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1968 Paris Revolution: Then and Now

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Sons and Brothers: A Glimpse into the Identity of the American Soldier in Vietnam

“END THE WAR NOW! BRING THE TROOPS HOME” and “BRING OUR BOYS HOME ALIVE!” shout out two protest posters held up in front of a large crowd of civilians at a 1969 march at the University of Michigan (Detroit News). This demonstration, fighting on alongside the anti-war counterculture that exploded throughout the world following the catalytic events at Paris in May 1968, was one of many other protests across the country that challenged America’s involvement in the Vietnam War - a war which sent young men far away from home and returned those who survived as “half men, physically handicapped and mentally deranged.” (Lears) Certainly, while much of the protest against the highly unpopular war was directed at ending the killing of Vietnamese civilians seen in news coverage from conflicts in Saigon and Hue, strong concern for American soldiers - friends and family members of those still at home, manifested in the riots in Chicago, Washington D.C., and in this march in Michigan, all movements that sought to cease the unnecessary deaths of loved ones.

That being said, one of the questions that ought to be answered in regards to this eruption of protest against the government is who exactly the American soldier in Vietnam was. If the American public was willing to fight for him, he must have certainly not been some wholly contemptible extension of the government’s war machine, spawned only to kill

Vietcong and quell communism; nor was he the one-dimensional minion of the political hegemony that the very spirit of 1968 rose up against. Rather, as Country Joe Macdonald sang in Woodstock, the American soldier in Vietnam was a person, a confused son who didn't know "what [he] was fighting for." And so, as we peer more into the identity of the American soldier in Vietnam through the vantages of socioeconomic status, level of education, we might also be able to better understand better the great protests to bring the soldiers back home and put a stop to the war that occurred in 1968 and onwards.

One realization that potentially points towards the widespread resistance to the war is the understanding that the Vietnam War involved the whole spectrum of American socioeconomic classes and not just the poor. It is a rather common misconception that the makeup of the army during the Vietnam war was disproportionately filled with those of lower socioeconomic background and status. In fact, there was diverse participation from the middle class as seen in statistics that demonstrate the Vietnam War's non-adherence to the paradigm of American wars of the past that likely led to this misconception: 76% of enlisted men were from backgrounds above the poverty line and 50% of the American army had lived in families with middle class incomes prior to the war (Dyhouse). Indeed, in many film depictions such as those of "Apocalypse Now" and "Full Metal Jacket," the representation of American soldiers as men from common working backgrounds sharing in the experience of Vietnam serves to be historically accurate amidst the otherwise mythical and creative liberties of the films (Dittmar, Michaud). Only the upper class was able to more effectively escape combat - though this is no new insight for modern history: A mainstay of the privilege of the rich has always been in the avoidance of firsthand experience in war (Stanley).

Furthermore, death and injury statistics of American soldiers in Vietnam do not hint at any sort of significant influence of socioeconomic background in deaths in the Vietnam War, with “casualties spread almost equally across the entire population” and not just concentrated among the poor (Stanley). Thus, the danger to the American soldier was felt by the great majority of the public back in the States as they watched news footage of the war and saw their loved ones caught in combat. This perhaps aided in strengthening the fervor for protests against the war as it mobilized more widespread resistance from more socioeconomic classes leading to more than half of the country believing that the “sending of American soldiers to Vietnam was a mistake” by the end of 1968 (Gallup). With the heightened spirit of “communal love” observed by the spirit of 1968 and onwards (Lears), whole communities came together to fight back against this war that was prematurely sending young men to their graves.

Another metric that can help better understand the identity of the American soldier in Vietnam is education level, something certainly related to but not fully married to the soldier’s socioeconomic status. Similarly to the misconception on levels of wealth present in enlisted men in the Vietnam war, levels of education were also much less skewed towards the underprivileged than commonly conceived; they were in fact fairly evenly distributed. The Vietnam War saw an enormously high proportion of educated, American soldiers with 79% of enlisted men indicating at least a high school degree by 1969, compared to the much lower 45% observed in World War II (Dyhouse). Additionally, despite the fact that the draft allowed a deferment for students who were currently pursuing a degree, those who had just finished their time at universities effectively shared in an equal chance of enlistment as those who did not have the privilege of a higher education, and so a significant spike upwards of a 62%

relative increase in the proportion of soldiers with a college education occurred between 1965 and 1969 (Erikson, Stoker). Marc Leepson, a draftee who had just finished his degree at George Washington University, recalled his horror with the draft that paralyzed the many new graduates like him who were now facing the possibility of going to the battlefield at Vietnam before even getting a job: “Seemingly within minutes after I had graduated that May... the draft board changed my status from II-S (student) to I-A (cannon fodder).” (Leepson)

Though only around 25% of the armed forces represented draftees, this statistic still meant that approximately 650,000 American civilians had found themselves caught in a war for which they had not signed up (Dyhouse) and so it came to no surprise that there was great resistance from the homefront for these these young men with bright futures ahead of them to be shuffled off to war. The draft’s influx of high school and college graduates contributing in bring down the average age of American soldier in Vietnam to around 22 years old by 1969 (Archives), and so public resentment exploded as “college campuses were gripped by protest opposed [to] the war and the draft” (Taylor, Morris) and movements broke out such as the famous 1968 Chicago riots that sought to bring these young men - these peers, friends, and family members back to American soil before they threw their lives away for hopeless war.

That being said, an important caveat regarding the two aforementioned vantages of peering into the American soldier in Vietnam must be observed: With over 88.4% of enlisted men indicating a Caucasian background, but only 10.6% representing African Americans and less than 1.0% representing other racial backgrounds (Dyhouse), any previous statistics on socioeconomic status and level of education therefore mostly concern only the white story of the matter - which, while indeed depicting the overall vast majority of the makeup of the

American armed forces of the era, cannot hope to paint a complete picture, especially considering the dramatic disparities between African Americans and Caucasians in regards to these two elements of socioeconomic status and education that disproportionately sent many more black Americans overseas relative to the black population in America at the time (Maycock). Certainly, while there is a potent and necessary discussion to be had on this topic especially in regards to the synchrony of the civil rights and Black Power movements of 1968 and onwards, it is plainly true that the unequivocal majority of American soldiers were white and were the 88.4% for whom the statistics outlining the previous discussion most apply.

However, while keeping this important caveat of race in mind, it can still be said with confidence that, at least in the Caucasian sphere, the American soldier in Vietnam was not just a single identity of a lower class man with a poor education as seen in the paradigm of the majority of soldiers in previous American wars, but rather a multitude of identities involving various social classes and levels of education. This fact provides some insight into why protest against the Vietnam War might have been so widespread in 1968 and onwards. Ultimately, the American soldier in Vietnam represented the American male citizen in America who was “only [in Vietnam] because of the war.” (Greenway, 60) Thus, intense protest of the war and the government that endorsed it grew accordingly when people saw that the soldier on the television screen could very well be a friend, neighbor, son, or brother who was only fighting for his life because, as Country Joe Macdonald puts it, “Uncle Sam needs [his] help.”

Citations

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