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The War in Vietnam. CBS News and The New York Times.

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Multimedia Technology in the Classroom: <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite>

Computers are changing the way history is taught. Nothing should replace the direct contact of lecture and discussion, but today's professors increasingly have multimedia facilities available that offer new ways to illustrate their lectures. These "smart classrooms" can project whatever appears on the computer to a large screen overhead with accompanying sound. All of this advanced technology is only as useful as the available software, however. <p> As recent discussions on H-War and H-Diplo attest, there continues to be strong interest in courses on the Vietnam war. Macmillan Digital USA has combined articles from the <cite>New York Times</cite> with footage from CBS News and the texts of many historical documents to produce the CD-ROM <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite>.[1] By simply bringing this CD to a "smart classroom" and "pointing and clicking," teachers can have at their fingertips photographs, maps, and video clips. Use of these helps to bring home to students the reality of the war, and offers the professor the welcome opportunity to save a few thousand words with a few pictures. Though it has serious problems of scope and is therefore not satisfactory as "stand-alone" history, anyone whose teaching involves <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> could benefit from using this collection of primary sources. <p> The most mundane but probably the most useful function the CD can provide is to display pictures of historical figures, as well as maps and photographs of locations as they are discussed in class. It is to easier to explain Dean Acheson's imperial bearing with a two-foot picture of him behind you (Biographies; Acheson, Dean Goderham). Discussing the difficulty of the 1970 Prisoner-of-War rescue attempt at Son Tay is much easier using a split-screen map showing both Son Tay's general position deep inside North Vietnam and specifically at a major intersection due west of Hanoi (Maps, Cities, Son Tay). Images such as these also render visible evidence that these are real people and real places, not historical abstractions, a benefit that is difficult to gauge but real nonetheless. More tangible is the time saved from spelling names and drawing maps on the blackboard. <p> The value of the CBS News videos deserves special mention as well. There are 39 clips, averaging about a minute in length. They include many of the most famous and evocative images of the war. It is one thing to describe the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem as callous and corrupt, but it is quite another to allow students to watch a Buddhist monk immolate himself and then hear Diem's sister- in-law, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, discuss the hypocrisy of their having "barbecued" themselves with "imported gasoline" (CBS News Videos, "Monk Immolation, Mme. Nhu"). Most of the other video clips that one would expect are there, including Walter Cronkite's editorial advocating withdrawal, the young girl running from her napalmed village, and Brigadier General Nguyen Loc Loan's execution of a prisoner (CBS News Videos; W. Cronkite, "Honorable End, Napalm Girl, Gen Loc Loan Executes Suspect"). The one glaring omission is any footage of the 1975 rooftop evacuation of the American embassy in Saigon. Also, as is the case with most of the material on this CD, it remains the job of the instructor to provide context. The video of the Loan shooting, for example, begins with stock footage of Loan laughing and joking, immediately juxtaposed with the shooting. Though it does not excuse his brutality, students should understand that Loan had just learned that one of his chief deputies and the major's entire family had been executed by this Viet Cong's soldier's unit. <p> As a research tool <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> has only limited value. The bulk of the texts are the over one thousand <cite>New York Times</cite> articles, along with other journalistic sources like CBS News transcripts. There are also excerpts from the Pentagon Papers and many "historical documents," primarily open diplomatic notes, the texts of press conferences and the like, but these are already widely available. Reasonably comprehensive book and film bibliographies are provided as well. The primary advantage of the CD-ROM is the ease

with which the texts of all of these can be searched instantly for the presence of either or both of two key words or phrases. This can make for a quick way to find background information on a subject or serve as an introductory guide to contemporary journalistic accounts. Researchers should be cautious in using it as a reference, however, as it can prove unreliable. The only non-Western aircraft in the "weapons" section, the MIG-21, is a good example of this. Though the description correctly notes it is "delta-winged," the aircraft in the accompanying drawing clearly does not have triangular wings (Weapons, MIG-21 "Fishbed"). <p> The interface is professionally done and relatively easy to use for those familiar with Window-based or Macintosh computers, but it can at times be awkward. A user familiar with either of the above will be able to intuitively figure out how to use it in minutes, and computer novices should be able to use it with an hour or two of practice. It looks and acts like a combination of Windows and the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) used on the World Wide Web, as information pops up in windows and links often appear that you can "click on" to go to other documents. The windows do not have a scroll bar, however, and it can be quite cumbersome to go through lists or documents a page at a time. Worse, it is impossible to "minimize" it and use another program without exiting first. Fortunately, there is a convenient system of "bookmarks," or shortcuts, which allows the user to make lists of instantly accessible documents. Further, 24-hour technical support is only a long distance phone call away, and at least in this reviewer's experience it is friendly and helpful. <p> The two main problems with <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> are the contemporary nature of its contents and its limited scope. Except for a four- minute video introduction by Dan Rather and a detailed timeline, nothing original appears to have been written for the CD. The "biographies" are not biographical essays written by historians but semi-biographical articles from the <cite>New York Times</cite>. Diem's biography, for example, is a brief, glowing endorsement published on May 10, 1957, which obviously cannot mention anything from the next six years, let alone what we have learned since that time (Biographies; Diem, Ngo Dinh). Others about figures as diverse as Paul Nitze and Martin Luther King, Jr. are reasonably good articles but mention next to nothing about the relationship of these historical figures to the war (Biographies; Nitze, Paul, and King, Martin Luther Jr). With the exception of an excellent introductory essay (Historical Overview), written by Iver Peterson and originally published on May 1, 1975, <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> has all of the problems of perspective and sources associated with journalism as "instant history." <p> The other major limitation of this CD is its scope. It emphasizes the American war in Vietnam, 1965-1973, and contains little from a Vietnamese perspective or on the French war. Of the 147 people with biographical articles and pictures, only thirty-two are Vietnamese and four French; historical figures as important as Bao Dai are left out. This American emphasis is perhaps inevitable given the intended popular audience and the reliance on contemporary journalistic accounts, which did not pay as much attention to the war in the 1950s and never had much access to the Vietnamese side. Less understandable, however, is the almost complete absence of sources on the domestic consequences of the war. This reviewer remembers a "multimedia" presentation by a high-school teacher playing a scratchy tape of "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" and "Okie from Muskogee" on an old shoebox-sized tape player, yet not one song is included on this CD. With the important exception of a video clip of the Kent State shootings (CBS News Videos, Kent State Tragedy), domestic reactions to the war are virtually ignored. <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> provides valuable images to supplement discussions of military and diplomatic aspects of the war; it is unfortunate it missed the opportunity to do the same for its cultural and social aspects. <p> For the reasons discussed above, <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> is a valuable complement to but a poor substitute for "conventional" resources. The articles and documents included are not useful enough to merit reading aloud in class, and students would be ill-advised to rely on it as a secondary source for their papers. Still, evaluating it for its usefulness in academe is in a sense unfair, as it is clearly intended for a popular audience. History "buffs" will find much of interest in the video clips, the texts of Congressional Medal of Honor citations, and the detailed descriptions of weapons. For those looking to make a more personal connection to the war, a section on "The Wall" gives the ability to search it by name or hometown, though this capability may be too sensitive to use during a lecture (Honors, The Wall). <p> In the last few decades computers have gone from rooms to cabinets to desks to laps, and there is already talk of "palm-tops." Readers of this listserv need no reminder of the explosive growth of the internet. The importance of computers in historical teaching and research can only increase in coming years. Still, it is easy to exaggerate the effectiveness of a new capability like CD-ROMs in the classroom, especially when a technology is still in its infancy. Computers, if used properly, should save time as well increase the impact of lectures. Used judiciously,

<cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> can accomplish both of these things. However, as long as historical CD-ROMs are written by publishers for popular audiences, not historians for scholarly audiences, the problems inherent in this CD will likely be repeated. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. The best place to start looking for other CD-ROMs related to Vietnam, the war, and its impact, is with a company called WAE (1-800-923-2376; http://wae.clever.net). The CD-ROM most analogous in scope to <cite>The War in Vietnam</cite> is <cite>Vietnam: A Visual Investigation</cite> (Redmond, WA: Medio Multimedia, 1994). Besides containing the full text of George C. Herring's <cite>America's Longest War</cite> (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979, 1986), it has a collection of photographs, interviews, and video clips from ABC News. <cite>USA Wars: Vietnam</cite> (Minneapolis, MN: Quanta Press, Inc.) contains photographs and documents oriented primarily toward military aspects of the conflict. Personal accounts from American participants can be found in <cite>Beyond the Wall: Stories Behind the Vietnam Wall</cite> (Magnet Interactive Studios, 1995). The Vietnamese struggle against France and the United States is one of three case studies aimed at teachers and students in <cite>Twentieth-Century Nationalism</cite> (Dallas: Zane Publishing, Inc.). <cite>Agent Orange: National Agricultural Text Digitizing Project</cite> (Beltsville, MD: National Agricultural Library, 1993) contains over 4000 pages of official documents related to the herbicide. For Vietnam in general see <cite>Vietnam in a Nutshell</cite> (Hong Kong: Cymbidium Multimedia Productions), and <cite>Passage to Vietnam</cite> (Sausalito, CA: Against All Odds/Interval Research, 1995). Finally, for something a little different, visit <cite>Haight-Ashbury in the Sixties: San Francisco's Renaissance of Peace Love and Consciousness, and the Community that Changed the World</cite> (Gualala, CA: Rockument, Inc., 1995). <p>

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