



WAR MEMORIAL CENTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Grades 9-12 / College

Title/theme

“Getting Our Voices Heard:” Latino Americans in Vietnam

This lesson explores the experience of Latino servicemen in Vietnam, focusing on the question of service and commitment while faced with discrimination.

Length

2-3 class periods

Suggested modifications:

Use Worksheet 2 if lesson plan used in conjunction with veteran interviews and QnAs.
You may skip Activity 4 if you need to shorten this lesson.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this class, students will be able to:

- Explain how the Selective Service System discriminated against some Americans while privileging others;
- Determine a connection between race, ethnicity, class, and discriminatory practices on the example of Latino Americans during the Vietnam War;
- Summarize personal experiences of Latino American veterans of the Vietnam War;
- Examine some aspects of psychological toll that war has on those who serve;
- Construct evidence-based arguments to support a thesis;
- Understand how individual stories can be used to illustrate and explain historical events and processes that affected a large number of historical actors;
- Determine how events of global and national importance (Vietnam War) connect with local (Wisconsin) history;
- Understand selected outcomes of the Vietnam War on the lives of those who served.

Wisconsin Standards for Grades 9-12

Content Area: History (Hist)

Wisconsin history era: 1954 - 1975 Civil Rights, the Later Cold War, and the Vietnam War Era

US history era: 1945 - 1980 Post-War Economic and Population Growth, Suburbanization, the Cold War, and Civil Rights

- Standard SS.Hist1: Wisconsin students will use historical evidence for determining cause and effect.
 - Hist1.a: Cause:
 - SS.Hist1.a.h Evaluate multiple events from different perspectives using primary and secondary sources and analyze intended and unintended

- causes from both long- and short-term perspectives. Evaluate how different groups and individuals contributed to the event or cause.
- Hist1.b: Effect:
 - SS.Hist1.b.h Evaluate multiple events from different perspectives using primary and secondary sources and analyze intended and unintended effects from both long- and short-term perspectives. Evaluate how different groups and individuals contributed to the effect.
- Standard SS.Hist2: Wisconsin students will analyze, recognize, and evaluate patterns of continuity and change over time and contextualization of historical events.
 - Hist2.a: Patterns stay the same over a period of time
 - SS.Hist2.a.h Evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources to apply knowledge of major eras, enduring themes, turning points, and historical influences to analyze the patterns of continuity in the community, the state, the United States, and the world.
 - Hist2.c: Contextualization
 - SS.Hist2.c.h Evaluate how the historical context influenced the process or nature of the continuity or change that took place.
- Standard SS.Hist3: Wisconsin students will connect past events, people, and ideas to the present; use different perspectives to draw conclusions; and suggest current implications.
 - Hist3.a: Connections:
 - SS.Hist3.a.h Analyze significant historical periods and their relationship to present issues and events.
- Standard SS.Hist4: Wisconsin students will evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources to interpret the historical context, intended audience, purpose, or author's point of view (Historical Methodology).
 - Hist4.c: Purpose:
 - SS.Hist4.c.h Analyze the intended purpose of a specific primary or secondary source.
 - Hist4.d: Point of view (POV):
 - SS.Hist4.d.h Analyze how the POV of the author can influence the content and intent of a primary or secondary source and identify whose voices may be left out.

Content Area: Social Studies Inquiry Practices and Processes (Inq)

- Standard SS.Inq3: Wisconsin students will develop claims using evidence to support reasoning.
 - Inq3.a: Develop claims to answer an inquiry question
 - SS.Inq3.a.h Develop a defensible claim to provide focus for an inquiry that is based upon the analysis of sources.
 - Inq3.c: Elaborate how evidence supports a claim
 - SS.Inq3.c.h Analyze the extent to which evidence supports or does not support a claim, and if it does not, modify the claim appropriately.
- Standard SS.Inq5: Wisconsin students will be civically engaged.
 - Inq5.a: Civic engagement
 - SS.Inq5.a.h Explore opportunities, informed by the knowledge and methods of the social sciences, for personal or collaborative civic

engagement with community, school, state, tribal, national, and/or global implications.

National Common Core Standards (History/Social Studies)

Grades 9-10 / 11-12

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Background information

No official statistics on how many Latino Americans served in the Vietnam War exist because no government agency collected data on Latino Americans in the armed forces during the second longest war in American history. While Latino Americans were singled out and discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic and racial identities in many other aspects of their daily lives, their unique experience during the Vietnam War was officially buried in a general story of American experience. In the words of Charley Trujillo, filmmaker and Vietnam veteran, “[When] they want us to come out here and work in the cotton fields, they call us Mexicans. As soon as there’s a war, all of a sudden we’re Americans.”¹

Despite the absence of official data, research has shown that Latino Americans died in disproportionately high numbers in Vietnam. Ralph Guzmán, who in the 1960s was a political science doctoral student at UCLA, conducted an influential study that aimed to determine how many Mexican Americans, at the time the largest Latino community in the United States, died in Vietnam. Guzmán examined last names on casualty reports from two periods, January 1961 – February 1967 and December 1967 – March 1969. Even before the war ended, he concluded that while Latino Americans constituted less than 12% of total population in the United States, they accounted for over 19% of casualties in Vietnam. He also found that the Selective Service System, a federal agency responsible for draft, protected young men from privileged backgrounds and sent men from poor and working class families to fight in the brutal war. Given the social and economic structure of the American society, that meant shielding predominantly white middle and upper class men and sacrificing many young men of color, including Latino Americans. Guzmán’s study also revealed that disproportionately high numbers of Latinos served in the high-risk branches of the armed forces.

Guzmán’s research confirmed anecdotal evidence from Latino communities from across the country although he and his collaborators examined data from only five Southwestern states with the largest concentrations of Latino Americans (at the time, mostly of Mexican descent or origin): Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Thus while the study did not take into account Latino Americans from many other states, including Wisconsin, it provided sufficient evidence to verify what many could witness in their communities across the United

¹ Quoted in *Soldados: Chicanos in Viêt Nam. A Film by Sonya Rhee and Charley Trujillo. Discussion Guide*, 2003, p. 13, accessed January 19, 2021, <https://pov-tc.pbs.org/pov/downloads/2003/pov-soldados-discussion-guide-color.pdf>.

States. Guzmán's work, published in 1970 as *The Mexican Americans: Our Second Minority*, continues to be influential until today. Its findings have been confirmed by more recent research. It is also considered to be a crucial factor in the growth of the Chicano (Mexican American) anti-Vietnam movement.

Today's estimates suggest that over 80,000 Latinos served in the Vietnam War. Simultaneously, the injustices that Latino Americans faced in their own home, including in the process of being drafted to serve in Vietnam, fueled a Latino-led anti-Vietnam war movement. The paradox of serving in large numbers but also leading a powerful anti-war movement is one of the underlying themes of the 2015 PBS documentary series *On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*. This lesson uses a clip from the PBS *On Two Fronts* to explore the issue of selective draft and its impact on young Latino men. It also examines the experience of three Latino Vietnam veterans from Wisconsin, George Francisco Banda, Fernando Hernandez Rodriguez, and Jose Cortez Ruiz, who have shared their eyewitness accounts of service in Vietnam.

Terms

Latino/Latina

Chicano/Chicana

Vietnam War

Selective Service System

Draft

Deferment

Materials

- Document 1: Video clip *The Draft* from *On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*, PBS, 2015, <https://myarkansaspbs.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/e6361021-bf68-4c02-a66a-2ee004433588/the-draft-on-two-fronts-latinos-vietnam/> (9'35")
- Document 2: An excerpt from *Adelante #1902*, Season 19, Episode 1902, PBS Milwaukee, November 9, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/video/adelante-1902-ulzqlu/> (first 11'06" of the video)
- Document 3: "George Banda: The Humble Hero," *Milwaukee Independent*, February 24, 2017, <http://www.milwaukeeindependent.com/profiles/george-banda-the-humble-hero/>
- Sheet 1: "Getting Our Voices Heard:" Latino Americans in Vietnam

Activity 1: Opening activity

- Make sure that students understand who Latino Americans are and what *Latino American* means. Depending on your students' personal experiences and communities, to which they belong and in which they live, many may be familiar with or self-identify as Latino Americans, while others may not know why some Americans self-identify as Latino Americans.

Note on vocabulary: Throughout this lesson, we use the term *Latino Americans* to refer to the collective identity of Americans who are descendants of people from Latin America or of Latin American origin. This term is often used interchangeably with *Hispanic*, including in official government classifications. However, the precise meaning of *Hispanic* implies individuals coming from Spanish-speaking countries. This excludes those regions of Latin America where Spanish is not the predominant language and includes Spain, a European country that for centuries held colonial control over vast areas in Central and South America.

We are also aware of the limitations of the term *Latino*. Because Romance languages (including Spanish and Portuguese) have grammatical gender (i.e., each noun has a grammatical gender, which impacts other parts of speech, e.g., verbs, adjectives, pronouns, etc.), *Latino* implies masculine grammatical gender while *Latina* would be an equivalent term that implies feminine grammatical gender. This means that *Latino* (masculine) is used in English to refer to what are gender-neutral concepts in English, e.g., Latino Americans, Latino art, Latino music, Latino literature, etc. In response to this phenomenon, which some consider as prioritizing and universalizing masculine forms over feminine forms, a gender-neutral term *Latinx* has been coined. The term is widely used in scholarship, academic discourses, and by some media outlets. However, *Latinx* has not been adapted by Latino Americans. Surveys have shown that the overwhelming majority of Americans of Latin American descent or origin are either not familiar with the term or simply prefer the term *Latino*. We have thus decided to follow the linguistic practice of referring to Americans of Latin American descent or origin as *Latino Americans* because it is geographically inclusive, more conscious of the complex role of Spain in Latin American history than the term *Hispanic*, and most widely adapted by Americans of Latin American descent or origin.

- Explain that students will examine the experience of Latino Americans in the Vietnam War. Begin with the following fact: No official statistics on how many Latino Americans served in the Vietnam War exist because no government agency collected data on Latino Americans in the armed forces during the second longest war in American history. Provide some historical background to open a discussion on the significance of that decision.

Suggested historical background: For example, between 1954 and 1958, nearly 3.8 million persons of Mexican descent were deported by the U.S. government in what is known as Operation Wetback. Many of them entered the United States legally in the first half of the twentieth century and some were U.S. citizens. It was not the first time when the United States organized mass deportations of Latino Americans. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, some 300,000 – 500,000 Mexican Americans were deported, although some estimates suggest a number as high as 2 million. The majority of them were American citizens. In the decades leading up to the Vietnam War, many existing segregation laws, most of which were historically aimed at African Americans, applied more or less officially to Latino Americans too. Particularly in Southwestern states, Latino Americans were forced to attend segregated schools and were excluded from many public spaces. Latino Americans were also systematically disadvantaged economically. Most of them worked manual jobs, for which they were paid low wages. Many worked in agriculture, which as an industry until today provides very little protection for workers. Although the labor of agricultural workers is essential to the survival of any society (they plant, cultivate, pick, pack, transport, etc. our food!), wages in agriculture are low, labor conditions dangerous, and opportunities for upward mobility limited.² The fact that an average Latino American was of working class background substantially impacted Latino American communities during the Vietnam War (see below).

- After providing some historical background on how Latino Americans were singled out as a separate group and discriminated against on the basis of their racial, ethnic, and national

² For an excellent timeline of Latino American history see “Latino Americans: Timeline of Important Dates,” PBS, accessed January 18, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/latino-americans/en/timeline/>.

identification, ask students to reflect on the government's decision not to count Latino Americans in the armed forces during the Vietnam War. Project the words of Charley Trujillo, filmmaker and Vietnam War veteran, on a screen or write them down on a board: "[When] they want us to come out here and work in the cotton fields, they call us Mexicans. As soon as there's a war, all of a sudden we're Americans." Encourage students to analyze what Trujillo meant. Suggested questions:

1. Why do you think the US government decided not to count Latino Americans in the armed forces during the Vietnam War, despite singling out Latino Americans for other purposes, e.g., economic discrimination, segregation, deportation policies, etc.?
2. How do you understand Charley Trujillo's words? What does he mean when he suggests that Latino Americans are called "Mexicans" when they are needed to do hard labor, but they are called "Americans" when they are needed to go to war on behalf of the United States?

Activity 2

- Divide students in pairs. Distribute Sheet 1: "Getting Our Voices Heard:" Latino Americans in Vietnam to each student. Students watch Document 1: Video clip *The Draft* (from *On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*, PBS, 2015, 9'35") and answer questions in Part I of Sheet 1 in pairs. Have students read the questions before they watch the clip. Explain vocabulary if necessary.
- After students discuss their answers in pairs, all students share, compare, and discuss their responses.
- Encourage students to reflect on what they learned about the Vietnam War and the experience of Latino Americans from the video. Suggested questions:
 1. Explain in your own words how the draft system helped men from privileged families and how it affected young men from working class families.
 2. The draft system during the Vietnam War was not designed specifically to target only Latino Americans. Why did it affect them so significantly?
 3. Can you think of other communities/groups that were affected by this system too?
 4. What you think of the draft system that protects certain groups and treats others as, in the words of Lorena Oropeza, historian cited in the video, "expendable"? What does "expendable" mean in this context?

Activity 3

- Explain that students will now hear directly from Latino Americans from Wisconsin, who served in Vietnam. Students watch **first 11'06"** of Document 2: An excerpt from *Adelante #1902* (PBS Milwaukee, November 9, 2017) and answer questions in Part II of Sheet 1 in pairs. Have students read the question before they watch the video. After students discuss their answers in pairs, all students share, compare, and discuss their responses. You may ask each pair to work with another pair or two other pairs (groups of 4 or 6) or lead a general discussion. Because the video is quite fast paced, it is likely that individual students and/or pairs will write down and focus on different details. Comparing answers should help all students make the most of the content.
- Students continue to work in pairs and answer questions in Part III of Sheet 1. After completing Part III, students share, compare, and discuss their answers. Alternatively, you may break the lesson here and assign Part III as homework.

Activity 4

- If you assigned Part III of Sheet 1 as homework, open this class period with students sharing, comparing, and discussing their responses to Part III.
- Distribute Document 3: “George Banda: The Humble Hero,” *Milwaukee Independent*, February 24, 2017 to students. Students read and analyze the interview, focusing on Banda’s Vietnam experience. Students should be able to recognize that Banda is one of the veterans featured in the *Adelante* video used in Activity 3. Suggested questions:
 1. How did service in Vietnam affect Banda’s faith? What changed his understanding of God and faith? What does his experience tell us about how war and violence can affect an individual?
 2. What kind of training did Banda receive to become a combat medic?
 3. Why is May 6, 1970 such an important date in Banda’s life?
 4. What did Banda experience after he returned home from Vietnam? What does his experience tell us about the American society during and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War?
 5. What did Banda learn about Vietnamese people, who he was told were his “enemy,” and Vietnam? What does he wish Americans knew about Vietnam and the Vietnamese?
 6. In this interview, Banda shares many important reflections that go beyond his experience in Vietnam. What are they? What do his reflections tell us about the experience of Latino Americans in the United States?

Activity 5 (closing activity)

- Explain to students that despite the absence of official data, we estimate that over 80,000 Latino Americans served in Vietnam. Research has also shown that Latino Americans died in disproportionately high numbers in Vietnam. Even before the war ended, Latino Americans constituted less than 12% of total population in the United States but accounted for over 19% of casualties in Vietnam (see “Background information” above for more details). Encourage students to reflect on what the experience of Latino Americans in the context of the Vietnam War tells us about service and commitment but also about the struggle of Latino Americans in their own homeland. Suggested questions (*some points signaled in questions below may have come up during class, especially when students shared their responses to questions in Sheet I; adjust accordingly):
 1. What did you learn about the Vietnam War from the experience of Latino Americans who served in it? What did you learn about the American society during the Vietnam War and in its aftermath from the experience of Latino Americans who served in Vietnam?
 2. How was the experience of Latino Americans in Vietnam different from the experience of other American servicemen and servicewomen? How was it similar to the experience of other American servicemen and servicewomen?
 3. Fernando Hernandez Rodriguez, Jose Cortez Ruiz, and George Francisco Banda all talk about the trauma that they experienced as a result of their service in the Vietnam War. They also admit that it took them a long time to talk about their experiences in Vietnam, even with their fellow servicemen who went through similarly difficult experiences. What does it tell us about the Vietnam War? What can we learn from Rodriguez’s, Ruiz’s, and Banda’s experiences about psychological toll that war may have on individuals?
 4. What does the experience of Fernando Hernandez Rodriguez, Jose Cortez Ruiz, and George Francisco Banda tell us about the role of supportive community in the lives of war veterans? Why do you think sharing the Vietnam memories with families, other

veterans, and the general public (us) has been so important to, in the word of the veterans, begin healing?

5. What can we do to support the veterans that live with the traumatic memories of war? How can we make sure that their voices are heard and remembered?

Additional suggested activities

For grades 9 – 12: Students design a Vietnam War memorial that commemorates the experience of Latino Americans. Introduce the concept of memorial to students. Point out that memorials can have many different forms and shapes. Use national and local examples to inspire students. This assignment is particularly well suited for group work.

Writing assignment for grades 9 – 12: You are a journalist whose task is to write an article on the personal experiences of Latino Americans in the Vietnam War. You have done your research on the Selective Service System and you conducted interviews with three veterans, Fernando Hernandez Rodriguez, Jose Cortez Ruiz, and George Francisco Banda. Write an article titled “‘Getting Our Voices Heard:’ Latino Americans in Vietnam.” Use at least six quotes from the interviews with Rodriguez, Ruiz, and Banda in your article. Your class notes and information you have collected in Sheet I should serve as your sources.

Writing assignment for college: Rosalio Muñoz, an anti-Vietnam War activist featured in *The Draft*, argues that Latino Americans have always felt pressure to prove that they “deserve” to be part of the American nation. That resulted in many of them sacrificing in Vietnam and other wars. How do you understand Muñoz’s statement in light of what you have learned about the Latino American experience during the Vietnam War? To what larger issues does he refer? Do you agree with him?