
Americans Against Vietnamese

Also treated in *Platoon* is the racism expressed by many U.S. soldiers against the Vietnamese people themselves. Of course, the official publications of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam advocated humane treatment of the Vietnamese people as the most effective way to win their hearts and minds:

Remember that we are special guests here; we make no demands and seek no special treatment.

Join with the people! Understand their life, use phrases from their language, and honor their customs and laws.

Treat women with politeness and respect.

Make personal friends among the soldiers and common people.

Always give the Vietnamese the right-of-way.

Be alert to security and ready to react with your military skill.

Don't attract attention by loud, rude, or unusual behavior.

Avoid separating yourself from the people by a display of wealth or privilege.

Above all else you are members of the U.S. military forces on a difficult mission, responsible for all your official and personal actions. Reflect honor upon yourself and the United States of America.

Indeed, there were many soldiers who displayed respect, even affection, for the Vietnamese. Such GIs volunteered their labor and resources to social relief organizations. Some married Vietnamese women and/or adopted Vietnamese orphans. These were the exception, however.

As with all wars, the terror of life and death promoted a racist contempt that served to dehumanize the enemy and make killing morally defensible. Many soldiers were instructed in this attitude in basic training. Marine PFC Reginald Edwards reports:

The only thing they told us about the Viet Cong was they were gooks. They were to be killed. Nobody sits around and gives you their historical and cultural background. They're the enemy. Kill, kill, kill. That's what we got to practice. Kill, kill, kill.

Rifleman Haywood T. Kirkland agrees:

Right away they told us not to call them Vietnamese. Call everybody gooks, dinks. They told us when you go over in Vietnam, you gonna be face to face with Charlie, the Viet Cong. They were like animals or something other than human. They ain't have no regard for life. They'd blow up little babies just to kill one GI. They wouldn't allow you to talk about them as if they were people. They told us they're not to be treated with any type of mercy. That's what they engraved into you. That killer instinct. Just go away and do destruction.

Once in combat, there were other factors that heightened this racist hostility. Compared to the U.S., Vietnam was perceived as a poor and backward country. Moreover, many GIs felt that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) showed less skill and courage in combat than the Vietcong, an observation that reinforced American cynicism toward the Vietnamese. The heat and rain, mud and leeches, insects, bad food, and long hours caused fatigue and irritation among the troops.

As if that weren't enough, there was the peculiar nature of the war itself. In contrast to the image many had of European wars, there were relatively few sustained confrontations between uniformed troops to gain or defend strategic territory. The enemy infiltrated the population and practiced hit-and-run tactics that frustrated GIs in the field. Many soldiers were killed or mutilated by land mines and booby traps with no enemy in sight. Frustration and rage built up within them. Finally, their ignorance of the language and culture made GIs vulnerable to terrorism by seemingly innocent villagers who were working with the NLF. Here is one soldier's story:

I met this girl in a village store...I guess she was the only Vietnamese I ever got close to. By then I spoke a little of their language and I found out she was studying English and Math. I said I would help her and kinda

started to hang around the place when I was free....Once, the last time, I brought a flower: it helped me forget.

One day we were on this patrol, it was rainy and suddenly we were caught in an ambush. Our guys returned the fire. We hit them hard and then called in the gunships for support....

Then, maybe thirty minutes after, the firing stopped and we moved out to look for the wounded and to take a body count. There was a bunch of bodies all around, all VC. One of them was my little girl friend, now dead, bullets through her chest and head. She had an automatic near her, I was shocked, she was a VC. Who the hell were our friends? Who were our enemies? I never felt more confused than at that moment.

Given the consequences of such deception, perhaps it was healthy for American GIs to be suspicious toward all Vietnamese. Unfortunately, this attitude frequently degenerated into an indiscriminant disdain. Commonly used terms like "dinks" and "slopes" expressed a general racist contempt for all Vietnamese people. Army medical officer Gordon Livingston recalls numerous examples of fairly routine American mistreatment of Vietnamese civilians, e.g., "driving tracked vehicles through rice paddies; throwing C-ration cans at children from moving vehicles; running truck convoys through villages at high speeds on dirt roads (if the people are eating rice at the time it has to be thrown away because of the dust)...."

The "gook syndrome" sometimes exploded into violent atrocities committed by GIs against innocent civilians as well as enemy soldiers (see Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of this issue.) As with all wars, some brutal men trained in weapons of violence took advantage of the opportunity to attack others with impunity. Incidents like the following illustrate the depths of inhumanity to which many young American boys were plunged in Vietnam:

'We had this gook and we was gonna skin him,' a grunt told me. I mean he was already dead and everything, and the lieutenant comes over and says, 'Hey asshole, there's a reporter in the TOC, you want him to come out and see that? I mean, use your fucking heads, there's a time and place for everything.' 'Too

Guerrilla War

It's Practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong.

Nobody wears uniforms
They all talk
the same language,

(and you couldn't understand
them even if they didn't).

They tape grenades
inside their clothes,
and carry satchel charges
in their market baskets.

Even their women fight;
and young boys,
and girls,
It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong;

after a while,
you quit trying.

—W.D. Ehrhart

bad you wasn't with us last week,' another grunt told me, coming off a non-contact operation, 'we killed so many gooks it wasn't even funny.'

Of course, for every GI who took ghoulish pleasure in such revenge against the enemy, there were more who were sickened by the cruelty. Many came to doubt seriously whether the war could or should be won. In 1971, a survey of men on their way to Vietnam found that almost all had serious criticisms of U.S. military policy in Vietnam. However, they were divided over whether to get out or step up the war. Forty-seven percent considered the war a mistake and 40 percent thought America was not fighting hard enough to win.

Once in Vietnam, such doubts grew worse. More and more U.S. soldiers came to question the purpose of the war and the ethics of their own participation. From 1964 to 1972, more than 500,000 cases of soldiers "absent without leave" (AWOL) were reported. Deserters numbered 93,250—three times that of Korea. Fewer than 3,000 deserted while in Vietnam. Some 20,000 men deserted after serving their year in Vietnam while in post-combat stateside military assignments. For many, desertion clearly was a protest against the war or an expression of delayed stress reaction. Like the draftees, deserters were drawn disproportionately from the ranks of poor blacks and blue collar whites with little education.

All American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam in 1973. The memory of crack U.S. troops winning key victories was now a distant thought. The war had lost all sense of moral purpose for too many. Could we justify the terrible expense when we had so many unsolved problems at home? Did we offer a moral alternative when we couldn't even overcome the hate among ourselves?

It must be understood that war has a political, economic, and social dimension as well as a military one. Superior firepower will not by itself win the battle for hearts and minds. If you can win that battle, there is much less need for superior firepower. Noting the terrible contradictions in the behavior of U.S. troops in Vietnam, Livingston asked, "How can we presume to influence a struggle for the political loyalties of a people for whom we manifest such uniform disdain is to me the great unanswered, indeed, unanswerable question of this war." Livingston also recognized the parallels to the "racist" treatment of black people back in the U.S. and warned, "the price of our lack of perception is defeat

abroad and, if not corrected, may be the dissolution of society at home."

Indeed, things seemed to be falling apart everywhere. The promise of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society Program had been squandered on the huge war budget and American cities were aflame with protest. More and more GIs wondered what they were supposed to be fighting for. Explanations by the White House were no longer convincing.

Certainly, some soldiers continued to fight with valor on the fields of battle. The Nixon years (1969-73) witnessed 20,000 Americans killed, 110,000 wounded, and more than 500 captured or missing in action. However, for many, given the plan for disengagement, heroism seemed futile. No one wanted to be the last soldier killed in Vietnam. By now, volunteers were a minority and desertions were on the rise. Morale was low and alcohol and drugs were abundant. The enemy seemed to be everywhere. After nine years of American bloodshed and body bags, Vietnam would be left to the Vietnamese.

Who Fights Today

In 1973 the U.S. abolished compulsory military conscription and instituted a professional volunteer army. Among the arguments for the change were that compulsory service violated civil liberties and an all-volunteer army was less likely to suffer from internal dissension. Among those opposed were that the public would be less watchful over White House use of military force in U.S. foreign relations, that the poor, especially racial minorities, would shoulder an unfair share of the defense burden, and that the overall quality of the troops would suffer.

Throughout the 1980s, high unemployment, especially for youth, rising government military subsidies, and a relatively peaceful international scene encouraged higher enlistments. During this period, opportunities for the advancement of blacks increased greatly. By 1986, blacks constituted ten percent of Army officers and seven percent of generals. Gen. Colin L. Powell became the first black man to chair the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In February 1991, as the ground war in the Persian Gulf became more imminent, the White House reas-

sured a worried public that it would not be necessary to bring back the draft. At the time, black men and women stationed in the Gulf totalled 104,000, 25 percent of the Americans deployed in the region and 30 percent of all Army troops. This represented over twice their 12 percent share of the U.S. population.

A *New York Times*/CBS poll found that 55 percent of black respondents opposed the Persian Gulf War compared to only 27 percent of white respondents. Reporting in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Michele N-K Collison found black students at Temple, Duke, Syracuse, Howard and other universities to be critical of the war. Rallies and teach-ins stressed the greater risk of casualties for blacks, an even larger component of the infantry, and the diversion of money to the war that could have been used for social problems afflicting black Americans.

Almost all students interviewed had a family member or friend in the Gulf and they were concerned for their safety. A student at Temple called it “a poor man’s army.” A residence hall coordinator at the University of California at Davis said “black students have a choice between the streets and the Army.” Many students criticized President Bush as hypocritical for asking “black troops to fight for freedom in the gulf” while refusing “to sign a civil-rights bill that would outlaw discrimination against black citizens.”

Clearly, criticisms by black Americans during the Vietnam War concerning U.S. value commitments, budget priorities, and racial justice were still relevant during the recent Persian Gulf War. The racial climate within the military has improved, but economic opportunities for black people in America remain bleak.

Reporter: What does it do to a guy when he survives all of this as you have?

PFC: Makes you scared. It really does. I was up there the day after on the 20th talking to a sergeant that I know, just trying to console him. He wasn’t hit that bad, but it sure makes you feel better when you have somebody to talk to. I was talking to him when mortars started coming in. It’s just impossible to describe how scared these guys are when mortars were coming in and there’s nothing they can do.

—Interview with unidentified U.S. soldier, as reported in *Vietnam Remembered*.