

The Editor's Desk

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Peace, color silkscreen poster
by unknown artist, ca. 1970-
1980. Library of Congress

It's going to make you uncomfortable. The opening remark in my interview with filmmaker Lynn Novick, at right, is an apt observation for this issue on the Vietnam War. The images and events described in these pages are raw and unsettling.

National memory of the Vietnam era is fraught with discord and distrust—about the price of war and whether our government was telling the truth about the necessity of military action in Southeast Asia. Anxieties were further fueled by the Cold War proliferation of nuclear weapons and the specter of communism—a social system that (Americans feared) united the Soviet Union and China, threatened democracy, and could detonate world destruction.

At the time the U.S. entered the conflict, Vietnam was at war with itself—a civil struggle for unification (led by North Vietnam) versus independence (sought by South Vietnam), complicated by insurgents (the Viet Cong) striving to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. For all these parties, the resentment of foreign occupation was deep and centuries long. Outside forces seeking to rule the Vietnamese people and profit from her resources included ancient China, imperial France, World War II-era Japan, post-WWII France (a second attempt at colonial rule, backed by the United States as military advisor), then full U.S. military intervention to protect South Vietnam from communist takeover. Bankrolling military actions were three superpowers—China and the Soviet Union backing North Vietnam, and the United States propping up a weak South Vietnamese government. The superpowers provided a super-supply of weapons, money, and aid that sustained hostilities and ensured a deadly stalemate.

Complicating the reading of this multi-layered story are the acronyms and alternate names of battling forces. To help you keep track, we include a timeline of events; a glossary of military terms, people, places, and forces; and an infographic illustrating the military investment of superpowers, troop levels, firepower, and resulting casualties and refugees.

It's easy to avoid talking about the Vietnam War. But if we look carefully, the mistakes we made then are eerily similar to ones we're debating today. There is insight to be gained—and historical interpretation continues to evolve. Facts kept secret by the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Russian governments have only recently become available to scholars. This issue includes some of that evolving scholarship, and the expertise represented is the most glittering in our publication history: respected authorities in their fields of study, two Pulitzer Prize-winning authors, and an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker. A retired U.S. Army colonel who also served as Chief of the American History Division at the Military Academy at West Point lends insight on U.S. military strategy. Interspersed among articles are the first-person accounts of decorated veterans and a conscientious objector. Together these voices present a broad view of international history, multinational war, domestic politics, home front tensions, and cultural memory.

Planning for this issue began more than a year ago, when the premiere of *The Vietnam War*, the newest documentary from co-directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, was set for September 2017. We seized the opportunity to expand conversations among viewers, to be an enduring companion to the epic film production while also creating a stand-alone resource that we hope will inspire inquiry in classrooms, libraries, discussion groups, and among families and friends across the country. To facilitate the task, we extended our page count—our heftiest issue ever—to present a history told in moving words and images.

Lynn Novick recently noted that film is a way to “curate a conversation that can't happen in real life.” The observation resonates with us, because it's what we try to do with each issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine. Join us in a national conversation, one about men and women, war and protest, history and memory, fact and fiction, courage and sacrifice.