Beyond Borders: the Black Vietnam Veteran's Influence on the Civil Rights Movement

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Introduction

"Why are you over here fighting against us? We haven't done anything to you. You're not even free in your own country, man!" These confronting questions were overheard in a P.O.W. camp during the Korean War. The African-American soldier that was asked these questions at the time did not have an answer ready: "it had never dawned on me that I'm over here fighting these people and I'm not even free in my own country."[1] Inadvertently the Korean War had provided a harsh lesson in reality for this soldier. It was not that this lesson was completely new territory though; during the Second World War African Americans had launched what became known as the 'Double V' movement: "victory abroad over Nazism and victory at home over racism and inequality." This movement ushered in a new assault on discrimination in the United States: while fighting Hitler's particular brand of racism on European shores black soldiers hoped to tackle the ongoing struggle for civil rights in the United States. As they risked their lives they not only faced perilous situations, but also constant oppression from the still-segregated American army, oppression that was documented by the black media which further fuelled their anger. [2]

It was when these soldiers came home that they took the experiences gained in the military and proceeded to play an important role in the various organizations of the Civil Rights Movement. During the second half of the 1960s the Movement entered a second phase, in which the focus shifted from confrontational nonviolent resistance to a more militaristic aggressive approach.[3] Second-phase organizations such as the Black Panthers had a distinct military aesthetic, which I propose was influenced by the experiences African-American veterans witnessed during the numerous wars in which they served, in particular the Vietnam War, which coincided with the Civil

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[1] C.S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2009) p, 97-98.
[2] G. Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2001) p, 211.
[3] D.R. Colburn and Pozzetta, G. "Race, Ethnicity, and the Evolution of Political Legitimacy" in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. by David Farber (London: North Carolina Press 1994) p, 119.

Rights Movement. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to examine in what ways exactly African-American veterans used their military experience in the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement to further its advances.

This essay proposes two different methods of analysing the influence of the various wars: the first method I propose is to analyse the effect of war on a confrontational level. As war lingered how did it affect African-American mentality and confront them with the inequality of their society? To elaborate: the Second World War spawned the aforementioned 'Double V' movement as black soldiers saw the war on racism in Europe as a chance to confront the racism in America. How then, did other wars such as the Vietnam War affect African-American mentality in other ways? The confrontational level of analysis will also encompass the practical applications of war experience. How did military training affect the various organizations of which African-American veterans participated? The second method of analysis concerns the psychological ramifications of military experience on veterans: while the relationship between the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement is analysed on a sociological level it is also important to evaluate exactly how the two events shaped the mentality of African-American soldiers as they returned home from war. Through psychological analysis I hope to prove that it was inevitable for the veteran to return home without in some way playing an important part in changing American society.

This essay will focus in particular on what Gary Gerstle labels 'race wars,' wars that challenged the supposed white supremacy, and how they played an important role in African-American veteran activism. [4] The scope of the essay will be the Vietnam War with World War II as an initial analysis. Due to their nature as 'race wars,' they influenced the Civil Rights Movement directly, whether through veteran experience or party philosophies, such as SCLC's adherence to non-violence or, in contrast, SNCC's growing militancy. Of particular focus will be the difference between World War II as a 'race war' and the Vietnam War as a 'race war'. As I hope to demonstrate, the

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[4] Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 190.

Vietnam War had racial characteristics different from the Second World War that made the experience more strenuous for black soldiers.

The notion that African-American veterans were directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement is not an original one, yet few sources focus exactly on the activities of veterans upon return, in particular during the latter half of the Vietnam War. In his book, C.S. Parker argues that the fight for civil equality was strengthened by military experience from the Second World War. His book encapsulates the activities of World War II veterans upon return and their role in the Civil Rights Movement. It is my intention to produce a similar analysis only then with veterans returning from the Vietnam War. While plenty of studies exist on the state of the Vietnam veteran upon return, one of which used in this essay is Robert J. Lifton's *Home from the War*, few fully document the activities of black Vietnam veterans when they came home.

Whereas most articles covering the Civil Rights Movement in relation to the Vietnam War explain the effect wars abroad can have on domestic social change, it is my intention to specifically focus on the importance of not just veteran experience during the more violent second phase, but also how the framework of the 'race war' influenced the Civil Rights movement and perhaps made it lean more towards more extreme measures. The academic discussion focuses mostly on the untimely death of prominent Civil Rights figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as an explanation for a shift in tactics but I propose that military experience, along with a background of 'race war' influence, most importantly the growing quagmire that was Vietnam, played an important part in the development of the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to the main question one of the questions I hope to answer is why the movement gradually shifted from non-violent resistance to confrontational militancy, and how veteran experience and war themes might have aided this transition. In conclusion, it is my intention to shed new light not only on how the Civil Rights movement developed, but particularly where it drew its influences from with regard to the military experiences of the black veterans.

Chapter I   **World War II, the New Wake-up Call**

As Europe once again sank into the depths of war in 1939 the United States did not yet feel inclined

to participate, nor was it ready on a practical level. Adhering to the isolationist policy that had been

tradition for over 30 years the United States had promised to supply the Allied forced with

ammunition, but not to actually intervene. This policy completely changed after Japan's audacious

attack on Pearl Harbor on the 7th of December 1941. The 'day that lived in infamy' catapulted

America into a two-front war: one supporting the Allies on the European shores and the other

against Japan on the Pacific front. This presented America with a serious problem; during Hitler's

invasion of Poland in 1939 America's armed forces ranked only forty-fifth in size in the list of the

world's largest armies.[5] Within the years that followed the American government was burdened

with the task of raising an army that could sustain a two-pronged war. It was during this time that

draft service and recruitment was heavily expanded. This did not only provide new opportunities for

white men and women, but also for African Americans, those going to the front and the ones

seeking newly opened jobs at home, who used the war to not only prove their own patriotism, but

also to confront the endemic racism of America by fighting this overtly racist enemy. In this chapter I

aim to provide a quick overview of the effects World War II had on the mentality of the black

community, including the experiences of African-American soldiers as well as those who stayed

home. As a concluding statement I aim to provide an explanation as to what made World War II

inherently different from World War I with regards to its effect on the African-American community.

By the time the war officially ended over 1 million African Americans had served in the Army

or Navy under still segregated rule.[6] Motivations for joining were diverse yet one constant theme

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[5] M.B. Norton et al., *A People & a Nation: A History of the United States*, vol. II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2008) p, 769.
[6] The exact number of registered African-American soldiers in World War 2, Army, Navy or other branches, is approximately 1,056,841. Records can be acquired through the official Army website: http://www.army.mil/africanamericans/

was visible among those that volunteered for the Armed Forces: not only was joining the Army considered an act of patriotism but it offered the African-American community a chance to confront America with its own racism, a strategy that relied on using the heinous racist and genocidal actions of the Nazi regime as a mirror for the United States to reflect upon.[7]

Individual experiences in the Armed Forces were both positive and negative, or as Christopher Parker describes it, a case of "taking the crooked with the straight."[8] The 'crooked' was obviously represented by the segregation of the Armed Forces and the humiliation that accompanied it. Nearly all of the training camps were located in the South, and training regimes there heavily followed the conduct of the Jim Crow laws. African Americans expecting to see equal treatment were in for a dose of reality as they were quickly reminded of the racist practices that still ruled: buses were segregated as were regiments, drill sergeants were overtly racist and often subjected black soldiers to humiliating experiences, and more often than not African Americans were not given the more honourable fighting positions.[9] They instead were assigned to menial professions denying them the opportunity to come back as war heroes: "[i]t is hard to identify one's self with fighting a war when all one does is dig ditches and lay concrete," one black soldier stated.[10]

Jim Crow, however, was not relegated to just a domestic product. It did not take long for its philosophies to be exported to the fronts in Europe: "[o]verseas, white servicemen often tried to convince locals to behave according to the tenets of white supremacy."[11] As the fronts of Britain and France started housing more American soldiers, the differences in their respective societies started becoming more apparent. White soldiers responded by enforcing Jim Crow or by convincing the

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[7]G. Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2001) p, 192.
[8] C.S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2009) p, 89.
[9] Norton et al, *A People & a Nation* p, 782-783.
[10]Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 214.
[11] Parker, *Fighting for Democracy* p, 95.

locals to do so. This was met with mixed results among the locals, but did increase frustration and hostility among black soldiers and their white colleagues.[12]

This clash of societies did also have a more positive effect however, the 'straight' part of the 'crooked and the straight.' One of the advantages of military experience was a chance for African Americans to witness societies in which segregation simply did not exist. While there were attempts to replicate Jim Crow on an international level this did not fully succeed everywhere, creating situations where black and white soldiers could potentially intermingle. Black soldiers, for once, had the right to. Another advantage or 'straight' that African Americans experienced in the army was a renewed sense of racial pride in their military accomplishments[13]. Not only did they receive military training, but their experiences abroad helped re-establish their racial pride in more ways than one: they had now received proper military training and had seen the supposed dominance of the white man being repudiated, but I will come back to this point later.

The reverberations of the war were not just felt only by those fighting on the frontlines. American society was rapidly changing, and the black communities were destined to change along with it. Even as draft numbers soared to new levels the Armed forces maintained their quota regarding the number of African-Americans that could serve. In simpler terms this meant new opportunities as jobs that were held by draftees now became available to African-Americans who could not or would not serve in the war, causing almost an exodus from the South to the North.[14] Another development was that African Americans became even more determined to fight for their equality. Protests against or using the war came in multiple forms: one particular form of protest was the adopting of the Zoot suit, which was used either as a real form of protest or as a means to escape the draft by appearing too irrational to serve.[15] Another form of raising social awareness was

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[12] Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 216.

[13] J. Westheider, "African Americans and the Vietnam War" in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. by Young, Marilyn B. and Robert Buzzanco (Blackwell Publishing 2006) p, 2.

[14] Norton, et al, *A People and a Nation* p, 777-778.

[15] One user of this tactic was Malcolm Little who, alongside his brightly-coloured Zoot suit, shouted numerous obscenities until he was sure the draft board would label him 4-F, unfit for service. Malcolm Little would later

the 'Double V' campaign. Created by black newspaper editors and endorsed by the NAACP, 'Double V' stood for a double victory in the war, one over the blatantly racist Axis empires and the other over the racial inequalities experienced at both the American army and society. 'Double V' was, in a sense, the aforementioned mirror black intellectuals had chosen as a means to confront America with its own hypocrisy. African-American journalists would provide ample media coverage of the racist practices within the Army and then directly link those practices to the conflicting image of an America fighting a war for democracy against an enemy whose virulent racism was considered an ultimate evil, yet a similar racism was still actively present within their own society. It was the intention of the 'Double V' movement to show the United States that racism, whether in Nazi Germany or anywhere else, had to be overcome. By confronting America with its own hypocrisy and proving themselves to be patriotic citizens by supporting the war, African Americans hoped to finally receive the equality they deserved. [16]

The strategy mentioned in the last paragraph is not a particularly new one. As early as the American Civil War African-Americans had participated in the hopes of elevating their racial status; the strategy was that "blacks' willingness to share the burdens of war would be rewarded in post-war America," a concept that had mixed results at best. [17] For example, while black regiments fought admirably along Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders their contributions would later be diminished in value or completely denied. The Eighth Regiment, already active during the Spanish-American war, served with distinction on the French battlelines during the Great War, and yet their efforts did not translate into massive social change, most certainly not in the way the Second World War would become the prelude to the Civil Rights Movement. [18] What exactly is it about the Second World War that provided such fertile grounds for change? In the previous paragraphs I illustrated

play an important role in the Civil Rights Movement as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, also known as Malcolm X. A. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books 1999) p, 110.
[16] Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 210-211.
[17] K.L. Phillips, *War! What is it good for? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2012) p, 21.
[18] Norton et al, *A People and a Nation* p, 634-636, p, 665.

how World War II provided both economic opportunities and allowed for a more critical reappraisal of American society and how military experience had a positive and negative effect on the black soldier, 'the crooked and the straight.' While such experiences must certainly be accounted for there is one particular aspect of the Second World War and the subsequent wars that I believe played a larger role on the mentality of the African American: the fact that these wars were what Gary Gerstle labels as 'race wars'.[19] The Second World War provides a two-pronged example of a 'Race War': the first is exemplified through the 'Double V' movement. World War II was inherently racial because of the doctrines that fuelled the Nazi Empire and America's position to oppose those doctrines as a free nation, immediately labelling America as a nation where such racism should not be allowed to exist. The second interpretation of World War II as a 'race war' is one that was already alluded to in earlier paragraphs and one that would carry on in the wars that followed. The experience abroad had allowed African-American communities to witness situations where the supposed dominance of the white man was being challenged. The Pacific front, and particularly Japan's early successes against America and other past colonial powers, had proven that the theory of the white man's inherent superiority was just that, theory. "I don't want them [the Japanese] to quite win, but I do want them to dish out to these white people all they can dish out to them,"[20] one black man stated to an NAACP reporter. This situation of white versus non-white would later return in the Vietnam War, and serves as one of the key differences between the Great War and World War II with regards to its impact on African-American mentality.

World War II proved to be a watershed in world history, especially for the black community. For African-Americans abroad, military participation was a dual-edged experience: they witnessed both the repudiation of white supremacy as well as the sting of racism still present in the army. On

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[19] The term 'race war' was originally coined by John Dower, and represented a war in which two opposing races would fight for dominance. While I mostly adhere to this definition, I would like to add that the term 'race war' would also mean a war which is racially charged, not only when two opposing races are the belligerents but when the ideology behind the war has a racial background.
Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 202.
[20] Ibidem p, 190.

the domestic front World War II offered African Americans a chance to confront their society on that racism. What I claim is that it was World War II's status as a 'race war' that made these developments possible, in a similar way that the Vietnam War would influence the Civil Rights Movement when both occurred. World War II's status as a 'race war', its effect on the United States as a mirror to highlight the injustice of segregation, and the experiences of black soldiers, both positive and negative, would leave an indelible mark that would help shape the Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter II   **Parallels and Pariahs: the War at Home and Abroad**

"Here lies a YM [yellow man], killed by a BM [black man], fighting for the WM [white man], who killed all the RM [red men]."[21] On a restaurant napkin Malcolm X succinctly, and somewhat cynically, expressed the sentiment many of his contemporaries felt during the 1960s, the sentiment of the Vietnam War being another expression of the racism endemic of the United States. It was during these times, when both the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War would reach their apex that many began viewing the two phenomena as inherently related.[22] Like World War II before it the Vietnam War would influence the Civil Rights Movement, infusing a new generation of black soldiers with racial pride and the will to fight for equality. Unlike World War II however, this relationship was not as one-sided: the two historic events would come to greatly influence and in some cases strengthen each other.

In this chapter I will use a similar structure as the one used in chapter I. Chapter II will provide a brief summary of the events in the Vietnam War that pertained to the black community as well as the experiences of the black soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Upon analysis I will demonstrate how both historic events played a significant role in each other's development and how black soldiers, who were still active on their tour of duty, played an important part in those developments. To fully understand the influence veterans had on the Civil Rights Movement it is also important to take a look at what transpired while most were still active in the war. Finally, as with the previous chapter, I will analyse the Vietnam War through the framework of the 'Race War' and how it differed from World War II. This analysis will prove useful in understanding the mentality of the black soldier when they returned home, a topic that will be elaborated upon in chapter III.

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[21] A. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books 1999) epilogue.
[22] A. Mack, "No 'Illusion of Separation': James L. Bevel, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War" in *Peace & Change*, vol. 28 (Peace History Society and Peace and Justice Association 2003) p, 108.

What is oft forgotten but a core fact of the Vietnam War was that it was at first a part of the decolonisation conflict between France and the Vietminh forces. The United States' initial position was that of an adviser and ally of the French forces. Only after France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 did the United States commit itself to sending 'advisors' to handle the civil crisis in a peaceful manner.[23] By 1964 the 'advisors' had all but failed to settle the crisis and President Johnson was looking for a means to escalate the war. After an incident involving alleged North Vietnamese aggression upon an American destroyer Johnson was able to pass the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, effectively escalating the Vietnam situation into a full-scale war. In stark contrast with how the war would end, the American public responded with approval upon this show of force by President Johnson.[24] By the time the war did end, however, the damage had been done. Where World War II united the people of the United States the Vietnam War would prove to do the exact opposite: "[t]he faith of many Americans in their society's complex web of cultural authority and political legitimacy was weakened, even destroyed by the government's failed policy in Vietnam."[25] By the end the Vietnam War had become one of the most polarizing events in American history, and had come to alter the course of another event that coincided with it, the Civil Rights Movement.

Like in World War II before it, African Americans would play an important part in the Vietnam War. To some, participating in an organization that appeared the most progressive in the United States was enough motivation: "[a]fter all, the black papers intoned, the integrated military remained the most important gain of the post-Korean War civil rights struggle."[26] This point of view, regardless of how true it actually was, was one actively promoted by not only the government itself but by the NAACP as well, enticing African Americans to enlist. For others, motivations for enlisting

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[23]'Advisors' was the term preferred by the Kennedy administration as opposed to army personnel. In reality, they were one and the same. G.C. Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (Kentucky: McGraw Hill 2002) p, 33-51.

[24] M.B. Norton et al., *A People & a Nation: A History of the United States*, vol. II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2008) p, 874.

[25] D. Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang 1994) p,140.

[26] K.L. Phillips, *War! What is it good for? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2012) p, 207.

were parallel to the motivations of World War II black soldiers: the army, more so than any other organization in the United States, provided an opportunity to not only prove one's loyalty to the nation but also a chance to raise one's economic status.[27] While these motivations for voluntarily enlisting paint a more positive picture, the draft regulations accomplish the exact opposite. Army deferments were possible, as conscientious objectors or through academic merit, but were mostly out of reach for African Americans. Coupled with that was the fact that draft boards more often targeted the lower classes, of which a large number were African-American.[28] These regulations did not go unnoticed, both by Civil Rights protesters and black soldiers during their tour, but more on that in subsequent paragraphs. Regardless, whether through voluntary enlistment or the draft by the end of the Vietnam War approximately 12.6% of all soldiers deployed in Vietnam were black.[29]

Not so different from WWII, but much more intense in its outcome was how racially charged the Vietnamese battlefield eventually became. For those who volunteered and those who could not avoid the draft the war brought the realisation that the military, which was being labelled the most racially equal organization, was hardly as progressive as advertised. White soldiers flying the Confederate flag or being openly supportive of the Ku Klux Klan only served to raise the ire of black soldiers even further in what was already a stressful environment.[30] Like in World War II open conflicts would regularly occur, most notoriously the practice of 'fragging', but a new strategy quickly rose in popularity among black soldiers, the practice of voluntary segregation: "[s]uspicious of the system and feeling like outsiders in a white dominated military, African Americans began seeking strength and comfort in an increased sense of racial solidarity."[31] As the war continued black soldiers, either voluntarily or forced because of racist practices, saw themselves the pariahs of the American military in a war that gradually became more and more unpopular. This voluntary

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[27] Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams* p, 149.
[28] Westheider, J., "African Americans and the Vietnam War" in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. by Young, Marilyn B. and Robert Buzzanco (Blackwell Publishing 2006) p, 2.
[29] Official records can be acquired at: http://www.army.mil/africanamericans/
[30] G. Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2001) p, 324.
[31] Westheider, "African Americans and the Vietnam War" in *A Companion to the Vietnam War* p, 6.

segregation, while unprecedented, was directly linked to the Civil Rights Movement and would, in turn, influence the Civil Rights Movement into a new direction.

The concept of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War being connected, perhaps part of the same problem, is one that was not just touched upon by historians, but by key figures of the Movement themselves. Whereas Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was at first hesitant to address the Vietnam War minister James L. Bevel would directly address the link between the war and the struggle for equality: "[t]he Lord can't hear our prayers here in America, because of all the cries and moans of His children in the Mekong Delta, and that is all He can hear as long as the war continues, so forget your prayers until the war is over, America." Among other things, Bevel considered the war an act of genocidal racism that directed attention away from the Civil Rights Movement, a notion that was shared by some of his contemporaries.[32] This illustrates the interplay between the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement: the experiences in the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement, such as the 1964 Democratic Convention and the Freedom Summer, led to a stronger sense of alienation between black communities and the government.[33] This development was one of the causes for the questioning of the Vietnam War while in turn the Vietnam War itself would lead to more disillusionment with the government, as previous paragraphs have pointed out, strengthening the resolve and inspiring participants of the Civil Rights Movement to push even further.

The two historic events did more than just strengthen each other. As the war continued black soldiers found solace in the rhetoric of the Civil Rights leaders, while those Civil Rights leaders used practices that originated during the war to further shape their ideologies. As previous paragraphs have shown, black soldiers who faced ongoing racism developed the strategy of voluntary segregation, the creation of separate black communities, to cope with the realities of the war. This strategy was directly inspired by the ideas of Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, of which,

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[32] Mack, "No 'Illusion of Separation'" in *Peace & Change* p, 115-116.
[33] R.D. Colburn, and Pozzetta, G.E., "Race, Ethnicity, and the Evolution of Political Legitimacy" in *The Sixties: from Memory to History*, ed. by Farber, D. (London: North Carolina Press 1994) p, 128.

a 1970s survey showed, over 70% of the black soldiers in Vietnam supported.[34] The idea of voluntary segregation adheres to the principles of the Black Power movement created by Stokely Carmichael and his colleagues, which stressed the need for African-American independent communities, which was in essence what the black soldiers were trying to accomplish in Vietnam.[35]

On the domestic front black soldier activity had exerted just as much influence on the Civil Rights Movement as vice versa. As previously alluded to black communities considered the regulations of the draft unfavourable towards African-Americans, and were among the first to protest the Vietnam War.[36] It was with regard to the second phase of the Movement, however, that influences of the war became more visible: The first official flag of the Black Power movement as well as its salute, the raised clenched fist, both found their origins among black soldiers in Vietnam looking for ways to recognize likeminded individuals. It was when these soldiers came home that they introduced these means of black communication to participants of the Civil Rights Movement, who proceeded to integrate the symbols into their platform.[37] It was with regard to one particular organization, however, that military influence became the most conspicuous, the Black Panthers. The use of military iconography, such as adherence to weaponry, military salutes and strategies, illustrates a direct connection between the Black Panther ideology and the Vietnam War, a connection that was confirmed by the Black Panthers themselves: "…by 1968 the Panthers symbolically connected the use of the gun in local black communities with global anti-colonialist struggles, particularly in Vietnam, which served as a model for black resistance in America."[38] The Black Panthers not only serve as a good example of how the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement affected one another, but also on how Vietnam veterans played a significant role in that,

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[34] Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 324.
[35] H.K. Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964-1966" in *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 91 (published online by JSTOR 2006) http://www.jstor.org/stable/20064069 p, 171.
[36] Westheider, "African Americans and the Vietnam War" in *A Companion to the Vietnam War* p,4.
[37] Ibidem p, 6.
[38] D. Kreiss, "Appropriating the Master's Tools: Sun Ra, the Black Panthers, and Black Consciousness, 1952-1973" in *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 28 (University of Illinois Press 2008) p, 72.

as a substantial number of Black Panthers were in fact returning Vietnam soldiers.[39] Both events

played an important role in influencing each other: the black revolutionary militants of the day

exerted influence on frustrated soldiers whereas the atrocities of Vietnam and the experiences of

those soldiers would inspire the participants of the Civil Rights Movement to challenge the system

even further.

There is one final aspect of the Vietnam War that is relevant to the development of the

veteran mentality. It, like World War II, was what I label a 'race war'. However, its inherent

differences in comparison to World War II explain why the Vietnam War became such a strong issue

among Civil Rights activists. As mentioned, a 'race war' either entails a war of two opposing races or

a racially charged conflict. In this respect the Vietnam War could be considered both and neither: at

its origins the Vietnam War was a colonial conflict between France and the Vietminh, which fits the

definition of a 'race war.' When the United States took over the situation took the characteristics of

a Cold War proxy conflict. However, while there may be no evidence of racial motivations for the

escalation of the war the war itself was interpreted as a 'race war' by inhabitants of the United

States, most prominently Civil Rights activists.[40] Similar to what happened in World War II, black

activists hoped to use the government's actions abroad to highlight the faults of its own society. The

key difference was that the United States, instead of acting as a hero against racism, was now itself

the villain. By lacking the clear antagonism of the Nazi party the Vietnam War became another

example of the subjugation of a non-white people.[41] This had a profound effect on the black soldiers

fighting abroad, who in general started feeling more empathic towards the Vietnamese people and

their plight.[42] This predicament and its consequences will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

Labelling the Vietnam War as a 'race war' and understanding how it developed differently from

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[39] Gerstle, *American Crucible* p, 325.
[40] Norton et al., *A People & a Nation* p, 860.
[41] Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams* p, 150.
[42] R.S. Laufer et al, "War Stress and Trauma: The Vietnam Veteran Experience" *in Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, vol. 25 (American Sociological Organization 1984) p, 78.

World War II 'the race war' provides one of the reasons why the Vietnam War was so controversial, and such an important topic for Civil Rights activists.

What started as an issue of decolonisation had possibly become the darkest page in the history of the United States. The Vietnam War influenced every member of the 'Great Society' and had a tremendous impact on the Civil Rights Movement. Soldiers fighting abroad, tired of the ever present racism and inequality, found comfort in the doctrines of self-reliance by the Black Power Movement. Those very soldiers in turn would influence the Movement, providing argumentative tools and a new military aesthetic that would become characteristic of the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement. This interplay was made possible by Vietnam's dubious status as a 'race war', a conflict of two opposing races with black soldiers caught in the middle, fighting for one side while growing more supportive towards the other. This double status had a profound effect on the mentality of the black soldier, one that will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter III   Birth of the Warriors: a Psychological Analysis of the Black Vietnam Veteran

Veterans, Charles Oman said, are "the best of soldiers while the war last[s]… [but] a most dangerous and unruly race in times of truce or peace."[43] War is an all-pervasive and society-changing endeavour, and the ones who are at its epicentre are the soldiers fighting those wars, heroes on the front yet often alienated upon return. The Vietnam War was no exception in that matter. Fighting a war that constantly fuelled paranoia was but one of the burdens the soldiers had to face: exposure to extreme violence, the realization of the futility of the war and decreased support from the home front left an indelible mark on the returning veteran, one that has been addressed both in academic discussion as well as popular media. For black soldiers the situation was even more complicated. Not only did it coincide with the Civil Rights Movement and did the two influence each other, the Vietnam War's status as a 'race war' further fuelled anxieties. In the previous chapter I aimed to provide an overview of the two events and how they affected one another. The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate on a psychological level how the Vietnam War affected black soldiers personally. This chapter will consist of an analysis of the effects of the Vietnam War on soldiers in general, after which it will focus on black soldiers and why military experience led them to develop a more politically active state of mind. Throughout this essay I assumed that black veterans were prone to activism upon return. It is in this chapter I intend to prove this assumption using psychological evidence as a foundation.

To say that there are a lot of stereotypes surrounding the Vietnam veteran is an understatement. The image of a grizzled, alienated and visibly frustrated figure that exists outside of society's boundaries was, and still is, a popular one.[44] To what extent is such an image correct? In his

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[43] R.J. Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims nor Executioners* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1973) p, 31.
[44] The Ur example of this image is of course Sylvester Stallone's depiction of a Vietnam veteran in the commercially acclaimed *John Rambo* series, but many more examples exist in films such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Forrest Gump* etc.

book *Home from the War* Robert J. Lifton provides a psychological analysis of the Vietnam veteran based on his observations during therapy sessions and separate interviews. He does not separate specifically between African-American and white veterans, but a few general observations can be made. According to Lifton there were three developments in Vietnam veterans that pertain to the growth of black militancy among them: the first development was the gradual diminishing of boundaries of violence. Constant exposure to extremities and fear of betrayal led to a perpetual state of anger and frustration: "[r]age close to the surface was the normal state for the Vietnam veteran."[45] The second psychological development was the general sense of alienation among veterans, both in a political and generational level: …"not one of them –hawk, dove, or haunted – was entirely free of doubt about the nature of the war and the American role in it."[46] Naturally these developments were not evenly shared in intensity amongst all veterans but their presence, especially in comparison to earlier war veterans, is telling.

The third development requires a more thorough analysis, as it is linked to the aforementioned concept of Vietnam as a 'race war'. Soldiers during their tour developed what became known as 'gook syndrome,' the psychological state in which all Vietnamese assumed a role of dehumanized subpar beings to bear the un-acknowledgeable subconscious guilt within.[47] By ceasing to acknowledge the humanity of the Vietnamese, many soldiers were effectively able to deny feelings of empathy. This, however, posed a problem for black soldiers. As mentioned in the previous chapter black soldiers felt more empathic towards the plight of the Vietnamese, due to the fact that they shared a history of white subjugation. This, in turn, led to a more immediate response when confronted with extreme violence. In the article "War Stress and Trauma" veterans of both races who had been subjected to extreme violence were tested on the level of stress symptoms present during and after their tour in Vietnam. What was apparent was the fact that black soldiers on average scored higher than white soldiers, which the article surmises is due to the inability of the

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[45] Lifton, *Home from the War* p, 137-145.
[46][46] Ibidem p, 35-36.
[47] Ibidem p, 196.

black soldier to dehumanize the Vietnamese.[48] Whereas white soldiers developed 'gook syndrome' to cope with the horrors of the war, African-American soldiers more often found themselves unable to turn their victims into subpar beings, an experience that they themselves were all too familiar with, submitting themselves to the reality of the war in a much more immediate way.

Disparity in the level of stress between African-American and white soldiers provides some explanation as to why African-American soldiers developed a tendency towards political activism as they experienced the extremities of the war more intensely. It is not however the only aspect relevant to this phenomenon. Aside from racial unease and growing frustration, the growth of political alienation plays an important part in the development of political activity among black veterans. Alienation in general was already likely to develop amongst veterans, but among black soldiers the frustrations of a spiritually segregated army alongside the continuing struggle for equality in the United States only served to strengthen those feelings: "[m]any blacks began to wonder why they were fighting for democracy abroad when the real battle was at home."[49] These factors led to the development of a strong sense of disillusionment with the American government, which coincided with the rhetoric of the SNCC and the Black Panthers at the time. Both parties stressed the importance of black independence and black communities more free from government influence, as their own experiences in the Civil Rights Movement led to a growing distrust of the government.[50] To black soldiers who were developing similar ideas the doctrines of Black Power, which in itself was already an expression of political alienation and distrust with the government, the rhetoric of the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement was a catalyst between their own distrust of government and the development of political thinking.

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[48] R.S. Laufer et al, "War Stress and Trauma: The Vietnam Veteran Experience" in Journal of Health and Social Behavior, vol. 25 (American Sociological Organization 1984) p, 77-79.
[49] J.M. Fendrich and Axelson, L.J., "Marital Status and Political Alienation among Black Veterans" in American Journal of Sociology, vol. 77 (University of Chicago Press 1971) p, 248.
[50] J.A. Tyner, "'Defend the Ghetto': Space and the Urban Politics of the Black Panther Party" in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 96 (Taylor and Francis 2006) p, 106.

Veterans of any war come back different from when they left. For African Americans, Vietnam was not the first war which inspired them to challenge the system. World War I, and World War II after it had already infused generations of returning veterans with a new sense of racial pride and militancy: "[i]nspired by the battles abroad… most black veterans returned home to fight for their right."[51] While this was a shared trait among black veterans of all wars, the Vietnam War and its returning veterans distinguish themselves in a few factors: the nature of the war created a perpetual state of increased anger, frustration and disillusionment. Furthermore to cope with the extremities soldiers developed 'gook syndrome', a state which denied the humanity of the Vietnamese. For black soldiers this presented a problem as they themselves felt more empathic towards the plight of the Vietnamese people, causing a heightened level of stress. The sense of political alienation among black soldiers was also strengthened not just because of the racist practices still present in the army, but also because of the similar developments participants of the Civil Rights Movement were experiencing, causing black soldiers to relate more easily to the ideas of Black Power. These factors helped create a more critical way of thinking in the black soldiers upon return, which they used to further help the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.

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[51] Onkst, D.H., "'First a Negro… Incidentally a Veteran': Black World War Two Veterans and the G. I. Bill of Rights in the Deep South, 1944-1948" in *Journal of Social History*, vol. 31 (Oxford University Press 1998) p, 518.

Chapter IV   **Not Done Yet: Black Veterans in the 1970s Civil Rights Aftermath**

> The majority of white people in the United States have literally no idea of the violence which
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> Negroes in the South are treated daily- nay, hourly. This violence is deliberate, conscious,
>
> condoned by the authorities. It has gone on for centuries and is going on today, every day,
>
> unceasing and unremitting. It is our way of life.[52]

In 1962 Robert F. Williams, a Korean war veteran and president of the Union County chapter of the

NAACP, argued in favour of the necessity of self-defence in the struggle for equal rights. Williams,

like many of his contemporaries, did not favour unnecessary violence against white men but rather a

pragmatic approach to confronting racism; he saw the use of Dr. King's confrontational non-violence

as the most powerful tool of all, yet inefficient in abating white aggression. He proposed a fusion of

confrontational non-violence with rational self-defence strengthened by racial solidarity, the latter

of which would take shape in the doctrines of Black Power. It would take a decade for this idea to

come into practice, although not by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. It was the Vietnam

veterans who returned home after a drawn-out war that would take this principle and continue the

fight for equality.

Previous chapters already dealt with the relationship between the Vietnam War and the Civil

Rights Movement, how they influenced one another and how they would help to push the black

Vietnam veteran into political activism. While Chapter II focused on veteran and war influence

during the Civil Rights Movement, in particular the mid-to late 1960s, that still leaves out the later

years of the Vietnam War. What exactly did the veterans accomplish after the zenith of the Civil

Rights Movement? In this chapter I aim to provide an answer to this question by first explaining

when and how the Civil Rights Movement splintered and placing that within the timeframe of the

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[52] R.F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* in R.P. Green and H.E. Cheatham*, The American Civil Rights Movement, a Documentary History* (Manchester University Press 2009) p, 99-101.

Vietnam War. By the time the war had ended the Civil Rights Movement had moved away from the national spotlight, but that did not mean the Movement was over. Historians have proposed that during this time, the early 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement entered a new phase. It is in this chapter I hope to illustrate that Vietnam veterans, using the framework and legal accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement, continued the struggle for equality and played an important if not essential part in that phase.

From the beginning the Civil Rights Movement was not as unified as it appeared on the surface, as different organizations with different tactics struggled to work together and achieve the goal of civil equality. It would not take long for rifts to appear. While Dr. Martin Luther King preached of a unified and equal America during the famous March on Washington in 1963 the SNCC was beginning to question the possibility of a civic nationalism, a sentiment that would grow in strength particularly after the events of the Democratic Convention in 1964.[53] As the Movement progressed the SNCC and SCLC would continue to grow further apart, particularly on the effectiveness of non-violence. Repeated experiences with white aggression had cast shadows of doubt among the members of SNCC, which would later develop into a change of tactics and the rhetoric of Black Power.[54] The latter in particular caused further divisions in the Movement, as the NAACP and SCLC were hesitant about outspoken black culturalism for fear of losing mass support and diminishing chances of integration.[55] After the untimely death of Martin Luther King an already splintered Movement had lost its spiritual leader and gradually faded away from the national spotlight. While the rhetoric of Black Power found new life among members of other ethnic groups in the 1970s, the apex of the Civil Rights Movement had long since passed.[56]

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[53] G. Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2001) p, 269, p, 283-284.

[54] A.K. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement" in *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 29 (Sage Publications 1999) p, 561.

[55] R.D. Colburn, and Pozzetta, G.E., "Race, Ethnicity, and the Evolution of Political Legitimacy" *in The Sixties: from Memory to History*, ed. by Farber, D. (London: North Carolina Press 1994) p, 126.

[56] M.B. Norton et al., A People & a Nation: A History of the United States, vol. II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2008) p, 891.

If we consider the death of Martin Luther King in 1968 as the beginning of the end of the Civil Rights Movement then where does that leave the black Vietnam soldiers who would still be on active duty until the end of active American involvement up until 1975? As the previous chapter has shown, the developments within both the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War had caused a critically conscious mentality within the black veteran, one that they would use upon return even after the zenith of the Civil Rights Movement. In his article "The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest during the 1970s" Stephen Tuck aims to expand the Civil Rights Movement timeline to include the early 1970s, and it is here where we find an expanded role for the returning Vietnam veteran. After the tumultuous 1960s the 1970s marked a more defensive strategy in the struggle for equal rights in what Tuck calls a return to the grassroots of local activism. Protests and court cases were still held on a local level and were often led by militant Vietnam veterans: "[m]arches were not headed by the city's traditional black leadership, but by angry unemployed Vietnam veterans."[57] The cases were often on a very local level, such as racial harassment suits against building sites in the South, but demonstrate a willingness to fight for equality by the returning black veteran well after the climax of the Civil Rights Movement.

What makes the post-war activities of the black veteran interesting is how they used the conceptual framework set up by the different sides of the Civil Rights Movement. What Robert Williams emphasized almost a decade in the past returning veterans now put into action: they emphasized both the necessity of public awareness, mass meetings and non-violence with the need for an independent black community. Using strategies affiliated with both the SNCC and the SCLC alongside the legal precedents set forth by the NAACP and the Civil Rights act, black veterans alongside other African Americans were able to increase voter registration, apply lawsuits against racist practices and further advance the struggle for equality.[58] While national attention was at a low

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[57] Tuck, S., "'We Are Taking up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left off': The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest during the 1970s" *in Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 43 (Sage Publications 2008) p, 641-642.
[58] Ibidem p, 645-646.

point that did not mean the Civil Rights Movement had ended. It had simply entered a new phase, a grassroots phase of sorts, in which local militants and black veterans on a local level achieved new victories through the strategies set forth in the 1960s.

While arguably not well-documented, evidence does exist that black veterans upon return took action and participated in ushering in a new phase of the Civil Rights Movement, the grassroots phase. While the Movement had already lost its momentum black veterans, upon returning from Vietnam instilled with racial pride, took the charge to continue the struggle for equality. Using the philosophies and rhetoric of both confrontational non-violence and Black Power veterans alongside local militants achieved victories both on the legal and local front.

Conclusion

Any war, no matter how small or whatever the outcome, has a profound effect on society. The Vietnam War was not an exception in this matter. Being the first in a line of controversial wars it radically changed American society, dividing its inhabitants and leaving behind a generation in doubt about the sincerity of its government. But the Vietnam War was not the only historic event taking place in the United States in the 1960s. From its beginnings the Civil Rights Movement had set forth to create a society in which all its inhabitants were considered equal, and during the 1960s the Movement had blossomed into a multifaceted nation-changing chain of events. The original intention with this essay was not just to produce an analysis on how the two events influenced and shaped each other, but more specifically how black Vietnam veterans played a part in establishing the connections between the two. Veterans experience the atrocities of war personally, and for black veterans serving in Vietnam this especially had a profound effect on their mentality. The purpose of this essay was therefore to analyse in what ways the experiences of the black Vietnam soldiers influenced the Civil Rights Movement and how these soldiers upon return used their military experience to further the advances of the Movement.

The assumption that Vietnam veterans naturally had to play a part in the Civil Rights Movement is supported by two reasons: during World War II the events of the war already helped in developing the then-fledgling Civil Rights Movement: Civil Rights activists at the time were hoping to use the extremities of Nazism to highlight the racism that was still endemic within American society. The appropriate example of such a strategy in action was the 'Double V' movement, which argued for a victory over racism abroad and at home. For black soldiers the war came as a double-edged sword: for many it was a chance to prove their loyalty to the American creed. The actual experience quickly turned to disappointment however, as the American military was still representative of its society and thus full of racist practices. Infused with racial pride and experience abroad these

veterans, upon return, were willing to challenge the status quo and would play a key role in the Civil Rights Movement. The second reasoning behind this assumption is the effect a 'race war', a racially charged event such as Vietnam or World War II, had on the African-American soldier. For black Vietnam soldiers fighting a war in which a non-white population was at war with what they experienced as a white government was a taxing endeavour. Coupled with other symptoms veterans experience post-war, such as alienation and enhanced frustration, it seems logical that just like the World War II veterans before them Vietnam veterans would align with the Civil Rights Movement and further aid its causes.

For black soldiers to exert influence over the Civil Rights Movement the Vietnam War did not even have to end. Even when they were still active on their tour of duty black soldiers developed methods of communication to recognize those who supported their causes. Anguished by the rampant racism and inspired by the rhetoric of Civil Rights leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael black soldiers willingly segregated themselves and formed independent communities, complete with cultural symbols and unique methods of communication. These developments found their way back to the United States through reporters and returning veterans and were incorporated into symbols that defined the aesthetic of the Black Power movement. This illustrates the interplay between the Civil Rights Movement and African-American experiences in the Vietnam War: developments and growing militancy within the Movement inspired black soldiers to maintain a separate and proud identity within a racist military. Their experiences, in turn, inspired the Civil Rights leaders of the late 1960s to challenge the status quo even further, using the experiences of the black soldiers as an example. Before the Vietnam War had even ended, African-American soldiers had already played an important part in the development of the Civil Rights Movement.

After the apex of the Civil Rights Movement black veterans continued to struggle for equal rights, even if on a less noticeable scale. Using a mixture of confrontational non-violence and black solidarity black veterans were able to use the legal framework set forth by the Civil Rights

Movement to achieve legal victories against racism in business practice on a local scale. The Civil

Rights Movement during this time entered a new phase, a return to the grassroots origins, in which

African Americans locally organised protests and used legal means to combat racism. These protests

were often spearheaded and organised by returning Vietnam veterans, who used the experience

abroad and the frameworks of the 1960s in tandem to achieve success.

The original intention of this research was to analyse in what ways black Vietnam veterans

played a part in the Civil Rights Movement and helped it develop. I have shown that both in the

1960s as in the 1970s these veterans and their experiences influenced the Movement and helped it

usher in new phases. However there are some questions that remain unanswered, in particular with

regards to the latter phase of the Movement. I have alluded to the fact that the national attention

towards the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s had all but dissipated, making it seem as if there

was a decrease in black activism.[59] While this certainly was not the case on a local level it does seem

like there is an incomplete understanding of the activities of black veterans in the 1970s, in

particular because secondary analysis seems to prove that they were in fact politically active and still

fighting for equality. While this disparity remains to be resolved in conclusion it is safe to say that

black Vietnam soldiers, while still on duty and back home, played an important role in shaping and

further aiding the advances of the Civil Rights Movement.

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[59] Stephen Tuck argues that there are three reasons for this development: the popular success of the Civil Rights Act, internal strife between competing organizations within the Movement and the loss of public and media interest.
S. Tuck, "'We Are Taking up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left off': The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest during the 1970s" in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 43 (Sage Publications 2008) p, 5.

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