Handout 1 - Americans Respond to Vietnam: A Document-Based Question

Suggested reading period: 15 minutes
Suggested writing time: 45 minutes

Directions: The following question requires you to construct a coherent essay that integrates your interpretation of the documents and your knowledge of the time period addressed in the question. High scores will be earned only by essays that both cite key pieces of evidence from the documents and draw on outside knowledge of the period.

Question: In what ways and to what extent did the Vietnam War change American culture, society and values?


“Fighting soldiers from the sky  
Fearless men who jump and die  
Men who mean just what they say  
The brave men of the Green Beret . . .  
Put silver wings on my son’s chest  
Make him one of America’s best  
He’ll be a man they’ll test one day  
Have him win the Green Beret.”

Document B: Excerpt from President Lyndon Johnson’s address to the nation, August 5, 1964

“As President and Commander in Chief, it is my duty to the American people to report that renewed hostile actions against the United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply. . . .

Repeated acts of violence against the armed forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense but with positive reply . . .

This new act of aggression aimed directly at our own forces again brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle for peace and security in Southeast Asia.

Aggression by terror against the peaceful villages of South Vietnam has now been joined by open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America. . .

The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the Government of South Vietnam will be redoubled by this outrage. . . We still seek no wider war.”
**Document C: Excerpt from “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” by Joe McDonald, 1965**

“Come on all of you big strong men,
Uncle Sam needs your help again;
He’s got himself in a terrible jam
Way down yonder in Vietnam,
So put down your books and pick up a gun,
We’re gonna have a whole lot of fun.

And it’s one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it’s five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain’t no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! We’re all gonna die! . . .

Come on mothers throughout the land,
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.
Come on fathers, don’t hesitate
Send your sons off before it’s too late.
You can be the first one on your block
To have your boy come home in a box.”

**Document D: Excerpt from a speech by Paul Potter, 1965**

“Vietnam, we may say, is a laboratory run by a new breed of gamesmen who approached war as a kind of rational exercise in international power politics. It is the testing ground and staging area for a new American response to the social revolution that is sweeping through the impoverished downtrodden areas of the world. It is the beginning of the American counter-revolution . . .

What kind of system is it that justifies the United States or any country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? What kind of system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values—and still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world?”
Document E:  *Excerpt from Communique #1, Weatherman Underground, 1970*

“Hello . . . I’m going to read A DECLARATION OF A STATE OF WAR.

All over the world, people fighting Amerikan imperialism look to Amerika’s youth to use our strategic position behind enemy lines to join forces in the destruction of empire. . . .

Now we are adapting the classic guerrilla strategy of the Viet Cong and the urban guerrilla strategy of the Tupamaros to our own situation here in the most technically advanced country in the world . . .

The hundreds and thousands of young people who demonstrated in the Sixties against the war and for civil rights grew to hundreds of thousands in the past few weeks actively fighting Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia and the attempted genocide against black people.”

Document F:  *“Flower Power,” by Bernie Boston, taken at The March on the Pentagon, October 21, 1967*
Document G: Excerpt from article reporting on President Richard Nixon’s first inauguration, Washington Post, January 21, 1969

“He [Richard Nixon] called upon Americans to ‘lower our voices’ and to shun inflated and angry rhetoric.

‘We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another, until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices,’ he declared.

Less than two hours later, however, groups of militant and mostly youthful demonstrators screamed anti-war slogans and hurled rocks and beer cans at the closely guarded Presidential limousine bearing Mr. Nixon from the Capitol to the Inaugural Parade reviewing stand at the White House.”


“Though far from a complete history, even at 2.5 million words, the study [the Pentagon Papers] forms a great archive of government decision-making on Indochina over three decades. The study led its 30 to 40 authors and researchers to many broad conclusions and specific findings including the following:

. . . That the Johnson Administration, though the President was reluctant and hesitant to take the final decisions, intensified the covert warfare against North Vietnam and began planning in the spring of 1964 to wage overt war, a full year before it publicly revealed the depth of its involvement and its fear of defeat.”


“America is moving out of Vietnam after the longest and most divisive conflict since the War Between the States. But Vietnam is not moving out of America, for the impact of the war there is likely to influence American life for many years to come. Though it is probably too early to distinguish between the temporary and the enduring consequences, one thing is fairly clear. There has been a sharp decline in respect for authority in the United States as a result of the war—a decline in respect not only for the civil authority of government but also for the moral authority of the schools, the universities, the press, the church and even the family.

There was no cease-fire on this front. Vietnam did not start the challenge to authority, but it weakened respect for the executives who got the nation involved in the war in the first place, for the Congress that let it go on for more than a decade and for the democratic process of debate, which failed to influence the course of battle for years and which finally declined into physical combat and sporadic anarchy.”
Document J: Excerpt from the lyrics of “Okie from Muskogee,” written by Merle Haggard and Roy Burris, 1969

“We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don’t take our trips on LSD
We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street
We like livin’ right, and bein’ free
We don’t make a party out of lovin’
We like holdin’ hands and pitchin’ woo
We don’t let our hair grow long and shaggy
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do
I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
And white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all”