

BLACK STUDIES 4650
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BLACK AMERICA AND THE WAR IN VIETNAM

I. SYNOPSIS

First, it was the heat. Then it was the smell. Both the first and the last experiences you had in the Nam if you survived your 365 and a "wake-up." "That's what being "in country" was like for most of the folks who went there. That, and staying alive.

The war in Vietnam was like no other war in American History. It was our first truly technocratic war in which rationalized planning supported by immensely destructive firepower was brought to bear on an agricultural country--and found wanting. It was also our longest war. The United States first became involved in Indochina in 1941. When it was declared over with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, some 58 thousand plus men and women were dead almost seven thousand of them black Americans. The Vietnam conflict (for it was not a war in the official declarative sense) was also the first time since before the U.S. Civil War, 1861-1865, that black and white had shared the same foxholes, cheek by jowl, and become dependent on each other for survival. THERE WAS NO TIME FOR RACISM IN THE BUSH.

In the rear it was a different story however. Blacks had their part of town where whitey wasn't allowed. White boys--and they really were, both of them, since the mean age of the combat soldier in Vietnam was 19 years in contrast to that of 26 years in World War II--had theirs too. By 30 April 1968 total U.S. military personnel in Vietnam numbered 543,300. Assuming a nine to one ratio, that is nine service and support for each grunt in the bush characteristic of a modern technology (including technologies of the intellect)-based army, such as we had in Vietnam, and you rapidly conclude that all of the fighting was done by no more than 50,000 men at any one time. What this means is that with a surfeit of bodies in the rear, a critical mass was effected that recreated America in Vietnam. RACISM IN THE REAR WAS ALIVE, WELL AND VIRULENT. Both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese would exploit this pernicious flaw in the American Character as a divisive weapon illuminating what the war managers could not seem to grasp--the fundamentally political character of the conflict.

Like nothing else, the war in Vietnam had and continues to have a profound impact on the home front. Wars are not fought on battlefields alone. Thus the need in this course to focus also on the domestic side of the war. At the outset of the build up in 1965, the Hawks seriously outnumbered the Doves. In fact, students, teachers, clerics and kindred souls were over represented in their ranks. And while we are talking about students, let us be clear about one thing: at no time was there greater than 12 percent participation by the national student

body in the anti-war movement. Television, the Elmer Gantry of the merchandising set, has a way of magnifying events out of their usual significance.

As the war got closer to home and the draft calls began to rise, protest intensified, not unlike a similar situation in about 1780, the fourth year of the war of 1776. Like that earlier time, some white folks found a way to get black folks to do their tours of duty for them. This time it was called student deferment. Student deferments had been introduced into the selective service legislation during World War II as a means of encouraging study in selected areas of science, engineering and kindred fields, which knowledge, not the body that produced it, was employed to prosecute the war effort. Folk who could afford it struggled to get in college and stay there as long as they could. Those who could not went to war. In a Spencerian way, a disproportionate number of the grunts in the Nam were of the lesser breeds.

Coeval with the rise of the war as an item of social interest, there was the fall of the Civil Rights Movement, which had reached its peak with the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964 as a way of life for many of its participants. Granted Black Power was coming in, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was yet to be, and Model Cities and the Great Society were just gearing up. Some of these participants would be absorbed by those endeavors. Still, many of them little understood that the struggle had only just begun. And then there was Cassius Clay, The Louisville Lip, who said: "Hell no, I won't go!" He had to be made an example of because he was symbolic of a rising tide of black, anti-war activity whose import sent shutters throughout the land of the free and the home of the brave. His case was followed closely overseas because the consciousness of the brothers had begun to change.

When there was conflict in the urban core, there was conflict in the rear area. Blacks arriving in the Nam after Tet were very different than Bloods there before. The early ones volunteered because, even with the war, the Army was a place where you could get ahead. The latter were conscripts--the poor, the illiterate, the detritus of a throwaway society. Some were from the war zones of Detroit and Newark. All they wanted was to do their time and get back to the world. The military made the same mistake with these folks it made with the "enemy"--it chose not to learn anything about them until it was almost too late. Back and forth, back and forth. Both the war and the homefront are inextricably intertwined.

They continued to be intertwined as the war wound down and after American involvement in it was declared ended. For then the veterans were among them their perspectives reshaped by their experiences. Unlike previous wars, Vietnam vets did not come home as a group. With the exception of the first combat units initially deployed, each soldier who went to Vietnam thereafter went as a replacement into a unit whose composition was constantly changing. And they came home the same way. No bands. No banners of "Well Done!" Instead, they came home to confusion, hostility, rage and a misdirected emphasis on the instrument of the policy rather than the policy itself. Moreover, there was so

little time to adjust. One day you were in a place where they want to take your life. The next, you are back in the world where all they want is your soul.

Veterans are people with problems just like everyone else. Some of their problems were present even before they went to Vietnam. Not a few (physical, psychological), were acquired in country. Most of the wounds suffered in combat came from booby traps and ambushes. After all, with all the noise our machines made, we could be heard long before we could see the "enemy." And then there were those whose problems arose because they could not readjust to civilian life--find a way to fit in. Having been so close to death in so many ways, life had acquired an entirely new meaning.

Black vets got it coming and going. Those who had incomplete educations and no skills when they went in, more often than not came out the same way. I mean, how much use is there for a rifleman or pig gunner back in the World? With no skills there were no jobs. Besides, there was the common belief that **ALL** Vietnam vets were junkies anyway. Too, many black vets left the army with Bad Conduct or Undesirable Discharges. One reason these were given was a supposed failure to adjust to military life. As I noted above, by the time the war managers began to take note, it was almost too late.

By the time it was over, some 3.5 million military personnel (men and women) had done tours of duty in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. There was also an equivalent number of civilians who engaged in activities ranging from diplomacy to racketeering. For every one of them the war was different. For the brothers and sisters, it was very different indeed.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

A. Background readings (required)

1. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where The Domino Fell*.
2. Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*.
3. William Dean Myers, *Fallen Angels*.
4. Charles Pugh, *The Griot*.
5. John Benjamin Carn, *Vietnam Blues*.

B. Supplementary readings. These materials will be placed on reserve at Norlin Library. They are intended to supplement the background readings and amplify various of the course topics and are listed thereunder although each article can and often does relate to more than one topic.

C. Methods of instruction.

1. My intent in this course is to provide a view of the War in Vietnam from an Afrocentric perspective. As such, it is focused not so much on the larger questions of objective, conduct and command and control, as much as it is on the experiences of black people both at home and in the war zone. Structurally, the course is divided into three parts: Homefront, In Country and Postwar. Within each of these parts there is additional division respecting the topics outlined in Part III of the syllabus.

2. Operationally, the course is designed more as forum than lecture. What this means is that you must prepare for each class session since it is conceivable that you might have to perform in some substantive way at each meeting. Accordingly, you are required to take responsibility for the quality of your own education since it is a participatory process--the instructor helps those who help themselves. To learn you must question: what you know, what you believe and, what you have previously taken on faith. You are also asked to do two other things. The first is evince discipline the only way you can master whatever talents you have. The second is make a commitment to excellence however you choose to define that word.

III. TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

A. HOMEFRONT

1. American idealism and the rest of the world.
2. The 60s: Optimism. Doubt. Disenchantment.
Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Movement."
Clyde Taylor, "Black Consciousness in the Vietnam Years."
William M. King, "What Do We Want?"
Herbert Shapiro, "The Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement."
3. Black antiwar protest.
 - a. Before 1965
Robert S. Browne, "The Freedom Movement and the War in Vietnam."
 - b. After 1965
Gerald Gill,
Addison Gayle, Jr., "Hell No, Black Men Won't Go!"
David Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War."
Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence."
4. Jackson State: The Lost and forgotten episode in American Antiwar Protest.

John A. Peoples, "The Killings at Jackson State University: May, 1970."
 Tim Spofford, "Lynch Street: The May, 1970, Slayings at Jackson State University."

Vernon Steve Weakley, "Mississippi Killing Zone: An Eyewitness Account of the Events Surrounding the Murders by the Mississippi Highway Patrol at Jackson State University."

Gene Cornelius Young, "May 15, 1970: The Miracle at Jackson State University."

5. Stateside and overseas: duty stations other than Vietnam

Charles C. Moskos, Jr., "The American Dilemma in Uniform: Race in the Armed Forces."

Congressional Black Caucus, "Racism in the Military: A New System for Rewards and Punishment."

William Stuart Gould, "Racial Conflict in the U.S. Army."

Flora Lewis, "The Rumble at Camp Lejune."

6. Project 100,000.

Patricia M. Shields, "The Burden of the Draft: The Vietnam Years."

L. Deckle McLean, "The Black Man and the Draft."

Lisa Hsiao, "Project 100,000: The Great Society's Answer to Military Manpower Needs in Vietnam."

7. The rise of black power in the American military establishment.

Milton White, "Malcolm X in the Military."

Jack White, "The Angry Black Soldiers."

Wallace Terry, "Black Power in Vietnam."

B. IN COUNTRY

1. Arrival and deployment.

William M. King, "'Our Men in Vietnam': Black Media As a Source of the Afro-American Experience in Southeast Asia."

Jack D. Foner, "The Vietnam War and Black Servicemen."

Gerald Gill, "Black American Soldiers in Vietnam."

Gerald Snead, "Vietnam: A Brother's Account."

2. Lifers, volunteers and conscripts.

Nick Jackson, "When John Wayne Went Out of Focus: GI Rebellion and Military Disintegration in Vietnam."

3. Differential manpower utilization policies and practices--who fought whom.

Rufus Brooks, "An Inquiry into Personal, Racial and International Conflict--August, 1970"

4. Vietnamese perceptions of black American troops.

Diane Nash Bevel, "Journey to North Vietnam."

5. Yankee Station, the Riverine and the air war over Indochina.
6. Life in the rear area.
Doris I. "Lucki" Allen, Interview from *A Piece of My Heart*.
"Samaritans on Wings: Black Nurses in Vietnam."
7. The war in the bush.
Thomas A. Johnson, "The U.S. Negro in Vietnam."
8. Racial solidarity among black troops: pre and post Tet.
George B. Crist, "Black is Beautiful and the Military Establishment."
9. Racially oriented propaganda and its consequences.
10. Black prisoners of war.
11. The trials and tribulations of military justice.
David F. Addlestone and Susan Sherer, "Race in Viet Nam."
Congressional Black Caucus, "Racism in the Military: A New System for Rewards and Punishment."

C. POST WAR

1. Returning to the World.
Whitney M. Young, Jr., "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home."
Wallace Terry II, "Bringing the War Home."
James Fendrich and Michael Pearson, "The Returning Black Vietnam Veteran."
2. Last hired, first fired: employment problems and job retention among black vets.
Thad Martin, "Still Looking For Respect."
3. Black Viet vets and the administration of justice.
Myra MacPherson, "The Blacks," from *Long Time Passing*.
4. The disabled black American war vet.
Erwin Randolph Parson, "The Intercultural Setting: Encountering Black Viet Nam Veterans."
5. Recapitulating the war: portrayals of black viet vets in literature and film.

IV. MEASURES AND METHODS OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

There will be three measures of performance evaluation used in this course this term. Two are written, one is observational.

The first (counting for 35 percent of your final grade), is a three (3) to five (5) page, double-spaced, typewritten response to the following: In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,--the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." In what ways does the black American experience in Vietnam illustrate his comment? The quote comes from "Of the Dawn of Freedom," which is chapter II in his, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Your second written measure (worth 30 percent of your final grade), also three (3) to five (5) double-spaced, typewritten pages, requires you to take a specific event covered in the course that most effectively characterizes this period in American History. You will then describe that event and offer a rationale for your selection. As you do this remember not to exclude either the domestic side or the foreign side of the question. Is there anything in your life experience thus far that resonates with your selection?

The third measure (worth 25 percent of your final grade) is class participation and will be comprised of both single and group presentations which will be announced in advance to allow adequate preparation time.

Item 1 is due in my box (30 Ketchum) not later than 1700, Friday, 16 October 1998.

Item 2 is due in the same not later than 1700, Friday, 11 December 1998.

NOTE WELL, LATE SUBMISSIONS REQUIRE LATE FEES. The late fee in this case is automatic reduction of the highest possible grade by ONE FULL LETTER.

V. CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF WRITTEN WORK.

A. THE DAY MY EVALUATION OF YOUR WORK TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER THE PROCESSES OF ITS CREATION IN IMPORTANCE, YOU HAVE A PROBLEM. NOT ONLY IS GRADING NOT FAIR AND NOT OBJECTIVE, IT HAS VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH EDUCATION. PURELY AND SIMPLY IT IS THE EXERCISE OF POWER THROUGH THE AUTHORITY OF THE TEACHER. ITS END IS PURPOSELY POLITICAL: TO LIMIT ACCESS TO SMALLER AND MORE ELITE GROUPS AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING THE STATUS QUO.

B. All work submitted must be an original copy. Reproductions (xerox, mimeo, ditto, etc) submitted in lieu of original copies will be penalized. MAKE SURE THAT YOU KEEP A COPY OF YOUR WORK FOR YOUR FILES.

C. ALL WORK MUST BE SUBMITTED ON OR BEFORE THE PUBLISHED DUE DATE.

D. Because each of us has a different image of what a specific grade means, I offer herewith what they mean for me. DO NOT, WHEN YOU WRITE YOUR PAPERS, ATTEMPT TO WRITE TO THESE CRITERIA. THEY ARE ILLUSTRATIVE ONLY. WRITE FIRST TO EXPRESS YOURSELF, EXPLAIN YOURSELF AND THE POSITIONS YOU TAKE AND, TO PLEASE YOURSELF WITH WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN.

1. "A." Demonstrates that you have mastered the subject and its supporting materials. A neat, solid, tightly organized presentation in which you make your case with authority.
2. "B." A solid work but unimaginative in character. Covers all the bases but rarely transcends them to express new insights or understandings.
3. "C." Competent. Follows the letter not the spirit of the assignment. Lacks substance, effort, care and concern.
4. "D." A weak and ineffectual presentation. A thoroughly disorganized endeavor from start to finish with no evident craftsmanship whatever.

E. GRADES SHALL BE ASSIGNED ON THE BASIS OF HOW EFFECTIVELY YOU ADDRESS THE FOLLOWING ITEMS IN YOUR WORK.

1. Appropriate evidence of a thorough review of the pertinent resources. This will be shown by the identification, assembly and organization of those materials that help to establish context for your presentation. 15 percent of grade.
2. Demonstrated understanding of your project, its supporting materials and its relations to the larger subject of which it is a part. The emphasis here is on analysis, synthesis and interpretation of those materials. This will be reflected in the thought, detail, and examination of issues (indicators of rigor, discipline and skill) which appear in your paper. In short, how completely you have developed the character of your presentation. 35 percent of grade.
3. Effective transmission of the meanings you have made of your labors. This will be reflected in the organization of the work (form) and the manner (style) with which they are communicated. To achieve maximum impact and effectiveness, purpose, direction, focus and objective must be clear. Coherence is your main goal here. 35 percent of grade.
4. Errors in composition. Here I am concerned with neatness of your final copy, spelling, syntax, grammar, typing and verb/subject agreements. 15 percent of grade.