

**Kymerli A. Wregglesworth**

**School:** Onaway High School

**Subject:** Modern United States History

**Grade Level:** High School (10th-12th grade)

**Lesson:** War Crimes in Vietnam/Compare and contrast with recent war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan

- This lesson would take place at the culmination of a several week long study of the Vietnam War. In addition to viewing numerous clips from Ken Burns's *The Vietnam War*, students will have participated in a variety of discussions and debates surrounding increasing military involvement in Vietnam, the utilization of the draft, domestic reactions to the war, and media influence on opinions about the war. Students will also have read Tim O'Brien's book, *The Things They Carried*, and discussed the issues raised by the narratives and how they relate to the actual history of the war.

**Standards:** USHG 8.1.2; USHG 9.2.2; USHG 9.3.1

**Objectives:**

- Analyze the My Lai massacre as an individual example of a war crime, as well as its place in the broader history of the Vietnam War.
- Compare and contrast the My Lai massacre and various recent examples of war crimes from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.
- Evaluate the military, governmental, and public responses to war crimes, both current and historical, and determine whether or not similar war crimes can be prevented in the future.

**Materials Needed/Resources:**

- *PBS American Experience: My Lai* video
- Chart paper/markers
- Articles - hard copies, or electronic versions
  - "Torture at Abu Ghraib"  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib?verso=true>
  - "Lessons of Abu Ghraib"  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/07/lessons-of-abu-ghraib/302980/>
  - "Ex-Soldier Gets Life Sentence for Iraq Murders"  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/22/us/22soldier.html>
  - "Facing hurdles from U.S., war crimes judges reject Afghan probe"  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-warcrimes-afghanistan/facing-hurdles-from-us-war-crimes-judges-reject-afghan-probe-idUSKCN1R01DZ>
  - "Trump's Pardons for Servicemen Raise Fears That Laws of War Are History"  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/16/us/trump-pardon-military.html>

**Activity:**

1. View *PBS American Experience: My Lai* video, pausing to discuss when relevant and/or necessary. Debrief the video with students when complete.
2. Silent Debate: post several pieces of chart paper around the room with one of the questions listed below on each sheet. Students should circulate around the room and respond to the question as well as respond to their peers. Agreement with an answer is symbolized with a check mark, disagreement with an "x". After students have had significant time to write and respond to one another silently, debrief the questions in a class discussion.
  - a. Which was worse: the massacre or the coverup? Why?
  - b. What should the rules of warfare be with regard to treatment of civilians? Who should be considered a civilian (non-combatant)?
  - c. Did My Lai substantially change public attitudes toward the Vietnam War? Has it changed how we prepare our soldiers for war?
  - d. What should a soldier do when they are given an order that they think is unlawful?
3. Assign students to read one or more of the linked articles as homework. They should look for similarities and differences between the modern war crimes and those committed at My Lai and be prepared to discuss them.
4. Hold discussion, referring back to the Silent Debate questions as a guide for discussion.

**Evaluation:** Students may be graded on their participation in the Silent Debate and the discussion of the modern war crimes articles. For a written evaluation, students can be asked the following: "Did the lessons of the Vietnam War affect the conduct of United States' soldiers in subsequent wars? Is it possible to train our soldiers to prevent them from committing war crimes? Why or why not?"

I began teaching a Modern U.S. History course this year, and have been very happy with the results. Students crave learning about the most recent past, and the survey history courses generally do not make it past World War II. Due to the interest my students expressed on learning about the Vietnam War, I made sure it was a main focus of several weeks of our class. One of the culminating lessons is described above.

Students were well-versed in the War by the time we got to discussing My Lai, and I knew that they would be thoughtful and analytical about such an important turning point. I wanted to extend their learning beyond Vietnam, however, and decided that comparing and contrasting more current examples of war crimes would be the way to do that. I also chose the Silent Debate strategy to give my less vocal students an opportunity to express their thoughts without having to fight the more dominant voices in the classroom.

The Silent Debate originally related only to the My Lai massacre. Students wrote their thoughts and responded to their classmates on the chart paper, and we debriefed by students choosing a comment from one of the questions that resonated with them for the class to discuss. The depth of thought was very inspiring to me as a teacher - I have been quite pleased with the value of this teaching strategy and hope to expand its use into other courses I teach.

The link to more current conflicts made the discussion even more real for students, especially since two students in the class are already enlisted and will attend Basic Training this coming summer. Two of the articles listed were not in my reading packets for students, but were recommended by students looking for more information about the articles they were assigned to read. Because of where we were in the course, and the culture that already existed, I allowed the students to run their own discussion on the similarities and differences between My Lai, Abu Ghraib, and crimes in Afghanistan. They also brought up information related to the government's treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo.

Because of the richness of the discussion, I chose to grade students based only on their insights and participation, rather than require a written evaluation. Sometimes, asking students to rehash what has already been debated in written form leads to second-guessing, and I liked the rawness of the original debate too much to ask students to rethink their opinions. Overall, this lesson is one that I am most proud of in my new course, and hope to expand upon the next time I teach the course by including the additional articles and integrating more from the novel, *The Things They Carried*, into the discussion.