



**CAL HUMANITIES**  
WAR COMES HOME

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**READS**

*NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER*

“A staggeringly beautiful book on combat—what it feels like, what the consequences are, and above all, what society must do to understand it. In my eyes Marlantes has become the preeminent literary voice on war of our generation.”

— **SEBASTIAN JUNGER**

# WHAT IT IS LIKE TO GO TO WAR

Author of the  
*New York Times*  
Bestseller  
*Matterhorn*



## KARL MARLANTES

CURRICULUM GUIDE

*what it is like to go to war*

# Curriculum Guide for *What It Is Like to Go to War* by Karl Marlantes

Made possible by a partnership between Cal Humanities and  
the California History-Social Science Project

## Overview of Cal Humanities/War Comes Home and California Reads

***War Comes Home*** is Cal Humanities' new statewide effort to engage Californians in thinking about what it means to come home from war: not only for veterans, but for all of us.

As our long combat commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down, we believe this is an important moment in which to pause to reflect on the momentous societal changes that are occurring as thousands of veterans resume civilian life and to consider how returning service members will rejoin their communities. How will veterans, those who bear the direct consequences of what it means to engage in war, as well as their parents, wives, husbands, children, relatives, and friends, create a new sense of home? How can we create a shared understanding of what it's like to go to war? What obligations do we have to those who serve in the name of our national defense? What can we learn from the past to understand the challenges faced by today's returning service men and women? How can we all welcome veterans home in a way that is helpful and meaningful to all of us?

This year, Cal Humanities and its partners will provide opportunities for Californians to explore these questions through hundreds of community events, forums, book discussion groups, exhibits, and interactive web events across the state. The Cal Humanities website ([www.calhum.org](http://www.calhum.org)) will be an online hub for activities, where you can learn more and share what you have discovered.

**California Reads** is a program of Cal Humanities conducted in partnership with the California Center for the Book and the California State Library. It invites Californians from all walks of life throughout our state to participate in reading and discussion programs and related activities hosted by libraries, schools, colleges, bookstores, and other community institutions. This is the second statewide read under our *California Reads* banner, providing Californians with opportunities to read and discuss stories and ideas that matter.

In keeping with our theme this year, we will be reading Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like to Go to War*. Marlantes is a Vietnam veteran, a Rhodes Scholar, and the author of the *New York Times* best-selling novel *Matterhorn*. His newest book has received much reader and critical acclaim since publication in 2011, and has often been cited by veterans as the work that best expresses their experience. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, it "ought to be mandatory reading by potential infantry recruits and by residents of any nation that sends its kids—Marlantes's word—into combat."

The California History-Social Science Project (CHSSP) has developed this curriculum guide for the book to support classroom discussion and activities. For seven years, Cal Humanities has collaborated with CHSSP as a trusted partner to reach young Californians through humanities education in K-12 schools. With shared interests in providing high-quality programming to actively engage classroom teachers, students, and the public with the important issues of our state and nation, CHSSP and Cal Humanities have partnered on a number of projects: *We Are California*, *California Reads: Searching for Democracy*, *Making Sense of the Civil War*, and *Teaching Democracy*. Altogether, they represent our commitment to intellectual curiosity and collaborative learning in the humanities.

A PDF version of this guide, along with additional resources and information about *War Comes Home*, *California Reads*, and related public programs and activities at libraries and other community venues, can be found on the Cal Humanities website at [www.calhum.org](http://www.calhum.org).

California Reads is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the BayTree Fund, The Whitman Institute, and the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian. Additional support has been provided by Grove-Atlantic Publishers, Inc.

Cal Humanities is an independent non-profit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. We promote the humanities as relevant, meaningful ways to understand the human condition and connect us to each other in order to become a better California. We produce, fund, create, and support humanities-based projects and programs, eye-opening cultural experiences, and meaningful conversations. Our audience is as diverse as the 38 million people from every corner of the globe that make up our state.

*The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services, the California State Library, Cal Humanities' funders and no official endorsement by any of these institutions should be inferred.*

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## **What it is like to go to war in Vietnam A Lesson for High-School Teachers**

**By**

**Beth Slutsky, Ph.D., California History-Social Science Project  
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### **Background:**

Prior to this unit of study, students should be exposed to the origins of American involvement in the war in Vietnam. This should include a broad overview of the Cold War, the American policy of containment of communism, proxy wars, decolonization in Southeast Asia, and the escalation of the war with the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August of 1964. Once students understand how and why the United States committed itself to the war in Vietnam, they can begin to learn about the on-the-ground and longer-term consequences of the war.

### **Question:**

What were the consequences of the war in Vietnam for American soldiers and the broader society?

### **Teaching Thesis:**

American involvement in Vietnam caused hundreds of thousands of soldiers, most of who were drafted into the military, to serve in on-the-ground guerrilla-style combat. American soldiers left home, traveled to distant places, risked their lives every day for months, and then returned home to a nation that they believed had not supported the war. American soldiers killed, were killed, had loved ones who were killed, and have permanent visible and invisible scars from this destruction. When soldiers returned home from war they had a range of experiences: some found the broader community did not welcome them, some tried to integrate into civilian life and found their communities ill-prepared to receive them, and some had wounds so deep they could not find a place in American society.

### **California History Social-Science Standards Addressed:**

- 11.3. Trace the origins and geopolitical consequences (foreign and domestic) of the Cold War and containment policy, including the Vietnam War.
- 11.4. List the effects of foreign policy on domestic policies and vice versa (e.g., protests during the war in Vietnam, the “nuclear freeze” movement).

### Common Core State Standards Addressed:

RH1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

RH2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

RH3. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RH5. Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

WHST1. Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*.

- a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

### Procedures for Historical Investigation

#### Part 1: Introduction

*In this section students gain **context** for the historical investigation and a **basic grasp** of the issue(s). This initial understanding will be challenged, extended, or supported by subsequent documents in this investigation.*

#### Materials and Resources

- Background and questions on war in Vietnam
- Map of Vietnam
- Excerpts from Marlantes' book and comprehension questions

#### Activities

1. In order to provide background for the war and have students understand a broad timeline of it, have them read *Overview of the War: Strategies and On-the-ground Experiences*, answer the embedded questions, and review the map of Vietnam and key battles. (30 minutes)
2. There are several excerpts from Marlantes' memoir in which he explains what it was like to be a soldier on the ground in Vietnam. Have students read these excerpts and answer the set of questions that follows each excerpt. Make sure students come away from the reading with a sense of the mixed emotions that soldiers encounter: exhilaration, excitement, terror, and grief all at once. (30 minutes)

**Part 2: Evidence Analysis**

*In this section students **analyze documents**—textual, visual, and/or audio—related to the **key historical investigation question**, as they examine the literal aspects of each source, consider multiple perspectives, determine what can be learned from various pieces of evidence, and compare different pieces of evidence.*

**Materials and Resources**

- Excerpts about the consequences of war for soldiers and the nation from Marlantes' book
- Matrix for analyzing quotes and determining significance

**Activities**

1. Students will learn about consequences of the war for individual soldiers and the nation. Have them read the selected excerpts to get a broader sense of what it was like to come home from war. They should select four of those quotes to complete the matrix. Students will summarize, then analyze, then synthesize the significance to explain the longer-term impact of war upon soldiers and the nation. (50 minutes)

**Part 3: Historical Explanation**

*In this section students **construct an explanation** about history, **marshalling evidence** for their **interpretation** from the sources analyzed to advance an **argument** in response to the key question. Teachers can **assess** students' understanding of the standard and the historical process by evaluating this product.*

**Materials and Resources**

- Writing About War sentence frames

**Activities**

1. Based on the matrix and introductory activity, students will begin to put these pieces together to write about war. Using the sentence frames, students should follow the directions to answer the focus question: what were the consequences of the war in Vietnam? They should also spend time considering the last part of the question: based on Marlantes' experiences of coming home from the war in Vietnam, how can society better prepare for returning soldiers? (30 minutes)

**Support for Student Literacy**

- For students with lower levels of literacy (ELLs or otherwise), you may wish to consider using shortened excerpts. Refer to Support for Student Literacy as a replacement for earlier excerpts that more succinctly address Marlantes' ideas in the previous documents. Students will still be able to complete the assignments while using these shortened excerpts.

## Overview of the War: Strategies and On-the-ground Experiences

*Excerpted from: The History Blueprint: Cold War America 4.8 – A War of Attrition, California History-Social Science Project, 2013*

*Directions: Read the overview of the war in Vietnam and answer the questions in the text as you come upon them.*

The war in Vietnam was not fought on traditional battlefields with clearly identified soldiers seizing new territory. Instead, the war was fought with different weapons, markers of success, and consequences than previous wars. Military planners on both sides of the conflict initially hoped to achieve quick success through strategic attacks on the enemy. While early on operations did inflict damage on their opponents, both sides ultimately settled into a war of attrition, a series of relatively small battles designed to deplete the resources of the enemy, weaken their morale and reduce public support for the conflict so that they were willing to surrender.



*Two bombs tumble from a Vietnamese Air Force A-1E Skyraider over a burning [Viet] Cong hideout near Cantho, South Viet Nam, U.S. Air Force, 1967.*

*Source: Library of Congress,*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001699982/>

*Question: How do you think this style of fighting affected soldiers?*



*Photograph of a Marine Landing at Danang, Vietnam, 08/03/1965. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier 595865.*

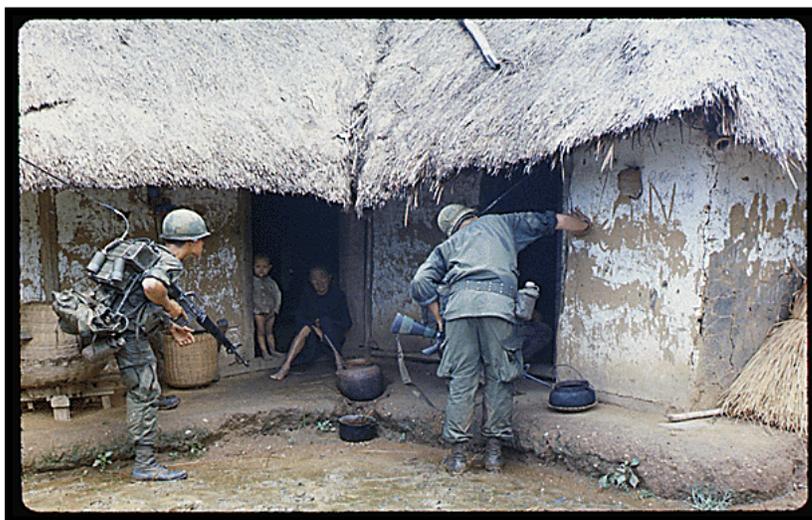
### *American Military Strategy*

The United States, for example, hoped to defeat North Vietnam through massive bombing campaigns, such as *Operation Rolling Thunder*. Starting in early 1965, American planes began to drop what would eventually total 4.6 million tons of bombs onto North Vietnam, as well on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a supply line that the communists used to transport people and goods from the north to the south. American commanders intended the campaign to demoralize the Communist soldiers and compliment U.S. ground troops. When President Richard Nixon took office in 1969 he employed a secret plan to end the war, which expanded the American air campaign. He began a secret bombing campaign in the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, sovereign nations separate from Vietnam, in an effort to attack the communist forces hiding in these border nations.

On the ground, American troops conducted “search and destroy missions,” to seek out the enemy and kill them to increase the body count, one measure of American success or failure in the conflict. Helicopters, a new military asset, quickly transported soldiers in and out during these missions. Soldiers burned to the ground many villages that contained suspected communist sympathizers. This displaced many civilians leaving them without food or shelter. (To see search and destroy missions in action, visit The History Channel website to see a three-minute video clip

(<http://www.history.com/topic/s/vietnam-war/videos#search-and-destroy> ) to hear interviews with Vietnam veterans and archival footage of the war. You will see graphic images of search and destroy missions. [As you watch, listen](#) to the soldiers describe the purpose of these missions and the role that they or other soldiers played.

**Question:** What were their perspectives of this war strategy?



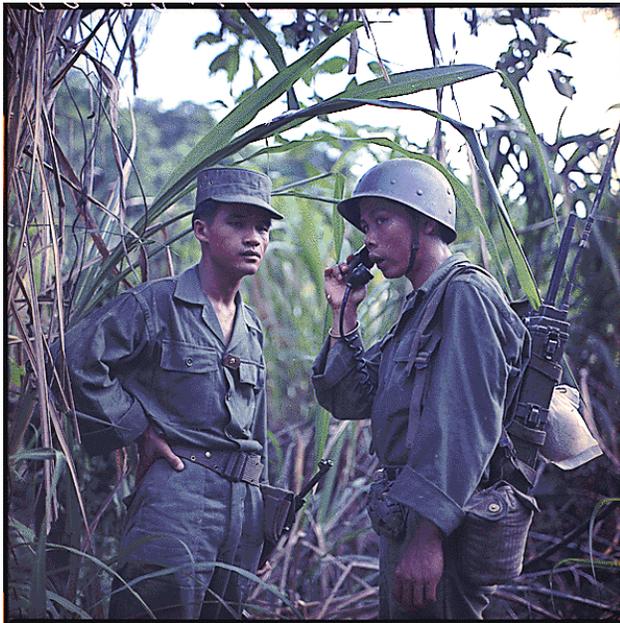
*Vietnam. As the second phase of operation "Thayer," the 1st Air Cavalry Division (airmobile) is having operation "Irving" in the area 25 miles north of Qui Nhon which lies 400 miles north-northeast of Saigon. The 1st Air Cavalry was given the mission of clearing a mountain range where an estimated two battalions of North Vietnam regulars were supposed to be massing an attack on Hammond Airstrip. Troops of "A" Company, checking house during patrol., 10/06/1966. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier*

Another tactic the U.S. employed was the use of defoliants and herbicides on the Vietnamese countryside. Hoping to both deplete the communists' food supply and eliminate their cover from the sky, the US military sprayed, by air and waterways, 12 million gallons of Agent Orange, a variety of defoliants and herbicides, on Vietnam. This campaign destroyed the forests and farmland; millions of Vietnamese and Americans were ultimately exposed to the toxic chemicals. (To see film clips of soldiers spraying defoliant on riverbanks in Vietnam (and what the trees looked like afterwards), visit the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University, “U.S. Army Newsfilm V-73-69: Weed Killer Knocks Out VC's Riverbank Ambush Sites,” South Vietnam [VC Weed Killer], 8-11 February 1969. Item Number: 987VI0672, Record 85332)

The United States also tried to gain the support of local people so that they would not aid the communists. American soldiers would go into South Vietnamese villages and (1) determine if locals were providing food or weapons to the communists, and (2) if the

villagers were not helping the North Vietnamese, solicit their support through food aid or protection from the enemy.

*Question:* How would gaining the support of local people be challenging for American soldiers?



*Vietnam. Vietnamese army personnel training in the jungle, May, 1962. U.S. Dept. of Defense, Department of the Army. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier: 530607.*

war progressed Communist forces became increasingly proficient in killing and maiming American forces, using home-made booby traps and mines, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns and anti-aircraft artillery imported from the Soviet Union and China. They repurposed the over 20,000 tons of explosive material dropped by U.S. planes for the homemade bombs. The

### *Vietnamese Communist Strategy*

The Communist-led North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) employed a different strategy, but with the same goal – consistent pressure designed to weaken American resolve and promote a negotiated peace that favored their side. Employing a guerilla warfare strategy, NVA and VC forces favored hit and run attacks and surprise ambushes over full-scale military conflict. Although American forces benefitted from more training and advanced military technology, NVA and VC forces posed significant challenges to the Americans. Neither the VC or the NVA wore bright uniforms marking their enemy status, making it difficult for American soldiers to differentiate between a civilian and a military combatant. And while many of the VC's weapons were crude in comparison to American firepower, as the



*Battle of Hamo Village during Tet., 1968. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier # 532451.*



*Photograph of Marines of Company I in Vietnam,  
10/30/1969. Source: National Archives, ARC  
Identifier # 532492*

communists also benefitted from a series of tunnels stretching throughout North and South Vietnam. The tunnels allowed for safe travel; stored ammunition, food, and water; provided sleeping quarters; and hospice for those in need of medical aid. The Communists were also aided by many civilians who provided safe haven, food, and support in local villages across South Vietnam.

*Question:*

What impact do you think the NVA and VC strategies of fighting had upon American soldiers (you may wish to refer to the photograph on the second page along with others in this section)?

*The End of the War*

President Richard Nixon shifted America's military strategy with his election in 1968. Nixon advocated a policy of "Vietnamization," which called for gradual reduction of American forces and increasing military leadership by the South Vietnamese. At the same time, Nixon's Secretary of State began secret peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris. These negotiations dragged on for years; a peace treaty between the U.S. and North Vietnam wasn't signed until 1973. In the interim period, the fighting continued and Nixon launched a controversial bombing campaign in Cambodia designed to destroy the supply bases supporting the communist forces. Public support for American involvement in the conflict declined precipitously during the period as well, increasing pressure on the Nixon administration to end the war. Following the American departure from the war in 1973, South Vietnamese forces continued to fight until they were overrun in 1975 with the fall of Saigon. That year America lost the war in Vietnam when North and South Vietnam reunited under Communist leadership.

*Question:*

How do you think the American loss of the war in Vietnam affected American soldiers that had served there?

**ANSWER KEY**

1. *Fighting affected soldiers because it was hard to discern the enemy*
2. *There are multiple possible answers for perspectives about the strategy, but students should grasp the on-the-ground challenges as well as the larger tactical and moral dilemmas.*
3. *Gaining support of local people would be challenging because they simultaneously needed to patrol them, locate enemies, and align themselves with friendly locals.*
4. *Students should understand that the strategies of fighting made it difficult for American soldiers to define success, locate the enemy, and engage in more conventional forms of combat.*
5. *Students should come away with an understanding of the fact that the American loss in Vietnam could have had an effect on soldiers. It could have made them regret the war, think it was not worth fighting in, or simply depressed about having sacrificed so greatly.*

# The Vietnam War



*Map of Vietnam War, Sonali Dujari, for California History-Social Science Project. Copyright © 2013 Regents of the University of California, All Rights Reserved.*

## Karl Marlantes Experiences War

*Directions: Read the background and three excerpts below then answer the questions in order to understand what it was like to be a combat soldier in Vietnam.*

*Background:* The following excerpts are from a memoir by Karl Marlantes called *What It Is Like to go to War*. He wrote this book to reflect on his experiences as a young American soldier who was sent to fight in Vietnam. In the book he describes what it was like to be a soldier fighting against communists in Vietnam, but he also explains the cost of war on himself, his fellow soldiers, and on American society overall.

EXCERPT 1: “The least acknowledged aspect of war, today, is how exhilarating it is. This aspect makes people very uncomfortable.... The hard truth is that ever since I can remember I have loved thinking about war- and I wasn’t the only one. I played it in the woods with my friends. I read about it, and people wrote what I read. I saw it in movies, and people filmed what I saw.... In Vietnam there were times when I swelled with pride at the immense destruction I could deal out. There is a deep savage joy in destruction, a joy beyond ego enhancement.... It’s the child toppling the tower of blocks he’s spent so much time carefully constructing. It’s the lighting of the huge bonfire, the demolition of a building, the shattering of a clay pigeon. It’s firecrackers and destruction derbies on the Fourth of July. Part of us loves to destroy. Nietzsche says, “I am by nature warlike. To attack is among my instincts.” P.62-63



*Vietnam memorial soldiers by Frederick Hart, Washington, D.C., Digital ID: (original digital file) highsm 04696 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/highsm.04696>*

### QUESTIONS:

1. How can war be exhilarating?
2. Friedrich Nietzsche was a famous philosopher who wrote a great deal about human nature. What do you think Nietzsche meant when he said: “To attack is among my instincts.”?



*Photograph of Private First Class Russell R. Widdifield in Vietnam. 1969. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier 532493*

EXCERPT 2: “A week before he was due to go home my friend Mike committed a real read-about-it-with-horror-in-the-papers red heat atrocity.... After more than a year in Vietnam he’d seen a lot of combat and lost friends. Mike’s squad had been assigned to protect a small village. One day he captured a Viet Cong guerrilla near a village where just a week earlier Mike had lost several friends to land mines. The prisoner, like Mike, was around eighteen or twenty. He had been captured loaded with land mines. There was no doubt about his, or his unit’s, intentions. When you step directly on a land mine the explosion often kills you by going up between your legs. The survivors have to look around for missing pieces and make sure they get thrown into the poncho with the body so you get all of your pieces buried in the same place.

Mike decided not to turn the prisoner over to the usual authorities, the South Vietnamese military, no paragons [virtuous models] of human rights. He kept the prisoner to interrogate himself. The rational purpose for this so-called interrogation was to find out where the prisoner’s unit was and where they were setting booby traps or perhaps

ambushes in order to avoid any more casualties to Mike’s squad. But, as Mike told me later, he “simply lost it.” He was “filled with rage.”

Mike kept the kid for a day, beating him until he grew too tired to beat him further. He would then rest up, fly into another rage, and beat him some more. In Mike’s own words, “I beat him to a pulp.” He then hung the kid upside down from a flagpole, hoisting him in view of the entire village, to “let the village know what Marines did to VC who killed Marines.”

The prisoner was seen hanging from the flagpole by an American Army unit who got him out of Mike’s hands. Fortunately, for both of them, the prisoner lived. Mike was tried, busted back to private, and discharged without honor. He has had to live with the fact that after months of honorable and difficult service he certainly had lost it, and this was his sad return to America. Mike now has a wife, kids, and a steady job in the upper management levels of a large corporation....

This act haunts Mike still. He did it. It happened....

What pushes the few over the edge into perpetrating something like My Lai, or what Mike did, I don't know. But with my war experiences behind me, and five kids, I can only say I no longer make hard and fast judgments. What amount of pressure is reasonable before one checks out and lets the rage take over? How do you judge another human on this level?" P. 104-106

QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think Mike kept the prisoner rather than turning him over to the South Vietnamese military (the people he should have turned him over to)?
  
2. What makes soldiers commit extreme acts of violence in war?

PUTTING IT TOGETHER:

Reflect on the two excerpts from Karl Marlantes as well as on the Overview of the War. In three or four sentences, respond to the following prompts: *Describe the experiences of American soldiers on-the-ground in Vietnam. How might this have impacted soldiers as they returned home?*

*ANSWER KEY*

- 1. Students should analyze quotes to understand that war can be exhilarating emotionally and in the moment*
- 2. Students should be able to synthesize and interpret the quote to say something about Nietzsche thinking that human nature drives humans behave a certain way.*
- 3. Students should come away with an understanding that Mike kept the prisoner because he had been so damaged by war that he could no longer think rationally.*
- 4. Students should come up with an answer about soldiers committing extreme acts of violence in war because of the traumatizing events of war itself.*
- 5. In students' reflections, they should explain in 3-4 sentences that the experience of war on the ground was fraught with tensions and mixed emotions. They should also make connections about the effect this might have upon soldiers' return home. For example, they could explain how the possible physical and mental effects from war could carry over to home.*

## The Aftermath of War

*Directions: Coming home from war had many effects on soldiers. Below is a matrix that you should complete to document and analyze these effects. Your first job is to read all of the eight excerpts from Marlantes' book. Next, choose three of them to complete this chart. In the first column, write the number of the quote you choose. In the second column, write the main idea of the quote or re-write it in your own words. In the third column, analyze that quote by explaining what it reveals about the author. In the fourth column, explain the relevance of the quote to the broader topic: how does this quote show the consequences of war.*

**EXCERPT 1:** “The fact was I felt unclean, insecure, strange, and awkward. I didn’t feel right- with anyone.... Perhaps the awkward wrong feeling started with the stewardesses on the airplane treating us as if we were tourists. The thing no one recognized, including the stewardesses and even most of us, was that just two or three days earlier



*Vietnam War Protestors – Veterans for Peace March on the Pentagon. October 21, 1967 Source: Frank Wolfe, Photographer. Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Serial # 7049-30*

many of us had been in combat, scared to death we were going to die and watching the deaths of others just like us.... It wasn’t the stewardess’ fault. They were just doing their job, handing out smiles and Cokes. We loved it. But we should have come home by sea. We should have had time to talk with our buddies about what we all had shared. We joined our units alone, and we came home alone, and this was key difference between us and veterans of other wars, including today’s.” P.182

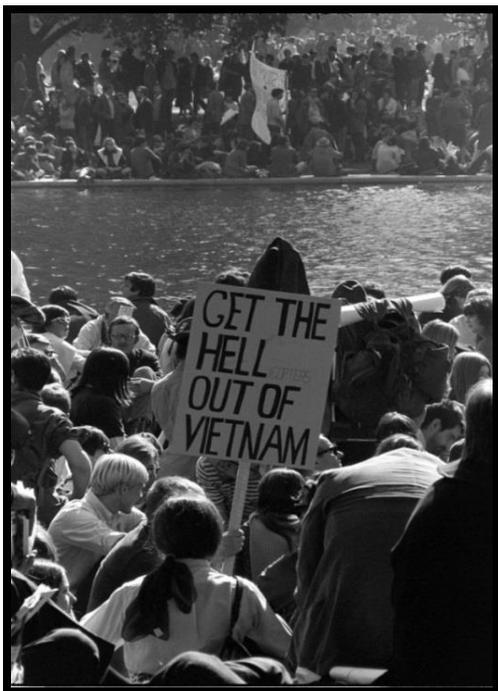
**EXCERPT 2:** “There is a correct way to welcome your warriors back. Returning veterans don’t need ticker-tape parades or yellow ribbons stretching clear across Texas. Cheering is inappropriate and immature. Combat veterans, more than anyone else, know how much pain and evil have been wrought. To cheer them for what they’ve just done would be like cheering the surgeon when he amputates a leg to save someone’s life. It’s childish, and it’s demeaning to those who have fallen on both sides. A quiet grateful handshake is what you give the surgeon, while you mourn the lost leg. There should be parades, but they should be solemn processions, rifles upside down, symbol of the sword sheathed once again. They should be conducted with all the dignity of a military funeral, mourning for those lost on both sides, giving thanks for those returned.

Afterward, at home or in small groups, let the champagne flow and celebrate life and even victory if you were so lucky- afterward.” P.195

**EXCERPT 3:** “One day my wife talked me into attending a fairly typical 1970s encounter group therapy weekend... At the retreat I was asked to role-play talking to the mother and sister of the NVA soldier I’d killed when he threw the hand grenade at me... I was asked by the leader of the therapy group to apologize to this imagined mother and daughter for killing their son and brother. Part of me was angry that I was asked to do this in front of a group of near strangers. Of course, I could have declined, but I didn’t; once a



*An Air Force honor guard pallbearers carrying the casket of an MIA away from a C-141 Starlifter aircraft are framed by a saluting arm. The C-141 transported the remains of POW's and MIA's from North Vietnam. March 29, 1977. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier 6375756*



*Vietnam War protestors at the March on the Pentagon. October 21, 1967. Source: Frank Wolfe, Photographer. Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, National Archives, Reference # 7051-33.*

Marine always a Marine. Within a minute of starting the apology I broke down wailing like a frightened child. Out came a torrent of terrible memories and remorse. This was the first time I felt any emotion about having killed. It was about ten years after the action. I sobbed and ran snot for hours that day, walking and running alone in the woods, my childhood place of solace. My ribs ached. The crying started again the next day, and would start again days and even weeks afterward and go on for hours at a time. Even at work the faces of dead friends and mutilated bodies on both sides would come unbidden to mind. I’d have to make excuses to go outside where no one could see me shaking, throat aching to hold back the sobs, walking down a city street or hiding in some corner of a parking garage. It went on like this for months, until I quit

my job. I got into something new and everything went away, until the next time. This pattern went on for nearly three decades.

The group was well intentioned but woefully ignorant, as was I, of post-traumatic stress

disorder, or PTSD. I never joined another therapy group again. Although the exercise got me “in touch with my feelings,” it was a damaging experience because no one was there to help me figure out how to handle those feelings in a healthy manner. It not only triggered extreme

PTSD emotional symptoms, such as constant unstoppable crying, but also crystallized one of my enduring problems with the war, guilt. Did I really need to apologize?” P.49-50

**EXCERPT 4:** “So ask the now twenty-year-old combat veteran at the gas station how he felt about killing someone. His probably angry answer, if he’s honest: ‘Not a fucking thing.’ Ask him when he’s sixty, and if he’s not too drunk to answer, it might come out very differently, but only by luck of circumstance – who was there to help him with the feelings during those four long decades after he came home from war. It is critical for young people who return from combat that someone is there to help them, before they turn to drugs, alcohol, and suicide. We cannot expect normal eighteen-year-olds to kill someone and contain it in a healthy way. They must be helped to sort out what will be healthy grief about taking a life because it is part of the sorrow of war. The drugs, alcohol, and suicides are ways of avoiding guilt and fear of grief. Grief itself is a healthy response.” P. 47

**EXCERPT 5:** “I was walking in uniform down M Street in our nation’s capital. I had been back perhaps a month. A group of young people, my age, began to follow me down the street on the opposite side, jeering, calling me names, chanting in unison. They were flying the flags of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. I stood and looked at them across the chasm of that street, not knowing what to say or do. I tried to think of something that would allow me to make friends with them. I didn’t want to fight them too. I was sick of fighting. I wanted to come back home, to be understood, to be welcomed.” P. 176



Richard M. Nixon shaking hands with armed forces in Vietnam. July 30, 1969. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier 194650

**EXCERPT 6:**” I went to a party at Raymond’s over the holidays... In the kitchen, the quiet eye of the storm, I talked with Raymond’s wife, Dee. She and my first wife shared the not uncommon and deeply disturbing experience of living with a man with post-traumatic stress disorder without knowing where all the craziness was coming from. Those women are veterans of a different war. For every veteran who goes through a divorce, a wife goes through one too. For

every veteran alone in the basement, there is a wife upstairs, bewildered, isolated, and in despair from the dark cloud of war that hangs over daily family life. For too many years the public hasn’t recognized or sympathized with families of veterans coping with PTSD and has left them in silence.” P.192-193



*A man looks at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Memorial Day 2013.  
National Park Service, Nathan King  
<http://www.nps.gov/vive/photosmultimedia/index.htm>*

**EXCERPT 7:** “We need to give returning veterans some sort of commitment to the future they are returning to. Most veterans can return to families or build them. All veterans can return to communities or build them. To do this, however, eventually the war has to be

integrated, the horror absorbed, the psyche stretched to

accommodate the trauma. This requires tools. Most veterans come from the strata of society where counseling is something that happens to crazy people. Counseling should be required. This will eliminate the stigma. A further way to eliminate the stigma would be to train senior officers and NCOs [non-commissioned officers, people in the military that tend to train soldiers] in the techniques of helping men and women leave military service, honoring parting as much as entering, with equal emphasis on ritual. Counseling for the veteran and his or her family should be paid for or supplied by the Department of Veterans Affairs for as long as the veteran or his family want it. There should be special religious services for each faith, specifically designed to get returning veterans back on home ground and reconnected to the infinite through something besides dealing and voiding death.... For those who don’t feel connected with any particular religion, it could be something as simple as sharing poetry and stories.” P.204-205

**EXCERPT 8:** “Society needs veterans to express all sides of their experience, the guilt and sorrow *and* the pride. Cut off one and you cut off the others.... The problem is that the veterans’ experiences and feelings remained quarantined from their families and communities. They go to the dark bar at the Legion Club, where children and nonveterans are not allowed. They disappear once a week into the VA outpatient clinic to be “cured.” They aren’t talking to friends and family; they’re talking to bar buddies and therapists....

The combat veteran experience is still not out in the open where the whole of culture can benefit from the sorrow and the pride and society’s attitude toward war and fighting can mature psychologically and spiritually. No nation will ever reach maturity, or make sensible foreign policy, until its warriors, its people, and its leaders can talk about all sides of war with equal feeling. “I lit up the whole valley” *and* “I’ve grieved, crying for the little ones like my own children.” Without integration of the positive and negative sides of the war, the experience isn’t transmitted in any practical and meaningful sense, and we will continue to seek the glory of war unchecked by wisdom about the costs of war.” P.218-219

**Evidence** (Describe the main ideas of the passage.)

**Analysis** (How did this affect Marlantes personally? What does it reveal about the costs of Marlantes going to war?)

**Relevance** (How does this show the consequences of war? Or, based on this passage, how society should welcome returning soldiers?)

<p><b>Excerpt</b> # _____</p>			
<p><b>Excerpt</b> # _____</p>			
<p><b>Excerpt</b> # _____</p>			

**Answer Key**

	Evidence (describe the main ideas of the passage)	Analysis (How did this affect Marlantes personally? What does it reveal about the costs of Marlantes going to war?)	Relevance (how does this show the consequences of war? Or, based on this passage, how society should welcome returning soldiers?)
Excerpt # 1	<i>Going to war alone and coming home alone.</i>	<i>Marlantes went to war alone and felt there was no transition to home life.</i>	<i>There should be ways to transition soldiers back home.</i>
Excerpt # 2	<i>Celebratory parades are not appropriate in the aftermath of war.</i>	<i>Marlantes felt inappropriately welcomed after the war. He wanted to both mourn and celebrate.</i>	<i>Society should integrate soldiers more fully into society and discuss all of their experiences from war.</i>
Excerpt # 3	<i>Passage explains the onset of PTSD</i>	<i>There was no institution established to deal with mental health issues that Marlantes encountered.</i>	<i>The consequences of war are felt for years after the actual battlefield and society should be prepared to help soldiers for as long as they need help.</i>
Excerpt # 4	<i>Processing war is very different for each person and often gets clouded by drugs and alcohol.</i>	<i>Marlantes experienced trauma from war for years after he left the battlefield.</i>	<i>Society should work to discuss war with veterans and know that drugs and alcohol and other unhealthy behavior can accompany it.</i>
Excerpt # 5	<i>It was hard to find friends after the war because so much of society had opposed it.</i>	<i>Marlantes could not find a place to fit in because of his experiences in the war and as a soldier in an unpopular war.</i>	<i>The consequences of making soldiers fight in war and return to society are felt on a personal level. Soldiers struggle to find an identity and community.</i>

Excerpt # 6	<i>Passage is about the effects of mental health challenges on the family members of soldiers, namely his friend's wife.</i>	<i>Marlantes experienced great personal loss- a divorce – and many friends who had similar experiences. War is hard on the entire family both during the soldiers' absence and upon his/her return.</i>	<i>Society should be aware of these challenges of soldiers' mental health issues upon their return and prepare families to cope with new stresses.</i>
Excerpt # 7	<i>To reintegrate soldiers into society after war, the department of veterans affairs should help provide a structure and system of support for everyone touched by war.</i>	<i>Marlantes writes that his community would have benefited from more counseling and religious services, plus a military that trains soldiers on the process of demobilization.</i>	<i>The military should train soldiers to leave the military in a more structured way than it currently does. It can be psychological, spiritual, or reflective.</i>
Excerpt # 8	<i>“Society needs veterans to express all sides of their experience.... Without integration of the positive and negative sides of the war, the experience isn't transmitted in any practical and meaningful sense, and we will continue to seek the glory of war unchecked by wisdom about the costs of war.”</i>	<i>Marlantes felt that soldiers were not encouraged to share all sides of their experiences – positive and negative- and they cannot fully integrate into society without confronting this.</i>	<i>Society should integrate soldiers in every way they can by encouraging that soldiers discuss – in an open and honest way – how terrible, terrifying, and exciting war was.</i>

**Writing about War**

*Directions: Answer the following focus question. Use at least two quotes from Karl Marlantes and one other piece of evidence (from the photographs or other primary source excerpts) to support your argument.*

**Focus Question:** What were the consequences of the war in Vietnam for American soldiers and the broader society? For your conclusion, write two sentences that addresses this question: based on Marlantes' experiences of coming home from the war in Vietnam, how can society better prepare for returning soldiers?

**Thesis:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Background:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Evidence #1:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Analysis (how evidence relates to thesis):** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Evidence #2:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Analysis:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Evidence #3:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Analysis:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Conclusion:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Writing about War ANSWER KEY**

- *While there are no precise right or wrong answers for this writing activity, students should be reflective and analytical about the broad spectrum of experiences of going to war.*
- *Students must use 3 pieces of concrete evidence to explain the consequences, both personally for Marlantes, and on a broader level.*
- *Students should come away with a statement of significance about how both the military and society should be more willing to discuss the reality of war, and that the consequences of war last a lifetime.*

**The Aftermath of War – Support for Student Literacy**

*Directions: Coming home from war had many effects on soldiers. Your first job is to read all of the excerpts from Marlantes' book. Next, choose three of them to complete the chart. In the first column, copy key parts of the quote or write the number of the quote you choose. In the second column, re-write that quote in your own words. In the third column, analyze that quote by explaining what it reveals about the author or the war. In the fourth column, explain the relevance of the quote to the broader topic: how does this quote show the consequences of war.*

**EXCERPT 1:** “The fact was I felt unclean, insecure, strange, and awkward. I didn’t feel right- with anyone.... We joined our units alone, and we came home alone, and this was the key difference between us and veterans of other wars, including today’s.” P.182

**EXCERPT 2:** “There is a correct way to welcome your warriors back. Returning veterans don’t need ticker-tape parades or yellow ribbons stretching clear across Texas. Cheering is inappropriate and immature...There should be parades, but they should be solemn processions, rifles upside down, symbol of the sword sheathed once again. They should be conducted with all the dignity of a military funeral, mourning for those lost on both sides, giving thanks for those returned.” P.195

**EXCERPT 3:** “One day my wife talked me into attending a fairly typical 1970s encounter group therapy weekend... At the retreat I was asked to role-play talking to the mother and sister of the NVA soldier I’d killed when he threw the hand grenade at me.... I was asked by the leader of the therapy group to apologize to this imagined mother and daughter for killing their son and brother...Within a minute of starting the apology I broke down wailing like a frightened child. Out came a torrent of terrible memories and remorse...The crying started again the next day, and would start again days and even weeks afterward and go on for hours at a time. Even at work the faces of dead friends and mutilated bodies on both sides would come unbidden to mind.

The group was well intentioned but woefully ignorant, as was I, of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. I never joined another therapy group again. Although the exercise got me “in touch with my feelings,” it was a damaging experience because no one was there to help me figure out how to handle those feelings in a healthy manner.” P.49-50

**EXCERPT 4:** “So ask the now twenty-year-old combat veteran at the gas station how he felt about killing someone. His probably angry answer, if he’s honest: ‘Not a fucking thing.’ Ask him when he’s sixty, and if he’s not too drunk to answer, it might come out very differently, but only by luck of circumstance – who was there to help him with the feelings during those four long decades after he came home from war. It is critical for young people who return from combat that someone *is* there to help them, before they turn to drugs, alcohol, and suicide... They must be helped to sort out what will be healthy grief about taking a life because it is part of the sorrow of war. The drugs, alcohol, and suicides are ways of avoiding guilt and fear of grief. Grief itself is a healthy response.” P. 47

**EXCERPT 5:** “This was mistake number one – lack of extended family involvement. The psychology of the young warrior is, I think, almost entirely related to hearth and kin. You can subvert [warp or change] that into patriotism and nationalism if you’re clever and work at it long enough, but I’d been detoxified.” P.179

**EXCERPT 6:** “I was walking in uniform down M Street in our nation’s capital. I had been back perhaps a month. A group of young people, my age, began to follow me down the street on the opposite side, jeering, calling me names, chanting in unison. They were flying the flags of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

I stood and looked at them across the chasm [difference] of that street, not knowing what to say or do. I tried to think of something that would allow me to make friends with them. I didn’t want to fight them too. I was sick of fighting. I wanted to come back home, to be understood, to be welcomed.” P. 176

**EXCERPT 7:** I went to a party at Raymond’s over the holidays... In the kitchen, the quiet eye of the storm, I talked with Raymond’s wife, Dee... Those women are veterans of a different war. For every veteran who goes through a divorce, a wife goes through one too. For every veteran alone in the basement, there is a wife upstairs, bewildered [confused], isolated, and in despair from the dark cloud of war that hangs over daily family life. For too many years the public hasn’t recognized or sympathized with families of veterans coping with PTSD and has left them in silence.” P.192-193

**EXCERPT 8:** “We need to give returning veterans some sort of commitment to the future they are returning to...Most veterans come from the strata [class] of society where counseling is something that happens to crazy people. Counseling should be required. This will eliminate the stigma [bad reputation]...There should be special religious services for each faith, specifically designed to get returning veterans back on home ground and reconnected to the infinite through something besides dealing and avoiding death.... For those who don’t feel connected with any particular religion, it could be something as simple as sharing poetry and stories.” P.204-205

**EXCERPT 9:** “Society needs veterans to express all sides of their experience, the guilt and sorrow *and* the pride. Cut off one and you cut off the others....

No nation will ever reach maturity, or make sensible foreign policy, until its warriors, its people, and its leaders can talk about all sides of war with equal feeling. “I lit up the whole valley” *and* “I’ve grieved, crying for the little ones like my own children.” Without integration [combination] of the positive and negative sides of the war, the experience isn’t transmitted [spread] in any practical and meaningful sense, and we will continue to seek the glory of war unchecked by wisdom about the costs of war.” P.218-219