A final goal is to explore ways that we memorialize the war, though this will be clarified in much more detail when I get to the final, culminating activity.

## **Rationale**

“War memorials should not lend themselves to clichés”. (Appy, 1) Nonetheless, the war for what Vietnam means in the hearts and minds of those who fought there, as well as those who didn’t, is a cultural battle. Books and poems are war memorials; they honor every person whom they recall, and everyone who went into each experience. From Tim O’Brien’s short story “The Things They Carried” to “The Invasion of Grenada” by W.D. Ehrhart, every one of the authors is struggling to make sense of what he has seen for himself and for his readers; sometimes they bring us the weight of objects to examine the past, and in others we are offered memories, but in all, they are simply metaphors for the real thing.

Given the history of Edison High School, I thought it would be important to see how an American high school managed such high rates of participation in the United States military, despite seeming to have been neglected by the lofty aspirations of “The American Dream”. Voluntary military service seems to be a sign of patriotism, so what drove these young men to volunteer? What was their experience? How could I get my contemporary Edison HS students to unpack the meaning(s) of military participation? One possible response to these queries is “Why bother? That was the past, this is now.” as one of my students said when I asked him about the Memorial Day events being held at our school every year. I think so long as military funding far surpasses educational funding in the United States, and a kid sees military service as a means to pay for college, instead of college and learning as genuine service to building the nation’s strength, there is a clear rationale for this type of curriculum unit. If military institutions do a better job of “preparing for the future”, as they say in advertisements, then we as educators need to do a better job of making our work, and our lessons relevant. This writing is an attempt to do so.

## **Content**

### *Presidential Speeches*

“The names and concrete details of war are important” (Appy, 2), claims author Christian G. Appy, and in memory we all seek to narrow down the truth of the matter, even when whatever happened seems elusive at best. According to 2 surveys of the most important reason men enlisted as volunteers into the Vietnam war (Appy, 47, Table 6), in 1968 47.2% were motivated by the draft, and only 6.1% for patriotism; patriotism had accounted for 11.2% (or twice the earlier amount), only four years earlier in 1964. The statistics, the facts, illustrate in plain numbers how disenchanted American volunteer soldiers had become; they also show how soldiers had become, as writer Susan Sontag would characterize the polarity, “Spectators” vs. “Actors” in their own fates. (Louvre, 79) Every writer faces this dilemma of choice: “To be or not to be” wrote William Shakespeare most famously, in the voice of Hamlet. If we have action, then we have choice, presumably, but without it we are non-existent.

Dr. Henry Kissinger, the national security advisor to President of the United States Richard Nixon from 1969-72 and then Secretary of State from 1973-76, wrote in his journals “A scientific revolution has, for all practical purposes, removed technical limits from the exercise of power in foreign policy”. (Kimball, 335) As interpreted by one critic who makes a very keen point on the Vietnam War, “Moreover, since these physical means of power were created in large part through science, the United States maintains a privileged position of knowledge. The United States knows more about ‘reality’ itself...Power and knowledge thus go together.” (James William Gibson in Kimball, 335). Especially as the war began, no one in the everyday public of America knew anything about Vietnam, a small nation on the other side of a globe that few were taught anything about in traditional schooling. The primary message that came to through the airwaves during the early 1960s was that it was a hotbed of Communism, and since Communism had been proved a bad thing during the era of Joseph Stalin and then Nikita Khrushchev, we seemed bent on facing it down and beating it back. Besides, there was nary a single Asian immigrant in the fighting forces of the United States, and certainly not in the voices that spoke with the voice of power. In 1951 President Harry S. Truman had said

“The Communists in the Kremlin are engaged in a monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world. If they were to succeed, the United States would be numbered among their principal victims. It must be clear to everyone that the United States cannot---and will not---sit idly by and await foreign conquest. The only question is: What is the best time to meet the threat and how is the best way to meet it? The best time to meet the threat is in the beginning. It is easier to put out a fire when it is small than after it has become a roaring blaze.” (in Kimball, 27)

US Entrance into the War seemed inevitable with that kind of motivation. Furthermore, the following President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, spoke of something he likened to a “domino effect”, when he spoke at a press conference in 1954.

“First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs. Then you have the possibility that many human beings pass under a dictatorship that is inimical to the free world. Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the “falling domino” principle...So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.” (in Kimball, 31)

By 1961, President John F. Kennedy, and others after him, would claim that American intervention in South Vietnam was an important case of a third world Guerrilla war of liberation, which he and others also claimed were wars of aggression, and had to be challenged.

“(A)s President of the United States, I consider it my duty to report to this assembly on two threats to the peace which are not on your crowded agenda, but which causes us, and most of you, the deepest concern. The first threat on which I wish to report is widely misunderstood: the smoldering coals of war in Southeast Asia. South Vietnam is already under attack...And the peaceful people of Laos are in danger of losing the independence they gained not so long ago. No one can call these ‘wars of liberation’.” (Kimball, 35)

Finally, in a fourth Presidential speech by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, listen for echoes of earlier presidential pontification:

“Tonight, Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change. This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania (Valley Forge, PA). It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Vietnam. Vietnam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise have ended their lives on Vietnam’s steaming soil... We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.” (Kimball, 38)

He went on to say

“This kind of world will never be built by bombs or bullets. Yet the infirmities of man are such that force must often precede reason, and the waste of war, the works of peace. I wish that this were not so.” (Ibid, 39)

There seems to be a consistent effort to be consistent; what has happened before has been right, because we are the United States, and the way we word the message is to place us as defenders of liberty, not as the Empire against which the little guy is fighting. Despite these eloquent arguments, what is most absent from them is the voice of the Vietnamese. He who controls the means to production, controls the war, someone once said, and the means to production of knowledge is the media and the airwaves. As stated earlier, we control reality when we control the language of the debate.

To some extent we are fortunate to live in a land in which words are used to ensure power, but in Vietnam the language belies a fierce use of force and violence. Violence begets violence, and what we can see in the speeches around the escalation of force in Vietnam is how distant United States citizens were from the war, and the realities of that war. Until, of course, soldiers came home, or didn’t. In a later explanation of the war, we hear Lyndon B. Johnson continue the cry for war:

“...if we walked away from Vietnam and let Southeast Asia fall, there would follow a destructive and divisive debate within our country . . . . A divisive debate over ‘who lost Vietnam’ would be, in my judgement, even more destructive to our national life than the argument over China had been.” (Kimball, 44)

Johnson even continues in his private diaries and reflections a significant confession of the Catch 22 “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t” conundrum in which he, and by extension the United States as an Empire, found itself:

“I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved....if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward

and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.” (Kimball, 45)

What we can see here is how a series of Presidents are drawn into an irreversible participation in the military-industrial complex, demonstrated by the quagmire of Vietnam. Our next President, Richard M. Nixon, found it inescapable as well, illustrated best by Kimball’s example of an interview between the President, who was “elected in part on the promise that he would end the long and bloody Vietnam war” (Kimball, 46) and a collection of television journalists in July, 1970. The war, as indicated by one reporter, Howard K. Smith, was an “undeclared war”:

(Smith) “...what legal justification do you have for continuing to fight a war that is undeclared in Vietnam?”

(Nixon) “This war, while it was undeclared, was here when I became President of the United States...I am simply stating the fact that there were 549,000 Americans in Vietnam under attack when I became President...The President...has the constitutional right--not only the right, but the responsibility--to use his powers to protect American forces when they are engaged in military actions, and under these circumstances...I have that power and am exercising that power.” (Kimball, 47)

Power seems to be the operative word here, and power is a fickle substance to master or control. The power that the American Empire attempted to exercise in Vietnam was

“the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future without having us impose our will upon them, or the North Vietnamese, or anybody else impose their will upon them.” (Kimball, 47)

President Nixon indicated that saving 17 million people in South Vietnam from a Communist takeover wasn’t worth the efforts of the United States, however he quickly returns to explaining how the domino theory (explained earlier) was still relevant, and that a loss or a surrender of the territory would only embolden expansionism by the Communists in the Soviet Union and China elsewhere. As a consequence, Nixon kept the soldiers there, and did so until the end of his presidency, when in 1975 Gerald Ford, the next president, declared an end to fighting, in large part due to the United States Senate cutting off funding for the war.

### *The Draft*

According to one source, the draft can be explained in very simple terms here:

Prior to 1970, draft status was determined by local draft boards, producing local variation in the numbers of males inducted. In 1969, this locally based system was replaced by national guidelines, and a televised lottery was held in December of that year to determine draft calls for males born between 1944 and 1950. Numbers 1 through 366 were drawn, with each number corresponding to a particular birth date of males in this pool. Males with lottery numbers greater than 195 were not called for induction, while males with numbers of 195 or below were called to report for possible induction. (Bergan, 379)

The process of issuing draft cards was by all accounts highly corrupted: local draft boards were staffed by political appointees, whose very interest in serving as a draft board member seems suspect. Over 3000 years ago Plato wrote “The best man for the job is he who would least like to have it” (*The Republic*) and in some neighborhoods, Edison High School’s North Philadelphia neighborhood for instance, draft code enforcement was cruel and exacting; in others it seemed practically laissez-faire. In addition to uneven stress around draft enforcement in the city of Philadelphia, the state, and the nation, medical deferments were accomplished easily in some families with a sympathetic doctor, whereas in others doctors seemed like informants for the government. According to the Selective Services own website (accessed in August 2015) states

Because the boards determined who would be drafted, there were instances when personal relationships and favoritism played a part in deciding who would be drafted. ([www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/How-The-Draft-Has-Changed-Since-Vietnam](http://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/How-The-Draft-Has-Changed-Since-Vietnam))

Today, conditions leading to anyone’s selection into service seem to have changed dramatically, and in large part due to the protests made by soldiers, families, peaceniks, and politicians, who advocated for dramatic reform and systematization of the draft, and for that matter the entire process of registration, across the whole of the United States and its territories. Today, thanks to the changes made to the draft law in 1971, it is genuinely a system, and not a hodgepodge of self-appointed patriots.

Before the lottery was implemented in the latter part of the Vietnam conflict, there was no system in place to determine order of call besides the fact that men between the ages of 18 and 26 were vulnerable to being drafted. Local boards called men classified 1-A, 18-1/2 through 25 years old, oldest first. This lack of a system resulted in uncertainty for the potential draftees during the entire time they were within the draft-eligible age group. All throughout a young man’s early 20’s he did not know if he would be drafted. (Bergan, 379-80)

In contrast,

A draft held today would use a lottery system under which a man would spend only one year in first priority for the draft—either the calendar year he turned 20 or the year his deferment ended, whichever came first. Each year after that, he would be placed in a succeeding lower priority group and his liability for the draft would lessen accordingly. In this way, he would be spared the uncertainty of waiting until his 26th birthday to be certain he would not be drafted. (ibid.)

The absence of a moral compass seems about par for the course; in “The Moral Mystery of My Lai”, a chapter exploring an incident that became one of the best-known atrocities of the conflict, the author describes how religion played a role in the morality of the war:

For a generation that felt alienated for many reasons, there was a sense that while morals

were valuable, in practice they were malleable. (Cotkin, 87)

The draft process pointed to inconsistencies for the experience of working class and poor young men compared to those of their upper class and even middle class members of their generation. One of the anthems of the time was the song “Working Class Hero” by John Lennon, an autobiographical myth but a bitter ballad to which many soldiers could relate.

As soon as you're born they make you feel small  
By giving you no time instead of it all  
Till the pain is so big you feel nothing at all  
A working class hero is something to be  
A working class hero is something to be . . .

There's room at the top they're telling you still  
But first you must learn how to smile as you kill  
If you want to be like the folks on the hill . . .

A working class hero is something to be  
A working class hero is something to be  
If you want to be a hero well just follow me  
If you want to be a hero well just follow me  
([www.metrolyrics.com/working-class-hero-lyrics-john-lennon.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/working-class-hero-lyrics-john-lennon.html))

Many of the soldiers whose numbers came up in the draft chose to protest, chose to leave, or chose, in some notable cases like that of Cassius Clay (“The Greatest”, aka Muhammad Ali) chose to go to prison rather than fight. The heavyweight champion of the world was stripped of his boxing title at the time he refused to register for the draft; the fact that his Muslim faith was not recognized as the Quakers were as a legitimate form of conscientious objection was because he stated directly that he was against that specific war, not all wars in general. In any case, Muhammad Ali fought the decision legally as well as in the court of public opinion for 3 ½ years, and was ultimately charged a \$10,000 fine and a five year prison sentence; furthermore, the New York Boxing Commission, the World Boxing Association, and the Texas Sports Commission all banned him from boxing as a professional because “his refusal to enter the service was detrimental to the best interests of boxing”. ([www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2013/apr/29/muhammad-ali-refuses-to-fight-in-vietnam-war-1967](http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2013/apr/29/muhammad-ali-refuses-to-fight-in-vietnam-war-1967), accessed August 2015)

The Selective Service Act states that

The Congress further declares that in a free society the obligations and privileges of serving in the armed forces and the reserve components thereof should be shared generally, in accordance with a system of selection which is fair and just, and which is consistent with the maintenance of an effective national economy. ([www.sss.gov/About/Agency-Mission/Military-Selective-Service-Act#451](http://www.sss.gov/About/Agency-Mission/Military-Selective-Service-Act#451))

It stands to reason that the “maintenance of an effective economy” was the justification for granting deferments to millions of college students (most of them white and middle or upper

class...). Protests also accompanied the deferment process, and in the 1960's, a time of exceptional rebelliousness against the status quo, and questioning the moral high ground of even the U.S. government's best intentions, there were a number of public demonstrations that through the television medium allowed the nation to believe there were a lot more people against the war than there were in actuality. In essence, the American Empire, who had been flying its plane while it was being built, had broken in pieces before it ever hit its target; the process of protest demonstrates a metaphor for how the war was never actually a war; it had never even been declared.

## **Strategies**

### *Close Readings of Speeches & news articles*

The excerpts in the Rationale above are drawn from longer, and in some ways even more interesting speech text, and should be an important element of reading in an educational context. It is not enough to read presidential speeches for the pleasure of seeing effective, professional writers articulate themselves, every teacher should extend reading to explore its meanings, its implications, and its possibilities.

### *Writing Editorials*

Students should form opinions; in so doing, the editorial form can be a useful avenue toward expressing those opinions. When we proceed to read news articles, from the past or from the present day, students should be challenged to formulate a verbal response, in part so that they have some practice exercising their minds finding the right word(s) for the job, but also so that students begin to relish and rely upon opportunities to use words in place of action; to use words as actions unto themselves.

### *Reading and Writing Poetry*

Every war has its poems, and in Vietnam much of the poetry reflected the view that war was less heroic than hellish; it expressed countercultural attitudes and sometimes used graphic slang in its expression. Such writing shows students how their writing in poetry can capture a truth in metaphoric ways, by creative means that can be elusive when one writes using a more logical, or even a more polite path.

### *Reading Fiction*

Stretching readers' attention spans seems crucial to expanding their skills, and in a metaphorical sense allows students to see how a nearly fifteen year war (that was undeclared, mind you) was a stretch for the attention span of a nation. Reading longer work can serve to enrich students' breadth of personal experience, in that they begin to empathize with a character the longer they live with him.

## *Writing*

Here is where the rubber meets the road, for writing is thinking made real. Students need to write, whether in an English class to try out the vocabulary they are constantly acquiring, but also to see what it is they really think when they see thought outside of themselves. They need to write “frequently and often”, even if in a history/social studies classroom.

## *Memorial Day Participation*

As a culminating project, students can choose some aspect of our school wide celebration of Memorial Day in which to involve themselves, be it serving in the color guard ceremony, acting as a guide and escort for visiting veterans of foreign wars, participating in the candle lighting event or rehabilitating a memorial garden that was planted at the school in 1988 as a reminder of the late Edisonians in whose memory the school finds the roots of its own empire.

## **Activities**

### *Lesson One*

On the first day of the unit members of the class are asked to raise their hands and identify someone they know who has served in the military; from here we will open the class with stories, stories of who has joined, who has fought, who has survived, and who has died. I will ask them to consider the statistical reality that out of their graduating class at least one male and one female will join the military, and that perhaps even though they may have very different experiences, there is also a statistical possibility that they will serve in a foreign war, that perhaps they will know nothing about it, or that they will know something that convinces them it is an unjustifiable war, and yet they will be required by their job to fight in it regardless of these considerations.

Here we will discuss the Selective Service Administration, which during Vietnam began issuing draft cards in early 1962 and transformed the laws by 1971. We will discuss the facts of how at our school 64 students were killed, but any other teacher approach this lesson can do to inspire students to perform some research into their own community history to find similar statistical data is essential to its purpose. I will pass out draft notice documentary photos, as well as selective service registration forms from the present, which by law male students must complete within 6 months of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. We will concentrate on their own responses to wars they have known, and raise the concept that the Vietnam war lasted from 1961-1975: fourteen years, and that beyond the 64 students who were killed, many others were drafted and some were severely injured and/or traumatized by the events during their service. In considering the draft, we will discuss how some men were offered citizenship if they would first fight in the military, others were granted amnesty from criminal convictions, and still others volunteered, for patriotic reasons or because of a family tradition, or out of a sense of adventure.

Next we will perform close readings of the poem “Beautiful Wreckage” as a group (or alternatively “The Invasion of Grenada”) by W.D. Ehrhart in order to see how at least one author communicated his experiences of the war. We will have Bill visit our classroom, or we will go to

see him (he was my English teacher at my high school when I was growing up...) Every student will perform a short writing assignment for homework by composing a poem with war as the subject, either in literal terms or with war as a metaphor: What war(s) have they survived? Each student will be expected to explain his/her poem to the class following a reading of it.

*Note:* Any other teacher using this curricular unit could be resourceful and seek out veterans of Vietnam who attended the school where he/she teaches, and have at least one of them as a guest.

### *Lesson Two*

We will read *The Things They Carried* (the short story, not the novel) by Tim O'Brien, and make lists of the burdens we carry in our own metaphorical backpacks.

Begin by either having the students read copies of the short story independently for homework, or structure a reading lesson in the classroom by reading aloud together, followed by small group work in which teams race to identify objects in the soldier's pack and then metaphorical objects that weigh him down. Discuss the meanings that students bring to the objects in their own metaphorical packs; be careful to draw students away from literal and into symbolic territory. Have them perform a Think/Pair/Share activity with a partner and then report back to the class what they learned. Alternatively, they can draw a Venn diagram between themselves and O'Brien's character and write a journal entry or even an essay.

### *Lesson Three*

Read primary source speeches about Vietnam by five sequential United States Presidents at stations after arranging the classroom desks into five pods and have students identify responses to each speech with sticky notes on large poster paper. Convene together as a collective class and brainstorm what common messages or themes arise in them as a whole. Have students organize the sticky notes into common categories as a group process. Ask them to create a chronological timeline of the American Presidents and turn groups loose on computers with 20 minutes to find out whatever they can about Vietnam during the time period of the President to whom they are assigned and require them to design a graphic organizer in which to teach the information to other students. Have each group present the lesson as another activity, by whatever means necessary!

### *Lesson Four*

Plan an Empire. Begin with students brainstorming a definition for "Empire". Next, have students work in pairs or teams to design how they would run their Empire: Who would rule? Why that person? How would he/she/they rule? (As an Emperor?) What would the rights of other citizens in the Empire be? How would you go about expanding your Empire? When is an Empire or an Emperor satisfied, if ever? How would you transfer power? Maintain power? Have students design a game/project/story/contest that would teach Empire-building to younger generations.

### *Lesson Five*

Build a memorial to the dead. These can be artistic, philosophical, and public, and can memorialize single individuals or collective groups of people. What decisions will go into building this memorial?

Study photographs or video of the American Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. and discuss the film *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, available through PBS (Public Broadcasting System) or Netflix. Alternatively, watch Youtube Rear Window: Maya Lin and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqlykfcCDZ8>). Spend a good deal of time discussing memorials with students: What memorials do they visit? Which have they seen? How have they been affected? What do memorials mean, for them, for others, for time? Consider visiting the Memorial in DC; consider visiting or comparing the memorial with others: perhaps there is one in your town.

### *Lesson Six*

Plan a Memorial Day ceremony. What will it entail? How will you honor, respect, memorialize, and/or challenge others to see the past conflicts in the present moment? Will the ceremony involve poetry? Music? Light? Performance? Speeches? Art? Who, if it is limited in any way, is your target audience?

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Appy, Christian G. *Working-class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1993. Print.

*This is a fantastic look at how the war impacted society on a class level. It is quite comprehensive, has one author (in other words it is not a collection of essays as much as a thorough analysis), and reveals the tremendous bias that went into providing soldiers for the war.*

Bergan, D. E. "The Draft Lottery And Attitudes Towards The Vietnam War." *Public Opinion Quarterly*: 379-84. Print.

*A very brief article on just what the title identifies; a little scant, though, on comprehensive details, because it is mainly a synopsis.*

Cotkin, George. *Morality's Muddy Waters: Ethical Quandaries in Modern America*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2010. Print.

*A painful look at the United States involvement in everything from the My Lai massacre to Capital Punishment to torture during the Iraq War, I see the book as condemnation, in very philosophical writing and from a broad point of view, of the United States' fundamental approach to handling transgressions of the moral code we herald as so dear to us, but rarely achieve.*

Currey, Richard. *Crossing Over: The Vietnam Stories*. Livingston, Mont.: Clark City, 1993. Print.

*Published at the same time he served as my poetry professor at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, these sketches of battle scenes are doubly remarkable for their poignant portrayals of war through the eyes of a doctor as much as for their ability to reveal the inner struggles of all soldiers in a personal way during the Vietnam conflict. Remarkably descriptive for its brevity.*

Ehrhart, W. D. *Ordinary Lives: Platoon 1005 and the Vietnam War*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999. Print.

*W.D. "Bill" Ehrhart was an English teacher at my grade school when I was an adolescent, and we have met and shared ideas since then now that we are both teachers. His own story is been a reminder of how one's life can be a message, and his book details how Philadelphians in particular fared during the transition from civilian life to war veterans.*

Goff, Stanley, and Robert Sanders. *Brothers, Black Soldiers in the Nam*. Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982. Print.

*I wish I could have taken the time to read this entire book; a landmark text, it outlines exactly what so many soldiers would say is true, and seems especially relevant here and now in the age of Michael Brown's shooting and the Black Lives Matter movement in how it explores the overt and direct racism that soldiers saw as another phase in the life of slave people who have essentially exchanged oppressed life on the streets for oppression in the ranks.*

Kimball, Jeffrey P. *To Reason Why: The Debate about the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990. Print.

*This was an exceptionally useful look at what was a 75-year, even centuries long buildup to the war of the 1960s, and could be used as a primer for studying how Vietnam has evolved to be what it is today; it is objective, but the evidence it provides is damning.*

Louvre, Alf. *Tell Me Lies about Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of the War*. Milton Keynes [England: Open UP, 1988. Print.

*A provocative exploration of how the war stirred about so much controversy at the time, as well as how it evoked the modern day “culture wars” between liberals and conservatives, the straight world and the countercultural.*

Nan, Stewart. *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War*. New York: Anchor, 1998. Print.

*This would be my choice for a textbook to the unit I have described: the Reader provides a vast selection of everything from nonfiction, fiction (both short and long), to poetry, as well as a catalogue of film involving the Vietnam War and songs/lyrics from the time period up to the present.*

## **Appendix**

### *Pennsylvania Common Core State Standards*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist No. 10*).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.9

Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.