

**History 282 US Diplomatic  
Discussion Transcript for November 3, 2020  
Vietnam Diplomacy**

**Main Reading: Chapter 16 Herring + Election Day jitters**

Student email comments were optional this week because the assignment coincided with Election Day. So, instead of the usual discussion transcript, I'm provided below my own short reflection on Herring's chapter about the US escalation into the Vietnam War. Here is a selection of student comments:

Anybody who feels overwhelmed by the stress of the 2020 election and the polarization of recent American politics should probably sit down with George Herring's chapter on the Vietnam War and take a hard look at 1968. It might not make you feel better right away, but it will help put some of your angst into perspective. Herring describes a grim catalogue of events that must have felt like the end of days to those who lived through it (and note to my snarkier students: yes, I'm old enough to have lived through it, but I was born in August of that year, and don't quite remember Lyndon Johnson or any of his struggles). Just imagine if you were a Dickinson student back then, facing a potential draft for military service in Vietnam, a war that Walter Cronkite, the most trusted news anchor on American television, had only recently suggested was becoming a losing cause. It was a year of not one but two shocking political assassinations (Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy), which occurred after a long decade of sporadic violence and urban unrest. NATO and other Cold War era alliances seemed to be falling apart. The economy was in turmoil and years of post-war prosperity seemed to be vanishing under the weight of government overspending, foreign competition and persistent poverty. There was an open cultural war that seemed to pit a revolutionary younger generation against a resentful "silent majority." And all of this happened against the backdrop of a divisive presidential campaign that nearly ended in a tie, after what Herring suggests was a cynical and deeply troubling example of collusion between the Nixon campaign and the government of South Vietnam to disrupt the Johnson Administration's peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese Communists, what was their hoped-for "October surprise" to help wind down an unpopular war and win the election for Vice President Hubert Humphrey. What could anyone find inspiring from this depressing litany? The answer is that it was not, after all, the end of days. Despite all of this setbacks and real tragedies, the country somehow endured. Herring titled his book, *From Colony to Superpower*, but much of his narrative is filled with such gloomy episodes, or at least bitter American division, and not steady triumphalism. The story of American political and diplomatic history is inevitably the story of people who disagree with each other and struggle mightily to achieve the elusive promise of the country's founding ideals. Some find that narrative depressing. Others appreciate it for its bracing reality. Freedom and equality, peace and prosperity, justice and unity –these aspirations are not inevitable but the struggle to achieve them in the United States has been long enduring and has definitely not been extinguished yet.