

Crisis Diplomacy in Vietnam & Iraq

(lesson plan for an undergraduate class on foreign policy or intro to US history)

Goal: To use the Johnson administration's formation of foreign policy towards Vietnam as a springboard for discussing the formation of Bush's foreign policy towards Iraq.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to identify and assess formative influences behind the Johnson administration's "Americanization" phase in its foreign policy to Vietnam (1964-65).
- Students will be able to intelligently discuss the role of domestic forces in the formation of foreign policy.
- Students will be able to intelligently discuss the role of dissent in the formation of foreign policy.
- Students will be able to identify similarities and differences between the Johnson administration's 1964 decision to increase US commitment in Vietnam with the Bush administration's 2001-2002 decision to invade Iraq.
- Students will be able to articulate political opinions in short, crafted thesis statements.

Time: 50 - 90 minutes

Materials:

Students will all need copies of the following: the conclusion to Logevall's *Choosing War*; Hubert Humphrey's 1963 memorandum to President Johnson discouraging escalation in Vietnam; *The Washington Post's* article "New Republic Editors 'Regret' Their Support of Iraq War" (June 19, 2004); transcript of Dave Davies' April 21, 2004 interview of Bob Woodward on Fresh Air (both available via Lexus Nexus). Also, enough copies of the group activity questions need to be made to give each group one question sheet.

The classroom should also have a chalkboard, white board, overhead, etc. that the instructor can use to facilitate discussion and highlight important ideas.

Pre-class preparation:

Students and instructor needed to have read the readings mentioned above and students will have had to craft responses to the study questions (mentioned below). Instructor will also need to have enough copies of the group activity questions to give to each group.

Activities:

Preliminary discussion (led by instructor, 20 – 40 mins)

Discussion questions (given to students in the previous class so they could prep)

A. "What did Logevall argue went wrong when the Johnson administration formulated its 'Americanization' policy to escalate US involvement in Vietnam?"

Key ideas that need to get on the board: **Short-term** vs. long-term goals; **obsession** with personal credibility by Johnson & advisors; **dissenting** views not taken seriously; **permissive** environment characterized by a lack of serious dissent (from congress, newspapers, & the public).

B. *“Using Woodward’s account, to what extent did the Bush administration’s handling of crisis diplomacy and decision to invade Iraq follow in the footsteps of the Johnson administration’s Americanization decision? How did they differ?”*

Key ideas that need to get on the board: similar--pet project of advisors (Rumsfeld & Cheney); isolation of dissention (especially Powell); lack of long-term planning; relative unilateralism. Different—Bush admin took more seriously the need to address public opinion; justification for policy (contain communism v. prevent use of WMD).

C. *“Logevall lamented the lack of forceful dissent from Johnson’s hawkish diplomacy. Woodward pointed out that Powell’s disagreement over policy placed him ‘out of the loop’ of decision making. To what extent should dissenting ideas be taken into consideration by foreign policy makers? To what extent is it the responsibility of informed people to dissent?”*

Many potential answers here. Possible directions for discussion include: entertaining too many dissenting ideas waters down policy; allowing for vocal dissent within administrations saps policy credibility; dissenting ideas help keep diplomacy balanced & grounded; allowing for dissent is vital to democracy; the media has a responsibility to question leadership; more people need to be critically informed... The key is to get students thinking about the role of dissent, how it forms, what it’s based on, who is involved, etc.

Group Activity: Crisis Diplomacy Thesis drill

(groups of three or four, chosen by counting off; 8 minutes)

The aim of the group activity is to create a pressured, competitive environment (akin to a period of crisis diplomacy) in which members of groups must work together to produce argumentative thesis statements. The goals of the activity are two fold. First, students will have an opportunity to practice writing thesis statements. Second, the harried process itself will allow students to better understand the roles of personalities, dissent, and formation of crisis diplomacy.

Step 1: Instructions

Tell the class that there’s going to be a competition and the group that wins will get a prize (extra credit always works). Groups will be determined by numbering off. The goal of each group will be to write the “best” thesis statements (determined by you, the instructor) in response to four questions. Each group will only have only **five** minutes to discuss and write each thesis statement. If the statement is not legible, it will be disqualified. Once students break into their groups, give each group a question sheet and immediately tell them that they have 300 seconds left. Every 30 seconds, remind them how much time they have left (270 seconds... 240 seconds... 210 seconds... etc.). When they are down to one minute left, give the time every ten seconds (60 seconds... 50 seconds... 40 seconds...) at 10 seconds count down every second. This is designed to create a fasted-paced and pressured environment in which groups must work. QUESTION: (written on a sheet and passed out to every group)

Question 1: Was it inevitable that America would go to war in Vietnam?

Question 2: Is it appropriate to compare Johnson’s diplomacy to Vietnam with Bush’s diplomacy to Iraq?

Question 3: What is the most important diplomatic issue facing the United States today?

Question 4: What is more important: having a unified foreign policy, even if it risks ignoring opposing opinions, or encouraging debate over diplomatic issues, even if it risks losing credibility in the eyes of the world.

Step 2: Discussion (20-30 minutes)

After collecting all the thesis statements, read each one aloud in front of the class (don't announce which group wrote which statements) and announce "good!" or "bad!," followed by a quick explanation ("too vague," "not argumentative," or "very provocative," "good job outlining main points.") Determine the winner and announce the group to the class. .

Before discussing the thesis statements, ask students what they thought of the assignment. Ask follow-up questions that get at how they dealt with a seemingly impossible task. Did they argue? Did they work as a team effectively? Did one person take control and ignore the others? Was everyone involved equally? Point out that the interpersonal cooperation and conflicts that students experienced in their own group is not altogether different from the tensions and pressures that diplomats and policymakers might operate under in times of tension and crisis.

Spend the rest of the period discussing the form and content of the thesis statements students wrote. Be sure to draw attention to the successful statements, specifically those that have a clear argument, possess some sort of insight or originality, and outline the main supporting points. Ask how some of the less successful statements could be improved. And don't shy away from discussing the issues raised by the questions and the thesis statements.