BLACK POWER SOLDIERS: HOW THE RISING STORM OF RADICAL BLACK MASCULINITY IN THE VIETNAM WAR SHAPED MILITARY PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS

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ABSTRACT

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During the Vietnam War, a new generation of African-American men entered the military. These young soldiers grew up in the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement and brought new expectations of racial equality to the military. At the same time, an escalating war in Vietnam and the racial inequity of the draft caused many soldiers to turn to radical expressions of black masculinity. These demonstrations of radical black masculinity renegotiated meanings of citizenship and military service for young, African-American men. These soldiers questioned the traditional narrative that military service could serve as a path to American citizenship and even questioned the value of American citizenship itself. These soldiers explored alternatives to American citizenship through experimentation with black nationalism and black power. After the Vietnam War, the military had to re-think the relationship of military service to American citizenship itself. In a nation without the draft, military service could no longer be the ultimate test of masculine citizenship. Instead, the military had to re-package itself as economic opportunity instead of patriotic duty.
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Introduction

On December 23, 1967, Marine Terry Whitmore lay in a hospital bed in the combat ward of Da Nang military base, Cam Ranh Bay. Compared to many men on the ward, Whitmore was lucky. He was not missing any limbs and although his legs had been riddled with bullets, he had suffered no permanent damage and was likely to walk again. Despite the pall of death and suffering that usually permeated the walls, on this particular Saturday, the air was filled with a sense of anticipation and excitement. President Lyndon B. Johnson was coming to personally tour the ward and award medals to all the wounded men. Like the other men, Whitmore was excited about the impending visit of the distinguished guest. Yet as a proud Marine, he struggled to hide his excitement under a suitably stoic expression. When Lyndon B. Johnson walked up to his bed, Whitmore did the Marines proud by exclaiming that he was feeling fine and ready to return to combat.¹ Once the President had moved on to the next bed, a man approached Whitmore to ask if he belonged to the 101st Airborne. Somewhat heatedly, Whitmore shot back, “Hundred and first? Man, I’m in One-one. First Marine, First Division. I ain’t in no motherfuckin’ army. I’m a U.S. Marine!” The man abruptly walked off as the soldier in the next bed leaned over to Whitmore and exclaimed, “Man, do you know who that was?” That man, of course, was General Westmoreland, the overall commander for the entire ground war in Vietnam and an Army man.²


Just three short months later, Whitmore took the first fateful steps to becoming a war deserter and an anti-war activist. On his decision to desert, Whitmore cited many of the same reasons militant African-American soldiers, serving in Vietnam, used to describe their discontent with military service: the military was a discriminatory organization that put the burden of the war unevenly on black men; the Vietnam War was an imperialist venture that asked African Americans to kill other colored men; the real war was not in Vietnam but in the civil rights struggle on the home front. The expression of these militant attitudes, although seemingly uncharacteristic for Whitmore, was part of a larger transformation in the attitudes of African-American soldiers. Whitmore had joined the Marines in the fall of 1966 as a young high school graduate because there were few job opportunities for a young black man in his hometown of Memphis. He also wanted to escape the vicious cycle of poverty that held his parents and the African-American community in its thrall. In seeking out the Marines, Whitmore consciously expressed admiration for the masculine ideals of hard work, patriotism, and social uplift that are associated with the Marine Corps and singled out the Marine Corps from all the other military service branches for its martial and masculine prowess. Meeting LBJ in person and being recognized for his bravery in combat, Whitmore had seemingly achieved the Marine masculine ideal. Whitmore’s transformation from proud Marine to disgruntled war deserter is indicative of a larger shift in the attitudes of African-American soldiers during the Vietnam War. How did African-American soldiers like

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5 Whitmore, *Memphis Nam Sweden*, 38.
Whitmore come to disassociate military service as a path towards civil rights and instead embrace a militant attitude against the military?

During the Vietnam War (1965-1973), African-American soldiers underwent a fraught transformation. Initially, these men approached the military as an oasis where they could enjoy the rights of citizenship and respectability denied to them in American society. As the war progressed, African-American soldiers began to see the military as categorically at odds with their racial identity. This change stemmed from a broader demographic shift underway within the military. Older, career-oriented soldiers had dominated the Armed Services. By 1968, these career-oriented soldiers had been largely replaced by draftees on the front lines of the war and in Vietnam. The demographic shift assumed added meaning for African-American soldiers because the younger generation of draftees had grown up in the crucible of the civil rights movement.

These African-American draftees challenged the very formulation of black military masculinity that had inspired generations of African-American soldiers into military service. Black military masculinity, which acknowledged that African-American men were politically and economically disenfranchised in American society, supplied a path out of discrimination in both symbolic and material ways. Donning the uniform of military service, African-American soldiers could claim the identity of the citizen soldier serving to protect American democracy abroad and at home despite their political disenfranchisment. In addition, the secluded life of regular soldiers on military bases offered a chance for African-American

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soldiers to assume a form of middle-class respectability by achieving the male breadwinner ideal for themselves and their families. After the desegregation of the Army in 1948, military bases became integrated spaces where African-American soldiers could in theory interact on an equal basis with white soldiers. In addition, lower prices on food and other family necessities at the post exchange as well as military housing allowed African-American soldiers to maintain a fairly middle-class standard of living. In essence, black military masculinity made men and citizens out of African Americans who were otherwise emasculated by the strictures of Jim Crow and white supremacy.

However, the rise of a nascent civil rights movement in the early 1960s and popular anti-Vietnam War sentiment in the late 1960s inspired a sharp critique of the state as the ultimate enablers of Jim Crow that challenged this traditional alliance between African Americans and the military. In the crucible of the Vietnam War, soldiers applied the radical civil rights movement to their own circumstances. For many, the military became the proxy for the state and the target for African-American soldiers’ militant criticisms. Ultimately, black radical masculinity fueled a racial crisis that blossomed during the last years of the Vietnam War. Its enduring legacy shattered the very assumptions of black

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9 The nature of military bases offering some protection to African-American soldiers has a long history dating back at least to World War I. Adriane Lentz-Smith argues that during World War I, the seclusion of African-American soldiers on the Houston military base angered local whites, who were unable to maintain Jim Crow modes of behavior for these interlopers. Lentz-Smith, Freedom Struggles, 60. For a more relevant argument to the experience of African-American soldiers on American bases in the early 1960s, right before the Vietnam War, see Annelise Orleck, Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 70-71.


11 The positioning of the state as the enemy was the underlying assumption of many black nationalist and black power organizations. See the Panthers’ Ten Point Program. Huey Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 123-124.
military masculinity by naming the military and the state as subjugators rather than allies in the civil rights struggle.

For the military establishment, the rise of radical black masculinity challenged all of its previously held assumptions about African-American soldiers’ supposed loyalty to the military. Since the onset of desegregation in 1948, the military presented itself as more progressive in civil rights than civilian society in general. Yet, as the first test of combat in a fully desegregated Army, the Vietnam War provoked widespread discontent. In the aftermath of the war, the military struggled to forge a new alliance with African-American soldiers and understand the roots of African-American dissent in the Civil Rights Movement. In the process a different understanding of military masculinity coalesced that was informed by the radical black masculinity of the Vietnam War. The new military masculinity stressed individual social mobility and the professionalization of the military. Values of citizenship and loyalty were overshadowed by emphasis on the material benefits of military service like a professional career. This new military masculinity coupled with the All-Volunteer Force became the military’s response to racial discontent.

In the past fifty years, scholarship on the Vietnam War has largely fallen into two categories, policy history and the experiential history of soldiers in the Vietnam War.  

\[12\] Although Harry S. Truman ordered the Army to desegregate immediately in 1948 through executive Order 9981, the US Army did not officially complete desegregation until 1954, after the end of the Korean War. See MacGregor, Morris J. Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965. (Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 1985), 473.


Historians who work in policy history have thoroughly traced the strategic failures of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), the Johnson and Nixon Administrations, and the Pentagon in fighting the Vietnam War. These policy histories place the blame for America’s failure thoroughly on the policy decisions of upper level strategists who failed to understand counterinsurgency. However, these historians have overlooked the effects on personnel discontent on American military failures in Vietnam. In contrast, those historians who work on the experiences of Vietnam-era veterans have fought hard to de-bunk the myth that Vietnam-era soldiers were war criminals, drug addicts, and mentally disturbed psychiatric patients unable to integrate into the civilian world or hold a normal job. \(^{15}\) As a result, this scholarship has emphasized overall loyalty and bravery of Vietnam-era soldiers despite the mistakes of policy makers in laying out a concrete military strategy in Vietnam. \(^{16}\)

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In the process, these scholars have minimized the extent of dissent in the military and largely ignored the racial discord that defined African-American soldiers’ experiences, especially in the later years of the war.

This thesis analyzes the experiences of militant African-American soldiers during the Vietnam War as they created new understandings of radical black masculinity that put them in direct opposition with military policy. By exploring both the impact of failed military policy on African-American soldiers and how the new masculinity forced the military to renegotiate their own understanding of black military masculinity, this thesis bridges the gap between experiential history and policy history and shows how the two are inextricably intertwined rather than discrete, separate spheres of influence.

Radical black masculinity, which coalesced gradually, can be divided into two distinct phases of development. In the first phase, which spanned the period between 1965 and 1967, frustration with failed military policy in Vietnam generated rumblings of discontent among African-American soldiers. This frustration trickled back to the African-American civilian communities through returning veterans and the radical black press where an emerging radical civil rights movement lent a militant edge to African-American critiques of the Vietnam War. The gathering storm of black discontent turned into explicit articulations of dissent in the second phase. The critical turning point came in 1968 and 1969 with the assassination of Martin Luther King and the rise of the Black Panther Party. Together these developments pushed many African-American soldiers into direct opposition to the military and created a counterculture of radical black masculinity heavily influenced by black power ideology.

Section 1: The Rumblings of Discontent 1965-1967
In July of 1965, President Johnson agreed to commit 500,000 troops to fight in Vietnam, thus marking the beginning of American involvement in a ground war that would provoke deep divisions and debates in the United States.\(^{17}\) Ostensibly fighting against an aggressive, communist invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnam, American troops actually faced a popular insurgency that they were not prepared to fight. In addition, President Johnson, the erstwhile commander of the war from 1965 to 1968, was more concerned with domestic policies at home than winning the war.\(^{18}\) His involvement in Vietnam stemmed more from his desire to be seen as hard on communism than from any will to seriously commit his administration to the war. Thus, from the very beginning, the Johnson Administration set no consistent policy other than crisis management and minimization of the impact of the Vietnam War on civilian society. Johnson’s lack of commitment ultimately hampered the military plans of General Westmoreland and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and created deep divisions between the Johnson Administration and top officials in the Pentagon during the first crucial years of the war (1965-1967).\(^ {19}\)

For the soldiers who served on the ground in the early years, these upper level rumblings seemed far away even though they would later have a serious impact on morale. These foot soldiers were Army and Marine regulars who for the most part had volunteered for service and saw themselves as a professional force. In 1965, only 28 percent of Army casualties were draftees.\(^ {20}\) Moreover, soldiers in 1965 were deployed as whole units,

\(^{17}\) George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 140-141.


\(^{19}\) Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 34.

creating a sense of unity and purpose. These soldiers had pride in both the Army and Marine Corps as a whole and in their individual units. Many of the officers and enlisted soldiers believed the United States to be the greatest military power in the world. However, as soldiers became wounded or died, their replacements were sent as individuals rather than as whole companies, thus breaking the carefully constructed unit morale that the Army and Marine Corps had cultivated in the early years of the war.21 In addition, high casualties coupled with a seeming lack of a coherent military strategy caused soldiers to question why they were fighting in Vietnam at all.

African-American soldiers who served in the early part of the war largely adhered to a traditional model of military masculinity. They had joined the military because they had bought into military advertising promising citizenship and middle-class respectability to the African-American soldier and because of high unemployment among African-American men in the early 1960s. As historians Donna Murch and Heather Thompson argue, despite general prosperity in the early and mid 1960s, African-Americans in rural and urban areas suffered from both the industrialization of agriculture and the de-industrialization of urban areas like Oakland, California, the later home of the Black Panther Party.22 More economically vulnerable than working-class whites, poor African Americans were the more likely to feel the effects of early de-industrialization and the transition to a service

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21 Longley, *Grunts*, 76-78.

The promise of good pay and the ability to provide for one’s family lured a myriad number of African Americans to enlist.

Among the African-American men to join the military in the early 1960s for economic reasons was Bobby Seale, later Black Panther founder and radical. As Seale came of age, he reflected on the limited opportunities that had stymied his father’s life and had turned his father into a disillusioned, violent man. Eager for something better, Seale enlisted in the Air Force where he hoped to secure job skills and an education that would help him break the cycle of racial poverty playing out within his own family. Seale was soon kicked out of the Air Force for discipline problems. However, most young, African-American men who joined the military in the early years joined for similar reasons and served out their terms successfully. Albert French, an enlisted Army man who joined the military in early summer 1965, laid out the reasons for joining, “It’s better than the streets. Half the dudes in jail already, ain’t a job nowhere, mills ain’t doing shit.”

Intangible reasons, like the desire to prove one’s manhood, inspired many young African Americans to join the military as well. Young African-American men felt emasculated in a society that denied them rights as citizens and largely condemned them to a life of poverty. Some turned to military service because it offered opportunities largely unavailable in civilian society. In the military, African-American soldiers could achieve middle-class respectability for their families by acting out the role of the primary

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breadwinner and patriarch. In addition, African-American soldiers felt that military service was an essential proving ground of black masculinity. Through heroism on the battlefield, African-American soldiers could disprove the stereotype that they were cowardly or that they did not belong in the proud, American military tradition. These reasons were reflected in the personal accounts of African-American soldiers who fought in the early years of the Vietnam War.

Jerond Belton, who enlisted in October of 1965, could have easily avoided military service by taking a music scholarship to North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University. However, Belton decided to reject the scholarship in favor of volunteering because he wanted to see the world. Reflecting on his decision, Belton remarked, “I didn’t know I would see it [the world] in a big mushroom [cloud] like the way it happened.” Partly to justify his desire for adventurism, Belton went on to say that after military service, he did use the G.I. bill to go to college. For young African-American men like Belton, military service offered the promise of “having it all,” a promising career, a college education, and the fulfillment of adolescent adventurism. One young black Marine, who was later radicalized by his experience in the Marine Corps, related how his desire to be seen as masculine drove his decision to enlist, “I passed this recruiting station, and saw in the window a sign that said, ‘JOIN THE ARMY AND BE A MAN.’” For some goddamned reason I believed that the

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26 The dream of middle class respectability can be seen in Colin Powell’s memoir. Colin Powell, My American Journey, (New York: Random House, 2005), 72-73. However, as a newlywed, he would be unable to find middle-class housing when he moved to Fort Bragg, NC with his wife.

27 Phillips, War! What is it Good For?, 207.

U.S.M.C. made a man out of anybody. And I wanted to be a MAN more than anything in this goddamned world.”

The military service branches understood African-American soldiers’ desires to achieve the military masculine ideal and they used masculinity to create unit cohesion and pride in basic training. Army and Marine drill sergeants derided all races equally and used derisive language to refer to recruits in order to bond soldiers to each other against a mutual antagonist, the drill instructor. Terry Whitmore described the use of language as a particularly effective tool in basic training. By the end of basic training, the soldiers had gotten accustomed to calling each other hogs. When during one roll call, a soldier referred to the men as hogs, the drill sergeant quickly corrected him and exclaimed, “What did you say, Marine? I see seventy-eight Marines in front of me. I have no hogs in my platoon.” The pride that swelled in Whitmore’s chest as he heard his old antagonist, the drill sergeant, praise the platoon made him for that one moment a proud Marine.

The psychological effect of basic training to bond soldiers together affected even unwilling draftees as well. David Parks, drafted in late 1965 and took basic training in January of 1966, described how the bullying tactics of his drill sergeant forced all the disparate soldiers in his platoon to bond together. “The fellows in my platoon are becoming nicer guys…Maybe it’s because they are making a team of us, getting us to realize we will have to depend upon one another in combat,” he wrote, “A white guy from New York, who hadn’t known Negroes before, said he feels we are no different from his own people. He

29 Brother Omar, “To My GI Brothers,” The Black Panther, 4 October 1968.

30 Longley, Grunts, 43-46.

31 Whitmore, Memphis Nam Sweden, 48.
feels that a lot of the other white guys are beginning to feel the same way." If basic training created for one fleeting moment a sense of racial solidarity, that solidarity slowly melted away in the sticky heat of the jungle.

In 1965 the African-American soldiers who served in Vietnam expressed a high level of pride in their service and conviction that the war would be won quickly. The common experience of training and the ideology of military masculinity lent these men a sense of confidence and pride. In addition, these soldiers had no reason not to trust the competency and professionalism of senior officers in MACV. For these early volunteers, the notion that a small, rural backwater would challenge American military might abroad seemed ludicrous. Woody Wanamaker an African-American sergeant who served three tours in country during the Vietnam War remarked on the unique atmosphere of his first tour. “At that time [1966], the general mood I saw in Vietnam was really up. There wasn’t any bickering, no “fuck the war.” And there was a lot of—I guess, pride. Even though troops were dying and I hated to see it. I still had a sense of duty. I liked the army. I enjoyed it.”

By 1968, Wanamaker would have a radically different view of military service when young, radical African-American draftees killed his best friend and severely wounded him in a fragging incident. Colin Powell who served his first tour in Vietnam in 1963 as a young captain reported a similar atmosphere of optimism despite his misgivings about U.S. strategy.

As the ground war wore on, faulty military strategy led to high casualty rates and mutual recrimination as officers and enlisted men vented their frustrations at each other over


military failures in Vietnam. General Westmoreland, the commander of MACV, used large, division wide patrols of the South Vietnam countryside in order to engage the Viet Cong.\textsuperscript{35} However, these large patrols enabled the Viet Cong to easily see the Americans coming and then melt into the jungles. A study done by the U.S. Army in 1967 found that the Viet Cong initiated 88\% of all engagements. This statistic was telling: the Viet Cong did not fight unless the odds were heavily in their favor.\textsuperscript{36} In the face of such an elusive enemy, the morale of the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps slowly morphed into frustration, fear and mutual recrimination.

The failures of American military strategy in Vietnam fueled tension between officers and enlisted men. War on the ground was usually left in the hands of junior officers who saw Vietnam as a chance to prove their prowess in combat and get their ticket stamped for further advancement in the ranks. Officers gradually began to rely on body count numbers to determine success in the war. Reliance on body count led to inflated numbers and risky, ill thought out ventures by junior officers looking for glory. More importantly, such decisions fueled resentment among enlisted men who felt that junior officers expended their lives thoughtlessly.\textsuperscript{37} Harry “Lightbulb” Bryant described the process he and his peers witnessed on the ground. “They had a habit of exaggerating a body count,” he recalled, “If we killed seven, by the time it would get back to base camp, it would have gotten to twenty-eight. Then by the time it got down to Westmoreland’s office in Saigon, it done went up to fifty-four. And by the time it left from Saigon going to Washington, it had went up to about one


\textsuperscript{36} Krepinevich, \textit{The Army and Vietnam}, 188.

hundred and twenty five.”  

Enlisted soldiers were clearly aware of the failings of military policy and they were willing to put the blame on their superior officers.

Westmoreland’s miscalculations, which seemed flagrant, rendered military authority suspect.  

Into this breach of authority, African-American soldiers found the ability to voice concerns over racial discrimination and mistreatment that had largely been silenced when morale was high. African-American soldiers’ most pressing concern over racial discrimination was the perception that African Americans shared an unequal burden in combat. Nevertheless, soldiers from all races tended to emphasize that racial tensions did not exist between soldiers in combat. After all, bullets did not discriminate and to survive, men in combat had to rely on each other. However, combat narratives of African-American soldiers suggest that the same racial tensions that structured the lives of soldiers in civilian society followed them into combat. Through careful scrutiny of the combat narratives of African-American soldiers, racial tensions surrounding the issue of combat become apparent.

Many African-American soldiers complained that they were given the most dangerous jobs in the combat unit. The position of point man or forward operator was the most dangerous position in the platoon because he was the man in front and usually the first to be shot at or step into a trap. Many African-American soldiers noted that the point man

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38 Harry “Lightbulb” Bryant, Interview with Wallace Terry, Bloods, ed, Wallace Terry, 23.

39 David Maraniss, They Marched into Sunlight, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 185.

40 Almost all the veterans who I interviewed emphasized that while racial tension was high in base areas, troops in combat areas did not experience much racial tension. See Jerond L. Belton, interview by author, digital recording, Durham, N.C., 26 March 2012. Robert Allen, interview by author, digital recording, Raleigh, N.C., 21 March 2012. Bruce Reavis, interview by author, digital recording, Durham NC, 5 May 2012. In addition, oral histories done by other interviewers and authors emphasize the same “racial equality” in combat. For some examples, see Blake, Tomas Frank. AFC 2001/001/3/7/4 Veteran’s History Project VHP MSS Box 1020 Military Papers (MS01). Landers, Robert Dowdney. AFC 2001/001/44179 Veteran’s History Project. VHP MSS Box #1257. For a really radical transformation from black radical to gung-ho soldier through combat experience see “A Black Muslim,” Baker, Nam, 56.
was almost always black and they attributed the uneven assignment of minorities to discriminatory racial attitudes of officers, who were disproportionately white.  

The strength of the perceptions and myths surrounding race in combat can be seen in how Reginald “Malik” Edwards remembered his experience walking point. Like many African-American soldiers, he noted that he was almost always assigned to walk point. However, contrary to other African-American soldiers, “Malik” argued that point was the safest position to be in combat since he would always be the first person to know what was going on. While this belief was obviously false, Malik’s insistence on his own safety and refusal to acknowledge a racial motivation for always being assigned to walk point speaks to the necessity of the belief that there were no racial tensions in combat. African-American soldiers like “Malik” had to refuse to acknowledge the importance of race in combat because the presence of racial tension directly endangered their lives.

However, Racial tensions among American troops in combat can also be seen in the narratives of soldiers trying to save their comrades under fire. Whether or not racial hierarchies actually played out in soldiers’ decisions to risk their lives to save one another, some African-American soldiers believed it did. In one example, Marine Rudolph Bridges saw a young, black man heroically risk his life to drag a fallen, white comrade out of the firing zone and into the cover. However, this touching narrative of interracial bonding in the midst of combat loses its luster because the white soldier was screaming, “Put me down

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“nigger” the entire time.\textsuperscript{43} In this example, it is unclear whether the white soldier meant to reinforce notions of black inferiority even while severely injured. The two soldiers could genuinely have been friends, in which case the white soldier’s screaming may have had less to do with reinforcing racial modes of behavior than with berating his friend for risking his own life by attempting such a foolhardy maneuver. Irrespective of the relationship between the two men, the incident made a real impression on Rudolph Bridges. Years later, he recalled the event as an extreme attempt to enact racial biases even in the midst of a life-threatening situation. Bridges’ quick judgment of this situation as an example of racial discrimination speaks to a larger concern of some African-Americans that they were disadvantaged in combat situations because white soldiers cared less about African-American lives than they did about white lives in combat.

In another narrative, albeit from 1970, some black medics invited a white medic, Jack Closkey, to their hootch to smoke marijuana. Closkey had tried to save the life of one of the black medics in the field. Passing around a joint, the black medics remarked, “This toke’s for Doc Allen. This is because Doc liked you. He said you were okay for a honky.”\textsuperscript{44} A white medic saving the life of a fellow soldier in a combat situation should have been a matter of course. However the fact that this white medic risked his life to save a black soldier must have been seen as out of the ordinary by the African-American medics who decided to recognize his bravery. Combat was not a theater where racial tensions disappeared under duress but one where racial tensions were acted out even as the individuals involved had to buy into the myth of racial insignificance.


\textsuperscript{44} Jack Closkey, “Bandages and Bodybags,” interview by Harry Maurer, \textit{Strange Ground}, ed. Maurer, 256.
Nevertheless, these narratives also make clear that moments of interracial bonding did dramatically alter the racial attitudes of those involved. Combat was the one realm in the military where white male hegemony came under clear challenge as all soldiers had to rely on each other. In the heat of battle, the Jim Crow strictures that had bound the lives of both black and white soldiers slowly disappeared. The interracial reliance forged in combat created friendships between soldiers who in any other situation would have been enemies. For instance, Arthur Gene Woodley came to rely on a fellow soldier from Arkansas who was a Klan member, yet the two would never have met or been friends in the civilian world. Their reliance on each other in combat forged a friendship that only ended when his friend died in his arms.45

For other African-American soldiers the closeness that soldiers experienced in combat broke down the notion of white male superiority and allowed African-American men to directly challenge the notions of military masculinity associated with the white male soldier. Harry Bryant in particular noted that “I got to find out that white people weren’t as tough, weren’t the number one race and all them other perceptions that they tried to ingrain in my head. I found out they got scared like I did. I found out a lot of them were a lot more cowardly than I expected. I found out some of them were more animalistic than any black people I knew. I found out that they really didn’t have their shit together.”46 It was in combat then that established racial and military hierarchies began to break down.

Combat soldiers’ concerns about racial discrimination slowly trickled back from the front lines to base areas in Vietnam and civilian communities at home, providing the basis for

45 Specialist 4 Arthur E. “Gene” Woodley, Interview with Wallace Terry, Bloods, ed, Terry, 247.
46 Specialist 5 Harod “Lighbulb” Bryant, Interview with Wallace Terry, Bloods, ed, Terry, 25.
African-American anti-war sentiment. African-American soldiers serving on base or near major bases, like Da Nang or Long Binh in Saigon used their unique position as purveyors of information to meld combat soldiers’ concerns with the radical critiques of civil rights leaders at home, giving voice to widespread racial discontent in the military. A revealing example of how news, unsanctioned by the military travelled among enlisted soldiers serving in Vietnam can be found in the letters of *The Black Panther*, a weekly newspaper published by the Black Panther Party. In one letter, a soldier in Saigon asked to be sent multiple copies of the newspaper to circulate among his comrades. The knowledge that this soldier had of this paper and his ability to share that knowledge with others speaks to the existence of informal, but highly developed networks of communication between African-American soldiers.47

Other African-American soldiers intimated how such networks functioned as communities that existed wherever African-American soldiers happened to meet each other. For example, David Parks mentioned a transformative moment when he was riding the train to Oakland, CA with other African-American soldiers. Their conversation soon turned to racial discrimination in the Army and Parks found that his experiences were almost universal. “All the souls here on the train talk about the hell they caught, the nasty details and the browbeating.”48 After this discussion with his fellow soldiers, Parks decided that fighting for promotion in the Army was not worth it since African-American soldiers would always get short shifted by white officers. Active soldiers used these networks to share complaints.


48 Parks, *GI Diary*, 52.
Sharing experiences gave men an opportunity to apply their insights to ideologies springing out of communities back home.  

Rumblings of discontent among African-American soldiers in Vietnam that trickled back to the civilian world influenced a younger generation of draftees to be wary of military service. The men coming of draft age in 1966 and 1967 had grown up in the crux of the civil rights movement at a time when military service started becoming a less and less desirable option for African-American men because of the Vietnam War. Many did not want to serve but often felt that they had no choice but to join the service because of the draft. A good indicator of the changing views of young African-American recruits comes from opinion surveys of their views on the draft and military service. In 1965, a Pentagon survey of Army recruits showed that 40 percent of African-American respondents saw military service as a primary source to economic betterment. However, after 1965, 50 percent of surveyed military volunteers cited the draft as their primary reason for joining. These results suggest military culture was shifting from the initial high morale at the beginning of

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49 There are many examples from all time periods that show this shift towards racial radicalization because of knowledge passed between African-American soldiers. For just a few examples, see: Ralph C. Thomas III, Interview by WGBH, “Interview with Ralph C. Thomas III,” Vietnamizing the War. Phillip Key, Interview by WGBH, “Interview with Phillip Key,” Vietnamizing the War. Haywood T. Kirkland, Interview by Wallace Terry, Bloods, 103.


52 Baskir and Strauss, Chance and Circumstance, 125.

the Vietnam War towards a slow disillusionment that would make civilian men less likely to participate in military service. In addition reports from the press claimed mass discrimination against racial minorities and the poor in the draft. Young, African-American men who ended up joining the service felt resentful that their fates had been sealed because of their race and educational level.\(^{54}\)

Press accounts of racial discrimination in the draft process reflect real concerns that African Americans had with draft boards, committees made up of local worthies who decided a draftee’s eligibility for service. In 1962 less than two hundred draft board members out of twelve thousand were African American. By 1970, African-American representation on draft boards had increased to 7 percent but was still well below the national representation of African Americans in the population, which was 11 percent.\(^{55}\) In addition, the Selective Service Board only gave educational deferments to students making a high grade point average or enrolled full time in college. Since African-American college students were often at an educational and economic disadvantage, they were not eligible for educational deferments.\(^{56}\) Military historians argue that most Vietnam War veterans were not draftees. However, closer scrutiny of the population data suggests that this claim can be misleading. In 1969, 88 percent of combat casualties were draftees, showing that while the majority of soldiers may have been volunteers, the soldiers most likely to be in combat duty were


draftees. Since African Americans were vulnerable to military service because of their economic status and racial identity and because they perceived that they shouldered a disproportionate burden of the fighting, the draft process fueled resentment in a new generation of recruits schooled in radical civil rights ideology and suspicious of military service.

Perhaps the draft program that caused the most resentment from the radical black press and young African-American men was Project 100,000, a program that brought the racial vulnerability of African Americans to center stage. Project 100,000 was based on the report *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, a study created by Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel P. Moynihan, which argued that the cause of black poverty in America was not unemployment but the lack of strong, male role models in nuclear families. Importantly for the military, the Moynihan Report revealed that 50 percent of African-American men were ineligible for military service and one of the main reasons was because they did not meet military IQ test requirements. Moynihan suggested that the recruitment of poor African-American men into the military would instill values of middle-class respectability and American masculinity in the African-American community. The Moynihan Report was meant to be a sympathetic portrayal of African-American poverty. However, in the wake of the Watts rebellion, a violent riot in the poor, mainly black Watts district of Los Angeles prompted by police brutality, African-American leaders like Benjamin Payton, the director of


\[60\] Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 42.
the Protestant Council of New York City’s Office of Church and Race and others quickly interpreted the report as blaming African-Americans for their own poverty instead of elucidating the role of the state in perpetuating racial poverty.61

In 1966, the Johnson Administration seized on the Moynihan Report proposal to create Project 100,000, envisioned as a perfect solution to both their manpower demands for more draftees and the problem of poverty, especially racial poverty. By drafting poor, young African-American men into the military, the Johnson Administration hoped to minimize the impact of the Vietnam War on white middle class voters as well.62 The problem with Project 100,000 was that Pentagon officials and mid-grade officers heavily resisted the recruitment of these poor, young men and dubbed Project 100,000 recruits derisively as the “moron corps.” Nearly 60 percent of these recruits ended up on the front lines of the Vietnam War and about 60 percent of them were African-American. For this reason, few of the young men garnered job skills from their military experience.63 Although the success of this program for the military and for the affected soldiers would be highly contested in the military, most officers saw the new recruits as unfit for military service. In addition, African American media outlets interpreted this program as taking advantage of poor men with no recourse to escape the draft.

Ironically, even as the military fought against press reports that African-Americans were asked to bear a disproportionate amount of the fighting and dying in Vietnam, programs


62 Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, 39.

like Project 100,000 only served to popularize these beliefs within the African-American community. Casualty rates for African-American soldiers did drop below their proportion in the civilian population between 1968 and 1973. Nevertheless the popular view of Vietnam had been ingrained in the minds of African-American soldiers, and they continued to allege that they bore a disproportionate burden in combat throughout the course of the war.\textsuperscript{64} For example, Phillip Key served in Vietnam in 1969, when casualty rates for African-Americans had already dropped significantly. Yet he still believed that African-American soldiers were more liable for combat duty as well as other punishments. “A lot of brothers were being busted, a lot of brothers that wasn't being promoted, a lot of brothers who were catching the shit detail jobs.”\textsuperscript{65}

Thanks to Project 100,000 anti-war sentiment among African-American soldiers and civilian communities intensified when a draft call was issued to Muhammad Ali, the world’s heavy-weight, boxing champion and radical civil rights icon. Although Muhammad Ali failed the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) and was declared ineligible for the draft, his draft status officially changed to “eligible” on February 16, 1966 with the passage of Project 100,000 and he received his draft call.\textsuperscript{66} The Nation of Islam paper, \textit{Muhammad Speaks}, immediately seized on the popularity of Muhammad Ali to springboard its own blistering critique of African-American involvement in the Vietnam War onto the national scene. Ali borrowed on black nationalism’s interpretation of the proper role of African Americans to American military service when he asked, “Why should they ask me and other

\textsuperscript{64} For statistics: Baskir, \textit{Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation}, 8.

\textsuperscript{65} Phillip Key, “Vietnamizing the War, WGBH Interviews.

\textsuperscript{66} Phillips, \textit{War! What is it Good For?}, 208.
so-called Negroes to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs on brown people in Viet Nam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? As the foremost African-American athlete in the United States and a paragon of black masculinity, Ali’s refusal to be drafted associated draft protest with desirable black masculinity rather than cowardice. For African-American men already disillusioned with the war, Ali provided a voice and credibility to their reluctance not to serve in the military. In addition, his bravery in standing up for his anti-war sentiments despite being stripped of his boxing title and license in 1967 and forced into retirement for three years inspired other African-American draftees to voice their anti-war sentiments. Ali’s ultimate triumph in the Supreme Court case *Clay vs. United States* only added to his legendary reputation as one of the greatest icons of radical black masculinity. For young African-American recruits influenced by Ali, real masculinity lay not in dying for what they perceived to be an imperialist war, but risking jail and permanent separation from family and friends by standing up for the principles of racial equality and pride.

The specter of cowardice surrounding desertion brought added significance to Ali’s defiant behavior. For Terry Whitmore, the Marine deserter, the charge of cowardice was especially potent and he took special care to emphasize that it was not cowardice that kept him from returning to the war. According to Whitmore, he had already more than proved his own bravery under fire by saving his lieutenant when he himself was injured. He went on to explain that his decision to desert was thus not motivated by cowardice but by anger at the Marine Corps. The Marines had promised him that he would be returning home after his ordeal but then changed his orders to return to Vietnam and not to the unit that he had

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originally served with, which was decimated. For Whitmore, Ali’s protest provided an alternative model of masculinity that painted his own actions as bravery for finally standing against an unjust war and accepting permanent exile from America.

For Air Force recruit, Bruce Reavis, Ali’s refusal to enter military service cast his own decision to join the Air Force as unmanly. Reavis’ introduction to military service was familiar to many young African-American men who served. While he had won a football scholarship to Rutgers University, he was unprepared for college courses and ended up dropping out after his freshman year. Realizing that he could not avoid the draft, Reavis preempted the military by deciding to join the Air Force. Reflecting on his military service, Reavis expressed regret that he did not choose to fight the draft like his hero, Muhammad Ali. Although he realized intellectually that he did not have Ali’s significant economic and political resources to fight the draft, he considered his decision to join the Air Force as a betrayal of his own masculinity. Revealingly, Reavis remarked, “I’m not proud of my military service. If I were a man, I’d have gone to prison like Ali.”

Ali’s draft resistance against Project 100,000 quickly became a media flashpoint that served to popularize a radical re-interpretation of African-American soldiers’ relation to the military during the Vietnam War. Ali flipped black masculine expectation on its head through his actions by suggesting that draft avoidance was an act of masculine bravery while bowing to the draft was an act of cowardice for young men.

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69 Bruce Reavis, interview by author, digital recording, Durham NC, 5 May 2012.

By 1968, conditions were ripe for racial conflict to unfold in the United States military. An earlier, older generation of proud African-American veterans had been worn down, disillusioned, and killed by the first brutal years of the war. In their place, a younger generation of African-American draftees more willing to question authority and conditioned by the radical civil rights movement and the black press to be suspicious of military authority came into the service. Although the military tried to redress racial ills and act more sensitively to civil rights in the later years of the war, the image of the military as a white, patriarchal organization that exploited poor, young black men had been set in the minds of young recruits. This younger generation of African-American soldiers was disillusioned by the traditional military masculinity espoused by the older generation of volunteers. They would find in radical black masculinity, represented by groups like the Black Panthers, a racial identity that spoke to their particular concerns about race, government, and military service.

Section II: The Storm Breaks 1968-1972

The rise of radical black masculinity was only a small part of a larger movement of general unrest and discontent in the military spurred by the Tet Offensive of 1968. A strong anti-draft movement in the United States supported anti-war organizing among Vietnam War soldiers and veterans. Between 1968 and 1973, a number of anti-war groups, operating locally at different military bases, provided a strong, military voice against the war. However, rather than participating in general discontent, black discontent took a radically different path and African-American soldiers often clashed with white soldiers. African-American soldiers perceived their concerns with military service to be different from the

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71 Cotright, Soldiers in Revolt, 25-27.
concerns of white soldiers because they believed that they bore a disproportionate burden in combat and in the draft.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, the radical civil rights movement provided an alternative subtext that questioned the very belonging of African-Americans to the American state, setting African-American soldiers at odds with both the military and white soldiers. In the later years of the war, tensions between white and African-American soldiers would escalate into rioting as well as numerous incidents of interracial violence that had remained largely under the surface during the early years.\textsuperscript{73} Ultimately, the rise of radical black masculinity would not only drive a wedge between African-American soldiers and other soldiers, but also challenge the very construction of military masculinity itself.

The first turning point of the Vietnam War was the Tet Offensive, a surprise offensive by the North Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{74} In purely military terms, the Tet Offensive turned out to be a complete disaster for the National Liberation Front and its North Vietnamese allies.\textsuperscript{75} However, the ability of the North Vietnamese to launch the counteroffensive despite claims by Johnson that they were close to defeat proved to be the death knell for the Johnson Administration and Westmoreland’s command of the war. General Creighton Abrams would replace Westmoreland as Commander of MACV on April 10, 1968 and Richard M. Nixon would take the oath of office on January 10, 1969.\textsuperscript{76} For the next five years (1968-1973), the U.S. would be involved in a long, slow withdrawal of troops even as MACV tried

\textsuperscript{72} Graham, \textit{The Brothers’ Vietnam War}, 145.

\textsuperscript{73} Longley, \textit{Grunts}, 129-130.

\textsuperscript{74} Lawrence, \textit{The Vietnam War}, 115.

\textsuperscript{75} Lawrence, \textit{The Vietnam War}, 123.

\textsuperscript{76} Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 18. Also, Lawrence, \textit{The Vietnam War}, 138.
increasingly desperate efforts to preserve a stable and independent South Vietnamese state.\textsuperscript{77}

For soldiers already frustrated by the lack of U.S. success, the latter half of the war offered more of the same strategies even as the U.S. lost the will to fight and instead began to negotiate seriously with the North Vietnamese for an early settlement to the war. The soldiers who fought the Vietnam War felt increasingly neglected by both the military and the government, leading to mass indiscipline among the ranks.\textsuperscript{78}

The soldiers who bore the brunt of the fighting in the latter half of the war were more likely to be draftees. This was partly because volunteers and those professional soldiers who already served in Vietnam were more likely to get stateside service. In addition, senior non-commissioned officers who did serve in Vietnam could use their seniority to get out of combat duty and remain on the relatively secure military bases.\textsuperscript{79} In the absence of volunteers and professional soldiers, draftees began to shoulder a disproportionate amount of combat duty.\textsuperscript{80} In oral histories, African-American and white drafted soldiers highlight the pervasive lack of enthusiasm for the war on the ground. Many expressed a sense of

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\textsuperscript{77}Krepinevich, \textit{The Army and Vietnam}, 1986., Lawrence, \textit{The Vietnam War}, 2008., and Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 1996. All offer a very balanced but ultimately negative critique of American strategy 1968-1973. These historians acknowledge some success in the later years particularly with programs like CORDS (which was designed to win the hearts and minds of Vietnamese peasants through combining and coordinating civilian and military operations/aid agencies to strengthen local government administration and root out the NLF). However, the ultimate view is that change came slowly if at all. For a different opinion see, Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 1999. This book is too uncritical of Abrams and the author barely veils his hero worship of this general. Nevertheless, even Sorley admits that whatever good policies that Abrams implements in the late years of the war, they are ultimately undermined by Nixon’s slow and relentless withdrawal of troops and the seriousness of peace talks beginning in 1968.

\textsuperscript{78}Cotright, \textit{Soldiers in Revolt}, 18. This trend towards indiscipline can be seen in increased rates of discharge among the enlisted for misconduct, unfitness, and unsuitability. In 1967, the Army had 10.8/1000, by 1973, it had 27.4/1000. Even more astoundingly, the Marine Corps went from 13.7/1000 to 49.0/1000 in the same time period. In addition, attrition rates among trainees (most of them drafted) increased in the Marines from 4.2 percent in 1968 to 22 percent in 1971.

\textsuperscript{79}Spector, \textit{After Tet}, 248.

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trepidation, dread, or anger at the racial and socio-economic injustice of the draft. Stan Goff, an African-American soldier who was drafted in January of 1968 along with his friend Bob Sanders, explained the hopelessness of the draft situation for those who were lower class or black. “If you had a B average, or your father was wealthy, or maybe you knew a congressman, then maybe you could get out of it,” he claimed. “I know there were bureaucratic loopholes, but I couldn’t get in on any of them. So I got my draft greetings. I just succumbed. What could I do?” Even more poignantly, Robert Kirk who reported to his draft board in 1969 decided to appeal his draft call. “I’ll never forget standing before those old men. They didn’t say one word to me as I presented my case. Not one word.” Afterwards he was ushered out of the room where he saw an office lady tell an eighteen-year-old African-American man who couldn’t read or write to “Just put your mark right here.” For Kirk, the experience of seeing an illiterate, African-American man being sent to Vietnam confirmed his suspicions that as an able bodied man, he would have no chance to avoid the draft.

Unwillingness to serve in Vietnam extended from the enlisted men to the officer corps. Many of the younger officers entered the service with the skeptical mindset of young college students involved in the anti-war movement. Charles A. Noon, a white officer who served in the Army from January of 1968 to January of 1970, joined ROTC in college because of familial pressure. After fulfilling his military obligations, Noon became an anti-

81 As always there are more stories about draft/service inequity than I can begin to list, many noting that everyone but rich, young white men were called to serve. Several poignant stories can be found: Anonymous Marine, interview by Mark Baker, in Nam, ed. Baker, 6-7. Stan Beesley, “Sua Sponte,” in Vietnam, ed. Beesley, 131-132. Harry Maurer, “Introduction,” in Strange Ground, ed. Maurer, 2-3.

82 Goff and Sanders, Brothers, xvi.

Another young, white officer to express his doubts about the war was the grandson of World War II general S.L.A. Marshall. John Marshall risked complete estrangement from his family when he obtained conscientious objector status. In a letter to his grandson, S.L.A. Marshall voiced strong disappointment, “That the Army seemingly prefers to give you an honorable separation means nothing to this part of what was once your family…We know why you quit. It wasn’t conscience. You simply chickened out. You didn’t have the guts to take it…No male among us has ever been like that and the women, too, thank heaven, are stronger. That means you don’t belong. In families with deep ties to military service, the Vietnam War strained bonds between an older generation of men who served and a younger generation of men beginning to doubt the morality of the war.

By the beginning of 1968, a manpower crisis had taken shape: enlisted soldiers and officers had lost faith in the military’s strategy in Vietnam. In addition, the popular anti-war movement in civilian society exacerbated the military’s manpower problem by planting fear and consternation in the minds of draftees who were unwilling to risk their lives for a war that the military seemed to be losing. This crisis extended from the Army to the Marine Corps and other branches of military service as well. For African-American soldiers in particular, the breakdown of Army order by 1968 created a vacuum where alternative understandings of masculinity resonated and gained added significance. Two events influenced by the radical civil rights movement in particular, unleashed critiques of the Vietnam War that many African-American soldiers already harbored inside.

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84 Noon, Charles A. III AFC2001/001/73905 Veteran’s History Project.


86 Cotright, Soldiers in Revolt, 25-27.
In April 1968, barely two and a half months after the start of the Tet Offensive, Richard J. Ford III was listening to Radio Free Hanoi while resting in the jungle during a search-and-destroy patrol. Ford and other African-American soldiers had listened to Radio Free Hanoi primarily for the soul music that the North Vietnamese government broadcasted. They rarely listened to Hanoi’s political critiques of the war because they viewed the station as a mouthpiece of North Vietnamese propaganda. However, on this day, Hanoi Hannah, the English-speaking radio broadcaster of the North Vietnamese regime had earth-shattering news for African-American soldiers listening to the program. Famed civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. As Ford listened in shock to the news, Hanoi Hannah entreated her audience, “Soul brothers, go home. Whitey raping your mothers and your daughters, burning down your homes. What you over here for? This is not your war.” As Ford struggled to hold in the tears, he wondered for the first time if Hanoi Hannah was right. “I really thought—I really started believing it, because it was too many blacks than there should be in infantry.”

Although Martin Luther King Jr. was heavily criticized in the last years of his life for being at times both too radical (in his opposition to the Vietnam War) and too conservative (in his refusal to move away from non-violence), he remained a gigantic figure in the civil rights movement. King always stood in the middle between the more conservative and more radical elements. His decision to speak out against the Vietnam War in May of 1967 shows just how radical the civil rights movement had become. Always good at gauging

87 Specialist 4 Richard J. Ford III, Interview by Wallace Terry, Bloods, ed. Terry, 41, 42.

88 For arguments criticizing King from the black nationalist/black power point of view see Simon Wendt, The Spirit and the Shotgun, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007), 155. Also, for anger at King for denouncing the Vietnam War and other controversy surrounding him, see Group IV Manuscript Division the Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Box A88.
public sentiment, King decided to come out against the war even as more conservative civil rights organizations derided him. However, the reaction of NAACP members to Roy Wilkins’ denunciation of King suggested that African Americans were more united against the war than previously thought. Out of some two hundred letters that the NAACP received about King’s decision to come out against the war, over 90 percent denounced the NAACP for failing to support King. Many of the letters contained returned NAACP membership cards. If King’s decision to support the war is indicative of a larger trend towards anti-war sentiment among African Americans, his assassination succeeded in uniting African Americans against the war. Black communities interpreted his assassination as the ultimate betrayal by the American state, which had failed to protect Dr. King or enact enough civil rights change. In the aftermath of his death, one hundred and twenty American cities experienced racial riots.

African-American soldiers were already aware of King’s opposition to the Vietnam War and in the aftermath of his assassination, increasing numbers began to seriously consider the reasons given by the radical civil rights movement for why they should not be involved in an American war overseas. In Ford’s narrative, it is the King assassination that finally

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89 Group IV Manuscript Division the Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Box A88, Vietnam War Correspondence 1967.


91 Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 163.

pushes him to question the Army’s role in Vietnam. Similarly, in Terry Whitmore’s narrative, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and his experience of the black subculture in Tokyo’s soul bars served as a similar catalyst in his transformation from loyal Marine to politically conscious war deserter. During his interview with an organization that helped deserters gain political asylum overseas, the King assassination provided him with justification for his decision. Thus the King assassination became a moment where African-American soldiers revisited and legitimized pre-existing critiques of the Vietnam War.

As African Americans in urban communities responded to the assassination with violence, some soldiers feared that they would be used for riot duty. The prospect was not unreasonable because some African-American soldiers had already been used for riot control during the Long Hot Summer of 1967 when the media reported almost daily incidents of racial violence and rioting in urban areas. In addition, the use of the 82nd Airborne Division, a mainly black division to quell rioting in Detroit in the same summer, awakened civilian societies and soldiers to the possibility of conflicted loyalties in riot control duty. Nevertheless the scope of racial rioting after the Martin Luther King assassination and the heavier use of Army and Marine regulars on riot duty in 1968 forced African-American

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soldiers who were reluctant to choose between loyalty to the military or racial loyalty into a moment of public reckoning.\textsuperscript{97}

At Fort Hood, Texas the refusal of the so-called Fort Hood G.I.s to participate in riot duty in Chicago in the aftermath of the assassination brought national media attention and forced African-American soldiers for the first time to see their racial loyalty and military loyalty in direct and violent conflict. African-American soldiers at Fort Hood, many of whom were veterans of the Vietnam War, harbored deep concerns about their role in the military. They gathered at a parade ground on base to voice their concerns. After negotiations with several junior officers, they met with the commander of the division, Major General John K. Boles Jr., who told them they could remain on the parade ground while he decided whether or not these G.I.s had the right to refuse riot duty. However, MP Lieutenant Colonel Edwin Kulo, unfamiliar with the circumstances, ordered them to disperse before hearing from the commander. Unwilling to budge, forty-three soldiers were ultimately arrested by military police.\textsuperscript{98} Perhaps bowing to public pressure and scrutiny, almost all of the Fort Hood G.I.s were given light sentences ranging from six months confinement, loss of $63 from one month’s pay, to being demoted to the lowest rank.\textsuperscript{99} Nevertheless, these instances forced African-American soldiers who were already harboring concerns about their relationship with military service to voice their critiques publicly.

Testimony from the Fort Hood G.I.s and many other African-American soldiers involved in similar but not as high profile protest to the King assassination gave insight into

\textsuperscript{97}Wendt, \textit{The Spirit and the Shotgun}, 169.


\textsuperscript{99}“Struggle to free Black GIs who refused riot job,” \textit{Muhammad Speaks}, October 25, 1968, 7.
how African-American soldiers resisted the prospect of having to choose between military loyalty and racial loyalty. According to the NAACP attorney for the soldiers at Fort Hood, many of them reported that if the soldier “complains to[o] often or to[o] loudly, he finds himself with a lot of extra duty in his company. He might get himself into a lot of difficulty by being branded a ‘troublemaker.’ For a career soldier this is a dangerous thing. He doesn’t want to make waves unnecessarily if he is depending on it for his livelihood.” These soldiers largely did not identify themselves as radical when they entered the military. While many were drafted soldiers, they wanted to simply serve their time peacefully. However, the specter of riot duty pushed these soldiers to choose between loyalty to the military or to their racial community. In addition, the larger institutional structure of the military discouraged African American soldiers from voicing their concerns about race and riot duty. When they did voice their concerns, these African American soldiers were then typecast as hopeless radicals and troublemakers.

Similarly, Haywood T. Kirkland’s unit was sent to Chicago as a riot squadron during the Democratic National Convention. When Kirkland protested, his captain pushed the issue, “Kirkland, you going to Chicago if I have to carry you myself.” Partly because of this experience, Kirkland decided he had to get out of the Army as soon as possible. He became a troublemaker and ultimately convinced his officers that it was more convenient to honorably discharge him earlier than to continue to put up with his antics. Upon release from the Army, Kirkland became involved in a black nationalist organization in Washington, D.C.¹⁰¹ Kirkland perceived the Army’s role in riot duty as a declaration of war against civilian

¹⁰⁰ Struggle to free Black GIs who refused riot job,” *Muhammad Speaks*, October 25, 1968, 37.

African-American communities. Unable to reconcile his own loyalty to his race with an already tenuous relationship to military service, Kirkland felt forced into open opposition to the military.

Finally, Malik Edwards, who had already left the Army by the time of the King assassination, pointed to the event to assert his belief that African-Americans were already fighting an internal war with whites. This prospect of racial war made it easier for him to accept the possibility of death when he joined the Black Panther Party. “For me the thought of being killed in the Black Panther Party by the police and the thought of being killed by Vietnamese was just a qualitative differences. I had left one war and came back and got into another one.” According to Malik, other Vietnam veterans in the Panthers felt similarly. For Vietnam veterans like Malik and Kirkland, military loyalty had not only been replaced by racial loyalty but their new loyalty meant direct antagonism towards the state.

If the King assassination loosened already strained bonds of loyalty between the military and African-American soldiers, the model of radical black masculinity provided by militant civil rights symbols like the Black Panthers would shape how African-American soldiers expressed their resistance in the military as it developed in 1968 and 1969. Wearing their black leather boots, jackets, and berets and carrying guns, radical black power groups like the Black Panthers sent a powerful message about black masculinity. Gaining prominence in 1967 and early 1968, the Black Panther Party made it clear that they would no longer accept police brutality and that they would fight violence with violence. The Panthers celebrated the image of martial masculinity and violence by positing the police as an

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102 Malik Edwards, Interview by Wallace Terry, Bloods, ed. Terry, 14.

external, conquering Army and themselves as freedom fighters.\textsuperscript{104} As Bobby Seale would later recount in admiration, Huey Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party, was the “baddest motherfucker to ever set foot in history.”\textsuperscript{105}

The Panthers’ critique of the police as an occupying Army put them in direct opposition to African-American involvement in military service and provided a masculine alternative for African-American veterans disillusioned with the Vietnam War but still holding on their identity as masculine warriors.\textsuperscript{106} Although the percentage of African-American soldiers who joined the Black Panthers was miniscule compared to the larger population of African-American soldiers, they made up a large number of the Panthers. Both Seale and Newton later remarked that Vietnam veterans who joined the Panthers played a vital role in teaching members to handle guns and other weapons. Radicalized by their military experience, veterans like Malik Edwards and Haywood T. Kirkland joined black nationalist or black power groups afterwards. Radical civil rights groups, like the Black Panthers, gave shape and form to amorphous black, anti-war sentiment by providing a clear, masculine alternative to military masculinity, thus forming the basis for a new understanding of radical black masculinity.

Despite rumblings of protest among African-American soldiers, the military and MACV were still largely unaware of the growing racial discontent in its ranks in early 1968. The military was preoccupied with more pressing disasters, such as the Tet Offensive and growing discontent among white soldiers and anti-war protestors at home. In the tense social

\textsuperscript{104} Wendt, \textit{The Spirit and the Shotgun}, 171-172.

\textsuperscript{105} Seale, \textit{Seize the Time}, 63.

\textsuperscript{106} Murch, \textit{Living for the City}, 139-140.

On August 29, 1968, the balmy Saigon night awakened with gunfire, shouts, and rioting as a small number of prisoners started to fight with each other in the largest military prison in Vietnam. Long Binh Jail, colloquially known as “LBJ,” erupted in violence as rioting prisoners numbering in the several hundreds overpowered the guards, the stockade commander, and set fire to a number of buildings, including the administration building that contained the prison records.\footnote{Ronald H. Spector, \textit{After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam,} (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 242.} The rioters were almost all African-Americans and reports quickly circulated that these black rioters were beating and harassing white prisoners within the jail. Military police [MPs] soon arrived at the compound and managed to retake most of the prison area using tear gas and fixed bayonets. However, over two hundred African-American prisoners held out against the military police in a sector known as “Big Red” in the northern part of the Long Binh compound. These prisoners soon made makeshift tribal robes out of Army blankets and adopted other black nationalist garb. The military police cordoned off “Big Red” and decided to starve out the prisoners. After one month, only fifteen prisoners remained in “Big Red.” At this point, the military police finally decided to act and
a squad armed with bayonets and tear gas managed to subdue the rest of the rioters. One prisoner died in the riot, twenty-six other prisoners were injured, and eight guards, including the commander of the jail, were hospitalized.\textsuperscript{109}

Immediately after the prison riot, Army officials scrambled to minimize its importance to the national media. Significantly, the riot was not reported in the \textit{Washington Post} until late September 29, 1968, almost a full month after the incident. The news report quoted officers who emphasized that the Long Binh jail riot was an isolated incident. “These guys in there have already struck out in the Army. One way or another, they’ve failed with their own unit. That’s why they’re here.”\textsuperscript{110}

The sheer size and scale of the riot suggests much more widespread discontent among African-American soldiers than the Army was willing to admit. In addition, the Long Binh Jail riot was not an isolated incident. Earlier in June of 1968, black Marines in a stockade in Da Nang had mounted a similar prison riot.\textsuperscript{111} Moreover, by the summer of 1968, African Americans formed 60 percent of the prison population at Long Binh stockade and over 40 percent at the III MAF brigade, the two largest U.S. military prisons in Vietnam. Many of these prisoners were guilty of petty crimes that should have been handled at the company level rather than at the stockade, including drug use, insubordination to officers, and public drunkenness. In the aftermath of the prison riot, Army officials at Long Binh struggled to separate true criminals from those who were there on petty charges.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{109} Spector, \textit{After Tet}, 255.


\textsuperscript{111} Spector, \textit{After Tet}, 243.

\textsuperscript{112} Spector, \textit{After Tet}, 249-251.
After 1968, all branches of military service began to experience racial rioting on bases. Although I have found no comprehensive list of riots or way to effectively measure the scope of racial violence, some of the more famous riots include the U.S.S. *Kittyhawk* riot in the Navy in 1972, the Da Nang riot in the Marines in 1968, and the Frankfurt riot in the Army 1971. The evidence suggests that new militant understandings of black masculinity born out of black soldiers’ experiences affected the military as a whole. In addition, a few C.I.A. reports from 1967 and 1970 reveal tantalizing glimpses of the extent of racial violence in the military. According to one report in 1970, the Army in Vietnam experienced a total of 340 incidents of racial violence involving African-Americans and whites from January to November of 1970. Considering that many incidents of racial violence probably went unreported, the number suggests a serious and widespread problem.

Even as racial violence garnered the most publicity, the most common expressions of militant black masculinity took more subtle forms that provided the basis for a flourishing counterculture of dissent. Many African-American soldiers were limited in the forms of discontent they could show and military officials ruthlessly quashed any overt political activity like anti-war organizing. In addition, many soldiers were still beholden to military pay and could not afford a bad conduct discharge. These soldiers could not participate in overt resistance activities even if they were sympathetic to the radical civil rights movement.

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113 Westheider, *Brothers in Arms*, xi-xvi.

114 Provost Marshal to Chief of Staff, Saigon, December 9, 1970, Confrontations between Caucasian and Negro personnel (November), NARA Administration E.O. 12958. Declassified by NARA 9/5/02.

115 Cotright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 2005. This book gives a great description of anti-war and African-American organizing in the military especially after 1968. It seems that there were a myriad of groups that formed, usually limited to a certain base. No organization got a national level foothold in the military except maybe the VVAW and then only because it was a veteran’s organization, not an organization of active-duty soldiers. In addition, the bibliography of this book has a list of various radical newspapers printed by these protest organizations.
These soldiers expressed their discontent through styles of dress, socialization, and behavior in their treatment of each other and white soldiers. Many African-American soldiers used the black power salute and/or the “dap,” a highly elaborate handshake between soldiers that could last up to several minutes at a time. “Dap” was a sign of solidarity and bonding among African-American men. Dap may have had its origins in African-American culture in Vietnam. One soldier claimed that the term came from the Vietnamese word for beautiful.116

African-American soldiers also began to adopt black nationalist ideology and ways of dress such as tribal dashikis. During the Long Binh Jail riot, the two hundred African-American soldiers who took over the “Big Red” sector of the stockade wore dashikis, which were a symbol of black nationalism and the “black is beautiful” movement.117 In 1970, Henry Rollins, an African-American soldier who became de-facto leader of Long Binh Army base was famous for wearing his hair in an afro and tribal dress. When a white sergeant major tried to courts martial him, he received a verdict of “innocent” by a jury of peers, all of them African-American and sporting afros as well.118 Although these forms of rebellion may seem to be minor and even petty, they were often the only ways African-American soldiers could express their discontent. Their ability to control aspects of their life like fashion and engage in little moments of dissent became powerful symbols of their independence from military masculinity. In addition, the mass participation of African-American soldiers in this counterculture limited the ability of the Army to respond.


At times, the practice of “dap” could even lead to racial violence. In one racial incident involving the dap, Wilton Persons, an Army officer described an incident at a mess hall where a group of African-American soldiers dapped at the same three tables. One day, a group of white soldiers, who were tired of seeing this extravagant display of black solidarity every day, decided to take over those same tables used by the soldiers and imitate them by dapping as well. The African-American soldiers reacted angrily and started a fight. Wayne Smith, an African-American soldier who served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970 commented on the impressions the dap must have made on the white soldiers, “It [the dap] must have seemed like some kind of secret society, like we’ve got our own “Skull and Bones” society or our own Masons, and that could provoke anger. But I also think some white brothers may have been envious of our willingness to show affection.” Within the larger sphere of discontent among all soldiers during the Vietnam War, African-American soldiers and white soldiers fought against each other even as they resisted a common enemy in the military bureaucracy.

As African-American soldiers created their own understanding of masculinity and came into conflict with white soldiers, they created separate, racially distinct spaces on bases and in major cities in Vietnam. While segregation was not a new phenomenon in American military service, the context for this segregation was one of personal choice. Rather than being forced into racial segregation, many African-American soldiers chose to live together or associate mainly or only with African-American soldiers. For white soldiers, this self-segregation by African-American soldiers was seen as both threatening and desirable, which


120 Wayne Smith, “You Look like a Gook,” Interview by Appy, Patriots, 364.
only increased racial tensions. For African-American soldiers, self-segregation promoted racial solidarity and pride and gave these soldiers a power and agency in numbers, which played into the growing tide of radical black masculinity.

For example, Long Binh military base remained a hot spot of racial tension with over seventy-nine incidents of racial violence in 1969.\textsuperscript{121} One white soldier who was posted to Long Binh in late 1969, noted that the base was ruled by a black sergeant wearing tribal dress. Another white soldier marveled at the sign that hung over the gates to the base made up of dog tags that declared “Revolution.” That African-Americans were able to hang such a sign in one of the largest U.S. Army bases speaks to the extent of racial dissent in the Army.\textsuperscript{122} This incident, as well as other incidents at Long Binh including the prison riot and Henry Rollins’ courts martial, made the base a hot spot for racial activity. By pooling their resources and sticking together in an act of racial solidarity, these African-American soldiers gained a level of protection.

Even subtle forms of discontent generated a spiral of actions and reactions that intensified racial violence. Mutual hostility between African-American soldiers and white soldiers only encouraged more racial segregation. For instance, in Saigon, the African-American entertainment district was in Cholon and at Soul Alley, while whites patronized bars on Tu Do Street. Whites and African-Americans did not patronize the same establishments and those who broke the strict rules of segregation could be prey to racial violence.\textsuperscript{123} James Calbreath found himself in for a shock on his first introduction to race

\textsuperscript{121} Provost Marshal to Chief of Staff, Saigon, December 9, 1970, Confrontations between Caucasian and Negro personnel (November), NARA Administration E.O. 12958. Declassified by NARA 9/5/02.
\textsuperscript{122} Anonymous, Interview by Harry Maurer, \textit{Strange Ground}, 515.
\textsuperscript{123} Robert Allen, interview by author, digital recording, Raleigh, N.C., 21 March 2012. Other interviews that tell similar stories are: Landers, Robert Dowdney, AFC 2001/001/44179 Veteran’s History Project, VHP MSS
relations in Vietnam. “The first real casualty I ever saw was a young black man who came in on a stretcher and he was hanging his head over the end of the stretcher and it was because he didn’t have a jaw.” Apparently, the young man had been drinking in a bar with some friends when a white soldier flung a fragmentation grenade at them.\(^{124}\)

Radical black masculinity was not the only possibility for African Americans. Many officers like Joseph B. Anderson, Colin Powell, and Archie “Joe” Biggers remained dedicated to a traditional understanding of military service even as younger African-American soldiers resisted.\(^{125}\) These soldiers maintained the values that had brought them into the Army professionally and often found themselves on the opposite side of a growing gulf among African-American soldiers. Anderson for instance pointed out that there were few opportunities for him in private industry. “As a graduate of West Point, I was an officer and a gentleman by act of Congress. Where else could a black go and get that label just like that?”\(^{126}\)

Other, older African-American soldiers who sympathized with younger, radical draftees would find the cultural, generation gap impossible to reconcile. Sergeant Woody Wanamaker felt initially sympathetic to racial discontent in the Army after King’s assassination. However, other African-American soldiers in his platoon saw him as a racial

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traitor for his attempts to work within the military institution to create interracial dialogue. These soldiers threw a grenade into his hootch, killing his best friend, another black sergeant, and wounding him severely. Whatever empathy Wanamaker had with the militant African-American soldiers soon disappeared in his own anger, guilt, and grief over what had happened. After his disastrous tour of duty in 1968, he continued to request assignment to Vietnam in hopes of rooting out those who had killed his friend and almost killed him.127 Similarly, in 1968, Colin Powell, now a major, had to move his cot every night for fear of coming under attack by his own men.128 These older African-American soldiers found that even if they sympathized with the younger generation, their authority rendered them suspect.

After 1968, radical attitudes of black masculinity became widespread in the military. However, radical black masculinity was not a monolithic force that drew all African-American soldiers to its sway. Older African-American soldiers, especially career enlisted and professional officers who had survived from the earlier half of the war largely remained loyal to the military as an organization. Nevertheless, radical attitudes dominated among drafted soldiers in the later half of the war for a myriad of different reasons. Tensions surrounding African-American soldiers’ participation in combat and the draft from the early years of the war coupled with the rise of new ideas about black pride from the radical civil rights movement and increasing violence between blacks and whites all combined to create a racial crisis that would last even past the end of the Vietnam War. Radical black masculinity was especially dangerous because it critiqued the state and by proxy the military as the natural enemies of African Americans. In this formulation, only resistance to military service was acceptable for any young African American worthy of his own masculinity.

127 Woody Wanamaker, Interview by Harry Maurer, _Strange Ground_, 242-244.

128 Powell, _My American Journey_, 133.
Towards the end of the war, the Pentagon would use this antagonism towards the state to attempt to eliminate black radical masculinity. However, by challenging the very desirability of military service, African-American soldiers changed the very formulation of black military service as a path towards manhood and citizenship. Moving forward from the Vietnam War, the military would have to find new ways to relate to African Americans.

Epilogue: A New Deal (1971-1973)

At the heart of the Vietnam experience is a powerful account of how a strong institutional culture can be successfully challenged and changed by a combination of flawed military strategy, a strong grassroots movement, and widespread racial discontent. One of the main assumptions of radical black masculinity was the belief that the state, and by proxy the military, were internal colonizers of African-Americans.129 Rather than using the military to secure citizenship and middle-class respectability as promised by military masculinity, growing numbers of African-American soldiers began to question the desirability of these values.130 African-American men had been disenfranchised not because they were lazy, or pathologically criminal, or unable to achieve the white, middle-class ideal of the nuclear family, as suggested by government documents like the Moynihan Report, but because they had been systematically disenfranchised and economically oppressed by the state and Jim

129 This interpretation of the state can be seen in numerous accounts of civil rights radicals, including the Nation of Islam, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, and Stokely Carmichael. See: Stokely Carmichael, Ready for Revolution, (New York: Scribner, 2003), 260-261. For a direct attack on the military as proxy for the state, see Huey Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, (New York: Penguin, 1973), 118. This ideology can also be seen in the Panther Ten Point Program, Seale, Seize the Time, 66-69.

130 This traditional identification of political enfranchisement/African-American citizenship with military service is well explained in Parker, Fighting for Democracy, 10-11. Beyond the mere promise of citizenship however, I assert that there were real material benefits to military service as elucidated in Graham III, The Brothers’ Vietnam War, 7. As well as Lentz-Smith, “The Great War for Civil Rights,” 5-8. In addition, Estes, I AM A MAN!, 166.
Crow. For African Americans influenced by the radical civil rights movement, military service meant accepting an impossible bargain that would not only hold African-American soldiers under the direct control of the institution that had oppressed them, but also forced them to recognize their own supposed pathology as men too flawed to achieve the dominant, masculine ideal of the middle-class, male breadwinner household.

In order to contain the growing irrelevance of traditional military masculinity, the Army had to change its own understanding of African-American soldiers to fit the new sensibilities of soldiers shaped by the civil rights movement. These changes in the relationship between African-American soldiers and military service converged on the All-Volunteer Force as a panacea for all of the military’s social problems. By instituting an All-Volunteer Force and getting rid of the draft, the Nixon Administration and the Pentagon hoped to quash the possibility civilian and military dissent. Since African-American men who subscribed to radical black masculinity were directly antagonistic to the military establishment, Army officials hoped that by ending the draft, African Americans with radical tendencies would no longer join the Army. Ironically, it was the Army’s and Marine


Corps’ own reliance on drafted soldiers in combat positions that brought this radical understanding of black masculinity into the military.

Nevertheless, the Army could not hope to rely solely on the All-Volunteer Force to eradicate discontent. One of the lasting achievements of the radical civil rights movement was to question the value of citizenship, assimilation, and respectability. By the early 1970s, many African-Americans had come to reject the idea that military service would rescue African Americans from their own pathological poverty and grant them citizenship and middle-class respectability. African Americans after the civil rights movement no longer saw the military as an oasis from the civilian world because the civil rights movement had succeeded in bringing down Jim Crow in the South. The African-American community came to accept the critique of military service offered by radical black masculinity even if it did not accept the tenets of radical black masculinity itself. In response, the military had to find a new way of attracting potential African-American men that would sell the benefits of the Army in radically different terms.  

Starting in 1972, the Army launched a new advertising campaign to recruit soldiers for the All-Volunteer Force. Teaming up with the advertising agency, Ayer & Son, the Army poured millions into advertising, buying up prime time television advertising spots and enlisting African-American media outlets. The new, re-vamped Army advertisements marketed the slogan “The Army Wants to Join You” as a radical re-envisioning of the meaning of military service. Rather than portray military service as a duty to one’s country,

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134 The idea that integration was not the ultimate goal was really popularized by the Panthers among others. Seale, Seize the Time, 70.

the new advertising strategy emphasized the material benefits for soldiers in the Army. In 1971, the military service branches ran a total of eleven advertisements in Ebony magazine, barely one advertisement per issue.\textsuperscript{136} By 1972, they ran a total of thirty-four advertisements, indicating a renewed market push capture the hopes and aspirations of young, career-oriented African Americans. Of these thirty-four advertisements, ten were directed towards college-bound or college-educated African Americans potentially interested in the officer corps. These advertisements included such messages as, “Save your family $11,280. The cost of an average college education” or “Thinking about a career? Think about two” for the Army reserve.\textsuperscript{137} One advertisement for the Judge Adjutant General (JAG) ran, “When you join the world’s biggest law firm, you’ll get a case load. Not a back room.”\textsuperscript{138}

The Army was looking for a new type of black man who expressed pride in his racial identity, but was ultimately a professional, career-oriented man who cared deeply about individual success. These ideal soldiers should still express a military masculinity that valued patriotism and service to one’s country. Yet the main benefit of military service was not citizenship or racial uplift, but individual social and economic mobility. The Army adopted the language and attitudes of the private sector by emphasizing military service not as a duty, but as a professional career. In addition, a raise in the pay of newly recruited privates from $288 a month to $307.23 a month helped to make the Army a competitive choice to the

\textsuperscript{136} I went through all twelve issues of Ebony in 1971 and all twelve issues in 1972.


\textsuperscript{138} “When you join the world’s biggest law firm, you’ll get a case load. Not a back room.” Ebony Magazine, October 1972, 140-141.
private sector.\textsuperscript{139} The Army hoped that through recruitment, they could spur a new demographic shift

Ultimately, the prescription for radical black masculinity was to offer African-American soldiers a “new deal” by adopting some of the social and economic critiques of radical black masculinity while rejecting its blatant antagonism towards the Army. The Army did not offer citizenship or respectability because these were goals already achieved by the Civil Rights movement. However, by selling social mobility, the Army attempted to move past the blame placed at its doorstep for discrimination against African Americans and emphasize a new, brighter future not based on the improvement of a supposedly flawed race, but by offering opportunity to individual, hardworking African-American men. Through the All-Volunteer Force, the Army adopted a new military masculinity forged in the experiences of widespread general and racial discontent among the troops during the Vietnam War.

Even as the Army moved forward into the All-Volunteer Force, radical black masculinity and the soldiers who created it must not be forgotten. Yet serious questions still remain to be answered about the fate of these radical soldiers. Did racial dissent persist within the All-Volunteer Force despite the efforts of the Army? If so, how did the experiences of these later soldiers differ from the experiences of Vietnam-era soldiers? How did the Army react to continued discontent? What is the enduring legacy of radical black masculinity for race relations in the Army today? These questions, along with the rise and development of radical black masculinity during the Vietnam War, represent crucial paths for

\textsuperscript{139} In May of 1972, the Army advertised a pay rate of $288. “We’ll pay you $288 a month to learn a skill. Only talks about good things of army service, good pay, free meals, free housing, also good postings in Panama, Alaska, Europe,” \textit{Ebony Magazine}, May 1972, 37. By March of 1973, pay had gone up. “You Can’t Get a Good Job Without Experience, We’ll Get You Both,” \textit{Ebony Magazine}, March 1973, 82-83.
further research as scholars seek to understand the long and tangled history of race, gender, and war in the United States.
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