

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
Second Semester, 1997-98

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HIS-337 THE VIETNAM WARS AND THE AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF WILLIAM SWENSGAARD, (MY STUDENT - CONCORDIA ACADEMY 63-65, CSP 66) WHO GAVE HIS LIFE IN VIETNAM IN LINE OF MILITARY DUTY; IN RESPECT TO MY STUDENTS PAST AND PRESENT WHO SERVED IN THE ARMED FORCES IN VIETNAM.

Catalog Description

This course retraces the origins of American military involvement in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 by retracing the origins of that involvement in foreign policy from 1940 to the present, the Vietnamese civil war and struggle for national identity is analyzed, and the impact of American involvement as a central event in shaping contemporary American domestic and foreign policy.

Required Reading

- A. David Halberstrom, Ho
- B. George Donelson Moss, Vietnam: An American Ordeal

Grading:

A total of 190 points distributed as follows:

1. Examinations on Thursday, Feb. 5th and Wednesday Feb. 25th. Part 1 will be a choice of two questions of 20 points each. Part 2 will be a choice of one question of 5 points. Part 3 will be a choice of one question of 5 points. Total: 100 points.
2. The final examination will total 80 points. Part 1 will be based upon a set of advanced questions covering the entire course with the student selecting two from a choice of four selected by the instructor, 30 points each. Part 2 will be a choice of one general question of 10 points. Total: 70 points.
3. Two quizzes of 10 points each.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What we usually call "The Vietnam War" (1965-1975) was one of the central events in modern U.S. history. It generated a deep and painful division of public opinion in which the pro-war forces were called murderers and their opponents traitors. It brought violent demonstrations and counter-demonstrations, massive draft-dodging, and costs of some \$200 billion. It required the services of some three million Americans, of whom about 58,000 died, it wrecked the careers of two presidents who carried it out, and it brought back its veterans to a cruelly indifferent homeland.

But that is not the whole story. The fighting in 1965-75 took place not in the US but in Vietnam (as well as in neighboring Cambodia and Laos). Somewhat over a million Vietnamese were killed in those ten years, about 20 for each American who died. Perhaps 6 million were driven home villages in the fighting. It was the most intense war in human history: year by year in a country about 2 1/2 times the size of Wisconsin about a million tons of bombs were dropped, a million acres were defoliated, and 200,000 acres of crops were destroyed.

One must also keep in mind that for the Vietnamese and their neighbors

1965-1975 was only one phase in a much longer war. For them the war began in 1940, and with varying levels of violence, has continued until (rather recently). Over that nearly half century long war about one and three quarters million Vietnamese, roughly 5 percent of the population, were killed, and about three and a half million wounded. Few Vietnamese alive today do not have at least one dead or wounded relative to remember. No American can pay attention only to what we were doing over there, or concentrate on only ten years of so protracted and terrible war --in which, in any case, the US was actively involved during the twenty years before 1965.

How and when did the United States get involved in these wars, and why did it stay so long? Why and how did it get out? Should the US have been there at any time over the years; was it morally right or wrong? Was it possible for the US to have won or not? What did the war do to or for American society? How and why did the Vietnam Wars get started in 1940? What kept them going until recent times? What drew so many outside powers--Chinese, French, Americans, and Russians--into the story? How did the fighting spread, slowly at first, then faster, to neighboring Laos and Cambodia? From where did the Vietnamese communists and others who fought with them get the strength to wear down and eventually expel the French and then the Americans? Were these wars of independence, or civil wars, or "proxy wars" in which local forces served the interests of competing great powers? It is these questions, as well as the more familiar ones--"Could the war have been won?" "Should we have gone into Vietnam?"--that this course attempts to answer. (During my last sabbatical on the Concordia University faculty I attended the University of Wisconsin, Spring 1987, and took a course with the above description with Professor Smail, a Southeast Asia historian specialist. With this background and reading to remain current I taught this course at Concordia until my retirement in 1994 and several times since)

Jan. 21 W Introduction

Part I: VIETNAM AND ITS HISTORY

Jan. 21 W Ecology and ethnic groups in Indochina

Reading

Moss (text), Preface and "The Fall of Saigon: The End As Prelude," vii-x, i-3.

Halberstrom (text), entire book by first exam.

Jan. 22 Th The Chinese Connection: Independence and Confucianism.

Jan. 23 F The Drive to the South, Nguyen Dynasty and French Conquest.

Jan. 26 M Social Change in French Indochina.

Jan. 28 W Vietnamese Responses.

Reading

Moss, Chapter 1, "A Place and a People," 4-31

Part II: JAPANESE OCCUPATION AND FRENCH/VIET MINH WAR

Jan. 29 Th Japanese Occupation and the August Revolution

Jan. 30 F The French/Viet Minh War

Feb. 2 M The Battle of Dienbienphu and the Geneva Conference

Feb. 4 W American Foreign Policy: Hegemonic Power

Quiz #1 will be given in class on Feb. 4 (W)

Reading

Moss, Chapter 2, "The Elephant and the Tiger," 32-72

Feb. 5 Th EXAM

Part III: DIVIDED LAND, UNEASY PEACE, 1956-64

Feb. 6 F After Geneva: Crisis in the Southern Half of Vietnam
Feb. 9 M Ngo Dinh Diem's Rise to Power

Reading

Moss, Chapter 3, "America's Mandarin," 73-108

Feb. 11 W Land Reform in the North
Feb. 12 TH War in Laos

Reading

Moss, Chapter 4, "Raising the Stakes," 109-145

Part IV: THE BIG WAR 1965-68

Feb. 13 F Vietnam in Early 1955
Feb. 16 M The Big War, 1965-67
Feb. 18 W The Big War, the Tet Offensive
Feb. 19 Th The Destruction of Laos
Feb. 20 F Collapse in the Southern Half

Reading

Moss, Chapter 5, "America Goes to War," 146-190; Chapter 6, "The Chain of Thunders," 191-253; Chapter 7, "The Year of the Monkey," 254-310.

Quiz #2 will be given on Feb. 20 (F)

Feb. 23 M Collapse in the Southern Half: U>S> Policy Decisions

Feb. 25 W EXAM

Part. V: EXPANSION OF THE WARS, 1965-75

Feb. 26 Th Drawing Down U.S. Troop Strength: Vietnamization
Feb. 27 F The Destruction of Cambodia

Reading

Moss, chapter 8, "A War to End a War," 311-379

Mar. 2 M The Fall of Saigon
Mar. 4 W U.S. Policy: Could the War Have Been Won?

Reading

Moss, chapter 9, "The End of the Tunnel," 380-414

Mar. 9 M The War at Home

Part VI: THE WARS CONTINUE

Mar. 11 W Cambodia Under Pol Pot
Mar. 12 Th New International Alignments, New Wars
Conclusions
Mar. 13 F EXAM