The War At Home: Black Vietnam Veterans and their Organizing Techniques During the Black Power Era

Research Thesis

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“America, God bless you if it’s good to you.”

-Kendrick Lamar
The Vietnam War left its mark on everyone, especially veterans, many of whom would never look at life the same way again. Black veterans were touched in especially profound ways. It was the late 1960s, during the height of the Black Power era, and many black soldiers in the field began to think differently about race and racism in America. When they came home from the war, they felt the United States had left them and the black community behind. But this new view of the world empowered black veterans, prompting them to voice the struggles they and their communities were facing. Infuriated by the mistreatment of their fellow black vets and black people more generally, they were committed to continuing the African American tradition of organizing.

Black soldiers have participated in every war in American history including the American Revolution. This also means that black soldiers have a long history of political organizing once they returned from the war. Many black veterans believed that they had just risked their lives for American freedom and that they deserved access to the very freedom rights that they fought and died for. Black Vietnam veterans were no exception to this and much of their political participation comes from the organizing techniques of black World War II veterans. They gained knowledge from political efforts such the Double V campaign which called for victory abroad against fascist leaders and victory against racism and Jim Crow at home. However, black WWII veterans were participating in a segregated army which made their struggle for freedom look different than what black Vietnam veterans experienced in the aftermath of fighting within the first technically integrated army. Black Vietnam veterans also were struggling for freedom in the aftermath of some landmark Civil Rights legislation that legally ended Jim Crow in the South. This may seem like a moment of racial progress, but these GIs and veterans were still being denied their freedom and rights as soldiers and citizens. Their freedom struggle may seem less
apparent than the struggle the World War II veterans were dealing with. But this only meant that black Vietnam veterans were organizing in a different climate than World War II veterans. These men were ultimately fighting for the same causes, their freedom rights.

Even though their experiences may have been different, both were committed to the freedom struggle. What’s more, black Vietnam veterans had a lot to learn from the struggle of World War II veterans. There was always one thing that was constant: the desire to fight for their communities. In a report from Langston Hughes, he noted that, “their willingness to take up weapons to ‘fight and die on American soil for their democratic rights’”\(^1\) was apparent. This willingness to defend their communities and freedom rights is something that Black Vietnam veterans continued to demonstrate through their varied forms of resistance.

The organizing techniques and strategies that black Vietnam veterans were utilizing would also draw from the techniques that were being displayed by the Civil Rights and burgeoning Black Power movements. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements cannot be separated. They are irrevocably intertwined. On the same day that the first marines landed at the Da Nang air base, Bloody Sunday was taking place in Selma, Alabama.\(^2\) The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement continued to unfold simultaneously. However, the war effort drained the Civil Rights movement of desperately needed money and support as American attention shifted away from this struggle to the struggle in Vietnam. However, at the beginning of the war, most of the African American community supported the war. Some did this because of the support from President Lyndon B. Johnson on civil rights legislation. Whitney Young, head of the Urban League, said, “If we were not with Lyndon Johnson on


Vietnam then he was not going to be with us on civil rights.” Others thought that this was a chance for black soldiers to finally prove themselves in a fully integrated army.

Whatever the reason, black support began to decline once the Civil Rights movement started to shift into the Black Power era. Black leaders were some of the first to denounce the war. Malcolm X denounced the war in Vietnam in 1964, and others, like Stokely Carmichael, followed suit in 1966. Carmichael even said, “This Vietnam War ain’t nothing but white men sending black men to kill brown men to defend, so they claim, a country they stole from red men.” However, this resistance to the Vietnam War did not gain much momentum within the national black community. By the mid-1960s, only 18% advocated a withdrawal from Vietnam.

Things began to change on February 17, 1967 when Muhammad Ali refused the draft. As a member of the Nation of Islam, Ali tried to gain conscientious objector’s status, but the government denied it. After he refused to step forward for his induction, he was stripped of his heavyweight titles and sentenced five years in prison. This came at a time when the United States was sending more and more young, poor, black men to Southeast Asia and at a time when more people within the black community began to question policies on the war and why black people were being sent in disproportional numbers. Young black men across the nation related to Ali and his struggle against the United States military and the racist policies of the draft.

African American resistance to the war reached a high point after Martin Luther King Jr, denounced the war at Riverside Baptist Church in 1967. Dr. King agonized over this decision because it would mean breaking from President Johnson who had, up until that point, been one of the greatest supporters of Civil Rights. However, he could no longer justify remaining silent

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over the issue of Vietnam. Dr. King said, “We were taking the young black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”^6 By 1967, major questions about the role of black men in Vietnam were being raised even by people who represented the moderate wings of the Civil Rights movement, such as baseball Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson.

All of this was happening while men were fighting in Vietnam, and these types of political questions were being raised there as well as in the United States. More and more black people began to question their place within the war and forces that were keeping them there. By the end of 1966, there were roughly 385,000 troops in Vietnam, and African Americans comprised about 15 percent of those troops.\(^7\) As anti-war sentiment at home began to rise, the war became increasingly deadly. This coupling resulted in low-troop morale, and more and more black soldiers became disillusioned with the United States and the war in Vietnam.

Black soldiers experienced both systemic and personal racism when it came to prosecuting the war. They were drafted more frequently, and then they were placed into extremely dangerous positions on the front lines. Then they came home and realized that the pace of racial progress was slow even after the landmark federal legislation that came out of the Civil Rights movement. The Vietnam War was syphoning government money away from the Great Society leaving black veterans and black communities under resources and underserved. They did not have access to their veterans benefits and their communities were not benefitting

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from the promised by President Lyndon Johnson. They believed that they deserved more than that after the sacrifices they had made for their country.

Most of the black veterans who came home ready to organize were in Vietnam around 1966 or later and began coming home around 1968. At the time, the Black Power movement was in full swing. Revolution was in the air. They were seeing activists like Stokely Carmicheal calling for “Black Power” and athletes like Muhammad Ali refusing the draft. In the field, black soldiers greeted each other with daps, their own type of handshake, and they wore their hair in afros. Many soldiers in the field embraced black nationalism, and they clung to these beliefs once they were home. The ways that soldiers organized in the context of Black Power, did not look the same for every veteran despite the preconceived notions that every black veteran was ready to take up arms once they returned home.

I.

In this essay, I explore the ways that black Vietnam veterans made sense of and drew upon their experiences in Vietnam to become politically active in African American communities once they returned home from the war. I begin by looking at the reasons why black men were fighting the Vietnam War and what their experiences were like once they arrived there. I look at the different ways in which being a GI in Vietnam politicized black soldiers and the ways that they engaged in political activity while they were in country. I then explore how black veterans made sense of America once they returned home from Vietnam and how these understandings translated into political organizing. Then I look at the stereotypes of black Vietnam veterans by using media outlets like The New York Times and black periodicals such as Ebony Magazine to high the myths and misconceptions that enveloped GIs. The heart of the paper, though, examines the different political organizing techniques that black GIs used.
Drawing heavily on interviews with black veterans, I unpack the different and unique ways that they engaged in political activity once they returned home.

My research reveals that a majority of black veterans became politically engaged in a variety of ways and with varying degrees on involvement. Some veterans expressed their discontent by refusing to take part in riot control in urban black communities while others joined groups like the Black Panthers. Still others became involved in veterans’ affairs and community organizing, and while some became peace activists. The different forms of organizing that veterans participated in allowed them to help their communities in the ways that were necessary in order to obtain the freedom rights that African Americans were still being denied. Black veterans looked to political organizing to enhance and protect those communities with which they most closely identified, especially the black, veteran, and incarcerated communities. It was the work of black Vietnam veterans that helped to ensure that these communities were not forgotten in the aftermath of a war that everyone in America seemed eager to forget.

II.

Black men have fought in every American war since the American revolution so it is no surprise that they fought in Vietnam as well. However, black men were fighting and dying in Vietnam at disproportional rates. This does not mean that these men were overflowing with patriotism or pride in America. Rather, this points to the systemic racism in the United States that made it harder for black people to either avoid the draft or have life options other than military service.

A lot of black men enlisted in the military during the Vietnam War, but many of them did this because they had very few other choices. By 1966, almost two thirds of black men believed
that they had a better chance of getting ahead if they joined the armed service.\textsuperscript{8} Self-advancement was the major reason that black men enlisted. William Washington, an eventual first sergeant, said, “My primary reason for joining the military, when I graduated from high school, job opportunities were not very good.”\textsuperscript{9} Other men wanted an opportunity to go to college which they would not have unless they took advantage of the military’s GI benefits. A lot of black men felt that they did not really have another choice. Private First Class Reginald Edwards said, “I was the first person in my family to finish high school. This was in 1963. I knew I couldn’t go to college because my folks couldn’t afford it. I only weighed 117 pounds, so nobody’s gonna hire me to work for them. So the only thing left to do was go into the service.”\textsuperscript{10} Even though the military did not necessarily prove to be a way out of poverty, it was almost always presented that way so many men felt that this was their only way out of poverty. To many, it seemed like the best option.

However, not every black man enlisted for economic reasons. Some men felt that military service was a way to prove their manhood. This was amplified during the Vietnam War because black men thought that this was their opportunity to show that they were capable of fighting alongside white men in the first fully integrated military. They also believed that it was a way to show their dedication to the Civil Rights movement. Men like Geronimo Pratt, one of the most high profile black veterans turned political activist, stated that he went to Vietnam because he knew that he would gain valuable skills that would help in the freedom struggle once he was home. He said, “So they advised us to join the army and we always followed the Elders’ advice. And that’s how I ended up in the Army. And I’ve always wanted to make that clear because I’m

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not a hypocrite. I’m a Vietnam vet. I have a lot of comrades who are Vietnam vets but I didn’t join the army out of any patriotism toward the United States.”¹¹ Men like Pratt believed that enlisting would strengthen the fight against racial injustice while also affirming racial pride and manhood.

The draft was also ever present in the minds of black men. By 1966, the U.S. needed more troop support, and they were not gaining an adequate number of enlistees. Because of this, the Moynihan report was drafted. This was a report written by Patrick Moynihan, an American political insider. This report stated that black men would benefit greatly from serving in the military. Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense during the Vietnam War, used this report to draft Project 100,000. This was essentially designed to be an anti-poverty program that was supposed to relieve poverty by drafting young, poor men into the military. This new initiative stated that the United States would begin drafting more and more poor men into the army to “salvage men who were caged and oppressed.”¹² Because this initiative targeted poor men, black men started being drafted a much higher rate than white men who had access to better education and employment opportunities. Even though this was disguised as an anti-poverty program, it was really a way to target black and poor men for cannon fodder.

White men also had better access to draft deferments such as college and medical deferments. For example, in 1966, a mentally qualified white man was 50% more likely to fail his physical for induction than a black man.¹³ White men were also more likely to have access to

better education and have more money to afford college. These were often opportunities that were denied black men, which made it difficult for them to obtain a college deferment.

Even if a black man did manage to get a college deferment, that did not guarantee that he would avoid the draft. One draftee, John Rogers Brown, was, “drafted out of the University of Iowa in April 1967.”\(^{14}\) Many black men who were enrolled in college still got their draft notices because of things like low grades or not having enough credits. This shows that no black man was safe from the draft, even if he was lucky enough to attend college.

Also, draft boards across the country often did not have a single black person on them, and they were the ones who administered tests and deferments. This placed black men at a higher risk of being drafted, and once they did, they faced a higher risk of being placed on the front lines. Because the tests the draft board administered were geared strictly towards white men, black men often failed them, and this meant that they were placed in dangerous combat positions once they arrived in Vietnam. The draft was disproportionately in favor of white men, and it is one of the greatest examples of how the Vietnam War used socio-economic inequalities to exploit black men for military service.

The inequality that black men experienced before they entered the war played a large role in how they reacted once they arrived overseas. They saw things such as Project 100,000, the draft, and unequal distribution of black men in the field as reasons why the Vietnam War was unjust, and these men carried these feelings with them to Vietnam. The draft and unequal economic and educational situations caused many black GIs to see the United States as a racist country and not as an entity that they should be fighting for in the name of democracy. This was

the beginning of a political consciousness that would continue to grow as black GIs experienced even more systemic racism and personal prejudice in the field.

III.

A young marine said, “Anywhere you go in this big, bad burly Nam you gonna find a brother.”\textsuperscript{15} This was true to an extent. So many black men had enlisted or were drafted to serve in the Vietnam War that they were a crucial fighting force in the war. These men also banded together in the face of racism that they experienced while serving, and the battlefield is where many black GIs began to explore their political consciousness. While they were serving many of these men also became aware of events such as Muhammad Ali’s draft resistance, Martin Luther King’s assassination, and urban rebellions that were happening back home. These events coupled with the racism that was experienced in country led many to feel disillusioned by the war and betrayed by the United States government.

One reason black GIs grew increasingly angry with their treatment in the Vietnam War was the slow rate of promotions and noncombat positions assigned to black men. Black men served disproportionately in dangerous combat positions, and, unlike white men, they were not typically rotated from the field into noncombat positions as their term of service progressed. Instead, they were given more responsibilities in the field. This meant that black men were dying at a higher rate in the field than white men. In 1966, even though black men were only 10\% of the overall troop strengthen, they sustained almost 16\% of the causality rates.\textsuperscript{16} This contributed to the growing disillusionment that both the black community at home and the black GIs felt with the war. Private First Class Reginald Edwards commented, “It was weird. The first person

\textsuperscript{15} Johnson, Thomas. "Negroes in 'the Nam'." \textit{Ebony}, August 1968, 31-46.
that died in each battalion of the 9th Marines that landed was black.”

This highlights how often black men were subjected to combat that resulted in the loss of life. This was so pervasive that black GIs and black people at home could not ignore it, and it became one of the leading factors in black disenchantment with the war and with the U.S. government more broadly.

This disillusionment continued to grow as black men continued being denied opportunity for advancement within the military. Many of the commanding officers were racist, and they rarely recommended black men for promotions. Instead, they kept them in field. Black soldiers began to resent this type of treatment. In one interview, nearly 64% of black soldiers thought that racism contributed to slower promotion rates. Veteran William Washington even said, “But I think that the racial strife as far as the military was concerned was based solely on the fact that promotions denied and opportunities denied.”

The high causality rates coupled with the lack of promotions demonstrated to many black GIs that the United States was not interested in giving them opportunity or skills, instead they just wanted to use black bodies as cannon fodder. This is one the reason that some GIs began to feel a sort of political awakening while they were in Vietnam.

However, there were other contributing factors to the black GI’s growing political consciousness. The height of the Vietnam War corresponded with the height of the Black Power movement, and this made black soldiers less willing to stay silent in the face of oppression. They saw Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali standing up to racism in very overt ways, and many black soldiers admired this form of political action. When asked about Ali, at the time called Cassius Clay, veteran Frank Carter said, “He’s a real man. If I had money I wouldn’t go either. I’d be up

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there too, in front of the top judge in the county.” These black political activists influenced black GIs to embrace each other and black culture, and this often led to an embrace of political organizing whether it was at home, once they were discharged, or right there in the field. Many black GIs shed the notion that they were military men first as their black racial pride grew. Private Allen E. Jones said, “They say I am just a Marine, but how can I forget eighteen years of being black and all that being black means in this country?” This embrace of racial pride gave soldiers the motivation to organize in the face of an oppressive military that they were told was supposed to be their saviors. Along with an embrace of black political activists, black GIs embraced black cultural expressions and styles in order to show race solidarity. As the government shipped more black men to Vietnam because of programs like Project 100,000, they began to unite and embrace racial pride that was informed by Black Power. Black GIs began wearing dashikis and afros to show their cultural heritage and support for the Black Power movement. They adopted other physical expressions to show their support for Black Power through things like slave bracelets made from old shoe strings and Black Power flags. They also adopted rituals such as dapping, and intricate handshake, to show their unity and brotherhood.

Black GIs also began separating themselves from white soldiers even though there is a myth that black and white soldiers were always in solidarity during their time in the field. There were some bonds formed, but the truth of the matter was that many white soldiers were openly racist and black soldiers avoided them to escape from this. Their true bonds were with other black soldiers. Their true bonds were with other black soldiers. For example, GI Terry Whitmore said, “In the Nam we blacks pretty much kept to ourselves, no matter how close we were to our

squad. The real bullshitting was always done with other blacks. Jiving about our blocks. Sometimes gambling a bit.”

This was also influenced, in part, by the Black Power movement, whose leading proponents called for racial solidarity. These men wanted to be with people who understood the oppression that they faced, but most importantly, they wanted to be surrounded by men who understood them as people.

Black soldiers were often punished for displaying racial pride even though white men were seldom punished for waving a confederate flag or having hair long or wearing peace symbols on their helmets. Officers wanted to punish these men because they did not want to accept that black GIs were not going be submissive. It was seen as a threat to their authority. *Ebony* magazine stated that, for officers, “The only way of dealing with the problem is to get to the man who is responsible for the trouble. He’s a ‘bad example’ in the military mind.”

Because of this, black cultural expressions were stifled and punished, and this caused many black GIs’ bitterness to deepen. This repression reinforced the opinion that the United States was racist, and that they should not be fighting in this white man’s war.

Black soldiers throughout the war were being disciplined at higher rates than white soldiers. This ranged from being held in military stockades to being dishonorably discharged. Even though this was supposed to be an integrated military, the military tried to control and subvert black men by policing them. For example, in the largest military prison in South Vietnam, Long Bing Stockade, 50% of the population was black. Officers put black men in prison for small misdemeanors, such as fighting, at high rates. PFC Reginald Edwards also said,
“If I had been white, I would never have went to jail for fighting. That would have been impossible.”

White and black men were participating in the same types of “crimes” but only black men were getting punished for it.

This can be seen in the amount of bad discharge papers that were given out as well. Black men were disproportionately receiving these bad discharges for minor disciplinary charges. These discharges had extremely negative impacts on black GIs because it meant that they were no longer eligible for their GI benefits once they returned home. These discharges papers were correspondingly rare. According to one news source, “of 919,349 discharges from services in 1971, only 5,3999 were bad conduct or dishonorable. Yet blacks received 1,092 or 25.3% of them – 19.3% of the bad conduct discharges and 33.3% of the discharges – despite the fact that blacks constituted no more than 15.1% of any branch of the military.”

These bad discharges were another way that the officers and other members of military authority were able to control black men in the field. This is especially prevalent because the men who were most likely to receive these disciplinary actions were men who were engaging in Black Power activism. Most of these were, “cited by commanding officers were ‘disorderly conduct,’ ‘bad attitude,’ ‘won’t work’ etc. Their ‘crimes’ were no more than civilian misdemeanors.”

This is not surprising since black men have continuously been criminalized for this type of behavior, and this was a way to use the bodies of black men without having to give them the benefits that they deserved.

All of these events were politicizing black vets; however, this politicization was even more cemented after 1968. Two major events happened in that year: the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Tet Offense. These two events increased the disenchantment and

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The Tet Offensive began on January 30, 1968. This attack on US strongholds led by the North Vietnamese Army during a period of cease fire surprised everyone. This surprise attack did not necessarily lead to a victory for the Vietnamese, but it did demoralize soldiers. It proved to many GIs that America might not win the war, that there was no light at the proverbial end of the tunnel in Vietnam. It also opened many of their eyes to the extent of the suffering for both American GIs and the Vietnamese people. Veteran William Washington noted, “But during Tet offensive, especially when I look at how Wai (ph) was devastated during that time and how we saw a lot of North Vietnamese regulars during that time that convinced me that we weren’t going to win this war and we aren’t being told the truth about what’s going on about this war.”

The Tet Offensive gave black GIs the notion that they were not fighting in Vietnam for the freedom of the Vietnamese, and that the U.S. government was not giving them the full story. This created a heightened sense of disenchantment with their service that was not seen in the field prior.

MLK’s assassination in particular made black GIs question their role in Vietnam. Staff Sergeant Don F. Brown recalled, “I didn’t understand how I could be trying to protect foreigners in their country with the possibility of losing my life where in my own country people who are my hero, like Martin Luther King can’t even walk in the streets in a safe manner.” After King’s death, black nationalism began to skyrocket in Vietnam. Black GIs were not going to sit back and face the racism that they were experiencing without a fight. Many were enraged that a black man who embodied what it meant to be non-violent could be killed in such a manner. It made many black soldiers close ranks around each other, and King’s death was the reason that some black GIs became politicized during their service. Regardless of how black GIs responded to

King’s death, it was one of the major factors that soured African Americans on the military and the government. Many GIs shared this frustration with military services, which further politicized them.

Both King’s assassination and the Tet Offensive made 1968 a crucial turning point in the minds of Black GIs. 1968 is also the peak moment in the emerging Black Power movement. All of this created a growing political consciousness among black GIs. After interviewing black GIs, Wallace Terry, a war correspondent for *Time* magazine, said, “A large majority of black enlisted men agreed that black people should not fight in Vietnam because they have problems of discrimination to deal with at home, a striking contrast with the typical attitude of the black soldiers I talked with in 1967.”

The assassination of Dr. King and the Tet Offensive coupled with the rise of the Black Power movement created a new type of black GI who had a growing political consciousness and an increasing willingness to resist racist authority in the military. This is the black GI that wanted to become politically engaged whether that meant in the field or once they returned home.

IV.

The burgeoning political consciousness of the black GI manifested itself within the killing fields of Vietnam before any soldier ever set foot back on American soil, and this politicization would serve as the foundation for political organizing in the aftermath of the war. Sometimes it came in the form of black political organizations. Self-defense groups that mirrored the Black Panther party began popping up throughout Vietnam. For example, organizations like the De Mau Mau was an incipient group that began to emerge in 1969 or 1970, a group that was formed loosely for black GIs to ban together. This group was founded as a way for black GIs to

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stand together in the face of the racism that they were experiencing from their superiors and other white GIs. Jimmy Williams, a black GI, said, “the De Mau Mau offered companionship, identity, and an interpretation of American race relations to the thousands of black GIs who suddenly found themselves fighting in South Vietnam.”

This type of comradery and solidarity is something that black GIs used to band together to fight against the racism that they were experiencing, and these groups offered an outline that returning veterans would use to organize once they arrived back in the U.S.

However, not every soldier decided to join Black Power groups. Black GIs resisted in several other ways. Some black GIs refused to work or fight and some were already thinking of how they would join the fight for civil rights once they returned home. There were even rumors that black soldiers were telling their commanding officers, “Let your mother do it,” when they were asked to do certain tasks in the field. Since many black men felt that they were being used as sacrificial lambs, then they could show their resistance to the war by refusing to let military or the commanding officers use their labor.

There were some soldiers who may not be directly associated with groups like the De Mau Mau, but they used their collective numbers to stage things like protests or found other ways to show their discontent. For example, some black soldiers at Camp Baxter in Da Nang, Vietnam organized a protest after a black and white soldier engaged in a gunfight. This a very visible form of resistance to the racial injustices that black GIs were experiencing in Vietnam, but having protests was not the only way in which black GIs made their discontent known.

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A group of one hundred and five Marines wrote and signed a letter stating that they were being racially discriminated against in Vietnam. They brought to the surface the fact that black soldiers were often denied promotions and that they were punished at higher rates than white soldiers. The letter states that the marines were experiencing, “The same racial prejudice that has been prevalent in America since birth, yet after 300 years it is still present in Vietnam.”35 This letter showed both the higher ups in the Marines and the American public that black GIs were facing a great deal of racism in Vietnam, and it made their anger visible in a way that the Marines could not ignore. These acts of visible resistance helped create a community of black soldiers, and they also enabled black GIs to ensure that their voices and their experiences with racism were not overshadow with talk of desegregation and inclusivity that the military was supposedly upholding.

Political organizing was at the forefront of many soldiers’ minds after 1968. According to one black GI who said, “A lot black soldiers was talking about race relations. We would talk about how we were going to go home and fight our own war.”36 Black GIs also started underground Black Power newspapers that expressed political opinions or comradery among black GIs. Newspapers like Black Unity and About Face were published by black GIs to show their discontent with the military and the Vietnam War. Other soldiers also expressed the desire to get out of the military because they were scared that they would be ordered to use their military skills against other black people and suppress black revolution. One soldier was very fearful of this and said, “I’m getting out. We’re building to a black and white civil war and black troops – look at the high percentage of black troops in elite combat units – black troops will be

used to zap black civilian. I’m getting out.”37 Soldiers who engaged in very tangible acts of resistance, like engaging in political organizations, starting newspapers, or leaving the service all together, in the field often came home to organize as well. Other soldiers were inspired by this type of organizing spirit, and used this as an inspiration for organizing once they returned home.

Other soldiers, however, began to think critically about their role in the war which also led to a high amount of political organizing once they returned home. Soldiers began to think about the way they were being used in Vietnam and the other atrocities that were stemming from the violence in Vietnam. Allan Nelson, a black veteran, expressed this growing consciousness by saying, “Personally, I was ambivalent about the war at first, but over time I came to believe it was not a good idea, an unfortunate decision by this country.”38 These feelings grew throughout many black GIs’ military experience, and it served as the beginnings of their political organization once they returned from the war.

Soldiers also expressed their discontent with the racist war through their expressions of black nationalism and Black Power. Things like giving dap and the slave bracelets made it known to higher ups and other white GIs that black soldiers were not going to tolerate racism. It was also a way to show each other that they were fighting for each other with the same intense energy that they were fighting the Vietnamese. These displays of pride gave black GIs a way to build up and support their communities even when they were not at home. Any of these events and displays of unity or self-expression served as a vehicle for organizing because these actions showed the military authority, and subsequently, the U.S. government that black GIs were not consenting to their role in the war. These experiences of organizing in the field influenced black

veterans, and some of the men even recreated the organizations that were created in Vietnam after they arrived back home. However, even if these men did not rejoin the organizations that they were in while in Vietnam, they took the spirit of resistance with them when they returned stateside.

V.

The experiences described in Vietnam and the political activism abroad set the stage for the way that they became politically active once they returned home. However, another crucial element in their expanding political activism was the treatment they experienced as veterans upon returning home. A major issue that new Vietnam veterans were presented with when they came home was the fact that they were returning to a country that did not support their efforts in the war. This was an extremely demoralizing realization for many black veterans because they were expecting to come home to a certain amount of respect that they saw their predecessors enjoy. However, unlike World War II, there were no parades for returning Vietnam veterans. It was quite the contrary. In fact, William Washington said, “Coming back was not what I thought soldiers coming back from the war would receive. The attitude of the country during that time was that the people were more than half against the war by now, right. And we had organizations like the Harikrishnnas who were in the airports who were – who were calling soldiers baby killers and spitting on soldiers.” 39 The fact that soldiers were being spit on is an extreme notion; however, Washington sums up the feeling that many soldiers were disappointed by the lack of respect they received since they had just come home from war.

This lack of respect is also due to the fact the Vietnam War was a failure. Many people looked down upon Vietnam veterans because they were considered to have lost the war, and for

black Vietnam veterans, this was also coupled with the idea that many black activists did not support the war effort. This created a feeling that there was no place for the black Vietnam veteran upon return. Veteran Frank Ackles Jr. said, “We had been a part of the most unpopular war, and we lost. Coming back as a black veteran, not only had you been involved in a war that civil rights leader were calling the white man’s war that you shouldn’t been a part of but you were also a part of losing effort.” This created a feeling among black veterans that they did not have a place within the black activist community who may have looked down on them for participating in the war or a place among veterans who looked down on them for losing.

This feeling of alienation was also coupled with feelings of anger because black GIs felt that the United States government had used them to fight a war in the name of freedom, and then they came home to a country that still did not respect their right to freedom. These men saw the war as another opportunity for the United States to use and abuse black bodies for their own gain with little regard for the men once they were no longer useful to them. Veteran Frank Carter said, “I feel as though I’ve been cheated, taken, like me and my people have been taken all our lives.” These men were angry because of the role that many were forced to play in the war and the still racist society that they were coming home to.

These feelings of anger and isolation continued to grow once black veterans realized how little the Veterans Administration was helping them readjust to civilian life. The institutions that were supposed to be assisting them were not doing enough in their opinion to facilitate the transition back to civilian life. They were facing high unemployment rates, inadequate housing, and did not have the skill set to gain access to higher paying jobs. Even though these problems

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were not unique to black veterans, they were experiencing them at a much higher rate than white veterans. For example, black veterans were three times as likely as white veterans to be unemployed.\textsuperscript{42} This was also the case for issues like job training or education. Because many black GIs were put on the frontlines and in combat units with little chance for promotion, they did not receive a valuable civilian skills training. They were essentially only equipped by the military to fight, and these skills did not translate into jobs once they returned home. It was also difficult for black veterans to go to college even with the GI benefits that were supposed to make it affordable. In 1972, the cost to attend State University of New York, a public university, was $2,349, but the black veterans were only receiving $1,980 for tuition without dependents.\textsuperscript{43} This was not an adequate amount to pay for tuition, let alone live on, making it extremely difficult for Vietnam veterans to go back to school. This left a disproportionate number of black vets without a job.

A major issue that returning black veterans were facing was drug addiction. In Vietnam, drugs were readily available, and the VA did little to assist with drug rehabilitation once they returned home. \textit{The New York Amsterdam News} pointed out that, “There are three VA hospitals in New York City currently treat a total of 417 veterans for addiction. Only one modality of treatment is offered, methadone maintenance.”\textsuperscript{44} By offering little help for drug rehabilitation or only offering methadone maintenance as rehab, the VA kept black veterans stuck in the cycle of drug abuse, and this made it more difficult for them to find a job or go to school. They were left behind and were not being offered the assistance that they deserved.

The military did not think that the drug problem was theirs to solve. One official even said, “The military’s problem is the defense of the country. They don’t see their mission as rehabilitation. This would take a huge and most difficult effort for them.” There was no systemic help for these veterans when it came to drug addiction, and this created more problems for black veterans. For example, veterans who were addicted to drugs had a hard time finding employment. The VA and the military did very little to help curb this drug addiction even though many of these veterans were exposed to these drugs, especially heroin, during their service in Vietnam. This was just another reason why many black veterans felt that their country had used them in Vietnam and then abandoned them once they returned.

These were issues that the VA was supposed to be helping veterans solve, but many returning black GIs stated that they were not being offered the type of help that they deserved or that they were receiving no help at all. One veteran said, “I have to go down to the Veteran’s Administration and file the paperwork and stuff like that. The first time I tried it, I sent it by myself and that’s been close to about six years ago and I haven’t heard anything.” The slow or lack of a response from the Veteran’s Administration created a lot of frustration among black veterans. They felt that they had fought for their country and now their country was abandoning them. They wanted the government to give them what they deserved. The lack of help from the VA caused black veterans to grow even more disenchanted with the government and the way the way that black veterans fit into U.S. society. The problems that they were experiencing back in the United States coupled with their experiences in Vietnam ensured that many black veterans would use their growing political consciousness to become politically active within their communities.

VI.

Racism in the field and the lack of benefits offered to black veterans led many of them to become politically engaged. There were, however, a handful of specific events that ignited a flame within black veterans. Black veterans were seeing first-hand how direct the racism still was even after the end of Jim Crow. For example, two black veterans, Army Privates Jimmy Williams and Bill Terry, were denied the right to be buried in the cemetery of their choosing just because they were black.47 These types of events proved to black veterans just how deeply entrenched racism was in the country. It did not matter that they were veterans or that they served their country. White supremacy mattered more.

There were other factors that played into the organizing drive of black veterans. For example, Geronimo Pratt, a black veteran who eventually became a powerful leader in the Black Panther Party, said that community elders were the ones who wanted him to use his military experience to join the fight against racial injustice.48 Others already had organizing experience before they went to the war. For example, Specialist 4 Robert E. Holcomb remembers, “I think my first protest came in march for civil rights that Martin Luther King had organized back in Gary when I was a junior in high school.”49 However, no matter what event sparked the desire to organize, many of these veterans came back from the war with a passion for helping themselves and their communities gain the freedom rights that they deserved.

These experiences could have driven some men to become politically apathetic, but that is not the reaction that many black veterans had. Instead, they found reasons to organize. This motivation to organize rests mostly in the racism and discrimination that they faced while in

Vietnam, the organizing that was happening while they were over there, and their treatment once they returned home. These experiences were some of the driving factors to organize once they returned home, and it follows the organizing traditions of other black veterans. However, this did not come without hardship. Black veterans were subjected to a plethora of stereotypes and negative attitudes so their organizing efforts often went unnoticed or, if they did garner attention, they were received with hostility. These stereotypes have informed contemporary understandings of what black Vietnam veterans were and are, and it shapes the way the public views the era in general. However, black veterans did organize politically, and they did so because of the racism and hostility that they were confronted with inside and outside of Vietnam, but they also did this because of the strong bonds of community that they felt while they were serving and when they came back home. It was this feeling that served as the motivation to organize.

VII.

There are many misconceptions about the ways that black Vietnam veterans behaved once they returned stateside. These soldiers were often portrayed in one of two ways: either as a violent black man with a gun or the man who had absolutely no interest in politics. But these are just myths. The organizing experience of black Vietnam veterans was diverse and complex.

In the media, black veterans were often portrayed as mindless killers who the public should fear. A San Bernardino County newspaper described black veterans as, “the best trained killers in the world. If they come back to a nation with no job opportunities… We’re going to have all kinds of problems.”⁵⁰ Even though many veterans did come back from Vietnam with a plethora of problems, this did not mean that they came home with a desire to be violent. This comes from the preconceived notion that black men with guns are inherently violent and that the

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Black Power movement enticed black veterans to engage in violent protest against whites. This reflected a gross misunderstanding of Black Power organizations. In fact, only a small number of men actually joined the militant groups that the media considered violent.

This portrayal of black Vietnam veterans is something that persisted well past the direct aftermath of the Vietnam War. Even in the 1980s, the media still perpetuated the idea that black veterans were ready and willing to use a weapon at any moment. A New York Times reporter said, “In the summer of 1980, new riots rekindled fears of potential violence from black former servicemen.”51 This underscores the way that black veterans were often feared by the white public because of the misconception that arming and training black men would spark violence. There is very little evidence that suggests black veterans came home and took part in political violence. This does not mean, however, that some men did not come back more militant, but rather that the public often conflated radicalization with violence.

Violent militants are not the only way that black Vietnam veterans were portrayed. They were often cast as men who were politically apathetic even if they were angry about their time in Vietnam and their treatment back home. Ebony magazine described the black Vietnam veteran as, “rather apolitical. He is not involved in any civil rights or political organizations – a trait he shares with most black Americans.”52 This is not an untrue statement. There were veterans who came back and decided not to become involved in any type of political organizing. Some were too jaded by the war, or they were still trying to readjust to life back home. One veteran said, “I’m still getting adjusted back to civilian life. I can’t tell other people what to do until I get my life together.”53 Even though this was true for veterans just coming back from the war, there

were still a great number of them who decided to become politically active. They saw the problems afflicting black veterans as a reason to organize rather than as a reason to become apathetic. The political activity, however, did not always look like the young militant black man ready to pick up a gun.

The idea of the apathetic or apolitical black vet also stems from the notion that many returning Vietnam veterans were hooked on heroin or some other type of drug once they returned. This notion goes hand in hand with the idea that Vietnam veterans were living off their government benefits. The image of the drug addicted veteran has defined how many people think of Vietnam and the returning GI, and even though most Vietnam veterans were susceptible to this stereotype, black veterans were more likely to be thought of as drug addicts or living off the their GI benefits. For example, in an article from *The New York Times*, the journalist M.A. Farber had to make a distinction that, “Vietnam heroin users seldom conform to the stereotype of the civilian ‘street junkie’ – the lone bleary-eyed figure in Harlem and Watts.” Even though this article does not distinctly mention race, the image of the heroin user being placed in Harlem and Watts is no mistake considering that Harlem was an epicenter of the black community and that race riots had previously broken out in Watts. It is not a coincidence that the image of the heroin addict is put in these places, and it shows the way that major media outlets and everyday people were taking part in stereotyping black veterans as heroin addicts. When people thought of heroin addicts, one of the first images that popped into their minds was the black Vietnam veteran, but this also ignores that the drug problem was mostly seen in veterans who were, “usually from a small town in the Midwest or the South, is in good physical condition, has used virtually no drugs before joining the army and shows no signs of a character disorder.” This

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shows that even though drug addiction was a problem for white veterans, it was black veterans who bore the brunt of the stereotyping.

This idea of the heroin addicted black veteran has also been cemented in popular culture. This picture is seen in movies like *Dead Presidents* which features a character named Skip who comes back from Vietnam addicted to heroin. He says, “Man I got over like a fat rat when I got out, man. Dig I got my school money comin’ from the government once a month. I got my veteran’s check comin’ once a month. I got my fifty percent medical check comin’ to me for the rest of my life. I ain’t gotta do a goddam thing else but go to the mailbox, you dig?” Skip’s character conforms to idea that black Vietnam veterans were drug addicts who were just living off the government’s assistant. This is particularly harmful image to put forth because *Dead Presidents* is one of the few films that is strictly about black Vietnam veterans so this is one of the only images that most people are exposed to.

This is not to say that there were not black veterans who were addicted to heroin when they came back from Vietnam because addiction was a real problem for the black veteran community. However, by assigning this stereotype to black veterans, films and other major media sources ignore the difficulties that veterans faced when it came to receiving their benefits, and it allows for criminalizing black veterans. This enabled the government or the VA to withhold the rights and benefits that black veterans were entitled to. This also implies that these veterans were not politically active, or really active in any sense of the word, but this is far from the truth. In fact, many black veterans saw the issue of heroin within their communities and were inspired to organize within their communities to help those who were suffering in ways that the military, the VA, or the government refused to do.

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There were also the veterans who came back from the war completely satisfied with the role that they played in the war. Some of these men are still very proud of having served in the armed forces. Martin Bronston, a Marine Corp veteran, said, “Being in the service is a good experience. I think that the government made a mistake in not keeping the draft… you learn your country that you live in is better than what you think.” Bronston was not the only black Vietnam veteran who felt that way, which is not something that is typically portrayed in the media. Even veterans who did become politically active and critical of the government were still proud of their service. John Heflin was a veteran who joined the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the most iconic Black Power organization of the era, but he also said, “I was proud to be in the military. It was just the policy at the time. The people in the military are good people.” The experience of black Vietnam veterans was extremely nuanced; even veterans who were proud of their service often engaged in some type of political organizing due to the highly divisive nature of the war.

Much of the political organizing of black veterans did not always look like the ways that the media portrayed it. In fact, veterans participated in politics in a variety of ways that ranged from small acts of resistance to full-blown political radicalization. This is also true for veterans who became politically active. The scope of political organizing for black Vietnam veterans is large and extensive; they ranged far beyond either Black Panthers or apolitical. They followed especially closely in the organizing tradition of World War I and World War II veterans, using their experiences in military to fight for their fellow-veterans and the black community.

VIII.

One way that black veterans showed their resistance was by refusing to participate in riot training or riot control. Many black servicemen worried that they would be asked to perform riot control duty when they returned to the states because this meant potentially fighting against black people and Black Power groups like the Black Panthers. Wallace Terry, a black war correspondent for Time magazine during the Vietnam War, did a survey of black soldiers and found that only 14 percent of soldiers said they would obey orders to do riot duty without hesitation, and more than 45 percent said that they would refuse the order entirely.59 Other soldiers followed through with those sentiments. For example, soldiers Richard Allen and John Chase were two men who refused to do the obligatory training sessions; many others followed in their example.60

Some men worried that they would have to preform riot control during the contentious 1968 Democratic National Convention where there would be many black protestors present. Specialist 4 Haywood Kirkland said, “Our unit was going to Chicago to be the riot squadron. I told them I’m not going there holding no weapon in front of my brothers and sisters.”61 This was also the location where seventy-five soldiers refused to move against the protestors and forty-three of these men were arrested. Many of these soldiers were Vietnam veterans. Private First Class Jerome Laughton was one of them. He said, “I don’t want to knife anyone of my brothers or sisters. We fought for one whitey in Vietnam, and we don’t want to go home and destroy the freedom we fought for in Vietnam.”62 Some black Vietnam veterans had strong feelings about

remaining in solidarity with their more radical black brothers and sisters, and they were even ready to be arrested in order to maintain this solidarity.

Some soldiers even went as far as saying they themselves would participate in a riot once they returned home. In fact, 45 percent of black enlisted men said that they would participate in a riot. Claude Bowen, a black Marine, said, “Hell, yes, I’d riot. If they’re kicking crackers’ asses, I’m going to get in an kick a few myself. I’m just doing what my grandfather had wanted to do and couldn’t.” Most soldiers did not take it that far, but this statistic underscores the fact that black soldiers were upset with the way their fellow African Americans were being treated.

These men were ready to take to the streets to show their dissatisfaction with the way that the U.S. was handling Vietnam. The refusal to preform riot duty and the possibility of participating in riots was a type of political organizing that is often not thought about in the context of black Vietnam veterans. However, it shows that even men who were still in the military were willing to engage in political activity for their fellow community members.

IX.

Refusal to participate in riot control was just the beginning of how black Vietnam veterans expressed their political activity once they returned to the states. Some veterans did come back highly politicized, and many of them decided to join Black Power organizations like the Black Panthers. Their service in the Vietnam War politicized soldiers because the burgeoning Black Power movement and the systemic racism that ran rampant throughout the different ranks of the military. By the end of the war, some young men were coming home as weapons experts, and this meant that some of them were ready to join the ranks of some of the most prolific Black Power groups. In Terry’s survey of black soldiers, he found that 36 percent of black combat

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troops said that they would join a militant group like the Black Panthers when they returned home.\textsuperscript{65}

Many of these men were especially angry once they returned home and found that their communities were still being treated so poorly. They felt that since they had served America, it was time for America to do something for them. These were the men who decided to use the skills they had learned in the military to help other African Americans resist racial discrimination. Black Panther leader Bobby Seale said that a lot of black veterans joined the Black Panthers because, “They’re angry because they fought for the man and black people are still getting messed up.”\textsuperscript{66} This is one of the main reasons that black veterans joined these highly politicized organizations. They knew that these organizations had the same ideals that they encountered with groups like the De Mau Mau while they were overseas.

Among of the most prominent of these men was Geronimo Pratt who eventually became a leading influence in the Black Panther Party. Pratt served in the Army and did two tours of duty in Vietnam where he eventually rose to the rank of sergeant. He did this with the idea of using his military skills to aide in the armed resistance back home. When he came back from Vietnam, he joined the Black Panthers and used his military know-how to teach fellow Panthers discipline, military tactics, and weaponry skills. “We had to defend these communities,” he said. “Our hope was lost. Now we had the backing of the Elders. So I did my thing. I did what I was told to do. I went throughout every ghetto, every swamp, every one-horse town that they sent me to, teaching people how to defend themselves, with what I had learned in the military.”\textsuperscript{67} Many radical veterans did not have a similar origin story, but they did feel that it was their duty to teach

\textsuperscript{67} Pratt, Geronimo. Pasadena College, October 1997.
their people how to defend themselves against entities that threatened them like the police. Like Pratt, these radical veterans chose to join groups like the Black Panthers.

Many young, black veterans followed in the footsteps of Pratt. It was not uncommon for young black men to come back from Vietnam, join Black Power groups, and use their newfound military skills to help these organizations with their weapons training and disciplinary programs. PFC Reginald Malik Edwards noted, “Most of the Panthers then were veterans. We figured if we had been in Vietnam fighting for our own country, which at that point wasn’t serving us properly, it was only proper that we had to go out and fight for our own cause.”

Like Pratt, these young veterans used their military skills and their wartime experiences to organize around their communities at home.

Veterans in the Black Power movement did not limit themselves to weapons training. Just like the ways that veterans participated in political organizing in various ways, men who joined radical groups did so for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Some men joined these groups because the organizations were disciplined and offered the comradery that soldiers had felt in the military.

These groups emulated the military in some ways and offered veterans the guidance they needed to readjust to civilian life. Specialist 4 Arthur “Gene” Woodley said, “I joined the Black Panthers group basically because it was a warlike group.” He also noted that, “The only friends I made were militant types, because they were the only ones who could relate to what I was tryin’ to say.” These radical groups offered a place of solace for many returning veterans who felt that they had nowhere to go in a country that was almost as hostile as Vietnam. George Armstrong, an Army Specialist Fourth Class said his life, “had been directionless until he joined

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[the black cultural nationalist organization] US,” in which he taught, “calisthenics, discipline and karate to youthful ‘simba’ members.” These groups enabled returning veterans to have a space where they felt comfortable, and they gave them an outlet through which to express their anger towards the war in a way that would benefit the black community.

These more radical veterans were also frustrated with the work of other civil rights groups, and therefore, were more inclined to join organizations like the Black Panthers. Former Black Panther and veteran, John Heflin said, “At the time I didn’t agree with the NAACP. I thought they were too passive. If you’re going to fight a war you should fight it. That’s probably how I ended up in the Black Panthers.” Heflin and other veterans emulated the idea of the young man who gravitated towards groups like the Black Panthers because they were frustrated by the slow pace of progress. This is accentuated by the fact that these men had seen combat and were in a high-pressure environment, and then they return home to a nation that had changed very little. They used the skills they acquired from the military to help the organizations they felt were rapidly trying to improve the lives of black people.

There was no universal role for the black Vietnam veteran when it came to how they operated in these organizations. The most common way that black veterans participated was through weapons and military training. Even though this is the prevalent image, it is not the only way that vets participated. For example, Bobby White and Bobby Harding were two Vietnam veterans who had multiple roles within the Black Panthers. They shared what they had learned in the military, but they also had others skills that were just as valuable to the Panthers. White became the lieutenant of information which meant that he oversaw news bulletins and decorating the office with revolutionary jargon. Bobby Harding was a poet. Black Panther Aaron Dixon

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said, “Harding was also a writer, a poet, and often times the three [Dixon, Harding, and White] of us would share our work and talk about getting published one day.” There were other artists and poets who joined the Panthers after they returned from the Vietnam War. PFC Reginald Edwards was one of those Panthers, and he eventually rose in the ranks and took over the D.C. chapter. These men shattered the illusion that black veterans specifically, and Black Panthers generally, were young, violent men infatuated with guns.

There were other highly politicized groups that black veterans joined. For example, De Mau Mau groups also formed within the United States once veterans returned. This group was similar in nature to the Black Panthers, and it carried over a lot of the ideals that the organization had overseas. These were men who were angry about being used by the United States and the lack of change within their communities. The man who claimed to be the leader of the De Mau Mau said, “De Mau Mau have the capability to do anything destructive. But we are not a violent movement. We are not killers. We are a brotherhood. All we want are jobs and a chance to be productive.” This sentiment is echoed by many black Vietnam veterans, and these are the main reasons that they organized.

The group, however, was met with harsh response by the public, and they were sensationalized by the media because there were nine members who had been charged with several murders. Whether they were guilty or not is another question, but after these convictions, the media went into a frenzy. People claimed that they were a terrorist organization that was out to kill white people, and that they were bloodthirsty for racial vengeance. However, several black veteran organizers repeatedly stated that these men were not terrorists. One man, Barry Wright who was the leader of Concerned Veterans from Vietnam, said, “These guys are angry as hell

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about the job situation and I don’t blame them. There was some strong, militant talk from them
about the situation in America, though I wouldn’t call it terrorist. I don’t remember hearing
anybody talk about killing white people or knocking off policemen.” This media craze over the
purported violent nature of these black veterans plays right into the stereotypes of the violent
returning GI, and it was harmful to these men who were only trying to get what they deserved
from the government.

The Black Panthers, along with the De Mau Mau and similar organizations, were often
misconstrued as inherently violent and terrorist in nature even though these men were just
looking for a way to demand their rights and find solace in the aftermath of the war. Groups like
the Black Panthers and the De Mau Mau were consistently portrayed as violent as another way to
justify denying giving black Vietnam veterans the right that they had fought and died for.

X.

Black Vietnam veterans were also passionate about veterans’ affairs because they saw the
ways that racism effected soldiers returning home. Once stateside, many black veterans faced
discharges that were less than honorable, limiting their access to G.I. Bill benefits and making it
difficult for them to find work and housing. All of this was on top of being plagued by the
problems ordinary black people face. Also, many of these men were not accepted by veterans’
groups like the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars because of their race and because
a lot of older veterans looked at Vietnam veterans as having “lost” their war. This led many
veterans to create their own organizations or join ones that catered specifically to organizing
around the needs of black Vietnam veterans.

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Some black veterans began organizing because they saw a large number of black veterans being given undesirable discharges. This meant that they were not eligible for their GI benefits, which often led to other problems, including a lack of employment. Black soldiers saw negative discharges as another way that the government used black bodies in combat without having to spend money on rehabilitation once they returned to the states. Many veterans felt lost and alone, and they knew that the government was not doing enough to repay them for their service. Veteran Thornell Gray said, “You figure you serve your time in the war and they at least would give you the benefits coming to you. It doesn’t work that way.” These men felt used and abandoned.

The need for benefits and rehabilitation services led many black veterans to organize. Veteran Barry Wright led the group called Concerned Veterans from Vietnam which helped veterans who were struggling with housing and education. They also paid special attention to veterans who had received bad discharge papers. He said, “But the more we listened to the guy on the street, the more we became aware of the discharge situation. It seemed that one out of four veterans we talked to had a bad discharge and couldn’t find work.” They also hoped to sue the Defense Department and force the Military Review Board to reconsider some of the bad discharge decisions.

These largely black veterans’ organizations did not limit themselves to addressing the issue of bad discharge papers, however. Most of them organized around helping veterans either gain their benefits or simply providing education about what types of benefits were available to them. Many men came back from Vietnam with limited or repressed knowledge about the benefits they were supposed to receive, and these are the issues that black veterans’

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organizations aimed to solve. Vietnam veteran Allen Nelson highlighted the way a lack of benefits impacted black veterans, and said, “It’s difficult because most veterans don’t have money to get a lawyer and get their own doctors, most veterans when they get out of the military they have to automatically start working. And once you get out you’re on your own. The government does not take care of you.” Nelson’s sentiment was shared by many black veterans, and they knew the only way to get the benefits they needed was to take care of each other.

One such group called the Black Veterans For Social Justice, Inc. provided a place for black veterans to feel safe and welcome. It also provided them with personal counseling, employment, and housing. To the members, however, it was more than that. It was said that, “at first glance, [the organization] appears to be nothing more than another run-down store or numbers spot. But ask anyone of its members, and they will tell you that what the forgotten Black veteran finds inside helps to ease the pain of everyday existence.”

Groups like these helped veterans regain their sense of place once they returned, and they also helped provide the benefits that the Veterans Administration were reluctant to provide. These types of groups were essential to black veterans because they were so often unable to join other veterans’ organizations, and they needed a place where they could share their experiences about the war and heal. This type of comradery is something that motivated black veterans because they understood that no one else was looking after them, and they continued to hold on to the strong bonds that were formed during the war.

XI.

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Along with facing the problems that came with being a black veteran, such as a lack of benefits and bad discharge papers, these soldiers had to deal with the problems facing the broader black community. Even though Jim Crow was no longer the law of the land, black communities across America still had to deal with de facto segregation. These problems on the home front politicized many veterans. They were shocked by the fact that while they were fighting abroad for the “freedom” of the Vietnamese people, their own people were still suffering. They believed that the war at home was where they should be putting their energy.

Some black veterans decided that they would take that anger and use it as motivation for political organizing. Often, black veterans used already established organizations to help the communities that were in need. For example, The Black Veterans for Social Justice, Inc. was not only investing in helping black veterans get back on their feet, they were also interested in helping families of Black veterans and addressing their needs as well. They raised money for families to pay medical bills, and they gave out turkey dinners for families at Christmastime. In this way, veteran’s organization offered support to the wider community and to veteran’s families.

These organizations morphed and changed into what they needed to be at the time. Sometimes that meant that they were also community organizers. For example, Concerned Veterans of Vietnam used their power as a veteran’s group to help defend their community. Once, when a racist cop came into their neighborhood and severely beat and arrested an innocent black veteran, they responded. Although the victim was a veteran, they said, “We’re going to try and get the officer removed from this beat. We don’t need anyone like that around here, especially in light of what I’m trying to do with the kids in this neighborhood.”

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were in Concerned Veterans of Vietnam were not only worried about their own veteran’s affairs, but they were also concerned about the welfare of the community.

Another veteran’s organization, the Ohio Association for Black Veterans Cleveland Chapter, organized for ten-weeks during the summer of 1969. They offered a day-care, breakfast, reading, and parenting training program. Black veterans around Cleveland helped to organize this community event regardless of whether they were employed or in need themselves. The organizers believed that, “the government is at war with women, children, the sick and the elderly the Black Veterans Association will be hard pressed to seek aid from the governmental bureaucracy.” These veteran’s organizations used their collective power to provide for the community in the ways that the government failed to do even when these men had issues of their own. These men came together because they saw that their communities were in need, and they could provide a way to fill this need.

Some veterans got involved in drug counseling or did what they could to raise money for the community. Even soldiers who were struggling to support themselves felt the need to support their community. Specialist 4 Arthur “Gene” Woodley said, “I don’t have a job now. But I would take any human service job, especially where I could show black kids and black people that we ought to stop look towards the stars and start looking at each other.” This desire to help their communities was widespread among black veterans, who channeled their frustration to create the change that they had hoped the government would provide. Ultimately, veteran organizing supported their communities in new ways. These men were not just black, and they were not just veterans. They belonged to both communities, and the ways that black veterans organized around veteran’s issues and needs, shows the expansiveness of the black organizing tradition.

81 Black Veterans Have Unique Summer Program for Children.” Cleveland Call and Post, August 21, 1982.
This intense desire to help provide for the community was a driving factor in many of the organizing efforts of black veterans. One veteran said that he would not put away his war clothes because, “because the destructive forces and problems are still at work in the African American community.” This notion encouraged many black veterans to be politically engaged within their communities. This type of engagement shows that black veterans were highly devoted to helping and organizing within their communities even when they were facing issues that were specific to the black veteran community. They knew that in order to help their communities, they would have to use their collective power to organize.

XI.

Another problem that black veterans faced was high incarceration rates. There were 44,000 male veterans who were incarcerated in 1975, and there were actually more veterans being imprisoned than white veterans. The prison population was disproportionately made up of black and Hispanic people from the inner cities, and this happened to also fit a large demographic of black veterans. Because these men were targeted and policed more, ever increasing black veterans who were being incarcerated.

A lot of these veterans did not know what their rights were as incarcerated citizens and VA offices did not offer a lot of support. More than 80 percent of incarcerated veterans said that they had not been advised about their eligibility for benefits, and 53 percent said that they believed that they had lost all their rights once they were incarcerated. However, veterans were entitled to almost every benefit from the VA including job training and educational benefits, but there was no formal program set up by the VA to help incarcerated veterans understand and

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utilize all of their benefits. To meet this need, some black incarcerated veterans stepped up and began organizing for the rights of their fellow inmates.

Haywood Kirkland was a veteran who was incarcerated after he robbed a post office truck to give money back to his community because he saw that it was in dire need of support. After his arrest, Kirkland tapped into his political spirit to organize incarcerated Vietnam veterans, which was exactly what incarcerated veterans longed for. He said, “The inmates at Lorton Reformatory in Virginia, they welcomed me with open arms. They were amazed we tried this thing for the community. It was like ‘power to the people.’ Heroes basically.” This type of energy inspired Kirkland to start the Incarcerated Veterans Assistance Organization. This group published an independent inmate newspaper and showed other prisons how to set up a similar group. Organizations like Kirkland’s helped incarcerated veterans understand and advocate for the rights that they were often denied.

These incarcerated veterans’ organizations not only offered the education and assistance that veterans in prison needed, they gave veterans’ organizations the education and assistance that veterans in prison needed, as well as a sense of community, which was especially important because prison separated them from their families and communities. Jerry Ganter, a black incarcerated Vietnam veteran, is the perfect example of someone who found solace within an incarcerated veterans’ organization. Another inmate had consistently asked him to join the group. This sparked a change in him, and he said, “It’s a good thing he didn’t [stop asking]. I might have cut my wrists by now.” To Ganter, Post 466 of the Vietnam Veterans of America saved his life. He, in turn, began to organize with the group. They eventually won a lawsuit that provided all incarcerated veterans in state prisons access to counseling services.

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Groups like Post 466 and Incarcerated Veterans Assistance Organization organized across the color line, but they were especially important to black veterans because they were incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates. These types of groups highlight the organizational spirit of many black Vietnam veterans. Problems like incarceration did not stop black veterans from using their experiences in Vietnam to become politically active.

XII.

There were some black Vietnam soldiers who came back to the United States and were inspired by the burgeoning peace movement. These black veterans, however, were drawn to peace activism for many different reasons, and it was often their wartime experiences that led them to engage in this type of activism. Frequently, these men came home and were traumatized by their war experiences. Black soldiers were often forced to the frontlines of the battlefields, and this meant that they were subject to some of the most gruesome and terrifying parts of the war. These soldiers wanted to leave the violent nature of the war behind and advocate for peace within America and abroad. This continues to challenge the narrative that was put forth of the young, disgruntled men who were ready to pick up arms as soon as transports landed.

The Vietnamese were often subject to brutal attacks by American soldiers, and this took a toll on many once they came home, turning many veterans against the war. Allen Nelson, a black veteran turned activist, said, “I think that after you go into combat, of course your mind starts to change. When you start seeing devastation, when you start seeing your friends die around you, you start asking that question, ‘What are we doing here? I think that those things start getting soldiers to think.”

Black veterans also felt a great deal of guilt because fighting against the Vietnamese people meant killing and harming another oppressed racial group. Grappling with this reality caused a lot of soldiers to devote their time to peace activism once they returned. Some soldiers felt so strongly about this that they even rejected the bonds on friendship that they had created during the war. David Tuck, a black veteran, was so affected by the things he saw that he went to the Bertland Russell International Crimes Tribunal when he was twenty-six years old to testify about the horrors of the Vietnam War. Tuck became an activist. Sol Stern from the New York Times said, “He told the tribunal that he had witnessed atrocities committed against prisoners by American and South Vietnamese troops, including the beheading of a captured North Vietnamese by a G.I. in his own unit.”

These types of atrocities haunted black veterans and guided their move towards peace activism once they returned from the war.

Black soldiers went to Vietnam and developed a strong connection with the Vietnamese people. Some of them related as an oppressed people, while others developed extremely personal connections to specific people. For example, Bill Hardman, a Vietnam soldier, nearly adopted a young boy. He said, “I didn’t want to leave. You hate to leave the people that you care about.”

These were real and deeply personal connections, and this is one of the reasons that many black soldiers began to look at the war, and war in general, more critically. Some black soldiers did not even see the Vietnamese as enemies. Rather, they saw them as allies in the struggle against white imperial forces. This type of connection sparked a sense of urgency among black veterans to organize against the destructive nature of the war, especially wars fought against people of color, once they returned to the states.

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Peace activism looked different for different veterans. For some, it meant involvement in the anti-draft movement. Tuck began “encouraging other blacks to resist the draft by any means necessary.”91 Anti-draft organizing fits well with the common narrative of resistance in the 1960s and 1970s. However, that is not the only way black Vietnam veterans opposed the war. Organizing took on many roles for black Vietnam veterans, and they were not always overtaken by what is thought of as the typical organizing culture of the era. For example, Allen Nelson was especially involved in peace education as a method of resistance. He said, “I think peace activity in this country is now very important because part of the peace activity is education and we have to educate people through what we do.”92 Peace activism also intertwined with veterans’ organizations. Many black veterans joined groups like Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and some veterans worked to do things like ensure that the bodies of men who were killed in combat were returned to the states for proper burials. This type of organizing shows how rooted many veterans were in ensuring peace, not only for themselves, but also for other who they saw as oppressed individuals, whether that meant Vietnamese or black US soldiers. This speaks to the nature of community building that veterans were invested in doing. To many, peace activism was a way to help fellow soldiers and the people who they believed they had wronged in some way.

XIII.

The Vietnam War is a dark stain on the tapestry that is American history. It was an unjust war for many people, especially the Vietnamese, but it was also unjust for black GIs and veterans. The unjust nature of this war lay in fact that black GIs were living, fighting, and dying for a country that still did not treat them as equal citizens and would do anything possible to deny them the rights that they deserved for their sacrifice.

The denial of rights and benefits that black veterans and GIs were subject to enabled the United States government to enforce and imply many things about black America and the Vietnam War. For example, the Vietnam War is and was considered the first war that America lost, and if black veterans were seen as incompetent drug addicts or violent men, then there was someone else to blame for catastrophic end to the war. The United States government could escape the culpability by allowing this belief to persist.

There were also events like the War on Drugs that followed the Vietnam War, which used some of the stereotypes associated with black Vietnam veterans. Obviously, the entire War on Drugs was not about black GIs or veterans, but the criminalization of this group of men allowed the United States to discredit the bravery and valor that these men showed. By doing this and creating the stereotype that all black Vietnam veterans were drug addicts, the government could ignore any sacrifice they made, and create policies like the War on Drugs which criminalized all black people. Examples such as this show that the United States government was not interested in helping black soldiers or black veterans. They were interested in using their bodies and their labor, and then using them to continuously hurt and marginalize black people in America after the civil rights era failed to deliver on its promise of equality and opportunity. The Vietnam War was just another way that the United States made sure that this was not possible and that white supremacy would still hold sway.

Black Vietnam veterans came home to an America that did not care about them. They had put their bodies on the line, most of the time unwillingly, in the name of supposed freedom. No one was waiting for them at the airport with flags and salutes. Instead, they came home to see the families they left behind struggling with poverty. They came home to limited access to their
GI benefits, far too few jobs, and increased rates of incarceration. It was not the Great Society that they had been promised.

Nevertheless, they did what black folk had been doing since they had been enslaved, they organized. Their activism took different forms. Some became Black Panthers and others advocated for veterans’ affairs. Whatever the form, black veterans organized to preserve and protect their communities and their rights as veterans and people. They used their experiences in Vietnam to inspire themselves and others to take political action rather than despair and become apathetic. These veterans rallied around their communities to try and create a better America than the one they came home to. The struggle for freedom rights became the war they actually believed in.