

Who Fought For The U.S.

During 1968-69, at the height of the American involvement in the war, there were 543,000 troops in Vietnam. You were much more likely to serve in the military, be sent to Vietnam, and see combat if you were from a lower-income family and without a college education.

Clearly, most of the alternatives for avoiding the draft and combat in Vietnam were restricted to those with money and education. Poor boys don't go to college or train to be doctors, teachers, or ministers. Poor boys don't go to psychiatrists or orthodontists for expensive treatment. Poor boys don't worry that much about their careers, and many are likely to be raised in a home where military service is valued and enlistment encouraged.

In some areas, these inequities were especially acute. A congressman from northern Wisconsin, for example, took a survey and found that of 100 draftees from his district, every one had come from families with an annual income of less than \$5000. A study in Chicago found that men from low-income neighborhoods were three times as likely to die in Vietnam as men from high-income neighborhoods. Those from neighborhoods with low educational levels were four times more likely to die in Vietnam as those from neighborhoods with

high educational levels.

One study of enlisted men found that a high school dropout had a 70 percent chance of being sent to Vietnam; a high school graduate had a 64 percent chance, and a college graduate, a 42 percent chance. A 1965-66 survey found that college graduates made up only 2 percent of all draftees. Another study by a Harvard University graduate found that only 56 of 1,200 Harvard students had served in the military, only two of whom were sent to Vietnam. James Fallows, at the time a Harvard University student, reflects: "During the five or six years of the heaviest draft calls for Vietnam, there was the starkest class division in American military service since the days of purchased draft deferments in the Civil War." Fallows says he and his Harvard classmates avoided service through a variety of devious tactics while the working-class men from Chelsea responded to the call. He asks "why all the well-educated presumably humane young men...so willingly took advantage of this most brutal form of class discrimination—what it signifies that we let the boys from Chelsea be sent off to die."

Given the widespread class discrimination in military service, it was to be expected that the sons of U.S. political leaders would be spared the sacrifice of Vietnam. Indeed, a 1970 report showed that 234 sons of senators and congressmen were of draft age during the war years, 1965-1970. More than half, 118, received deferments. Of those remaining, only 28 were sent to Vietnam and only 19 (8%) saw combat. None were killed and one was wounded. Barry Goldwater Jr. did

Table 1. Likelihood of Vietnam-Era Service

	<u>Military Service</u> (%)	<u>Vietnam Service</u> (%)	<u>Combat Service</u> (%)
Low-Income	40	19	15
Middle-Income	30	12	7
High-Income	24	9	7
High-School Dropouts	42	18	14
High-School Graduates	45	21	17
College Graduates	23	12	9

his "alternative service" in the House of Representatives. It is tempting to speculate whether Congress' long and active support for the war might have been compromised had their children and grandchildren been exposed to the same risks as those of their less fortunate constituents.

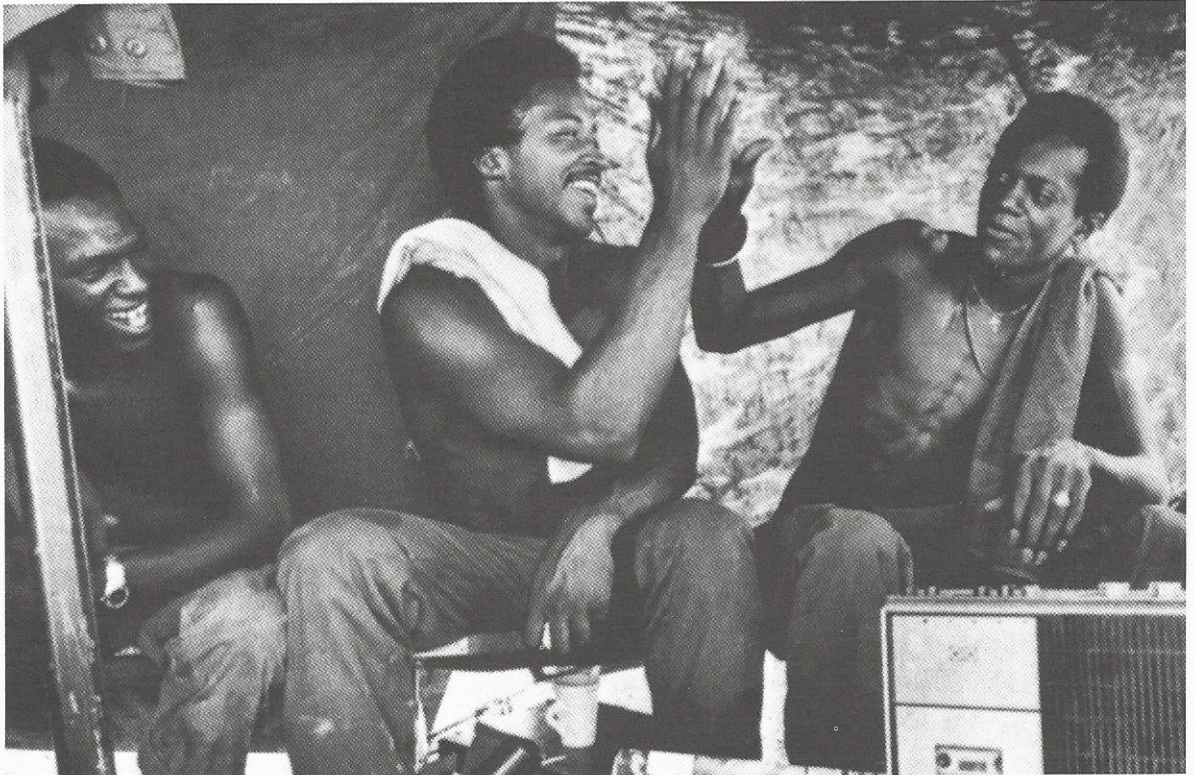
Racial Minorities in Vietnam

During the war, as today, many blacks volunteered for military service, especially in the Marine Corps, in hopes of escaping the ghetto and bettering themselves. Many of these men were assigned to combat in Vietnam. Since the poverty rate among blacks in the U.S. is three times that among whites, black youths also were much more likely to be drafted into the military, assigned to Vietnam, and killed in combat. A final reason for this discrimination was that few blacks were assigned to decision making roles on local draft boards. In

1967, only 216 of 16,632 draft board members (1.2%) were black.

Blacks and Hispanics comprised 31 percent of all combat troops at the beginning of the war. In 1965, blacks accounted for 24 percent of all Army combat deaths. This was almost twice their share of the relevant population. As the government expanded its draft call, the black casualty rate declined proportionately to 20 percent in 1967 and 14 percent in 1968. By the end of the war, blacks accounted for 10.3 percent of all armed forces who served in Vietnam (11.9% of the Army). Although they were more likely to have been involved in heavy combat than white soldiers (37% to 25%), they constituted 13.5 percent of all combat deaths, a figure slightly greater than that of draft-eligible black males in the general population.

Hispanics also served and died in large numbers. One of two Hispanics in Vietnam served in combat and one of five were killed in action. General S.L.A. Marshall noted, "In the average rifle company, the strength was 50 percent composed of Negroes, Southwestern Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Guamanians, Nisei, and so on. But a real cross-section of American youth? Almost never." This discrimination was reinforced by



both the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) and by a program called Project 100,000. The AFQT was designed to weed out potential recruits who lacked the skills needed by the military. While too low a score on the test served to bar entrance into the service for some, a low but passing score channeled many into non-technical positions in combat units.

Project 100,000 was a plan to extend opportunities for military service and promotion by providing remedial programs for those who would otherwise fail the AFQT because of their lack of formal education. Of course, it also was a plan to meet draft quotas without removing other deferments. As mentioned, while the Project did increase the numbers of minorities eligible for military service, their relatively low scores on the AFQT condemned them to a combat role in Vietnam. A total of 354,000 men were recruited into the military under the program, 41 percent of whom were black and 40 percent of whom were assigned to combat units. Their casualty rate in Vietnam was almost twice as high as that of Vietnam veterans as a whole. Project 100,000 was terminated in 1972 when many fewer American soldiers were being called to Vietnam.

The data show clearly that the military in Vietnam consisted overwhelmingly of lower-income males with a high school education or less. A significant portion of this group included whites from rural areas in the south and blue collar communities in the north, and blacks and Hispanics of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent. Included in this figure were significant numbers of almost illiterate men recruited from city streets and country roads. This volatile mix of traditional racial enemies had consequences that will be discussed in the next section.

Black Against White in Vietnam

Back home in the U.S.A., blacks were waging an assault on institutionalized racism. Ghetto riots and militant rhetoric provoked a white backlash which increased racial tensions and incidents of violence. Ultimately, the American people's problems with racism at home also came to haunt them in Vietnam, provoking discord among the troops and conflict with the Vietnamese and undermining any effort to promote

the ideal of democracy as an alternative to communism.

There is never a convenient time for war. However, the war in Vietnam worked a special hardship on the black community. As the war escalated, it took media coverage and public attention away from the issue of civil rights reform. The war demanded more and more of the national budget. Black youths were serving and dying in disproportionate numbers.

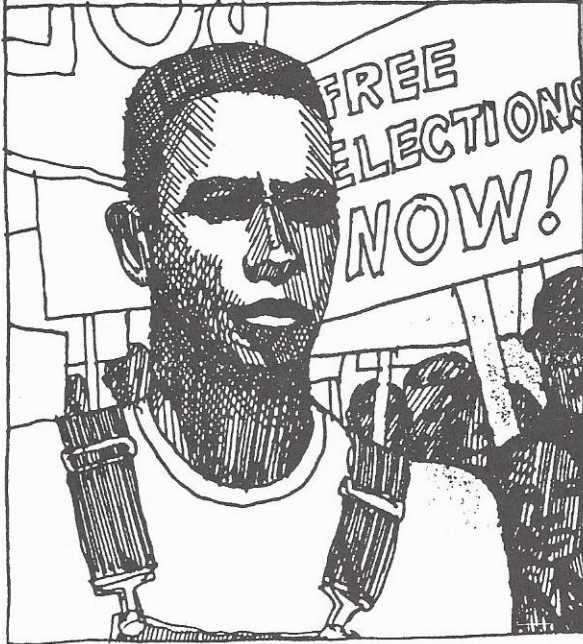
In the early 1960s, the main student civil rights organization was called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As early as 1965, many SNCC leaders had come to the conclusion that Vietnam and segregation were "part of the same system" of racist oppression. Sammy Younge Jr., a student at Tuskegee Institute, was killed while trying to use a "whites only" restroom at a gas station in Alabama. Three days after Younge's murder, SNCC issued its first official statement opposing the war in Vietnam. The statement pointed out that Younge's murder had taken place at a time when the United States was sending black youths to Vietnam to fight for the "freedom of others, while in our own country, many government officials openly avow racism."

Also in 1966, SNCC boycotted a White House conference on civil rights supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League, on the grounds that "an administration that was obliterating human rights in Vietnam could not further them within the United States." Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) leader Lincoln Lynch stated that to support the war, so "suffused with conscious racism, is to support the racism on which it feeds." Julian Bond gave up his seat in the Georgia legislature rather than disavow SNCC's staunch opposition to the war.

By 1967, despite severe admonitions from national leaders, Martin Luther King Jr. began linking Vietnam and civil rights. King charged that the social programs needed to advance the cause of needy minorities were being sacrificed to the escalating costs of the war. He bemoaned the poor "paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam." And he challenged ministers to present the "alternative of conscientious objection" to young men seeking counseling on military service.

By 1968, the Black Panther party had moved to the forefront of what had now become the Black Power movement. Its ten-point program for social change

ONE MAN SAID "WE SHOULD FIGHT FOR FREE ELECTIONS IN MISSISSIPPI AND ALABAMA, NOT IN VIET NAM."



SOME NEGROES ARE WORRIED BECAUSE SO MANY OF US SUFFER FROM THE WAR.



included the following provision: "We believe that black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America."

By 1969, this attitude had become widespread in the black community. Journalist Wallace Terry interviewed 392 black enlisted men in Vietnam and found that 64 percent believed that their fight was in the United States, not in Vietnam. About a third advocated immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops. Marine PFC Reginald Edwards told Terry, "We fought for the white man in Vietnam. It was clearly his war. If it wasn't, you wouldn't have seen as many confederate flags as you saw...an insult to any person that's of color on this planet." The saying, "No Vietnamese ever called me Nigger," became a popular way for black soldiers to say, "It's not my war." By the end of the decade, the symbols of black nationalism were evident throughout the U.S. military: there were black power salutes and handshakes, Afro hairstyles and soul music.

Many blacks identified with the Vietnamese who also were treated as inferiors. Vietnamese civilians who

worked on American bases prepared the food, hauled the garbage, cleaned the buildings, and carried the baggage. They did all the dirty work, for which they received very little pay and were treated with suspicion and contempt by many soldiers. Black soldier Gerald Bayette saw the situation this way:

The first thing that caught my attention while waiting for my bags at the airport was the Vietnamese. They were the ones unloading the plane, carrying the bags to where we were waiting. All during which the American soldiers who were supervising (of course) ordered them to hurry up while making derogatory remarks about Asians in general. I thought about the airport and train stations in the States, where menial jobs such as baggage carrying are handled by the brothers, who must take the same devil's abuse in order to provide for their families. It disgusted me.

Despite reservations about racism in Vietnam, black soldiers distinguished themselves in combat; and, as in previous wars, traditional racial antagonisms melted in

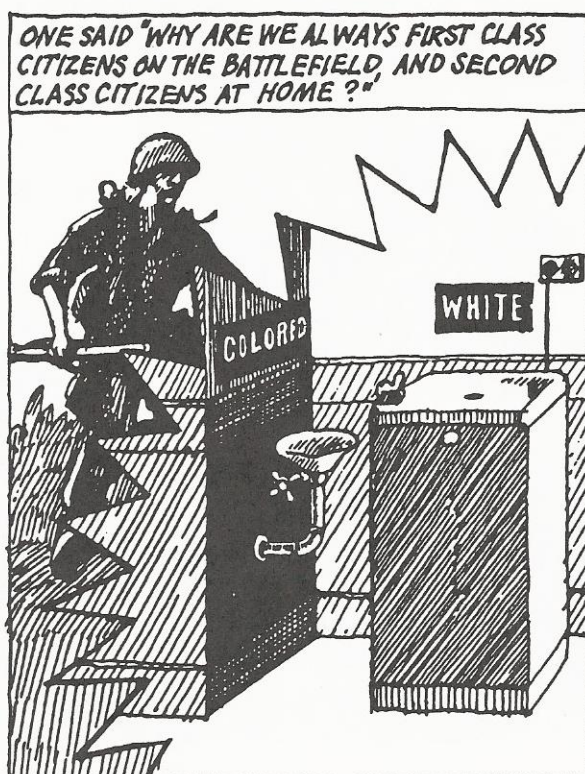
the heat of battle on the front lines. One black GI reflected: "You couldn't think just white or just black—you had to think for everybody. That was one of the things that the war did for me. It started me thinking about men in general, instead of whites or blacks—even though a lot of whites forgot about that after they got back to the States. It taught them a lot of lessons. Some whites never forgot. And a lot of blacks never forgot it either." Here is one of many such examples, offered by black soldier, Harold "Lightbulb" Bryant:

There was another guy in our unit who made it known that he was a card-carrying Ku Klux Klan member. That pissed a lot of us off, cause we had gotten real tight. We didn't have racial incidents like what was happening in the rear area, 'cause we had to depend on each other. We were always in the bush.

Well, we got out into a fire fight, and Mr. Ku Klux Klan got his little ass trapped. We were going across the rice paddies and Charlie just started shootin'. And he jumped in the rice paddy while everybody else kind of backtracked.

So we laid down a base fire to cover him. But he was just immobile. He froze. And a brother went out there and got him and dragged him back. Later on, he said that action changed his perception of what black people were all about.

In the rear, however, hatred between blacks and whites tore U.S. troops apart and frequently exploded into violence. Certainly, there is plenty of evidence of official discrimination and black defiance of such in the military. Even by October 1971, blacks constituted 14.3 percent of the enlisted men but only 3.6 percent of the officers in the U.S. Army. Racial confrontation in the military started to become a serious problem around 1967-68, about the time that ghetto riots and black militance were on the rise back home. In 1968, forty-three black GIs at Fort Hood refused to go on "riot duty" at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In 1970, seven black soldiers from the 176th Regiment disobeyed orders to go on patrol duty, claiming their lives were being deliberately endangered by racist officers. In 1972, racial incidents on the USS Constella-



tion caused a training exercise to be canceled. When the ship returned to port, 122 black sailors (joined by eight white sailors) raised their fists in protest.

A 1971 Congressional Black Caucus study found that half of all soldiers in confinement were black. A 1971 NAACP study showed that a white first offender was twice as likely to be released without punishment as a black first offender. This study also found that blacks received 45 percent of all less-than-honorable discharges, a rate more than three times their share of enlisted men.

In many units, blacks and whites chose to eat in separate groups and sleep in separate buildings. Such separation further fueled mistrust and hostility. Given the lack of confidence in military justice, the tension of the war and the ready availability of weapons, it was, perhaps, inevitable that such hostility would erupt into

deadly violence. In addition to beatings, stabbings and shootings, there were “fraggings”— attempts to kill or injure by tossing a fragmentation grenade. Fraggings most often came from angry troops against overzealous platoon leaders who pushed them too hard. However, sometimes they occurred in racial confrontations. A racial incident at Cam Ranh Bay led to a fragging in which 31 were injured. The insult “nigger” led to a brawl at Puloi near Saigon in January 1971. By mid-year, 154 assaults by Americans on Americans had been recorded. Between 1969 and 1971, there were 600 fragging incidents in Vietnam in which 82 Americans were killed and 651 wounded by each other. (see Chapter 5 for more discussion of this issue). This theme of self-destruction in the U.S. Army is featured dramatically in the Academy Award winning film, *Platoon*.



OK Corral East
Brothers in the Nam

Sgt. Christopher and I are
in Khanh Hoi down by the docks
in the Blues Bar where the women
are brown and there is no Saigon Tea
making our nightly HIT—'Hore Inspection Tour'
watching the black digging the night sights
soul sounds getting tight

the grunts in the corner raise undisturbed hell
the timid white MP has his freckles pale
as he walks past the high dude
in the doorway in his lavender- jump suit
to remind the mama-san quietly of curfew
he chokes on the weed smoke
he sees nothing his color here
and he fingers his army rosary his .45

but this is not Cleveland or Chicago
he can't cringe any one here and our
gazes like brown punji stakes impale him

we have all killed something recently
we know who owns the night
and carry darkness with us

—Horace Coleman