DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY EPISODE
The Vietnam War
A film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick

Please note, scene/clip markers below are noted for use with The Vietnam War classroom version. All of these clips are also included in the full broadcast version of The Vietnam War, but time markers noted below may not correspond.

Episode One: Déjà Vu
Pre-viewing Questions:
● Why do countries go to war?
● When is war necessary?
● How is it possible to find meaning in suffering?

Episode Discussion Questions:
● Why was the U.S. unable to avoid becoming directly involved in Vietnam?
● Why does the film say the Vietnam War ended in “failure” instead of defeat?
● Why does the film include “the quality of mercy” as something that was called into question by the Vietnam War?
● Why does the film jump forward chronologically with short moments of U.S. veterans’ stories from the 1960s?

For Further Reflection:
● Why did France originally invade Vietnam?
● Which U.S. veteran’s story leaves you the most interested in learning more about him/her?

Episode Two: Riding the Tiger
Pre-viewing Questions:
● What does it mean for someone to consider him- or herself to be “political”?
● Do you have a cause that you care so much about that you’d risk your life to defend it?

Episode Discussion Questions:
● How did President Kennedy get caught up in “the lie”?
● What was the lie?
● Was Kennedy telling the truth in his response to the reporter during the news conference?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment
All of Scene 6: “Ap Bac” (Length: 11:12)
● Why was Ap Bac such a crucial battle in the war?
● Why does the U.S. commander in the Pacific urge The New York Times reporters to “get on the team,” when they report Ap Bac as “a defeat”?
● Why does Madame Nhu describe the U.S. as “false brothers”?
● Why does President Kennedy say, “I cannot give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and then get the people to reelect me”?
Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 7: “A Monk Becomes a Martyr” (Length: 4:52)
From beginning of scene to 1:04:00, “soon other monks would become martyrs ...”
- What impact did the monk who burned himself to death, Thich Quang Due, have on the war?
- Why did the photographer, Malcolm Brown, take photos of the monk burning himself?

For Further Reflection:
- What is the difference between communism and capitalism?
- Is there a “Cold War” happening now?

Episode Three: The River Styx

Pre-viewing Questions:
- Would you join the U.S. military today?
- What would you tell a family member or friend who was thinking about joining the military?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why did President Johnson escalate U.S. war involvement with “Operation Rolling Thunder”?
- Why did the U.S. strategy change from “retaliatory” to “systematic”?
- During the interview with Morley Safer, why does the American soldier say, “You can’t do your job and feel pity for these people”?
- Why did President Johnson say that Safer had to “face the American flag” after Johnson saw Safer's coverage of the war?
- Why did the U.S. military consider a 10-to-1 kill ratio to be “a victory”?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 3: “No Wider War” (Length: 4:53)
From beginning of scene to LBJ saying “no wider war.”
- Why does the narrator say that the events surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin were “among the most controversial and consequential events in American history”?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 6: “Off to War” (Length: 10:30)
- Why did President Johnson say, “I don’t think anything is going to be as bad as losing,” despite Vice President Humphrey’s warning about expanding the war?
- Why did President Johnson feel he had “no choice” about using ground troops?
- Why does Phil Caputo talk about the geographic beauty of Vietnam when the Marines land on Danang?

For Further Reflection:
- Do you agree or disagree with how the U.S. military measured success in Vietnam? What does the American flag mean to you?
Episode Four: Resolve

Pre-viewing Questions:
- Is there a difference between being dutiful and being honorable?
- What do you think is a harder character defect to overcome, ignorance or arrogance?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- What does Kennan mean when he says it is “very difficult to dispel ignorance, if you retain arrogance”?
- What does Mogie mean when he writes, “I am once again an atheist until the shooting starts”?
- Why does the film include the Vietcong vet talking about U.S. soldiers weeping just like his Vietnamese comrades did?
- Why did McNamara believe that the bombing would kill morale in North Vietnam instead of increasing North Vietnamese anger?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 4: “The Metrics” (Length: 4:28)
From beginning of scene to 25:22
- What does Joe Galloway mean when he says that you make “honorable men” liars if you use body count as a “success mark” in the war?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 13: (Length: 10:38)
From beginning to end of scene at 1:51:05
- What does Harrison mean when he says, “I understood theoretically what it meant to be in a war, but of course no one can really understand it until they've done it”?
- Why does Carol Crocker say, “this almost had nothing to do with his death for me”?

For Further Reflection:
- Research whether or not there was an anti-war movement in North Vietnam.
- Write a letter to Mogie in Vietnam conveying your feelings and questions about his experience there.

Episode 5: This Is What We Do

Pre-viewing Questions:
- What does it mean to be racist?
- Can someone learn to overcome his or her own racism?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why does Musgrave say, “racism 101 turned out to be a very necessary tool when you have children fighting your war”?
- Why did the U.S. soldiers risk their own lives to recover the dead bodies of their comrades?
- Why did Harrison describe the battle of HHI 875 as “a microcosm” of what happened in Vietnam?

For Further Reflection:
- What do you think are some appropriate ways to honor and remember your ancestors?
- If you'd been drafted to serve in Vietnam, would you have gone?
Episode Six: Things Fall Apart

Pre-viewing Questions:
- What is difficult about “thinking for yourself”?
- What do you do if the idea of being loyal to your country conflicts with what you value as an individual?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why did President Johnson decide to “disengage” in Vietnam?
- Why did Martin Luther King decide to speak out against the Vietnam War?
- Why does Carol Crocker say that Robert Kennedy’s death “put those of us going out on our own on a path that felt uncertain”? Why “those of us going out on our own” as opposed to everyone?

For Further Reflection:
- Do you think that the racism that Black soldiers experienced in Vietnam is different from your understanding of racism within the United States now?
- What does the expression, “my country, right or wrong,” mean to you?

Episode Seven: The Veneer of Civilization

Pre-viewing Questions:
- Have you ever felt that you were forced to do something against your own will?
- What is the hardest decision you’ve ever had to make?
- Do you trust your government?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why does Tim O’Brien think that wrestling with whether to go to Vietnam was “more tortuous and devastating” than anything that happened in Vietnam?
- Why did Tim O’Brien say, “it was that failure of nerve that I still regret”?
- Why did the U.S. government tolerate so much corruption on the part of the South Vietnamese government?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 1: “Service to One’s Country” (Length: 3:25)

From beginning to 3:25 to “unpatriotic thing”
- Why does Tim O’Brien say it was “a forfeiture of a decision” when he boards the bus for military induction?

Scene 3: “Looking at Our Future Selves” (Length: 4:37)

From beginning at 19:13 to 23:50
- Why does the film include this scene of the North Vietnamese military experience?

Scene 5: “We Miss You a Lot” (Length: 5:23)

From beginning at 37:34 to fade to black at 42:57
- Why does the film include this scene of the U.S. military experience?
- (If you show this clip alongside the one above) How is the film’s portrayal of the U.S. experience similar or different from that of the North Vietnamese experience?
Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 7: “It Would Shock America” (Length: 5:36)
From 48:16 to 53:52

- Why didn’t President Johnson go public about Nixon contacting “a foreign power in the middle of a war”?

For Further Reflection:
- What were the biggest obstacles that prevented each side from holding peace talks?
- What was the public response when it was first revealed that the Nixon campaign had reached out to South Vietnam urging them to not attend peace talks?

Episode Eight: The History of the World

Pre-viewing Questions:
- What are the most effective ways to protest government policy if you disagree with it?
- Is there a political movement happening now that is important to you?
- Is dissent patriotic or unpatriotic?
- What does it mean to be a “patriot”?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why couldn’t Nixon allow the U.S. to be seen as surrendering?
- Why does McPeak say the music and overall counter-culture in the late 1960s made for a better America today?
- Why did Nixon describe the anti-war movement in the U.S. as “mindless”?
- Why does the film use a montage that cuts between footage of Woodstock and Vietnam?
- Why were attempts on the lives of U.S. military officers by their own soldiers increasing by 1969?
- What did Gillam mean when he said, “the other casualty was the end of the civilized me”?
- Why does Jack Todd say that going to Canada was “the bravest thing I ever did”?
- What does the army medic mean when he says, “when you kill someone for your country, all things change”? Why does he say, “for your country”?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 4: “All Kinds of Craziness” (Length: 5:09)
From 30:38 to 35:47 (“I want you to come home”)

- Why does Wayne Smith say, “Vietnam was a microcosm, everything that was happening in Vietnam was happening in America”?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 7: “The People in the Streets” (Length: 10:52)
From beginning of scene at 47:45 to 58:37 (“keep them on the run”)

- According to the film, what impact did the anti-war movement have?
- Why did Nixon write himself notes saying, “don’t waver, don’t react”?

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Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 12: “A Wake-up Call” (Length: 9:37)

From beginning of scene at 1:36:15 to 1:45:52 (“wake-up call”)

- What did Sam Hynes mean in asking, “If we could kill our own students, what had happened to our country”?
- Why did Ehrhart join the anti-war movement?

For Further Reflection:
- Why were the peace talks held in France?
- If you were able to talk to Hegdahl now and ask him about his experience as a Prisoner of War (POW), what questions would you have for him? How do you imagine he would respond to you?

Episode Nine: A Disrespectful Loyalty

Pre-viewing Questions:
- What are healthy ways to help military veterans transition back to civilian life?
- Should the draft be re-implemented now?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why did most Americans both approve of the arrests of protesters, while also believing that their government was lying about the war?
- Why does the film label Jack Todd “a deserter”?

Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment

Scene 4: “The Turning” (Length: 9:32)

From 29:10 (beginning of scene) to 38:42 (“that’s why it was so important.”)

- Why was it so important to John Musgrave to conduct his anti-war activism “as a Marine”?
- In his testimony, what did John Kerry mean in describing Vietnam as “a place where America finally turned, and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning?”
- Why was Phil Gioja so upset by Kerry’s testimony?
- Why did Ron Ferrizzi feel it was harder to throw away his medals than to serve in Vietnam?
- What did Tom Vallely mean by saying he did it out of a “disrespectful loyalty”?

For Further Reflection:
- Why does the military give awards for various kinds of military service?
- If you were going to teach a class on the Vietnam War, would you use this film to help you do it?

Episode Ten: The Weight of Memory

Pre-viewing Questions:
- What is the difference between capitalism and democracy?
- Which force holds greater sway in American life right now?
- Can a society heal from the wounds inflicted by its past?
- Why does history matter?

Episode Discussion Questions:
- Why does President Ford say, “Today America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam, but not by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned”?
● Why did the U.S. government refuse to recognize the new Vietnamese government after the war?
● Why does the narrator of the film say that “everyone came home from Vietnam alone”?

**Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment**

*Scene 3: “Handwriting on the Wall”, Scene 4: “Losing a Nation” (Length: 13:52)*

From Scene 3, 25:29 (Bao Ninh - “After 30 years of inconclusive war...”) to

*Scene 4, 39:21 (Phan Quang Tue - “You have to lose a nation and a dream to feel...to feel that humiliation.”)*

- Why does the leader of South Vietnam say, “it is so easy to be an enemy of the United States, but so difficult to be a friend”?
- Why does Phan Quang Tue say, “you have to lose a nation and a dream to feel...that humiliation”?

**Episode Spotlight: Discussion Questions for Short Segment**

*Scene 6: “The Happiness of a Mother” (Length: 9:29)*

From 57:13 “At 7:53 am, April 30, 1975, the last helicopter...” to 1:06:42 (fade to black)

- Why does news anchorman Walter Cronkite say, “We have reached the end of the tunnel and there is no light there”?
- Why does David Brinkley suggest that future U.S. leaders announce war plans from Arlington Cemetery?

**For Further Reflection:**

- Research the experience of South Vietnamese people in the “reeducation camps.” What happened there?
- Imagine you are a historian in the year as far in the future as the end of the Vietnam War is in the past. What are three defining elements of current life in America that you imagine you’d write about?
- If you were going to design a memorial commemorating those who lost their lives fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, what would your memorial design be?
- What is the legacy of the Vietnam War?