

Lies My Teacher Told Me About the Vietnam War

Loewen, James W. Lies My Teacher Told Me. Simon & Schuster, 1995.

As we read the following assertions made by Loewen, please ask yourself why the Vietnam War would get so little attention in the classroom:

On average, textbooks give 47 pages to the 1930s, 43.6 pages to the 1940s, and fewer than 35 pages to each later decade, including the 1960s with the civil rights movement, most of the Vietnam War, and the murders of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, JFK, and RFK.

High school history books devote the same quantitative coverage – nine pages – to the War of 1812 and the Vietnam War.

Only one book, *The American Pageant*, includes one of the five most recognizable Vietnam War pictures:

- Buddhist monk immolating himself
- Little girl running naked fleeing a napalm attack
- The national South Vietnamese police chief executing a terrified man
- The bodies in the ditch after the My Lai massacre
- American evacuating from a Saigon rooftop by helicopter

No textbook shows any damage done by the U.S., even though we dropped three times as many bombs on Vietnam as we did in WWII, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Many textbooks do not mention My Lai.

Most quote only Johnson and Nixon as primary sources on the Vietnam War – not a word from those who fought in or opposed it. Textbook authors leave out all the memorable quotations of the era:

- “We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops... We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.
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- “No Viet Cong ever called me “nigger”.” – Muhammad Ali
- “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.” – A U.S. army officer involved in retaking a town lost during the Tet Offensive
- “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?” – John Kerry (Vietnam Veterans Against the War)
- American troops “had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam.” – John Kerry at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing
- “It does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn’t it?” – General William Westmoreland’s characterization of civilian casualties

Why do you think that the Vietnam War gets so little attention?

In 1925, the American Legion declaimed that the ideal textbook:

- Must inspire the children with patriotism
- Must be careful to tell the truth optimistically
- Must dwell on failure only for its value as a moral lesson
- Must speak chiefly of success

Today’s textbooks hew closely to the American Legion line.

Do you think this is true? Why or why not?