The United States and the Vietnam War

POLS 3995 - Special Topics Course

Hartford Campus
Tuesdays from 4pm to 6:30pm
Instructor: Brian Waddell

Key questions include:
Why did we get involved in Vietnam?
How did we go about fighting this war?
Why did we lose?
What did the war do to those who fought it, and to our nation as a whole?
What did we take away from our involvement in this war?

Although the Vietnam War was the most significant event in America’s postwar era, it is too little studied and understood, receding further every year into the mists of history. Yet the War has much to tell us today about the limits of U.S. power, and about how war and the national security state distorted American democracy in significant ways. The War was the culmination of a particular mindset among American leaders that saw the world as a kind of chessboard in which the U.S. needed to marshal its considerable economic and military resources to control events in far-away places, an attitude that persists today. Due to an easy confidence and ideological certainty that ignored complex realities, we stumbled to a stunning defeat that undermined this nation’s faith in its leaders and that led to a broad attack by various government leaders and institutions on those who would question our leaders and their policies.

How to tackle such a subject? A course on the United States and the Vietnam War means confronting a huge swath of modern American history, the enormous institutional changes initiated by World War II, and the attitudes and outlooks of an entire generation of political leaders. It also means confronting the experiences and memories of those who experienced the war firsthand. How to do this in one semester? My approach is to intermix scholarly analysis with memoirs and documentaries – to gain some analytical tools for comprehending why and how the War proceeded the way it did, but also to listen closely to the voices of those who experienced it.