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Arndt, Michael
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By Michael Arndt
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ANN ARBOR, Mich.—Neil Falk, a 19-year-old University of Michigan sophomore, remembers nothing of the Vietnam War. Born the year after the first U.S. combat troops went ashore at Danang, he says the little he knew of Vietnam came from looking at a Best of Life magazine collection.

"I was basically, totally, factually, historically ignorant of anything that happened in the war," Falk says. "And that disturbed me, because no matter where you turn in the news today you hear the word Vietnam."

In debates over U.S. intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua, he says, "you hear people saying we don't need another Vietnam, and you hear about the vets and Agent Orange." He mentions, too, movies, such as "Apocalypse Now" and "The Deerhunter," films that depict experiences of the war.

But because of his limited knowledge, he confesses, the points being raised "really didn't make any sense."

Today, the West Bloomfield, Mich., teenager is, at last, learning about the war. With 200 other students, he is enrolled in a course called "The Vietnam War, 1945 to 1975." Though an elective, it is the most popular Asian history course at the University of Michigan.

Michael Arndt is a Tribune reporter

Ten years after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam experience is being taught on college campuses as never before. From Amherst College to the University of Utah, a growing list of schools is offering courses on Vietnam and America's 30-year effort to prop up a falling domino.

In general, what they are teaching is that the war was a profound, and foreseeable, mistake.

Academics attribute the burgeoning interest in Vietnam, in part, to the news media fanfare that heralded the 10th anniversary of the April 30, 1975, communist takeover of South Vietnam.

They believe, however, that the interest among scholars is more deep-rooted, and they see it as a sign—along with the parades belatedly honoring Vietnam veterans and the hundreds of memoirs rolling off presses—that the nation is coming to terms with America's longest war and, after the Civil War, its most divisive.

"The number of courses has increased exponentially over the last five or six years," says Douglas Pike, a former U.S. foreign-service officer who is director of the Indochina Archives and the Indochina Studies Program at the University of California-Berkeley.

Last summer, as part of its research, the Washington-based Project on the Vietnam Generation surveyed 500 schools across the country.

The project, which grew out of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, found 72 college courses solely about Vietnam and the Vietnam War and at least 26 others that devote 10 percent or more of the term to the war. Fourteen of the Vietnam courses, or almost 20 percent, were new this year, and more than half were first offered since 1982.

In another recent survey, Allen Goodman, associate dean of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, querried more than 100 college political science departments and discovered 30 courses on the Vietnam War and another 26 that touch on the war. Of those devoted exclusively to Vietnam, more than half, once again, were developed over the last three years.

Howard Jones, an associate professor of history at the University of Alabama, was teaching a course in American diplomatic history in 1980. He asked his students whether they would take a course on Vietnam.

"There wasn't a great deal of interest," he recalls. "Then, two or three years ago, I asked the same question. There was a lot of interest. It just really surprised us."

The finding prompted Jones, 44, and Ronald Robel, 51, an assistant professor of history and Chinese, to offer a course entitled "U.S.-Vietnam War" in the fall of 1984.

They expected several dozen students. Instead, 180 students signed up, forcing them to move the class to an auditorium. This fall, Jones and Robel restricted enrollment to 80. But Robel says they could have easily "run up the enrollment."

"What we are finding," says Sandie Fauriol, executive director of the Project on the Vietnam Generation, "is a tremendous hunger among the younger generation who are totally ignorant and a tremendous hunger as well among the faculty to share their knowledge."

It was not this way a decade ago. "I'm not sure amnesia is the correct medical term," Goodman says, "but I would say by the summer of '75 we in the academic world wanted to forget everything about Vietnam, and that continued for five years. We were sick of Vietnam and wanted to get it behind us."

Pike, 57, who had been a close adviser to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, recalls observing the same phenomenon within the government. He has since labled it "The 'Gone with the Wind' Syndrome."

"Remember the scene at the end of the movie?" Pike asks. "Here's Scarlett O'Hara sitting in the ruins of this magnificent mansion. Everything around her is smoldering. She says, 'I won't think about that today.' It connotes that you have to think about it sometime, but not now."

Most schools still have no classes on the Vietnam War. Though they have been offered in other years, Vietnam courses are being given this semester at only three Big 10 universities: Michigan, Indiana and Iowa.

The subject also is absent from the fall course offerings at the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago and Northern Illinois University.

Goodman, 40, who is also an associate professor of international affairs, could be speaking for many other professors

Continued on page 14

Vietnam

Continued from page 11

as he explains why he does not teach a class about Vietnam: "Do I plan on teaching a course on the Vietnam War? Always. But my time is so limited and my resources spread so thin that I probably never will."

Then there is the question of what constitutes history. Stephen Vlastos, 41, an associate history professor at the University of Iowa, first offered his course, "Problems in Human History: The Vietnam War," in 1981.

He recalls being challenged by other faculty members who contended the war was so recent that it could not properly be called history. He persuaded them that by then it could and says he has encountered no further criticism.

Pike and others, such as John Smails, a 55-year-old history professor at the University of Wisconsin, say instructors are also hampered by the lack of good, balanced textbooks. The most commonly used text appears to be Stanley Karnow's "Vietnam: A History," typically supplemented by three or four books on more specific aspects of the war.

But as the conservative outcry that greeted Karnow's companion 1983 public television series showed, his treatment of the Vietnam War is not considered fair by all.

Instructors complain as well that students are not getting prepared in high school for college-level courses on Vietnam.

"Most of the students are surprisingly ignorant," says Mark DePue, a 31-year-old history graduate student who is teaching two sections of "Problems in Human History: The Vietnam War" at Iowa. "They wouldn't know the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution from Grenada."

DePue's students confirm his conclusion. "Everything usually ended even before Korea," says Rob Schweers, 18, a freshman from Burlington, Ia., recalling his high school history course.

"Usually, when you start a history class, you already know something of the past," adds Mark Lechowicz, 18, a freshman pharmacy major from Palatine. "But when I got into this class, it was all new to me."

Students today, according to professors, are more conservative than their predecessors were in the 1970s. And Jones and Robel say the student body of Alabama, made up largely of Alabama natives, is even farther to the right than others elsewhere.

Robel says he got a sense of this last year. During the course of the semester, he traces events in Vietnam from the beginning of recorded history, through the period of French colonialism and American intervention to today. Jones parallels this with what was happening in the United States.

"Every time I mentioned an Asian name," Robel says, "I could almost sense the iciness in the auditorium."

"The first class," Jones adds, "wanted to get into the war the first day of class; they wanted to fight right away. But this class is different. They certainly do see that if you're going to understand what happened, you've got to have the historical background."

The University of Michigan's "The Vietnam War, 1945 to 1975" was first offered in 1981. This semester it has nine discussion sections. Philip Cunningham, 31, a history graduate student, leads five of them.

Though not much older than his students, he says he and the students are of different generations. He says the line of demarcation is the Iranian hostage crisis.

"We grew up seeing America as the bad guys and Third World revolutionaries as the good guys," he says. "The Iranian crisis turned that around. That made the U.S. government look like the victim and the Third World look like the oppressors."

At the beginning of the semester, Cunningham asked his students to give him words or phrases they associate with Vietnam. He lists some of them: "Helicopters. Guerrilla warfare. Napalm. Jungle. Chaos. Confusion."

"We ended up with 40 words," he says. "They were all negative words."

He questioned one of his classes more extensively recently, asking the students, nine men and five women, about their recollections and perceptions of the war and why they were taking the class.

Their memories are sketchy, limited to body counts on the evening news and the buying of POW/MIA bracelets, campus antiwar demonstrations and the chaotic evacuation of the American Embassy in 1975. The war is something they have not discussed with their parents. Nor do they know veterans.

"One of my strongest memories," says Deborah Hamann, 21, of Denver, a senior majoring in political science and German, "is all through high school. Iran. Nicaragua. El Salvador. Guatemala. You just hear over and over again, is this going to be the next Vietnam? After a while, you start thinking is everything going to be the next Vietnam?"

"I've seen the media and the 'Rambo' movies," says Frank Bloomquist, a 19-year-old sophomore communications and marketing major from Toledo. "They were fun to watch. But I've never really sat down and thought about the Vietnam War until this class.

"I've changed my views totally. Before, I was totally for why we were in and now I think the communists over there did have something to offer the people, whereas the Saigon regime didn't."

James Coyle is a 38-year-old teaching assistant at Cornell University. The university requires freshmen to take at least two seminars. Coyle, who had taught sections of a government department course on the Vietnam War, is teaching a new seminar this fall entitled "The Vietnam Experience."

He has 18 students—13 men and five women—which is the enrollment limit. "I could have filled three courses if I wanted to," he says. "There was that much demand."

The students are reading four memoirs and four novels, all written by participants in the war, including Philip Caputo, who wrote "A Rumor of War," and Ron Kovak, author of "Born on the Fourth of July."

And though the intent of the seminar is to teach freshmen how to write, Coyle says he also is using the class to show the students that "the people who wrote these books were their age right now; the average age of a Vietnam veteran was 19. 'There but for the grace of God might go I.' "

Coyle served in Vietnam in 1969-70 as a foreign-language propaganda officer. "That means I flew around in helicopters, throwing out leaflets," he explains. He returned to Vietnam in 1975 to retrieve the family of his Vietnamese wife and is now working on a doctoral degree on 16th Century Vietnam.

"I wanted to do a course on the war for some time, as a personal need as much as to convey something," he says. "One of my students, commenting on Caputo and Kovak, said she was struck by how the war obsessed these authors. I'm still obsessed about it myself."

"I don't think Vietnam's a flash in the pan," Jones says. "It will tend to peak and then level off. But I don't think it will decline. Vietnam will continue to draw."

Smails of Wisconsin adds: "If only because it was a lost war, there will be a course on Vietnam till the end of this century."

Some of the last evacuees to leave Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War are helped aboard a hellcopter in 1975.