

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Fall 2016 History 393-001
Wednesdays, 7:20-10 PM
Room: 228 Robinson B

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Office hours: Wednesdays 6-7pm + by appointment

VIEWING THE VIETNAM WAR: FILM AS HISTORY

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This is a history and film course about tragedies: the deaths of almost 60,000 Americans and at least twenty times that number of Vietnamese; the physical and psychological maiming of men, women and children on both sides of the war; the physical destruction of one country and the moral corruption of another. It is also a course about American politics and ideology during the cold war; most especially about the corrosive and pervasive influence of anti-communism on American diplomacy and politics. It is also a course about presidential decision making, and about “how American culture led us into Vietnam and made us fight the way we did” Since 9/11, it is a course that is increasingly relevant in so far as it reveals what Americans have taken as the lessons of the Cold War in general and the Vietnam War in particular. Finally, the course is a reminder that while history happens in the past, it seldom remains there. In this election season, that may be particularly true.

The "texts" for the course include works of history, journalism, autobiography, literature, contemporary documents, and most prominently documentary and feature films. The latter are chosen to expose the broad range of emotions Americans and Vietnamese experienced as a result of the war, and how Hollywood, television and independent documentarians have interpreted the war for postwar generations.

FORMAT: The class meets on Wednesdays from 7:20-10 pm. A documentary or feature film will be screened and discussed during each class. In addition to discussing each film in class you will be expected to be ready to discuss the similarities and differences between what you have read in the assigned readings and what you have seen in the films.

The central question: Does the medium control the message? Is there *necessarily* a difference between history presented through documentary films and written history? If so, what does written history “do better,” and what (if anything) does film “do better”? (What does “better” mean?) Does the presentation of history *necessarily* change with the medium?

NOTE #1: 100% attendance is expected. Given the course’s organization and content (films, class discussion etc.) there is no point in taking this class if you do not plan to attend regularly. Attendance will be noted.

Note #2: This syllabus is my best estimate at the beginning of the semester of how our course will proceed. However, it is subject to change if I consider changes advisable.

REQUIREMENTS: In addition to keeping up with the assigned readings and movies, and attending all classes, students will be responsible for the following:

PAPERS: Three essays. They will count equally in calculating final grades. Assuming that you have perfect attendance and meet all the other noted course requirements, your grade will be based on the grades you receive for your three essays.

***** Please submit your papers in the following way: email subject title H393F16_paper# and the attached file: H393F16_last name_Essay#** If you use a mac's pages program please convert to a word file.

VIETNAM MEMORIAL VISIT: Everyone must visit the Vietnam Memorial. I will try to arrange a time when we can go as a group. Anyone who cannot participate in the group visit will have to visit the memorial independently and complete an additional assignment TBA.

READING QUIZZES: There may be 1 or 2 short answer in-class quizzes based on the readings. Their dates will be announced a week before.

Paper Schedule

**NOTE: PAPERS ARE DUE AS EMAIL ATTACHMENTS:
ESSAY 1 DUE NO LATER THAN 5PM FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 23.
ESSAY 2 DUE NO LATER THAN 5PM FRIDAY OCTOBER 28
ESSAY 3 DUE NO LATER THAN 5PM FRIDAY DECEMBER 9**

ASSIGNED READINGS: (Available in the Book Store)

1. Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, H. Bruce Franklin (Editors) *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War /*
2. Marilyn B. Young *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*
3. Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and The Pentagon Papers* (Ellsberg traces his transformation from cold war strategist, Marine officer and super anti-communist to radical anti-war activist who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*.)
4. Bao Ninh *The Sorrow of War* (A North Vietnamese soldier's tragic view of the war)

Additional readings in the form of short articles will also be assigned during the semester.

Our course integrates the chronological history of the war with the consequences of the decision making process. The **chronological structure** is maintained by reading Professor Marilyn Young's *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*. The **consequences** will be revealed in many of the readings, in our discussions and in the films.

THE COURSE IS DIVIDED INTO 3 SECTIONS (LISTED BELOW). AN ESSAY OF ABOUT 2,500 WORDS IS DUE AFTER THE COMPLETION OF EACH SECTION. Note that the course readings are not divided into weekly assignments. These books are intended to be the basis for your research. Skim through every chapter and article during the first few weeks to see what is relevant for your essay. I am assuming that you will read what is most interesting and useful to you.

I. PRESIDENTS AND POLITICS: DECISIONS TOWARD DISASTER

ESSAY ONE: [DUE FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23 NO LATER THAN 5PM. EMAIL AS ATTACHMENT TO BOTH SHERWIN AND MARCHBANK.

IMPORTANT: YOUR EMAIL SUBJECT LINE MUST BEGIN WITH: H393F16. ALSO YOUR ATTACHMENT MUST BE DESIGNATED: H393F16_LAST NAME_Essay#]

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT: *You have been invited to present the Freshman Day Welcoming Speech at George Mason University on Friday September 23. Your subject is “The Importance of Presidential Decision Making: Lessons from the Vietnam War.”* (Length: 2,500w - about 8 double spaced pages with Times 12 font). **NOTE: Your speech must include AT LEAST 8 footnoted references from the course texts, and AT LEAST 2 footnoted references to the films.**

RELEVANT READINGS FOR PART I: (These readings, along with the films, will be the basis for your essay (written speech). The readings for this section are heavy so start early.)

Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, chapters 1-9;
Gentleman, *et.al.*(eds.), *Vietnam and America*, Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Ellsberg, *Secrets*

Week #1: (WED. 8/31)

Course description - review of syllabus - review of requirements.
Film: “Vietnam, A Television History” (PARTS 1 and 2 of PBS series)

Week # 2 (WED.; 9/7)

Film: “Johnson, Nixon and the Vietnam War” (Untold History)

WEEK # 3 (WED.; 9/14)

Film: “The Fog of War” (SecDef Robert McNamara’s view)

Week # 4 (WED.; 9/21)

Film: “The Most Dangerous Man in America” [Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers]

II. HOLLYWOOD'S VIETNAM

ESSAY TWO: [DUE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28 NO LATER THAN 5PM. EMAIL AS ATTACHMENT TO BOTH SHERWIN AND MARCHBANK.

[IMPORTANT: YOUR EMAIL SUBJECT LINE MUST BEGIN WITH: H393F16. ALSO YOUR ATTACHMENT MUST BE DESIGNATED: H393F16_LAST NAME_ESSAY#.]

You are presenting a short paper at the upcoming meeting of the Organization of American Historians as a member of a panel entitled: "Hollywood Films and History: Distortion and/or Insights." Your presentation focuses on the feature films on the Vietnam War that you have seen. (Length: 2,500w - about 8 double spaced pages with Times 12 font) NOTE: Your essay must include AT LEAST 8 footnoted references from the course texts, and AT LEAST 2 footnoted references to the films.

RELEVANT READINGS FOR PART II: (These readings, along with the films, will be the basis for your paper.)

Ellsberg, *Secrets* (The chapters on his experiences in Vietnam)

Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (Epilogue)

Gettleman, *et.al.* (eds.) *Vietnam and America*

Bao Ninh *The Sorrow of War*

Week #5 (WED.; 9/28):

Film: "Platoon" (Oliver Stone production. He fought in Vietnam.)

Week #6 (WED.; 10/5)

Film: "Born on the 4th of July" (Based on *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic's memoir)

Week #7 (WED.; 10/12)

Film: "Casualties of War" (Based on a true story that appeared in *The New Yorker Magazine*,

Week #8 (WED.; 10/19)

Film: "Remembering My Lai"

Week #9 (WED.; 10/26)

Film: "The Deer Hunter"

III. THE WAR AT HOME

ESSAY THREE: [DUE FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9 NO LATER THAN 5PM. EMAIL AS ATTACHMENT TO BOTH SHERWIN AND MARCHBANK.]

[IMPORTANT: YOUR EMAIL SUBJECT LINE MUST BEGIN WITH: H393F16. ALSO YOUR ATTACHMENT MUST BE DESIGNATED: H393F16_LAST NAME_Essay#.]

You have been appointed “Historian Advisor” to the newly elected president. Write your new boss a memorandum entitled: “What You Need to Know About the Vietnam War, and Why.” (Length: 2,500w - about 8 double spaced pages with Times 12 font) **NOTE: Your essay must include AT LEAST 8 footnoted references from the course texts, and AT LEAST 2 footnoted references to the films.**

RELEVANT READINGS FOR PART III: Selections of your choice from:

Ellsberg, *Secrets*

Young, *The Vietnam Wars*

Gettleman, *et.al.* (eds.) *Vietnam and America*

Bao Ninh *The Sorrow of War*

Week #10 (WED.; 11/2)

Film: “Berkeley in the Sixties” (University of California, Berkeley)

Week #11 (WED.; 11/9)

Film: “The War At Home” (University of Wisconsin)

Week #12 (WED.; 11/16)

Film: “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger” (The film title is a quote from Muhammed Ali protesting the draft.)

Week #13 (WED.; 11/23) THANKSGIVING — NO CLASS — DRIVE SAFELY

Week #14 (WED.; 11/30)

Film: “Hearts and Minds”

Week #15 (WED.; 12/7) LAST CLASS

Film: “Regret to Inform”

(NOTE: PLEASE PLAN CAREFULLY - NO EXTENSIONS.)

IMPORTANT DATES FROM GMU CALENDAR:

FIRST DAY OF CLASSES- AUGUST 29

LABOR DAY- SEPTEMBER 5 (University closed)

LAST DAY FOR STUDENTS TO ADD CLASSES- SEPTEMBER 6

LAST DAY FOR STUDENTS TO DROP CLASSES- SEPTEMBER 30

MIDTERM EVALUATION PERIOD- SEPTEMBER 26-OCTOBER 21

COLUMBUS DAY RECESS- OCTOBER 10 (Monday classes meet on Tuesday. Tuesday classes do not meet this week)

THANKSGIVING RECESS- NOVEMBER 23-27

LAST DAY OF CLASSES- DECEMBER 10