

Lesson Plan: Iconic Imagery of the Vietnam War

Grade level: 8-12

Time: Lesson is adaptable for one or more 50-90-minute class periods.

Subjects with which this lesson interfaces:

History, Civics, Government, Journalism, Photography, Communications

Content Advisory: The imagery included herein depicts graphic scenes of violence from the Vietnam War. While appropriate for high school and college-aged students, teachers are advised to exercise caution before adapting this lesson for younger grades.

Materials needed:

- Access to the Internet (with sound) for showing audio-visual files
- Overhead projector to display the Internet video clips
- Class copies of Photo Analysis Worksheet Handouts #1-3 (attached below)

Essential Questions:

- How can a photograph define or misrepresent an event in the historical record?
- In what ways did photo-journalism affect the course of the Vietnam War?
- Does the existence of journalists in a war zone help or harm a war effort?

Learning Outcomes:

- Identify iconic images from the Vietnam War
- Apply evidentiary skills and analysis
- Understand the role of photojournalism in a democracy
- Develop an argument for and against free journalism in war zones
- Draw conclusions and make hypotheses applicable to modern-day contexts

Summary:

Students evaluate three iconic photographs and events of the Vietnam War, as broadcast to the United States in 1963, 1968 and 1972, respectively. Analyzing the news events using primary and secondary historical sources ---textual facts, still photography and film footage--- students weigh the merits and detriments of publicizing dramatic war scenes through mass media. After placing the imagery in context with major turning points of the Vietnam War, students consider independent journalism's impact on policy-makers, military strategists and public opinion.

Biography of an Image: Handout #1A

Self-Immolation of Buddhist Monk, Thich Quang Duc, Streets of Saigon, 1963

Photographer: Malcolm Browne, Associated Press

Photographic Award: World Press Photo of the Year, 1963; Pulitzer Prize, 1963.

You Tube Video of Historical Event (5 minutes, 15 seconds) "Protesta Silenciosa: Thich Quang Duc"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwsomcfQEiY&feature=player_embedded#!



Photo: Malcome Browne, AP

NOTES:

Biography of an Image: Handout #1B

General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon, 1968

Photographer: Eddie Adams, Associated Press

Photographic Awards: World Press Photo of the Year, 1968; Pulitzer Prize, 1969

You Tube Video of Historical Event (3 minutes, 2 seconds) "Vietnam Execution"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGrsw6m9UOY>



Photo: Eddie Adams, AP

NOTES:

Biography of an Image: Handout #1C

“The Girl in the Picture, Kim Phuc” 1972

Photographer: Nick Ut, Associated Press

Photographic Awards: World Press Photo of the Year, 1972; Pulitzer Prize, 1972

You Tube Video of Historical Event (1 minute, 32 seconds) “Vietnam Napalm”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev2dEqrN4i0>



Photo: Nick Ut, AP

NOTES:

STUDENT Photo Analysis Worksheet Handout #2

1. Describe the photograph. Who is the photographer and subject?
 2. List the emotions this photograph makes you feel:
 3. If you already know the *historical context* of this picture, explain why this event occurred:
 4. If you do not know the *historical context* of this picture, explain what you think occurred:
 5. With whom does this picture make you sympathize? Why?
 6. Do you view this image and conclude that someone --an individual, a government, an army-- is at fault for the harm depicted? Why/ Why not? If so, who?
- Using Explanatory Photo Facts Handout #3, read the primary and secondary reports of the image.
7. Explain how additional details from textual reporting give this photograph greater meaning. Does this image offer a complete story of the facts?

- 8. What historical facts are missing from this photograph that cannot be captured on camera? Does the omission of these facts make the image a misrepresentation of reality?**

Watch the You Tube film footage video clip of this event

- 9. Which do you think is a more powerful story-teller: the video, the text, or the image itself? Why? Which form of documentary evidence is the most accurate?**

- 10. Argue that this photo is **helpful or unhelpful** in educating about the Vietnam War:**

Photo helped educate public about Vietnam	Photo misled the public about Vietnam

11. Make an argument that this photo is a **help or a hindrance to the United States' military and political goals in the Vietnam War:**

Photo helped U.S. military and political goals	Photo hindered U.S. military and political goals

12. Using the historical reaction to this photograph as your factual support, explain how U.S. Constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and speech encourage citizens to be informed and engaged with world events:

Explanatory Photo Facts: Handout #3A

Self-Immolation of Buddhist Monk, Thich Quang Duc, Streets of Saigon, 1963

Photographer: Malcome Browne, Associated Press

Explanatory Facts:

- Thich Quang Duc, a sixty-six year old Buddhist monk self-immolated in the streets of Saigon on June 11, 1963. The martyrdom was an act of protest against the brutal crackdown on Buddhists led by the U.S-backed regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in S. Vietnam.
- Photographs of the event were circulated around the world and increased pressure on both the U.S. policy-makers and the Diem regime for change in their governance of S. Vietnam.
- Malcome Browne's image helped discredit and marginalize the Diem regime, raise questions about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and set in motion the November 1963 coup d'état which left both Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Ninh Nhu dead.

Primary Accounts of the self-immolation:

1. Đúc's last words before his self-immolation were documented in a letter he had left:

"Before closing my eyes and moving towards the vision of the Buddha, I respectfully plead to President Ngô Dinh Diệm to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality to maintain the strength of the homeland eternally. I call the venerables, reverends, members of the sangha and the lay Buddhists to organise in solidarity to make sacrifices to protect Buddhism."

2. David Halberstam of the New York Times, reported an eye-witness account of the event in his 1965 book, "The Making of a Quagmire."

"I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning human flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think ... As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him." P.211

3. Madame Nhu (Wife of the Secret Police , Ngo Ninh Nhu, brother to Ngo Dinh Diem) remarks about the self-immolation, 1963:

"What have the Buddhist leaders done comparatively? The only thing they have done is barbecue one of their monks. Whom they have intoxicated, whom they have abused the confidence. Even that barbequing was not done with self-sufficient means because they used imported gasoline... Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands."

Explanatory Photo Facts: Handout #3B

General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon, 1968

Photographer: Eddie Adams, Associated Press

Analytical/Primary Accounts of the Saigon Execution:

1. Writer and Critic David D. Perlmutter writes of the Saigon Execution image:

"No film footage did as much damage as [AP](#) photographer Eddie Adams's [35mm](#) shot taken on a [Saigon](#) street ... When people talk or write about the Tet Offensive at least a sentence is devoted (often with an illustration) to the Eddie Adams picture."

2. On General Nguyen Ngoc Loan and his famous photograph, Adams wrote in *Time Magazine*

"The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. ... What the photograph didn't say was, 'What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American people?'"

3. Stanley Karnow, Author of *Vietnam: A History* writes p. 529

"But the most memorable image of the upheaval in Saigon—and one of the most searing spectacles of the whole war – was imprinted the next day on a street corner in the city. General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of South Vietnam's national police was the crude cop who had brutally crushed the dissident Buddhist movement....Now his mood was even fiercer: Communist invaders had killed several of his men, including one gunned down with his wife and children in their house...That morning, Eddie Adams, an Associated Press photographer had been cruising around the shattered town. Near the An Quang temple, they spotted a patrol of government troops with a captive in tow. He wore black shorts and a checkered sports shirt and his hands were bound behind him. The soldiers marched him up to Loan, who drew his revolver and waved the bystanders away. Without hesitation, Loan stretched out his right arm, placed the short snout of the weapon against the prisoner's head, and squeezed the trigger. The man grimaced—then, almost in slow motion, his legs crumpled beneath him as he seemed to sit down backward, blood gushing from his head as it hit the pavement. Not a word was spoken. It all happened instantly, with hardly a sound except for the crack of Loan's gun, the click of Adam's shutter... At the "five o'clock follies," as correspondents in Saigon called the regular afternoon briefings held in the U.S. Information Service Auditorium, General Westmoreland exuded his usual confidence. But his report was smothered the next morning in America's newspapers, whose front pages featured the grisly photograph of Loan executing the Vietcong captive."

Explanatory Photo Facts: Handout #3C

The Girl in the Picture, Kim Phuc, 1972

Photographer: Nick Ut, Associated Press

Analytical/Primary Accounts of the napalming incident

1. Denise Chong, author of *The Girl in the Picture* writes in 1999:

"Upon impact, the napalm ignited in a fierce explosive splash across the highway and the fields on either side. Flame shot upwards. Shades of saffron, blood, fire and sunset filled the viewfinder...Even from a distance of several hundred yards, the blast of heat was as if a door had opened on an immense brick furnace. Fire rolled and roiled out of the treetops. Heavy, dirty black smoke swirled skyward. The darker rooftops of the twin spires of the temple rose mirage-like beyond the obliterated road and fields in between. Faint shouts and screams could be heard. ... The first discernible figures, rendered against the smoke like a child's drawing of stick-men on a dirty pane of glass, were a half dozen or so women and children and a small black dog. A boy carried a child on his hip; two girls clutched jute sacks. The same stunned emptiness was in the eyes of human and animal, as if they did not comprehend what they had run from, or what they were running to. They found a curious reception – journalists and soldiers dressed alike in battle fatigues, some pointing long lenses, which, from a distance, can look like gun barrels. ... Never a fast runner, Phuc had fallen a step or two behind her brothers...Once on the highway, she heard the drone of a low-flying airplane, and curious, she turned her head to look. She had never before seen a plane so close. Without breaking her stride, she watched it drop four bombs before it passed from sight. ... Phuc was struck with such force from behind that she fell face first to the ground. Oddly, she felt unafraid, only curious, the same reaction she had had when she'd turned at the drone of the airplane and watched it unload its bombs. She did not wake up to what was happening until fire enveloped her. Fear took over. She would not know that she had got to her feet, had pulled at the neck of her burning clothes—in the way one would in discomfort on a hot day – and that what was left of them fell away. Her first memory of the engulfing fires was the sight of flames licking her left arm, where there was an ugly, brownish-black gob. She tried to wipe it off, only to scream out at the pain of the burn that had now spread to the inside of her other hand. In that instant, Phuc knew she had touched burned flesh. She had taken a hit of napalm to her left side, on the upper part of her body. It incinerated her ponytail, burned her neck, almost all of her back and her left arm. "..nong qua, nong qua!" A child's cry pierced the emptiness. Of the soldiers and journalists who heard the cry perhaps only the Vietnamese understood it: "...too hot, too hot!" Nick reached for the last of four cameras he had in his bag; never did he want to have to live with the regret of a great picture, but no film to take it. ... A screaming girl came running, naked, her arms held limply outwards.

2. On Kim Phuc and his famous photograph, Nick Ut writes in 2002:

"Even though it has become one of the most memorable images of the Twentieth century, President Nixon once doubted the authenticity of my photograph when he saw it in the papers on June 12, 1972.... The picture for me and unquestionably for many others could not have been more real. The photo was as authentic as the Vietnam War itself. The horror of the Vietnam War recorded by me did not have to be fixed. That terrified little girl is still alive today and has become an eloquent testimony to the authenticity of that photo."

Lesson Plan: Iconic Imagery of the Vietnam War

TEACHER'S GUIDE: Step-by-Step Lesson Methodology

Anticipate Timing: Depending on class length time and student reading ability, teachers may choose to conduct the iconic imagery lesson in class using a single photograph (ie; #A), assigning the other photographs (#B and #C) as homework, or for a small group project.

Preparation:

1. Choose which images the class will analyze. (A, B, C) Make one photocopy of each photograph worksheet per student.

- Biography of an Image: Handout #1A, #1B, #1C
- Photo Analysis Worksheet Handout #2 (this worksheet is applicable to all 3 photographs)
- Explanatory Photo Facts: Handout #3A, 3B, #3C

2. Que the Internet and projector to the You Tube site with the first image the class will analyze:

Image #A: (5 minutes, 15 seconds) “Protesta Silenciosa: **Thich Quang Duc**”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwsomcfQEiY&feature=player_embedded#!

Image #B: (3 minutes, 2 seconds) “**Vietnam Execution**”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGrsw6m9UOY>

Image #C: (1 minute, 32 seconds) “**Vietnam Napalm**”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev2dEqrN4i0>

CONDUCTING THE LESSON: 50 minutes (may be extended)

3 mins: Write the “Essential Questions” on the board. Tell the students you will be investigating the significance of war-time photojournalism through an analysis of iconic imagery from the Vietnam War.

10 mins: Distribute a Biography of an Image Handout #1 and the Photo Analysis Worksheet Handout #2. Ask the students to look at the image, and then answer questions 1-6 on the worksheet. Sample answers are provided on the Teacher’s Guide.

10 mins: Share and discuss student answers.

10-15 mins: Distribute the Explanatory Photo Facts Handout #3. Ask students to read (option: aloud) the text and answer questions 7-8 on the worksheet. Discuss answers.

10-15 mins: Show the You Tube video clip corresponding to the image. Ask students to answer questions 9-10 on the worksheet. Pause and discuss answers. Encourage students to exchange their own ideas.

5 mins: Summarize. Assign remaining questions 11-12 as homework / extension for longer class periods.

TEACHER'S Photo Analysis Worksheet #2 and Sample Answers

1. Describe the photograph. Who is the photographer and subject?

Sample answers:

- a) Malcome Browne's 1963 photo: shows a monk sitting in the streets, engulfed in flames, with an old 1950's car in the background, and numerous monks clothed in robes, looking on
- b) Eddie Adams' 1968 photo: shows a street scene, with uniformed man shooting a gun at another, younger man's head. The man being shot seems to be handcuffed from behind.
- c) Nick Ut's 1972 photo: Asian children crying and running down a country road, with a terrified, naked little girl in the center. There are soldiers walking behind them.

2. List the emotions this photograph makes you feel:

Sample answers:

Sad/happy, confused, disturbed, upset, curious, reverent, embarrassed, disgusted, vengeful, proud, etc.

3. If you already know the *historical context* of this picture, explain why this event occurred:

Sample answers:

- a) The monk, Thich Quang Duc, is self-immolating in the streets of Saigon as a protest against the U.S-backed regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and its brutal repression of Buddhists in Vietnam, 1963.
- b) General Ngoc Loan, a South Vietnamese general, shoots a suspected North Vietnamese "Vietcong" guerilla soldier in the streets of Saigon during the Tet Offensive, 1968.
- c) The "Girl in the Picture" is Kim Phuc, a 9 year-old South Vietnamese peasant, scalded with napalm burns from a "friendly fire" bombing accident over her village in Trang Bang, 1972.

4. If you do not know the *historical context* of this picture, explain what you think occurred:

Sample answers:

- a) A monk is committing suicide by setting himself on fire. Other monks at the scene are not trying to stop him, and he's not resisting the pain. It seems like the monk is making a deliberate choice.
- b) On a city street with a soldier looking on, an older Asian man is shooting a younger one with his hands bound behind his back.
- c) A naked little Asian girl is running—arms-outstretched and screaming--down a country road with other children and uniformed men moving away from a dark cloud, possible explosion in the background.

5. With whom does this picture make you sympathize? Why?

Sample answers:

- a) The monk, because you'd have to be really fed up with something to martyr yourself so dramatically.
- b) The younger man getting shot because he looks so innocent and vulnerable.
- c) The children, especially the little girl. The terror on their faces is inhuman and horrible.

6. Do you view this image and conclude that someone --an individual, a government, an army-- is at fault for the harm depicted?

Why/ Why not? If so, who?

Sample answers:

- a) It's unclear who is at fault because the monk seems to be there voluntarily.
- b) The older man shooting the younger man seems at fault. Also, there is a soldier looking on, doing nothing.
- c) It's unclear who is at fault. The uniformed men in the background could be the aggressors, but they look more dazed than menacing. It's hard to assess their role.

TEACHING DIRECTIVE: Using Explanatory Photo Facts Handout #3, read the primary and secondary reports of the image.

7. Explain how additional details from textual reporting give this photograph greater meaning. Does this image offer a complete story of the facts?

- a) The dramatic way this monk is protesting and the basic requests he makes of the Diem regime indicates that the government has been brutal, immoral and unjust. The callous response of Madame Nhu also serves as an indictment against the U.S-backed puppet regime. This photo makes it impossible for Diem (and, by extension, the U.S.) to pretend they've been effective in South Vietnam.
- b) Knowing that this picture was taken during the Tet Offensive, a humiliating moment for the Americans fighting the Vietcong, makes this event seem like an outrageous and common act of vengeance. It also raises questions about the supposed democratic "ideals" the Americans were trying to instill in Vietnam. Due Process, Right to remain silent, Right to a fair trial: this captured soldier was offered none of these basic civil protections. The contextualizing facts of this photo make the U.S. mission in Vietnam suspect.
- c) This picture is unique because its main subject lived to tell her story. The first-hand accounting of innocent children suffering as "collateral damage" in war is too horrible for words. The image itself silences any argument that war is a reasonable solution. In that way, the "factual story" behind the image – who accidentally dropped the napalm and why – is rendered meaningless. War is exposed for what it is.

8. What historical facts are missing from this photograph that cannot be captured on camera? Does the omission of these facts make the image a misrepresentation of reality?

Sample answers:

- a) Missing facts: why the monk set himself on fire, whether his martyrdom was justified or an over-reaction.
- b) Missing facts: why the man is being executed on the street, whether it was justified or an over-reaction.
- c) Missing facts: why the girl is naked, what they are running from, who are the uniformed people?

TEACHING DIRECTIVE: Watch the film footage video clip of this event

9. Which do you think is a more powerful story-teller: the video, the text, or the image itself? Why? Which form of documentary evidence is the most accurate?

Sample answers will vary. Possible discussion points:

- a) **Video footage** is dynamic, like real-life. It moves your eyes away from a single image and allows you to focus your mind on other aspects of the event, rather than one frozen frame of reality. While it can be painful to watch a detailed account of human suffering, the additional context provides mitigating data.
- b) In the same way that “the book is always better than the movie,” the **textual reporting** provides details, nuance and richness of meaning that neither a single image nor video footage can offer. It incorporates several points of view and therefore represents a more accurate reality than other means of reporting.
- c) **Photographs** grab the viewer’s attention and demand your curiosity. It’s easy to ignore text and headlines. Images are “worth a thousand words” because they establish shared conclusions in the viewers’ minds without language. The image becomes short-hand for a collective consciousness about a topic. The photo evokes a visceral response and compels action in a way that text or film footage may not. Excellent photojournalism tolerates no counter-argument: judgment on the event is irrefutable.

Argue that this photo is helpful or unhelpful in educating about the Vietnam War:

Photo helped educate public about Vietnam	Photo misled the public about Vietnam
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a.) Most Americans had not heard of the Vietnam War in 1963. Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation image made people aware of a distant conflict which would later claim nearly 60,000 U.S lives. b.) The Tet Offensive in 1968 was a turning point in the War when many people realized there was a divide between the ideals of the military mission and reality. Cynicism about the U.S. government, the purpose of the War, and the way in which it was fought are represented by Eddie Adams' photo. c.) Kim Phuc's image crystallized public opposition to the already-unpopular war. It compelled the final protests against the Nixon administration for its repeated war crimes in SE Asia, and accelerated the pressure to withdraw U.S. forces by 1973. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a.) The photo of the self-immolating monk dramatized a negative impact of the U.S.-supported Diem regime, without depicting the positive influences. The U.S. also sponsored humanitarian projects to protect civilians from Communist aggression. b.) General Ngoc Loan's cavalier street execution image makes murder seem commonplace. In reality, Vietnamese POWs experienced a range of treatment. c.) About Nick Ut's image of Kim Phuc, a military strategist remarked “We were winning the war until that photo was taken.” Many people wrongly concluded that the Americans had napalmed Trang Bang when it was actually the South Vietnamese pilots.

10. Make an argument that this photo is a **help or a hindrance to the United States' military and political goals in the Vietnam War:**

Photo helped U.S. military and political goals	Photo hindered U.S. military and political goals
<p>a.) Most Americans had not heard of the Vietnam War in 1963. Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation image made people aware of a distant conflict which would later claim nearly 60,000 U.S lives. Arguably, this picture can make the case for greater U.S. "protectionist" involvement.</p> <p>b.) "Body counts" were a means by which success in the Vietnam War was measured. A public street execution of a captured Vietcong displayed a command of authority by U.S. allies, which had been the subject of speculation throughout the War.</p> <p>c.) For some people, Kim Phuc's image in 1972 underscored the immorality of abandoning U.S. commitment to help the South Vietnam resist communism. Some folks saw this picture as emblematic of what S. Vietnam would be like without the Americans present offer protection.</p>	<p>a.) The Diem regime could not rebound after the negative publicity from the self-immolation and Madame Nhu's insensitive remarks. This was the first of several peaceful monastic protests before the Diem brothers were murdered in a coup, October 1963.</p> <p>b.) Eddie Adam's photograph makes the U.S.-led War seem like an unjustifiable horror upon innocent people. It is difficult to justify why the man wearing an American military uniform is executing an apparently defenseless civilian. The image became a metaphor for the War itself, and severely damaged U.S. credibility.</p> <p>c.) After seeing Kim Phuc's image, President Nixon is reported to have doubted its authenticity. The photograph allows for no official explanatory counter-argument to the public demand: "This War Must End."</p>

11. Using the popular reaction to this photograph as your factual support, explain how Constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and speech encourage citizens to be informed and engaged with world events:

Sample answer: The American public reacted strongly to these images, which in-turn pressured policy-makers to make changes. The right to free speech and press operates as a "check and balance" on governmental power. Because conflict-based photo-journalism often reveals disturbing injustices, it invites the viewer to learn more, tell others and get involved in holding the authorities accountable.