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Cover Page Footnote

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**RACE BEFORE NATION:
African American Activists and Their Response to the War in Vietnam**

By
Nicholas L. Busby

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Known for his fiery speeches, charismatic leadership, dedicated activism, and Black Power militancy, Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture), vehemently opposed the Vietnam War. A 1968 article from the *Chicago Defender* quoted a radio interview in which Carmichael declared “this country is messed up, if any Black man thinks for himself, he’s not going to Vietnam.” Carmichael continued to urge Black men to avoid the draft and put “race before nation.”¹

Echoing the sentiments of boxing hero Muhammad Ali, Carmichael’s bold pronouncement symbolized the beginning of the end for the fragile consensus of the major civil rights organizations formed by the unprecedented legislative progress under the Johnson Administration. Johnson’s Great Society programs promised to specifically address poverty and racial inequality, major goals of the civil rights movement. As the Vietnam War escalated and Black soldiers died in disproportionate numbers, the War on Poverty de-escalated, undercutting domestic progress, especially in communities of color. From 1966 onward, African American leaders began objecting to the war as it became clear that both the war and the funding it required were hurting their struggle for equality. Clear, statistical evidence of racial bias within the military, especially the high casualty rates and draft rates of Black soldiers, angered and emboldened the radical activists in the movement, which had previously been kept in check by the promise of legislative change. Moderates of the civil rights movement avoided condemning the disparate statistics within the military, in order to maintain support for President Johnson and his Great Society. The explicitly revolutionary groups, largely motivated by the disproportionate statistics in the military, opposed the Vietnam War and the government that perpetuated it on anticolonial and antiracist grounds, thus breaking the consensus of civil rights organizations because of a differing perception of racism in the military. This paper will explore the impact of the Vietnam War on civil rights

¹ "Avoid Viet Duty,' Says Carmichael." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, January, 16, 1968, 5.

organizations, with a particular focus on how these groups responded to the war itself, the experiences of Black servicemen, and the empirical evidence of institutional racism in the military, using the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party (BPP), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, and the National Urban League (NUL) as representative case studies.

This turbulent decade holds an extraordinary place in African American history. With the acceptance of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the first war that began with an integrated military,² the decade had a façade of massive socioeconomic and political advancement for African Americans. The pervasive, disillusioning, and divisive conflict in Vietnam conclusively impacted race relations and the African American struggle for equality. Black soldiers in Vietnam, the war itself, and the struggle for equality at home were intricately connected; this relationship remains largely un-interpreted in historical works.³ Many different factors motivated members of the civil rights movement to speak out against or remain silent over Vietnam. The specific cases of racially disproportionate statistics in the military, the de-escalation of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs, changing societal standards, and nonviolence ideals became the decisive factors that inspired African American leaders to speak out against the war. Nevertheless, some factors proved especially important in expanding this rift within the civil rights movement. Civil rights leaders publicly objected to the war after they were certain that the Vietnam War was hurting their struggle for equality, whether that be racism in the

² James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African America/ns and the Vietnam War*. New York: New York University Press, 1999, 2.

³ Several historical works have analyzed and extensively recorded the relationship between these anomalies. This essay will not reach the depth of past works, but it would not be possible without them. However, previous works have not provided an adequate interpretation of the relationship between the Civil Rights Movement and the racially disproportionate statistics in the military during Vietnam; this essay seeks to fill this gap in the historical literature.

military, or detrimental policy shifts at home.⁴ Some activists in the civil rights movement immediately condemned racism in the military and the decline of focus and funding in the Great Society Programs, while other, more moderate activists, waited until President Johnson left office to reluctantly conclude the War on Poverty was utterly hopeless. However, in either instance, Black activists put race before nation and did what they thought would benefit their tireless struggle for equality.

To analyze the responses of Black American leaders to the disproportionate statistics in the military it is necessary to contextualize the death toll, the draft, and the military hierarchy. Furthermore, Black newspapers in the 1960s frequently reported upon this data offering a wide variety of responses to the war and these disparate statistics. Examining the earliest and most radical denunciations of the Vietnam War illustrated the massive importance that systemic racism in the military had for many activists. Such statistics and dissent provided a platform for moderates within the civil rights movement. These concerns, combined with sharp criticism of dissenting radicals, resulted in a fracturing within the civil rights movement. Analysis and comparison of various opinions and sentiments over the Vietnam War exemplified the similarity and dissimilarity of the societal beliefs, goals, and aspirations for equality of the civil rights and Black Power movements.

⁴ Civil rights activists frequently praised President Lyndon B. Johnson for doing more for African Americans than previous Presidents. Johnson's Great Society was a series of programs focusing on addressing poverty and racial inequality. In 1965, the Moynihan Report prematurely affirmed President Johnson's commitment to racial equality and his War on Poverty. Moynihan failed to account for the escalation of U.S. intervention into Vietnam which would cut the funding for Johnson's "poverty program" by more than half in 1967 (from an expected \$3.4 billion to less than \$1.62 billion). These cuts undermined the programs, and activists accused Johnson of favoring the War in Vietnam over the War on Poverty. See: Thomas F Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Daniel S. Lucks, *Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017); Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Duke University Press, 2016):12.

Racism in the Military

Though the military was officially desegregated by the start of the conflict in Vietnam, an examination of the numbers reveals that desegregation did not equate to equity of experience. Though only 9.3 percent of the military was African American, Black soldiers accounted for 25 percent in 1965 and 16 percent in 1966 of the death toll. The death toll for Black soldiers would eventually drop to 7.6 percent in 1972, due to a combination of declining re-enlistment among Black men (who previously re-enlisted at much higher rates than their White counterparts) and the overall strategic shift away from ground forces to air power as the overall death toll among soldier climbed.⁵ From 1961 to 1972, African Americans made up 9.3 percent of military personnel but accounted for 12.6 percent of deaths, thus, Blacks died at a rate of 30 percent higher than Whites, on average.⁶

The draft also perpetuated institutional racism and the negative sentiments surrounding Vietnam in the African American community. Between 1965 and 1970, Blacks made up 14.3 percent of all draftees, even though they only consisted of 11 percent of the draft eligible population. The Selective Service was not necessarily deliberately racist. However, their requirements, influenced by socioeconomic status, education level, etc., nevertheless benefitted White people.⁷ Despite post-World War II gains, African Americans' means collectively lagged behind those of Whites.⁸ They were therefore less likely to have access to routine medical care, resulting in higher numbers of undiagnosed diseases amongst African Americans that, with proper documentation, would have deemed many Black Men unfit for service. Military medical exams

⁵ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 13, 78.

⁶ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 12, 13.

⁷ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 20-23.

⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2016): 407-414.

were relatively superficial, relying heavily on previous medical records, thereby unwittingly discriminating against African American draftees. Consequently, a mentally and physically healthy White man was 50 percent more likely to fail his pre-induction physical than a Black man in 1966.⁹ Additionally, White men were much more likely to be enrolled in college than Black men, making it more common for Whites too receive college deferments throughout the Vietnam War.

Statistics reflect the big picture, but Black enlisted men experienced the hierarchical oppression and institutional racism firsthand. Blacks commonly made up to 50 percent of some combat units, and rarely found themselves in support units.¹⁰ Additionally, throughout the war, only 2 percent of military officers were African American men.¹¹ Lieutenant Commander William S. Norman, one of the few Black Naval Officers during Vietnam, stated:

I was not frustrated by the war as much as I was frustrated by the role of Blacks in the Navy in that war. I wasn't really certain by then that our best vital interests were being served by the war effort. Yet the Navy was asking Black people to take part in a war while subjecting them to institutional racism -- institutional racism intentionally. You could go aboard a carrier with five thousand people, and you would find the overwhelming majority of the Blacks in the lowest level in jobs, in the dirtiest jobs, down in the laundry room, down in the bowels of the ship....I felt that the system was set up in such a way as to perpetuate racism, and we were not doing anything about it.¹²

Norman's statement exemplifies the perspective of many Black servicemen throughout the conflict, civil rights leaders expressed similar sentiments. The Congressional Black Caucus reported in 1972 that "no military procedure has brought forth a greater number of complaints and evidences of racial discrimination than the administration of non-judicial punishment."¹³ African

⁹ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 30-32.

¹⁰ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 14.

¹¹ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 54, 55.

¹² Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: an Oral History*, New York: Presidio Press/Ballantine Books, 2006, Lieutenant Commander William S. Norman, 186.

¹³ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 47.

American men disproportionately received Article 15s¹⁴ and were more likely to be court martialed and acquitted from the charges that led to the hearing. The trials themselves were also more likely to be unfair to Black men because of the rarity of Black officers available to preside over the hearing and White officers that frequently held racial prejudices.¹⁵ Furthermore, systemic racism in the military received a lot of attention due to its persistence and severity during the early years of Vietnam.

Black Newspapers, the Vietnam War, and Military Racism

Go through and add stuff from the book

Nearly all aspects of the Vietnam War were subject to exhaustive reporting and public scrutiny. Journalists hurriedly relayed information to their audience about the war in Southeast Asia because of the exponential curiosity surrounding the quagmire. For every example of systemic racism detailed above, James Westheider and Lawrence Allen Eldridge provided numerous newspaper and magazine publications that described, though not always accurately, racism in the military.¹⁶ When Black newspapers did cover Vietnam, their emphasis typically revolved around African American soldiers regarding their experiences and opinions on the war. For example, in an issue of the *Chicago Defender* from 1967, entitled “Negro Soldiers Still Face Discrimination,” the renowned civil rights journalist, Ethel Payne, discussed her experiences

¹⁴ Formerly known as Nonjudicial punishments, Article 15’s could be issued by any officer of senior NCO for tardiness, disobeying the dress code, speaking out of turn, etc. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 45-49.

¹⁵ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 52, 53.

¹⁶ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 1-66. For a more detailed and comprehensive examination of how Black newspapers responded to war see Lawrence Allen Eldridge. *Chronicles of a Two-Front War: Civil Rights and Vietnam in the African American Press*. Columbia, United States: *University of Missouri Press*, 2014. Also: Nikolas Kozloff. “Vietnam, the African American Community, and the Pittsburgh New Courier.” *The Historian*, no. 3, 2001.

interviewing members of the military, concerning racial discrimination. Payne found that systemic and personal racism frequently affected people of color in the military, and that often the people in charge were unaware of these racial insensitivities.¹⁷ In another article from the same newspaper, in 1969, an unknown author articulated the complaints made by Black soldiers that they were “not being promoted consistent with their performance – They train and teach the Whites that later overtake them.”¹⁸ In a 1967 periodical from the *Michigan Chronicle*, Aretha Watkins explained the ‘double enemy’ that beleaguered Black military personnel: the double enemy being the North Vietnamese and discrimination. Watkins insinuated that the most undeniable form of systemic racism that existed in Vietnam¹⁹ was the military justice system that punished Black soldiers more frequently, and often more severely, than Whites.²⁰

African American newspapers frequently expressed very similar observations as did White newspapers, though the Black newspapers focused on military racism much more frequently than White newspapers. In a publication from the *Chicago Defender*, Benjamin E. Mays, a prominent civil rights activist and friend and mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., wrote of three observations he had on Vietnam in 1971. Out of the three observations, Mays did not mention race or racism once, but rather focused on his complex, yet mild, intellectual and political objections to America’s intervention in Southeast Asia.²¹ Mays remained generally neutral on the Vietnam War, although he refrained from criticizing the activists that did oppose the war, unlike other moderates that

¹⁷ Ethel L. Payne. "Navy Answers Complaint about Negro GIs' Mistreatment in Viet." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, May 13, 1968, 5.

¹⁸ "Racial Bias in Vietnam." 1969. *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*, Dec 11, 23.

¹⁹ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 46-47.

²⁰ Watkins, Aretha. "GI Tells of Double Enemy, Vietcong, Discrimination." *Michigan Chronicle* (Detroit, MI), July 2nd, 1967, 31st ed., sec. 13.

²¹ Dr. Benjamin E. Mays. "Three Observations about the Vietnam War." *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition)*, May 22, 1971, 10.

remained neutral.²² Very early in the War in 1965, the *Birmingham World*, a prominent African American newspaper, insightfully stated: “Both determination and patience will be needed by the American people in the years ahead. As more American boys die, there will be growing resentment and increasing pressure on Washington to go all out to win.”²³ Thus, many African Americans objected to the Vietnam War for larger reasons than solely to denounce all forms of racism, or to defend fellow African Americans. Henry Darby and Margaret Rowley detailed five distinct reasons that Martin Luther King Jr. objected to the War with only one of them being institutional racism in the military.²⁴ Additionally, White newspapers did not entirely neglect racism in the military either. In a 1967 publication of the *New York Times*, an article discussed the astoundingly high death toll of African American soldiers in Vietnam at that time.²⁵

Black newspapers overwhelmingly had a tendency to focus on the conflict in Southeast Asia through a lens framed within the African American community; this was similar to the focus of African American civil rights organizations and activists. Both exaggerations and justifications of racism in the military occurred frequently. In a 1968 article quoted by Westheider, *Ebony* claimed that Blacks made up 60 to 70 percent of some combat units, while they only made up 20 to 30 percent of all combat personnel throughout the peak years of Vietnam.²⁶ Radical newspapers like the *Black Liberator* and the *Black Panther*, as well as Black activists commonly utilized fiery rhetoric that effectively confronted institutional racism, sometimes through exaggerations.²⁷ The vast array of responses and opinions that the Black press had upon Vietnam and the

²²Nikolas Kozloff. “Vietnam, the African American Community, and the Pittsburgh New Courier.” *The Historian*, no. 3 (2001): 527.

²³ “The Vietnam War.” *The Birmingham World* (Birmingham, Alabama), December 18, 1965.

²⁴ Henry E. Darby, and Margaret N. Rowley, “King on Vietnam and Beyond.” *Phylon* (1960-) 47, no. 1 (1986): 43–50.

²⁵ “Negroes’ Death Toll is High in Vietnam,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Feb 15, 1967.

²⁶ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 13.

²⁷ For examples of clear exaggerations of the disparate military statistics, see the quotes from H. Rap Brown and Eldridge Cleaver on Page 13 and the quote from John Lewis on Page 18

disproportionate statistics in the military, mirrored the wide range of responses of Black leaders and organizations. Even among the ‘radical’ activists, there was a huge variety of sentiments and opinions surrounding Vietnam.

Black Power Activists Respond

The Civil Rights Movement had been slowly progressing toward increasingly radical sentiments long before the Vietnam War. Before Rosa Parks, a seasoned civil rights activists under the NAACP²⁸ prompted the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the battle for civil rights had rarely utilized public demonstrations and protests. This bus boycott would lift Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. into the national spotlight, while also signaling the need for direct-action protests against the political power structure. Subsequently, organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) frequently conducted marches, boycotts, and sit-ins in their struggle for civil rights. Furthermore, SNCC was especially prepared to stand against the American Government.²⁹ Created by student activists in 1960 as a grassroots organization, SNCC declared independence from other civil rights organizations like Dr. King’s SCLC.³⁰ This gave them absolute control of their public opinions and statements, allowing them to freely express discontent whenever they felt necessary.

²⁸ Danielle L. McGuire. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance- a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010. See Also: Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 217.

²⁹ SNCC and the BPP, are the main focus of this essay. They represent the most radical sentiments expressed over Vietnam, whereas Dr. King and the SCLC and John Lewis represent the middle of the spectrum. As for the NUL, this author primarily focused upon them because they were labeled as the most moderate Civil Rights organization. See Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 229.

³⁰ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 44.

SNCC would become dramatically more radical throughout the Vietnam War. Under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown (later Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), revolutionary Black Power rhetoric would be at the forefront of SNCC's ideologies and public statements. Additionally, the Black Panther Party (BPP), created the same year SNCC spoke out against Vietnam in 1966, embraced and promoted Black Power ideologies that challenged the American government on antiracist and anticolonial grounds. Black Power called for a complete reconstruction of American society, claiming this to be the only option that would bring equality to people of color.³¹ Heavily influenced by the growing Pan-Africanist philosophies that urged international cooperation among oppressed people; these organizations opposed the Vietnam War with an international mindset. Even Dr. King, who denounced the use of Black Power slogans, took a provocative stance against the American government because of its obsessive involvement with Vietnam.³² Although these organizations and leaders represent a wide array of responses, they were all relatively radical compared to the moderate organizations like the National Urban League (NUL) and NAACP.

In order to understand Black Power activist's response to the Vietnam War, one must understand the basic principles and ideals of Black Power, as well as how it has been misrepresented in American history. Partially due to their early condemnation of Vietnam, largely based upon the racism in the military, Black Power activists continuously suffered gross misinterpretations and exaggerations. Quoted by his close friend, Harold Sims, the famously moderate Whitney Young insightfully stated:

Black Power is less an assertion of domination or violence, or a call for exclusion, than it is a rejection of the results of white power over Black people and their communities. Without exception, one can document easily the negative consequences of white

³¹ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 215. See Also Robyn C. Spencer. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016,

³² Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 141-213.

domination ... educationally, in housing, economically, and socially. Black Power is a cry for dignity! It's a plea for recognition ...that I'm somebody! That I have roots and pride! That I have rights! That I insist upon the opportunity to participate in my destiny, and the destiny of my children... and that I want a piece of the action! If I'm going to suffer the responsibilities, the horrors, and the dangers of this country, then I insist on enjoying some of the rewards.³³

Correspondingly, James Baldwin, who quickly noted the economic profligacy of the American war in Vietnam,³⁴ conclusively declared: "Black Power means the recognition that neither the American government nor the American people have any desire, or any ability, to liberate Negroes or – which comes to exactly the same – themselves."³⁵ Even the beloved Dr. King had acknowledged the similarity in goals between the civil rights and Black Power movements.³⁶ Thus, displaying how African Americans disagreed on how to achieve equality, even though they fought the same struggle. In response to the misrepresentation of his messages, H. Rap Brown powerfully claimed:

The media claims that I teach hate...If Black people hate white people it's not because of me, it's because of what white people do to Black people. If hate can be taught, ain't no better teacher than white people themselves. I hate oppression. I am anti-anybody who is anti-Black. Now if that includes most white people in America, it ain't my fault.³⁷

Given the reported racism in the military, the antiracist and anticolonial ideologies of Black Power activists were in clear opposition to the disproportionate statistics in the military and America's intervention in Vietnam.

SNCC would be the first major civil rights organization to voice opposition to the Vietnam War in 1966. During the years preceding of Vietnam, characterized by the Cold War and Red

³³ Harold R. Sims, "Whitney Young's Open Society," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 396 (1971): 76.

³⁴Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 266.

³⁵ James Baldwin and Fred L. Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Jackson, University of Mississippi, 1996, 61.

³⁶ Manning Marable. *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 93.

³⁷ H. Rap Brown. *Die Nigger Die!* New York: The Dial Press, 1969, 121.

Scare, there was much contention between various Civil Rights organizations upon what strategies would gain civil rights most successfully.³⁸ SNCC continuously harbored relatively radical activists that frequently expressed sentiments that stunned and discomforted moderate civil rights organizations. For example, John Lewis, one of the more moderate Chairmen of SNCC, was forced to change his speech at the famed March on Washington in 1963 in order to avoid criticizing President John F. Kennedy.³⁹ Being a relatively moderate voice within the organization, Lewis would later leave SNCC shortly after the election of Stokely Carmichael as Chairman of the organization in 1966. Lewis disagreed with the direction the organization was going, characterized by Carmichael's call for Black Power. Carmichael would be succeeded by the arguably more radical, H. Rap Brown, signifying the growing prominence of radical Black Power ideologies throughout the Vietnam War. It is no surprise SNCC adamantly condemned America's presence in Vietnam. With their peers being drafted to fight a war they objected to on antiracist and anticolonial grounds, SNCC was bound to break the consensus of civil rights organizations over the issue of Vietnam.⁴⁰

Radical African American leaders did more than just publicly oppose the government and U.S. foreign policies. They adamantly encouraged fellow young Black men to avoid the draft and even outwardly supported the North Vietnamese. These positions led J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI to label them as enemies of the American Government.⁴¹ In the SNCC position paper on Vietnam, issued in 1966, the organization noted: "We are in sympathy with, and support, the men in this

³⁸ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 9-73.

³⁹ Birmingham Campaign | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. May 11, 1961. Accessed February 09, 2019. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/> Also See: Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 49, 50.

⁴⁰ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 215.

⁴¹ The American Government and FBI put several different activists under surveillance of COINTELPRO. Members of the BPP, SNCC, and even Dr. King had their phones hacked and lives watched because of their denunciation of racist America that promoted the Vietnam War. See Robyn C. Spencer. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016. See Also: Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 4.

country who are unwilling to respond to a military draft which would compel them to contribute their lives to United States aggression in the name of the ‘freedom’ we find so false in this country.”⁴² SNCC’s position paper powerfully noted the disproportionately high draft rate, and death toll of Black men. In a publication of the *Chicago Defender*, the author reported mutual pledges of support made between “Black Power Militant” Stokely Carmichael and Ton Quang Phiet, a North Vietnamese Communist.⁴³ Additionally, SNCC members commonly wore signs that read: “No Vietnamese ever called me Nigger,” to protest rallies.⁴⁴ Considering the larger context of the Cold War and the long history of “Red-Baiting” civil rights activists,⁴⁵ the Black Power leaderships’ anticapitalistic pronouncements established negative sentiments surrounding Black Power in popular culture, in spite of their realistic grievances. Despite mainstream America’s interpretation of Black Power, radical activists did what they thought would reap the most benefits for African Americans. Nonetheless, many Black activists became increasingly frustrated toward their communities compulsory role in the Vietnam War.

Civil rights leaders spoke out against the war in Vietnam for many different reasons. Religious ideals, political objectives, and the recognition of the common element of racism that affected Black soldiers in Vietnam and African Americans across America, each played a role in determining one’s stance on Vietnam.⁴⁶ Additionally, most of these aspects were sources of

⁴² SNCC Position Paper: Vietnam, In *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience*, ABC-CLIO, 2018, Accessed February 7, 2018.

⁴³“Stokely Calls for N. Viet Support.” 1967. *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*, Aug 31, 3.

⁴⁴ *King in the Wilderness*. Directed by Peter W. Kunhardt. By Chris Chuang. USA: HBO, 2018. Documentary. See Also: John Lewis and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015, 372.

⁴⁵ Throughout the Cold War and Red Scare, civil rights activists were frequently “Red Baited.” Essentially, this was when activists were accused of being Communist, subsequently discrediting their grievances and ruining their reputation. For more information, see Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*.

⁴⁶Henry E. Darby, and Margaret N. Rowley, “King on Vietnam and Beyond.” *Phylon (1960-)* 47, no. 1 (1986): 43–45. See also: Simon Hall, “The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam,” *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 3 (2003): 669–701.

divergence among civil rights leaders;⁴⁷ nevertheless, contention initially resulted from the presence of systemic racism in the military. Black Power activists repeatedly declared their opposition to the American military. In his political autobiography, SNCC Chairman H. Rap Brown powerfully stated:

We must refuse to participate in the war of genocide against people of color: a war that also commits genocide against us. Black men are being used on the front line at a disproportionate rate. Forty-five percent of the casualties are Black. That's genocide! We cannot let our Black brothers fight in Vietnam because we need them here to fight with us. If we can die defending our motherland, we can die defending our mothers.⁴⁸

Brown expressed other reasons why he disagreed with America's foreign policy, but his most powerful objection was the presence of systemic racism in the military. Similarly, Eldridge Cleaver, a leading member of the Black Panther Party professed:

It is no accident the U.S. government is sending all those Black troops to Vietnam. Some people think that America's point in sending 16 percent Black troops to Vietnam is to kill off the cream of Black youth. But it has another important result. By turning her Black troops into butchers of the Vietnamese people, America is spreading hate against the Black race throughout Asia.... Black Americans are considered to be the world's biggest fools to go to another country to fight for something they don't have for themselves.⁴⁹

The relatively radical sentiments expressed by Cleaver and Brown were common across Black Power activists and organizations. Maintaining solidarity with oppressed people played a substantial role in prompting radical leaders to denounce Vietnam and the American military. Although other factors contributed to their anti-war declarations, systemic racism in the military emboldened many radical Black leaders to voice their discontent. Some, like Malcom X swiftly condemned U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In Malcom's, case, he denounced the Vietnam War before even 3,000 U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam on anticolonial grounds, stating the long history

⁴⁷ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*. Also See: Simon Hall. *Peace and Freedom: the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements of the 1960s*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

⁴⁸ H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die!* New York: The Dial Press, 1969, 136.

⁴⁹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, New York: Dell publ., 1999, 153.

of the Vietnamese fighting for their independence.⁵⁰ Although Malcom X's untimely death at the start of the Vietnam War would keep him from being a major opponent to the war, his work influenced a whole generation of Black activists that fervently opposed the war.

The most prominent organization to be heavily influenced by Malcom X, the Black Panther Party offered some of the most passionate and vehement opposition to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense⁵¹ in Oakland California in 1966, a little over a year after the Watts Riot. The Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles exploded for six days in a racial uproar only days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, which stunned both President Johnson and Dr. King.⁵² The timing of the Watts Riot and the formation of the Black Panther Party (BPP), exemplified the changing nature of the Civil Rights Movement. Black people throughout the North experienced a wholly different type of racism than people in the South. Police brutality, lack of economic opportunities, and insufficient housing plagued Black people in northern cities. Moreover, the civil rights movement rarely focused on these systems of racism most apparent throughout North. Their priority traditionally focused on obtaining basic civil rights for African Americans throughout South. This context fostered revolutionary ideologies that called for a sociocultural revolution that would finally lead to equality for Black people.

The disparate statistics within the highly controlled institution of the military certainly enhanced the notion that America was unable to be impartial to Black people. Moreover, the Black

⁵⁰ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 98.

⁵¹ Spencer covers how the Party's original name was "the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense," reflecting their initial desire to deter police-brutality in their community at any cost. She goes on to note how this led to a negative perception of the Party, which is why they dropped "for Self-Defense" from their name. Robyn C. Spencer. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016, 34-38.

⁵² Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 14. See Also: Nikolas Kozloff. "Vietnam, the African American Community, and the Pittsburgh New Courier." *The Historian*, no. 3 (2001): 524.

Panther Party unwaveringly promoted Black Power ideologies which were in natural opposition to America's presence in Vietnam. Robyn Spencer, prominent historian of the BPP, stated "In the context of Vietnam, the Panthers were the literal embodiment of the Black Power soldier who was committed to the war at home."⁵³ The BPP combatted racist America on several fronts, including literally fighting police brutality, aiding impoverished people of color with issues like housing and medical care, and protesting the Vietnam War.⁵⁴ They also made strong connections between their struggle and that of the North Vietnamese. The BPP saw Black America as an "internal colony of the United States," a colony that was interconnected to the struggles of developing countries in, and out, of Africa.⁵⁵ Creating a sense of solidarity among international revolutionary struggles strengthened their beliefs regarding antiracism and anti-colonialism, furthering their stance against America's intervention in Vietnam.

The Black Panther Party, arguably the most notorious Black Power organization, frequently voiced their support for North Vietnam, while simultaneously calling attention to the racism in the American military. In a 1969 page from *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service*, there was a photo of North Vietnamese communist forces staging an attack with this provocative statement published underneath by a Panther: "South Vietnamese Liberation Fighters Launch An Attack On The Enemy."⁵⁶ Referring to the North Vietnam as "South Vietnamese Liberation Fighters," and the US forces as "the Enemy," summed up the Party's position on Vietnam. In a publication from the same year, there was a cartoon of a presumably North

⁵³ Spencer *The Revolution Has Come*, 43.

⁵⁴ Although the BPP would be known for policing the police, see footnote 46 and Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 25-60, the BPP was more committed to social programs. They provided several different services like free breakfast for children and medical screening for sickle cell. See Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 85, 86, 145.

⁵⁵ Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 29, 147

⁵⁶ David Hilliard, *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service (1967-1980)*, New York: Atria, 2007, 20.

Vietnamese mother holding an infant, an assault rifle, and Chairman Mao's "Little Red Book," with the caption: "We will fight and fight from this generation to the next," written underneath.⁵⁷ This represented the attempted solidarity between radical African Americans and distant communist forces which they viewed as similarly oppressed people. Additionally, the Black Panther Party infamously sold copies of Chairman Mao's "Little Red Book" to college students in order to raise funds. However, one Panther reported they never even read the "Little Red Book,"⁵⁸ symbolizing the tendency of Black 'radicals' to adopt an exceedingly strong opposition to America.

The BPP also restricted any Party member from serving in the military, and one of the points, in their Ten Point Platform, was: "6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service."⁵⁹ Radical African American leaders had a habit of ostracizing themselves from other Black people through their fiery rhetoric, and often outlandish claims. Organizations like the Black Panther Party and SNCC, would undoubtedly opposed Vietnam even if systemic racism was not prevalent in the military. Nonetheless, the early response of radical organizations to the Vietnam War was vindicated when the moderates that harshly criticized them for speaking out, expressed similar sentiments. This affected the increase in popularity of Black Power Organizations throughout the Vietnam War.⁶⁰ In both cases, fighting for the African American community was their constant priority.

⁵⁷ Hilliard, *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service*, 18.

⁵⁸ *Berkeley in the Sixties*. Directed by Mark Kitchell. Produced by Mark Kitchell. By Stephen Lighthill and Veronica Selver. United States: Tara Releasing, 1990.

⁵⁹ Hilliard, *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service*, 24, 25.

⁶⁰ Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 81.

Marching the Divide: Less Radical Activists and Vietnam

Civil Rights activists withheld their discontent as long as they could, in order to maintain a consensus among activists and organizations. The Vietnam War troubled Dr. King, and his discontent meant more to the African American population and President Johnson than others. After years of deliberation and concern over the Vietnam War, on May 4th, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his most comprehensive condemnation of the Vietnam War. Dr. King's 'Beyond Vietnam' speech, given at the Riverside Church in New York City, would go down as one of his finest orations.⁶¹ Dr. King knew the negative responses that would arise from his public denunciation of America's presence in Vietnam. His prominence and sway with the African American population was unrivaled. Despite countless pleas from his peers to stay silent on this issue,⁶² King declared: "Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision.... For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent"⁶³ Nonetheless, President Lyndon B. Johnson and members of the African American community felt betrayed and even horrified by Dr. King's controversial avowal.⁶⁴ Dr. King held off voicing his discontent until the Vietnam War clearly consumed the War on Poverty and disproportionately harmed African Americans in the military and their greater

⁶¹ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015, 395-396. See Also: "Vietnam War." Birmingham Campaign | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. May 11, 1961. Accessed February 09, 2019. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/vietnam-war>.

⁶² *King in the Wilderness*. Directed by Peter W. Kunhardt. By Chris Chuang. USA: HBO, 2018. Documentary.

⁶³ Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Beyond Vietnam" (1967). In *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience*, ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed February 7, 2018.

⁶⁴ Randall B. Woods, "The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 1 (2007): 13.

community at home. Additionally, Dr. King waited until after the Black Power leaders of CORE and SNCC broke consensus among the major civil rights organizations to voice his discontent.

Many Black leaders and activists held very similar sentiments and would continue to focus on the impact of systemic racism on Black military personnel, while simultaneously putting a larger emphasis on Vietnam's negative impact on the Great Society programs. In his memoir, 50 years after Vietnam, John Lewis, one of the less radical voices of SNCC who denounced the use of Black Power sloganeering,⁶⁵ powerfully stated:

From the outset, Black U.S. soldiers were dying in Vietnam in horrifyingly disproportionate numbers – while 10 percent of the nation's population was Black, one out of every four American fatalities in Vietnam was a Black soldier. By late 1965, Americas front lines in Vietnam were so filled with Black men – as many as 60 percent – that the soldiers called it Soulville. Some of these Black soldiers had to grapple with the sight of confederate flags, burnt crosses and Ku Klux Klan costumes showing up among their White comrades.⁶⁶

When less radical figures eventually spoke out in protest to Vietnam, their objections typically resembled their more radical allies, minus the confrontational rhetoric. Relatively moderate figures like Lewis and King differed from other opponents of Vietnam in that for both Lewis and King “the principle of non-violence was paramount.”⁶⁷ Lewis stated: “Most of the others were angered more by the idea that Black men were being sent to fight a war for a White society that oppressed and exploited them.”⁶⁸ These opinions and views closely resembled the quietly expressed concerns of more moderate activists.

Furthermore, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr expressed numerous different reasons as to why he detested America's presence in Vietnam. In the last year of Dr. King's life, he continuously

⁶⁵ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015, 389.

⁶⁶ Lewis and D'Orsor, *Walking with the Wind*, 369.

⁶⁷ Lewis and D'Orsor, *Walking with the Wind*, 372.

⁶⁸ Lewis and D'Orsor, *Walking with the Wind*, 372.

outlined the many objections he had regarding the War in Vietnam. In Dr. King's most powerful and comprehensive condemnation of Vietnam, at the Riverside Church, he stated:

A few years ago, there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both Black and White, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or engines in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive tube.... We were taking the young Black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guaranteed liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem.⁶⁹

Although Dr. King did not detail the racially disparate statistics in the military that night, he made it clear that he had waited until the war in Vietnam detrimentally affected the African American community and their movement for equality. "We arm Negro soldiers to kill on foreign battlefields, but offer little protection for their relatives from beatings and killings in our own south. We are willing to make the Negro 100% of a citizen in warfare, but reduce him to 50% of a citizen on American soil," King orated in his speech *The Casualties of the War in Vietnam*. He continued: "There are twice as many Negroes in combat in Vietnam at the beginning of 1967 and twice as many died in action (20.6%) in proportion to their numbers in the population as Whites."⁷⁰ Dr. King would persistently condemn the war in Vietnam and the racially disproportionate death toll, until his tragic death, just a year after his speech at the Riverside Church.⁷¹ All civil rights activists, like Dr. King, put race before nation when deciding their public position upon Vietnam. If the disproportionate statistics in the military had not emboldened other groups, like SNCC, CORE,

⁶⁹ "Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Beyond Vietnam" (1967)," In *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience*, ABC-CLIO, 2018, Accessed February 7, 2018.

⁷⁰ Martin L. King Jr. "The Casualties of the War In Vietnam." | The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. February 25, 1967. Accessed April 26, 2018. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/casualties-war-vietnam>.

⁷¹ Henry E. Darby, and Margaret N. Rowley, "King on Vietnam and Beyond." *Phylon* (1960-) 47, no. 1 (1986): 44.

and the BPP, to speak out against Vietnam, Dr. King and others would have likely held off their discontent in order to maintain a consensus.

Nation Before Race? Moderates and the Racially Disparate Statistics in the Vietnam War

Radical activists frequently questioned the intentions of their moderate counterparts, charging them with putting nation before race. Radicals expressed clear intentions of putting the Black community before America, whereas the opinions, sentiments, and intentions of the moderates appeared to support the American Government in its intervention into Vietnam. However, the Nation Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League (NUL) had long taken a very different approach to obtaining civil rights and equality than other organizations. While SNCC, CORE, and the SCLC were marching and boycotting, the NAACP and the NUL were in the courtroom and city governments fighting for equality. In fact, until Executive Director Whitney Young politicized the NUL in 1961, this organization focused on uplifting African Americans through combatting employment and housing segregation.⁷² Often criticized as being too slow, their tactics were in direct contrast to those of SNCC and SCLC,⁷³ and earned the NUL the label of being the most moderate civil rights organization.⁷⁴ Primarily focusing on employment, economic, and legal issues, these conservative organizations sometimes condemned the direct action tactics used by other organizations. The NAACP and NUL, both being nearly 55 years old at the start of the Vietnam War, were especially ecstatic about having a President who was as enthusiastic about civil rights as Lyndon B. Johnson. Moreover, the head of the NUL, Whitney Young, and the head of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins, both had a close relationship

⁷² Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 227, 228.

⁷³ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 217.

⁷⁴ See explanatory footnote 25, Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 228, 229.

with President Johnson throughout the Vietnam War.⁷⁵ They also held the prevalent belief that the Vietnam War would not last any longer than a few years, which defended their silence over Vietnam for as long as possible. Furthermore, these organizations had previously achieved major legislative victories through their tried and tested strategies, that they felt were being disrupted by the direct action tactics of more radical groups. These factors swayed the moderates to uphold their “hands-off” approach to Vietnam, believing it would benefit their political struggle for equality in the long run through legislative gains.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, moderates of the movement had to justify the statistics that attested to systemic racism in the military in order to rationalize their silence upon this controversial war.

Nevertheless, the moderates acknowledged and challenged some of the forms of systemic racism in the military, particularly the hierarchal oppression and the military justice system. During his trip to Vietnam in 1966, Whitney Young recognized the lack of African American men in positions of power, specifically in the Navy. He stated: “the Navy in terms of numbers still lags behind in spite of a new commitment to integration, and Negro officers are few. On an aircraft carrier with a crew of 3,000 and 240 officers, the single ranking Negro officer was one junior-grade lieutenant.”⁷⁷ The NAACP made similar remarks, yet this hierarchal oppression of Black servicemen was evidently not enough to spark dissent within the conservative wing of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, the NAACP and the NUL, legally represented numerous Black military personnel throughout America’s involvement in Vietnam. These two conservative organizations also conducted numerous investigations into incidents of racial discrimination in the military which were thoroughly documented.⁷⁸ Moderates also touched on the hypocrisy of

⁷⁵ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 219.

⁷⁶ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 213-215

⁷⁷ Whitney M. Young, “When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home,” *Harper's Magazine*, June 1, 1967, 68.

⁷⁸ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 72, 163, 171.

sending Black men to fight a war for someone else's rights, when Black Americans did not receive those same rights at home.⁷⁹ These reasons were evidently not important enough for them to publicly denounce the war. Although they never outright condemned the military justice system as racist, they did fight for the equality of Black people in the military.

Whitney Young and the NUL attempted to stay completely neutral on the war,⁸⁰ though their justification of the institutional racism in the military symbolized the length they were willing to go to stay neutral. Upon his views of the disproportionate death toll statistics, Whitney Young stated:

The reason for the high rate of Negro combat deaths lies in the simple fact that a higher proportion of Negroes volunteer for hazardous duty. They do so not for the money – which doesn't begin to justify the risk – but more from a desire to prove to themselves and to their White colleagues that they are men capable of as much skill, courage, and sacrifice as any man alive.⁸¹

Although Young's justification of the racially disparate death toll was not entirely wrong, several historians have proved it was not fully accurate.⁸² While Young did misconstrue the causes of the disparate fatality rate, he did fully recognize and denounce the institutional racism prevalent in hierarchy of the military.⁸³ In a 1968 publication of the *Chicago Defender*, Sol Stern discussed both his and Whitney Young's interviews conducted with Black military personnel regarding the experiences and hopes concerning their return home. Stern noted how the Defense Department explained the racially disproportionate statistics by the increased amount of Blacks that re-enlisted for the elite combat units for the higher pay;⁸⁴ a notion that even Young denounced as racist.⁸⁵ As

⁷⁹ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*,

⁸⁰ Hall, "The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam," 671, 672.

⁸¹ Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," 66.

⁸² Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 97, 98. See Also: Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*.

⁸³ Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," 67, 68.

⁸⁴ Sol Stern, "When the Black G.I. Comes Back from Vietnam." *New York Times* (Current File), *Chicago Defender* Mar 24, 1968.

⁸⁵ Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," 66.

quoted by Stern, regarding the high death toll of Blacks in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel George Shoffer professed: "I feel good about it. Not that I like the bloodshed but the performance of the Negro in Vietnam tends to offset the fact that the Negro wasn't considered worthy of being a front-line soldier in other wars."⁸⁶ This sentiment was surprisingly common in high ranking African American military personnel and the moderates of the Civil Rights Movement. The NAACP, the most prominent of the conservative civil rights organization, adhered to extremely similar sentiments as Young,⁸⁷ though there was notable dissention within different branches of this organization over Vietnam.⁸⁸ Whitney Young, the NUL, and the NAACP truly did fight for the betterment of African Americans, despite their distorted view of systemic racism in the military.

Although their responses and justifications of Vietnam and the disparate statistics seemed conservative, the moderates actually clung to the majority opinions and sentiments of the Black community. The *Chicago Defender*, throughout the course of the war, continuously surveyed the nearby African American population concerning their opinion on Vietnam and their perceptions of various civil rights leaders who opposed the War. In a report from 1967, the *Defender* found that more than half of the Black people surveyed wanted America to maintain their presence in Vietnam.⁸⁹ Moreover, a report on a Harris poll from 1967 relayed that just under half of the Black people surveyed disagreed with Dr. Martin Luther King's stance on Vietnam.⁹⁰ Therefore, in not taking an oppositional stance to Vietnam, the moderates represented a substantial portion of the African American population.

⁸⁶ Stern, "When the Black G.I. Comes Back from Vietnam." *Chicago Defender*.

⁸⁷ Hall, "The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam," 681.

⁸⁸ Hall, *Peace and Freedom*, 97. See Also: Lucks *Selma to Saigon*, 219.

⁸⁹ Sam Washington, "Should we stay in Asia? How Negroes Feel," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, April 1, 1967.

⁹⁰ "Half of 160 Negroes in a Survey Oppose Dr. King on Vietnam," *Chicago Defender*, May 23, 1967.

Although the moderates adhered closer to the opinions of both the Black and White populations, many radical activists believed the moderates fully supported the War effort, thereby violating their hands-off approach.⁹¹ In an article published in *Harper's Magazine*, Whitney Young of the NUL, discussed the various opinions of Black soldiers that he talked to on his trip to Vietnam.⁹² Young's interviews with Black GI's reflected a generally positive and optimistic attitude and experience; this was likely due to fact that Young's trip was in the very early years of the war when sentiments were generally much better. Young's trip to Vietnam, among other things, inclined some activists to accuse Young and Wilkins of supporting the war. They were frequently accused of putting nation before race for their relationship with President Johnson, their justification of the disparate statistics in the military, and Young's trip to Vietnam. In response to all of the hate that Whitney Young received for his trip to Vietnam,⁹³ he stated:

I hoped, by my presence [in Vietnam] and by my words, to voice the concern of the Negro community for the men fighting and dying in Vietnam and to let negroes know the fight was continuing at home to assure them equality of opportunity upon their return. Another reason for the trip was to gather information about the kind of skills acquired by Negro GIs, the nature of their civilian ambitions, and how they might best be helped to readjust and contribute to civilian life.⁹⁴

Whitney Young served to be the man who knew "how to get power from the powerful and share it with the powerless," according to Andrew Young. Whitney Young, over the course of his tenure at the NUL, successfully acquired several thousand jobs, including jobs for returning Vietnam veterans.⁹⁵ Although many activists questioned Young's intentions for visiting Vietnam and his close friendship with President Johnson, he still fought to enhance the quality of life for Black veterans and people. The moderates persistent silence and belated responses to the Vietnam War

⁹¹ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 232.

⁹² Whitney M. Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," *Harper's Magazine*, June 1, 1967 63.

⁹³ Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," 63. See Also: Hall, *Peace and Freedom*, 103.

⁹⁴ Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," 68, 69.

⁹⁵ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 227.

were “too little, too late,” and symbolized the accusations of putting nation before race.⁹⁶ Young and Wilkins repeatedly received insults of being “Uncle Toms” for their close affiliation with President Johnson, and their tendency to mollify his policies in Vietnam.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the moderate’s harsh criticism of the dissenting radicals distorted the fact that they put race before nation. Historian Daniel Lucks stated: “it was not surprising that they perceived SNCC, CORE, and African Americans who opposed the war as irresponsibly radicals who were jeopardizing the recent gain in civil rights.”⁹⁸ Many Black activists believed that the moderates discretely supported the war. Certainly, some of their actions and words attest to this belief.

Like most of the population, as the war persisted, African Americans’ became more distraught over Southeast Asia. In a publication entitled “Negro Opinion on Viet is Shifting [sic],” Sam Washington detailed how the NAACP and Urban League were falling out of favor in the Black community.⁹⁹ A little over a year would pass after this publication, and Young, among other moderate activists, would speak out in protest of the Vietnam War. The Nixon administration taking over the White House, and the fall out of public opinion definitely influenced their change in stance upon Vietnam.¹⁰⁰ When moderates did voice their criticisms, their condemnations mirrored the previous statements made by Black Power ‘militants.’ In 1969, Young stated: “[the war has] an extra dimension for Black people that it does not have for many Whites. We are suffering doubly. We are dying for something abroad that we do not have at home.”¹⁰¹ This comment reflects strikingly similar sentiments to those of SNCC’s position paper. The eventual

⁹⁶ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 234.

⁹⁷ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 231, 234.

⁹⁸ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 214.

⁹⁹ Sam Washington. "Negro Opinion on Viet is Shifting." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, April 22, 1967, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Hall, “The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam,” 696.

¹⁰¹ Special to the, Daily Defender. "Young Blasts Vietnam War." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, October 14, 1969, 4.

complaints of moderates closely resembled the previous remarks of radical activists, which the moderates harshly criticized. The shift in politics of moderate civil rights activists, exemplified that the differences between Black leaders and their conflicting stances on Vietnam, differed only in means to achieve the same ends. Regardless, ignoring the disproportionately high death rates and draft rates of Black Americans in order to appease the Johnson administration expanded the chasm within the movement. Additionally, advancing Black Americans through the process of political gains was consistently at the forefront of their public positions and strategies.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The reported racism in the military divided African Americans activists. During the early years of the war, it was unclear what the impact that Vietnam would have on the Great Society programs that promised sociopolitical advancement to people of color. Moderates justified and disregarded the racially disparate statistics, while other figures saw these statistics as concrete evidence for the inability of White America to be impartial to Black people; even in the military, one of America's least prejudiced institutions at that time.¹⁰³ Additionally, the more radically inclined activists saw the moderate's justification of the reported racism as a political abandonment of the African American community in favor of loose promises made by an inherently racist government. If it were not for the institutional racism that affected African American men in the

¹⁰² It could certainly be argued that the moderate in fact did put the 'greater good' of America before their mission to advance African Americans. However, this would ignore their public statements upholding their reasonable opinion that maintaining affiliation with an undeniably racially progressive Presidency (relatively, at least) would lead to further advances for Black people. In a way, their harsh criticisms of the radicals in the movement displayed the moderate's steadfast belief in their own strategy. This argument would also disregard their continuous efforts to protect and improve the situation of thousands of Black people in and out of the military during Vietnam.

¹⁰³ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 2.

military, civil rights leaders would have been much more reluctant to speak out against Vietnam in the early years of the conflict. Racism in the military, whether systemic, personal, or merely superficial, had a profound impact on the evolution of the struggle for equality at home which subsequently became increasingly radicalized and militant.

The Black Power movement that emerged from the civil rights movement, and the Long Hot Summer Riots of 1967, embodied the frustration and dissatisfaction within the Black community that the government could no longer quell with legislation. In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the evident racial unrest in American cities. Commonly known as the Kerner Commission, its members found that the source of the racial tensions went much deeper than racially discriminatory laws. In a summary of their findings, the Commission members stated: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one white,--separate and unequal....This deepening racial division is not inevitable....To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.”¹⁰⁴ The Kerner Commission did not provide any new information to many ‘militant’ African American activists that previously realized the necessity for a cultural revolution in obtaining the crucial advancement for people of color. The Kerner Commission, along with the increasingly negative feelings surrounding Vietnam vindicated the previous denunciations from Black Power activists and organizations that promoted the sentiments expressed in the Kerner Commission in the preceding years.

¹⁰⁴ National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Summary of Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. Washington, D.C.: Commission, 1969.

The conflict in Vietnam was not favorable for any idealist, including the civil rights activists and President Johnson, both whom hoped to achieve massive sociocultural advancements.¹⁰⁵ “Something had to give – either the War on Poverty or the War in Vietnam,” noted John Lewis.¹⁰⁶ A dissenting voice within the NAACP, Robert Scheer stated: “the only victory we are assured of in Vietnam is that the Vietnam War has defeated the War on Poverty.”¹⁰⁷ The promises of a Great Society made it difficult for civil rights activists to speak out against America’s policy in Vietnam. Nevertheless, several aspects of Vietnam impeded the African American struggle for equality. Black Power was a natural progression in the struggle for equality considering the detrimental effect Vietnam had on Johnson’s Great Society programs and the inability of the military to rid itself of institutional and personal racism. Close friend to Whitney Young, Harold Sims, stated Young was famous for saying “there are no moderates in the civil rights movement... all are militants in the fight for justice.”¹⁰⁸ The different positions taken on Vietnam, by the divergent wings of the African American struggle for equality epitomized the fact that their differences were not in objectives or goals, but rather in political means as to how to achieve their mutual goals.

Through the accounts and opinions on Vietnam and the disparate statistics in the military provided and analyzed, it becomes apparent that radical Black Power activists and moderate civil rights activists only differed in their political means, not their goals or objectives. For many Black leaders, systemic racism in the highly controlled and regulated institution of the military, illuminated the unwillingness of White America to be impartial to people of color. Others, who

¹⁰⁵ Woods, “The Politics of Idealism,” 11.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis and D’Orsor, *Walking with the Wind*, 371.

¹⁰⁷ Hall, *Peace and Freedom*, 98.

¹⁰⁸ Harold R. Sims, “Whitney Young’s Open Society,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 396 (1971): 71.

still had faith in President Johnson and his War on Poverty, waited until Vietnam consumed the Great Society ideals. The affect that Vietnam had on the African American community as a whole, both within the military and at home, substantiated civil rights leaders' opposition to the conflict. The disproportionate statistics in the military provided the initial motivation to some activists that would lead to the growing divide within the struggle for equality. Their positions display an obvious priority of putting race before nation, regardless of when they spoke out against Vietnam. The differences between the Black Power and the Civil Rights Movement were ultimately political, and Vietnam offered an invaluable window into those differences.

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