History 191:

Vietnam: The American War

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In the 21st century the American way of fighting has become synonymous with counterinsurgency. The “War on Terror” has lacked many fixtures of conventional warfare, from a formal declaration and popular involvement to clear and shared notions of who are our enemies and what constitutes victory. While this predicament may seem novel, its original outline is most clearly discerned in what Americans call the “The Vietnam War” and what Vietnamese consider “The American War.” “Vietnam: The American War” explores that conflict—one of America’s longest and most tumultuous—in order to interrogate the confusions, contradictions, and asymmetries of modern American warfare. By examining the conflict’s origins and impact on both America and Vietnam, it will ask students to consider why we fought, what we accomplished or lost, and whether a liberal democracy can justify waging war against an ideology in a land not its own.

This is an eclectic survey of the war from 1930 to 1975, although we will occasionally venture outside that window. The course’s intent is to make you familiar with both the basic contours of the conflict as well as the myriad ways of approaching it. If you enjoy political or diplomatic history, then you have something to look forward to. If you enjoy social or cultural or transnational or any other kind of history, then you have something to look forward to. If you enjoy
being challenged with new or difficult perspectives, then you have something to look forward to.

Class will consist of lectures on Mondays and Wednesdays, and a discussion section on Fridays.

Reading:

The following books have been ordered at the UR Bookstore. They are also on 2-hour reserve in Rush Rhees Library. Many are available in used copies at a substantial discount online.

Young, Marilyn. *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*
Kennan, George. *American Diplomacy*
Small, Melvin. *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Heart and Minds*
Bilton, Michael, and Kevin Sim. *Four Hours in My Lai*

The following books will be excerpted as selections on Blackboard.

Elliott, David. *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*
Shawcross, William. *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*
Stur, Heather Marie. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*
O’Brien, Tim. *If I Die in a Combat Zone*
Allen, Michael. *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the unending Vietnam War*
Pham, Andrew X. *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*
Course Requirements:

Reading assignments of approximately 100 pages are to be completed each week. Some weeks this will be supplemented by other materials, such as films or music. All readings must be completed by discussion section, held each Friday, on the week in which they are assigned. Both attendance and participation in discussion section is mandatory. Unexcused absences will be counted against a student's grade. In addition, students must submit (via email) a question based on the week's reading by 11:59PM Thursday, and should expect their questions to be discussed the following day in section. Each student will be responsible for two papers. The first, 5-7 pages in length, will be a response to a question posed by the instructors based on assigned readings. The second, 10-12 pages in length, will be on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with the course instructors, requiring outside research. Students will also take an in-class Midterm Examination on February 26, and a comprehensive Final Examination at the end of the course. Final grades will be determined by the rubric below:

Class Participation and Weekly Questions --- 15%
Analytical Paper --- 15%
Midterm Examination --- 15%
Research Paper --- 25%
Final Examination --- 30%

Academic Honesty:

Students should fully familiarize themselves with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy: http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/index.html. We will enforce a zero tolerance policy on cheating and plagiarism. Students found giving or receiving unauthorized aid on an exam, or who commit plagiarism on writing assignments will fail the course - no questions asked. Ignorance of the rules is not an excuse. Those unclear on what constitutes plagiarism and what requires citation should contact the instructors - they are more than happy to help - or consult the materials accompanying this syllabus.

Students with Disabilities:

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL, 1-154 Dewey Hall, 585-275-9049) offers a variety of disability services for undergraduates and graduate students in Arts, Sciences & Engineering. These services aim to provide an inclusive experience and equal access to academic content and
program requirements. They can help you to request needed accommodations for your success in this class. You can learn more at: http://www.rochester.edu/college/cetl/undergraduate/disability. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us as well.

Topics and Assignments
13 January -- Introduction
15 January - Vietnam - History to 1945
Assignment: Elliott, Selections TBD

20 January – Everyday Life in Vietnam
22 January – Discussion
Assignment: Elliott, Selections TBD

25 January – Imperialism to WWII
27 January – The Cold War
29 January – Discussion
Assignment: Kennan

1 February – French War in Vietnam
3 February – Diem Regime
5 February – Discussion
Assignment: Young, p. 1-88

8 February – Ho Chi Minh/North Vietnam
10 February – Fall of Diem
12 February – Discussion
Assignment: Young, p. 89-104; Tang, Selections TBD

15 February – American Entry
17 February – The Law and the War
19 February – Discussion
Assignment: Young, p. 105-49; Law of Land Warfare, Selections TBD
22 February — Everyday Life in America
24 February — Johnson’s War (1963-65)
26 February — MIDTERM
Assignment: The Green Berets, Selections TBD;

29 February — McNamara’s War (1965-67)
2 March — Tet Offensive
4 March — Discussion
Assignment: Young, p. 150-231; Terry, Selections TBD

14 March — The Television War
16 March — My Lai Massacre
18 March — Discussion
Assignment: Bilton, p. 1-24, 47-141;

21 March — War at Home - Politics & Nixon’s Suppression of Dissent
23 March — The Draft
25 March — Discussion
Assignment: Appy, Selections TBD; Bilton, p. 315-78

28 March — Civilian Antiwar Movement
30 March — Race, Gender, Class
1 April — Discussion
Assignment: Small, selections TBD; Stur, Selections TBD, Alice’s Restaurant

4 April — Weapons of War
6 April — Nixon’s War (1969-72)
8 April — Discussion
Assignment: Young, p. 232-280; Terry, Selections TBD; O’Brien, Selections TBD

11 April - GI Antiwar Movement
13 April — Laos and Cambodia
15 April — Discussion
Assignment: Small, p. 119-163; Shawcross, Selections TBD

18 April — American Exit (1973-75)
20 April — Aftermath in Vietnam
22 April — Discussion
Assignment: Young, p. 281-329; Tang, p. 259-310

25 April — Aftermath in America
27 April — Myth and Memory
Assignment: Allen, Selections TBD; Pham, Selections TBD, Rambo: First Blood Part II