

TEACHING GUIDE

The Most Dangerous Man in America

Some considerations which contributed to the list below include:

- Tom viewed the film with his students and with the teacher group, both commented on the need for context, foundational knowledge, understanding of who the various characters are. Students shared that very few, if any, traditional high school history classes ever study the Vietnam War – the school year ends before US history classes reach the 1950s.
- Students today can be very cynical about government and those in power (in this case, the very cynicism that the tea party movement exploits). More examples of government lies or cover-ups can contribute to students feeling more duped and powerless. Therefore we want to emphasize the power of collective resistance and stories of hope; how one whistle-blowing activity can be echoed and amplified; and what systemic changes are needed so that the public is fully informed and has a strong civic voice(s).
- We want to promote a culture of caring – as contrasted to the callousness described in Generation Kill where the soldiers know that the war is to benefit the rich and that they are being lied to – but killing and winning (as opposed to “losing” in Vietnam) are the goal.
- We want to promote the value of asking questions and being informed citizens– so that we would not need to wait until someone uncovered the history of a country we were at war with – it would be understood that we cannot make an informed decision without a historical perspective – and history from the “other side.” This will require looking at sources of news – journalism today – internet, print media, documentary films, radio. How do we (as per DN!) “break the sound barrier”?

These are just brief descriptions of what would be full activities with instructions, handouts, etc.

Pre-viewing activities:

Activity #1: What do we know? What have we heard? Students organize into small groups, brainstorm and write responses to the following--write down all you know, think you know or have heard about the Vietnam War. Use these questions as guides: how long was the US in Vietnam? Why was the US in Vietnam? Who was the US fighting? How and why did the war end? Who won? (This activity can also be expanded to include interviews of family members, friends, seeking answers to the same questions in order to gather as much misinformation of the war as possible). Small groups report out, responses are gathered on butcher paper taped to classroom walls. Students then make a "T-chart", dividing 8 x11 writing paper in half vertically, on one half they write down what they think they know about the war, leaving space on the other half to write down what they learn about the war from the film. Quotes will be provided that students will "talk back to" as to whether the statements are 'truths' or 'lies'. Activity themes will foreshadow questions for Activity #2.

Activity #2: War – and Anti-War -- Reception (meet and greet role play). Students assume roles of characters from film (Ellsberg, McNamara, Kissinger, Tony Russo, David Harris, etc.) meet each other, discover basic facts about the war and the era, answer questions in order to give themselves a working vocabulary and foundational understanding of the issues covered in the film. We have generated a list of 25 characters that students will meet during this activity. The list includes key characters from the film (LBJ, Nixon, Kissinger, McNamara, Daniel Ellsberg and others; list will also contain characters from the era whose presence will help provide context and background information in order to help students better understand the film. Those characters include Dr. King, Vietnamese voices, an American GI of color, mother of a deceased soldier). During the reception students will have to find the following: someone who supported the war; someone whose life changed as a result of the war; someone who opposed the war; someone who lied about the war, someone who told the truth; someone who was silent; someone who was an ally of Daniel Ellsberg; someone who was part of a movement to end the war; someone who was a follower of Gandhi; a government official who took steps to end the war. Characters that students meet will be integrated into other aspects of the curriculum.

Activity #3: Rethinking the Vietnam War role play: Its 1945, World War II has ended, Vietnam is set to claim its long awaited independence, what did the Vietnamese want, what did the French want, how did the U.S. government respond? As is explained in the intro to this lesson, this counters the notion that the war was inevitable. “When teachers pattern curricula after non-explanatory explanations, we mystify the origins not just of the war in Vietnam, but of everything we teach. Students need to learn to distinguish explanations from descriptions, like “war broke out,” or “chaos erupted.” Thinking about social events as having concrete causes, constantly asking “Why?” and “In whose interests?” need to become critical habits of the mind for us and for our students. It’s only through developing the tools of deep questioning that students can attempt to make sense of today’s global conflicts.” The core of this lesson will be the current role play, expanded to include additional perspectives and to include an additional activity, a "choice point" around the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Students will critically examine source documents in order to analyze the Tonkin incident and generate connections between realities set in motion by Tonkin and alternatives that may or may not have occurred if, for instance, McNamara had told the truth. What else might have been possible? What possibilities were lost?

Viewing Activities:

Activity #4: What do we know and what have we learned continued: Using the "T-chart" begun in Activity #1 and incorporating quotes from the transcript, students write down what they learn from the film in the context of what they thought they knew about Vietnam War era and Daniel Ellsberg. In particular, students will distinguish truths from lies and activism vs. silence. We want students to understand that Daniel Ellsberg was not the only person who knew hidden truths about Vietnam. While others chose silence, Ellsberg chose to reveal the truth.

Activity #5: Exposing the Lies: Expanding on previous activity, teacher provides a list of official lies about the war, students use information from the film and the Pentagon Papers to "talk back" to the lies. We can tie in an overview of a history of official war time lies from the Mexican War to Iraq and Afghanistan. This would require that they use the Pentagon Papers as a primary document.

Post-viewing activities:

Activity #6: Mini-mock trial on Pentagon Papers case. Students are divided (by counting off in 3's – with more 3's than 1s and 2s) into three groups. 1s are side a, 2s are side b and 3s are judges. Student (in their groups) are introduced to the Pentagon Papers case and asked to consider: what is the legal issue in this case, what are the relevant facts, what are the key arguments on both sides, and then each group develops questions. Then the students re-divide into groups of 5 with a 1, a 2 and 3 threes. Each side presents their case, judges ask questions – after each case is heard, judges retreat to chambers and determine opinion – majority and minority. Meanwhile the 1s and 2s shift to the role of reporters – judges announce their decisions. Concluding activity – judges turn their decision into an essay. 1 and 2s write articles as if they were journalists. Then students examine the actual court decision and the actual media coverage and compare to their own decision and their own news articles. **Extended activity:** Examine other freedom of press cases: John Peter Zenger, embedded reporters, etc.

Activity #7: What is a "whistleblower?" What does whistleblower mean? Review President Obama's "Whistleblower" policy. Engage students in role play about contemporary whistleblower issues (such as Julian Assange). Tie in Daniel Ellsberg's heroism with both historical tradition and current events. How can students be whistleblowers in their lives today? Introduce a lesson on the roles of: perpetrator, target, bystander, ally which helps students move from the category of bystander to ally - recognizing that being a whistleblower is one way of being an ally. Students will be asked to write about a time when they played one of the roles on the continuum. Then they role play a time when they did not do the right thing, when they were silent – and then role play a different response to develop the skills to become allies, including whistleblowers. Identify whistleblowers in their own personal lives and internationally.

Activity #8: Develop concluding activity about Daniel Ellsberg's legacy, view Ellsberg in context of on-going social movements and his continued social activism and commitment to non-violence. For example, a personal writing assignment about courage to stand up for what's right -- helping students locate those "Daniel Ellsberg" places in themselves, and figuring out what helps us effect that courage in our lives. **Extended Activity:** Ellsberg says that Thoreau demands that we cast our full ballot. Read Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and discuss with class.

Additional Resources

Books, websites, films