

A Negro Looks At The War In Vietnam

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TO BE A NEGRO in America is to be expected to have no thoughts or opinions about anything, save the race problem. If a Negro has a thought about foreign policy he is warned that his opinion will set back his race in its quest for full citizenship. The Negro, of whatever station, is expected to possess only safe, conventional opinions. To suggest that there may be a Negro way to look at any problem, domestic or foreign, that differs from the dominant white way, has been tantamount to a suggestion of racism, or gross disloyalty. With the rest of the world looking at Vietnam, perhaps a Negro might be permitted just a peek.

Negroes have more than earned the right to comment about the war in Vietnam. Their sons, husbands and brothers have won that right in battle. But winning the right to freedom of speech and exercising this right are vastly different things as Julian Bond has already discovered. To comment about international issues then is to step out of the straitjacket to which the Negro has been assigned in his role first as this society's slave, then as its "boy." For to a Negro, any Negro, this war is filled with contradictions and paradoxes. To say the least, official explanations just don't add up.

The Negro is heavily involved in the war in Vietnam. The Pentagon reported that the percentage of Negroes drafted topped the percentage of whites for the 12 month period ending June 1965. 16.3% of all men drafted were Negro, while non-whites comprise only 11% of the population. The comparative rate of re-enlistment in the army after one hitch was 49.3% for Negroes, 18.5% for whites; in the Navy 41.3% Negro, 21.6% white; in the Air Force 50.3% for Negroes, 27.4% for whites. Few of these Negroes attain officer rank (3.5% Army, 0.3% Air Force, 1.5% Navy), but many become sergeants and non-commissioned officers. Irony number one: Those who have received so little of this nation's fruits now carry more than their share of the fighting. While white youngsters are struggling mightily to evade the draft by any means possible, Jack Moscokitz, Assistant Secretary of Defense for civil rights and industrial relations, points proudly to the Negro re-enlistment rate and says,

That uniform gives prestige and status to a guy who has been 100 years on the back burner.

In Vietnam proper, news reports, TV interviews and news photos feature the message "Negro and White Fight Side by Side" and "We Too Are Americans," (the Negro Press version). Actually Vietnam is the first truly integrated war ever fought by the United States. Estimates by personnel officers are that there are 20,000 Negroes—at least 10% of the fighting men out of 200,000 there are Negroes. The Pentagon reports

that the Negro death ratio exceeds the white; fully 18.3% of the deaths are Negro. Certain companies of the all-volunteer 173rd Airborne Division have a ratio of 6 Negroes out of every 10 soldiers, indicating that Negroes want to share the select paratroop tradition or that Negroes like and need the \$50 a month extra in a paratrooper's jump pay. While on duty and at the front there is little suppressed racial antagonism. "In battle they don't judge people by the color of their skins." Irony number two: In fact, in one stage of the campaign Vietcong snipers were only firing on white troops and there was considerable discussion about blackening the faces of *all* United States troops in that particular sector.

The untold story in Vietnam is that Negro troops are carrying the brunt of the psychological warfare. The very presence of the Negro troops bewilders the Vietnamese as well as the Vietcong. Simeon Booker of the Johnson Publications (*Ebony*, *Jet* and *Negro Digest*) states that in response to hostesses who point to their skins, smile and say to the Negroes, "We're sisters and brothers," Negro officers answer—"We're not white, but we are brothers to whites in America and that's what democracy is—brotherhood." (Between January 1 and January 25 of this year inside brotherly America 3 Negroes have been killed, purely in the spirit of brotherhood—2 shootings, 1 burning.) Irony number three: Above and beyond the actual number of racial killings, civil-rights lawyers in the South say that discrimination is now merely becoming less publicized, but remains just as formidable. The South is becoming more and more like the *North*. In another show of domestic brotherhood the United States Army ousted the sharecroppers from an empty military base in Mississippi. The sharecroppers had attempted to seek shelter from the unseasonable cold. While their sons and husbands were fighting valiantly for liberty's cause, these sharecroppers could not enjoy the fruits of their liberty. Yet the American troops told the Vietnamese, "that's what Democracy is—brotherhood."

After duty hours association between United States troops of different races is not always free of segregation. The fighting men go their separate ways "voluntarily," the whites to Saigon's Tu Do Street and the Negroes to Saigon's waterfront section Khawh Hoe. Much of this social segregation is self-segregation of course. The brothers in arms are happier, more natural, more comfortable that way.

Negroes and whites of America then are deeply engaged in the Vietnam war. The feelings of comradeship and

brotherly love which cannot, for some strange reason, be expressed in the peace and plenty of home can be expressed in the heat of jungle fighting in Vietnam. But it is a "poor man's war" as James Reston of the *New York Times* put it, for the poor and uneducated are most vulnerable to the draft. Unfortunately for them, Negroes have always been children of poverty.

As the military buildup grows and the casualties begin to mount, as surely they have for the integrated army of blacks and whites, the big unanswered question is why American arms are committed there at all. To be a white person in America, I suppose, since this writer has never been white, one becomes accustomed to the illogical ways of American policy making. But to a Negro this growing involvement doesn't make sense.

- *The public is told:* America is against tyranny, right or left, and is definitely opposed to aggression. Yet one sees that America supports Fascist dictators Franco and Salazar, as well as military takeovers in South America and supports all sorts of world-wide shennanigans when United States military and, in particular, economic interests are threatened.

- *The public is told* that the the United States must stand by her foreign commitments (we can't let the Vietnamese down), when twenty two million people are living witnesses to the fact that America has failed to keep its constitutional commitment to its own Negro citizens at home.

- *The public is told* that the war is savage and cruel, but has not been told that peace for the Vietnamese peasant is just as cruel. In a land that is 90% agricultural, 2% of the population owns 45% of the land and as yet there is no realistic prospect of basic land reform by the South Vietnamese.

- *The public is told* that the South Vietnamese should have a free opportunity to develop itself economically but not told that twelve thousand French nationals have an investment of *one-half billion dollars*, primarily in rubber trees, which the French will not relinquish.

- *The public is told* that American aid is trying to help the Vietnamese, but not told that the black market is flourishing and corruption among Vietnamese officialdom is reaching staggering proportions. An unemployed wife of an American aid official in South Vietnam sent home \$36,000 within six months to be deposited to her account.

- *The public is told* that United States favors free elections, but is not told that as long as from 1956 to the present, Diem to Air Marshall Ky, Saigon officials have felt that an election would be an act of suicide.

The entire Vietnamese war is too much to ask this Negro to accept. For the harder that the United States and its integrated army struggles and becomes involved in this war, the more obvious the accuracy of the statement becomes—"An army can defeat another army—an army can never defeat a people."

NOTES ON THE WELFARE STATE

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The first need, then, is not more this and more that; rather, it is different ways of doing this or that. And that requires a political movement which speaks in terms of the intransigence of *its* needs, not the needs it thinks are "realistically acceptable"—the slogan of the post-war "effective" liberals. The time of the white man's and philanthropist's burden is over.

With justice, though, *little sense can be made of a demand for "power" unless it is placed concretely in the context of what is currently being done with power.* The use of figures on the distribution of wealth was not gratuitous. Despite the moderates' "consensus" that poverty can be abolished without conflict between rich and poor, is it reasonable to think that poor people would tolerate such inequality, if they could do anything about it? No, it is not. But the old struggle for the economic surplus is now in the political arena.

If government, through the monies it spends and programs it supports, is the largest consumer in the society, then the impact of political power for poor people becomes more than merely a social-psychological therapy. The purposes for which just under one hundred billion dollars is spent is variable to a great extent. Money spent in urban renewal and the profitable defense and aerospace boondoggles, the fruits of publicly supported technological innovation, could be used not to line pockets and to perpetuate inequality, but to build a better, more equitable society. The impact of new political power would be to change the business of government.

Self-government means that a people sets its own priorities for allocation. The priorities of America today subordinate poor people to middle-class and Big Business culture. On one hand, the culture is undemocratic; on the other, it provides boodle for the already affluent; and in between are the crumbs, fearfully picked up by the poor.

Traditionally, the Left has seen The People as a Sleeping Giant, always about to awake. Today, the poor are a minority; whether they have the interests which are distinct from the workers generally is a matter of controversy. (This writer opts for the notion of solidarity rather than cleavage.) But the point is this: nowadays, the people who say that thirty years ago they fought for the Wagner Act (etc.) now argue moderation, order, responsibility, and "effectiveness," and find the advocates of a movement of poor people either extremist or romantic. Filled with phrases like "iron law of oligarchy," and theories of the professionalization of dissent, these people forget that outside of an increasingly isolated West, the world's poor people *are* an awakening giant who demand power and justice.

History guarantees little; it offers opportunity. When we ask "whose welfare" will be served, we ask,

"Who will struggle?"