

The Influence of Black Power and Black Nationalism on the Vietnam War

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Introduction

During the summer of 1964 two significant events took place that reshaped the nation for decades to come. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into effect the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which effectively ended segregation in public spaces and employment discrimination. This legislative action marked a tremendous success for the Civil Rights Movement. A month later the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution will propel the United States into another war for democracy, this time in Communist Vietnam. During the initial stages of the Vietnam War twenty four percent of Americans opposed the United States involvement in the war. By 1973, the percentage of working-class Americans in opposition to the war effort had skyrocketed to sixty percent.¹ While UNITED STATES . foreign policy makers were primarily focused on spreading democracy throughout Communist Vietnam, many African Americans being asked to fight this war for foreign democracy were more concerned fighting for their own democracy stateside. Many black soldiers believed that they were being treated as pawns in what many were referring to as a “white man’s war”.² Black soldiers while in the military found unity and empowerment in the ideas of Black Nationalism and Black Power that swept through the nation in the late 1960’s and asserted this ideology in their protests against racial discrimination in the military through physical resistance influenced by these ideas. The concepts of Black Power and Black Nationalism gain a lot of attention and influence on black soldiers because of the Black Panther Party. This group which will emerge in 1966 with its core values modeled around the ideas of Black Power and Black Nationalism will help spread these values to soldiers who will take them with them to Vietnam. The Vietnam War provided a transformative experience for black

soldiers and the effects would follow them when they returned home from war. While some soldiers would return to lead as normal of a life as possible after facing racial discrimination and regular brushes with death, the Vietnam War also bred a new generation of activists who came home ready to fight racial discrimination thus reinvigorating the domestic Black Power movement.

Historian and *Times* reporter Wallace Terry interviews a number of black soldiers who served in the Vietnam War and collected their accounts of their on-base experiences and post-war life in his novel *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History*. What is revealed in the pages and the interviews from the black soldiers is that a culture of racism and racial tension existed between white and black soldiers. As Terry was the official reporter covering the Vietnam War for *Times* he spent a lot of time overseas observing the interactions of soldiers in Vietnam. The comradery between the soldiers that he referred to as a foxhole brotherhood was present in the early stages of the war however upon returning years later that was no longer present as racial tension between soldiers was escalating. What he saw was self-segregation and isolation from black soldiers who wanted very little to do with their white counterparts.³ While serving in the military black soldiers continued to encounter Klu Klux Klan members who would make their membership and association well known to black soldiers as well as other white soldiers who hung the Confederate flag and shouted their racist ideologies on base. When black soldiers stood up against the prejudice that they found on base they were disproportionately punished in comparison with their white counterparts.⁴

While incredibly similar the concepts of Black Power and Black Nationalism are different in many ways. Black Power is specifically a movement that emerges and has a strong presence

in the 1960's through the 1970's and focuses on rights and equality for the black community. This concept will have a large following with the Civil Rights Organizations whose ideals line up similarly with the concept of Black Power. Black Nationalism on the other hand similarly focuses on and emphasizes being proud of the black identity. Where it differs is that it roots itself in the ideas that black people are separate and should gain a separate status not because they are inferior but because they are better if not equal to their white counterparts. This is built on the ideas on nationalism which in a broad sense is extreme patriotism marked by thoughts of superiority and the desire for political independence. Nationalism usually coincides with identifiable importance on cultural differences in comparison with other nations. The language, customs, and traditions are all significant and while they can be present in other cultures they are of greater importance to yours overall. The idea of Black Nationalism is heavily supported throughout the 1960's and 1970's by the Nation of Islam and eventually some of the Civil Rights Organizations will go on to apply the concept of Black Nationalism to their organizations. These organizations included the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Stokely Carmichael in 1966 was elected as chairman of SNCC and proceeded to add the idea of racial separatism to the principles of SNCC. With this increased use of the idea of Black Nationalism, the concept quickly spreads through the black community and in turn the soldiers that are fighting the war. ⁵

To combat the racism and discrimination on base and the war, African American soldiers expressed their opposition through already established Black Power organizations such as the Black Panthers and also through smaller organizations such as the De Mau Mau and the Bloods of 'Nam. Each of these groups shared a common goal of creating black unity through the ideas

of Black Power and Black Nationalism. Out of these ideas emerged unique ways of expressing their black unity, in the form of hand gestures such as the Black Power Fist and the dap which would be supplemented in for the Black Power fist after it was prohibited by the Army.⁶

Another popular tactic was the alteration of uniforms or equipment with Black Power slogans and imagery which further aligned black soldiers with the concepts of Black Power and Black Nationalism.

For black soldiers the ideal way of fighting oppression and discrimination was through organizations because fighting racism as a group was more effective than fighting it alone. However physical displays of resistance were often more organic in the environment of a war zone. Basic tactics of physical resistance tended to fall into two categories; the less severe method of alterations and unapproved extended leaves of absence and the more aggressive physical demonstrations that involved fighting other soldiers to the more extreme method of killing them. Some soldiers found that leaving without permission was their preferred method of opposition would have been classified in two categories, those soldiers who were absent without leave (AWOL) and those who were deserters.⁷ Typically soldiers that left base found a new home in Vietnam in the nearby communities that surrounded the base.⁸

The Vietnam War was a tumultuous time for Americans and especially for the black community. The black community was not only forced to fight for their civil rights and the chance to participate in the democracy that the rest of America was free to practice, they were also made to fight in a war to instill democracy in a foreign nation. To combat this inequality, black soldiers who were already being surrounded by the ideas of Black Power and Black Nationalism, integrated these concepts into their lives as soldiers as a way to assert their black

identity and combat the oppression that they had found in the war. Through this assertion of their black identity, many black veterans became reinvigorated to combat racial discrimination both and home and overseas.

Historians have examined the topic of black soldier's resistance during the Vietnam War era however there is only one historian who is the more vocal in examining the interrelated nature of soldier revolt with Black Power and Black Nationalism. James E. Westheider explores the argument that while in the beginning of the war black soldiers had a positive view of the military as it was a way to boost the socio-economic status, eventually this positive perception on military involvement will shift to a negative one. The policies and procedures that emerged during the war will cause black soldiers to believe that the military was creating systematic exploitation of black soldiers to fight a war they were only involving themselves in as a way to improve their lives.⁹Westheider explores this argument in his books *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* and *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* which provide the strongest argument that the opposition to the war and the treatment they received was gradual as they had a positive association with the military before the war continued to escalate. Westheider enforces his argument of gradual opposition when he states; "As the draft and the war came under attack, racial unrest would also rise again in the armed forces during the Vietnam War era."¹⁰

This paper aims to show that there is a symbiotic relationship between the Black Power Movement and the concept of Black Nationalism and the resistance that occurred during the Vietnam War. This connection has received very little historical attention because many historians have presented a view that the resistance emerges later in the military as a

byproduct of the racially prejudiced actions of other soldiers in the military and the rise of the concepts of Black Power and Black Nationalism. However, it can be argued that the resistance was always closely related and influenced by these concepts from the very beginning of the war. Black soldiers will head into Vietnam hearing anti-war sentiments from Civil Rights Leaders and Black Power groups which will morph their military experience. By denying the closely related nature of these ideologies it diminished the soldiers demand for greater equality and reinforces the stereotype of the angry militant black protester. The Black Power Movement and the ideas of Black Nationalism benefited from soldiers protests just as much as soldiers benefited from these ideals. The emphasis on black men being proud of their identity and that they are just as good if not better than their white counterparts provided a principle for black soldiers to unite under which in turn provided these movements with the man power and support that they needed to be successful. The evidence from this comes from the calls to action that civil rights activists, Black Power Movements, and Antiwar movements were directing towards black soldiers in and going to war.

The Vietnam War: Background and Policies

To better understand the resistance of black soldiers in Vietnam, one must first understand the circumstances that brought the United States to war. Following the conclusion of World War II, the democratic United States and the Communist Soviet Union both emerge as world powers and were locked in a battle of political and sociological ideologies with nuclear implications known as the Cold War. While the Cold War was a war in name only; as no

weapons were ever fired by either side, there was a deep hostility that emerged from both sides of the conflict and the United States beginning to push an anti-communist doctrine domestically.

While the early stages of the Cold War occurring from 1947 to 1953¹¹, The French was engaging in a war with what then was known as Indochina; but will later become Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, beginning in December of 1946 and going till August of 1954. Known as the French Indochina War, France will enter the war trying to reassert their position as a colonial power. By the end of the campaign France will be defeated at the hands of Indochina. The French Indochina War will be a precursor to the United States involvement in Vietnam because President Harry S. Truman will use the Mutual Defense Act of 1949 to assist the French in the war by providing both economic support as well as arms support. Following the French defeat the country of Vietnam will split at the seventeenth parallel in 1954 resulting in a Communist North and a non-Communist South which will cause a civil war to erupt in the country.

As the French have slowed their occupation of Vietnam and have begun to pull their troops out completely, the UNITED STATES . began to increase their military presence. In July of 1959 the first American soldiers will be killed in an attack by the Viet Cong effectively raising tensions between the two countries. Under newly elected President John F. Kennedy in 1960, the United States will become a large player in the Vietnamese Civil War. The war was sold as a battle to stop the further spread of Communism and many Americans will easily accept this idea due to the tensions with the Soviet Union and the fear of communists still being prevalent at home.¹² In the wake of the civil war in Vietnam, the Kennedy Administration will help put Ngo Dinh Diem in power in South Vietnam. However, as it quickly becomes evident that he

valued power more than helping his country in 1963 the American military assisted in the coup and assassination of Diem.¹³

The assassination of Kennedy in 1963 will bring in a new administration under President Lyndon B. Johnson who will take office and will further increase the United States involvement in the war, in a retaliation attack against North Vietnam for attacking UNITED STATES . ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. This retaliation will take place in August of 1964 and will become known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and would officially bring American into the war in Vietnam. Troop numbers will rapidly increase under the Johnson administration and by the year 1969 troop numbers reached 543,400.¹⁴

The Vietnam war lasted through four Presidential administrations and became increasingly unpopular with the American population as the war progressed. While the military was running battle campaigns in Vietnam there was an antiwar movement building momentum in the United States and on the bases as the war dragged on. Composed of students, veterans, Civil Rights groups and ordinary citizens, antiwar sentiment will rapidly spread across the United States. With each Presidential administration there would be a new way to handle the issues of military enlistment which was a prime concern throughout the Vietnam War.

The two main draft policies that will happen during the Vietnam War will be the Selective Service Act, which will have alterations with each administration, and Project 100,000. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 which was signed into order by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II to get soldiers ready to fight in World War II will be altered during the Korean war and provide students a way out of military service. If those

drafted were college students with a high academic ranking they were allowed to not serve in the war. This policy will change going into the Vietnam War. Under Kennedy further deferments were offered for men who were studying certain majors. The problem that emerged from the Selective Service Act was that it, whether intentional or not, tended to create a racial and economic divide as more black men and poor men were drafted into the military.¹⁵

As a way to increase soldier recruitment after it became evident that the Selective Service Act was not providing as many soldiers as was needed to fight the war, Secretary of Defense; Robert S. McNamara created Project 100,000 in 1966. Project 100,000 reduced standards for who could enlist in the UNITED STATES . military and was in place from the years 1966 to 1971. By 1969, Project 100,000 effectively enlisted 246,000 men with ninety-two percent of the new recruits only being qualified to serve due to the decrease in standards.¹⁶ What can be noted about the statistics of this project is that black soldiers will account for forty percent of the total number enlisted which is more than three times the total percentage of black individuals as a whole in the United States.¹⁷ For McNamara, Project 100,000 was about more than just increasing soldier presence in Vietnam; it was a way for soldiers who came from poverty-ridden areas and families to receive education and training that would provide them with marketable skills after their tour of duty ended. However, when the soldiers that were recruited under Project 100,000 were interviewed after their tour was over it was revealed that there was little to no improvement in their lives.¹⁸

The Antiwar Movement

The antiwar movement was organized by American youth who were being sent to fight in the Vietnam War. The war marked a shift in the way that the American populous viewed war. In contrast to Vietnam, World War II has often been labeled as the “last noble war” and the generation that fought in that war labeled as the “greatest generation.” World War II is often remembered that way due to the fact that there was a tangible and noble reason for fighting overseas which was to stop Adolf Hitler and the spread of Fascism. For Americans, the Vietnam War lacked a similar appeal and purpose which caused many to disagree with the American military involvement in Vietnam.¹⁹ The first well-known public protest over the Vietnam War happened in the spring of 1965 in Washington D.C. and brought ten thousand protesters that included; veterans, civil rights activists, and a group known as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); which will later become a leader in the antiwar movement.²⁰ The SDS was a group rooted in confrontational practices that encouraged and partook in destructive oppositional practices which included attacking draft centers in protest of the draft; and destruction of government areas.²¹ The antiwar movement will regularly express their displeasure the Johnson and Nixon’s administration handling of the Vietnam War.

Besides students, the most vocally opposed to the Vietnam War were the Civil Rights Organizations. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Martin Luther King Junior, and especially the Black Panther Party (BPP) all came out at different stages of the Vietnam War to address their opposition of American involvement, and especially the black involvement in the war. Most of the argument’s that were made were rooted in pointing out the inequalities that black people faced in the United States and the violent nature of the military involvement in Vietnam. In 1966 SNCC took a

powerful stand against the war by comparing the bombings on the Vietnamese people to the murders of black Americans at home that were routinely ignored by the United States government.²² Following the death of Vietnam War veteran Sammy Younge SNCC stated; “We believe the United States government had been deceptive in its claim of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, just as the government has been deceptive in claiming concern for the freedom of the colored people...in the United States.”²³ SNCC continued by saying that instead of the United States working to end the oppression they have refused to fully acknowledge that equality is a main goal for them. SNCC’s opposition of the war effort is rooted in the argument that the United States is offering and promising the Vietnamese liberty and freedom similar to what they have at home without acknowledging that they are failing at offering that liberty to all of the American people some of which who are continuously facing discrimination and oppression.

Originally refusing to comment on America’s involvement in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr. will publicly come out against the war on April 4, 1967 in his speech Beyond Vietnam. “We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia when they had not found in south west Georgia and East Harlem.”²⁴ In his speech King addresses several serious issues that he had been confronted with perusing civil rights in conjunction with Vietnam. There is a hypocritical nature to the Vietnam War and he can no longer preach nonviolent opposition against a government that uses violence to solve problems. King has seen through the campaign to sell the war to the American people, why should black men fight for democracy when they do not have it at home? King confronts the soldiers to reshape their thinking, they

should not be thinking of themselves as liberators, they are invaders and colonizers; performing horrendous acts against the Vietnamese people and claims that the actions against them are no better than the actions that the Germans did to those in the concentration camps of Europe.²⁵ King urges soldiers to think of the alternatives to war in Vietnam and tells the black soldiers in the military to notice that there the struggle that the Vietnamese are facing is very similar to their problems at home.

In 1968 CORE also declared its opposition to the war; specifically targeting the Johnson administration, citing the Vietnam War as a colonial war disguised as one to protect democracy.²⁶ CORE further explains the colonial nature of the war by saying “black people of this country who have suffered from racism and colonialism in their own country...have no trouble recognizing the racist and colonial nature of this war.”²⁷ CORE breaks down the UNITED STATES . military machine in both their actions in war and the ideologies they are using to affirm the actions being taken out against the Vietnamese. There is a visible racist ideology that the United States is fighting the war with that is reminiscent of the black oppression from the time of slavery to the then modern era. When CORE stated their disapproval, they called for total and complete opposition of the Vietnam War and requests that soldiers register as conscientious objectors so that they are not a part of the colonial war.²⁸

Each of the previously mentioned figures and groups had a profound impact on the antiwar movement and in swaying many black soldiers opinion on the war. They made their stance very clear in that the American involvement in Vietnam was counterproductive to the larger issues that were occurring at home. The Civil Rights Movement was raging in America

during the Vietnam War Era and there was a clear racist ideology that the government was using to back and push their foreign policy that came out in their military tactics and brutality during ground operations. With the pro-war propaganda that came out that depicted the Vietnamese as cartoonish stereotypes and referring to them as “Gooks” these civil rights groups were able to see and call attention to how racist the military complex really was. This allowed for them to begin to unite black soldiers under the ideas of Black Power and Black Nationalism to oppose their involvement in the war and fight discrimination they were subject to overseas. However, the messages that was the loudest and had the most resonance was the ones that came from the Black Panther Party.

The Black Panthers and Vietnam

Created by joint founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) emerges as a militant group to combat police brutality and develop aid programs help to poor black citizens. The BPP will quickly be labeled a militant black nationalist group as they delivered messages to the black community to arm themselves against white America. As a part of their founding message the BPP delivers what is called the Ten Point Program which addresses their expectations of the American government and what they are required to do for the black community. The Ten Point Program covers issues such as police brutality, education, incarceration, and the point that is most significant for this paper, their expectations of the military. What comes as the sixth point of the Ten-Point program is the BPP’s opinion on the black involvement in the military; “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 other people of color in the world who, like Black people, are being victimized by the White racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.”²⁹ This was the first statement that the BPP will make against the war, but it will not be their last. The BPP will once again speak out against the military involvement but this time it will more directly speak to the black soldiers serving in the army. In a speech given by Eldridge Cleaver who at the time of the speeches delivery in 1970, was the minister of information for the BPP. His speech which is titled *To My Black Brothers in Vietnam* Cleaver called for the full revolt of black soldiers against the UNITED STATES . army as the Vietnamese that they are killing are their brothers and sisters in the struggle against the American military system.³⁰ The speech is a call to arms against the Presidents and the country with the declaration that they should be fighting against America not with them. Cleaver suggests that black soldiers should begin to destroy the army from the inside out by killing white soldiers and generals and to dispose of black soldiers who refuse to stand with them in destroying the UNITED STATES . military system.³¹ By 1970 both Newton and Seale have been imprisoned and there is tension within the BPP but their influence will be incredibly impactful on Black soldiers who throughout the war will listen to their messages of Black Power and Black Nationalism and apply it to their military life.

Physical Resistance

For black soldiers in the military there was a varied approach in how they had begun to physically oppose their part in the Vietnam War. There was the minor oppositional tactics which usually were in the realm of altering uniforms, violating appearance standards, or

engraving common military tools. The next level still remains peaceful and lies in the realm of abandoning their military duty. This usually came as absences without leave (AWOL) or desertion. Both are the same actions however AWOL is the leaving of military position for less than thirty days, once extending passed the thirty day mark a soldier is labeled as a deserter. The most sever method of physical opposition was more hands on and aggressive and came in the form of fragging and physically fighting fellow soldiers or other military personal. Black soldiers are seen partaking in all three levels of physical opposition some preferring the subtler alteration-based opposition and others preferring the more physical acts of abandoning their posts or attacking other soldiers.

Zippos, Jackets & Salutes

While not the most severe methods of resistance soldiers would use subtle methods of conveying their black identity while in the military. What came from this subtlety was engraved lighters, personalized tour jackets, and soldiers exchanging the Black Power Fist (Appendix 1 image 1) and hand gestures known as the Dap. Of the three more subtle methods, the engraving of Zippo lighters was a common practice for all soldiers not just black soldiers however, black soldiers would often engrave the lighters with black power symbolism such as the black power fist or quotes that exemplified their black pride. The Zippo was a common item that a soldier would have with them that they would use to light cigarettes or fires, the personalization was a way to attach meaning to a common item that would accompany soldiers on their journey through Vietnam. One of the Zippos that was found after Vietnam belonged to a soldier named Carlos who had his lighter engraved with the saying; "You are true to your

color don't fake it be it all Black and Proud because we are a winner."³² While images of the black power fist were more common there still were soldiers who would engrave sayings asserting their Black Power on an item that would be used for a variety of tasks; from lighting a cigarette to burning down crops, huts, and villages; it was a way to assert their Black identity.

For soldiers there was very little personalization to their uniforms, as when you are a part of the military there is very little you can do to show your individuality when you are also supposed to look the same. One way that soldiers could show their individuality was through personalized tour jackets. Soldiers would go to sewing shops with their jackets and get sayings or images similarly what they would do with the Zippo lighters. One such example of a personalized tour jacket (Appendix 1 image 2). The jacket has "Black Unity", the Black Power fist, and the image of a bracelet on the wrist of the fist. What this bracelet is a reference to is the opposition group the De Mau Mau who would make bracelets out of old shoelaces as a way to show their unification as a group.³³ What both the Zippos and the tour jackets create is a personal way of showing their alignment with the ideas of Black Power and Black Nationalism. It is an artistic unification where even if the images and sayings are different there is still a strong black identity that the soldiers are expressing. Another part of their assertion of their black identity comes from the growing of afros while in service one source reported that sixty percent of black soldiers would wear their hair in afros with seventeen percent saying that they would wear their hair in an afro if not for their commanding officers (CO's).³⁴

While the alterations and personalization's were common amongst black soldiers the most notable and most common practice was the hand gestures that they used as a nonverbal

communication amongst one another. The Black Power Movement is seldom talked about without mention of the Black Power Fist which is one of the most culturally recognizable images of the Civil Rights Era. A political gesture by nature the fist has been used in countless demonstrations of black solidarity with one of the most famous Black Power displays occurring at the 1968 Olympics where two black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos held up the Black Power fist on the medal podium.

Due to the political nature of the Black Power salute it was quickly prohibited in the UNITED STATES . army, the fist was widely used by soldiers with a reported fifty-six percent of soldiers using the salute.³⁵ In place of the Black Power Salute came what would become known as the Dap. The Dap which stood for dignity and pride was a black power handshake that was also used as nonverbal communication method to express feelings of unity, strength, and defiance.³⁶ This new form of verbal communication that was used to convey similar messages of Black Power and unity as the Black Power Fist had come about during black GI's time in Vietnam. It was used as a message of trust and meant; "we're side by side, we're together."³⁷ Much like the Black Power Fist that came before it, the Dap was seen as a politically dangerous action in the military, it will likewise be prohibited in the army. CO's believed that the dap was a message system that black soldiers would use to plan revolts against them and were threatened by the action and quickly have it banned.³⁸

The nonverbal communication for all the army feared it to be had a unifying purpose about it. It created a language that was deeply rooted in the concept of Black Nationalism (tying into the idea that part of what nationalism has is a language or communication style that is

different from others) and Black Power, reinforcing the ideas of brotherhood and togetherness. The dap would change meaning with each combination of hand gestures that would be used all of which would convey important information to other black soldiers.³⁹ The use of the Black Power Fist and the Dap which were deeply connected to Black Power and Black Nationalism further drives the idea that these methods of resistance were born from these movements and were deeply imbedded in the ideologies of the movements.

AWOL and Desertion

In comparison to the subtler practices mentioned above, some soldiers found that they wanted a less quiet and more obvious expression of their disapproval with their time in the military. The practices of AWOL and desertion were not uncommon in the military during the war in Vietnam. AWOL and desertion are differentiated in both the severity of the abandonment of ones post as well as the numbers of soldiers who had practiced each method. As previously mentioned the differences between AWOL and desertion is that when a soldier goes AWOL they are off base without military leave for up to thirty days, however once that thirty days hits and they do not return, and their leave continues they are labeled a deserter. In terms of AWOL during the year 1966 on average there were fifty-seven soldiers going AWOL for every 1000 soldiers that were serving in the army. At the height of the United States involvement, being 1971, the number increases to 176 incidents for every thousand soldiers.⁴⁰ Black soldiers who often found an ally in the Vietnamese while they were over in Vietnam and often would often go AWOL or desert to small communities outside of their base. One of the largest areas of desertion is known as Soul Alley in Saigon.⁴¹

Going AWOL or deciding on desertion was a personal decision but also could be coerced by outside influence. The Vietnamese forces who were able to pick up on the racial tensions that existed in the army would often reach out to black soldiers to persuade them to desert the army. "If you go AWOL because you don't want to fight or because you can't put up with the army racism, the NFL will get you out of the country."⁴² The Vietnamese were tactful on how to persuade black soldiers into leaving the army. The culture of racism that existed in the military was apparent and easy to spot there for was easy to exploit. However, these messages would only ever be effective on the soldier's that were planning to desert or go AWOL anyway with these feelings of anger leading them to Soul Alley.

Soul Alley which was a small area around one of the main bases of operation in Vietnam was the main escape for soldiers who went AWOL or deserted. In 1970 Time magazine covered Soul Alley and reported that anywhere from three hundred to five hundred black soldiers were hiding out in Soul Alley, just a fraction of a much larger number that had ran from the army.⁴³ The army is only able to report such statistics to Times because there are regular raids that occur at Soul Alley; which only makes up part of the lifestyle that exists there. There is a freedom that exists in the community where black soldiers are free to express their black identity without being reprimanded by CO's and where the brotherhood of Black Power remains without constant suppression from the military. While in Soul Alley there is still an expression of the nonverbal language that they were using on base. In place of the Fist or the dap there is two taps to the chest which lets other former black soldiers know "I will die for you."⁴⁴

Fragging

Disillusioned by the racist military system black soldiers acted against their CO's and other soldiers in a physically aggressive manner. Taking inspiration from Cleavers message of rising against others involved is two clear levels of aggressive tactics with the less sever method being face-to-face confrontation and the more sever method of using their weapons against other soldiers. Known as fragging this was when soldiers used grenades or other explosive devices with the intent to harm or kill fellow soldiers. While the statistic shows no racial breakdown, the National archives reports that at the conclusion of the war two hundred and thirty-seven deaths were ruled as homicides.⁴⁵ It cannot be ignored that on some levels soldier homicide was a major byproduct of the war in Vietnam. When soldiers are surrounded by death all day and anger and racial tensions begin to rise, it is only natural that it would reach a point where it would burst, and the aggression would come out in an aggressive and potentially deadly way.

For soldiers, the appeal of fragging came from its anonymity. With an explosive there would be no evidence that would be traced back to you, anything that could link you would be destroyed once the grenade went off. Even still if someone was suspect they could easily get around the accusation by saying that it was used earlier in a fire fight or was dropped somewhere in the jungle. For how deadly it was it was a very clean way for soldiers to get rid of their problems. While it is impossible to pinpoint numerically exactly how many incidents of ragging were carried out by black soldiers, sources suggest that it was related to racial tensions

within the military. Historian George Lepre believes that there were two major motivators for fragging which were; racial tensions and a person's military rank.⁴⁶

Physically aggressive tactics towards the beginning of the war were very limited if not rare. However, following the assassination of Dr. King in 1968 six command level serious incident reports were filed, all of which involved racial violence against white soldiers. These incidents continued to escalate and often would occur at night when people were either sleeping or had their guard down.⁴⁷ Fragging and other forms of physical violence began to become more severe as the war progressed with soldiers taking out hits on officers and other troops. Lepre explains that during the war there would be underground dealings between soldiers offering up money in exchange for the deaths of officers that soldiers either had previous altercations with. One of the most notable examples of a bounty and requested assassination was on Lieutenant Colonel Weldon F. Honeycutt the commander of the 101st Airborne Division whose bounty was placed at \$10,000.⁴⁸ The bounty against Lieutenant Honeycutt was placed due to his operation to take control of Hill 937 which was an aggressive campaign that while successful came with a price of heavy casualties.⁴⁹ There is a clear connection with the concept of fragging with the message of Cleavers speech *To My Brothers in Vietnam* the request to kill officers or other soldiers is attempted and moderately successful. By the conclusion of the war there are fifty-seven fragging related deaths in the military with forty-two deaths in the Army and the rest occurring in the Marines.⁵⁰

During the war the Army Concept Team in Vietnam looking to having a better understanding of the tensions and the motivations for why soldiers were acting out

aggressively, they surveyed officers and soldiers using an eight-question questionnaire. These questions included what the suspected reasons for fragging were, the types of individuals who acted out, and whether or not fragging was an indication of a larger problem.⁵¹ When officers were questioned on the types of individuals who would participate in fragging, one of responses that officers provided was that these activities are carried out by “Black power advocate(s), way to obtain equal opportunity.”⁵² Army officers believed that soldiers that were champions for the concept of Black Power would have been behind fragging activities. As the message from Cleaver was to destroy the army from within it the attacks become incredibly influenced by the concepts of Black Power and Black Nationalism.

The Military System

Black soldiers often would be punished in disproportionate numbers for physical aggression against white soldiers and officers which caused disproportionately high dishonorable discharge rates for black soldiers. For black soldiers twenty-four percent of black soldiers will face dishonorable discharge.⁵³ President Carter in 1977 will request for the Pentagon to change the discharge conditions from dishonorable to general in 432,530 cases.⁵⁴ These discharges were related to desertion, drug use, and other charges which would have included violence and aggression. However, the military was not only focused on limiting the aggression that was present on base.

Another of the main concerns from the military was the antiwar sentiment that was being spread on base. In one instance there was a military attempt to ban free speech on bases that had to do with antiwar sentiment that was being spoken by three soldiers known as the

Fort Hood Three. The three men who had refused to serve in the war once they were drafted in 1966 because they believed that it was unjust, much like many other Americans had believed, were put on trial for antiwar sentiment.⁵⁵ What this protest represented was “the abandonment of the military principle of blind obedience.”⁵⁶ As the three men were from the minority groups in America being either black or of Spanish decent they were aware that the war they were fighting they would see no gain from once they returned home. They cited the Black Power movement as an influence of their opposition to the war and its practices they believed that the Black Power Movement and the Antiwar movement needed soldier participation to further spread its message.⁵⁷ All three men were found guilty of insubordination and were dishonorably discharged and sentenced to jail time.

What both examples are an indicator of is that the military, intimidated by the antiwar sentiment and the concept of Black Power wanted to find ways to remove those who believed in these principles. The imprisonment of the Fort Hood Three and the banning of the Black Power Salute and Dap discussed earlier is a limitation of free speech and expression which are Constitutionally protected rights that the UNITED STATES . military was violating out of fear of losing control.

Conclusion

By the conclusion of the war there was a clear understanding that the United States had lost the war in Vietnam. A number of factors contributed to the loss that the United States faced in Vietnam, with the largest being that we did not know how to fight a war in Vietnam. Covered in dense jungle the United States military would be forced to try and navigate through

an unfamiliar territory against an enemy that knew the area better and was able to use that to their advantage. Due to his dense jungle environment it was not uncommon for entire battalions of United States soldiers to be take out by the Viet Cong and it was not unlikely that you would accidently engage in a firefight with United States soldiers. While these deaths would be labeled as friendly fire, it adds to the grey area of whether or not the “friendly fire” was accidental or just labeled that way because there was no evidence to incriminate another soldier to label it as homicide.

As with any war, Vietnam left a lasting legacy on the United States and the people who fought in the war. There are both visible and invisible marks that are left on our veterans that people can see when they drive down the street, visit veterans hospitals, or our nation’s capital. There are veterans who wear the title “Vietnam Veteran” with pride because they came home and continued with their lives with some but not an extreme lasting effect. Others come home missing limbs or with nothing at all waiting for them after the war because the system has failed them. For example, the promises of Project 100,000 were not fulfilled. Many veterans have gone from one bad situation to the next and in the worse cases ended up homeless because the promises of work were not there when they returned from war.

Then there are the effects that cannot be seen when passing a Vietnam War veteran, the emotional and psychological effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that linger long after the cease fire was signed. For black soldiers PTSD would become another serious concern for them and will come with more stressors than white soldiers will have faced. A study focusing on PTSD in black Vietnam Veterans show that there is a high rate of PTSD in

black soldiers due to greater exposure to the battle front, prewar factors that deal with socioeconomic status, and the racism and prejudice that soldiers faced in Vietnam.⁵⁸ Having to deal with both regular artillery fire and racial discrimination following these firefights would leave lasting marks on black soldiers.

Despite the real world's heavy presence of black soldiers, pop culture has widely taken a majority white approach to remembering and showing Vietnam. This is an incredibly white washed narrative that places black soldiers as background or side characters that are typically represented as angry and militant soldiers who are usually high and regularly express their displeasure with fighting the war. There are very few cases in film that Black Power and Black Nationalism is highlighted and an important feature to their experience in the war.

As a major protest movement of the mid to late-1960's the Black Power Movement and Black Nationalism had a great significant impact on the black experience in Vietnam. Black soldiers will go into the war hearing the likes of Dr. King and the Black Panther Party telling them that the solution to oppression and resistance to the war lies in contentious objection and destroying the army from within. These are the messages that black soldiers are entering the war hearing. A war that they believed was not for them, a war that they were being forced to fight all while hearing important figures telling them that resistance to the war is resistance to white oppression. They hear this and it becomes a battle cry for black soldiers. Whether it was through organization's such as the Black Panther Party that had small groups located within the barracks, or physical resistance that ranged from the small act of using the Black Power Fist to the much larger acts of desertion and physical aggression, black soldiers were motivated and

unified by the messages of Black Power and Black Nationalism. They must be remembered not at militant rebels but as determined activist working towards black unity and empowerment even while fighting overseas.

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- ¹ Shmoop Editorial Team, "The Vietnam War Statistics", *Shmoop University Inc.* Last Modified November 11, 2008. Access Date November 7, 2018. <http://www.shmoop.com/vietnam-war/statistics.html>
- ² The expression "white man's war" emerged from the clear and overwhelming support that the Vietnam War garnered from the white population in America.
- ³ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History*. (New York, The Random House Publishing, 2006).
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ "Black Nationalism and Black Power," Digital History, 2016, , accessed November 07, 2018, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3331.
- ⁶ Hamilton, LaMont. "Five on the Black Hand Slide: Origins and Evolutions of the Dap" Published September 22,2014. Date Accessed November 7, 2018. <https://folklife.si.edu/talkstory/2014/five-on-the-black-hand-sideorigins-and-evolutions-of-the-dap>
- ⁷ For soldiers who were absent without leave this meant that they were off base without authorization for a maximum thirty days, once this period of time extended beyond the initial thirty days they were labeled as deserters.
- ⁸ James, Maycock, "War Within War". The Guardian, September 15, 2001, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/sep/15/weekend7.weekend3>
- ⁹ James E. Westheider, *African Americans and the Vietnam War: Fighting on Two Fronts*. (New York, New York University Press, 1997). Pg.8-17
- ¹⁰ James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.,2008). Pg 15.
- ¹¹ The Cold War will not officially conclude until 1991 but the early years of the conflict will coincide with the French Indochina War.
- ¹² Ghram A. Cosmas, "The Vietnam War". Dictionary of American History. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler, 3rd edition. (Sale Group, 2007), s.v.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ "The Military Draft During the Vietnam War," Resistance and Revolution: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement at the University of Michigan, 1965-1972, , accessed November 11, 2018, http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/draft_protests/the-military-draft-during-the-
- ¹⁶ "Project 100,000 (1966-1971)" Project 100,000 (1966-1971). The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://blackpast.org/gah/project-100-000-1966-1971>.
- ¹⁷ Ibid
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Additionally, there is a debate over whether or not the attack in the Gulf of Tonkin was falsified in an attempt to bring American into Vietnam without just cause.
- ²⁰ John Morello, "Antiwar Movement", *Americans at War* Encyclopedia.com (2005) accessed on November 11, 2018. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/defense/energy-government-and-defense-magazines/antiwar-movement>
- ²¹ Ibid
- ²² "SNCC Statement on Vietnam". January 6, 1966 accessed on November 11, 2018. <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/policy-statements/vietnam/>
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Clayborn Carson, Kris Shepard, Andrew Young, *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*(New York, Grand Central Publishing, 2011). P. 133-164
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ It is important to note that the accusations of colonialism came from the fact that colonialism is rooted in the ideas of gaining partial or full political control of another country with the intent to exploit it for resources.
- ²⁷"Congress of Racial Equality Statement on Vietnam and the Draft." 1968 accessed on November 11, 2018. http://www.aavw.org/protest/civilrights_core_abstract08.html

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- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ “The Black Panther Party: The Ten-Point Program” October 1966, accessed on November 11, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm>
- ³⁰ Eldridge Cleaver “To My Black Brothers in Vietnam.” 1970 accessed on November 11, 2018 <https://www.hippy.com/hippie-havens/to-my-black-brothers-in-vietnam-1970/>
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Sherry Buchanan, Bradford Edwards, *Vietnam Zippos: American Soldiers’ Engravings and Stories (1965-1973)*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007). Pg. 69
- ³³ “Vietnam Tour Jacket with Black Power Embroidery,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed on October 15, 2018. https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2012.136.
- ³⁴ Sherry Buchanan, *Vietnam Zippos: American Soldiers’ Engravings and Stories (1965-1973)*, pg. 69
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Hamilton Lamont, “Five on the Black Hand Slide: Origins and Evolutions of the Dap”.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ David Cortwright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago, Haymarker Books, 1975).
- ⁴¹ James Maycock, “War within War.” *The Guardian*, September 15, 2001, accessed October 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/sep/15/weekend7.weekend3>
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ *Time*, 1970: “South VietNam: Soul Alley” accessed on November 11, 2018.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ The National Archives, “Casualty Statistics: The Vietnam War” accessed on November 11, 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>
- ⁴⁶ George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam*. (Texas Tech University Press, 2011)
- ⁴⁷ Ibid. pg 21
- ⁴⁸ Ibid. pg. 38
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid. pg.227-228
- ⁵¹ Ibid. pg. 85-89
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ “Dishonorable Discharges” 1974. Accessed on November 11, 2018. http://www.aavw.org/served/vetsissues_disdischarges_abstract02.html
- ⁵⁴ George C. Wilson, “Carter Authorizes Military to Review Viet Discharges” (*Washington Post*) March 29, 1977. Accessed on November 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/03/29/carter-authorizes-military-to-review-viet-discharges/1b83a118-0841-4bc3-918a-6450616889a0/?utm_term=.6ad2a37f4a6b
- ⁵⁵ Laura Smith, “When the Fort Hood Three refused to go to Vietnam they Sparked a military revolution” (Timeline) November 30, 2017. Accessed on November 11, 2018. <https://timeline.com/when-the-fort-hood-three-refused-to-go-to-vietnam-they-sparked-a-military-revolution-f981e39301a1>
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Bruce P. Dohrenwend, J. Black Turner, Nicholas A. Turse, Roberto Lewis-Fernandez, Thomas J. Yager, *War Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Black, Hispanic, and Majority White Vietnam Veterans: The Roles of Exposure and Vulnerability*, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 21, No. 2. April 2008, pages 133-141.

Appendix



Figure 1: Tommie Smith and John Carlos Doing the Black Power Fist at the 1968 Olympics
<https://www.complex.com/sports/2017/09/mexico-city-olympics-black-power-fist>. Accessed December 14, 2018





Figure 2: Vietnam Tour Jacket with Black Power Embroidery
https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2012.136 Accessed November 11, 2018



Figure 3: 1971 Navy Recruitment Poster <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/OnlineLibrary/photos/prs-tpic/af-amer/afa-pstr.htm> Accessed December 14, 2018

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