



TITLE

THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL: TEACHING THE WAR BY BEGINNING WITH THE END

GRADE LEVEL: MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

SUBJECT: History, Art, English

THEME: Activism, Bias and Stereotype, Civil Rights, Colonization, Identity and Culture, Immigration , International Affairs, Labor, Mental Health, World War II

STANDARDS: UCLA Public History Initiative: Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s); Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics; Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to:

- Describe the elements of the Vietnam War Memorial, designed by Maya Lin, as a way to understand how the memorial reflects both the complex history of the war and honors those who fought and died.
- Frame the key events and turning points of the Vietnam War in preparation for further study.
- Explain how Maya Lin, her background, and how she came to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How does the Vietnam War Memorial capture the complexity, anguish, and sacrifice of the war?

CLASSROOM TIME:

2 Periods

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LAST UPDATE: JAN, 11TH, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

The Vietnam War is America’s most complicated and controversial war. Unpopular, costly in casualties and treasure, and humiliating in its conclusion, the war left Americans feeling exhausted and depressed after years of sacrifice by soldiers who returned home not to parades, but to an emptiness for their service. To honor the men and women who served, a different kind of monument was chosen. It was conceived by Maya Lin, a Chinese American student at Yale, only 21, who won a public design competition for the memorial. She sought to capture the pain of the war but also to create something meaningful from that pain: “I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, and with the passage of time, that initial violence and pain would heal.” This was a different way to speak about a war and memorialize those who fought and died - Lin and her design also elicited controversy for its minimalist and unconventional approach, her lack of experience and formal training, and her Asian ethnicity.

This lesson seeks to introduce the war from the legacy it left in America’s history. Usually, the Vietnam War is taught as a chronological history. It begins in the wake of World War II, moves to the end of French colonialism in Indochina and the division of Vietnam into North and South. The story continues with American entry into the conflict to support the “democratic” South against the Communists of the North. Then, American commitment to the war deepens and the fighting escalates in the belief that, if South Vietnam falls to Communism, all of Southeast Asia will follow - the “domino theory.” By beginning the study of the war with Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, the lesson immediately addresses the controversial nature of the war, the splits it engendered in American political and social life, and the wounds it inflicted on the body and the mind of the nation. From opening the history of the Vietnam War with a study of the memorial, the events of the war can be seen from a different perspective allowing students to discover the complexity of the conflict.

Introduce the study of the Vietnam War by showing the class photos of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Use selected photos (teacher choices) from the National Park Service website: <https://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm>. Two such photos are included below.

ASSIGNMENT:



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ASSIGNMENTS (CONT.):

Engage the students with a photo analysis exercise for two or more of the photos (consider time allotted for the lesson and the grade level of students. See DocsTeach for document analysis worksheet: <https://www.docsteach.org/resources/document-analysis>

This will work best with small groups of students. These groups can continue to work on the next activities below.

Focus attention to the quote below taken from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial website above:

“The names of the first men killed (in 1959) start at the highest point of the wall, on the right arm, and continue toward the shorter end. The names resume on the far, short end of the left arm, continuing back toward the junction of the two walls. This way the first deaths and the last deaths (May 15, 1975) meet in the middle. Directories are placed near the wall for visitors to look up names.

The design choice proved controversial, and eventually a flag and figurative sculpture of servicemen was added to the plan. The memorial wall dedication on November 11, 1982, was accompanied by a 56-hour reading at Washington National Cathedral of all the engraved names of the dead.”

Allow some time for students to absorb what the monument does and how it does it by listing all the names of the dead and ask why that might be controversial. Also, students should discuss how this memorial differs from other war monuments.

Have students, at this point, start a K/W/L exercise:

See: <https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/KWL%20Chart.pdf>

The exercise will help the teacher in finding out what students’ prior knowledge is about the Vietnam War. This can be done individually for a few minutes and then the small groups can share the charts with each other.

Have students refer to one of the timelines below to trace the history of the Vietnam War. The goal of this lesson is to identify some of the key events and turning points that will then become the source of deeper study of the war. In small groups, have students skim through the timeline to:

1) **Select** those key events for further study

2) **Identify** through their selection of events, the conflicts and controversies that arose during the war.

The first link to the Britannica timeline is shorter and simpler to use. The History.com site is far more comprehensive going more deeply into the colonial history of Southeast Asia.

Britannica.com

<https://www.britannica.com/list/vietnam-war-timeline>

History.com

<https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-timeline>





ASSESSMENT:

Each group should report and explain:

- 1) How it selected the key events and why they should be included in their study of the war
- 2) Why the war grew more controversial over time and how opposition to the war increased. Remember that the lesson is the first step in studying the Vietnam War.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES:

1. Connecting the past and present: While students are discussing how to memorialize and honor those who have fought in wars, teachers can encourage students to compare the creation of the Vietnam War Memorial with the recent controversies surrounding Confederate monuments. What emotions are evoked by various monuments? How do monuments affect our views of the past and how we interpret history?

2. Students can pursue learning more about Maya Lin and how she came to design the Vietnam War Memorial. Suggestions: Have students read this article from The Attic.

<https://www.theattic.space/home-page-blogs/2019/10/23/the-woman-who-healed-america>

Using the article, ask students to write about the connection Maya Lin

PROMPT: write their own summative story; draw a timeline of key events from her life; create a graphic story; write a poem; design a collage. Encourage students to include several aspects of Maya Lin's life (her parents, her ethnicity and gender, her education and interests, other works she created, core ideas or beliefs she holds) and guide them in how some of these characteristics can be represented in their work.

RESOURCES

National Park Service:
<https://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm>

The Attic. "The Woman Who Healed America,"
<https://www.theattic.space/home-page-blogs/2019/10/23/the-woman-who-healed-america>

Maya Lin Studio
<https://www.mayalinstudio.com>



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