

## **The Vietnam War's Effect on U.S Veterans**

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Imagine coming home from a long, exhausting day at work to find a homecooked meal waiting for you along with a supportive family there to lift your spirits. What a wonderful feeling, right? Now, imagine that same thing but instead of a meal and supportive family waiting for you; you find there is no food in the house and your family doesn't want you to be home at all. You are exhausted, tired, and want nothing more than a welcoming home, but nobody cares. This is a similar feeling the veterans experience upon arrival home from the Vietnam War. Many Americans chose to look down upon soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War. There were shouts of hatred, people throwing objects, and some even spitting on these veterans. There are many people who consider all U.S. soldiers who fought in Vietnam to be baby killers and immoral fiends. These people also generally opposed the war to begin with. They believed that no good came out of sending U.S. soldiers to Vietnam. Who do these people blame? They generally directed their hate and disdain toward the soldiers at war. However, though there are some veterans who have committed immoral acts, that should not reflect on the group as a whole. Vietnam veterans fought the war to keep communism from spreading and a majority of them made the choice to fight. Those veterans did not deserve the hatred that so many Americans spat upon them.

Countless Americans opposed the involvement of the U.S. in the Vietnam war. These Americans started a protest group called the anti-war activists. Believing the war was immoral and wrong, they developed hate toward anyone involving themselves in the war. With so many opposing the Vietnam War, people began questioning the government's motives to have troops in Vietnam. This created political tension starting with John F. Kennedy and carrying through to Richard Nixon. Anti-war protestors were unhappy with how the war was being handled by the presidents and government. Large anti-war groups would protest that America needed to pull her

troops out of Vietnam. At the beginning of the war, protests were small and peaceful for the most part, yet as war progressed, protests escalated. As Enzo George (2015) mentions in his book, *The Vietnam Conflict*, protests went from tiny rallies to huge walks and marches in large cities all across America. He goes on to say, “by 1967, the country was deeply divided over the war” (pp.36-27).

With all this division, hate spawned from people across the country as protests became more and more dangerous. College campuses became riot and rally grounds, people gathered in front of the white house, and the streets were filled with anti-war protests every day. Several of these protest were about eradicating the American draft system for war. This event is addressed by Cath Senker (2012) in her book, *Living Through the Vietnam War*, saying, “A few angry students threw rocks at the national Guard” (p.50). In response, the national guards on campus first attempted to deescalate the situation with tear gas. Though this cleared out countless students, some remained relentlessly protesting. Another author, Christian Appy (2015) paints a picture of how the guardsmen were cornered, “they found themselves blocked by a fence to their rear and a semicircle of students to their front” (p. 188). Not long after this, they began firing rifles in retaliation to the violent students. Sadly, this event ended in the death of four students and another nine wounded (Senker, 2012). This unrest in America lead to unnecessary deaths among our own people. Meanwhile, the real battle was taking place thousands of miles away in Vietnam. Even the men who fought for America were beginning to receive hate instead of honor as was typically expected of a war veteran. However, this war was different. Not only did people believe America had no business involving themselves, but they started turning on soldiers who were involved. Because of the events at My Lai and the amount of men volunteering for the war, negative stereotypes starting forming about all U.S. soldiers.

Anti-war protestors were unashamed to show their feelings of disagreement toward U.S. soldiers. Upon returning and departing, U.S. soldiers were booed and shouted at with words of hate. The majority of these anti-war protestors were made up of women and college students. Despite this, there were still plenty of people supporting the soldiers. Many soldiers even volunteered to go to war. All the anti-war protestors could not stop young men from volunteering to fight for their country. In fact, the majority of U.S. soldiers were volunteers, not draftees. In George's (2015) book, he states that "Draftees made up about a quarter of the total number of recruits" (p.9). There were over two million soldiers who served in Vietnam, however "only around 20 percent saw combat. The rest served in support roles" (George, p. 9). This would suggest that a low number of the draftees actually were involved in the fighting. There was no doubt that a considerable amount of anti-war activists discouraged the draft system; however, statistics show that a majority of the U.S. soldiers made the choice to fight in Vietnam.

Another reason people have negative stereotypes toward Vietnam veterans is because they were accused of killing innocent Vietnam civilians. There were countless lives lost in Vietnam, both U.S. and Vietnam citizens alike. Some Americans showed disdain toward Vietnam veterans because of this. They considered the veterans ruthless "baby killers," who fought a war that was not necessary. Despite all the hate, not all Vietnam soldiers deserved to be looked down upon. Many of them were fighting because they believed it was needed to prevent communism from spreading around the world.

Those people who accused U.S. soldiers of baby killing were usually referring to a specific event in the war. It was called the Massacre at My Lai. Once this massacre took place in Vietnam, word eventually reached Americans of what the U.S. soldiers did. Ruthlessly killing innocent Vietnam civilians, U.S. soldiers left the village of My Lai in shambles. This horrified

the American people and painted an ugly stereotype for all soldiers serving in Vietnam. Even though the U.S. soldiers who participated in this massacre were in the wrong, it is unfair to slap a label on all the soldiers. There were many U.S. soldiers who are considered heroes for serving their country. No doubt, the world will always consist of corrupt and wicked people, but moral and respectable people also reside in world.

Darkness took over on March 16, in 1968. It was the day of the My Lai massacre. It was called a “search and destroy” mission. U.S. soldiers went into the village with no intention of leaving survivors. According to Martin Gitlin (2014) from his book, *Vietnam War*, there was no threat of attack from the civilians in this little village (p. 59). Despite the lack of threat, the soldier were nonetheless commanded to shoot everyone in that village. As Gitlin (2014) states, “they...[U.S. Soldiers]...rounded up hundreds of terrified men, women, and children and shot them to death”(pp.59-60). This platoon of soldiers was led by Lieutenant William L. Calley. His punishment, according to Senker (2012), for this crime was “three and a half years of house arrest” (p. 43). [Even in this tragedy, there was one soldier who stuck to his morals, pilot Hugh Thompson. He evacuated many citizens out of the village to safety.](#) As Gitlin (2014) states, he also “told his men to shoot their fellow soldiers if they attempted to kill another civilian” (p.50). His efforts prevented further bloodshed and he made no hesitation to report this massacre to his superiors (p. 50). More of those soldiers should have stood up against the command they were given just as Hugh Thompson did. My grandfather, who served as a marine in Vietnam and saw combat, agreed that this was a heinous act. He said, “During a war you never harm innocent civilians, it’s just a moral understanding among soldiers” The massacre at My Lai was a horrible incident that should have never occurred. Once America learned of this, almost a year later, their dislike for U.S. soldiers grew even more. However, to accuse all Vietnam veterans of these

immoral acts would be wrong since only a handful of men participated in this despicable incident. Overall, there were U.S. soldiers who acted shamefully without a doubt, but not all the veterans deserved to be accused of these crimes.

Throughout the war and afterwards there were many Americans who opposed the United States' involvement in Vietnam. This opposition brought unrest among the nation and distorted people's views of U.S. soldiers. Many Americans protested against the draft and chose to show hatred toward Vietnam Veterans. Digging into the stereotypes of Vietnam veterans has been an interesting research journey. I wanted to find out why there was hate and disdain toward these veterans. After all, many of them volunteered to fight for our country to stop the spread of communism. This research has shown me that not all the soldiers had pure and good intentions. Some left all morals behind in Vietnam and committed heinous acts. Though, this is not the case for countless of the soldiers. I discovered that though there were some who misrepresented America, countless others gave their lives to protect America and the people of South Vietnam. As for me, I cannot hold the appalling acts some soldiers committed against the entirety of the Vietnam Veterans. My grandfather fought in that war as a marine and he experienced death and grief firsthand. He was in Vietnam for ten months before a bomb went off and blew the back of his legs off. His battalion managed to get him out and he spent months recovering in a hospital. Looking back at the war, he told me, "It was a wasted war, we lost so many lives for no reason." Though he believes this, he also told me he has no regrets serving for his country. This goes to show that even though soldiers fought in the war, they may not have agreed with the motives of it. Because of this, I believe that Vietnam veterans should not be looked down upon. The hate and aversion they received upon returning home was not justified. People will always have differing opinions and views, however, this is never an excuse to exhibit hatred toward others.

Those Vietnam veterans should not have had to endure hate speech, getting spit on, or having things thrown at them. The freedom to express our opinions is something to be treasured, but should not be used to bring harm to others.

**Author's Note:**

I made some very minor changes to this paper. Some grammatical things I changed as well as some citing mistakes I corrected. Overall, however, I felt that this paper did not need a whole lot of revising. The initial draft laid out everything I wanted to say. Because of this, I did not feel the need to add or remove large parts of this paper. I loved writing this paper because I learned so much about the war that I did not previously know. It was truly eye opening.

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