



MINNESOTA REMEMBERS  
**VIETNAM**  
AMERICA'S SECRET WAR  
EDUCATOR TOOLKIT

## Activity Guide for Secondary Social Studies Duty and Sacrifice

### Essential Question

How can we honor the memory of those who have served while thinking critically about the causes and consequences of war?

### Supporting Questions

- Whose lives does war affect, and in what ways?
- Who is a veteran, and what does this status mean?
- What responsibility should the United States government and its people have towards those who have served to protect it and its interests?
- For what reasons do non-Americans fight in America's conflicts?

### Resources/Materials

- Handout A - Concept Map
- Handout B – America's Secret War - Digital Shorts
- Handout C - Story Wall
- America's Secret War - Digital Shorts
  - **The CIA, the Hmong and the Secret War**  
Hmong General Vang Pao, a courageous and powerful leader, worked in tandem with the CIA to conduct covert operations in Laos. Among the hardest hit by this "Secret War" were the Hmong of northern Laos. Tens of thousands were killed during the war, and even more lost their lives while attempting to escape to freedom after the war ended.  
<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/the-cia-the-hmong-and-the-secret-war/>
  - **America's Secret War Digital Short: Hmong Veterans Not Considered 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/>
  - **America's Secret War Digital Short: Xai Nou Serves General Vang Pao to the End**



As a child of 10 or 11, Xai Nou Vang became involved in the CIA's clandestine operation in Laos during the Vietnam War. He later became a Special Guerilla Unit Captain and bodyguard to the revered General Vang Pao - but his memories of children fighting and dying in that operation haunts him still.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/xai-nou-vang-serves-general-vang-pao-to-the-end/>

- America's Secret War: Minnesota Remembers Vietnam (full documentary) -

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

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.

- America's Secret War viewing guide (optional): <https://goo.gl/a17tPD>
- Minnesota Remembers Vietnam Story Wall - <https://www.mnvietnam.org/>

### **Why We Fight – From My Parent's Perspective**

Kou Xiong regrets not asking his dad about his experience before he passed away. Luckily, it's not too late to ask his mom.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/why-we-fight-from-my-parents-perspective/>

- These optional resources can be used as extensions to incorporate more modern-day absent narratives of military service for non-U.S. citizens. Each article complements the sacrifices, choices, and hardships that soldiers (including the Hmong) faced in the past and in the present.
  - [The Tragic Fate of the Afghan Interpreters the U.S. Left Behind](#) - modern day example of the complexities of recruiting locals to assist the U.S. in its conflicts while also providing for compensation, safety, and recognition.
  - [Service Members, Not Citizens: Meet The Veterans Who Have Been Deported](#) - modern day example of serving the U.S. military as a non-citizen and the hope, albeit at times wishful, that recognition will be obtained and maintained for one's sacrifice to the U.S.

## **Activities**

### **1. Concept Map (Handout A)**

Begin the lesson by having students create a concept map of who or what defines a veteran. Allow students a couple of minutes to record their thoughts and then share their responses. Encourage students to refer to and add to their concept maps throughout the lesson.

### **2. America's Secret War – Digital Shorts (Handout B)**

- a. Guiding questions for discussion prior to viewing digital shorts:
  - For what reason(s) do people become soldiers?
  - What sacrifices do you believe people make when they become soldiers?
  - How could service in the armed forces alter or affect a person?
- b. [The CIA, the Hmong and the Secret War](#)  
Discussion Questions:
  - How did the war affect the people of Laos, specifically the Hmong?
  - What options did the Hmong have when the war came to their homeland?
- c. [America's Secret War Digital Short: Hmong Veterans Not Considered Veterans](#)  
Discussion Questions:



- Why did many of the Hmong decide to become soldiers and assist the U.S. military?
  - How prepared were the Hmong soldiers who engaged in combat?
  - Who were many of the Hmong soldiers? Does this agree with your personal beliefs about who, or what constitutes a soldier?
- d. [America's Secret War Digital Short: Xai Nou Serves General Vang Pao to the End](#)  
Discussion Questions:
- How does the U.S. government recognize the contributions of the Hmong people in the Secret War?
  - What sacrifices did the Hmong make to assist the U.S.?
3. **View the Film** – [America's Secret War: Minnesota Remembers Vietnam](#) (57 minutes)  
Optional: Students complete or discuss the viewing guide: <https://goo.gl/a17tPD>
4. **Story Wall – Research and Analysis** (Handout C)
- a. **Story Wall Overview:** The story wall contains personal accounts from the Secret War in Laos and the War in Vietnam. Each story provides a unique perspective from a storyteller who provides insight into the war and its effects on their lives. The interactive map (<https://www.mnvietnam.org/map/>) provides the viewer with a glimpse into where storytellers were during the conflict, and where they are today (or at the time the story was shared).
- b. **Modeling the activity:** Prepare students to research one of the stories for the Story Wall activity by reading [Why We Fight - From My Parent's Perspective](#) with your students. Complete the Story Wall handout with students to model what information to look for.
- c. **Independent or Partnered Research**
- Direct students to the map on the Story Wall page from Minnesota Remembers Vietnam. <https://www.mnvietnam.org/map/>
  - Allow students to browse through the map to find a story of interest and then complete the document analysis questions.
- Note: The stories present multiple perspectives (e.g. Hmong, American, civilian, combatant, etc.). Depending on the course, educators may want to limit the scope that students choose from in their research.
- d. **Assigned Research Recommendations (if teacher chooses to skip independent exploration of the story wall):**
- [Kao Kalia Yang's Hmong Memoirs](#)  
Author Kao Kalia Yang reads from and talks about writing her award-winning book, "The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir."
  - [Growing Up Hmong American: One Woman's Story](#)  
A personal story shared on the Story Wall, by Hmong American Kaolee Vang
  - [Like Father Like Sons: Shu Lor's Story](#)  
Hmong musician Shu Lor carries on his family's tradition of blending traditional melodies with modern flair. And he's also the composer behind the TPT-produced documentary "America's Secret War" about the CIA's clandestine operation in Laos during the Vietnam War. Here, he gives us a behind-the-scenes glimpse of his parents' contribution to his score. **Note:** Make sure to



turn on the sound: You'll hear an extended take of the documentary's theme music.

- [Yang Thao: MY FATHER'S QEEJ](#)

I can still remember my dad carefully wrapping his qeej with black cloth and carrying it with him, all the way to the United States. At this time, I even wondered why did he even bother bringing this instrument?

- [Jonathan Vang: KNOWING IS HALF THE BATTLE](#)

My parents were refugees as a result of the Secret War. My dad was recruited as part of the CIA secret army, when he was a mere teen. I've never felt comfortable enough to ask my dad about his specific experience fighting against the Vietcong or the NVA, but I have heard bits of stories of confronting North Vietnamese soldiers as a teen.

- [Suzanne Joachico: THE STORY OF MY GRANDMOTHER: AMERICA'S SECRET WAR IN LAOS](#)

There is nothing that we could do, as the generation that benefited from the courage of our parents and grandparents, to repay them for what they were willing to go through to get to freedom and provide a better life for us. All that we could do is embrace and appreciate life to its fullest potential.

## 5. Socratic Seminar

Conduct a Socratic Seminar by having students refer back to their concept maps to discuss their ideas of veterans, sacrifice and recognition.

**Discussion Questions:** *Have students record their responses prior to the discussion for an "entrance ticket." Allow a few minutes for students to brainstorm and record their thoughts.*

- Has your understanding of who or what a veteran is changed? Why or why not?
- Who should the United States recognize as having veteran status?
- What amends, if any, can be made to the Hmong for their sacrifice and service?
- What lessons can be learned from America's involvement in the Secret War?

## 6. Closure

Conduct a [whip around](#) to allow students to share their final thoughts, or pose questions of their own.



### Recommended Time Setting for a History Class

- A mini unit within or after the teaching of the American Civil War would likely be appropriate to emphasize the choices that individuals, families, and societies are forced to make. Enables students to access prior knowledge of division/disagreement between nations (groups of people with varying ideologies) when covering a foreign region that many have likely never heard of.

### Recommended Time Setting for a Citizenship and Government Class

- Screening this film should be completed during a unit on the various types of governments (democratic and non-democratic), which can be used to help explain how countries with differing forms of governing interact with one another.

### Recommended Time Setting for a Geography Class

- This mini-unit could be completed while studying/creating maps and/or the 5 themes of geography. Place and location could and should be highly emphasized throughout the screening of the film. In addition, analyzing and creating maps should also be a central focus.

### Recommended Content to Pre-teach

Students must be familiar with the Cold War prior to viewing this film. A lesson, or lessons, covering the following would be helpful to students unfamiliar with the following:

- WWII/Cold War
- Types of Government (democratic and non-democratic)
- Containment and the Domino Theory (a comparison of Laos being the “cork in the wine bottle” is referenced in the film by Pao)

### Recommended Unit Planning:

Roughly 4-5 classes of 45 - 60 minutes in length are recommended to cover the activities and film(s).

#### Day One:

Concept map  
Digital Shorts 1 - 3  
Discussions (as needed)

#### Day Two:

Screening of *Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: America's Secret War*  
Optional: Discussion Guide

#### Days Three-Four:

Introduction to and modeling of Story Wall  
Independent and/or partnered research

#### Day Four or Five:

Socratic seminar



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This activity guide was prepared by Michael Paulson, a high school social studies teacher for Intermediate District 287,  
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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## Handout A: Minnesota Remembers Vietnam - The Secret War in Laos

**Warm Up:** Create a concept map in the space below on who, or what a veteran is to you. Refer to your concept map during discussion(s) and alter it as needed throughout the lesson.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Class Hour \_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

America's Secret War Educator Toolkit is a partnership of TPT and the Minnesota Humanities Center.  
[mnavietnam.org/educator-resources](http://mnavietnam.org/educator-resources)

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## Handout B: America's Secret War – Digital Shorts

**Prior to Viewing Digital Shorts:** answer each question below to record some of your thoughts, beliefs, and understanding of soldiers.

1. For what reason(s) do people become soldiers?
2. What sacrifices do you believe people make when they become soldiers?
3. How could service in the armed forces alter or affect a person?

### **Digital Short One: America's Secret War Digital Short: The CIA, the Hmong and the Secret War**

Hmong General Vang Pao, a courageous and powerful leader, worked in tandem with the CIA to conduct covert operations in Laos. Among the hardest hit by this "Secret War" were the Hmong of northern Laos. Tens of thousands were killed during the war, and even more lost their lives while attempting to escape to freedom after the war ended.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/the-cia-the-hmong-and-the-secret-war/>

#### **Discussion Questions to Digital Short One:**

1. How did the war affect the people of Laos, specifically the Hmong?
2. What options did the Hmong have when the war came to their homeland?

### **Digital Short Two: America's Secret War Digital Short: Hmong Veterans Not Considered 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 of the US armed forces.

<https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/hmong-soldiers-not-considered-us-veterans/>

#### **Discussion Questions to Digital Short Two:**

1. Why did many of the Hmong decide to become soldiers and assist the U.S. military?
2. How prepared were the Hmong soldiers who engaged in combat?







## Handout C: Story Wall

### Directions:

- Access the Story Wall with the following link: <https://www.mnvietnam.org/>
- Browse through the stories by using the interactive map. <https://www.mnvietnam.org/map/>
  - Red icons indicate where the storyteller was during the Secret War and/or the War in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.
  - Black icons indicate where the storyteller was when their story was submitted.
- Once you have selected a story, complete the document analysis questions below.  
Note: Some questions or elements of the biographical information may not be answerable.

### Biographical Details:

- Where was the story submitted from?
- Where was the participant's primary location during the Secret War in Laos and/or the War in Vietnam?
- Story Subject:
- Military Branch:
- Dates of Service:
- Veteran Organization:
- Unit:
- Specialty:

### Analysis Questions:

- What were three important events that were shared by the storyteller?
- In what way(s) did the war impact, alter, and/or affect the storyteller's life?
- What dangers or challenges did the storyteller experience because of the war?



- What difficult choices or sacrifices did the storyteller make?
- How does the storyteller feel about their experience(s) from the war?
- Did the storyteller provide any lessons to be learned?
- What lessons have you learned after reading their story?
- If you had the ability to do so, what questions would you ask the storyteller?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Class Hour \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_