

Vietnam in Verse



Operation 'Yellowstone' Vietnam: Following a hard day, a few members of Company 'A,' 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry (Mechanized), 25th Infantry Division, gather around a guitar player and sing a few songs. January 18, 1968 (US Signal Corps photo; National Archives)

Vietnam in Verse

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2014, REVISED IN 2024)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

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GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Two 45-minute classes

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on creative primary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate materials of historical significance.

In these lessons students will analyze four songs and two poems from and about the Vietnam War era. These songs and poems in many ways reflect the experience of the average soldier and the tensions over issues such as the draft and the pushback against the emerging counterculture. In the first lesson students will analyze popular music that reflects the issues surrounding America's involvement in the war in Vietnam and important cultural changes in American society. In the second lesson the students will analyze two different poems written by individuals who experienced the Vietnam conflict and later published these poems that reflect their memories of the war. Students will practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on these source materials. You will assess the students' comprehension through analysis activities, class discussions, and two brief essays or paragraphs.

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source documents using close-reading strategies
- Demonstrate understanding of complex text through critical-thinking questions
- Demonstrate understanding of both the literal and inferential aspects of that evidence
- Write a comparative/argumentative essay using text-based evidence
- Explain how popular culture can reflect cultural values
- Demonstrate how artistic expression can express historical observations
- Identify changes over time in cultural norms (e.g., counterculture during the Vietnam era)

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- To what extent was popular music an expression of the sentiments of many Americans concerning the war in Vietnam?

- To what extent does poetry effectively communicate the experiences of soldiers serving in Vietnam?
- In what ways did veterans' descriptions of wartime service resemble or depart from songwriters' descriptions?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

MATERIALS

- Source 1: "Eve of Destruction," by P. F. Sloan, 1965. Published by Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group.
- Source 2: "Ballad of the Green Berets," by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler and Robin Moore. © 1966 Estate of SSGT. Barry Sadler, reprinted with permission from Ms. Lavona Sadler.
- Source 3: "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag," Words and music by Joe McDonald © 1965 Renewed 1993 Alkatraz Corner Music Co. used with permission.
- Source 4: "Okie from Muskogee," by Merle Haggard and Roy Burris, 1969. Okie From Muskogee, Words and Music by Merle Haggard and Roy Edward Burris, Copyright © 1969 Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, Copyright Renewed. All Rights Administered by Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, 424 Church Street, Suite 1200, Nashville, TN 37219 International Copyright Secured All Rights Reserved, Reprinted by Permission of Hal Leonard LLC.
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Song or Poem
- Activity Sheet 2: Songs—Compare and Contrast
- Source 5: Yusef Komunyakaa, "A Break from the Bush" from *Dien Cai Dau* © 1988 by Yusef Komunyakaa. Published by Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.
- Source 6: Brian Weigl, "Elegy" from *ARCHEOLOGY OF THE CIRCLE*, copyright © 1999 by Bruce Weigl. Used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.
- Activity Sheet 3: Soldiers' Poetry of Vietnam—Similarities and Differences
- Computer screen, Smartboard, overhead projector, or other means of display

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE UNITED STATES AND THE VIETNAM WAR

by Meredith Lair, George Mason University

The story of the Vietnam War (1950–1975) can vary dramatically, depending on who tells it and when it starts. From an American perspective, the war was an expression of Cold War “containment” policy, whereby successive presidential administrations sought to limit communism’s spread around the globe. In Vietnam, the “American War” of the 1960s and 1970s had deep roots in French colonialism and the decades-long struggle for Vietnamese independence.

The Cold War pitted American ideals—belief in democracy and self-determination—against American opposition to communism. From 1950 to 1954, the United States provided military aid to France to suppress the Vietnamese independence movement, which was led by communists. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States again prioritized containing communism over the will of the Vietnamese majority. In South Vietnam, a new country the US helped to create in 1954, successive authoritarian regimes ruthlessly suppressed dissent. And yet, the United States backed them and invested staggering resources in quelling resistance and efforts to reunify Vietnam under one flag—because it would have been communist.¹

American commitments to South Vietnam were limited to advice, aid, and military advisors in the 1950s and early 1960s. When these investments failed to create political stability, President Lyndon Johnson authorized significant military escalation in 1965, necessitating an increase in the draft. Suddenly, a remote conflict on the other side of the world was *the* most pressing concern for millions of young American men who were eligible for military service.

The American public initially supported this escalation, out of patriotism and because they did not know what was to come. As American casualties increased—ultimately 58,220 Americans died and 153,000 were wounded—so too did opposition to the war.² While American casualties were the primary driver of antiwar sentiment, other factors contributed: concern for US forces’ indiscriminate use of high-tech weaponry, which contributed to staggering Vietnamese casualties (estimates range from 1 to 3.8 million for the war as a whole)³; belief that the war was unnecessary and irrelevant to American national interests; and criticism of US government misinformation about whether the war could be won. Related antiwar concerns included the unfairness of the Selective Service system, which enabled men of privilege to avoid military service, and state-sponsored violence against antiwar protesters. In 1968, the percentage of Americans who regretted US involvement in Vietnam surpassed the percentage of Americans who did not. But consensus that the war was a mistake did not yield agreement about what to do next. Until the war ended in 1975, Americans were divided about whether to escalate, stay the course, or withdraw.⁴

¹ George Herring, who was a towering figure in Vietnam War studies and diplomatic history, wrote, “I still believe that US intervention in Vietnam was misguided. It can be argued that the containment policy worked in Europe, contributing significantly, maybe even decisively, to the outcome of the Cold War. That said, I am persuaded that containment was misapplied in Vietnam. Obsessed with their determination to stop the advance of communism, and abysmally ignorant of the Vietnamese people and their history, Americans profoundly misread the nature of the struggle in Vietnam, its significance for their vital interests, and its susceptibility to their influence.” George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), xiii, 8–16. See also Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 54–55, 58–59; and Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).

² It is important to realize that the US population in the 1960s was about 200 million, less than 2/3 the US population in 2024. The Department of Defense provides a breakdown of American Vietnam War casualties here: <https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/app/conflictCasualties/vietnam/vietnamSum>. The inverse relationship between American casualties and American public support is accepted as fact by Vietnam War historians and is true for other American wars as well. It is explored in Mark A. Lorell, et al, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy during the Vietnam War* (Rand, 1985), described and available for download here: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R3060.html>.

³ Vietnam’s population in the 1960s was about 38 million, with about 22 million people in “North Vietnam” and about 16 million people in “South Vietnam.” “Casualties” means dead and wounded. There is no definitive Vietnamese casualty figure, because there are so many variables: civilian, military (which military?), insurgent, geographic area (Vietnam proper? Cambodia? Laos?), time period (1965–1973? 1963–1975? 1950–1975?), and cause (do victims of landmines or Agent Orange who died years after the shooting stopped count?). Vietnamese casualty figures are highly politically charged, with Vietnam’s government reporting higher casualties than anyone else. Nick Turse offers a helpful summary of the complexity of the problem in *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 11–14.

⁴ For a discussion of this specific poll, see Mark Gillespie, “Americans Look Back at Vietnam War,” *Gallup*, November 17, 2000. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx>. Scroll down for data on this poll. For a graph of this data across time, see Tom Rosentiel, “Polling Wars: Hawks vs. Doves,” Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2009/11/23/polling-wars-hawks-vs-doves/>.

Americans expressed opinions about the Vietnam War in a variety of ways. On the local level, they wrote letters to elected officials, conducted demonstrations, and petitioned authorities to issue statements for or against. On the national level, antiwar protesters streamed toward large-scale protests in major cities, especially Washington, DC. War supporters also demonstrated, but their gatherings were smaller. Most demonstrations were peaceful, but they often included small contingents who engaged in violence and vandalism. Americans also channeled their concerns into support for pro- or antiwar politicians. In the 1968 presidential primaries, three of five Democratic candidates and two of four Republican candidates supported immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. But hawkish candidates won both parties' nominations, and President Nixon—who vowed to fight on to “peace with honor”—prevailed in the general election.⁵

Vietnam veterans comprised a small but important component of the antiwar movement. Their opposition was rooted not in news reports or antiwar literature, but in their own observations. They objected to American casualties and what they regarded as the pointlessness of the war's violence. Back home, veterans in uniform at antiwar demonstrations offered a powerful visual corrective to the movement's public image as a collective of youthful citizens unwilling to fulfill their patriotic duty.⁶

*Meredith Lair is an associate professor of history at George Mason University. Her work focuses on warfare and its relationship to American society and culture. She is the author of *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (2011).*

⁵ Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2002).

⁶ Gerald Nicosia, *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2001).

LESSON 1

AMERICANS DEBATE THE MEANING OF MILITARY SERVICE, 1965–1969

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2014, REVISED IN 2024)

MATERIALS

- Source 1: “Eve of Destruction,” by P. F. Sloan, 1965. Published by Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group.
 - Several performances of this song are available online. This one is performed by Barry McGuire: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdWGP3HQVjU>
- Source 2: “Ballad of the Green Berets,” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler and Robin Moore. © 1966 Estate of SSGT. Barry Sadler, reprinted with permission from Ms. Lavona Sadler.
 - Several performances of this song are available online. This one is performed by Sgt. Barry Sadler: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kj9qv6rmG8>
- Source 3: “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die-Rag,” Words and music by Joe McDonald. ©1965 Renewed 1993 Alkatraz Corner Music Co. Used with permission. Lyrics on <http://www.countryjoe.com/feelmus.htm>.
 - Several performances of this song are available online. This one is performed by Joe McDonald and the Fish: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws0DLWApHko>
- Source 4: “Okie from Muskogee,” by Merle Haggard and Roy Burris, 1969. Okie From Muskogee, Words and Music by Merle Haggard and Roy Edward Burris, Copyright © 1969 Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, Copyright Renewed. All Rights Administered by Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, 424 Church Street, Suite 1200, Nashville, TN 37219 International Copyright Secured All Rights Reserved, Reprinted by Permission of Hal Leonard LLC
 - Several performances of this song are available online. This one is performed by Merle Haggard: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68cbjLl4U>
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Song or Poem
- Activity Sheet 2: Songs—Compare and Contrast
- Computer screen, Smartboard, overhead projector, or other means of display

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on creative primary source materials. In these lessons students will analyze four songs and two poems from the Vietnam War era. These songs and poems in many ways reflect the experience of the average soldier and the tensions over personal issues such as the draft and the pushback against the emerging counterculture.

PROCEDURE

1. Divide the class into “critical-thinking groups” of 3 to 5 students.
2. The students need to be at least familiar with the domestic social and cultural issues surrounding the conflict in Vietnam. You may choose to have the students read the Historical Background essay provided or share the information with the class orally.

3. Distribute Sources 1 and 2 with the lyrics to “Eve of Destruction” and “Ballad of the Green Beret.” If possible, have a copy up on a projector so everyone can see it and you can refer to it easily.
4. Depending on the reading level of the students, you may have them read the lyrics aloud in their groups or “share read” them with the whole class. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few lines while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
5. If possible, play performances of the songs. This can serve as a shared reading as the students can sing along with the music.
6. Distribute Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Song or Poem, two for each student.
7. Go through the first verse of one of the songs with the whole class and ask them to identify what they think is the most “important or powerful” phrase in the verse. The class should discuss different phrases and what makes them important or powerful. Guided by you, the class should come to an agreement on a phrase and the reason it is powerful or important. Make sure the students use textual evidence to support their answers.
8. The students will then select two more important or powerful phrases from the song within their group. They can choose phrases from any of the verses. However, they must reach their answers through consensus and base their selection on textual evidence. Using their selection and analysis of the phrases as supporting evidence, the groups will state the message or theme of the song. Have students compare answers with other groups.
9. Repeat the process with the other song.
10. Distribute Sources 3 and 4 with the lyrics to the other two songs, “The I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag” and “Okie from Muskogee” along with two copies of Activity Sheet 1. Have the groups complete the activity sheets and share their answers with the other groups.
11. Distribute Activity Sheet 2: Songs—Compare and Contrast. Each student will write a short essay or paragraph explaining what some lyricists found objectionable about the counterculture movement and/or what some lyricists found objectionable about military service in Vietnam. They should use the analysis their groups completed for each song and must cite evidence from the text of the songs.
12. Ask students which of the songs they think were the most popular. Talking points for discussion:
 - “Ballad of the Green Beret” was the #1 Billboard song in 1966.
 - “Okie from Muskogee” was #1 on the country music charts in 1969 and #41 on Billboard.
 - “Eve of Destruction” was Billboard #29 in 1965.
 - “The I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die-Rag” peaked at Billboard #67 in 1967.
 - However, from 1968 anti-war protest songs began to outsell singles that may have been seen as supporting the war.

LESSON 2

VETERANS RECALL THEIR EXPERIENCES, 1988–1989

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2014, REVISED IN 2024)

MATERIALS

- Source 5: Yusef Komunyakaa, “A Break from the Bush” from *Dien Cai Dau* © 1988 by Yusef Komunyakaa. Published by Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.
- Source 6: Brian Weigl, “Elegy” from *ARCHEOLOGY OF THE CIRCLE*, copyright © 1999 by Bruce Weigl. Used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Song or Poem
- Activity Sheet 3: Soldiers’ Poetry of Vietnam—Similarities and Differences

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PROCEDURE

1. Assemble the students into their critical-thinking groups.
2. The students need to be at least familiar with the military situation in Vietnam. You may share the Historical Background essay with the students or share the provided information orally.
3. Distribute Sources 5 and 6, “A Break from the Bush” and “Elegy.” If possible, display the poems so that everyone can see them and you can refer to them easily. These poems were written by Vietnam War veterans and published thirteen and twenty-four years after the war ended.
4. Distribute two copies of Activity Sheet 1 to each student.
5. Share read both of the poems with the whole class and ask the students to identify an “important or powerful” phrase in one poem. The students should discuss some phrases and why they are important or powerful and come to a consensus.
6. The groups will then complete the activity sheet for each poem. Have students compare answers with other groups. Make sure they are using textual evidence to support their answer.
7. Students will now use Activity Sheet 3: Soldiers’ Poetry of Vietnam—Similarities and Differences to compare and contrast the two poems.
8. Discussion Question: Using the information you have learned from reading and analyzing the two poems, what conclusions can you draw about the experience of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam?
9. Students will use the analysis that they completed for the four songs and two poems to write a short essay that answers the following question: In what ways did veterans’ descriptions of wartime service resemble or depart from songwriters’ descriptions?

Source 1

Eve of Destruction

The eastern world it is explodin',
 Violence flarin', bullets loadin'
 You're old enough to kill, but not for votin'
 You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin'
 And even the Jordan River has bodies floatin'

But you tell me over and over and over again, my friend
 Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction

Don't you understand what I'm trying to say?
 Can't you feel the fears I'm feelin' today?
 If the button is pushed, there's no runnin' away
 There'll be no one to save, with the world in a grave
 Take a look around ya, boy, it's bound to scare ya, boy

And you tell me over and over and over again, my friend
 Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction

Yeah, my blood's so mad feels like coagulin'
 I'm sittin' here just contemplatin'
 I can't twist the truth, it knows no regulation.
 Handful of senators don't pass legislation
 And marches alone can't bring integration
 When human respect is disintegratin'
 This whole crazy world is just too frustratin'

And you tell me over and over and over again, my friend
 Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction

Think of all the hate there is in Red China
 Then take a look around to Selma, Alabama
 You may leave here for four days in space
 But when you return, it's the same old place
 The poundin' of the drums, the pride and disgrace
 You can bury your dead, but don't leave a trace
 Hate your next door neighbor, but don't forget to say grace

And tell me over and over and over and over again, my friend
 You don't believe we're on the eve of destruction

Mm, no no, you don't believe
 We're on the eve of destruction

Source: P. F. Sloan, 1965. Published by Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

Source 2
Ballad of the Green Beret

Fighting soldiers from the sky
Fearless men who jump and die
Men who mean just what they say
The brave men of the Green Beret

Silver wings upon their chest
These are men, America's best
One hundred men will test today
But only three win the Green Beret

Trained to live off nature's land
Trained in combat, hand-to-hand
Men who fight by night and day
Courage peak from the Green Berets

Silver wings upon their chest
These are men, America's best
One hundred men will test today
But only three win the Green Beret

Back at home a young wife waits
Her Green Beret has met his fate
He has died for those oppressed
Leaving her his last request

Put silver wings on my son's chest
Make him one of America's best
He'll be a man they'll test one day
Have him win the Green Beret.

Source: Barry Sadler and Robin Moore, © 1966 Estate of SSGT. Barry Sadler, reprinted with permission from Ms. Lavona Sadler

Source 3

I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag

Come on all of you big strong men,
 Uncle Sam needs your help again;
 He's got himself in a terrible jam
 Way down yonder in Vietnam,
 So put down your books and pick up a gun,
 We're gonna have a whole lot of fun.

Chorus: And it's one, two, three,
 What are we fighting for?
 Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
 Next stop is Vietnam;
 And it's five, six, seven,
 Open up the pearly gates,
 Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
 Whoopee! We're all gonna die!

Come on generals, let's move fast;
 Your big chance has come at last.
 Gotta go out and get those reds –
 The only good commie is the one that's dead
 You know that peace can only be won
 When we've blown 'em all to kingdom come.

(Chorus)

Come on Wall Street, don't move slow,
 Why man, this is war au-go-go
 There's plenty good money to be made
 Supplying the Army with the tools of the trade,
 Just hope and pray that if they drop the bomb,
 They drop it on the Viet Cong.

(Chorus)

Come on mothers throughout the land,
 Pack your boys off to Vietnam.
 Come on fathers, don't hesitate
 Send your sons off before it's too late.
 You can be the first one on your block
 To have your boy come home in a box.

(Chorus)

Source: Words and music by Joe McDonald © 1965 Renewed 1993 Alcatraz Corner Music Co. Used with permission.

Source 4
Okie from Muskogee

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don't take our trips on LSD
We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street
We like livin' right, and bein' free

We don't make a party out of lovin'
We like holdin' hands and pitchin' woo
We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do

I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all

Leather boots are still in style for manly footwear
Beads and Roman sandals won't be seen
Football's still the roughest thing on campus
And the kids here still respect the college dean

And I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee
A place where even squares can have a ball.
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse

And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all
And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all
In Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.

Source: Merle Haggard and Roy Burris, 1969. Okie From Muskogee, Words and Music by Merle Haggard and Roy Edward Burris, Copyright © 1969 Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, Copyright Renewed. All Rights Administered by Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, 424 Church Street, Suite 1200, Nashville, TN 37219 International Copyright Secured All Rights Reserved, Reprinted by Permission of Hal Leonard LLC

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Activity Sheet 1
Analyzing a Song or Poem

Important Phrases: Which are the most important or powerful phrases in the song or poem? Choose 3 phrases.

Phrase 1:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 2:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 3:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Using your analysis of the phrases as evidence, state the theme or message of this song or poem:

Source 5
A Break from the Bush

The South China Sea
drives in another herd.
The volleyball's a punching bag:
Clem's already lost a tooth
& Johnny's left eye is swollen shut.
Frozen airlifted steaks burn
on a wire grill, & miles away
machine guns can be heard.
Pretending we're somewhere else,
we play harder.
Lee Otis, the point man,
high on Buddha grass,
buries himself up to his neck
in sand. "Can you see me now?
In this spot they gonna build
a Hilton. Invest in Paradise.
Bang, bozos! You're dead."
Frenchie's cassette player
unravels Hendrix's "Purple Haze."
Snake, 17, from Daytona,
sits at the water's edge,
the ash on his cigarette
pointing to the ground
like a crooked finger. CJ,
who in three days will trip
a fragmentation mine,
runs after the ball
into the whitecaps,
laughing.

Source: Yusef Komunyakaa, "A Break from the Bush" from *Dien Cai Dau* © 1988 by Yusef Komunyakaa. Published by Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.

Source 6
Elegy

Into sunlight they marched,
Into dog day, into no saints day,
And were cut down.
They marched without knowing
How the air would be sucked from their lungs,
How their lungs would collapse,
How the world would twist itself, would
bend into the cruel angle.

Into the black understanding they marched
Until the angels came
Calling their names,
Until they rose, one by one from the blood.
The light blasted down on them.
The bullets sliced through the razor grass
So there was not even time to speak.
The words would not let themselves be spoken.
Some of them died.
Some of them were not allowed to.

Source: Brian Weigl, "Elegy" from ARCHEOLOGY OF THE CIRCLE, copyright © 1999 by Brian Weigl. Used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Activity Sheet 3
Soldiers' Poetry of Vietnam—Similarities and Differences

Use the chart below to compare the poems “A Break from the Bush” and “Elegy.”

Similarities	Differences

Discussion Question: Using the information you have learned from reading and analyzing the two poems, what conclusions can you draw about the experience of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam?