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History Through the Lens of Diplomacy: From Saigon to Hanoi

In this activity, you will be challenged to think like a diplomat and respond to a variety of situations.

Use the [quick reference guide](#) for tips, tricks, and help along the way.

Part 1: Evacuation of Saigon

Imagine you are a diplomat for the U.S. State Department working in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, Vietnam. The official U.S. military presence withdrew after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords between South and North Vietnam, in 1973. However, you – along with approximately 5,000 Americans, including diplomats and military personnel—are still working in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon along with several thousand South Vietnamese. Diplomats continue to work to strengthen the U.S.–Vietnam relationship. However, you notice that the North Vietnamese Army is still on the offensive, capturing more and more South Vietnam cities.

Prompt: What would you do as a diplomat to help calm the North Vietnamese Army? What tools might help convince the North Vietnamese Army to follow the terms of the Paris Peace Accords? How are you approaching the conversation (carrot or stick negotiations)?

Despite the best diplomatic efforts, the North Vietnamese Army is not slowing down. South Vietnamese citizens began to flee in mass numbers. The fall of the second-largest city, Da Nang, sparks even more South Vietnamese citizens to flee. The closer the North Vietnamese Army gets to Saigon, the more panic people are feeling.

Prompt: As a diplomat, what do you do? Do you continue to negotiate with the North Vietnamese to halt the army's progression? Can you use the tools of diplomacy with threat negotiations to get the North Vietnamese Army to comply?



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On April 29, 1975, North Vietnamese troops shelled Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base. U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin ordered the evacuation of U.S. citizens and military in Saigon. By this point, sea planes were blocked and airplanes could not land in Saigon, leaving only one option for an evacuation: a helicopter airlift. The U.S. embassy became the sole departure point for helicopters.

Prompt: You have been asked to evacuate the embassy. Only Americans are asked to evacuate, but the South Vietnamese staff in the embassy are to remain. You look out the window of the embassy and see thousands of South Vietnamese lined up to get out. What do you do? Do you just leave? Try taking local embassy staff on the helicopters?

While Saigon was evacuating, approximately 100 miles away in Cần Thơ, the consulate was also under evacuation orders. Consul General Francis "Terry" McNamara received orders from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to evacuate only the Americans; they were only going to provide helicopters with enough room to evacuate the 18 or so American employees.

Prompt: Imagine you're Consul General McNamara. You don't want to leave your local consulate staff behind as you know they will likely face detention or even death for working with Americans. You also know that Saigon desperately needs more helicopters. What do you do? How do you evacuate both Americans and local staff?

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In Saigon, helicopters landed at 10-minute intervals at the embassy, including landing on the embassy roof. With some pilots flying for 19 hours straight, over 7,000 people were evacuated, including 5,500 South Vietnamese, in less than 24 hours. Over in Cần Thơ, Consul General McNamara, using his negotiation skills, was able to convince the embassy to keep the helicopters going to Saigon, if he could evacuate everyone, including South Vietnamese staff, by boat. He was able to safely evacuate both American and local staff and their families from the consulate using two boats. With the evacuations, the U.S. Embassy in Saigon was abandoned.

Prompt: When an embassy is forced to evacuate, what does that mean for relationships? Trade? People? Country, the region? Other countries?

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Part 2: Normalization

With the closing of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, and a trade embargo on Vietnam, relations between the U.S. and Vietnam were fraught with mistrust. The U.S. believed that Vietnam was not cooperating in accounting for the missing Americans from the war. Vietnam demanded reconstruction assistance it was promised during the Paris Peace Accords. As the Cold War heightened, efforts to normalize relations post-war stalled.

Prompt: Could diplomatic relations ever be re-established between Vietnam and the U.S.? What compromises are both Vietnam and the U.S. going to have to make in order to re-establish diplomatic ties?

Starting in the late-1980's, a shift began to occur. With the easing of the Cold War, Vietnam is trying to reduce its economic dependence on the Soviet Union. At the same time, the U.S. sees an opportunity to bring a peace agreement to Cambodia. Both the U.S. and Vietnam need each other to make this happen. Remember, it's been over 15 years since the U.S. had official diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Other than occasional diplomatic missions to look for American soldiers who are Missing in Action (MIA), there is no formal relationship, no trade, no cultural exchanges.

Prompt: The U.S. and Vietnam need to increase dialogue and cooperation. How do you re-establish diplomatic relations with a country? Take a look at the tools of diplomacy for help.

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The George Bush Administration presented Hanoi with a "roadmap" plan for phased normalization of ties in 1991. The "roadmap" proposed that as Vietnam increased Missing in Action (MIA) cooperation and helped achieve the Cambodia peace agreement, the U.S. would increase humanitarian assistance and ease its economic embargo. This "roadmap" increased positive cooperation and outcomes. Relations between the U.S. and Vietnam began to normalize. However, the trade embargo is still in place and there is no official embassy or consul.

Prompt: Does the U.S. need an embassy or consul in Vietnam? How may the presence of an embassy/consul help or hinder diplomatic relations? How does the trade embargo affect the establishment of diplomatic relations?

In 1994, the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam was lifted. In the following months, a consular agreement was signed. Relations continued building as Vietnam provided the most detailed documents to date related to missing Americans, positively affecting U.S. popular opinion. Then, in 1995, the U.S. officially opened the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital, and Vietnam opened its embassy in Washington, D.C. Opening the embassy in Hanoi signaled to the world that the U.S.-Vietnam relations were healing. (Include Trowel from Albright visit)

Prompt: What does opening an embassy signal? Why is it an important step in the normalization of a relationship?

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Debrief:

- What steps did both nations take to rebuild trust before full diplomatic normalization?
- Why was it important for the U.S. to re-establish a relationship with Vietnam in the 1990s?
- What does the U.S. gain from reconciliation with Vietnam?
- What lessons can we take away from the normalization of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship? How can this be applied to other bilateral relationships the US has?