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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the writing about race during the Vietnam war (1964-1975) focused on the two-front war fought by black American troops. One reason for this was simply the large number of black soldiers serving in Vietnam. A second reason is more complex, and involves the existential contradictions that arise when one is a black soldier in Vietnam, fighting to impose "democracy" on a colored people (who may not want it if the costs are too high) coeval with one's inability to exercise one's civil rights back in the United States. Third, there was that whole civil rights thing, followed by Black Power, which migrated overseas with each troop deployment. Coverage of the Civil Rights movement sensitized the press to coverage of the Black Power movement. What journalists and reporters saw in disproportionate black combat death rates, Article 15s, racist promotion criteria and rumbles between black and white soldiers, was the sometimes bitter fruit of the military's attempts to integrate itself; to undo what it had done in segregating the post-Civil War militia into black and white branches.

The concentrated attention of this coverage sometimes masked the fact that there were other peoples of color fighting the American war in Vietnam, as this special issue of *Vietnam Generation* is designed to show. Too, looking at the conflict in the context of the rise and fall of colonial powers, it was clear that what America was about in Southeast Asia was a white man's war—a last ditch stand to preserve some of the myths engendered by insecure acting out in the name of control. Like the black soldiers, these other non-white warriors suffered their own peculiar brand of torment as a consequence of their involuntary or voluntary participation, and paid a great price for their citizenship. Our goal for this issue, *A White Man's War: Race Issues and Vietnam*, then, is to foster further research into some of the questions raised here; questions born out of the different experiences of blacks, Native-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans during the period of active US involvement.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, there are no "subcultures" in the United States. Each of the peoples cited here has some full-fledged scheme for making sense of their world, and a set of patterns to guide their conduct; that is what culture is. As we learn more about each of the cultures we embrace and profess, we set the stages for cross-cultural contrasts that might more effectively illuminate the

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founding concepts of our society and its construction. Vietnam was the United States' first integrated—though not racially balanced—war in quite some time. As a consequence, it raised anew the old questions about the meanings of freedom, equality, justice and liberty and forces us to consider how these meanings change as a function of one's status in the American social order. For, as Harold Cruse has observed in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, "...America, which idealizes the rights of the individual above everything else, is in reality, a nation dominated by the social power of groups, classes, in-groups and cliques—both ethnic and religious. The individual in America has few rights that are not backed up by the political, economic and social power of one group or another."¹ When any particular group, readily identified by some ascriptive criterion, falls out of favor, its members, by virtue of their relative powerlessness, get the short end of the stick.

Lyndon Johnson wanted no wider war in Southeast Asia because it would interfere with his favored domestic agenda;² thus, the war was done on the ethical cheap. Sons of the rich and powerful, and many of the sons of the middle and upper-middle class were afforded the easy out of college deferments. After the lifers and volunteers were used up in a bait-and-switch marketing strategy designed to attrite the enemy, the war came increasingly to be fought by the relatively powerless and dispossessed. When the skewed death rate of black combat troops began to raise a public furor back home, a simple answer was to thin them out by increasing the presence of other soldiers of color in the ranks. What before was a front-line unit that was 60% black, became a front-line unit only 40% black. Colored casualties might still be as high; but the impact of the numbers' magnitude is masked by its spread among different groups whose existential pathways in America have been very different indeed. It would be wise to keep those kinds of notions to the front in moving through this issue of the journal. Be forewarned, however; there are gaps in the record. The solicited pieces on the Puerto Rican and Asian-American experience proved less than satisfactory. Consequently they have not been included. What remains suffices to line out some avenues of investigation.

An important addition to this volume are the extensive bibliographies on American minorities in the Vietnam war. By no means complete, these citations are meant to assist the scholar or student in beginning to explore the issues of race and Vietnam. We hope that you will explore them, add to to them, and annotate them.

Finally, there is this. Mother Africa teaches that the present flows into and creates the past which functions simultaneously as context for the present. As we retreat further and further from the war

itself, we reshape it in accord with current needs. White folks took a beating but came back ticking!—This is the new message we are given as the “official” accounts are constructed to cement the growing number of cracks in the cultural wall. We present the essays in this issue in the hopes of widening those cracks and, indeed, forcing Americans to build a complete new structure which can contain us all. The old one can no longer serve.

Who controls the past influences the present. When one is not the custodian of his own experiences, the meanings made out of those experiences are subject to all manner of deletions, denials, and distortions. Who benefits when that is done? We encourage those of you who read this to write in with suggestions respecting questions, theories and methods of investigation that will help us to flesh out the record.

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¹ (New York: William Morrow) 1967: 7-8.

² Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row) 1976.