



MINNESOTA REMEMBERS  
**VIETNAM**

AMERICA'S SECRET WAR  
EDUCATOR TOOLKIT

## Activity Guide for Secondary English Language Arts Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: America's Secret War

### Activity Guide Outline:

1. Absent Narratives
2. Multiple Perspectives
3. Narrative Writing
4. Argumentation
5. The Function of Story

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### Absent Narratives

#### Essential Question

Who are the Hmong, and how were they impacted by the United States Secret War?

#### Supporting Questions

- What was the United States Secret War, and how does learning about it help us honor the Hmong's sacrifices?
- How might learning about the Hmong motivate us to understand Minnesota's other newest Americans and population make up?
- How might learning about the United States Secret War teach us about concealed or absent narratives?
- How might learning about the Hmong and their involvement in the United States Secret War give us a more complete understanding of Minnesota and United States history?

#### Resources/Materials

- **America's Secret War documentary**  
In the shadows of the Vietnam War, the CIA organized a secret war in neighboring Laos to prevent communism from spreading deeper into Southeast Asia. The Hmong fought for the U.S. — and for themselves— to keep Ho Chi Minh's regime from destroying their way of life.  
<https://www.mnvietnam.org/americas-secret-war/>



- **America's Secret War viewing guide** <https://goo.gl/a17tPD>
- **Story Wall Digital Short: A Hmong Soldier Remembers**  
Doua Yang was a Hmong soldier who fought in the CIA's secret war in Laos during the Vietnam war. He tells of his experiences during the war, his escape from the communists after the war and his eventual immigration to the U.S.  
<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/a-hmong-soldier-remembers-doua-yang/>

## Activities

### 1. Vision Quest Quick Write and Discussion

Begin the lesson by having students write a response to each question and have students volunteer sharing their responses.

- a. You are asked to fight for a people and country you do not know. How do you feel?
- b. You are asked to pick your loyalty between family members, knowing you will have to fight and kill them. How do you feel?
- c. You now must leave your home and family members to settle in another country, where you do not know the culture, people, or language. How do you feel?
- d. From the above questions, will you go to war? Explain your answer.

### 2. Video Preview Mini Discussion

Ask the following questions to check for students' background knowledge and to illustrate their potential lack of knowledge of these main topics.

- a. What do you know about the Vietnam War?
- b. What do you know about the United States CIA Secret War?
- c. What do you know about the Hmong?

### 3. View the film America's Secret War

Show the film [Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: America's Secret War](#), and have students fill in answers to the viewing guide. <https://goo.gl/a17tPD>

### 4. View the Story Wall clip [A Hmong Soldier Remembers](#)

### 5. Academic Circle

Following the viewings, have students generate discussion questions. Conduct an academic circle discussion or Socratic seminar with student questions. Some guidelines for student questions can be for them to consider these three levels of questions.

- a. Level I: literal recall
- b. Level II: Inferential, interpretive
- c. Level III: thematic, topical



## Closure

Students reflect on and discuss, verbally or in writing, the essential and supporting questions.

To learn more about the Absent Narratives Approach™ of the Minnesota Humanities Center, visit <http://www.humanitieslearning.org/resource>

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## Multiple Perspectives

### Essential Question

How does learning about multiple perspectives help us understand ourselves in order to form a society that values society and unity?

### Supporting Questions

- How are diversity and differences assets that enrich our lives?
- How can multiple perspectives help us work out our differences in order to peacefully coexist?
- How can multiple perspectives help us cultivate and recognize shared values?

### Resources/Materials

- **From Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: The Story Wall**  
Story Wall is an archive of personal narratives on the Vietnam War/Secret War  
<https://www.mnvietnam.org/>
- **America's Secret War Digital Shorts:**
  - **Kevin Yang's "Cups and Quarts"**  
Spoken Word artist Kevin Yang performs "Cups and Quarts," an original piece about his Hmong heritage, at Twin Cities PBS for the premiere screening of the documentary America's Secret War.  
<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/cups-and-quarts/>
  - **Hmong Veterans Not Considered US Veterans**  
Although they were hired and paid by the CIA, the soldiers who fought in the Secret War are not recognized as US veterans, and they receive no associated benefits. More than 35,000 Hmong and Lao soldiers died as surrogates as the US armed forces.  
<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/hmong-soldiers-not-considered-us-veterans/>

### Activities

#### I. Multiple Perspectives Activity

Begin the lesson by showing the digital short [Hmong Veterans Not Considered US Veterans](#). Have students jot down what they saw in the video and how it makes them feel. Afterwards, go around and ask several student to share what they wrote down. The idea is students will notice



different things and have different feelings, which illustrates how multiple perspectives create a more complete understanding of the digital short.

## 2. View and Write

Direct students to the [Minnesota Remembers Vietnam Story Wall](#), and have them view or read stories from at least three different perspectives. For example, students may read a story from a veteran, refugee, or activist. Students reflect on these stories, noting common themes between the pieces.

## 3. Spoken Word

View Kevin Yang's [Cups and Quarts](#)

Students write a poem about what they learned from visiting the [Story Wall](#). Students may take ideas from their reflections above. Students perform their piece in class.

- Have students post their spoken word poems on the Story Wall. [Share Stories Page](#)  
(note: teacher must submit story for student; not all stories are selected)

## 4. Closure

Direct students to do research on the Minnesota Memorial to The Special Forces in Laos. As a class, discuss the essential and supporting questions as they relate to their findings on the Story Wall and in their research on the memorial.

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## Narrative Writing

### Essential Question

How can we incorporate the Hmong's involvement in the United States Secret War into the American experience?

### Supporting Questions

- What is an American?
- Who is an American?
- How does recognizing the Hmong people's contributions to the United States shape our national identity?

### Resources/Materials

- **America's Secret War Digital Shorts:**
  - **PTSD in the Hmong Community**



Arriving in the US as refugees brought one level of relief, but it also awakened other tensions. The absence of immediate trauma released long-suppressed fears and emotions. Without a direct translation for “mental health” in the Hmong language, it becomes even harder to talk about PTSD and the lingering trauma of war.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/ptsd-in-the-hmong-community/>

- **Special Guerrilla Units**

Hmong soldiers were trained in guerrilla tactics by American and Thai specialists. They were called "Special Guerrilla Units," or SGUs. In the later years of the war they were often child soldiers. With mere days of training, the SGUs would be sent into battle against the Communist People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Battles were fierce and brutal injuries were common.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/sgu/>

- **From Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: The Story Wall**

- **Growing Up Hmong American: One Woman's Story**

This is a personal story shared on the Story Wall, by Hmong American Kaolee Vang.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/growing-up-hmong-american-one-womans-path/>

- **Ka Vang's "Extraordinary Hmong"**

Poet and spoken word artist Ka Vang was born at the secret CIA military base in Laos, Long Cheng, at the end of the Vietnam War. She immigrated to the Frogtown neighborhood in St. Paul, MN in 1980 when she was just five years old. Here, Vang performs her spoken word piece Extraordinary Hmong and talks about the importance of keeping Hmong traditions alive.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/extraordinary-hmong/>

## Activities

### 1. Quick Write and Class Discussion

Have students write answers to the first two supporting questions (What is an American? Who is an American?). Lead students in a discussion about what they wrote.

### 2. View and Discuss

View [Special Guerrilla Units](#) and [PTSD in the Hmong Community](#)

After viewing the videos, ask students to respond to the following questions:

- Did you learn something new?
- What surprised you in your learning?
- Does it change what you wrote in the previous activity about what and who is an American?



### 3. Supplemental Viewing and Reflection

Direct students to visit the [Story Wall](#) for more stories about others' experiences with the Vietnam War.

- a. View [Growing Up Hmong American: One Woman's Story](#) and [Extraordinary Hmong](#)

Students reflect on the impact of the Vietnam War, focusing on the different groups and their various contributions.

### 4. Reflection

Guide students through a class discussion or academic circle on the essential and supporting questions, using their observations from the digital shorts and Story Wall.

### 5. Closure

In a short essay, students answer the following questions:

- What is an American?
- Who is an American?
- How does recognizing Hmong contributions to the United States shape our national identity?
- How are you, the student, a product of the Vietnam War?

Students post their writing on the [Story Wall](#) (*note: teacher must submit story for student; not all stories are selected*)

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## Argumentation

### Essential Question

How can we use argumentation to give voice to others?

### Supporting Questions

- How is the Hmong's involvement in the US Secret War an absent narrative?
- How might learning about the Hmong and their involvement in the US Secret War render justice and restoration?

### Resources/Materials

- **America's Secret War documentary**

In the shadows of the Vietnam War, the CIA organized a secret war in neighboring Laos to prevent communism from spreading deeper into Southeast Asia. The Hmong fought for the U.S.



— and for themselves— to keep Ho Chi Minh’s regime from destroying their way of life.  
<https://www.mnvtiam.org/americas-secret-war/>

- **Story Wall: Hmong in America Story Collection**

Minnesota is home to more than 66,000 Hmong people, making it the largest Hmong population in the world. What led to this "Hmong Migration"? Why did the Hmong leave their native Laos and settle in Minnesota? And what exactly does it mean to be Hmong in America? These stories give a bit of insight.

<https://www.mnvtiam.org/story/hmong-in-america/>

## Activities

### 1. Preview

Begin the lesson by having students respond to these questions:

- What do you know about the Hmong?
- What do you know about the US Secret War?
- If you do not know about one or both, why?

### 2. View

Watch [America's Secret War](#) documentary

### 3. Reflect

- What did you learn from the film that you did not know about before?
- What surprised, shocked, angered, pleased you about what you learned?
- What more would you like to know?
- Which/Whose story resonated with you, and why?

### 4. Research and Reflection

Direct students to read through [Hmong in America Story Collection](#).

Students reflect on what they learned about the Hmong in this story collection. Consider when and where in their education they have learned about the Hmong and the Secret War, and if they have not been taught about the Hmong and the Secret War, then consider what is lost as a result.

### 5. Class Discussion

As a class, discuss the essential and supporting questions as they relate to the documentary, readings, and viewings in the story collection.

### 6. Closure



Option 1: Write a letter to the school district administration or Minnesota Department of Education and make a case for ethnic studies, including curriculum on the Hmong and the Secret War. Make sure you have a clear claim and support your claim with examples from what you viewed and read in this lesson.

Option 2: You have been drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. You will write a Conscientious Objector letter to the United States Department of Defense. Look up the address of the DOD and put it on letterhead. Despite the draft, you may object the Vietnam War and refuse to serve on specific grounds (claim). Perform research on what these categorical reasons are to find out which one aligns with you.

Review the [America's Secret War](#) documentary and Story Wall [Hmong in America Story Collection](#) in order to reference historical facts of the US Secret War and how such facts go against your categorical reason(s). You may not make up facts about the war or yourself.

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## The Function of Story

### Essential Question

How do stories connect and sustain us?

### Supporting Questions

- How does learning about the Hmong's involvement in the US Secret War and hearing individual stories of the Hmong address and do justice to the silencing of this community in the past?
- How does learning about Hmong tapestry or story cloth help us understand Hmong culture and history?
- How can the study and production of stories help us appreciate beauty, find meaning, and stimulate conversations between different cultural groups?

### Resources/Materials

- **Project Paj Ntaub featuring Suzanne Thao**  
The Hmong Museum's longest running program, Project Paj Ntaub, is a space for intergenerational communities to gather together and learn the art of paj ntaub.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao2f4KkXaf8>
- **America's Secret War documentary**  
In the shadows of the Vietnam War, the CIA organized a secret war in neighboring Laos to prevent communism from spreading deeper into Southeast Asia. The Hmong fought for the U.S.





— and for themselves— to keep Ho Chi Minh’s regime from destroying their way of life.

<https://www.mnvtiam.org/americas-secret-war/>

- **Cy Thao Hmong tapestry**

Former Minnesota legislator and Hmong community leader Cy Thao captures the Hmong experience in his paintings.

<https://www.mnvtiam.org/story/minnesota-legislator-and-painter-cy-thao/>

- **America's Secret War digital short: Dr. Mai Na Lee's Family Escapes Communist Pathet Lao**

As the Secret War ended, Hmong who fought on the side of the United States were hunted by Communist Pathet Lao soldiers in their native Laos. Dr. Mai Na Lee and her family were among the many people who fled the, eventually swimming across the wide and fast-flowing Mekong River into Thailand’s refugee camps.

<https://www.mnvtiam.org/story/dr-mai-na-lee-escapes-the-communist-pathet-lao/>

- **Story Wall Website**

The Story Wall is an archive of personal narratives on the Vietnam War/Secret War.

<https://www.mnvtiam.org/>

- **Story Wall: Hmong in America Story Collection**

Minnesota is home to more than 66,000 Hmong people, making it the largest Hmong population in the world. What led to this "Hmong Migration"? Why did the Hmong leave their native Laos and settle in Minnesota? And what exactly does it mean to be Hmong in America? These stories give a bit of insight.

<https://www.mnvtiam.org/story/hmong-in-america/>

## Activities

### I. Quick Write/Class Discussion

Students respond to the following questions and share their responses in a class discussion.

"Myths are the path to human understanding, and myth-making is the path to self-expansion and human expansion. Myths help us understand reality. They are the dreams of the universe."

— **Joseph Campbell**, *The Power of Myth*

- a. Try to remember your favorite story. What makes it memorable?
- b. Why do we tell stories? Consider the different cultural origin stories with which you are familiar. What do they do for these cultures?
- c. What are some possible functions of stories in people's lives?
- d. List the different ways or mediums in which stories are told.



## 2. View

Have students view stories in the links above, taking notes on details of the stories and how they are told.

## 3. Reflection: Check for Understanding

Have students write short responses to the following questions.

- a. What is a paj ntaub [pronounced “pan dow”], and what is it used for?
- b. What is a Hmong tapestry, and what is it used for?
- c. What are the different mediums used to tell the stories you learned about?
- d. What details were memorable, and how were these details presented to the viewer?

## 4. Class Discussion

As a class, discuss the essential and supporting questions as they relate to the readings and videos.

## 5. Storytelling Project

Assign topics to students, or have students choose from the list of topics:

- The war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia
- The CIA Secret War
- The Hmong and their involvement in the Secret War

Students will incorporate what they learned into a story, told through the following choice of mediums:

- a. an illustrated tapestry or graphic panels, to be placed on display boards
- b. a short documentary, in the style of the digital shorts
- c. a narrative poem
- d. spoken word performance

The teacher may use an open market approach, with projects/students at different stations, and invite other students or classes to visit the different stations.



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This activity guide was prepared by Chong Thao, a high school English Language Arts teacher for Saint Paul Public Schools, in partnership with TPT and the Minnesota Humanities Center.

To access this guide and additional resources to support teaching about America's Secret War,  
visit [mnvietnam.org/resources/](http://mnvietnam.org/resources/)

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