

Section V: Cold War/Vietnam



Title: POWs

Grade Level: Middle/High School

Objectives: Analyze news sources from the Vietnam War era to describe how POWs and their families were represented in the media. Write letters from the perspective of a POW relative that describe the concerns of POW families and that propose a possible solution to the POW dilemma in Vietnam.

National History Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension; Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation; Standard 5: Historical Issues—Analysis and Decision-making; Era 9:2: How the cold war and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.

Time: 45 minutes

Background:

From 1961 to 1973, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong held hundreds of Americans captive—in North Vietnam, but also in Cambodia, China, Laos, and South Vietnam. In North Vietnam alone, more than a dozen prisons were scattered in and around the capital city of Hanoi. American POWs gave them nicknames: Alcatraz, Briarpatch, Dirty Bird, the Hanoi Hilton, the Zoo. Conditions were appalling. Prisoners were variously isolated, starved, beaten, and tortured. They endured pain and psychological deprivation, often for years on end. But they resolutely resisted their captors. They exercised as best they could. Some played mind games to keep themselves sane, making mental lists or building imaginary houses, one nail at a time. They drew strength from one another, secretly communicating via subtle hand gestures or code tapped out on their cell walls.

During the Vietnam War, American prisoners were a focus of public attention as never before. Over 4,000 Americans were captured during World War I; more than 130,000 were taken prisoner during World War II; 7,000-plus were held in Korea. The American public knew little of their plight. But Americans were painfully aware of the 726 who were prisoners of war in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese paraded them in a sophisticated propaganda campaign to erode public support for the war. POW families launched awareness campaigns. Thousands of Americans donned simple bracelets engraved with the names, ranks, and dates of loss of U.S. soldiers who were prisoners of war or missing in action in Vietnam. And the media gave the POW situation extensive coverage.

“It’s easy to die but hard to live, and we’ll show you just how hard it is to live.”

—North Vietnamese prison guard to an American POW



American POWs in the “Hanoi Hilton” prior to their release *National Museum of American History*

Materials:

- *New York Times*

“U.S. Fears Hanoi Is Brainwashing American POWs,” April 3, 1967

“Dear President Nixon,” October 3, 1971

“U.S. Bars Pullout until All POWs Have Been Freed,” March 26, 1973

These articles may be available through your school or library's subscription periodical service, such as EBSCOHost, ProQuest, or Lexis-Nexis. The articles can also be purchased at NYTimes.com.

- POW pajamas and POW bracelet
- Photograph of American POWs in the “Hanoi Hilton” prior to their release

Lesson:

The acronym POW has become common in our culture following Vietnam. It appears frequently in titles of popular arcade/video games and is often mentioned in the media. Begin by asking your students to write down what POW stands for. (You may want to ask them what MIA stands for, as well.) Once all students understand the meaning of POW, use the background information included to explain what prisoners of war are and what happened to them in Vietnam, how they fought back, and how they lived. This should take 10–15 minutes.

Next, have the students read the Vietnam-era *New York Times* articles, then answer the following questions: What is the topic of the story? How does the story describe POWs? How does the story describe the families of POWs? How does the story describe the North Vietnamese? How does the story describe the U.S. administration? Does the story support continued fighting, negotiation with the North Vietnamese, or a different option?

After the students have finished analyzing the stories, discuss with them the news portrayals of Vietnam. Emphasize how North Vietnamese treatment of POWs and their use as propaganda tools spread national concern for the POWs—even though there were far fewer prisoners in Vietnam than in previous wars. As a result, POW families began campaigns to raise public awareness and to pressure the U.S. administration into doing something to bring these men home. Later in the war, governmental and nonprofit groups took over these campaigns to express outrage at the behavior of the North Vietnamese. In the discussion, students should explain why the POWs in Vietnam have attracted so much more attention than POWs in past wars.

Finally, have students pretend to be a relative of a Vietnam POW and write letters directed to the administration. They should describe the concerns of the POW families, as well as proposing possible solutions to the conflict.



POW bracelets *National Museum of American History*



POW pajamas
National Museum of American History