



Teaching the Vietnam War Through Diverse Perspectives

By Lynn Novick, director/producer

For nearly 10 years, Ken Burns and I have explored one of the most consequential, most misunderstood, and divisive events in American history: the Vietnam War. We have tried to find out what really happened, why things went so badly wrong, and why, for more than four decades, we have been unable to put the war behind us. It has been the most challenging, ambitious project we have ever undertaken.

Through the courageous testimony of nearly 80 eyewitnesses, we have been able to see this painful and searing conflict with fresh eyes.

We interviewed those who fought in the war and those who fought against it, grunts and officers in the army and Marines, prisoners of war, medics, a fighter pilot, a helicopter crew chief, a Gold Star mother and sister, a nurse, college students, anti-war activists, deserters, CIA officers, diplomats, and journalists.

Too often, when Americans talk about the Vietnam War, we are talking only about ourselves. In our film, you will get to know dozens of Vietnamese witnesses from the North and the South – soldiers, civilians, spies, artists, diplomats, politicians, and journalists – who were willing for the first time to share their stories about the war as it really was.

There is no single truth to be extracted from the Vietnam War. On all sides, questions remain that will never be fully answered. Who was right? Who was wrong? What does it mean to be a citizen, and a patriot? Were the sacrifices in blood and bone too high? Could it have turned out differently?

As we began to conceptualize ways for our film to be used in the classroom, we reached out to many educators to find out how they were currently teaching the Vietnam War. Many of the educators we spoke with felt that the topic was given too little time in their classrooms. Some educators told us the Vietnam War a particularly challenging period to teach because of the emotionally charged questions that still loom. However, almost all educators expressed great interest in finding ways to more effectively teach this important subject.

Drawing on this information, our partners at [PBS Learning Media](#) have created a collection of classroom resources that will encourage students to explore many dimensions of this watershed in our nation's history. The materials will examine key military, political and

cultural events as well as the diverse human experiences featured in the series. They will challenge students to think deeply and critically about topics such as the challenges of leadership, the era's evolving political dynamics and seismic cultural transformations, the role of the media in shaping popular beliefs and misconceptions about the war at home and abroad.

We hope that when our film airs it launches a new national dialogue about this epic tragedy, and that the resources we have developed will enable teachers and students to engage controversial topics in a safe and respectful environment, as well as to reflect on the profound lessons the war teaches about courage, conscience, resilience, forgiveness and, ultimately, reconciliation.