



Television Race Initiative

A Project of P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc.

FACILITATORS GUIDE



POV

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Dear Discussion Facilitator,

I began this journey because I wanted to understand what war does to human beings and their environment. I wondered, what would it be like to have bombs falling in my home town, Agent Orange killing the redwood and oak forests around me, napalm burning the children on their way to school? What is the legacy of war? And what happens after the troops go home?

War by its nature is brutal. Young people answer their country's call and are asked to engage in the business of war: killing. How does it affect a human being to kill another human being, even a child? Why do some soldiers come back from war and refuse to talk about their experience? What happens to the widows — on both sides of a war — whose husbands don't come home?

Everywhere I went in the United States and Vietnam, widows wanted to become a voice for peace, asking, "What can I do to help end war?" In Vietnam, I heard again and again, "If people could just come here and see what war does, they'd never want to do it again."

My hope in making *Regret to Inform* is that by hearing these women's stories from both sides, viewers will begin to see that the enemy is war itself.

I am grateful for this deeply thoughtful facilitators guide. I also wish to thank every facilitator who will help communities discuss the disturbing, emotional, challenging issues raised by this film and then decide what they want to do about war and peace.

Former President and General Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it." Maybe that day has come.

With hope,
Barbara Sonneborn



JANE WATTENBERG

*Barbara Sonneborn, Producer, Director,
and Writer of Regret to Inform*

**Regret to Inform is about war,
not about taking sides.
Discussing Regret to Inform is about
reconciliation, not about blame.**



Regret to Inform

In 1968, on her 24th birthday, Barbara Sonneborn received word that her husband, Jeff, had been killed in Vietnam while trying to rescue his wounded radio officer during a mortar attack. "We regret to inform. . ." the telegram began. Twenty years later, Sonneborn, a photographer and visual artist, set out on a search for the truth about war and its legacy. The result is a moving examination of the impact of war over time. Her debut documentary chronicles her journey to Que Son, where Jeff died, and weaves together the stories of widows from both sides of the American-Vietnam conflict. Their stories and the images of Sonneborn's journey, through Vietnam and through memory, are the "text" of *Regret to Inform*.

The Opportunity

Anyone who has lived through a modern war has, to some degree, been conditioned not to see their opponents as people. To survive, in spirit as well as in body, we create distance — sometimes physical, sometimes emotional — between ourselves and those we oppose, viewing them through a lens that allows us to see them as "enemy" rather than as fellow human beings. By asking to hear individuals' stories, filmmaker Barbara Sonneborn shatters that lens.

The stories we hear in *Regret to Inform* humanize war. They transform anonymous casualties into people with families and hopes and feelings. The love expressed in the film's stories reminds us that despite seemingly insurmountable political divisions, there is much that we all share. And stories inspire stories. By breaking long-preserved silences, *Regret to Inform* shortens the distance between people who once viewed each other only as enemies. The shorter the distance, the easier it is to move toward healing and reconciliation.

When Barbara Sonneborn was asked if making this film had healed her, the filmmaker paused, then answered, "It has deepened me" (*Release Print*, Dec./Jan. 1998-99). By discussing this film, we too can be deepened. Our attempts to listen, understand, and act honor those who died as well as those who survived. The closing of the film reminds us,

"They say:

Our deaths are not ours;
they are yours;
they will mean what you make them."

— Archibald McLeish



Phan Ngoc Dung
and her late
husband.

NATIONAL PARTNERS

Facing History and Ourselves

16 Hurd Road
Brookline, MA 02146

www.facing.org

Facing History and Ourselves is a national educational and teacher-training organization whose mission is to encourage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote a more humane and informed citizenry.

National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ)

475 Park Avenue South, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10016

www.nccj.org

NCCJ is a human relations organization dedicated to fighting bias, bigotry, and racism in America. NCCJ promotes understanding and respect among all races, religions, and cultures through advocacy, conflict resolution, and education.

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

1818 R Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20009
202-387-3760

www.aacu-edu.org

AAC&U is a national association committed to making the aims of liberal learning a vigorous and constant influence on institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.

YWCA of the USA

Cyria Lobo
350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 301
New York, NY 10118
212-273-7800

www.ywca.org

The YWCA of the USA is dedicated to the empowerment of women and girls and to the elimination of racism. The 363 member associations provide safety, shelter, job training, child care, physical fitness programs, counseling, and social, health, and educational services to millions of women and girls and their communities annually. The YWCA has historically implemented communitywide dialogues and initiatives on issues of racism.



HISTORICAL TIME LINE

- 1945** World War II ends. Ho Chi Minh appeals to U.S. for help in preventing resumption of French colonial control of Vietnam.
- 1946** Vietnamese war of independence against France begins, led by Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh.
- 1950** U.S. opts to bankroll France's campaign to resume control of Vietnam. Korean War begins.
- 1953** Korean War ends.
- 1954** Battle of Dien Bien Phu. France abandons efforts to regain Vietnam. Vietnam temporarily partitioned along the 17th parallel with elections promised in two years.
- 1956** Diem refuses to allow popular elections to reunite Vietnam.
- 1959** Diem moves to eliminate former Viet Minh members in South Vietnam.
- 1960** John F. Kennedy elected president. National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) formed and begins military struggle against repression in the South.
- 1962** Cuban Missile Crisis.
- 1963** JFK approves military overthrow of Diem. JFK assassinated.
- 1964** Gulf of Tonkin incident reported, leading to Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Bombing of Vietnam and use of Agent Orange begins.
- 1968** Tet Offensive. My Lai Massacre. Police respond violently to anti-war protests at Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Nixon elected president. Martin Luther King assassinated.
- 1969** Nixon orders first withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. Fighting expands into Laos and Cambodia.
- 1970** Neutral Cambodian government overthrown and replaced with a pro-U.S. government. American troops cross border into Cambodia. Four students shot and killed by National Guard during anti-war protest at Kent State. Congress repeals Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.
- 1971** South Vietnamese army, with support of U.S. Air Force, attacks enemy strongholds in Laos. They are successfully driven back.
- 1973** Paris Peace Accord signed. U.S. withdraws from Vietnam.
- 1974** Nixon resigns.
- 1975** Vietnam reunited under a central government organized by Hanoi. Saigon renamed Ho Chi Minh City.
- 1995** U.S. ends economic embargo of Vietnam.

Background and Preparation

As a facilitator for *Regret to Inform*, you do not need to be an expert on Vietnam or the history of the Vietnam War. However, the more you know, the more likely you are to understand participants' comments and the less likely you are to be caught off guard. If possible, check out some of the Web sites or books listed in the resource section at the end of this guide before your event.

History: The Military Conflict

With the end of World War II, the United States shed its traditionally isolationist position to emerge as an international political power. Worried about the spread of communism, and believing that the Soviet Union was acting as an aggressor by instigating communist revolutions throughout the world, the United States adopted a policy of "containment."

Under this policy, the United States sought to prevent the establishment of communist regimes wherever it could, convinced that all such governments added to the strength of the Soviet Union. This position sometimes put American officials in the awkward position of supporting dictatorships over popularly supported communist governments, as ultimately happened in Vietnam.

Though approached to support Vietnam's independence by the popular communist leader Ho Chi Minh, the United States opted instead to side with French attempts to regain colonial control. France's efforts failed, and in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily divided along the 17th parallel with the North controlled by Ho and the South by pro-American Ngo Dinh Diem.

When it became clear that Ho Chi Minh would win the planned election in 1956, Diem, with U.S. backing, refused to allow a vote. Tensions mounted and by the early 1960s, Diem's increasingly repressive government was rapidly losing support. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy gave tacit approval to a coup, hoping that new leaders could rally popular support and counter Ho. President Kennedy was mistaken.

When Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency following JFK's assassination, he inherited an unstable South Vietnam and 16,500 American troops on the ground there. In 1964, citing a report that later evidence would show was inaccurate, President Johnson announced that American destroyers in international waters had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. Congress responded quickly, passing a resolution authorizing the president to "take all necessary measures to repel attacks on U.S. forces." This Gulf of Tonkin Resolution became the basis for U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

Despite the absence of a formal declaration of war, the United States began a massive bombing campaign that included the use of Agent Orange, a defoliant, to clear the dense jungle that provided cover for the Viet Cong. The poison had a devastating impact on Vietnam's environment and agricultural economy, and on the health of those who were exposed, including American soldiers.

United States involvement increased, peaking in 1968 with more than half a million troops fighting in Vietnam. By 1969, the fighting had secretly expanded into Laos and Cambodia. By the time the U.S. forces withdrew in 1973, approximately 3.1 million American troops had served in Southeast Asia and



more than 58,000 had died there. When the war officially ended in 1975, the conflict had claimed the lives of more than 3.8 million North and South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. Many thousands more were injured, physically and psychologically.

Events in the United States

Facing strong criticism for his handling of the war, Lyndon Johnson did not seek re-election. In 1968, Richard M. Nixon was voted into office on a promise to end the war "with honor" and to restore "law and order" to American streets, which had become the site of increasing anti-war protests. Participation in the civil rights movement had given many young Americans experience in the politics of protest, including questioning the authority of government and organizing demonstrations. Based on college campuses, in church basements, and even at meetings of veterans groups, the anti-war movement ranged from peaceful teach-ins, church services, and rallies to sit-ins, civil disobedience, and the bombing of buildings in which military research was conducted.

News coverage, especially on television, amplified the political pressure to end the war. It was no coincidence that anti-war protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago responded to police brutality with the chant "The whole world is watching." Coverage of American students being beaten, or in the case of Kent State (1970), being killed by the National Guard for what many perceived as the simple exercise of the American right to free speech, sparked outrage.

In addition, for the first time, footage on the nightly news showed people what was happening on battlefields far from home. Over time, the graphic nature of these images helped to rally the average American behind the anti-war cause. Especially jolting was footage from the Tet Offensive, the massive North Vietnamese attack launched on January 31, 1968, into the heart of Saigon (the South's capital). Faced with pictures that undermined claims that America was winning the war, the U.S. government was forced to consider the possibility that there would never be a way to win this war. Debacles like the 1968 My Lai Massacre, in which U.S. soldiers killed the residents of a defenseless village, further eroded public support for the war.

For many years, the United States attempted to fight a heavily technological war against opponents whose strength lay less in weaponry than in their ability to intermingle with the country's entire population and their unshakable commitment to defend their own land. In 1973, the United States decided to abandon that fight and pulled out the last of its troops, leaving its South Vietnamese allies vulnerable. Two years later, the North marched into Saigon and reunited the country under communist control. The legacy of America's involvement was a South Vietnam governed by communists who continued to fight, using their political and civilian powers against former adversaries.



Vietnam and bordering countries.



PREPARING THE GROUP

Discussions are more productive when participants feel safe and comfortable. As you think about how to create that kind of environment, consider the following:

- ❖ Where will I hold the event? Do those I hope to attract have a way to get there? Is the space accessible? Is it “neutral” territory or will some feel more comfortable than others entering the building?
- ❖ Would it be helpful to have a second facilitator who is different from me (male with female, Vietnamese with American, veteran with civilian, etc.)?
- ❖ Is the room comfortable? Are the chairs set up so people can see one another? Can people hear one another?
- ❖ How well do group members know one another? Is this a new conversation for them or are they simply continuing a conversation they’ve already been having? Do I need to provide time for introductions? Besides names, what might people need to know about each other to help them feel comfortable? Do I need to provide name tags?
- ❖ How big is my group? Is it so big that some people will feel too intimidated to speak? If so, have I planned some small group or partner time as part of the discussion format? Do I need or want to provide activity options that are not discussion-based? Do I need to provide translators?
- ❖ Does my discussion format give everyone a chance to be heard? What strategies will I use to keep one or two people from dominating the discussion? How will people take turns or indicate that they want to speak?
- ❖ How will I involve the group in setting ground rules that encourage open and productive dialogue?
- ❖ Would people feel more comfortable talking if the group agreed to confidentiality? If so, how should I handle requests for press coverage and how do I record the proceedings?
- ❖ Have I structured the event to leave enough time for planning future action?

Knowing Your Audience

Even without knowing exactly who will attend a particular event, you can assume that participants are likely to relate differently to *Regret to Inform*. For today’s typical college students, born after the Vietnam War ended, Vietnam is just part of American history, evoking no more or less emotion than World War I does for their parents. In contrast, with veteran’s groups or Vietnamese immigrant communities, you are likely to have audience members who experienced the war directly. They may not agree on interpretations of events, but they’re likely to share an emotional response to seeing footage of the conflict.

Some may have had firsthand experience with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a term first coined in the 1980s to refer to Vietnam veterans’ emotional symptoms. PTSD now is used to describe reactions to traumas such as rape, natural disasters, and violent crime. Because *Regret to Inform*’s emotionally charged content may trigger memories of such traumas, you may want to have on hand phone numbers of local agencies or organizations that provide support services for people experiencing PTSD.

The film itself points out that many people affected by the Vietnam War never set foot on Vietnamese soil. Widows and other family members are the most obvious examples. The war also created deep divisions within many American families as fathers who served in World War II struggled to understand sons who burned draft cards. The option available to middle- and upper-class white men to avoid military service — by attending graduate school or moving to Canada — was rarely available to poor men or men of color, which exacerbated class and racial divisions. When war protesters, most of whom were white, aimed their criticism at soldiers and their families, who were disproportionately from communities of color, tensions further increased.

Knowing Yourself

As a facilitator, you sometimes may feel like a conduit for all the emotion in the room. But it’s important not to get so caught up in the emotion that you take sides, which will tend to silence the opposition, and not to let your personal issues dominate the conversation, which may exclude issues that are important to the community. To avoid being caught off guard by your own reactions, watch the

film before your event so that you aren’t processing raw emotion at the same time that you’re trying to facilitate a discussion. Know your “hot button” issues. If they come up, remember that your job is to keep the discussion flowing, not to debate others in the room.



Vietnamese women during a bombing attack. Photograph courtesy of Educational & Television Films, L.T.D.

Leading a Discussion of *Regret to Inform*

Before Viewing the Film

Discussing *Regret to Inform* offers a wonderful opportunity to expand people's thinking about the universal human costs and causes of war. During an open exchange, participants are likely to touch on deeply held beliefs about the role of government, nationalism, racism, gender, and politics in the persistence of war. In fact, challenging people to look at how their beliefs affect whether they accept or reject the use of violence may become a central part of your event.

Transforming Obstacles into Dialogue

A facilitator isn't a psychologist. You can't change the reactions of people who are viewing *Regret to Inform* through the lens of their own unresolved personal issues. At the same time, you don't want to silence their voices. But deep pain, intense anger, or guilt can block people's ability to hear others and, therefore, engage in dialogue. The best way to keep a discussion going if a participant becomes disruptive or offensive is to be clear about the purpose of your event. Here are some examples of dialogue blockers and how to use them:

- *Everything would have been okay if the government had just let us win the war.* You should encourage people to comment on how the politics or policies of the Vietnam War help explain or provide evidence for their ideological beliefs. However, if the discussion begins to focus exclusively on the merits or failures of a particular battle or policy, participants may be unable to consider the film's broader issues.

It can sometimes be difficult to move a group beyond limited historical debates. Some people avoid emotional issues that make them uncomfortable by keeping the discussion focused on familiar political or historical territory. Others may dwell on a specific policy because they feel a need to justify their own actions. But because we can't change historical events, discussions that focus too narrowly on past politics or policy may leave participants feeling helpless. While it's important to let people be heard, it's also important to help the group make connections to broader, more current issues.



Barbara Sonneborn, 20, and her husband Jeff Gurvitz at a party, University of Illinois.

RESPECTFUL SHARING

To create an atmosphere in which people can share opinions respectfully you might:

- ♦ Agree to discussion ground rules before you start. Examples: No one may interrupt someone who is speaking; people may speak for themselves ("I think. . .") but may not generalize for everyone ("Americans believe. . ." or "people agree that. . .").
- ♦ Clearly identify and state the purpose(s) of your event. Should the discussion veer off track, reminding the group of the purpose can be a respectful way to refocus. For example, if you agree that your event is primarily to hear women's stories, but men begin to dominate the discussion, you can intervene gently, restate the purpose, and ask to hear from women in the group.
- ♦ Remind participants that they may be talking about their neighbor's son or mother, or that they may be offering an opinion on the most important event in another person's life.
- ♦ Talk about the difference between "debate" and "dialogue." In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to each other actively. Remind participants that your event is about dialogue.
- ♦ Remind participants of this basic tenet of media analysis: Who we are influences how we interpret what we see. In other words, 20 people watching this film may have 20 different views of its content and meaning, all of which may be accurate.



TOPICS AND PARTNERS

War affects everyone, but as you look for specific partners for Regret to Inform events, it may help to start with groups already organized by ethnicity or by common interests:

Asian Americans
Asian studies
Conflict resolution
Death
Diversity
Gender
Grief
International studies
Love/Marriage
Military history
Oral history
Patriotism
Peace studies/Peace and justice
Prejudice
Psychology
Racism
Reconciliation
Refugees
Religion (faith communities)
U.S. history
Veterans
Vietnamese Americans
Vietnamese history
Vietnamese immigrants
Violence
War
Widows
Women's studies/Women's issues

If the discussion seems bogged down in a debate over history, try restating the event's purpose and ask a question that links the topic at hand with that purpose. In response to "Everything would have been okay if. . ." above, you might have the group define "win." What would winning look like to the various people featured in *Regret to Inform*? What would it take to transform a conflict like the Vietnam War into a win for everyone involved? Or ask for a reaction to one of the film's human dilemmas such as having to choose between saving yourself or saving a neighbor.

- *This film is anti-American.* The United States, as elsewhere, has a long history of citizens attempting to silence opponents' voices by questioning their patriotism. In the case of this dialogue blocker, however, a comment intended to silence may serve as a wonderful springboard. Ask for details. What, exactly, did the speaker perceive to be anti-American? Is it anti-American to listen to the stories of a former enemy? If so, how would we ever get to a point of reconciliation? Why might it be hard to hear stories in which we are not the "good guy"?
- *The North Vietnamese did reprehensible things, too.* By attempting to deflect responsibility, this kind of statement can begin a cascade of blame and defensiveness. To steer the discussion to a more productive path, note that one point of the film is that war creates situations in which none of the combatants can avoid reprehensible acts. Ask for examples of things that people in the film did that they wouldn't have done if not for the war.

In general, any time the discussion strays into unproductive territory, try to guide people back to common ground by helping them identify moments of compassion in the film. It's not necessary for everyone to agree on every point, but for people to work in partnership or coalition, there must be some common ground. You might ask: What expressions of love did you see or hear? or What did the pictures of parents with children in their arms make you think of? You also might ask people to imagine themselves in another's shoes: What would you do if you were drafted by your government and asked to kill people who looked like you? What would you do if you lived in a small village and soldiers came in and started burning your crops?



Vietnamese woman fleeing a fire bomb attack. Photograph courtesy of Educational & Television Films, L.T.D.



Nguyen Thi Hong.

Opening the Discussion

The editing and cinematography of *Regret to Inform* convey a somber grace. The pace is deliberate, quiet, dignified. It invites reflection, almost as if viewers were standing at a grave site. You can preserve that reflective mood after the film by calling for a few moments of silence, or suggesting that everyone take a deep breath, or beginning with an activity that people do by themselves and then share.

For example, people might take a few minutes to jot down initial thoughts or reactions. Depending on the size of the gathering and your room's logistics, you may want to invite people to share those thoughts with a partner or small group before engaging in large-group discussion. Another possibility is to ask participants to represent their emotions or impressions in a drawing and then share what they've drawn. The idea isn't to produce great art but to give people a chance to communicate on an emotional rather than an exclusively intellectual level.

Or you might have participants write down a list of adjectives that describe their impressions of the film. Then list those adjectives on a flip chart and use them to begin your discussion: Which things in the film elicited these responses? Are you surprised by anything on the list? Which list items did you experience and which weren't part of your reaction? How do different reactions reflect different personal histories?

Continuing the Discussion

Let participants' reactions guide discussion paths. Because *Regret to Inform* is a rich resource, participants probably will have more than enough to say to carry on a fruitful dialogue once you open the floor to them. Also, chances are that what audience members find most touching or important is what will lead them to action.

If your audience includes members who lived through the events in the film, you may want to devote some of your event to their experiences. *Regret to Inform* uses

THE STORYTELLERS

One way to reinforce the humanity of the women who speak in the film is to refer to them by name in your group discussion. As a sign of respect, it is important to pronounce each name correctly. If you are not familiar with English and Vietnamese, you might want to spend some time reviewing these names before your event.

Barbara Sonneborn

Bar-bah-rah Sahn-ah-born

April Burns

Ay-pril Burnz

Lula Bia

Loo-lah Bee-yah

Norma Banks

Nor-mah Banks

Phan Ngoc Dung

Fahn Nok Zoong

Diane C. Van Renselaar

Di-yan See Van Ren-se-lahr

Grace Castillo

Greys Kaste-yo

Nguyen My Hien, M.D.

Nu-en Me He-en

Nguyen Ngoc Xuan

Nu-en Nok Su-ahn

Charlotte Begay

Shahr-laht Beh-gay

Tran Nghia

Chan Nee-ah

Truong Thi Huoc

Chwong Tee Hoo-ak

Phan Thi Thuan

Fahn Tee Thwahn

Truong Thi Le

Chwong Tee Lay

Le Thi Ngot

Lay Tee Not

Nguyen Thi Hong

Nu-en Tee Hong



stories from the Vietnam War to examine the lasting impact of declaring enemies and using that declaration as a basis for violence. It also uses the exchange of stories as a starting point for reconciliation. Often, that exchange will provide a natural flow for your discussion. You can encourage people to share stories by asking them to identify which moments of the film were most memorable and prompting them to explain why.



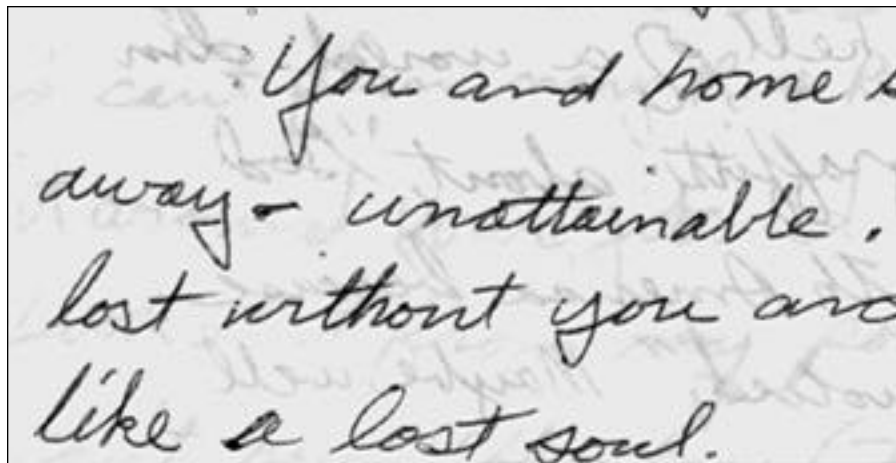
April Burns and her husband Bill before the Vietnam War.

To help you organize your discussion, or simply to help you review the content of *Regret to Inform* in preparation for leading your discussion, this guide suggests three broad frames: The Cost of War/The Cost of Silence, Distance, and Choices. Each section begins with general questions related to the film. In the accompanying sidebars are selected quotes that you can use as discussion sparks or simply as reminders of the film's content. **You are not expected to cover all of these questions or quotes.** They are included to help you anticipate responses that might arise and to serve as a reference for important moments in the film. Choose those that best meet your group's needs.

Closing the Discussion

Each section wraps up with general questions designed to help people apply what they've learned from the film and discussion to their own lives. The "Moving Toward Action" questions provide an essential bridge from consideration of global issues — which can seem overwhelming and leave people feeling frustrated, angry, or cynical — to local action, which can make people feel empowered and transform negative emotions into hope.

Note that this guide does not include a list of recommended follow-up activities. Instead, generate a list from your group. Leave time to brainstorm and encourage participants to pursue one or more of the possibilities that they've suggested.



Excerpt from a letter to Barbara Sonneborn from her husband Jeff Gurvitz.

The Cost of War/ The Cost of Silence

History books often present war as a series of key battles with a focus on political and military strategy. Human beings, if considered at all, are divided into victors and vanquished, innocent and guilty, fighters and civilians. But, as *Regret to Inform* makes clear, reality is rarely so neat. Civilians find themselves dodging bombs. Battlefield brutality leeches into daily life as soldiers return home to an unrealistic expectation: Live as if you had never been commanded to kill. Neighbors become enemies, then neighbors again.

In the face of this complexity, it's easier to remain silent than to recall horrific experiences. It's more comforting to ignore suffering than to confront the possibility that we may be partly responsible. And it would have been easier for the women Barbara Sonneborn interviewed to remain anonymous, but they chose to speak.

Their stories can prompt audience members to consider these questions: How do race, culture, age, and gender influence the kinds of stories that one tells? What role might racism play in where war is waged, who fights, and what methods they use? Does war make us feel safer? How has modern technology changed war? How does war change beliefs? How does war shape beliefs so that engaging in conflict seems acceptable? What do we learn about how war's impact extends over time and expands to encompass people beyond the relatively small circle of combatants?

Stories

- Who typically tells "war stories" and what is usually the content of those stories? Are the stories in *Regret to Inform* typical war stories? What do we learn from the widows that we might not have learned from their husbands, had they survived to tell their own "war stories"? What does it feel like to listen to stories about the impact of war?



Gravestone of Lula Bia's husband.

COST OF WAR/SILENCE

Stories

"You cannot predict war; you never know what will happen." (Dr. Nguyen My Hein)

"I remember before Jeff left, we talked about how afraid I was that he would get killed. We never talked about the fact that he would have to kill people, maybe even a child. I realized we hadn't ever talked honestly about what war means." (Barbara Sonneborn)

"He wanted to be patriotic. He wanted to help. But once he saw all of the killing of all the group, the Vietnamese, just looking like him, just about the same skin color, the same height. I think that really made him think of what is he doing here?" (Charlotte Begay)

"If you weren't dead, you weren't safe." (Truong Thi Huoc)

"If the wind blew the tree, they chopped down the tree. If the cow moved, the cow got shot. And the chicken, duck, pig – anything alive was murdered." (Phan Thi Thuan)

"All the members of my family, I mean nine people, were killed without even having anything for their breakfast." (Truong Thi Le)

"What does it look like when someone you love is killed by a mortar? . . . Was it like an explosion of razors or did it blow one great big hole in him?" (Barbara Sonneborn)

"They tortured me mercilessly. . . . The cruelty that we experienced was longer than a river, higher than a mountain, deeper than an ocean." (Nguyen Thi Hong)

"What haunts me is not only that Jeff died here, but that he had to be a part of this at all." (Barbara Sonneborn)

Impact

"Sometimes the effects of war don't happen right away. . . . It isn't just the war is here and it's over. It starts when it ends." (Norma Banks, on watching her husband die slowly from the effects of Agent Orange)

"The mother part of me say don't do it, because it will be a horrible thing to put your son through. And another voice said if you die, then everything, all the lives lost in Vietnam don't mean anything." (Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, on contemplating suicide)

"My son would ask me why his father did not return. . . . I also want to ask you if the children – sons and daughters in America – do they ask their mother 'Why didn't my father come home?' " (Le Thi Ngot)



"Jeff wrote me that [Que Son] was dense jungle; now there is only a metallic smell in the air, the lingering aftermath of Agent Orange. Nguyen tells us that out of the 107 villages in this area 106 were burned to the ground, some of them many times over."
(Barbara Sonneborn)

"I looking at my husband. He have a scar on the face. I don't have a scar. It's so deep."
(Nguyen Ngoc Xuan)

"He left his soul in Vietnam, she said, but it took seven years for his body to catch up."
(Widow at Vietnam Memorial Wall whose husband committed suicide because he couldn't stand the flashbacks)

Reconciliation

"In the United States sisters, mothers, and wives also feel pain when children and husbands are lost in war. But we lived in the country where the war was going on. . . . We hope there will never be war again, not anywhere. . . . It is very, very painful."
(Phan Ngoc Dung)

"When I was young, I had hatred in order to defend my country and my people. Now there are not many days left in my life, and there is peace. I can see that we are all the same, people there and people here. But if the war had not ended, the younger generation would be fighting just as I did."
(Tran Nghia)

"My guide, Nguyen Thi Hong, takes my hand as she tells me that she was a Viet Cong leader in the area. I am the first American she has met since the war. For all I know she might have led the attack that killed Jeff." (Barbara Sonneborn)

"Please take [my story] home to your people. And I hope there will be a good result – to help Vietnam heal the wounds of war. But the road from here to there is very difficult. But please try. And not just for us, you do that for yourself. And it will make us feel better that you tried." (Nguyen Thi Hong)



*Vietnamese woman searching through the wreckage of her home.
Photograph courtesy of Great American Stock Footage*

Impact

- What are the casualties of war besides those who died or were wounded in battle? Beyond political change, what is the impact of war? How long does that impact last? Besides the combatants, who else is affected? What happens to the environment when a piece of land becomes a battlefield?

Reconciliation

- As you watch *Regret to Inform*, where do you hear and see moments of reconciliation? How can breaking silence lead to healing?

Moving Toward Action

What did you learn about war when you were growing up? What were the sources of your information? In our own families, what stories do we tell and why? Which stories do we not tell and why? What is the impact of those choices? Do women tell different stories than men (or tell the same stories in a different voice)? How are we affected when people who have seen the horrors of war are silenced? How can we transform stories of horror into healing?

- What stories are important for me to share? When and with whom will I share them?
- What stories are important for me to hear or read? Where will I find those stories? How and when will I make time to listen?

Distance

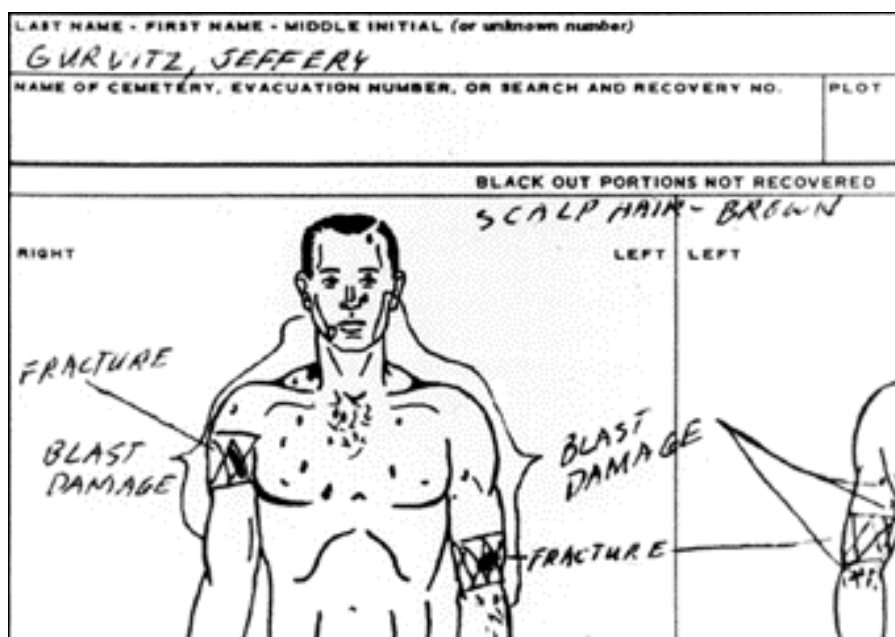
Because the Vietnam War was not fought on U.S. soil, American civilians were inevitably distanced from events in Vietnam. What do we miss when we see things from a distance, or exclusively through the eye of a camera? When does distance clarify our vision? Does *Regret to Inform* increase or decrease our distance from events? How about from people? How does it differ from other films about war or from news coverage of war?

The people interviewed in *Regret to Inform* speak about many forms of distance. Which kinds of distance listed in the sidebar (geographic, experience, etc.) contribute to the continuance of war? Which sources of distance are missing from the list? How does distance allow us to create enemies? How are fathers distanced from their children when they return from war unable to talk about their experiences? How does distance foster racism and how does racism increase distance?

Moving Toward Action

Which kinds of distance separate us from other people in our community? Are the distances physical? Psychological? Historical? Based on race or ethnicity? Which distances are helpful? Which are problematic? What role does distance play in designating others as “enemy”?

- Can I identify the race-based distance(s) in my community?
- What is one thing I can do to lessen the distance between me and others in my community?
- How can I help others bridge distances?



Casualty report illustrating Jeff Gurvitz's fatal wounds.
Courtesy U. S. Army/Department of Defense

DISTANCE

Geographic/Physical

"For me, Vietnam is the land of my imagination. But for Xuan, it is the land of memory." (Barbara Sonneborn)

"I received this wallet in the mail . . . It had mud on it. That was the closest I felt I could get to him physically. Something I got to at least [smells wallet] . . . smell the earth of Vietnam and get some sort of feeling what he might have experienced, what he was surrounded with." (April Burns)

"So this is the place. After years of imagining it, it's so ordinary. This is where you died Jeff, so scared, so young, so far away from home." (Barbara Sonneborn)

"We sit in a motel room. Not even 10 feet away there is a television set that shows what going on in Vietnam." (Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, reflecting on coming to America)

Experience/Perception

"We call it the Vietnam War, but Xuan and everyone else I meet here call it the American War." (Barbara Sonneborn)

"All I see is blood and body part all over the place. . . . How can you just see a little boy, then just little piece jump all over the place. Is that true? Is that real? You have to experience it to know for yourself." (Nguyen Ngoc Xuan)

"I only received three letters and he said that he really didn't want to say anything about what was going on. He didn't want to depress me or worry me. I often wondered about that. . . . What did he have to do?" (Lulu Bia)

Psychic Distance

"It's as if I were a bystander at my own life, calmly watching myself do things that I never expected or desired to do." (Jeff Gurvitz)

"I was asleep and it was like a dream and I saw David and . . . I kept trying to tell him don't go, don't go any further, stay away, and then there was an explosion . . . So that night, there's a telegram." (Grace Castillo)

Barriers/Interpreters/Shields

"The closest I could get to the war, besides Jeff's letters, was the news on television. But that was not the war. I could never have imagined what was happening [in Vietnam]." (Barbara Sonneborn)

Time

"I have a tape that Jeff sent me from Vietnam, I didn't receive until after he died. And I couldn't listen to it for over 20 years." (Barbara Sonneborn)



CHOICES

"He really didn't like the idea of having to kill, but he really didn't have. . . you know, any choice." (Norma Banks)

"Just today there were four men walking through a rice field. One of them was holding what could have been a weapon, or could have been a hoe or a rake or something else. From the distance you're at it's hard to tell. I can't see killing a man for holding a hoe or a rake and if it was a weapon, I'd wanna be damn sure before I killed him, damn sure." (Jeff Gurvitz)

"I don't think he wanted to be an aggressor. And I think he was unwillingly cast in that role the moment he started flying these missions over North Vietnam, and I think he knew it." (Diane Van Renselaar)

"I wanted to stop him [from going to Vietnam] and I tried to. And I decided, smash the right hand. . . I was going to do it. . . and then I just couldn't." (April Burns)

"I decide who live and who die. I'm going to live, my neighbor die. . . I fourteen- year-old. Why do I have to force to make the decision like that? I don't even trust my twenty-four-year-old son with a lawn mower sometime, but I have to decide who gonna live, who going to die." (Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, on pretending not to hear a neighbor's cry for help and taking food from a wounded friend)

"To help my family I go work in the bar, go to sleep with American men for money. . . For a long time I think I'm a bad person, but in my heart, I know I'm a good person. I wouldn't do the thing that I did if I have another choice." (Nguyen Ngoc Xuan)

"The city police force, under the American advisors, came to search my house and arrested my husband, my sister, and my daughter. . . They said, 'If you do not tell your husband to testify and collaborate with the American and the Saigon authorities, don't you know that they will bury your mother and daughter alive?' " (Phan Ngoc Dung)

"Is your husband a hero? Is he a murderer? What is he? Did he kill people over there? Yes, he probably did. And were these people a threat to his country? No they were not. I don't see my husband as a murderer, but at the same time we have to look at it for what it is and . . . it is murder and is it justifiable?" (Diane Van Renselaar)

Choices

Few things in life amplify the consequences of choices more than war. At the same time, because it imposes military law and increases government control, few things circumscribe individual choice more than war. As you watch *Regret to Inform*, consider the choices that people made. Who had a genuine choice? Were there instances when a person appeared to have a choice but genuine choice was illusory? Who had no choice and what specific circumstances eliminated their opportunity to choose?

- How did the men whose stories we hear in the film become soldiers? Was joining the armed forces a choice? Was the choice the same for American men as South or North Vietnamese men? If not, what factors were different? How did beliefs about the following concepts influence individual choices:
 - ❖ Family obligation — *Serving to prevent a brother from being drafted.*
 - ❖ Beliefs about patriotism — *I have to serve my country like my father served. Serving will prove that even a Navajo can be a patriotic American.*
 - ❖ Pride — *Serving to make a son proud.*
 - ❖ Responsibility — *If I don't go, someone else will have to go in my place.*
 - ❖ The "cause" — *After we gain independence, life will become normal for us. We know we might die tomorrow, but we keep fighting.*
- How does a soldier's ability to make choices differ from a civilian's ability to make choices? What options does a soldier have who doesn't want to kill?
- What kinds of choices does war force?

Moving Toward Action

What kinds of choices do we make about how we treat people who are different from us ethnically, racially, religiously, or nationally? What kinds of choices do we have about how our government or our military exercise power? What choices have we made, or do we continue to make, about how to express patriotism? How does what we have learned from our families, culture, and personal experience influence our choices? Can we live without war or is war inevitable? How does our answer to this question influence the actions we take?

- A bumper sticker reads: "If you want peace, work for justice." What can I do to promote justice in my community? In the world?
- I will let my elected representatives know how I feel about the use of military force by. . .
- What alternatives to war can I envision and how might I advocate for them?

Vietnamese man taken captive by American soldiers. Photograph courtesy of Great American Stock Footage



RESOURCES

Nonfiction

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. Second revision, updated edition. New York: Penguin, 1997.

Dudley, William, ed. *The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1998.

Memoirs

Hayslip, Le Ly and Wurts, Jay. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

Smith, Winnie. *American Daughter Gone to War: On the Frontline with an Army Nurse in Vietnam*. New York: Pocket Books, 1994.

Fiction

Ninh, B'ao. *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995 (originally published in Hanoi, 1991).

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Somerville, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

WEB SITES

<http://www.vietvet.org> or <http://grunt.space.swri.edu>

Practical information (e.g., on veterans' benefits) but also supplies access to interactive discussion areas and reports written by veterans and their relatives about recent trips to Vietnam.

<http://students.vassar.edu/~vietnam/index.html> and

<http://www.OCF.Berkeley.EDU/~sdenney/>

Useful university sites with access to historical documents and, at Berkeley, links to other information sources, from the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi to Southeast Asian newspapers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For additional resources related to *Regret to Inform*, contact P.O.V. or TRI or visit www.pbs.org/pov/tvtraceinitiative. You can request a copy of the complete multimedia resource list compiled by *Booklist*, the journal of the American Library Association, called *Delve Deeper into Regret to Inform*.



Nguyen Ngoc Xuan and Barbara Sonneborn.

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For additional information about *Regret to Inform* or related national events/activities, contact:

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Regret to Inform is a featured program of the **Television Race Initiative** (TRI), a multiyear effort in which diverse, character-driven, high-profile television broadcasts create a spine for sustained community dialogue and problem solving around the issue of race relations. In partnership with national and community-based organizations, TRI uses storytelling — initially in the form of several public television broadcasts — to “break the ice” and encourage essential conversations that lead to constructive action. Previous selections included Macky Alston's *Family Name* (P.O.V./PBS 1998), Orlando Bagwell's *Africans in America* (WGBH 1998), The Fred Friendly Seminars' *Beyond Black and White: Affirmative Action in America*, and *Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers*, Emiko Omori's *Rabbit in the Moon* (P.O.V./PBS 1999), *An American Love Story* (PBS 1998) co-presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS) and American Playhouse, and FRONTLINE's *Secrets of the SAT* (WGBH 1999).



Regret to Inform had its national broadcast premiere on January 24, 2000, on P.O.V./PBS. A laboratory for television's potential, P.O.V. (a cinematic term for “point of view”) amplifies broadcasts by pioneering media innovation, interaction, and impact through a wide range of energetic broadcast-related activities. As the pre-eminent showcase for our nation's boldest and most exciting independent nonfiction films, P.O.V. seeks to entertain, inform, and connect citizens to ideas, services, and each other.



Regret to Inform is co-presented by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA). Through film, video, radio, and new technologies, NAATA aims to promote better understanding of the Asian Pacific American experience to the broadest audience possible.

For more information, additional copies of this guide, or copies of previous guides, visit the TRI Web site at www.pbs.org/pov/tvraceinitiative, or E-mail TRI at tvrace@pov.org.

For film rental, video public performance, and institutional video sales for schools, universities, museums, film societies, and other nonprofit organizations (discount available for public libraries), contact:

New Yorker Films
16 West 61 Street
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