



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2002 Volume III: War and Peace in the Twentieth Century

---

## **Questions of War and Peace: Using Case Studies to Teach the History of American Foreign Policy**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 02.03.02  
by Russell Sirman

The unit plan is designed to provide teachers with a set of resources and strategies for using case studies to teach students about the history of American foreign policy. The unit uses a case-study approach to examine three controversial issues in American foreign policy in which U.S. policy makers had to make important decisions regarding questions of war and peace. The specific cases discussed are: the decision whether to use atomic weapons to end the Second World War against Japan; the decision whether to escalate the Vietnam conflict by committing American combat troops; the decision whether to deploy American troops to support humanitarian relief efforts in Somalia.

The unit plan begins with a discussion of teaching strategies with a particular emphasis on using case studies as a tool for teaching analytical writing skills in accord with Advanced Placement standards and with the standards recently developed for the interdisciplinary segment of the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). A modified CAPT grading rubric is provided to help teachers assess student writing.

The unit plan continues with a discussion about the choosing of cases for investigation. All three proposed cases were chosen because they provide a snapshot of decisions taken during three distinct time periods of American history in the twentieth century. The atomic bombings case captures policy decision-making at the moment the United States is emerging as a global superpower. The decision to escalate the conflict in Vietnam falls squarely within the postwar context of the bipolar international system marked by superpower rivalry between the United States and The Soviet Union. American military support for humanitarian relief efforts in Somalia in 1992-93 illustrates the complexities and dangers of foreign policy decision-making in the early phases of the so-called "New World Order" in international politics.

Next, the unit plan discusses the sources used to support each case study. The sources designed for student reading receive the bulk of the analysis; however, there is also a discussion of the reading list for teachers. Alternative classroom resources such as videos, films and on-line resources are discussed as well. The unit plan next moves on to a specific discussion of teaching methods. The Somalia case is highlighted with a set of four sample lesson plans that teachers can adapt and modify for their own needs. I conclude with an annotated list of reading and classroom materials.

(Recommended for U.S. History, grades 10-12.)

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>