Leadership and Decision Making

Activity 1: Truman’s Decision to Aid the French

Period Covered: 1945-1952

Grade Levels: 9-12

Introduction:

In these scenario-based activities, students view video segments from selected episodes of THE VIETNAM WAR, describing specific situations facing each of five US presidents during the course of the war. Students then engage in decision-making activities that analyze the circumstances, explores the president’s options, and then defines a course of action. After students come to a decision, they will see what the United States actually decided to do and comment on the decisions made.

Materials:

- Video Clips:
  - Ho Chi Minh’s Quest to End French Colonial Rule
  - Truman Faces a Cold War
  - Truman and Vietnam

Summarizing Points:

- US and Vietnamese motivations to form an alliance
- Actions Ho Chi Minh took to position Vietnam for independence after the war
- The importance to the Vietnamese of seeing American OSS officer with Ho Chi Minh when he reads Vietnam’s Declaration of Independence
- Similarities and differences between Vietnam’s Declaration of Independence and the United States’ Declaration of Independence
- Truman under pressure to return France and Vietnam to pre-war arrangement

Procedure:

1. Watch “Ho Chi Minh’s Quest to End French Colonial Rule” and “Truman Faces a Cold War.”

2. Discuss the clips as a class using the summarizing points. Ask students to speculate on how US foreign policy toward Vietnam might have gone differently had the United States followed Lt. Col. Peter Dewey’s recommendation to promote Vietnamese independence.
3. Explain to students that after Ho Chi Minh declared independence with unofficial US support, the French returned to Vietnam to reclaim their colony at the end of World War II. Vietnamese forces rose up to resist French control, and within a few years the conflict became a stalemate. The French asked for US aid in regaining control of Vietnam.

Tell students: Faced with a decision, President Truman has asked you to make a recommendation. Will you advise him to:

a) Support the French in regaining Vietnam.
b) Support the Vietnamese independence movement.
c) Stay neutral and don’t support either side.
d) Try to negotiate a settlement between the French and Vietnamese.

Students can work in groups or individually to determine their recommendation. They should be prepared to present and defend their decision.

4. Show the last video segment, “Truman and Vietnam,” which reveals what Truman decided to do and why. Have students compare and contrast their decisions with that of Truman; they will then write a brief analysis of Truman’s and their own decisions.

Post-Activity Questions
- What is your opinion of President Truman’s decision? Explain.
- In what ways might the increase in tensions in the Cold War have influenced Truman’s decision? What might have been the outcome if he had chosen a different option, like negotiating a settlement between France and Ho Chi Minh or supporting Vietnamese independence, or doing nothing?
- Why do you think President Truman chose not to inform the American public about the increase in aid to the French in Vietnam? Do you think they should have been informed? Explain.