

H-Net Reviews

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

Reviewed by Richard Jensen

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This is a valuable multimedia historical resource—one that can be recommended to all high school and college libraries. It is easy to use and contains a vast amount of historical text, video and sound that can be accessed easily. The search engines are good, and students can use every feature with no more than ten minutes practice. The program allows users to take notes, but not to copy or excerpt any text or video from within the program. However, it is possible to download any text or video item to a hard drive by going to File Manager. <p>The cd-rom is easy to install on Windows or Macintosh machines; it opens with highly dramatic color combat footage of ambush in the jungle—rather like “Platoon”—but the rest of the cd is much more sober and less melodramatic. Credit for overall design of the contents is given to Dan Rather of CBS and R W Apple of <cite>The New York Times</cite> (and assistants). No historians are visible. The production team used Macromedia for multimedia design. <p>The program is menu driven, with nine main sections. Throughout the main, focus is on U.S. military operations in Vietnam, and secondly on diplomacy and decisions in Washington. There is very little from the perspective of the Vietnamese, Chinese, Soviets, Thai or others. <p>A major starting point in the “Historical Overview.” It is based on Iver Peterson’s essay in the <cite>New York Times</cite> of May 1, 1975, with hyperlinks to other <cite>Times</cite> stories. There is minimal interpretation of factual reporting—hence the materials can be used as evidence for people working from any number of interpretive perspectives. <p>“As It Happened” is a convenient entry point to CBS videos and <cite>Times</cite> stories and pictures. There are forty videos from CBS, with color and sound; these are 320x240 72 dpi images that are best viewed in a small window (they are too grainy when enlarged.) The selection includes three captured Communist videos, and Morley Safer’s vivid report on how

Marines burned 150 houses in village of Cam Ne. (The corresponding <cite>Times</cite> story is here too.) These total 437 megabytes in easy-to-use QuickTime format (*.MOV). These selections allow teachers to explain in some detail what “the first televised war” was all about. Still images include large files (these are non-standard JPG files which can not be read by standard viewers like HiJack or VistaVue), and small PCT files (which can be readily accessed). <p>“Chronology” is a timeline, by month, 1940-1995, of events in Vietnam region and elsewhere, with hypertext links to <cite>Times</cite> full text stories. “Weapons,” recycled from a previous Vietnam cd-rom, has fair detail on U.S. weaponry—air, infantry, helicopters, etc. The coverage is uncritical: it does not explain strengths and weaknesses of weapons or how they were used, but does do that for VC weapons like booby traps. Most of the information on U.S. weapons comes from the standard JANE’S reference books. Still images include large files (these are non-standard JPG files which can not be read by standard viewers like HiJack or VistaVue), and small PCT files (which can be readily accessed). <p>“Biography” contains about 150 news stories, with photo, from <cite>Times</cite> of top political and military figures of all three sides. When one of these names appears in a <cite>Times</cite> story, or Pentagon Papers, it is highlighted in blue and a mouse click brings up the biography—a highly useful research device. (I was surprised to discover how many of the top U.S. military commanders had extensive experience in Asia, including prewar China.) The section entitled “Honors” has the full text of citations for all the Medal of Honor winners. It has the names of 2198 MIA, 591 POWs, and all the names on the Vietnam Memorial. (The Memorial names are searchable; they can be arranged by hometown or date of death.) <p>The “Maps” section is simple, and too thin for serious work. There are twenty master topographical maps that are good for locations (about

180 cities are located). There are large scale maps of a few main cities like Hue, Hanoi, and DaNang. Unfortunately, there are no dynamic maps or battle maps showing the relative positions and strengths of the combatants. Also missing are maps of the air strikes that played a major role in the war. <p> In addition, the CD has a fully-searchable text library. One of the strongest features is the complete text of 2,170 <cite>Times</cite> articles (I did not see any editorials). They are arranged chronologically, 1940 to 1995, with unusually good coverage of the earlier period (four hundred articles before 1965), and several hundred thousand words of text post 1963. There are seventeen reports datelined Hanoi. Since the Pentagon Papers break off in 1968, newspaper coverage becomes more important to the researcher. For 1968 there are seventy-one stories totaling 80,000 words; for 1969 fifty-two totaling 50,000 words; for 1970 there are thirty-five stories totalling 40,000 words. Obviously only a fraction of newspaper stories were included, with the editors favoring interpretive pieces that focus on Washington strategy; thus in 1970 about a third of the stories are datelined from Saigon or elsewhere in Asia. <p> The <cite>Times</cite> stories can be easily searched. They are in ascii format on the cd itself (and can easily be copied). However, inside the program they are not in Windows format. The stories can be printed on paper, but not excerpted into a word processor. Students will have to retype every word, or (much easier) hunt down the ascii file. The <cite>Times</cite>

stories are usually illustrated with a map or photo, but the date may be years off. Thus news stories on presidential candidate Robert Kennedy in 1968 are matched with a 1962 photo, which amounts to sloppy historiography. <p> The excerpts from Pentagon Papers amount to about 100,000 words—mostly from the “Documents” section at the end of each volume of the Gravel Edition. It includes the <cite>Times</cite> reports on the Papers. The materials are useful, but they underscore the need for an on-line edition of the complete Pentagon Papers. Numerous full text presidential documents, or NY Times reports on them are included. The CD also includes numerous CBS television news transcripts without the video. <p> There is a very long unannotated, uncritical bibliography (any book ever put in the Library of Congress card catalog gets a listing; no articles). To make it less useful, it is sorted alphabetically by title. Much more valuable is Edward Moise’s bibliography, which is on-line at: <http://www.vietvet.org/Moise1.htm>. A long unannotated filmography of documentary and feature films is excerpted Dittmar and Michaud’s 1990 book, “From Hanoi to Hollywood.” “Tools” has an AOL connection and a glossary of 368 terms, whose definitions average a much-too-brief thirty words. <p> On the whole this is one of the best cd-rom resources for recent history. It can be the basis for many term paper topics and multimedia reports. Students will still need a paper textbook to outline the unusually complex history of the Vietnam War. <p>

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