

"The Fortunes of War or the Luck of the Draw": Examining the Influence of Recruitment Tactics
on Desertion Rates During the Vietnam War

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Abstract

This research project will explore the differences in recruitment tactics, along with motivations for desertion, among U.S. and Viet Cong soldiers during the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong recruitment tactics would involve targeting the demographics of young men using propaganda or promise of free food or supplies and exploiting the culture of duty and community embedded into Vietnamese culture. On the United States side of the war, they imposed a lottery system with the intent of streamlining the recruitment process and ensuring fairness. However, evidence indicates that this military draft led to significant opposition to the war and a culture of reluctance around military service. Previous research suggests that factors such as race and education affect the likelihood of being drafted. For example, Black high school graduates were more likely to be drafted than their White counterparts. Lack of progress or success in the war led men from both sides to desert their duties, though often for varying reasons. Findings from this study will provide additional insight into the effects of the two countries' recruiting tactics during wartime and the potential effect of those tactics on desertion trends. Discussions around reinstating the draft are still common in American political rhetoric. As such, an understanding of the relationship between recruitment tactics and desertion during wartime is needed.

Keywords: Vietnam War; Desertion; Recruitment Tactics; Draft Dodgers; War Culture.

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Introduction

The Vietnam War “was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.” (Networks 1). The purpose of this paper will be to examine the influence of recruitment tactics due to “[o]ver the fiscal 1965-73 period the Defense Department reports that 495,689 servicemen (and women) on active duty deserted the armed forces.” (Foundation 45). This paper will not only dive into reasons for recruitment tactics leading to desertion rates but also find out the root cause of all these tensions on both the Vietnam and the United States sides. Findings in this paper involve the root cause of the war, and the key high drive of recruitment can be traced to the Cold War. “Many tactics and strategies used in modern counterinsurgencies can trace their roots back to this Cold War conflict.” (Tran 104). Additionally, it will explore the unfairness of the United States draft culture an example would be “black high school students... increased their likelihood of being drafted by completing the twelfth grade” (Shields 224). Furthermore, examining reasons for Vietnamese men deserting the war and going to another country. Including false promises of shelter as well as harsh conditions on top of fear of war.

Research Question and Rationale

My research question for this paper is, “During the Vietnam War, specifically between 1950 and 1975. How has military recruitment tactic affected the desertion rate for soldiers in both Vietnam and The United States?”. In this paper, inspired by my father, and have heard many stories about people from my father’s side of the family fleeing the country and escaping

to America by boat. Because of this, there has always been a curiosity as to what happened during the Vietnam War and, most importantly, why my family on my father's side escaped instead of fighting for their own country. On the contrary, my grandfather, my mother's father, fought for the Vietnam side during the Vietnam War. The aim was to figure out if there was a difference between why my grandfather decided to fight in the war while my dad and uncles did not. In developing my research question, the preference was to figure out recruitment tactics within the Vietnam War and why there was such a divide between people who fought in the war and people who didn't. In delving into researching the topic, it became clear that there weren't a lot of sources that talked specifically about the Vietnam Side of recruitment, enough to where that could be my only scope of focus in this paper. That was when it was determined for this paper to expand its focus more, with a strive to find out the lives of other men in the United States during the war who were similar to my father and share their stories. After narrowing down and expanding my scope of focus, it has been concluded that the desired topic to be an examination of recruitment tactics within the United States and Vietnam and how it has led to desertion rates in both Vietnam and the United States.

Literature Review

My primary sources include four propaganda posters, three from Vietnam and one from the United States. Propaganda posters are like ancient art; to understand them, you must learn about their history, which will be delved into. Like art, propaganda conveys feelings, and the utilization of it as a primary source aims to convey myself, as well as the others reading this paper, to get a feel of how people felt during the war. Along with that will be one thesis as a primary source examining the Viet Cong soldiers and their weaknesses. For secondary sources, we will be using one book written by "Bao Ninh was born in Hanoi in 1952. During the Vietnam

War he served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade. Of the five hundred who went to war with the brigade in 1969, he is one of ten who survived.” (Ninh back cover). The book is a fictional book that dives into the life of a North Vietnamese soldier after the war, reminiscing his loss of love and his anger at the memories of the war. Along with this beautiful novel is followed by six academic articles diving deep into recruitment tactics from the NVA (North Vietnamese Army), SVA(South Vietnamese Army), and the United States. There are also two articles about the Vietnam War, prefacing the context and motivations behind this war from the Cold War.



“Is This Tomorrow; America Under Communism” is a comic book cover released in 1947 in St Paul, Minnesota. The book’s intended purpose “was to warn children of the threat of communism taking over the world by a cautionary tale that describes how communist leaders will take over America.” (Smith 1). The picture depicts America being in chaos and everyday citizens being killed by the communist soldiers. Implying that the communist party is deeply rooted in evil and that once the United States falls under communism, all of us will be killed.



Following this belief, “A 1954 poster created for South Vietnam by the U.S. Information Agency warns that: ‘Anywhere there is communism, there is terrorism and assass-ination.’ (U.S. Information Agency)” (Porges 1). Similarly to the last book cover, this propaganda was sent to South Vietnam, warning that if they don’t defend themselves from communism, then they will be assassinated. It’s a poster like the last comic book cover, except this time, the United States is turning it into actionable actions by sending this to South Vietnam.

On the contrary, the North Vietnamese Army wanted to influence the countries and their soldiers otherwise. “As the war raged, the posters became vital as a nationwide calling to arms, helping to boost the patriotism throughout the country as well as spreading information.” (Stephanie B. 1). Despite fighting for communism, the country was still encouraged to keep their patriotism and fight on. It also has become difficult for artists to capture pictures of men fighting in the war as it was too dangerous to do so. “Artists were encouraged to keep drawing through turbulent times as a way of defying the enemy and showcasing a determination for national unification as well as the optimism and hope for peace in the country.” (Stephanie B. 1). The

picture below on the left roughly translates to “Rush to overwhelm the enemy,” and the right one translates to “Ready to protect our country.”



The root of the Vietnam War and the United States’s interference can be explained by the “ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.”(Networks 4), combating beliefs between the democratic government vs. the communist government. In agreement with this statement, “Many tactics and strategies used in modern counterinsurgencies can trace their roots back to this Cold War conflict.” (Tran 104). As the Cold War intensified, so did the Vietnam War. The United States began to “hardened its policies against any allies of the Soviet Union” (Networks 4). Within the country, the conflict happened between Chi Minh “Ho’s communist forces took power in the north” (Networks 4). The South remained non-communist, and in “1955, ...strongly anti-communist politician Ngo Dinh Diem... become president of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN), often referred to during that era as South

Vietnam.” (Networks 4). With that, “President Dwight D. Eisenhower had pledged his firm support to Diem and South Vietnam.” (Network 4) and the war began.

Andrew Cooley’s thesis examines the Viet Cong soldiers' strengths and weaknesses. He discussed the Viet Cong’s “manpower sources and recruiting techniques; then examine control headquarters and the tactical units; followed by a brief description of logistics as it affects the soldier” (Cooley 37). To start, “The Viet Cong recruit soldiers from both North and South Vietnam” (Cooley 37). Although this keeps their options open, they have specific tactics for Northern recruitment. People recruited in the “North are trained there and then infiltrated south to join their units. This infiltration is not limited to Northerners, however, since some Southern recruits are also sent north for training and return south through infiltration” (Cooley 37), leading to a spreading of the Viet Congs even in the South. The “Viet Cong recruiters were prepared to exploit any form of discontent. They appealed to religious sects, persecutors under the Diem regime, ... social rebels...adventurers... [and] inhabitants living in areas controlled by the Viet Minh.” (Cooley 38). Additionally, much of their recruiting is focused on the “Mekong Delta. Emphasis is placed on recruiting youths between seventeen and thirty-five years of age. Special targets are those men subject to conscription in the South Vietnamese Army” (Cooley 39). Furthermore, Cooley dove into desertion reasons from the Viet Cong, some including “most Viet Cong that deserted did so for physical rather than ideological reasons.” (Cooley 119).

An information paper by The Ford Foundation titled “VETERANS, DESERTERS, AND DRAFT-EVADERS --THE VIETNAM DECADE –. “ Highlight the fact that “[n]o group of Americans was touched as deeply by the Vietnam conflict as the millions of young men who came to maturity in the decade between 1964 and 1973.” (Foundation 1). Even highlighting the fact that “The burden was shared unequally because the nation lacked a system of universal

military service.” (Foundation 1). This paper will dive into “persons served in the armed forces during the Vietnam era.” (Foundation 1). Additionally, addressing problems the few of those men who were lucky enough to return faced. Such as “in education and employment...abuse, bad discharge records, or psychological distress.”(Foundation 1). The first and second parts of this report will consist of “[t]he lives of the much smaller group of men who evaded the draft or deserted the armed forces during the Vietnam years also remained troubled... The second part of this report considers their situation and prospects.”(Foundation 2). In the final section, this paper will highlight the conclusion and provide “recommendations for possible Foundation activity.” (Foundation 2). Moving forward, we won’t have to face the same problems again in the United States draft during a war that does not hope to happen.

Findings

The Cold War has been introduced within my literature review. My findings from the root cause for the desertion rates within the Vietnam War for both Americans and Vietnamese men will be traced back to the Cold War. This war has played a significant role in fueling recruitment tactics and driving desperation to fight in this war. With intensifying ideology “between the United States and the Soviet Union.” (Networks 5). The United States was willing to do anything to protect itself against communism. Going as far as creating theories to further intensify our fear of communism spreading. In 1961, the United States president at the time, John F Kennedy, sent a team to “report on conditions in South Vietnam [and] advised a build-up of American military, economic and technical aid in order to help Diem confront the Viet Cong threat.” (Networks 5). This eventually led to his Domino Theory. President John F Kennedy’s theory states that “if one Southeast Asian country fell to communism, many other countries would follow” (Networks 5). As such, he “increased U.S. aid”(Networks 5) within South Vietnam to help fight against communism in the hope that Vietnam wouldn’t fall under it and

eventually support his theory. Marking the beginning of the big breakout in Vietnam, “By 1962, the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the 1950s.”(Networks 5). Furthermore, the United States sent a “1954 poster created for South Vietnam by the U.S. Information Agency warns that: ‘Anywhere there is communism, there is terrorism and assass-ination.’ (U.S. Information Agency)” (Porges 1). Along with that, fear of communism spread to the point of making it on the book cover. “Is This Tomorrow; America Under Communism” is a comic book cover released in 1947 in St Paul, Minnesota. The book’s intended purpose “was to warn children of the threat of communism taking over the world by a cautionary tale that describes how communist leaders will take over America.” (Smith 1).

With a heavy escalation of the U.S. military presence within South Vietnam to fight against communism from North Vietnam taking over along with a big spread in fear of communism. It didn’t stop there, “In early August of 1964, two American ships were attacked by North Vietnamese forces. This led to the passing of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which led to the start of U.S. escalation into the Vietnam conflict. After escalation, the United States would send approximately 2.7 million men in total overseas.” (Tran 107). As the Ford Foundation has highlighted, “[n]o group of Americans was touched as deeply by the Vietnam conflict as the millions of young men who came to maturity in the decade between 1964 and 1973.” (Foundation 1). As such, the draft was seen as a need not just a want, “by international crisis” (Shields 215) the draft was to take “able young men...quickly into service in event of an emergency... Nearly everyone served. At that time the armed forces required approximately 70 percent of the nation's young men to meet its manpower needs” (Shields 216). The draft at the time just took everyone. But as the first of the baby boom generations began to mature, there

became a surplus of people needed to serve. This creates “serious problems in the choice of who was to serve.” (Shields 216). Inequality began to happen as men were able to dodge the draft by attending “graduate school” (Shields 216). The burden of the draft “did not fall evenly upon young men ... Individuals who unfortunately possessed combinations of draft vulnerable personal characteristics” (Shields 215) were set to pay a higher price, such as “black high school students” (Shields 224). Equality was not achieved in this draft “fairness with respect to service, or ex-ante equity, was not achieved by the Selective Service System during the Vietnam era. The greater probabilities of being drafted among high school graduates and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are consistent with army records” (Shields 226).

Many Americans, “[b]y November 1967... As the war stretched on, some soldiers came to mistrust the government’s reasons for keeping them there, as well as...repeated claims that the war was being won.” (Networks 7). As time went on, an increase in physical and psychological deterioration among soldiers became more apparent. Things such as “drug use, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mutinies and attacks by soldiers against officers and noncommissioned officers.” (Networks 7) became a challenge, and this marked the start of the protest of the Vietnam War for American citizens. Between “July 1966 and December 1973, more than 503,000 U.S. military personnel deserted, and a robust anti-war movement among American forces spawned” (Networks 7). The Ford Foundation defines the term “desertion” as “an absence-without-leave of more than 30 days.” (Foundation 45). By that definition, after 30 days, by “December 31, 1973, all except 28,661 deserters had been returned to military control.” (Foundation 45). Although a large part of the group technically didn’t desert, the rest of the approximately 20,000 people are expected to be in Canada, according to Stewart. “By the end of that year it was becoming even more apparent that U.S. military deserters...were going absent

without leave in... Nonetheless, despite a low estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 draft dodgers and 4,000 military deserters in Canada during the war, neither U.S. Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon nor their Secretaries of State or Defense made any formal representations to the Canadian government in public or private.” (Stewart 2). It is evident that because of the U.S.’s government decision not to make any formal representation to the Canadian government, that they did feel guilty for “repeated claims that the [Vietnam] war was being won.” (Net 7). Coupled with the unfair draft system imposed on “[t]he greater probabilities of being drafted among high school graduates and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds” (Shields 226). As well as being “[b]ombarded by horrific images of the war on their televisions, Americans on the home front turned against the war as well: In October 1967, some 35,000 demonstrators staged a massive Vietnam War protest outside the Pentagon. Opponents of the war argued that civilians, not enemy combatants, were the primary victims and that the United States was supporting a corrupt dictatorship in Saigon.” (Networks 7). All of this has come together and created one big mess for the Americans to not only desert the war but protest it as well.

To start, Andrew Cooley’s thesis will be a primary source supporting this part of my paper. Additionally, this discussion will explore propaganda posters from the Vietnam War and try to get a feel of what the purpose of those are. To begin, it has been discovered that a lot of the Viet Cong’s recruitment tactics within the Vietnam War aimed heavily towards all of the citizens, North and South. “The Viet Cong recruit soldiers from both North and South Vietnam” (Cooley 37). This was surprising since the initial assumption was a war between the North and the South, the North would recruit people within their vicinity. Additionally, their recruitment tactics are shaped this way: people recruited in the “[n]orth are trained there and then infiltrated south to join their units. This infiltration is not limited to Northerners, however, since some

Southern recruits are also sent north for training and return south through infiltration” (Cooley 37). This was an effective attempt at recruiting since it not only gathered more troops but, ideologically, when the North was getting people from the South, once you were in their system, you would have to follow communism. Furthermore, The “Viet Cong recruiters were prepared to exploit any form of discontent. They appealed to religious sects, persecutors under the Diem regime, ... social rebels...adventurers... [and] inhabitants living in areas controlled by the Viet Minh.”. (Cooley 38). Recruiting didn’t stop there, Viet Cong knew they were outnumbered since South Vietnam was sided with the United States, so they decide to even focus on “recruiting youths between seventeen and thirty-five years of age. Special targets are those men subject to conscription in the South Vietnamese Army” (Cooley 39).

Now, a closer look will be taken at their propaganda, as the war became more intense, these “posters became vital as a nationwide calling to arms, helping to boost the patriotism throughout the country as well as spreading information.” (Stephanie B. 1). Despite fighting for the communist party which the United States deemed to be bad, the Viet Cong used another way to spread their propaganda. Encouraging patriotism was in their tactic as “[a]rtists were encouraged to keep drawing through turbulent times as a way of defying the enemy and showcasing a determination for national unification as well as the optimism and hope for peace in the country.” (Stephanie B. 1). The pictures in my literature review roughly translates to “Rush to overwhelm the enemy” and “Ready to protect our country.”. Both posters exemplify a sense of togetherness and a sense of patriotism, keeping their people together in the belief that communism is good.

Although the Vietcong tried to appeal a lot to the masses of people, the “major problem of the Viet Cong is defection, which in most cases is caused by prolonged family separation, or

an inability of the soldier to adapt to the rigors of revolutionary life.” (Cooley 99) This leads to a lot of desertion; one deserter stated that “because the living conditions were miserable, and his family was still required to support him.” (Cooley 100). Furthermore, “most Viet Cong that deserted did so for physical rather than ideological reasons.” (Cooley 119). Above, the analysis focused on how the Viet Cong also tries to target the youth within their recruitment as well. But, according to Cooley, “youths are blackmailed into enlisting.” (Cooley 41). Coercion into the Viet Cong army, as well as harsh conditions and taking the people away from their families for a prolonged time, led to a lot of Vietnamese men deserting. The book “The Sorrow War” written by Bao Ninh highlighted this in a more intrapersonal manner. Stating, “[b]ut we also shared a common sorrow, the immense sorrow of war...It was thanks to our sorrow that we were able to escape the war, escape the continual killing and fighting, the terrible conditions of battle and the unhappiness of men in fierce and violent theaters of war.” (Ninh 231).

Conclusion

Despite both being ideologically different, in terms of when the citizens are fighting the war, these men both are victims of war. This research project explored the differences in recruitment tactics, along with motivations for desertion, among U.S. and Viet Cong soldiers during the Vietnam War. My findings have concluded that the root cause of all this tension is rooted in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. This ideological war has led to a huge push in recruitment tactics within both the United States and Vietnam. As such, this push has affected the lives of men across the war. Some on the United States side deserted to Canada, and some on the Vietnam side just escaped the war all in general. From seeing the unfairness in the draft system within the United States to the harsh conditions within the Viet Cong Army, this understanding will feed into further research in the future. Knowing the driving

factors of the desertion rate will help us understand how we as a country can fight together and stay together in a future where it is hoped that we won't need to do this. As such, for future research recommendations, this paper was being researched. Some topics came across with a lot of depth. Recognizing that some topics that can be researched for the future would be "What has the South Vietnamese Army done to combat the North Vietnamese Army taking their men troops?". "Has the United States done anything to make the draft fairer for these men since the Vietnam War to the present?" and "How does the protest within the United States influence the Vietnam War?".

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