

## **The Vietnam Oral History Project: A Corrective for Historical Analogies**

by Christy Jo Snider, Berry College

I began teaching my course in the history of American foreign policy the year the United States went to war in Iraq, and although my lectures conclude with the end of the Cold War, my students have always found ways to tie several of the historical events we cover to the current conflict in the Middle East. To students searching for relevance in incidents that occurred many decades ago, George Washington's warning about "entangling alliances" in his Farewell Address becomes an indictment of a long-term commitment to Iraqi stability, and James Polk's justifications for beginning the Mexican-American War foreshadow George W. Bush's claims about weapons of mass destruction stockpiled by Saddam Hussein.

Students use historical analogies most frequently, however, during our discussions about the United States' involvement in Vietnam. They have suggested correlations between recent events in Iraq and everything from Richard Nixon's decision to turn the bulk of the fighting over to the South Vietnamese army to the difficulty U.S. soldiers had in distinguishing civilians from the Vietcong. At times such analogies can be a useful teaching tool, but they can also mask the very real and significant differences between events that occurred in distinctive contexts.

In an effort to combat this inclination to generalize about the similarities between Iraq and American involvement in Southeast Asia, I have begun assigning an oral history project on the conflict in Vietnam to the undergraduates in my U.S. foreign policy course. In the final stage of this project the students conduct and transcribe an oral interview with a member of the community who was influenced or touched by the war in Vietnam. The oral interview itself offers a partial corrective to students' tendency to perceive connections between what are

actually unique historical situations, but the research that goes into preparing for the interview is just as important in helping them to differentiate between those situations.

Students begin this project by locating someone to interview. In the past, I have provided them with a list of potential interview subjects, including faculty and staff members, who were on campus during the mid-to-late sixties and early seventies. It is also possible to work with the alumni relations office to locate former students who live near campus and would be willing to participate in this project. Although the selection of an interviewee may be left solely to the students' discretion, contacting and making arrangements with someone to interview was the part of the assignment that caused my students the most anxiety. Therefore, if this portion of the process can be made as stress-free as possible, the students are more likely to enjoy the project and focus their attention on its research aspects.

Once students have lined up interview subjects, they are asked to examine the secondary literature on American foreign policy toward Vietnam from 1960 to 1975 so that they can acquire a general understanding of U.S. interest in the region and how America's relationship to Vietnam changed over time. They are also required to research more specifically attitudes about U.S. involvement in Vietnam held by Americans whose situations were similar to those of their interviewees. For example, if the subject was a faculty member during the Vietnam War, the student would be expected to look at sources that explore the views of professors and university administrators toward the conflict. If the interviewee was a student during the conflict and never served overseas, the researcher would want to focus on how the home front responded to the war.

Using this research, students then write a five-to-six page report on how public opinion affected American foreign policy during the Vietnam War. It is likely (and even desirable) that, given the different experiences of their subjects, class members will approach the topic from a

variety of perspectives. Teachers can highlight this diversity by holding a class discussion on the day the assignment is due about the relationship between the development of U.S. foreign policy and public opinion.

The report, along with the class discussion, serves a dual purpose. First, it gives the students a clear sense of exactly how American policy toward Vietnam developed over several decades and enables them to recognize at least some of the differences between the situation in Southeast Asia and that in Iraq. This more nuanced understanding of the conflict in Vietnam makes it easier to dismantle some of the common analogies they use. Second, the research provides the background knowledge necessary to develop interesting and appropriate questions to ask their oral history interviewees.

Soon after students turn in their reports, they are required to write a list of questions to ask their subjects. In order to conduct a forty-to-fifty-minute interview, they must prepare between twenty-five and thirty questions that touch on four different topics: subjects' backgrounds, their memories of the war period, their recollections about their reactions to events of the time, and their judgments about those events.

Background questions help both the subject and student become comfortable with the oral interview process, provide some basic context for the rest of the discussion, and shed light on the personal history of the interviewee. They should elicit information about where subjects grew up, what their childhoods were like, and what their parents did for a living. To jog subjects' memories about the war period, students should begin by asking them to recall what they were doing between 1964 and 1975. They should then move on to questions based in part on their research for the report on the American government's policies toward Vietnam. Such questions might focus on their subjects' experience with the draft, what college was like during

the conflict in Vietnam, whether they ever did anything to protest or support the war, and if the war had any impact on their daily lives. Students should encourage interviewees to talk about the sort of individual experiences, personal stories, and memories that are not found in standard history books.

Questions about subjects' reactions to events of the era should probe a bit deeper and focus on getting subjects to explain their feelings and viewpoints during the Vietnam War. Students might ask subjects what they thought about the United States' draft policies, why they voted the way they did in the election of 1968, or what they thought about Nixon's decision to pursue the Vietcong into Cambodia. Questions about subjects' judgments on events of the time should provide interviewees with the opportunity to discuss the overall impact and importance of the Vietnam War and express their own opinions about it. Students might ask what mistakes their subjects thought were made during the Vietnam War, whether they would change anything if they could re-live those years, what they felt was the saddest thing about the war, or what they thought people should remember about the war.

Teachers should urge students to write their questions in a manner that precludes yes or no answers. They should begin their questions with what, why, how, and where. Instead of asking "Was it difficult to watch students leave campus to serve in the military?" students should ask "What was it like watching students leave campus to serve in the military?" Teachers should also emphasize that negative questions—questions that ask what was bad about or wrong with a situation—often elicit interesting results. For instance, asking "Why did so many students think the draft process was unfair?" will generate a range of responses that differ from those elicited by the more neutral question "What was the draft like?" A subject might be inclined to make only favorable comments about an experience unless prompted to remember other aspects of it.

Teachers should review the students' lists of questions before the interview to ensure that they have covered all the important issues and have a firm grasp on standard question format. It can also be useful to distribute a list of the best questions from the class when returning students' individual lists. Students may be motivated to revise their questions further before they meet their subjects for the actual interview.

The second-to-last stage of the oral history project is the interview itself. Once students have assembled their final list of questions, they should contact their subjects to schedule a time and to ask that they sign a waiver form. Requiring interviewees to sign a waiver is standard practice for oral history interviews. The waiver forms used for this project allow subjects to determine whether or not they want the final interview turned over to the university's archive for preservation or destroyed/returned after completion of the project.

The following guidelines may help students prepare for the interview:<sup>1</sup>

- 1) The interview must be tape-recorded or video-taped to ensure accuracy, and it should last between forty and sixty minutes.
- 2) The ideal interview setting involves only the interviewer and the subject in a location with comfortable seating and no distractions.
- 3) If the subject expresses concern or anxiety about the interview process or being recorded, students can offer to provide a list of questions before the interview. They should also assure the subject that the recording will be used only to make a transcript for the final assignment if that is the interviewee's preference. The recording can be destroyed or returned to the subject once the assignment is completed.

- 4) Students should make sure that they have the list of questions and that the tape or video recorder is functioning properly before they leave for the interview. They should also bring spare batteries and a notepad for jotting down ideas.
- 5) Before asking their first question students should record an introduction that states the date and time, where the interview is taking place, who is conducting the interview, and who is being interviewed.
- 6) Students should limit their own remarks as much as possible. Brief questions will allow subjects to tell their story without interference. While it may be appropriate at times to prompt the interviewee to expand on a topic, students should not turn the interview into a dialogue.
- 7) Students should only ask one question at a time. They can make notes on follow-up questions to ask after the subject has finished answering the initial query.
- 8) Students should not immediately ask another question once interviewees have finished answering a question. A moment of silence might give subjects a chance to think of something else to add to the response.
- 9) Continuous taping of the interview is less distracting than switching the tape or video recorder on and off. Unless the interview is interrupted by a phone call or other intrusive event, students should leave the recorder running even if some of the material taped is unrelated to the topic.
- 10) Students should thank their subjects for their time once the interview is complete and send thank-you notes soon after.

The last part of the project involves transcribing the interview in a manner that is both accurate and understandable. If teachers are planning on submitting their students' oral history projects to a university's archives, it would be useful to contact the archivist before beginning the assignment. Most university archives have transcription formats that they use for their projects, and it will be helpful to have the students follow those guidelines. If a local archive is not involved, however, students should follow common transcription procedures:<sup>2</sup>

1. The transcription should have one-inch margins, each page should be numbered, and the text should be double-spaced.
2. At the beginning of the transcription, students should identify who transcribed the tape and the date(s) the transcription was done.
3. All speakers should be identified at the start of their comments with their names in bold capital letters, followed by a colon. For example: **MICHAEL SMITH:** In 1964, I entered Berry College as an undergraduate....
4. Transcriptions should omit expressions like "um" or "ah," but should include "um-hum" or "uh-huh" when used to indicate yes or no in response to specific questions.
5. The interviewee's words should not be revised so that they conform to standard written grammar. Sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and incorrect verb tenses should be left alone. Commas and dashes can be used to reflect pauses made by the subject.
6. Brackets should be used to explain any instances where the interview was interrupted or the tape recorder turned off. For example: [Interview interrupted by a telephone call].

7. If a word or phrase used by the subject is unclear, question marks should be placed both in front of and behind it. For example: **MICHAEL SMITH:** And then the building was ?destroyed? by a huge sink hole.
8. Students should indicate in the transcription the end of a side of the tape in capital letters. For example: END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO TAPE ONE.
9. Like research papers, transcriptions must be proofread for misspellings or other obvious mistakes.

Student reactions to this assignment have been fairly positive. In the anonymous evaluations conducted at the end of the semester the majority of students mentioned that they enjoyed the actual interview process, and some even suggested expanding it to cover conflicts other than the war in Vietnam. Doing so might shed light on other issues in the history of American diplomacy.

From a pedagogical point of view, it is clear that the project has advanced students' research skills beyond those used in typical library research by giving them the opportunity to write questions that produce evidence, to find ways of communicating effectively in a one-on-one situation, and to learn the procedures used in transcribing interviews so that later researchers can use them. Many of my students have also done a remarkable job linking the individual experiences and views about the Vietnam War recounted in their projects to the larger question of American foreign policy during the Cold War. Others have produced interesting studies about the variety of ways in which U.S. citizens supported, protested, or were conflicted about American actions in Southeast Asia. More important, after exploring in depth the development of U.S. policy toward Vietnam, the impact of public opinion on those policies, and how individuals

thought about or were affected by those policies, the students are much less likely to rely on simple historical analogies to explain the diverse reasons for America's international actions. It seems clear, thus, that this project can address some of the important issues involved in teaching students to more accurately analyze and differentiate distinctive historical events—a useful skill while the United States remains heavily involved in Iraq.

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<sup>1</sup> The oral history guidelines I give my students are modified from Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society* (Walnut Creek, CA, 1995). Other useful texts on oral history include Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling, *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (Lanham, MD, 2006), James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill, 1979), and Willa K. Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977, reprint 1991).

<sup>2</sup> This transcription format is based on that recommended by the American Folklore Center of the Library of Congress.