



PRIMARY SOURCE READING 20

Lessons of Vietnam

More than 55,000 young American men and women lost their lives in Vietnam. Those who survived are still asking, “Why were we there? And why were we not welcomed when we came home?” Today, the *children* of the “Vietnam generation” are asking even more questions. “What was it like over there? What should I understand about what happened in the Vietnam War? What is significant about this war?”

Bill McCloud is a social studies teacher and Vietnam veteran. He gathered more than 100 responses from people all over the United States to the question, “What should we tell our children about Vietnam?” One of McCloud’s respondents was Myra MacPherson, a writer for the *Washington Post* and a lecturer on Vietnam and journalism.

Guided Reading *In this selection, read to learn what MacPherson feels are lessons to be learned from Vietnam.*

A marine called Eddie wears a wooden leg now. He looks back to that fateful day in the jungles of Vietnam. “I saw the old woman that blew my leg off. It was a command-detonated mine. I was crawlin’ . . . just me and a buddy. Everyone else was dead.”

For Eddie, a blue-collar kid from South Boston who went to war to “kill a Commie . . .,” this was not the way it was supposed to be. Like countless other teenagers, Eddie felt as invincible as John Wayne, the celluloid hero who epitomized blood-and-gut glory for the Vietnam generation. But John Wayne never got any closer to combat than Hollywood, California. Today’s youth, tempted by such revisionist absurdities as *Rambo*, should know that Sylvester Stallone sat out the real war in Vietnam at a college in Switzerland.

Eddie found that war was sickeningly different from all those reels of pseudo blood. One of 350,000 GIs wounded in Vietnam, Eddie echoed a thought I have heard many times from many veterans.

“I saw them World War II movies. I thought war was glorious,” he said. “I thought it was glamorous.”

. . . Today’s youth should know what Eddie and thousands of other young [soldiers and nurses] had to learn so painfully: war is not glamorous. It is only remotely tolerable and justifiable if it is deemed absolutely necessary. America’s leaders, with their failed policies and

reasoning, could never credibly tell us that about Vietnam.

Vietnam was an ill-conceived, ill-advised, ill-planned tragedy that left a welter of confusing legacies. With all its scars and confusions, Vietnam will haunt us forever. It is a war everyone wanted to forget—but can’t. And shouldn’t. By examining the unvarnished truth about Vietnam, perhaps we will learn to avoid such mistakes again.

One lesson we must learn is that sending young [people] into combat on the basis of nothing but the most abstract threats to national security is folly. Worse still is leaping into impossible situations where young [people] get killed for symbolic reasons. The explanation for being in Vietnam was that we were containing communism, primarily the Chinese. After all the bloodshed, destroyed land, and millions dead, the Vietnamese are fighting the Chinese, and the Chinese are our allies.

It has also never been made clear what we would have won had we beaten the North—a victory that would have necessitated keeping a large occupation force there endlessly, with the probability of the fiercely determined North Vietnamese breaking out in warfare again.

One lesson of Vietnam is that intervening is much more complicated than siding with “good guys” or “bad guys”: we need to give up our delusions of omnipotence. It is not in our power to shape countries as we would want them.



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Rather than intervene on ideological grounds, humanitarian concerns would be better served if we asked: Will it work? Can we make life better for the country? Is it really in our national interest?

. . . All told, the Vietnam War defies common experience. Yet there were general aspects of combat that must be explained to today's youth. In this war of no fixed goals, the "body count" became a perverted measure for winning. Units were awarded ice cream and beer for killing the most. Years later, men faced the trauma of being part of such purposeless killing. In a war with no front lines, fought in and around civilians, it was often impossible not to kill them. Years later, soldiers remembered the bloodied bodies of women and children. They never knew who the enemy was. Friends were ripped apart by an invisible enemy—the booby trap. GIs went in one-year hitches. Survival guilt developed years later when they wondered what happened to those who remained behind.

. . . Such guerrilla warfare is what today's youth would experience, because atomic weapons have made all-out victories such as World War II obsolete. Instead, the superpowers will have to continue to fight their "dirty little wars," as Vietnam was termed, and as Afghanistan became for the Russians, surrogate wars of bluff and bloodshed in tiny countries around the world.

If such wars recur, America would face a major cost never written in the defense budget—the cost of creating new veterans. For a trenchant

lesson of what happens to soldiers of unpopular wars, we can look to the shameful treatment of Vietnam veterans. Congress refused to appropriate adjustment counseling funds for a decade, Vietnam veterans were treated to one of the shabbiest GI bills in history, and Reagan's administration tried to gut their counseling centers and stalled a congressional order to study the effects of Agent Orange [a chemical defoliant sprayed over the jungles and farms in Vietnam].

The private sector was little better. For years, frustrated veterans urged businessmen in vain to hire Vietnam vets. And America's Vietnam Memorial was not the gift of a grateful nation. Veterans themselves had to raise the money.

A final lesson would be for every junior and high school class to visit the Vietnam Memorial. There, tourists still their talk and laughter. Veterans in wheelchairs stroke the indentation of names, almost as the blind finger Braille. Roses, pictures, letters are placed beside names: "This is my father. I never knew him. If anyone knows him, please write me."

It is important for the young to look at those names, wall upon wall, nearly 58,000 of them, and realize that this is the highest of all the prices of that war. Reconciliation and understanding can come only if the vast majority, those of us relatively untouched by that war, take it upon ourselves to face what it all meant. This means, in part, listening—and listening hard—to the tales that those of the Vietnam generation have to tell.

INTERPRETING THE READING

Directions Use information from the reading to answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. According to MacPherson, how was war viewed by many young Americans before they arrived in Vietnam?
2. What "lessons" of Vietnam does MacPherson believe Americans must learn?

Critical Thinking

3. **Drawing Conclusions** How is the Vietnam War still affecting American society?