

# Teaching Vietnam: The Country and the War

## *Theory to Praxis: The Way We Teach Our Daughters About the Vietnam War*

**James T. Gillam**  
Spelman College

I teach Asian history at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. By training, I am a specialist in the traditional and modern history of China and Japan. However, since the faculty at Spelman is small, and my Academic Dean thinks that serving in the Vietnam War qualifies me as an expert in Vietnamese history, I have developed an area of study outside my graduate school comfort zone. This extra area of competence has taken the form of a course on the history of Vietnam from the colonial era to 1991.

I have given guest lectures on Vietnam and the war we fought there at all-male schools like Morehouse College, and coeducational schools like The Ohio State University. The pedagogy I use in those places is the old fashioned, read the books, give the lectures and hold discussion pattern. Under the best of circumstances, most of the students do the reading, and a few of the men dominate the discussion. At OSU, I attributed the lack of female participation to lack of preparation. There may have been some of that. Yet when I began to teach about the war to Spelman's female student body, some of the responses I received on papers and in discussions from my best students brought me up short. They forced me to recognize that women are shaped to different gender roles than men, and consequently, they have a culture that is different from that of men. Those differences meant that if I was to be an effective teacher of the war to the women at Spelman I would have to make some important changes in the way I teach this subject. This sample of some of the mistakes that I see from time to time will show you what I mean. One student wrote a paper that noted correctly that the Vietnam War was an up-close, personal war. That "bombs were not fired from tanks from miles away. Instead, it was fought from distances of ten feet away by soldiers armed with landmines."

My analysis of these and similar responses by my students led me to believe that aside from the difficulty of mastering the terminology and geography of Vietnam, my students were also making a number of mistakes because their gender role preparation was so different from that of men. One of the most obvious of these differences can be seen in the way boys and girls play. There is a peculiar part of male gendering and role playing that requires boys to pretend to kill, or at least dominate something or someone. Conversely,

females practice the skills of personal diplomacy and nurturing. These differences in gender conditioning mean that women and men come to accept certain attributes as desirable and understandable on a visceral level long before they get to my class. This helps partially explain why, for example, many women accept intelligence, attractiveness, and the ability for nurturing as desirable attributes. Men, on the other hand, find it acceptable, if not actually desirable, to be seen as tough guys that have a killer instinct.

This is not to say that women are incapable of mastering the larger issues of history, culture, economics and diplomacy that are part of the Vietnam War. Once they get started, they do as well as any of my male students. In fact, they seem to negotiate the diplomatic maze of the war faster and more successfully than many of the men I have taught. Yet, many of them report confusion when they see a unit designation such as "4<sup>th</sup> Div. 1/22." They quickly tumble to the idea that "Div." means a division, which is a large unit of soldiers. But almost to a woman, they mistake the battalion and regimental designation of "1/22" as a fraction for something unexplainably military that is probably not important. There are other things too. For many of them the word "Tracks" means footprints on the ground. Or, most of them are astounded to find out that a rifle can be gas operated and that the entire cartridge does not leave the barrel of a weapon when it is fired.

The mastery of these kinds of minutia is not needed to understand the historical issues of the Vietnam War. Yet my students demand to be prepared to hold their own in the male dominated society outside the gates of Spelman. Perhaps they don't need to know that "Tracks" are tanks and armored personnel carriers. But, they do need to know that the failure to create enough expanding gasses from the cordite in an M-16 cartridge was the primary cause for the failure of the rifles our government issued to its soldiers in Vietnam. Technical details like that lead to larger discussions of morality and war, or more pointedly, they lead to talk of the responsibility of our military industrial complex. For these reasons, I try to prepare my students by exposing them to both the study of Asia, and the mostly male specialty of war.

In pursuit of these objectives, I have adopted three basic pedagogical tools. The first and second tools are the parceled classroom technique, and the use of writing across the curriculum. I learned both these methods in a faculty development seminar from Professor Jacqueline Royster, late of Spelman College, and currently on faculty at The Ohio State University. My other tool is the problem posing method of education. It is a style of teaching made famous by the Brazilian educational specialist Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The parceled classroom technique

requires that students become active agents in their own education through group responsibility and writing. The problem posing pedagogy requires that the uncritical withdrawal of knowledge deposits from the memory banks created in lectures be avoided at all costs. Instead, Freire recommends that students digest the information in the course and relate it to their own personal circumstances in ways that transcend mindless recitation for exams and the cut and paste method of writing research papers.

My use of the parceled classroom and writing across the curriculum are reflected in the fact that my syllabus for the course has fewer lectures than most college courses. Instead, I deliver start up lectures on "Course Questions." These are topics that scholars who are conversant about Vietnam and the war would be expected to know something about. Then, teams of students return to class with presentations of further research on these topics. They stand for questions by myself and their colleagues, revise their presentations and save them to disc. At the end of the semester, all students are presented with a copy of the research on all the topics covered in the course.

When I use the problem posing method, I try to move the students through a series of activities that touch upon three levels of epistemology. First, there is the theoretical level. For this, there are readings like "A Strategic and Economic Perspective" in Robert MacMahon's *Major Problems in the Vietnam War*. Next we move to the application of theories like containment, or the domino theory to the strategies and tactics they created. For this, they can read Turley's essay called "Tactical Defeat, Strategic Victory for Hanoi" in the same book. Then we touch upon the daily reality that was created by tactical decisions of unit commanders. That means the students must come as close as they can to things like search and destroy missions and ambushes in the jungle. For this stage of the work, I try, as Friere instructs, to get the students to make the materials as meaningful on a personal level as possible. This is done in a number of ways. Sometimes they read and discuss primary sources like Ronald Glasser's *365 Days*. Glasser was a physician who treated the wounded at Camp Zama, Japan. His book is a compilation of vignettes about serving in Vietnam in various roles. Of course, he talks about infantry and tank drivers, but he also paints poignant pictures of the burn ward, the psychiatrists. For me, his most moving vignette is a single page autopsy report on a soldier who stepped on a landmine. Sometimes I also show my students parts of videos that I have edited for the class after I returned to Vietnam as a guest of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education. Then they discuss these materials and add their estimation of the personal costs of theory, strategy and tactics.

(The remainder of my presentation at the conference was a film presentation from my return to Vietnam and a discussion of the film as an aid in understanding the war in a "then and now" context. For this publication, I have replaced the film with part of a primary source that I wrote for publication about a little known aspect of search and destroy missions called tunnel warfare. Hopefully, this narrative will have

the same effect as the film did; to move the audience from pedagogical theory to practice and to give the audience the experience of becoming a young tunnel rat in 1970, and then reliving the experience as a middle aged scholar in 1991.)

### THE TUNNELS IN 1969-1970

One of the unique features of the war in Vietnam was the presence of many tunnels that connected underground enemy living quarters, training facilities, supply depots, machine shops and even hospitals. The entrances to these complexes were very difficult to find. More often than not they were discovered by accident or by the rare fortune of actually seeing the enemy enter or leave one. The first time I saw this happen, a small tree rose straight up out of the ground and a man crawled from under it and put it back in the hole. I had a brief conversation with myself about hallucinations and reality, and by the time I was finished, the man had disappeared. A senior NCO in my company told me in no uncertain terms that my slow reaction time and size meant that I had moved to the front of the line of "volunteers" to be a tunnel rat. I knew our company commander wouldn't allow me to be forced into a tunnel, but the unspoken belief in my own immortality that most young men have, or my stupidity, led me into an occasional foray into the tunnels we discovered in the central highlands of Vietnam and Cambodia.

Specialist fourth class Greg Bodell, the man who taught me the basic rules of survival in the tunnels, told me several things that still remain with me. "If you're going to go in, do it quick", he said. "Otherwise, they get far enough ahead of you to set traps or wait around a turn in the tunnel for you to come by head first and defenseless." Another of 'Bo's rules was that tunnels turn every five meters or so to prevent cave-ins. So, it was easy to estimate how far you had gone by counting the turns. Finally, he told me "if you ever see a flashlight coming your way, you can fire away, but more than likely, you're already a dead man." Armed with these pearls of optimism, a pistol, several grenades, and a sharp sheath knife I went into a number of tunnels.

Like my first few hours in Vietnam, my memories of the tunnels are another cognitive slide show, but the scenes are more frightening. It amazes me still that I know what the emotion of fear looks like. Sometimes I can still smell it. I can see myself jolted by an adrenaline overload that would energize a mannequin. That is closely followed by the struggle to overcome the initial wave of suffocating panic associated with the blindness and claustrophobic atmosphere when the walls of a tunnel pressed in both shoulders at once. As the pictures move from the intangible to the tangible, they slow to a litany of vivid freeze frames that capture the more real, and therefore more frightening, tactile aspects of an intensely personal kind of warfare conducted in total darkness. There was the thump-scrape vibration in the tunnel floor caused by the man, or woman ahead of me, the smell of food cooked on a unique smokeless stove, and occasionally, the incongruously antiseptic smell of a hospital thirty or more feet underground. I also remember the heat of thermite and phosphorous grenades used to melt equipment in the tunnels,

and the lung ripping pain of gas in the tunnels. The last frames have always been reminders of the cruelty and suddenness with which death could appear in those dark and cramped labyrinths of twenty-five years ago.”

### THE CUCHI TUNNELS, 1991

“... we took a bus ride to the market town of Cuchi to see the tunnel and bunker complex that was built there during the war. These are the tunnels that achieved legendary status after the war was over. One of the more famous accounts of them has been *The Tunnels of Cuchi*, by Thomas Manfold and John Pennycake. This tunnel complex, the extent of which was determined only after the end of the war, includes over 200 kilometers of tunnels and various military facilities under and around the American Air base at Cuchi. The complex had three underground levels providing housing, communication, medical, storage, and manufacturing facilities for hundreds of people. Every ground level access point was surrounded by camouflaged ambush positions and fighting bunkers. Probably the most unique thing about this facility is the maintenance of secrecy that surrounded it. While we were there, I met a number of people who worked on the base, and a woman who had lived with an American who was stationed there for two years. Despite the obvious number of these kinds of contacts between Americans and Vietnamese, no American was sure of exactly what was below the ground in Cuchi until long after Bob Hope had hosted his last Christmas show there. In fact, several of the people I spoke to were proud that they had enjoyed a party directly underneath Hope’s stage during his last performance.

After a short lecture on the tunnels’ history and construction of the complex, I watched my group of middle aged scholars line up behind a guide for a “patrol” down the jungle trails and into the tunnels. Another veteran and I watched them go in clusters of three and four. We trailed behind our colleagues/comrades and smugly noted the number of hidden fighting bunkers and ambush positions they walked by without noticing. It occurred to both of us that if this were the 60’s or early 70’s, most of us would already be dead. The high point of the “patrol” for most of our group was an excursion into the tunnels. After asking several of them to remove themselves from atop the camouflaged entrance, our guide led some of us below. After a quick and heated debate with myself, I decide that I deserved one fear-free trip through one of Uncle Ho’s underground wonderlands.

I broke all the rules! I made sure that I was the last one down and I let them all move very far ahead of me. I was as at ease as my memories and the darkness allowed me to be. Then, somehow, the lessons imprinted long ago slowly and surely took control. I suppose it was that training that helped me overcome some of the momentary panic of crawling along in the bowels of a living flashback. A small corner of my consciousness began to think this was not such a good idea, but part of my unconsciousness returned me to the mantra of my youth. The momentary panic receded as the old rhythms returned: five meters and expect a turn; feel for the trap door that will let them come up behind you and nail you to the

tunnel floor with a spike. Ignore the bats and rats; don’t even think about the possibility of a live cobra being turned loose and heading in your direction.

Just as I recalled the lesson of the lights, I was half blinded by a flashlight. I froze like a stray dog in the headlights of an approaching car. Then my heart registered its disapproval of the whole venture by going into overdrive. It must have been the glimpse of the Vietnamese face along with the light. I remember trying desperately to determine I the year was 1970 or 1991, and just before I worked out the answer, a hand that should have held a weapon reached for my shoulder. A voice said “I thought we had lost you. Let me help you to the exit.”

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Paulo Freire, Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Robert McMahon, and Thomas Paterson, eds., *Major Problems in the Vietnam War*, (New York: 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Ronald Glasser, *365 Days*, (New York: 1988).

<sup>4</sup>James T. Gillam, “Historical, Social, and Personal Effects of a War and a Battle: The Vietnam War, and the Tet Offensive,” in *Journal of Third World Studies*, Fall, 1995, Vol. XII, No. 2, pp. 26-29.

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