

Insight

on the news

August 15, 1988 / \$2.00

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Insight

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Vol. 4, No. 33

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INSIGHT (ISSN 0884-9285) is published weekly, except two issues combined at year-end, at 3600 New York Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002. Second class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Copyright ©1988 by The Washington Times Corporation, 3600 New York Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002. Subscriptions: U.S. 1 year (51 issues), \$25.50; 2 years (102 issues), \$49.00. Foreign rates, including Canada and Mexico, available on request. Single copies of most past issues of Insight are available prepaid at \$3.00 per copy. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: INSIGHT, P.O. Box 96067, Washington, D.C. 20090-6067. Customer inquiries: INSIGHT, P.O. Box 91022, Washington, D.C. 20090-1022. Or call 1-800-356-3588.

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 Insight is available on microfilm from Publication Products, Bell & Howell Co., Old Mansfield Road, Wooster, Ohio 44691-9050

Taking a Trip Back to the Sixties

SUMMARY: Eight years ago, only about two dozen college courses were offered on the Sixties and the Vietnam War. Since then, such offerings have mushroomed as students, whose parents grew up in the turbulent decade, become more eager to learn of a period in sharp contrast to today. As the instructors gain more experience in teaching the classes, they are working to improve the scope.

Some students say they enroll out of curiosity about a time of turbulent political activity very different from these more quiet times. Others say they are fond of the music of the period and want to know more about it. Still others take the courses to find out about the war a father fought in or fled to Canada to avoid.

Whatever the reason, classes in the Vietnam War and the Sixties are a hot item at U.S. colleges and universities, attracting ever-larger numbers of students and popping up each year at colleges where they had not been taught before.

According to a recent study conducted by the Indochina Institute at George Mason University in Fairfax County, Va., more than 300 such courses are now taught at U.S. institutions of higher learning. Ten



Hung: Courses have a long way to go.

years ago, such courses were almost non-existent; in 1980 there were only two dozen or so. According to the institute's report, the number is likely to continue to climb, at least for the next five years.

Says Nguyen Manh Hung, director of the institute: "It's a phenomenon we're call-

ing the Second Vietnam Generation. It's the young people who grew up with the war on television, with the demonstrations, the riots, the tumultuousness of the Sixties a dim memory from their early years. We think that what's happening is that they want to clear up that memory."

The courses vary widely. Some, such as the one taught by Joe Dunn, a history professor at Converse College in Spartanburg, S.C., concentrate on the war itself, with a few excursions into what was happening at home. "It is a look at another culture, with an emphasis on the background of the conflict, the conflict itself and its ramifications," says Dunn, who saw combat action in Vietnam.

Others, such as the seminar taught by Georgetown University history Professor Dorothy Brown, take up a whole range of events from the Sixties, from the civil rights movement to antiwar demonstrations. Brown requires her students, among other things, to write an essay, "The Crisis in Values in the 1960s:" (the students, she explains, "must supply what comes after the colon" with "one of the many ways American society changed in that period").

At Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, Vietnam veteran Harry W. Haines, a professor of communications, introduces his class to a variety of movies, from John

JON A. REMBOLD / INSIGHT



FRED WARD / BLACK STAR

Vietnam War protest in Washington, 1969: Courses help the "second" Vietnam generation understand the 1960s' import.



Capps at Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in which students see a "coming together"

Wayne's 1968 "The Green Berets" to such later milestones as "The Deer Hunter" and "Coming Home." "The films," he says, "make real the ideological conflict of the time."

And Walter Capps, a professor of religious studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, brings what he calls "eyewitness reporting, people alive and active in the events of the time" to his course, which examines "how the war affected the American sense of national identity and altered the way we look at ourselves."

His eyewitnesses include "Vietnam veterans, Army nurses who served in the war, military strategists, Vietnamese-Americans from Long Beach and antiwar activists." Once, he says, "we had a debate between a combat veteran and a conscientious objector. That helped focus the issues as little else could."

Capps's class, which enrolls more than 900 students, is only one popular course among many. According to the Indochina Institute's survey, 58 percent of the courses on the war and the Sixties have "higher than normal enrollments" for those schools. (Hung says the two subjects are so interconnected, the institute does not separate them.) Only a small number of them, 6 percent, have lower than normal enrollments.

Dorothy Brown's seminar at Georgetown, for example, is limited to 18 upper-level students, and she has had to turn away as many as 125 per semester. Dunn's class each year attracts at least 8 percent of the student body at Converse, a women's college of 700.

Two years ago, at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, political scientist Michael Shafer introduced a Vietnam course that failed to make that year's published list of courses but still attracted more

than 65 students during the first three days of enrollment. At Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, a Sixties course taught by a team of four professors, including historian Steven Hochstadt, has 92 students at a school where most classes tend to be far smaller. Says Hung, "At some schools, there will be three or four Vietnam era-related courses, one taught in the English department, another in history, another elsewhere."

Instructors make use of a wide range of teaching aids, taking advantage of a decade and war that were heavily televised, widely reported and photographed, and whose images — from civil rights marches in the South through the counterculture gathering at Woodstock — are etched in the public memory.

Students in many of the courses, for example, are required to view documentaries such as "Eyes on the Prize," on segregation and the civil rights movement, and the series "Vietnam: A Television History" on PBS. Hollywood classics from the Sixties, such as "Easy Rider" and "Bonnie and Clyde" are also standard fare.

Some professors, Noel C. Eggleston of Radford University in Virginia, for instance, have their classes reenact such controversial events from the era as the trial of Lt. William L. Calley Jr. for war crimes committed at My Lai. Other classes have simulated Sixties demonstrations, the proceedings of the International War Crimes Tribunal and the meeting of the North Vietnam Politburo to plan the Tet offensive of 1968. "The only limit," says Capps, "is the imagination of the person who is planning the class."

Reading lists are frequently very long, allowing students to choose from a wide variety of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. At California State University at Northridge,

the Vietnam War syllabus includes 104 novels. In addition, most of the courses require students to listen to songs by Bob Dylan, Country Joe and the Fish, Grateful Dead and other musicians and groups whose enduring popularity has helped keep the popular culture of the Sixties alive for a younger generation. Says Hochstadt, "With a plethora of materials at hand, the temptation is to give the students too much."

Still, many voice complaints about the quality of much that is available for classroom use, particularly textbooks. Says Dunn, who recently completed a soon-to-be published study of works on Vietnam and the war: "The prevailing assumption of the books has tended to be 'this war was immoral,' and that's no way to begin an objective study." In addition, he says, "most come from the left and perpetuate myths and stereotypes." Hochstadt says most of the books on the Sixties "treat the activists with condescension. There is little balance."

Efforts have been made to address the problem. This year, for example, the Center for Social Studies Education in Pittsburgh published "The Lessons of the Vietnam War: A Modular Textbook," a 376-page volume that brings together essays by a variety of experts on Vietnam.

With a grant from the New Jersey Department of Higher Education, Shafer of Rutgers is supervising the production of a textbook, videotapes and other materials — "a complete curriculum," he says — for high schools and colleges. Says Shafer, "Our notion is to avoid treating the war as an aberration, but to regard it as a period of history where many traditional themes in American history — the drive for equality, concern for the underdog, anticommunist sentiment and others — were writ large." Among other things, his project is to edit documentary films from their standard 60- and 90-minute formats to 20- and 30-minute segments, more suitable for classroom situations.

Hung of the Indochina Institute thinks the courses have a long way to go. "Most of the students are still taught by people whose views on the war were formed by watching the news on television and haven't been altered by subsequent scholarship," such as Guenther Lewy's 1978 "America in Vietnam," a revisionist history that Hung says helped give respectability to dissent from the dominant antiwar sentiment at U.S. universities.

"We are seeing independent views emerge on the part of a minority of profes-

There is “envy of commitment” for the “more committed 1960s,” but today’s students “believe Sixties-type activism may not be the best way.”

sors,” he says. Last spring Hung brought together roughly 200 Southeast Asia scholars and others for a two-day conference on the teaching of the Vietnam War era in American colleges and universities. The result: “A feeling that while we’ve matured in many ways, we perhaps are teaching the war too much from the point of view of America, as though it were only America’s war and crisis, and a consensus that we need to look at the event more through the eyes of the people of Vietnam.”

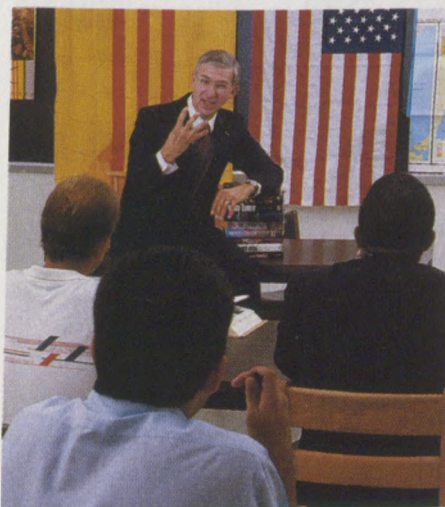
Interestingly, the Indochina Institute’s survey shows that almost 80 percent of the men and women teaching courses in the war and the Sixties can be defined as part of the Vietnam generation (ages 33 to 50 last year). Still, very few of them believe they should place themselves before their students as eyewitnesses to the era they teach. Says 43-year-old Philip Straw, who teaches an honors seminar on the war at the University of Maryland, “It is not my role to insert my own experiences and prejudices into the classroom.” Adds Hochstadt, who describes himself and the three others who team-teach the Bates course as “between 35 and 40 and on the left, if not radical,” it is “not only awkward but wrong to present yourself as some kind of artifact of the time you’re talking about. That’s no way to teach history.”

Straw, a former Marine who won the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart in Vietnam, takes advantage of his school’s proximity to Washington to invite the likes of Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commanding officer of U.S. forces in the war, former Sen. J. William Fulbright, an early opponent of the war, and Bui Diem, former South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, to speak before his class.

His purpose, Straw says, is “to present the students with as wide a variety of information as possible without ‘McDonaldizing’ the war.” He initiates the course each semester with a 50-minute slide show depicting “a series of contrasting images”: shots of Marines decorating a Christmas tree for Vietnamese children and U.S. soldiers building homes and roads for the Vietnamese, along with pictures of the war’s horrors.

Santa Barbara’s Capps, who started his Vietnam War course in 1979, says he did not “really feel confident with it” until 1984, underlining the newness of such courses and the fact that most of them are in continuous evolution until instructors latch onto a format they like. Haines, for example, says he plans to include films on Indochina from the early 1950s — “that’s

when Hollywood discovered that region of the world” — when he next teaches the course. He will also add “Karma,” the first of a trilogy by Vietnamese film director Ho Quang Minh that will deal with the war. And Hochstadt says the Bates team of four — all male, and white — is “dissatisfied with the way we’re constituted, because we fly right in the face of the 1960s we teach.”



Straw keeps his past out of the class.

Dunn will begin teaching a seminar on the Sixties this year, in addition to his class on Vietnam, which he describes as “a freshman seminar with 12 of the brightest entering students. They will be interviewing local people who were in the civil rights movement, learning in a personal way about the ways the 1960s changed people’s lives in their area of the country.”

At Georgetown Brown notes that her students “are attracted to the political fervor of the Sixties,” and Haines of Trinity says many of his students come to the class “with highly romanticized notions of what it means to be a combat soldier, an antiwar activist.” (An informal poll by the Indochina Institute found that most students said they took the courses because they were interested in learning about a “passionate and exciting time in our nation’s history.”)

Nonetheless, Hochstadt, who detects “envy of commitment” on the part of his students at Bates for the “more committed 1960s,” says today’s students “do not seem capable of renewing or re-creating” the earlier era and “clearly believe Sixties-type activism may not be the best way to get things done.”

On occasion, though, the courses have awakened concerns that go beyond the classroom. Students in Capps’s course at

Santa Barbara regularly raise money to help send local Vietnam War veterans to Washington to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. His students have also created outreach programs for veterans. And members of Straw’s honors seminar at the University of Maryland initiated an effort that led to the building of a memorial on the College Park campus to veterans who fought in that war. A similar memorial was built by students in a Vietnam War class at the College of Wooster in Ohio.

Attempts on the part of professors to re-create the Sixties sometimes go awry. Hochstadt reports, for example, that a member of the Bates College teaching team once suggested the students meditate in the manner of Eastern religions, an exercise popular among many students in the Sixties. “It took about one minute before a student got up and left,” he recalls, “slamming the door loudly behind him.” Soon, the class was giggling nervously and talking. “It was simply something they had no interest in doing.”

And Georgetown’s Brown says that when she planned to conclude her last seminar with a singing of the Sixties protest song “We Shall Overcome,” she was met with almost total silence on the part of the students. “Except for one black, they didn’t know the tune — the song that was the anthem of that time. I was shocked.”

Even so, most teachers say the courses strike a “deep chord” among the students, in the words of Converse’s Dunn. Capps says he believes many of his students come to the class aware “of a sense of national failure and a feeling that Vietnam is a part of that failure that they need explained, they need to confront.”

Capps concludes his course with a slide show based on pictures some of his students take on a trip to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He explains: “It’s the best means I have come up with to resolve the tensions generated in the course, to conclude with a coming together, rather than a continuation of the differences exacerbated by the war.”

Says Haines: “These young people are going to be confronted with images of Vietnam for the rest of their lives. If we fail to contextualize the images they are engulfed by, those images unravel and lose weight. I think the major effort these courses are involved in is helping a new generation come to terms with the significance of that unusual decade, restoring a sense of proportion that is so easily lost, unless we talk about these things and sort them out.”

— Stephen Goode