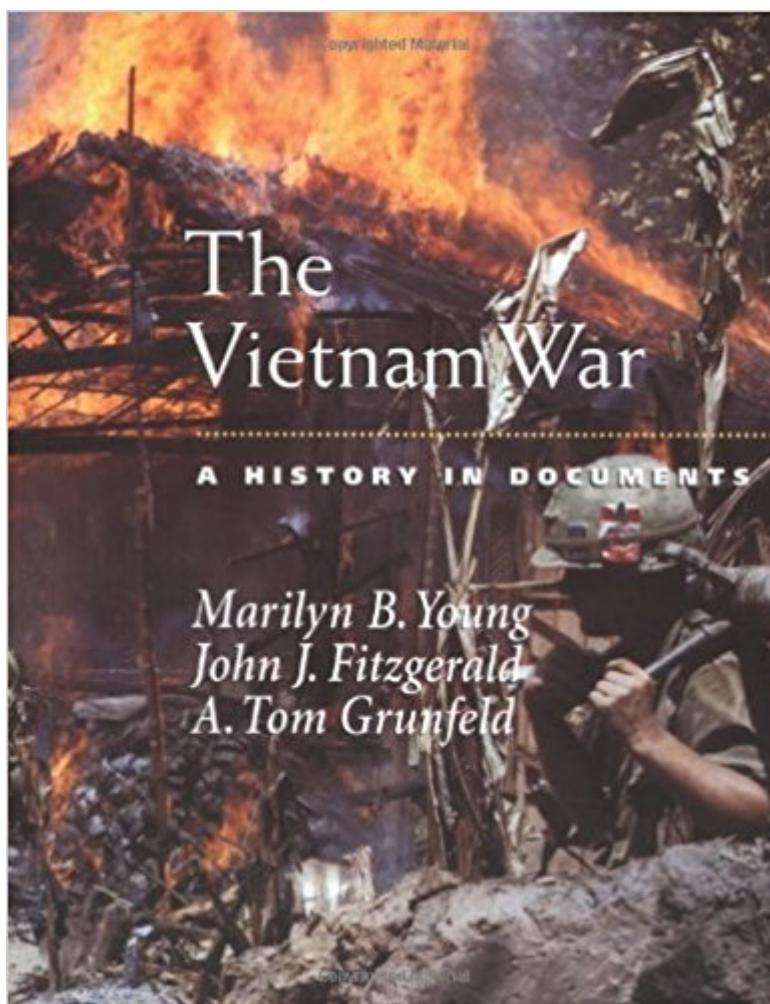


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The Vietnam War: A History In Documents (Pages From History)



Synopsis

The Vietnam War tells the story of one of the most divisive episodes in modern American history through primary sources, ranging from government documents, news reports, speeches, popular songs to memoirs, writings by Vietnam veterans (including coauthor John Fitzgerald), and poetry by Vietnamese and Americans on matching themes. The book begins in the 19th century when Vietnam became a French colony, and traces the insidious route by which the United States became involved in a war on the other side of the world.

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Customer Reviews

Grade 7 Up-This "documentary history" provides a social and political context for the conflict, with no military history and little coverage of the actual fighting. Instead, it focuses on the official documents, speeches, quotes, media commentary, and memoirs that trace the history of French and, later, American involvements in South East Asia. The documents are skillfully tied together by brief text that gives good background information. The authors primarily credit gross miscalculations on the part of American policy makers, such as John Foster Dulles and Robert S. McNamara, in helping lead the country into this conflict and are often critical of the United States politicians. A concluding section recounts a Vietnamese woman's return visit to her homeland long after the war, describes the changes in U.S./Vietnamese relations and attitudes, and looks at the role of the war in limiting the expansion of Communism. Related topics, such as the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam

Veterans against the War, and the Kent State shootings, are covered, and ample information on Ho Chi Minh is included. The book is well balanced in showing both sides; the tragedy of the war is underlined by truly awful statistics on the amount of munitions used, the destruction of Vietnam, and the loss of life. Good-quality, black-and-white photos and illustrations are plentiful and informative. Comparable in style and reading level to John M. Dunn's *A History of U.S. Involvement* (Lucent, 2001), this excellent title could be used in conjunction with William Dudley's *The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints* (Greenhaven, 1997). Jeffrey A. French, Euclid Public Library, OH Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

"Simply terrific. If I were teaching the Vietnam War, I would rush to use it. The photos are extraordinary and the documents powerful. There is no better single volume on the war that makes the events and ideas come alive as this book does."--Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*"Comprised of first- and second-hand accounts of American policy in Vietnam during the 1960s. Its primary sources are held together chronologically with narrative. Political cartoons, U.S. government files, Vietnamese iconography, and song lyrics by Bruce Springsteen are among the book's most compelling and evocative elements."--*Hampshire Gazette*"Provides historials and students of history with a wealth of first-hand information missing from past conflicts. Those "primary sources"...provide the basis for a different way to teach history - allowing students to decide the meaning."--*Longmeadow News*

This is a useful text for teaching advanced secondary students and/or undergraduates about the Vietnam War while exposing them to discussions about primary documents (both textual and visual documents). Not only are there sections that explain what a document is and how to read it, but there are a variety of content (including an entire chapter in the form of a picture essay) that allows for a wealth of teaching opportunities. I did however receive some consistent feedback from students that the presentation of the information is a little difficult to follow--some students felt the structure was less clear compared to other books due to its scattered interspersing of documents with side captions that floated next to but not in-line with the rest of the textual and visual evidences being introduced and organized in a more traditional linear fashion. Nevertheless, there is a lot to teach from. The Vietnam War is one of the most agreed upon "mistakes" of U.S. foreign policy during the twentieth century and yet American reasons for entering, staying in, and eventually bowing out of military efforts in the region is often little understood by politicians and citizens alike. The book covers especially well the First Indochina War, 1946-1954, in which the Americans

became heavily invested and financially involved in the French struggle to reassert its colonial claim over Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia following the expulsion of the Japanese at the end of the World War II. The successful expulsion of the Japanese and then the French by Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh communist forces is integral information to understanding the Second Indochina War, or what Americans call the Vietnam War. While some say the war stretched over 30 years, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Cong forces invaded South Vietnam almost immediately after the country's expired unification date following the Geneva Conference, intensive American involvement lasted some 16 years in the "quagmire" of Vietnam. The complex reasons for why such a culturally unpopular and politically dubious war (not to mention why such a militarily advantaged American military was unable to "win" the war) are all examined through the presentation of primary documents with limited organizational interpretations. This is an interesting collection of the cultural, historical, political, and social viewpoints of a hopeless struggle that presents viewpoints from Americans, Vietnamese, citizens, politicians, and military leaders. Those teaching history should take particular note, but the casual reader interested in the conflict will also find themselves engaged with the content (perhaps questioning at times certain interpretations but nevertheless intrigued by why some things got read the way they did at the time and since).

Absolutely fascinating read.

OK.

I have been using this book in my college classes for about 10 years now. I assign it alongside a text (Herring or Hearden) and a novel--O'Brien's 'Things Fall Apart.' In this way, the documents work quite well with the broader historical context provided by the text and the war stories provided by O'Brien. After reading a couple of extremely negative reviews of this book, I thought I had better weigh in and try to help the potential reader. It is best to try to understand "America's War in Vietnam" (as the Vietnamese like to accurately call it) from a number of perspectives through many mediums. This book of documents will augment and enhance any reader's knowledge of this important topic. One must remember, however, that primary source documents place a good deal of power and responsibility in the reader's hands. One then has to do the work of an historian, deciding where to place each document for proper context, considering matters of motive and perspective, etc. 'The Vietnam War: A History in Documents' does a good job of setting up the reader/student to do just that. I recommend it without hesitation or reservation.

This book should be very popular with teachers who teach that wars are more than battles and dates, who want students to go beyond pop culture's depiction of the experience of the individual soldier in Viet Nam, and who want students to understand that even publicly confident leaders are often baffled, uncertain, ignorant of history, or wrong. No textbook on this complex war can even begin to cover everything, of course. Instead of details about military operations, this book concentrates on presidential decision-making, personal responses on both sides, and efforts (e.g. songs, posters, propaganda leaflets) to persuade public opinion one way or another. The material in this book on how to read documents and on propaganda by both sides should be especially effective in the classroom. In fact, the book's great strength is its inclusion of (and guides to understanding) documents such as the 1945 Viet Minh Declaration of Independence, a state department policy statement, the 1954 Geneva conference's Final Declaration, and various responses to that declaration. Defenders of U.S. involvement in the war will likely be unhappy with parts of this book, including the suggested bibliography, but no book on this war will please everyone, and probably no book on this war can truly be neutral. Fortunately the inclusion of essential primary documents allows teachers of any persuasion to use this book. The materials from the Vietnamese side are probably especially valuable here, because those materials are not familiar to American students. As a documentary history this book naturally includes no classroom activities; for that, teachers might want to consult Echoes from the Wall (a free curriculum distributed by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund) and Lessons of the Vietnam War, by Jerry Starr's Center for Social Studies Education. A teacher might also want to supplement this history with a few disparate excerpts from Bill McCloud's wonderful collection, What Should We Tell Our Children About Vietnam?

As one of the authors of the book, *The Vietnam War: A History in Documents*, I take exception to the review from the reader in Colorado. I have seen his actual comments and he must know that we have shown them to be incorrect. He claims that we are incorrect on certain pages but in fact we had the facts correct. He is entitled to his own opinion but he is not entitled to his own set of facts. He seems to think that we should have written another kind of book. That is his privilege. It would be decent for any reviewer to comment directly on the book being reviewed rather than a book that he thinks we should have written. His comments are very close to being dishonest and seem primarily interested in disparaging the book. The controversy over the Vietnam War has not yet ended. Yours truly, John J. Fitzgerald

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