



## Last Plane Out of Saigon

**Learning Objectives:** The student will make connections between different events during the Vietnam conflict and will analyze excerpts from *The Last Plane Out of Saigon* to use in explaining the human consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

**TEKS:** (8) History. The student understands the impact of significant national and international decisions and conflicts in the Cold War on the United States. The student is expected to:

- (E) analyze the major issues and events of the Vietnam War such as the Tet Offensive, the escalation of forces, Vietnamization, and the fall of Saigon; and
- (F) describe the responses to the Vietnam War such as the draft, the 26th Amendment, the role of the media, the credibility gap, the silent majority, and the anti-war movement.

**Materials Needed:** For Part I: a graphic organizer and a copy of the Vietnam reading for each student. For Part II: A set of excerpts for each student.

**Teacher information:** **Part I** provides the opportunity for students to get background information on the Vietnam conflict. **Part II** allows students to analyze the human consequences of this conflict in a Document Based Question (DBQ) format. If students have not had prior exposure to analyzing excerpts such as they might do for a DBQ, additional modeling of analyzing excerpts and grouping excerpts may be required. This lesson will be an adapted DBQ since all of the excerpts come from the same text, *The Last Plane Out of Saigon*.

### Teaching Strategy – Part I:

1. Provide each student with a graphic organizer and a copy of the reading over Vietnam.
2. Instruct students to read the assigned material and identify each event in the **boxes** on the graphic organizer. If they don't have enough room to write in the boxes, it is okay to write outside the box. Explain that at this time they should leave the circles blank.
3. Once students have an understanding of each event (you may want to share out as a class so that students can self-assess their answers), explain to students that events in history have connections. Sometimes these connections are direct and sometimes we may have to stretch to make connections. Note: You may want to see if students are familiar with Kevin Bacon's 6 degrees of separation.
4. Explain to students that the circles on the graphic organizer are where they will make and explain the connection between events in the boxes. They may refer back to their reading for assistance. It might be helpful for the teacher to model one. For example: the connection between the domino theory and Ho Chi Minh could simply be that they were linked by the issue of communism.

5. After students have had a chance to make connections, call on a few to share their responses. This will provide the teacher with an opportunity to assess student understanding and students a chance to review and correct or add to their graphic organizer.

*Note: The graphic organizer and connection strategy was present by Allen I.S.D. teachers at the Texas Social Studies Supervisors Association 2015 Fall Conference. Used with permission.*

### **Teaching Strategy – Part II:**

1. Divide the class into groups of four and give each student a copy of the excerpts. Instruct the group to equitably divide the excerpts among their group. Explain that they should read and annotate their assigned excerpts.
2. Instruct students that as they read they should consider the following prompt:  
**Explain the human consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.**
3. As they read, they should use the following questions to guide them in analyzing each of their assigned excerpts and highlight or underline the words that support their analysis.

What is the point of view of the author?

- a. Is the place and time identified in the excerpt? Does this affect the meaning of the excerpt? If so, how?
- b. What can one learn by reading this excerpt?

*Note: Encourage students to turn to group members if they are struggling on analyzing their excerpt.*

4. Once students have analyzed their excerpts, explain to them that they are to share their analysis with other members of the group. They should take notes on the excerpts they did not personally analyze.
5. When everyone has shared their information with the group, ask the students to decide which excerpts are similar. Explain that certain excerpts can be grouped together to address the prompt. Some suggested examples for grouping are: Americans in Vietnam, Americans at home, and the Vietnamese people.
6. Have the group write the story of each of their groups using evidence from the excerpts with regards to the following prompt:  
**Explain the human consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.**
7. After the groups have completed their stories, ask for a volunteer to share for each group.
8. As a closure, have each student prepare a thesis statement for the prompt addressing each of the groups.

## Vietnam Background Reading

The United States became involved in Southeast Asia in the 1950's as a result of the domino theory. This theory, speculated that if one country in the region came under the influence of communism there was a strong possibility that surrounding countries would fall under the influence of communism, creating a domino effect. Our objective would be to stop this from happening.

In 1954, communist leader Ho Chi Minh led a successful revolt in the former French colony of Indochina. As a result, Indochina was divided into independent Laos and Cambodia, while Vietnam was divided in half. North Vietnam was given to the communists and South Vietnam was non-communist. To reunite the country of Vietnam, the plan was to hold free elections in 1956, allowing the people of Vietnam to decide whether to be communist or not. The Soviet Union and China sent aid to North Vietnam, while the U.S. sent military advisors and even more aid to South Vietnam under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy after the French withdrew.

During the two years prior to the proposed election, Ho Chi Minh established a strong communist dictatorship in the North with plans to control South Vietnam and tensions mounted in the area. Communist soldiers, called Viet Cong, began to wage a guerrilla war in the South, raiding villages and killing supporters of the South Vietnamese government. When it appeared that elections would not be held due to the unrest, the U.S. government felt stronger action must be taken and began to send more military aid and troops. In 1963, President Diem of South Vietnam was assassinated and because he had established a brutal dictatorship in the South, the news was first met with relief. However chaos resulted, and the U.S. had to become more involved than ever to avoid total collapse of the South Vietnam government.

In 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin and led President Lyndon Johnson to ask Congress to approve the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The resolution authorized the president to take "all necessary measures to repel any armed attack." Johnson ordered air strikes against naval bases in North Vietnam. When American bases were attacked in the South, Johnson increased the air strikes to include military targets, further escalating the war. He also increased the number of American forces to over 500,000 personnel in response to the increase in aid coming from communist nations to North Vietnam. New weapons including Agent Orange were used in the attempt to halt the Vietcong. Agent Orange destroyed the thick jungle foliage that hid the enemy. This herbicide not only caused harm to the environment but also was toxic to those who came in contact with it.

The turning point in the war occurred in January of 1968. The Viet Cong launched surprise attacks throughout the South called the Tet Offensive, and temporarily gained control of the American Embassy in Saigon. American and South Vietnamese forces counterattacked, claiming victory when they regained control. However, the victory came at a cost. The American public realized the ground war was not going as well as U.S. commanders claimed.

The increased presence of the media reporting the war, from 1965 until the end of the war, allowed Americans to see the destructiveness first-hand. Because what Americans saw on television differed from what the government was telling them, a "credibility gap" emerged. This distrust and unrest was especially evident with the youth who began to

stage anti-war rallies across the country. Burning their draft cards was just one action the protestors used to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the war. Anti-war sentiment spilled over into novels, music, and the movies of the day. The line was clearly drawn between the “doves” who saw the war as immoral and the “hawks” who saw the war as the way to stop communist aggression. In 1968, President Johnson declined to run for re-election because of dissatisfaction over the war as the nation remained divided over our involvement in Vietnam.

Despite campaign promises of “peace with honor,” Richard Nixon expanded the war in Vietnam after he became president in 1968. He ordered the bombing of neighboring Cambodia because it was believed to be a place the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong often hid. He took these strong actions because he felt the “silent majority” of American citizens still supported the war’s goal of controlling communism. Protests against the war, especially among the young, continued. In May 1970 at Kent State in Ohio, four students were killed and nine injured by the Ohio National Guard. Several of the students who were shot were involved in a protest of Nixon’s Cambodian Campaign, while others were innocent bystanders. The role of youth in the Vietnam conflict would result in a change to the U.S. Constitution. In 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment was ratified to allow citizens to vote at the age of eighteen. Proponents believed it was only right to allow an eighteen-year-old to vote if he were old enough to be drafted into the military and go to war at same age.

When Nixon realized that American involvement must come to an end, he introduced his policy of “Vietnamization.” Under this policy, the U.S. would equip and train South Vietnamese forces while slowly withdrawing U.S. troops. It was a way in which the U.S. could hopefully have “peace with honor.” At the same time, Nixon continued to launch a major aerial offensive called “Operation Linebacker” against the North Vietnamese. He even considered using nuclear power at this time, but decided against it.

U.S. involvement finally came to an end in 1973. President Nixon sent Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to Paris to negotiate peace. It was later discovered that secret peace negotiations had actually begun as early as 1970. Nixon thought he had a cease-fire agreement to announce when he was re-elected in 1972, but the South Vietnam President Thieu rejected it and another bombing campaign was ordered. Finally, a cease-fire was signed with the U.S. agreeing to leave South Vietnam by March of 1973, and the North Vietnamese agreeing to simultaneously release any remaining American prisoners of war still held. However even with the U.S. gone, the fighting continued. The South Vietnamese army was no match for the North Vietnamese and in 1975; Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese marking the official end of the war.

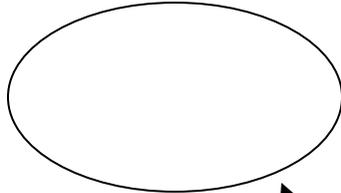
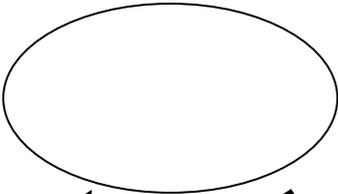
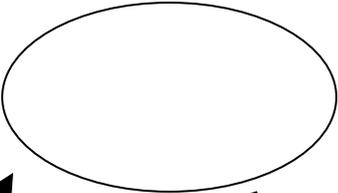
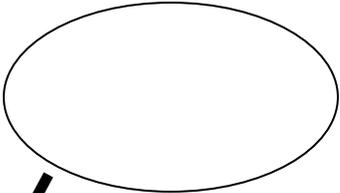
The conflict in Vietnam had several significant effects. Over 1,000,000 Vietnamese soldiers were killed along with close to 60,000 American troops. The war also caused Americans to become wary of future conflicts and commitments of American troops and resources. The War Powers Act of 1973 was an attempt to limit the president’s ability to commit troops to extended combat without a formal declaration of war by Congress. The act required that Congress be notified within two days if the President committed troops and formal Congressional approval if the troops were committed for more than sixty days. It passed over Nixon’s veto.

# Six Degrees of Separation

“ I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation between us and everyone else on this planet....  
I am bound to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people.”  
John Guare's Screenplay for *Six Degrees of Separation*, 1993

Domino Theory

War Powers Act



Ho Chi Minh  
revolt

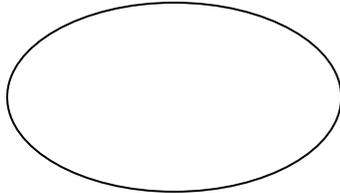
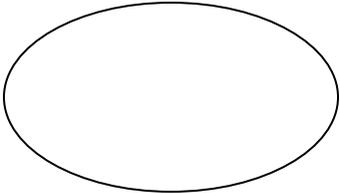
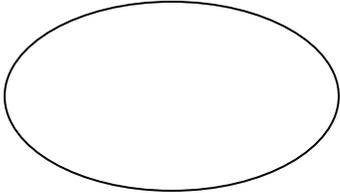
Gulf of Tonkin

Tet Offensive

Credibility Gap

Vietnamization

26th Amendment



## **Explain the human consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.**

The question above is based on the following excerpts from *Last Plane Out of Saigon* by Richard Pena and Johan Hagan. Source: N.p.: Story Merchant, 2014. Print.

### **Excerpt A**

“Americans began dying in Vietnam in 1961, and eleven years later, they are still dying here. This has been, by far, the longest war that American sons and daughters have been forced to die in. Yet the debate continues, with the debaters apparently unwilling to see that the “rightness” or “wrongness” of this war has now become academic. But they are not the ones who have seen the toll this war has taken in human terms. They have not seen tens of thousands of refugees marching homeless from their destructed homes. They have not watched as an American soldier, with the physique of a varsity athlete, had his leg amputated. They have not held that leg once it was detached, and wondered if this was not a page from the insanity depicted in *Catch 22*. “

pps. 38-39

### **Excerpt B**

“I am astonished by the opportunity that is before me. I have been put in such a unique position. Being assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Hospital is a stroke of luck. We at 3<sup>rd</sup> Field see a completely different side of war than anyone else in Vietnam. 3<sup>rd</sup> Field is not a military post, but rather an individual hospital within the Saigon area. As a result, we are not bombarded with the usual barrage of military regulations. Although we seldom see the actual jungle combat of the war, we do see the results of the war in human terms, and we do see that the war that is fought in the city. This refers not only to the mangled and maimed brought into the emergency room and operating room, but also to the effect the war has on the Vietnamese people.”

pp. 54

### **Excerpt C**

“It is difficult to describe these days in Vietnam when all one has are his friends... .The group is perhaps thirteen, perhaps fifteen, Numbers don’t matter. Yet in a few short months we have built a companionship and trust that few people experience in a lifetime. Perhaps the reason is that we are confronted with death every day. Perhaps we attempt to offset the horrors and loneliness of war with friendship and acceptance. In this period of uncertain reality, our emotions swing to the extreme. Yes, we would gladly risk our lives for one another. My God, how young we are—how old we are!”

pps. 60-61

### Excerpt D

“An allied Cambodian was flown to the hospital on a Saturday. ...I was present because I was on call. The lab summoned me to give some blood for the Cambodian....Immediately after I had given the blood, I was informed that he was coming into the OR. It was a desperate attempt to save his life. The doctors stated that he wouldn’t survive an operation, yet he wouldn’t survive without one. What a war!...The Cambodian had his left leg amputated. I stared at my own blood as it splattered all over the OR floor. My mind flashed to what my friends in Austin would be doing that very instant. The Texas Longhorns were opening the 1972 football season that night. My friends were probably sitting in the stands between the twenty- and forty-yard lines—all would have dates. It suddenly struck me that they were immune to the realities and horrors of war. Watching a football game seemed so trivial in comparison to the loss of life. How I envied them.” pp. 82

### Excerpt E

“In reality, it is the Vietnamese people who have suffered the most from this conflict. Yet it is their wants and needs which receive the least attention. The government of South Vietnam in 1972 is nothing short of a totalitarian dictatorship. President Thieu has declared martial law, eliminated all elections and freedom of speech. The newspapers are censored. Only a few, which are sympathetic to the government, are allowed to exist.” pp. 89

### Excerpt F

“There’s a lot of time to read; to think; to theorize; to discuss priorities, foreign policy, and values; and to recognize the tragedy involved with Vietnam. Yet, to speak out about the tragedy is said to be anti-American. Despite all the Vietnam participants have endured in this forsaken country, these self-acclaimed “true American” call us disloyal because we speak of mistake, of failure—because we speak the truth as we experienced it. I submit that the true American patriots are those that see the faults of our country and do not hide from them but instead attempt to rectify them.” pp. 100

### **Excerpt G**

“On January 27, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed by the participants—the participants—North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, South Vietnam, and the United States. To me, it was something of an anticlimactic victory for peace. It took so long in coming, and in the end the agreement that was reached was one of ambiguity, which contained ineffective checks....President Nixon saturated the world with words like ‘just peace,’ ‘honorable peace,’ right kind of peace.’ The sad fact is that there is no peace in Vietnam. The fighting continues to be even more intense than ever.”

pps. 110-111

### **Excerpt H**

“So what can be said to the families of the 58,282 American soldiers who died or went missing? After nearly four decades, they still have not forgotten. History has not judged our country kindly when it comes to the Vietnam War. To these families, the least America can do is to say,...”

pp. 129