

AMST 150: The American War in Vietnam
Spring 2023

Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen

Departments of English and
American Studies & Ethnicity

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Class schedule: TTH 11-12:20PM

Classroom: SAL 101

Discussion Sections with Teaching Assistants:

Ann Tran (ngtran@usc.edu) – Wednesday sections, 10AM and 11AM

Dillon Sung (daslesun@usc.edu) – Friday sections, 12PM and 1PM

Jason Vu (jtvu@usc.edu) – Wednesday 1PM and Friday, 11AM

Professor's office hours: available after lectures; Tuesday 2:30-3:30PM in person in THH 404D; and by appointment in person or via Zoom. Contact Titi Nguyen (titinguy@usc.edu) to schedule appointments.

This 4 unit course is costing you **\$8548**, besides books. Attendance is not mandatory, but maybe you should attend the class to make it worthwhile (besides the intellectual benefits).

Lectures will be in person with a Zoom option for those who cannot attend physically. I cannot guarantee the quality of the Zoom option, as I have been informed that the classroom may be technically difficult to work with. Zoom meeting ID: 917 4578 3399 (also see Blackboard for the class).

Electronic device policy:

Phones are not allowed. Laptops and pads for taking notes are allowed, but students are required to sit in the front few rows of the class if they wish to make use of these devices. The human temptation to use a laptop for something else besides note-taking is a bit too much, as I am well aware of myself. If you decide to sit in the back, take notes with pen and paper. Studies indicate students retain more information with hand-written notes. The teaching assistants will also be taking notes and making them available for anyone unable to take notes or who misses lecture. Lecture notes will not be made generally available; you must request them from your TA.

A reminder about the university's values:

Act with integrity in the pursuit of excellence. Embrace diversity, equity and inclusion and promote well-being. Engage in open communication and be accountable for living our values.

COURSE OVERVIEW

The American War in Viet Nam remains as the most controversial and divisive war for Americans in the 20th century. The war is still invoked in debates over American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This course provides an introduction to the war's history in order for today's Americans (and international students) to understand some of the key factors leading the US into its current geopolitical situation. The course spends the bulk of its time on the period of American involvement (1954-1975), and ends with postwar legacies in Southeast Asia and the United States. The course is a multidisciplinary, multicultural and international overview of the war's history. *It is not a military history course that understands war as a conflict involving politicians, generals, and soldiers.* Instead, this course conceives of war more broadly, as an activity that involves all of society and one that inflicts greater damage on civilians than on militaries (more civilians have died in 20th century wars than soldiers, a pattern repeated in this war).

The course is also concerned with challenges of memory and forgetting, and examines the war's afterlife in American and Southeast Asian memories. Student reading will draw primarily from films, literature, art, journalism, historical writing, and political discourse, while lectures will provide necessary historical and political background. The course corrects some fundamental flaws in the American pedagogy and scholarship on the war, beginning with how the name of the "Vietnam War" indicates that the war was fought only in Viet Nam. The war was also fought in Cambodia and Laos, and the course examines the war's impact on those countries and their peoples. Americans have also seen the war purely from the perspective of American self-interest and ethnocentrism. In contrast, this course stresses the diversity of American experiences, the importance of Southeast Asian points of view, and the existence of international actors in the war who were neither American nor Vietnamese.

This course will bring up topics that have proven divisive in American, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian societies and histories. These topics include: the justification or lack thereof for war; the roles of ideology, state power, corporate power, and individual responsibility in war; the factual occurrence of atrocity, rape, massacre, torture, protest, and political imprisonment *committed by all sides*, and the controversial matter of interpreting those facts; the visions of leaders, soldiers, antiwar and peace activists, and artists in dealing with war and its aftermath; the importance of race, gender, class, and sexuality to the fighting, protesting, and remembering of war; and other issues.

Rest assured that all sides of the conflict are subject to investigation and critique in this class. However, it seems to be human nature that when one hears one's own side or position being criticized, that is all one hears. I take the position that all sides were responsible, to one degree or another, for the tragedies that happened in this war, and will make my best case for that in a

serious, evenhanded, and scholarly manner. I expect that all students in this class will likewise approach the course material, the lectures, the discussion sections, and their fellow students' opinions in the same manner. Students can disagree with each other and with me, even passionately so, but all conversation and criticism in the course must be civil. Refrain from personal attacks and focus on the arguments.

All students will work in teams of 3-4 to collect oral histories of war survivors and contribute them to the course archive, anotherwarmemorial.com. Over several iterations of this course, students have contributed about 160 oral histories, and they have been archived in USC's [Digital Library](#). In this unique approach to course design and student scholarship, the students profile and commemorate witnesses of the war through oral history interviews. The goals of the course are to create a resource that the students can use in their own studies, can be shared with the public, and be used by future researchers. Some of the oral histories from this course were featured in the [Stranger's Guide to Vietnam](#).

The goals of the course for student learning are:

- 1) to provide a multidisciplinary overview of the history of the war and its afterlife.
- 2) to address a diversity of ethnic, cultural, and national memories about the war.
- 3) to prepare students to think critically and analytically, both in general and in relationship to the American War/the Vietnam War and the problems and challenges of remembering and forgetting

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS

Section: attendance	10%
Section: participation	10%
Blackboard: weekly posts	10%
First paper (on 3 previous oral histories)	10%
Final paper (on 3 oral histories from this course)	10%
Midterm exam	10%
Final exam	10%
Oral history group project	30%

In order to receive a passing grade, *students must meet the minimum requirement of earning a score for each of these grading criteria*. Receiving a zero in any of these criteria—or missing an entire paper or not participating in the group project—indicates that you have not done the work for the course and will *result in a D or F for the overall class grade*.

Discussion sections have their own attendance and grading policy; see your section syllabus. Your teaching assistant has authority over their discussion section and will assign the grade for that section.

Participation in sections is both verbal and written; besides classroom participation, students are also expected to post weekly comments or responses that are *thoughtful* and *substantive* on [Blackboard](#), an electronic resource for the class. Blackboard comments are run through the discussion section, but I will read them and may draw on them for my lecture and will make reference to them in lecture. Blackboard posts will alternate between an original comment of 300 words or a response to another student's comment. The Blackboard comments are designed to encourage students to keep up with the reading and to practice their writing and analytical skills. The original comments are graded on a scale of zero to 4:

- 4: has four elements: argument, evidence, originality (not something discussed in lecture or section), and stylistically correct.
- 3: has three of the four elements
- 2: has two of the four elements
- 1: has one of the four elements
- 0: no comment posted

There will be two papers of 5-7 pages, written about the oral histories of [anotherwarmemorial.com](#). The first paper will be about 3 oral histories that have already been done, in which you will assess the oral histories and grade them. From the class's collective grading criteria, your own oral histories will be assessed by the professor and TAs. The second paper will assess 3 oral histories from this class, and include a reflection on your own team's oral history.

The midterm and final exam will be purely fact-based, with no interpretation or essays. Expect some of the following: multiple choice, fill in the blank, identification of passages or characters, questions about plot or content from the reading or viewing, questions about facts from the lectures. The exams are designed only to see if you have kept up with the reading, the viewing, and the course lectures.

The oral history group project will take place over 12 weeks (see the separate Oral History Project guidelines). The project is lo-tech, involving Zoom for interviews; available software for video editing; and uploading videos through YouTube and profiles through Wordpress. The project is graded on a series of incremental steps. As long as you do them on time, and as long as the oral history meets basic technical and content standards, and as long as you participate equally with your teammates, the grading should not be difficult.

Students will work in teams of 3 or 4 to interview survivors of the American war in Viet Nam, which also included Laos and Cambodia. Whereas most war memorials commemorate men, soldiers, the dead, and those who fought on only one side during the war, this memorial is expansive in its definition of "war": that definition includes anyone who fought in the war, regardless of side; those who fought in the war and lived to suffer afterwards, e.g., from suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, Agent Orange related afflictions; civilians who suffered directly from the war (from living in the wartorn country or from having relatives die in the war on any

side); refugees; antiwar activists; conscientious objectors; and children of any of these people who feel that the war's trauma was passed onto them.

This syllabus and other course documents are available on [Blackboard](#).

Syllabus is subject to change at the professor's discretion.

Required Texts:

Christian Appy, *Patriots* (selections)

Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*

Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Rithy Panh, *The Elimination*

Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer*

Students who cannot afford to or who do not want to buy these books can look for them in libraries beyond USC. Many public libraries offer e-books and audio books, and while local Los Angeles libraries may run out if everyone in the course turns to them, local libraries from your hometowns may have them available.

Required Films:

Frances Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* - [USC libraries](#), Hulu Premium, or for rent on iTunes, Youtube, and Vudu.

Clint Eastwood, *Gran Torino* - [USC libraries](#), or for rent on Amazon, Youtube, iTunes, Vudu, and Google Play.

Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath, *The Betrayal* - [USC libraries](#); this film is pending, based on whether it is available for streaming

Rithy Panh, *The Missing Picture* - Online at [Kanopy](#) through USC, [USC libraries](#), or for rent on Amazon, Youtube, iTunes, Vudu, and Google Play.

Week One:

Tues, 1/10 – Introduction to Course

Thurs, 1/12 Is the United States “Beyond Vietnam”?

Readings: Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (1-84, “The Things They Carried” through “The Dentist”)

Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam” (11 pages)

Audio of King’s speech: <http://mlk->

kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/

Week Two:

Tues, 1/17 France and Indochina Before the United States

Reading: Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (85-130, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” through “Style”)

Thurs, 1/19 American Innocence...

Readings: Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (131-207, “Speaking of Courage” through “The Ghost Soldiers”)

Screening: *Apocalypse Now*, original release (not director’s cut), on your own time

Week Three:

Tues, 1/24 ...or the Heart of Darkness

In class discussion of *Apocalypse Now*

Readings: Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (208-233, finish the book); Tim O’Brien (from *Patriots*, 542-545)

Thurs, 1/26 Orientalism: Western Fantasies of Asia

Readings: Edward Said, “Introduction” (pp. 1-28) from *Orientalism*

Week Four:

Tues, 1/31 American Literature of War

In class discussion of Tim O’Brien

Readings: Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War* (1-100)

Thurs, 2/2 Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality in American Culture and the War

Readings: Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War* (101-156)

American conflicts over race: Julian Bond, General Baker, Jr., James Lafferty, Yusef Komunyakaa, Vincent Okamoto, Charley Trujillo (from *Patriots*, 143-145, 146-149, 164-166, 257-258, 357-361, 366-370)

Fri 2/3 First Paper Due (your TA will designate the time and method of delivery of your paper)

Week Five:

Tues, 2/7 The North Vietnamese Go to War

Reading: Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War* (157-233)

North Vietnamese views on the war: Vu Thi Vinh, Nguyen Thi Kim Chuy, Le Cao Dai, Duong Thanh Phong, Huynh Phuong Dong, Lam Van Lich, Le Minh Khue, Tran Van Ban (from *Patriots*, 103-104, 105, 138-141, 247-249, 330-331, 341-342, 508-514, 515-516)

Thurs, 2/9 North Vietnamese Memories

Reading: Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (acknowledgments, prologue, 1-62)

Week Six:

Tues, 2/14 Nothing is More Precious Than Independence and Freedom

In class discussion of Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*

Thurs, 2/16 The End of the American War

Reading: Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (63-164)

Week Seven:

Tues, 2/21 **MIDTERM EXAM in person, in class; professor will be absent, TAs will proctor the exam**

Reading: Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (165-215)

Thurs, 2/23 The South Vietnamese Perspective

Reading: Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (216-315)

American antiwar movement: Anne Morrison Welsh, Vivian Rothstein, Tom Englehardt, Clark Dougan, Daniel Ellsberg (from *Patriots*, 150-155, 274-278, 268-273, 304-306, 432-435)

Week Eight:

Tues, 2/28 The End of the War for the South

Reading: Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (316-368)

South Vietnamese views: Luyen Nguyen, Truong My Hoa, Oliver Stone, Nguyen Ngoc Luong (from *Patriots*, 94-98, 228-230, 252-255, 374-376)

Thurs, 3/2 Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In class discussion of Le Ly Hayslip

Reading: Rithy Panh, *The Elimination*, first third

Views on the end of the war: Phan Xuan Sinh, Vu Hy Thieu, Tran Ngoc Chau, Frank Snepp, Truong Tran (from *Patriots*, 25-27, 190-194, 475-479, 496-503, 504-507)

Screening, *The Missing Picture*, on your own time

Week Nine:

Tues, 3/7 The “Sideshow” in Cambodia
 Reading: Rithy Panh, *The Elimination*, second third

Thurs, 3/9 Year Zero: The Khmer Rouge
 In class discussion of *The Missing Picture*
 Reading: Rithy Panh, *The Elimination*, final third
 Screening: *Gran Torino*, on your own time

March 12-19 Spring Break

Week Ten:

Tues, 3/21 Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Cambodia
 In class discussion of *The Elimination*
 Reading: Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer* (1-128)

Thurs, 3/23 The “Secret War” in Laos
 In class discussion of *Gran Torino*
 Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer* (131-151)
 Screening: *The Betrayal*, on your own time

Week Eleven: this week is subject to change

Tues, 3/28 The War in Laos Continues
 Reading: Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer* (151-274); Fred Branfman (from *Patriots*, 217-220)

Thurs, 3/30 Laotians and Hmong at War

In class discussion of *The Betrayal*

Week Twelve:

Tues, 4/4 Laotian and Hmong Refugees

In class discussion of *The Latehomecomer*

Thurs 4/6 Student Presentations

Week Thirteen:

Tues, 4/11 Student Presentations

Thurs, 4/13 Student Presentations

Week Fourteen:

Tues, 4/18 Student Presentations

Thurs, 4/20 Student Presentations

Week Fifteen:

Tues, 4/25 Student Presentations

Thurs, 4/27 Revisiting the War in the United States

Reading: William Westmoreland (from *Patriots*, 539) Leroy Quintana, Huu Ngoc, Wayne Karlin, Duong Tuong (from *Patriots*, 538, 545-546, 547, 548-550)

Fri 4/28 Second Paper Due (your TA will designate the time and method of delivery of your paper)

Study Days – April 29 - May 2

Final Exam – Tuesday May 9, 11AM-1PM