

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

A Son Writes Home-Lessons from the Vietnam War From Geraldine Dineen

Grade – 11

Length of class period – 45 minutes; two periods required

Inquiry – What was the perspective of the American soldier during the Vietnam War? How did that changeover time?

Objectives - students will be able to analyze the changing attitudes of active military.

Materials

1. collection of letters written by Jeff Rogers between August 1968, and November 1969 [adapted from: Brown, Victoria Bissell and Timothy J. Shannon. *Going To The Source*. 2004. Bedford/St. Martin's: Boston]
2. graphic organizer

Activities

1. using a graphic organizer, students will analyze letters to find evidence of support or disillusionment with U.S. participation in the Vietnam conflict
2. students will complete analysis questions
3. students will participate in class discussion to compare analysis

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

1. ability to accurately discern opposing perspectives in documents
2. depth of analysis of documents, use of specific references to documents to support analysis
3. participation in discussion

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

- 1.3 Trace the changing role of U.S. participation and influence in world affairs.
- 1.26 Evaluate the impact of major belief systems on societies and nations.
- 2.1.1 Find relevant and accurate information from a variety of sources to answer a history/social studies question.
- 2.2.3 Cite evidence from a source to determine an author's purpose and intended audience.
- 2.5.14 Represent information in various formats.
- 3.1.1 Use evidence to develop an interpretation of a historical event.
- 3.1.2 Evaluate primary and secondary interpretations of a historical event.
- 3.2.9 Cite examples and analyze how people and/or personal accounts can influence historical memory.

A Son Writes Home

Letters from the Vietnam War

“The longer I’m over here, the more I think we should get out quickly, almost no matter how.” Jeff Rogers announced that hopeless view in a letter to his parents on April 20, 1969, after five months as a naval officer on board a hospital ship anchored off the coast of Vietnam. Jeff’s despair over the war was not unusual among those serving “in country” in 1969; nor was it unusual for men and women in the service to write home expressing their despair. Jeff Rogers’s letters home are notable only because his father was William P. Rogers, the secretary of state in Richard Nixon’s administration. In fact, Jeff Rogers was the only child of a high-ranking administration official to serve in Vietnam during the Nixon years. Over the course of Jeff’s one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, from early November 1968 through October 1969, he provided his father with a more direct, candid view of the war than a secretary of state typically gets in military reports or intelligence briefings.

Jeff Rogers did not go to Vietnam enthusiastically, but he did go willingly. He enlisted in the navy in 1968 after a year at Harvard Medical School convinced him that he did not want to be a doctor. Up until that moment in his life, the 24-year-old Rogers had enjoyed all the privileges his father’s success could afford. He attended private schools, and was a classmate of the Nixon daughters at Sidwell Friends’ School in Washington, DC. Jeff avoided the early disruptions of the war, gliding smoothly from Dartmouth to Harvard Medical School, but his decision to withdraw from Harvard put him at unfamiliar risk.

In 1968, any young man who left school was likely to be drafted into the army, and William Rogers’s son was no exception. Jeff had to immediately weigh all the options that his peers were weighing: get drafted, enlist, apply for conscientious objector status, or move to Canada. A physician had even offered to give Jeff a bogus medical excuse. In the end, he chose to enlist in the navy and went to officer candidate school (OCS), where he trained to be a ship’s navigator. Family privilege did not keep Jeff out of Vietnam; indeed, he was one of the few from his class in OCS to be assigned to the war zone.

The same week Jeff arrived in Vietnam, Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election. During the campaign, Nixon railed against U.S. policy in Vietnam, blaming the Democrats and former President Johnson with not bringing about “peace with honor.” Nixon began his presidency believing that he could, within a year, disentangle the U.S. from the war and withdraw the 540k troops fighting there but still, somehow, “win the peace.”

As Jeff Rogers settled into his navigators post on board the USS *Repose*, just off the coast of Vietnam, his father joined a debate within the Nixon administration about how to achieve peace with honor in Vietnam.

Jeff Rogers's Letters from Vietnam, November 10, 1968-August 28, 1969

A record of correspondence that stretches over a year offers an opportunity to trace change in the attitudes of the letter writer and to link attitudinal change to the writer's experiences during that twelve-month period. As you read Jeff Rogers's letters home, use this table to keep notes on his attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Watch for experiences and observations that indicate a change in his view of the war, but note those comments indicating unchanged attitudes as well. Both are important for understanding how the war experience affected Jeff. Use these notes to answer the analysis questions that follow the documents.

| | Evidence of support for U.S. effort in Vietnam | Evidence of disillusionment with U.S. effort in Vietnam |
|-------------------|---|--|
| 1. Nov 10, 1968 | | |
| 2. Nov 24, 1968 | | |
| 3. Dec 7, 1968 | | |
| 4. Dec 30, 1968 | | |
| 5. Feb 18, 1969 | | |
| 6. Mar 14, 1969 | | |
| 7. Apr 20, 1969 | | |
| 8. May 24, 1969 | | |
| 9. May 31, 1969 | | |
| 10. June 10, 1969 | | |
| 11. June 23, 1969 | | |
| 12. Aug 28, 1969 | | |

1. November 10, 1968

Jeff Rogers left Travis Air Force Base, northeast of San Francisco, California, on Friday, November 1, 1968, and after a series of airplane flights, he arrived in Vietnam on Tuesday, November 5, the day Richard M. Nixon was elected President. He devoted most of his first letter home to his parents to describing life aboard his hospital ship, the USS Repose.

Dear Mother and Dad,

I'm quite impressed with and already proud of what this ship does. As they say, it's not about the traditional Navy—a lot of the stuff about secrecy, about protocol, about routine, and of course about weapons is irrelevant here. But it's obvious we do a vital job and a greatly appreciated one. Some Statistics: in 1968 so far, 5, 571 patients (2,624 battle casualties, 485 non-battle casualties, 2,590 disease) only 152 deaths and returned 2,834 to combat. We've had a total of 8.763 helicopter landings since we got on station in February, 1966 and not one accident. It's a little "heavy" at times directing down a helo [helicopter] that extends almost the full length of the landing pad onto a small area which is moving up and down ten feet or more, especially when you know that there may be someone close to dead already inside—minutes count. All kinds of patients are brought aboard—about 15-20 helos per day [by boat] quite a few Vietnamese—some combat victims but many others for elective surgery or general care.

I feel good about doing something relatively positive in this war. But it's also a strange feeling of being almost farther from the war here. Standing on the bridge at night and watching flares gunfire, and occasional ships firing in the distance while drinking coke or coffee, BS'ing with the men on watch, and thinking about going back to bed in an air conditioned room after eating a midnight breakfast if wanted—the two things contrast so much. And then supervising the carrying from the helos of bleeding, dying, sick patients. It's hard to know what my reaction to it all is yet. Mostly I've been too busy so far to have time to form a reaction. And we get so little news out here. Just occasional Armed Forces Radio and week or two old papers and magazines. Right now anyway somehow for me personally the war seemed worse when I was watching it on TV—maybe partly because of feeling frustrated to only be able to sit there. But for the guys brought aboard (and women civilians too), the war is here and a helluva lot worse than it is on TV. And for the doctors—they seem much more tired than the crew. I was pleased with the outcome of the election. I'm not surprised it was so close. Just like in '60. Another couple of weeks and it might have been reversed. Have you talked with Mr. Nixon, Dad? Must be kind of an awesome feeling for him now.

Love, Jeff

2. November 24, 1968

Dear Dale and Don [Jeff's older sister and her husband],

You speak of having trouble imagining me over here. Well, in a way, it's difficult to comprehend being over here. The American presence is so overwhelming here, it doesn't seem halfway around the world in the military, it's as if a portion of the U.S. had been transplanted over here and stuck in amongst little bits and pieces of a foreign, oriental country called Vietnam. Here I live with Americans, eat American food, drink fresh water (distilled aboard

ship), watch occasional taped U.S. TV, listen to U.S. radio and watch American military power fire at an invisible enemy. Never once in three weeks here have I even been aware of hearing Vietnamese talked. The Vietnamese I have interacted with so far are either fluent in English or are too wounded or sick to talk. It's a strange war, but as attested to by the 34 guys we flew out yesterday by helicopter on stretchers on their way back home—a real one.

Love, Jeff

3. December 7, 1968

Jeff's job was to position the USS Repose at offshore locations as close as possible to battle areas so that helicopters carrying the wounded had quick access to the hospital. He also helped to direct the highly skilled helicopter pilots on to the ship's small landing pad and aided in the transfer of the wounded from the helicopters to the operating room.

Dear Dad,

I was pleased to hear that Chief Justice Warren agreed to stay on. I assume that was your work—congratulations. My major news is that I have taken over as navigator of the *Repose*. This won't change my job much because I've been doing the navigator work anyway. But this gives me more leeway in making decisions. So the *Repose* has definite advantages for a junior officer. It is one of the very few large ships on which an Ensign can become an OOD ("officer of the deck") after only a month aboard (this is nothing great to my credit, as other Ensigns have made it in equal or less time, though some in much more). Other advantages of the *Repose* for officers are the good living conditions, and the preferred treatment you get on next duty. I toured the crew's living quarters the other day, really for the first time—and they're pretty bad. Four small "bunks" in a stack, all very close together, and inadequate toilet and shower facilities. Compare to my two-room stateroom, bathroom shared by two people, and quiet....

Disadvantages of the *Repose* are the full unbroken year over here and the unNavy-like nature of the ship—no weapons, unique organization, etc. The biggest disadvantage of this ship is its monotonous and repetitious operating schedule. Pretty much the same times, same places, same operations. This simplifies navigation and much but increases the tedium of a year over here

I really appreciate your letters too.

Love, Jeff

4. December 30, 1968

Dear Mom and Dad,

The *Newsweeks* just started arriving; getting here when they are still current, which is great. Mail time both ways varies a lot. We've been spending three days in Da Nang harbor, where we get mail quickly; followed by three days off the DMZ [*the demilitarized zone, which marked the border between the northern and southern parts of the country*] on the 25th. We go to Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines on the 27th so at least we'll be in a little better shape for the New Year. On the way to Subic celestial navigation becomes important, so I should get some experience using a sextant with stars and the sun. We go to Subic four times a year for 5 or 6

days each time. But the ship hasn't gone anyplace else for 1½ years, so unless the war changes, we stay right here.

Since I stopped writing yesterday, the following things happened—all fairly typical of life on the *Repose*. I stood a 12 noon to 1600 [4pm] OOD watch during which we sent away various of the ship's boats to the Da Nang area for milk, mail, to take some of the crew to beach parties, to transport the Captain and other brass to play tennis or amuse themselves. Like a lot on the *Repose*, things often seem to be done haphazardly and the little things sometimes seem more important to the brass aboard (5 captains, 4 medical) than the big things, which is frustrating. The Captain gets much madder if you are 5 minutes late with a boat for tennis than if a helicopter with 16 seriously wounded medevac (medical evacuation patients) is mistakenly sent one hour out of its way—both have happened.

[*Rogers then described his first trip ashore with thirty other officers to have dinner and drinks at the Officers Club at the Naval base in Da Nang.*] You feel a little foreign walking from the boat to the club. Mud streets, dodging motor scooters, being saluted by little Vietnamese military men, and almost being run over by little Vietnamese civilians. Then into the club and back to the pseudo-America where the Vietnamese waiter and waitresses seem to be the foreigners there to serve the big Americans. These parties are cherished by the Captain, Exec, and the doctors—but they turn off almost all of the junior officers in the ship's company—including me definitely. They take up time better used sleeping and the “regulars” become so obsessed with their little ventures that they become a real burden for those who have to prepare boats for them and see that everyone gets there and back...quite a lot of trivia to take up the time we don't have between the important things...this month promised to be very quiet—just administrative, with lookout for small craft and swimmers (patrol boats in the harbor, after dropping percussion grenades to keep away any Viet Cong swimmers who have a liking for sabotaging ships).

Being on the periphery of a hospital here, I'm more convinced than ever that I was correct in leaving medicine. But I'm also less sure than ever of just what I want to do. One thing I've eliminated is a career in the Navy.

Yes, we see some of the firing around Da Nang and near the DMZ. And we anchor close to the piers which have been shelled occasionally—but still we are relatively quite safe.

Love, Jeff

5. February 18, 1969

Dear Mother and Dad,

Though it's been quite a while since I wrote, not much new has happened in the interim. Thirty days straight of floating with only a sandy, barren, low coastline in the distance. There have been some kind of depressing times for me since Subric in that the initial excitement of the ship and activity of learning has worn off and now it's the prospect of 8½ more months of the same plus questions still about what I want to do in the future and about myself in general. But my spirits are pretty good now. I've been spending some time with the nurses, which is something of a diversion, though even there the conversation often revolves around the frustration of one year at sea, the frustration of this war, and the condition of the dead and dying patients.

Everyone has been prepared for a large Tet offensive (Tet began yesterday, the 17th), though so far only minor increases in fighting seem to have occurred. I've doubted all along that they would have a major offensive at this time. They are too smart to do so when we are all prepared for one. We'll see.

Seems like Nixon is doing a good job so far. I've heard only positive comments even from self-proclaimed "liberals." Seems to me the two basic elements are his air of calm, quiet efficiency and his open honesty with the press and public about his opinion. I think the latter is very important. The fact that no one in the administration seems disturbed by such trivial things as everyone knowing who the cabinet would be a day or two early is a hugely refreshing contrast to Johnson. As is his directness about his hopes and himself: i.e. "hope to win the respect and eventually the friendship of Negroes." If he can just keep speaking openly and honestly and acting on his own beliefs even when he starts to be criticized, as is inevitable, he should be a damn good president, I think.

I received and enjoyed the tapes you sent. It was reassuring to know you're still having ice cream with butterscotch sauce for dinner. In your last letter, it annoyed me a little what you said about Dad not being able to ask about job suggestions for me. I'm not asking any special favors, in fact I've made it clear I don't want them. All I'm asking is that you keep your eyes open for possibilities. I can't believe that any mention of the subject [of Jeff's search for a post after Vietnam] would be taken as an "order" as Mother suggests. Which brings me to the whole subject of not using pull. I agree in general, but I think it's easy to be so sensitive to it (as I've been in the past) as to pass up opportunities and thus perhaps the chance to do something worthwhile for others. Dad and I were talking once about families and Dad pointed out that an alternative to rejecting the parents, in effect, and starting on your own was to build on what the parents are and have done, and he used the Kennedy's as an example. Well, one of the reasons the Kennedy's have done so much is that they haven't been afraid to use their own and each other's influence. Though I, too, find the extremes they carry it to distasteful, there is definitely something to be said for not being afraid to use "pull" if one honestly believes it will be for the good of all. So I repeat my original request made months ago: I'd appreciate it if Dad would let me know if he hears of any good Junior Naval Officer billets that exist in the D.C. area. I don't think it's an unreasonable request to ask of my father, the Secretary of State or not. Thanks....

I found the following headline in the *Wall Street Journal* and it now is on my desk:

Cruise Ship Staves Off Ennui with Good Food and Endless Activities

Love, Jeff

6. March 14, 1969

Jeff wrote this letter just three days before Nixon ordered secret bombing of Cambodia.

Dear Mother and Dad,

Nothing much new to report. Things stay the same here—which is one of the most discouraging aspects of this war. No apparent motion or progress, just a steady influx of dead and dying men. For the first time, yesterday, I felt a little sick to my stomach watching a helo land with six Marines straight off the battlefield—they looked pretty badly mangled when they took them off the helo. Soon found out I was right: 5 out of 6 were dead on arrival, the 6th died

shortly after. Not that I'm not expecting to see death in a war, but all of it we see here seems harder to accept because we see or sense no progress towards any goal.

Another thing that bothers me about the war is the so-called "intelligence." First of all it seems to have little relation to what really happens. A case in point is the intelligence about the recent offensive. We were told a month before Tet they expected a big attack on Quang Tri during Tet, etc., etc. As far as I know there has still been no sizeable attack on Quang Tri, and the offensive began after Tet, is not the same type of offensive as was predicted, etc. Every few days we get classified intelligence messages saying that "tonite will be the big attack." Never happens.

And on the other side our press releases both exaggerate and underplay events. *Newsweek* described the attack on Da Nang as something like: "bombs raining in on the city, fires and secondary explosions throughout the city." We got there several hours after the attack and saw three fires, widely scattered, and little else. In general, things look normal and only moderate damage was done to several military installations. Or another example was the explosion in the landing craft at Da Nang—an explosion we could see, hear, smell. Military press releases as reported on American Forces Vietnam radio network said one killed and 30 injured. In truth, over 30 were killed instantly and the whole landing area was a shambles.

So if intelligence reports and press reports have such little relation to what really is happening, who does one believe? Worse, I really wonder if anyone knows what the true story is. The war is too fragmented, too spread out, and too multi-faceted to really be understood as far as who is accomplishing what.

About income tax. We don't have to file as long as we're in the Vietnam combat zone, so I'll wait until I get back to do that.

Yes, we occasionally have beach parties and I've gotten to swim once or twice. But we just got word that there had been a sniper incident at the beach we've been using so beach parties may be out.

We have a change of Command next month. Should be interesting to adjust to a new Captain. This Captain now is quite lax and so we have things pretty easy, but I dislike him strongly, to be frank. His priority list is 1. His reputation and social status 2. Other niceties (but not necessities) like parties, uninterrupted church services, and short hair 3. the welfare and safety of patients. His attitude bothers me a lot.

Love, Jeff

7. April 20, 1969

Secretary of State Rogers and his wife were scheduled to make an inspection trip to Vietnam in the spring of 1969. Though Rogers was often frozen out of strategic planning for the war, his trip was intended to demonstrate Nixon's continuing support for the war even as it laid plans to announce the Vietnamization policy.

Dear Mother and Dad,

Needless to say, when writing from Vietnam, things are the same...I've been navigating without a Chief, but my men have been very efficient and we've been getting along pretty well. In fact I was real pleased with our navigating on the way back from Subic—our star sights coming out good. Also the Captain let me take the ship alongside an oiler the other day and that

went well, the Captain of the oiler saying it was one of the best approaches he'd seen this deployment.

So there are a few high spots, but much just sitting around waiting and thinking, both of which can get pretty depressing. It's funny that many of the situations I've been in the past several years seem somehow prison-like or other-worldly. Even at college (though I hardly felt it there) a common expression was "When we get to the outside world." At med school the same: everyone looks forward to going out in the "real world." At OCS (Officer Candidate School) to extremes: "Only 28 days to freedom, back to the outside." Or just civilian life in general referred to as the "outside." And then there's the added confinement, even with the material luxuries of being on a floating football field.

That confinement is one reason I've been wondering, Dad, if you plan to travel at all around Vietnam when you're here—if you still plan to come. It's a shame to be over here a year and see only the coastline and bits of Da Nang. I don't know if it's possible or ethical for me to travel around with you (or your entourage, that is) for a day or so, but it would be great if it would. If it's impossible, I certainly understand.

The longer I'm over here, the more I think we should get out quickly, almost no matter how. Even an initial small unilateral withdrawal might both demonstrate our ultimate peace goal and scare the South Vietnamese into doing a little more for themselves. As I've said before the thing that bothers me most about it all are the sickening sameness of each day, of the news reports, of the "battles," of the intelligence briefings, of the dead and dying people—there seems to be no progress or even change—just more dead and destroyed. The other aspect that makes me doubt that we should stay is the very strong impression that NO ONE REALLY KNOWS what's happening over here. Our Captain says "the allies have really been winning a great victory in the A Shaw Valley" and Marines who have been wounded in the A Shaw Valley say we are getting wiped out there...the government since '65 predicts changes that never occur, and doesn't predict the few that do, etc. It's not that there's a conspiracy to deceive, or a plan to keep the war going by the Vietnamese capitalists or the U.S. militarists or expansionist plans by the U.S.—as the radicals would have one believe. It's not that intentions are bad—it's just that knowledge of what's really happening is abysmal, and given the nature of the war and the country it's probably impossible to ever attain a complete, accurate picture. And if no one can really understand what's happening now, how can anyone decide what should happen or how to get there. Maybe I'm saying that the whole thing is beyond our control and we should stop trying to control it, because all we do meanwhile is waste men and money. The loss of men is obvious. The loss of money becomes clearer when you watch millions spent on the battleship *New Jersey*, then see it off the coast here, firing maybe 50 rounds a day far inland and read reports that it "destroyed 4 enemy bunkers and 2 tunnels, no known enemy killed." In fact, I think every U.S. Navy combatant ship over here could be pulled out without any noticeable effect on the war. (Supply ships and hospital ships are different.)

I like what the administration has been saying so far but, as you pointed out, it seems awfully important that results be "forthcoming," not just talk. Look forward to seeing maybe both of you next month.

Love, Jeff

P.S. If troops are pulled out of Vietnam, an excellent way to get them back would be on big white ships.

8. May 24, 1969

William and Adele Rogers made an official State Dept. visit to Vietnam between May 14 and May 19. On the first day of their visit, President Nixon went on national television to announce the new Vietnamization policy. Jeff Rogers was able to travel around the country with his parents for three or four days. Today, Jeff recalls visiting Hue with them and seeing some young recruits preparing to go out on their first mission, looking “petrified.” He says his parents were deeply affected by the trip, including their visit on board the USS Repose.

Dear Dad,

I'm enclosing the death report on Forbes, the man with the blistered amputation you gave the purple heart to. They didn't think he would die, but he did. The hospital people also wanted you to know so you could take it into account if you write letters to families.

Love, Jeff

9. May 31, 1969

Dear Mother and Dad,

Hope the rest of your trip went well. As I wrote to Dad earlier, it was great to see both of you and a really good chance to see more of the country. Am working on a collection of pictures of our trip to the *Repose*, some of which Mother would particularly like I suspect. Don't know if you ever heard, also, that just before you went into the Intensive Care Unit to give purple hearts another patient died. Apparently they just covered him with a sheet while you were there and removed him later. But to most of the men over here and to their families that's what this war is about—not the pacification resettlement* stuff you were shown on your trip.

Love, Jeff

*“pacification resettlement” was a wartime term for U.S. efforts to move South Vietnamese villagers away from areas controlled by the north or the Viet Cong and to persuade them that allegiance to the U.S. and Saigon promised greater political and economic freedom.

10. June 10, 1969

Dear Mother and Dad,

Generally things are the same....Of course, people are standing by to see if there'll be any major changes in our operations with the ~~beginning of~~ withdrawal [*crossed out*] replacement, though it's probably doubtful I realize. If troops continue to be removed, it's going to be harder than ever for those who remain—and for the families of those wounded or killed. Also for those who are sent over here. Wonder if there's some way to stop sending any combat troops over here and use the natural end of men's tours to phase out our combat troops. Probably will be necessary to send replacement advisory and support military types for some time. But to send replacement frontline Marines, for example, who may have a 20% chance of getting killed or permanently maimed over here while troops are being withdrawn will be hard as hell on everyone. Anyway, I am pleased about the first move and hope that the process goes as quickly as possible or quicker....

Mother, let me put in a correction. As long as you think it's a good story (I do too) and are going to be telling it, let me tell you how it really goes: This nurse did not say, as you said, "No, it doesn't matter to me that your father is Secretary of _____ what is he secretary of?" This implies that she didn't know his position. She did. What really was said is as follows: Me: "Does my father's position make any difference to you one way or the other?" Her: "No, it doesn't matter to me that your father is Secretary of _____ (brief pause while her mind went blank for a second before she completed the sentence) Me (interrupting quickly during the pause): "Okay, okay, you've convinced me." The point is not that she didn't know what Dad is Secretary of, but that her mind went blank for a second just at the appropriate time. (Which perhaps indicated indeed that Dad's position was not in the forefront of her impression of me, which is what I was trying to ascertain."

Love, Jeff

11. June 23, 1969

Dear Mother and Dad,

As always, things are the same. So there really is no news. There is very little talk about the replacement ← → withdrawal—obviously it doesn't affect at all the lives of most people over here. As a matter of fact, there is in general little talk about the general situation over here and what should be done. People just seem to have given up on the whole mess and only look forward to finishing their year (this is not a new development, having been that way since I arrived)....

Love, Jeff

12. August 28, 1969

Dear Mother and Dad,

Got back from R&R a few days ago. It was great—especially the days of leave I took afterward to visit Pleiku. I was off the ship 13 days—somewhat longer than most R&R's to say the least. Six days in Tokyo...then back to Vietnam and up to the Pleiku area for three days. I was with an Army major I'd met in Saigon. He is really fine and was great to me—as were all his friends and associates, from the Commanding General on down (or "up" depending on what you think of Generals). I spent two days traveling in helicopters around the various Montagnard villages that the U.S. civic action people are working in. It is one of the most fascinating things I've seen. The people are truly primitive, yet truly appreciative of the Americans—in both respects quite unlike Vietnamese. Again it confirmed my impression that one's attitude towards our involvement in Vietnam is conditioned very strongly by one's experience here, because there is a huge variety of possible types of experiences: from getting killed, which we see on the ship every day—to political involvement which I saw in Saigon—to the grateful smiles of some Montagnard chief—to obscene gestures towards thievery from GI's that I see in Da Nang.

Watching the civic action work with the Montagnards raises again the moot question of whether we should be here at all—and the vital question of what to do now—abandoning some of these people too abruptly would be criminal now—but having Americans killed every day is equally criminal....The chances to go into the villages and talk to the people leisurely and

actually see what's going on was a good complement to my field trips with Dad in which we saw a great variety of places—but one felt it was all staged in the showplaces of Vietnam. This visit was the real places where the war is going on....

I, for one, have been really pleased with all the major directions that you and the President have been steering policy, as well as pleased with the President's domestic plans. Do hope though that the next withdrawal from here isn't postponed too long. I worry that the administration will fall into the LBJ trap of trying too hard to save face for the U.S., i.e., not withdrawing in the face of enemy action. When in reality "fact" is much less important than lives.

See you in two months.

Love, Jeff

Analyzing the source:

1. What did your notes on Jeff's letters reveal to you about the direction and timing of his changing attitudes toward the war? What personal experiences caused him to question U.S. involvement in Vietnam? Which six paragraphs from these twelve letters would you select to illustrate Jeff's evolution while in Vietnam?
2. Write a one-paragraph "interpretation" of the letters Jeff wrote on May 24 and May 31 (sources 8 and 9), immediately after his parents' visit to Vietnam. How does your reading of all the other letters in this set influence your interpretation of these two short letters?
3. The sons of Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who served under President Johnson, developed stress-related illnesses while their fathers were presiding over the Vietnam War. Based on the letters excerpted here, how would you describe Jeff Rogers's reaction to his father's position in the Nixon administration? Do these letters provide you with enough evidence to characterize this father-son relationship?
4. Jeff Rogers said that the United States should get out of Vietnam "quickly, almost no matter how." But shortly after the Vietnamization program began, Jeff complained that it made things "harder than ever before for those who remain" (see sources 7 and 10). What were Jeff's concerns about Vietnamization? How do his concerns amount to an argument for getting out of Vietnam? How do they amount to an argument for staying in country?
5. When the U.S. attacked Iraq in the spring of 2003, some Americans expressed concern that the experience there would replicate the Vietnam War. How does Jeff's August 28, 1969 letter (source 12) call up similarities and differences between Vietnam and Iraq?