

Course Syllabus: The History of the Vietnam War; History 5310: W02/ Fall 2014

Dr. Mark Saad Saka

**Course Objectives:**

This course is a graduate level, web-delivered seminar in the history of the American war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia; 1945-the 1980s. I begin the course in the year 1945 as the Second World War drew to a close and the United States aided the return of the French colonialists to reestablish their empire in what was then Indochina. Although North Vietnam formally ended the war the spring of 1975 with the unification of Vietnam and the conquest of Saigon—now Ho Chi Minh City—I have chosen the 1980s for two reasons; the first being this will allow us to include the reign of Pol Pot in neighboring Cambodia, 1975-1979 for any comprehension of the Vietnam War that omits the Cambodian nightmare and genocide lacks historical depth; and second, the political realignment between the United States, China, and Pol Pot in the 1980s in an anti-Vietnamese alliance could make even the most optimistic historian cynical. Finally, we will examine the human and environmental legacies of the chemical war waged on Vietnam which continues through the present and future.

**Required Course Readings:** the following seven books are required for this course.

Appy, Christian G. *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, University of North Carolina Press, 1993. ISBN # 978-0805080063.

Buzzanco, Robert. *Masters of War: Military Dissent & Politics in the Vietnam Era*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, ISBN # 0-521-59940-7.

Duiker, William J. *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*, McGraw Hill Press, 1995, ISBN # 0-07-018030-x.

Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States in Vietnam 1950-1975*, fourth edition, McGraw Hill Press, 2001, ISBN # 978-0072536188. (Note\*\*-this book has just come out in a fifth edition, but I am using the fourth, there is not much difference between the two in material but there is about a forty dollar difference in price).

Short, Philip. *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, Henry Holt Press, 2006 ISBN # 978-0805080063.

Summers, Harry G. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, Presidio Press, 1982 ISBN # 978-0891411567

Wilcox Fred A. *Scorched Earth : Legacies of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam*, Seven Stories Press, 2011 ISBN # 978-16069801380.

**Course Requirements:**

First, regular communication is essential for a web-delivered course. Please send me your address so that when I critique your book reviews and research paper I can send them to you with

comments and such. If I already have your address from a previous seminar that you have taken with me, just let me know.

Second, you will be required to write a five to seven page book review on each of the seven books. The reviews are due on the dates listed in the following section. The review should provide a critical analysis of the book. In your reviews, please stay focused on the book and history. Please do not include movies and films of the war.

Third, you will be required to write a fifteen research paper that will be due on the date listed in the following section. The topic of the research paper must be approved by me. The paper should follow the Chicago Style formatting, 12 font, 1 inch margins, double spaced, cover page required (the cover page does not count as a page), and endnotes (the endnotes do not count as pages, and a bibliography).

Fourth, keep an open mind. The Vietnam War was and continues to be a controversial war in American history, politics, culture, and society. For those of you who did not live through the Vietnam War, its legacy continues to shape the American political and cultural landscape, for those of you who lived through the War years and the sixties in general, the war shaped your ideas and values, in ways that anyone born later could not understand.

### **Course Outline**

August 25-course begins

September 5-book review over "America's Longest War" by George Herring due

September 19-book review over "Sacred War" by William Duiker due

September 26-book review over "On Strategy" by Harry Summers due

October 6-book review over "Masters of War" by Robert Buzzanco due

October 17-book review over "Working Class War" by Christian Appy due

October 24-book review over "Scorched Earth" by Fred Wilcox due

November 7-book review over "Pol Pot" by Philip Short due

November 7-paper topics must be approved by me by this date

November 14-last day to drop course with a W

November 21-a working bibliography and an abstract for your research paper due.

December 8-final paper due (5:00 p.m.)

**Things to think about for *America's Longest War: The United States in Vietnam 1950-1975***

This is the best synthesis of the Vietnam War I have read. Although it mainly includes an American perspective, it is still easily comprehensible as a one-volume treatment. How did the United States end up in a long-drawn out land war in Southeast Asia? What were the major turning points and events in America's entrance and withdrawal from Vietnam and Southeast Asia?

**Things to think about for *Sacred War: nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam***

This book provides a Vietnamese perspective of the war. What were the origins of the Vietnamese struggle for national unification? What factors made individual Vietnamese give their allegiance to Ho Chi Minh and his revolutionary movement instead of to his nationalist rivals? Does this book provide an answer as to how and why the Vietnamese revolutionary communists won the war?

**Things to think about for *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War***

I first read this book while stationed at Fort Sill Oklahoma while attending the Officer's Basic Course in the Field Artillery. It was considered the most incisive defense of the role of the Army, and the Armed Forces, in the war. Summers applies the principles of war based upon the classic "On War" by Carl Von Clausewitz to answer the question as to "What Went Wrong"? For your review, please explain in one paragraph who Carl von Clausewitz was and why he is important to war theory. For Summers, what went wrong and what lessons can the United States learn from the Vietnam War (or did we learn?)

**Things to think about for *Masters of War: Military Dissent & Politics in the Vietnam Era***

This book explores the crucial dissent within the ranks of the top echelons of the United States military brass, inter-service rivalries, and the political leaders. The author challenges the notion prevalent among some circles in American society that the United States lost the war because the military fought "with one hand tied behind its back" or that the anti-war movement prevented its victory. Do you feel that the author makes his point? How does the author see the Tet Offensive as the turning point in the war?

**Things to think about for *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam***

This book places the Vietnam War in the context of America's class structure (class is a word Americans like to pretend does not exist—in my opinion). How and why did the responsibility of the Vietnam War fall on the poor and working class in America and not the children of the rich powerful?

**Things to think about for *Scorched Earth: Legacies of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam***

This book continues the impact of the Vietnam War on the generations born after the war from the chemical war waged on the Vietnamese people from Agent Orange and other defoliants. How have some Vietnamese and American doctors and scientists tried to build bonds of friendship and peace?

### **Things to think about for *pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare***

Who was Pol Pot? Who was the Khmer Rouge? Why did one of the most radical and ruthless experiments in social engineering ever undertaken in history unleash genocide and mass murder on an unimaginable scale? Why? How? How did Cambodia become a sideshow to the American War in Vietnam and what responsibility did the United States, China, as well as utopian visionary idealists from Europe (the Sorbonne) have in the horror and tragedy that unfolded in the Cambodian “killing fields”. How and why did the United States and China become the major international backers of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge during the 1980s? What does the American and Chinese support for Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s say about “morality” in international affairs and foreign policy?