1
Working-Class War

Where were the sons of all the big shots who supported the war? Not in my platoon. Our guys' people were workers. . . . If the war was so important, why didn't our leaders put everyone's son in there, why only us?
—Steve Harper (1971)

Mapping The Losses

"We all ended up going into the service about the same time—the whole crowd." I had asked Dan Shaw about himself, why he had joined the Marine Corps; but Dan ignored the personal thrust of the question. Military service seemed less an individual choice than a collective rite of passage, a natural phase of life for "the whole crowd" of boys in his neighborhood, so his response encompassed a circle of over twenty childhood friends who lived near the corner of Train and King streets in Dorchester, Massachusetts—a white, working-class section of Boston. ¹

Thinking back to 1968 and his streetcorner buddies, Dan sorted them into groups, wanting to get the facts straight about each one. It did not take him long to come up with some figures. "Four of the guys didn't go into the military at all. Four got drafted by the army. Fourteen or fifteen of us went in the Marine Corps. Out of them fourteen or fifteen"—here he paused to count by naming—"Eddie, Brian, Tommy, Dennis, Steve: six of us went to Nam." They were all still teenagers. Three of the six were wounded in combat, including Dan.

His tone was calm, almost dismissive. The fact
that nearly all his friends entered the military and half a dozen fought in Vietnam
did not strike Dan as unusual or remarkable. In working-class neighborhoods
like his, military service after high school was as commonplace among young
men as college was for the youth of upper-middleclass suburbs—not
welcomed by everyone but rarely questioned or avoided. In fact, when Dan
thinks of the losses suffered in other parts of Dorchester, he regards his own
streetcorner as relatively lucky. "Jeez, it wasn't bad. I mean some corners
around here really got wiped out. Over off Norfolk street ten guys got blown
away the same year."

Focusing on the world of working-class Boston, Dan has a quiet, low-key
manner with few traces of bitterness. But when he speaks of the disparities in
military service throughout American society, his voice fills with anger, scorn,
and hurt. He compares the sacrifices of poor and working-class
neighborhoods with the rarity of wartime casualties in the "fancy suburbs"
beyond the city limits, in places such as Milton, Lexington, and Wellesley. If
three wounded veterans "wasn't bad" for a streetcorner in Dorchester, such
concentrated pain was, Dan insists, unimaginable in a wealthy subdivision.
"You'd be lucky to find three Vietnam veterans in one of those rich
neighborhoods, never mind three who got wounded."

Dan's point is indisputable: those who fought and died in Vietnam were
overwhelmingly drawn from the bottom half of the American social structure.
The comparison he suggests bears out the claim. The three affluent towns of
Milton, Lexington, and Wellesley had a combined wartime population of about
100,000, roughly equal to that of Dorchester. However, while those suburbs
suffered a total of eleven war deaths, Dorchester lost forty-two. There was
almost exactly the same disparity in casualties between Dorchester and another
sample of prosperous Massachusetts towns—Andover, Lincoln, Sudbury,
Weston, Dover, Amherst, and Longmeadow. These towns lost ten men from a
combined population of 100,000. In other words, boys who grew up in
Dorchester were four times more likely to die in Vietnam than those raised in
the fancy suburbs. An extensive study of wartime casualties from Illinois
reached a similar conclusion. In that state, men from neighborhoods with
median family incomes under $5,000 (about $15,000 in 1990 dollars) were
four times more likely to die in Vietnam than men from places with median
family incomes above $15,000 ($45,000 in 1990 dollars). 2

Dorchester, East Los Angeles, the South Side of Chicago—major urban
centers such as these sent thousands of men to Vietnam. So, too, did lesser
known, midsize industrial cities with large working-class populations, such as
Saginaw, Michigan; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Stockton, California; Chattanooga,
Tennessee; Youngstown, Ohio; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; and Utica, New
York. There was also an enormous rise in working-class suburbanization in the
1950s and 1960s. The post-World War II boom in modestly priced, uniformly
designed, tract housing, along with the vast construction of new highways,
allowed many workers their first opportunity to purchase homes and to live a
considerable distance from their jobs. As a result, many new suburbs became
predominantly working class.

Long Island, New York, became the site of numerous working-class suburbs,
including the original Levittown, the first mass-produced town in American
history. Built by the Levitt and Sons construction firm in the late 1940s, it was
initially a middle-class town. By 1960, however, as in many other postwar
suburbs, the first owners had moved on, often to larger homes in wealthier
suburbs, and a majority of the newcomers were working class. Ron Kovic,
author of one of the best-known Vietnam memoirs and films, *Born on the
Fourth of July*, grew up near Levittown in Massapequa. His parents, like so
many others in both towns, were working people willing to make great
sacrifices to own a small home with a little land and to live in a town they
regarded as a safe and decent place to raise their families, in hope that their
children would enjoy greater opportunity. Many commentators viewed the
suburbanization of blue-collar workers as a sign that the working class was
vanishing and that almost everyone was becoming middle class. In fact,
however, though many workers owned more than ever before, their relative
social position remained largely unchanged. The Kovies, for example, lived in
the suburbs but had to raise five children on the wages of a supermarket
checker and clearly did not match middle-class levels in terms of economic
security, education, or social status.

Ron Kovic volunteered for the marines after graduating from high school. He
was paralyzed from the chest down in a 1968 firefight during his second tour of
duty in Vietnam. Upon returning home, after treatment in a decrepit, rat-
infested VA hospital, Kovic was asked to be grand marshal in Massapequa's
Memorial Day parade. His drivers were American Legion veterans of World
War II who tried unsuccessfully to engage him in a conversation about the
many local boys who had died in Vietnam:
"Remember Clasternack? . . . They got a street over in the park named after him . . . he was the first of you kids to get it . . . There was the Peters family too . . . both brothers . . . Both of them killed in the same week. And Alan Grady . . . Did you know Alan Grady? . . .

"We've lost a lot of good boys . . . We've been hit pretty bad. The whole town's changed." 4

A community of only 27,000, Massapequa lost 14 men in Vietnam. In 1969, Newsday traced the family backgrounds of 400 men from Long Island who had been killed in Vietnam. "As a group," the newspaper concluded, "Long Island's war dead have been overwhelmingly white, working-class men. Their parents were typically blue collar or clerical workers, mailmen, factory workers, building tradesmen, and so on." 5

Rural and small-town America may have lost more men in Vietnam, proportionately, than did even central cities and working-class suburbs. You get a hint of this simply by flipping through the pages of the Vietnam Memorial directory. As thick as a big-city phone book, the directory lists the names and hometowns of Americans who died in Vietnam. An average page contains the names of five or six men from towns such as Alma, West Virginia (pop. 296), Lost Hills, California (pop. 200), Bryant Pond, Maine (pop. 350), Tonalea, Arizona (pop. 125), Storden, Minnesota (pop. 364), Pioneer, Louisiana (pop. 188), Wartburg, Tennessee (pop. 541), Hillsburg, Indiana (pop. 225), Boring, Oregon (pop. 150), Racine, Missouri (pop. 274), Hygiene, Colorado (pop. 400), Clayton, Kansas (pop. 127), and Almond, Wisconsin (pop. 440). In the 1960s only about 2 percent of Americans lived in towns with fewer than 1,000 people. Among those who died in Vietnam, however, roughly four times that portion, 8 percent, came from American hamlets of that size. It is not hard to find small towns that lost more than one man in Vietnam. Empire, Alabama, for example, had four men out of a population of only 400 die in Vietnam—four men from a town in which only a few dozen boys came of draft age during the entire war. 6

There were also soldiers who came from neither cities, suburbs, nor small towns but from the hundreds of places in between, average towns of 15,000 to 30,000 people whose economic life, however precarious, had local roots. Some of these towns paid a high cost in Vietnam. In the foothills of eastern Alabama, for example, is the town of Talladega, with a population of approximately 17,500 (about one-quarter black), a town of small farmers and textile workers. Only one-third of Talladega's men had completed high school. Fifteen of their children died in Vietnam, a death rate
three times the national average. Compare Talladega to Mountain Brook, a
rich suburb outside Birmingham. Mountain Brook's population was somewhat
higher than Talladega's, about 19,500 (with no black residents of draft age).
More than 90 percent of its men were high school graduates. No one from
Mountain Brook is listed among the Vietnam War dead. 7

I have described a social map of American war casualties to suggest not simply
the geographic origins of U.S. soldiers but their class origins—not simply
where they came from but the kinds of places as well. Class, not geography,
was the crucial factor in determining which Americans fought in Vietnam.
Geography reveals discrepancies in military service primarily because it often
reflects class distinctions. Many men went to Vietnam from places such as
Dorchester, Massapequa, Empire, and Talladega because those were the sorts
of places where most poor and working-class people lived. The wealthiest
youth in those towns, like those in richer communities, were far less likely either
to enlist or to be drafted.

Mike Clodfelter, for example, grew up in Plainville, Kansas. In 1964 he
enlisted in the army, and the following year he was sent to Vietnam. In his
1976 memoir, Clodfelter recalled, "From my own small home town . . . all but
two of a dozen high school buddies would eventually serve in Vietnam and all
were of working class families, while I knew of not a single middle class son of
the town's businessmen, lawyers, doctors, or ranchers from my high school
graduating class who experienced the Armageddon of our generation." 8

However, even a sketchy map of American casualties must go farther afield,
beyond the conventional boundaries of the United States. Although this fact is
not well known, the military took draftees and volunteers from the American
territories: Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and
the Canal Zone. These territories lost a total of 436 men in Vietnam, several
dozen more than the state of Nebraska. Some 48,000 Puerto Ricans served in
Vietnam, many of whom could speak only a smattering of English. Of these,
345 died. This figure does not include men who were born in Puerto Rico and
emigrated to the United States (or whose parents were born in Puerto Rico).
We do not know these numbers because the military did not make a separate
count of Hispanic-American casualties either as an inclusive category or by
country of origin. 9

Guam drew little attention on the American mainland during the war. It was
only heard of at all because American B-52s took off from there to make
bombing runs over Vietnam (a twelve-hour round-trip flight requiring midair
refueling) or because a conference between President Johnson
and some of his top military leaders was held there in 1967. Yet the United States sent several thousand Guamanians to fight with American forces in Vietnam. Seventy of them died. Drawn from a population of only 111,000, Guam's death rate was considerably higher even than that of Dorchester, Massachusetts.

This still does not exhaust the range of places we might look for "American" casualties. There were, of course, the "Free World forces" recruited by and, in most cases, financed by the United States. These "third country forces" from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines reached a peak of about 60,000 troops (U.S. forces rose to 550,000). The U.S. government pointed to them as evidence of a united, multinational, free-world effort to resist communist aggression. But only Australia and New Zealand paid to send their troops to Vietnam. They had a force of 7,000 men and lost 469 in combat. The other nations received so much money in return for their military intervention that their forces were essentially mercenary. The Philippine government of Ferdinand Marcos, for example, received the equivalent of $26,000 for each of the 2,000 men it sent to Vietnam to carry out noncombat, civic action programs. South Korea's participation was by far the largest among the U.S.-sponsored third countries. It deployed a force of 50,000 men. In return, the Korean government enjoyed substantial increases in aid, and its soldiers were paid roughly 20 times what they earned at home. More than 4,000 of them lost their lives. 10

The South Vietnamese military was also essentially the product of American intervention. For twenty-one years the United States committed billions of dollars to the creation of an anticomunist government in southern Vietnam and to the recruitment, training, and arming of a military to support it. Throughout the long war against southern guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars, about 250,000 South Vietnamese government forces were killed. The United States bears responsibility for these lives and for those of third country forces because their military participation was almost wholly dependent on American initiatives.

In this sense, perhaps we need to take another step. Perhaps all Vietnamese deaths, enemy and ally, civilian and combatant, should be considered American as well as Vietnamese casualties. To do so is simply to acknowledge that their fates were largely determined by American intervention. After all, without American intervention (according to almost all intelligence reports at the time and historians since), Vietnamese unification under Ho Chi Minh would have occurred with little resistance. 11
However one measures American responsibility for Indochinese casualties, every effort should be made to grasp the enormity of those losses. From 1961 to 1975 1.5 to 2 million Vietnamese were killed. Estimates of Cambodian and Laotian deaths are even less precise, but certainly the figure is in the hundreds of thousands. Imagine a memorial to the Indochinese who died in what they call the American, not the Vietnam, War. If similar to the Vietnam Memorial, with every name etched in granite, it would have to be forty times larger than the wall in Washington. Even such an enormous list of names would not put into perspective the scale of loss in Indochina. These are small countries with a combined wartime population of about 50 million people. Had the United States lost the same portion of its population, the Vietnam Memorial would list the names of 8 million Americans.

To insist that we recognize the disparity in casualties between the United States and Indochina is not to diminish the tragedy or significance of American losses, nor does it deflect attention from our effort to understand American soldiers. Without some awareness of the war's full destructiveness we cannot begin to understand their experience. As one veteran put it: "That's what I can't get out of my head—the bodies . . . all those bodies. Back then we didn't give a shit about the dead Vietnamese. It was like: 'Hey, they're just gooks, don't mean nothin'. You got so cold you didn't even blink. You could even joke about it, mess around with the bodies like they was rag dolls. And after awhile we could even stack up our own KIAs [killed in action] without feeling much of anything. It's not like that now. You can't just put it out of your mind. Now I carry those bodies around every fucking day. It's a heavy load, man, a heavy fucking load." 12

The Vietnam Generation's Military Minority: A Statistical Profile

Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon sent 3 million American soldiers to South Vietnam, a country of 17 million. In the early 1960s they went by the hundreds—helicopter units, Green Beret teams, counterinsurgency hotshots, ambitious young officers, and ordinary infantrymen—all of them labeled military advisers by the American command. They fought a distant, "brushfire war" on the edge of American consciousness. Beyond the secret inner circles of government, few predicted that hundreds of thousands would follow in a massive buildup that took the American presence
in Vietnam from 15,000 troops in 1964 to 550,000 in 1968. In late 1969
the gradual withdrawal of ground forces began, inching its way to the final U.S.
pullout in January 1973. The bell curve of escalation and withdrawal spread
the commitment of men into a decade-long chain of one-year tours of duty.

In the years of escalation, as draft calls mounted to 30,000 and 40,000 a
month, many young people believed the entire generation might be mobilized
for war. There were, of course, many ways to avoid the draft, and millions of
men did just that. Very few, however, felt completely confident that they would
never be ordered to fight. Perhaps the war would escalate to such a degree or
go on so long that all exemptions and deferments would be eliminated. No one
could be sure what would happen. Only in retrospect is it clear that the odds of
serving in Vietnam were, for many people, really quite small. The forces that
fought in Vietnam were drawn from the largest generation of young people in
the nation's history. During the years 1964 to 1973, from the Gulf of Tonkin
Resolution to the final withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, 27 million
men came of draft age. The 2.5 million men of that generation who went to
Vietnam represent less than 10 percent of America's male baby boomers.

The parents of the Vietnam generation had an utterly different experience of
war. During World War II virtually all young, able-bodied men entered the
service—some 12 million. Personal connections to the military permeated
society regardless of class, race, or gender. Almost every family had a close
relative overseas—a husband fighting in France, a son in the South Pacific, or
at least an uncle with the Seabees, a niece in the WAVES, or a cousin in the
Air Corps. These connections continued well into the 1950s. Throughout
the Korean War years and for several years after, roughly 70 percent of the draft-
age population of men served in the military; but from the 1950s to the 1960s,
military service became less and less universal. During the Vietnam years, the
portion had dropped to 40 percent: 10 percent were in Vietnam, and 30
percent served in Germany, South Korea, and the dozens of other duty
stations in the United States and abroad. What had been, in the 1940s, an
experience shared by the vast majority gradually became the experience of a
distinct minority.

What kind of minority was it? In modern American culture, minority usually
serves as a code word for nonwhite races, especially African Americans. To
speak of American forces in Vietnam as a minority invites the assumption that
blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans fought and died in
numbers grossly disproportionate to their
percentage of the total U.S. population. It is a common assumption, but not one that has been sufficiently examined. For that matter, the whole experience of racial minorities in Vietnam has been woefully ignored by the media and academics. For Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, even the most basic statistical information about their role in Vietnam remains either unknown or inadequately examined.

We know how many black soldiers served and died in Vietnam, but the more important task is to interpret those figures in historical context. Without that context, racial disproportions can be either exaggerated or denied. To simplify: At the beginning of the war blacks comprised more than 20 percent of American combat deaths, about twice their portion of the U.S. population. However, the portion of black casualties declined over time so that, for the war as a whole, black casualties were only slightly disproportionate (12.5 percent from a civilian population of 11 percent). The total percentage of blacks who served in Vietnam was roughly 10 percent throughout the war. 16

African Americans clearly faced more than their fair share of the risks in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967. That fact might well have failed to gain any public notice had the civil rights and antiwar movements not called attention to it. Martin Luther King was probably the most effective in generating concern about the number of black casualties in Vietnam. King had refrained from frequent public criticism of the war until 1967, persuaded by moderates that outspoken opposition to the war might divert energy from the cause of civil rights and alienate prowar politicians whose support the movement sought (President Johnson, for example). By early 1967, however, King believed the time had come to break his silence. As for diverting energy and resources from domestic social reform, King argued, the war itself had already done as much. More importantly, he could not in good conscience remain silent in the face of a war he believed unjust.

King's critique of the war was wide ranging, based on a historical understanding of the long struggle in Vietnam for national independence, on a commitment to nonviolence, and on outrage over the violence the United States was inflicting on the land and people of Indochina. Always central in King's criticism of the war, however, was its effect on America's poor, both black and white. "The promises of the Great Society," he said, "have been shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam." The expense of the war was taking money and support that could be spent to solve problems at home. The war on poverty was being supplanted by the war on Viet-
nam. Beyond that, King stressed, the poor themselves were doing much of the fighting overseas. As he put it in his famous speech at Riverside Church in New York City (April 1967), the war was not only "devastating the hopes of the poor at home," it was also "sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population." 17

While King focused attention on the economic condition of white and black soldiers, he emphasized the additional burden on blacks of fighting overseas in disproportionate numbers while being denied full citizenship at home: "We have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit." In another speech he added, "We are willing to make the Negro 100 percent of a citizen in warfare, but reduce him to 50 percent of a citizen on American soil. Half of all Negroes live in substandard housing and he has half the income of white. There is twice as much unemployment and infant mortality among Negroes. [Yet] at the beginning of 1967 twice as many died in action—20.6 percent—in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole." 18

In his postwar apologia for U.S. intervention, America in Vietnam, Guenter Lewy accused King of heightening racial tension by making false allegations about black casualties in Vietnam. After all, Lewy argued, black casualties for the whole war were 12.5 percent, no higher than the portion of draft-age black males in the total U.S. population. Lewy's charge falls apart, however, as soon as one points out that black casualties did not drop to the overall figure of 12.5 until well after King was assassinated. During the period King and others were articulating their criticisms of the war, the disproportions were quite significant. To attack the antiwar movement for failing to use postwar statistics is not only unfair, it is ahistorical. Moreover, King was by no means the first prominent black to criticize the war or the disproportionate loss of black soldiers. Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Adam Clayton Powell, Dick Gregory, John Lewis, and Julian Bond were among those who spoke out repeatedly well before 1967. In fact, had the civil rights movement not brought attention to racial disproportions in Vietnam casualties, those disproportions almost certainly would have continued. According to Commander George L. Jackson, "In response to this criticism the Department of Defense took steps to
readjust force levels in order to achieve an equitable proportion and employment of Negroes in Vietnam." A detailed analysis of exactly what steps were taken has yet to be written. It is clear, however, that by late 1967, black casualties had fallen to 13 percent and then to below 10 percent in 1970-72.

Blacks were by no means united in opposition to the war or the military. For generations blacks had been struggling for equal participation in all American institutions, the military included. In World War II the struggle had focused on integration and the "right to fight." Aside from some all-black combat units, most blacks were assigned to segregated, rear-area duty. The military was officially desegregated in 1948, and most blacks served in integrated units in the Korean War. It was the Vietnam War, though, that was hailed in the mass media as America's first truly integrated war. In 1967 and 1968 several magazines and newspapers ran major stories on "the Negro in Vietnam." While disproportionate casualties were mentioned, they were not the target of criticism. Instead, these articles—including a cover story in Ebony (August 1968)—emphasized the contributions of black soldiers, their courageous service, and the new opportunities ostensibly provided by wartime duty in an integrated army. The point was often made that blacks had more civil rights in the military than at home. In Harper's magazine (June 1967) Whitney Young of the Urban League wrote, "In this war there is a degree of integration among black and white Americans far exceeding that of any other war in our history as well as any other time or place in our domestic life." As Thomas Johnson put it in Ebony, giving the point an ironic turn, "The Negro has found in his nation's most totalitarian society—the military—the greatest degree of functional democracy that this nation has granted to black people."  

Whitney Young justified disproportionate black casualties as the result not of discrimination but of "the simple fact that a higher proportion of Negroes volunteer for hazardous duty." There was some truth to this. In airborne units—the training for which is voluntary—blacks were reported to comprise as much as 30 percent of the combat troops. Moreover, blacks had a reenlistment rate three times higher than whites. It fell dramatically as the war went on, but it was always much higher than that of white soldiers. These points surely suggest that many blacks were highly motivated, enthusiastic troops.

That enthusiasm itself does not prove that the military had equal opportunities for blacks or an absence of discrimination. After all, presumably
the same blacks who volunteered for airborne (for which they received additional pay) might just as eagerly have volunteered for officer candidate school had they been offered the chance. Only 2 percent of the officers in Vietnam were black. Blacks might have taken advantage of opportunities to fill higher-paying, noncombat positions, had they been offered. The military's response was that blacks were disproportionately enlisted combat soldiers because they were simply not qualified to fill other jobs. Of course, qualifications are determined by the crudest measurement—standardized tests—and black soldiers scored significantly lower than whites. In 1965, for example, 41 percent of black soldiers scored in the lowest levels of the Armed Forces Qualification Test (categories IV and V), compared to 10 percent of the white soldiers. 22

These scores account for much of the disproportion. To that extent they reflect the relationship of race and class in civilian society. Poor and working-class soldiers, whether black or white, were more likely to be trained for combat than were soldiers economically and educationally more advantaged. While enlisted men of both races were primarily from the bottom half of the social structure, blacks were considerably poorer. One study found that 90 percent of black soldiers in Vietnam were from working-class and poor backgrounds. This is a large part of the reason why more blacks reenlisted. Men who reenlisted were given bonuses of $900 to $1,400, equivalent to one-third of the median family income for black families in the mid-1960s. However, the military's assignment of blacks to low-ranking positions was not simply a reflection of the economic and racial inequalities of civilian society. The military contributed its own discrimination. In the first years of American escalation, even those blacks who scored in the highest test category were placed in combat units at a level 75 percent higher than that of whites in the same category. 23

Though racial discrimination and racist attitudes surely persisted in the military, class was far more important than race in determining the overall social composition of American forces. Precisely when the enlisted ranks were becoming increasingly integrated by race, they were becoming ever more segregated by class. The military may never have been truly representative of the general male population, but in the 1960s it was overwhelmingly the domain of the working class.

No thorough statistical study has yet been conducted on the class origins of the men who served in Vietnam. Though the military made endless, mind-numbing efforts to quantify virtually every aspect of its venture in Vietnam, it did not make (so far as anyone has discovered) a single
study of the social backgrounds of its fighting men. Quantitative evidence must be gathered from a variety of disparate studies. Probably the most ambitious effort to gather statistical information about the backgrounds of Vietnam-era soldiers was conducted just prior to the large-scale American escalation. In 1964 the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveyed 5 percent of all active-duty enlisted men.

According to NORC’s occupational survey (table 1) roughly 20 percent of American enlisted men had fathers with white-collar jobs. Among the male population as a whole more than twice that portion, 44 percent, were white-collar workers. Of course, not all white-collar jobs are necessarily middle class in the income, power, and status they confer. Many low-paying clerical and sales jobs—typically listed as white collar—are more accurately understood as working-class occupations. While the white-collar label exaggerates the size of the middle class, it nonetheless encompasses almost all privileged Americans in the labor force. Thus, the fact that only 20 percent of U.S. soldiers came from white-collar families represents a striking class difference between the military and the general population.24

The high portion of farmers in the sample is a further indication of the disproportionate number of soldiers from rural small towns. In the 1960s only about 5 percent of the American labor force was engaged in agriculture. In the NORC survey, more than twice as many, 12 percent, came from farm families. Though the survey does not reveal the economic standing of this group, we should avoid an American tendency to picture all farmers as independent proprietors. At the time of the survey about two-thirds of the workers engaged in agricultural labor were wage earn-

Table 1. Occupations of Fathers of Enlisted Men, by Service, 1964 (Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father’s Occupation</th>
<th>Army</th>
<th>Navy</th>
<th>Air Force</th>
<th>Marines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White-collar</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-collar</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father absent</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Approx. N) (28,000) (17,500) (28,000) (5,000)

ers (farm laborers or migrant farmworkers) with family incomes less than $1,000 per year. 25

There is also good reason to believe that most of the men with absent fathers grew up in hard-pressed circumstances. In 1965, almost two-thirds of the children in female-headed families lived below the census bureau's low-income level. 26 All told, the NORC survey suggests that on the brink of the Vietnam escalation at least three-quarters of American enlisted men were working class or poor.

Although this book focuses on enlisted men, the inclusion of officers would not dramatically raise the overall class backgrounds of the Vietnam military. Officers comprised 11 percent of the total number of men in Vietnam, so even if many of them were from privileged families, the statistical impact would be limited. Furthermore, though we need further studies of the social backgrounds of the Vietnam-era officer corps, it may well have been the least privileged officer corps of the twentieth century. For example, in his study of the West Point class of 1966, Rick Atkinson found a striking historical decline in the class backgrounds of cadets. "Before World War I, the academy had drawn nearly a third of the corps from the families of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. But by the mid 1950s, sons of professionals made up only 10 percent of the cadets, and links to the upper class had been almost severed. West Point increasingly attracted military brats and sons of the working class." 27 Also, as the war dragged on, the officer corps was depleted of service school and ROTC graduates and had to rely increasingly on enlisted men who were given temporary field commissions or sent to officer candidate school. These officers, too, probably lowered the class background of the officer corps. 28

Class inequality is also strikingly revealed in the most important postwar statistical study of Vietnam veterans, Legacies of Vietnam. Commissioned by the Veterans' Administration in 1978, about two-thirds of the Legacies sample of Vietnam veterans was working class or below. That figure is remarkable because the survey used sampling techniques designed to produce the widest possible class spectrum; that is, in choosing people for the study it sought a "maximum variation in socioeconomic context." Even so, the sample of Vietnam veterans was well below the general population in its class composition. When measured against backgrounds of nonveterans of the same generation, Vietnam veterans came out on the bottom in income, occupation, and education. 29

The key here is disproportion. The point is not that all working-class
men went to Vietnam while everyone better off stayed home. Given the enormous size of the generation, millions of working-class men simply were not needed by the military. Many were exempted because they failed to meet the minimum physical or mental standards of the armed forces. However, the odds of working-class men going into the military and on to Vietnam were far higher than they were for the middle class and the privileged.

The *Legacies* study also suggests an important distinction between black and white soldiers. The black veterans, at least in this sample, were significantly more representative of the entire black population than white veterans were of the white population. This reflects the fact that whites and blacks have different class distributions, with blacks having a much larger portion of poor and working people and a much smaller middle class and elite. In the *Legacies* sample, 82 percent of black nonveterans were working class and below, compared with 47 percent of the white nonveterans. In other words, while black soldiers were still, as a group, poorer than white soldiers, in relationship to the class structure of their respective races, blacks were not as disproportionately poor and working class as whites. This is, I think, one reason why black veterans seem to have less class-based resentment than white veterans toward the men of their race who did not serve in Vietnam. 30

Education, along with occupation and income, is a key measure of class position. Eighty percent of the men who went to Vietnam had no more than a high school education (table 2). This figure would compare well to statistics of some previous wars. After all, at the time of the Civil War and well into the twentieth century, only a small minority of Americans had high school educations. However, if considered in historical context, the low portion of college educated among American soldiers is yet another indication of the disproportionately working-class composition of the military. The 1960s was a boomtime for American education, a time when opportunities for higher education were more widespread than ever before. By 1965, 45 percent of Americans between eighteen and twenty-one had some college education. By 1970 that figure was more than 50 percent. Compared with national standards, American forces were well below average in formal education. Studies matching school enrollments to age and class show that the educational levels of American soldiers in Vietnam correspond roughly to those of draft-age, blue-collar males in the general population (table 3). Of course, many veterans took college courses after
Table 2. Educational Attainment of Vietnam Veterans at Time of Separation from the Air Forces, 1966-1971 (Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal year</th>
<th>Less than 12 Years</th>
<th>12 Years of School</th>
<th>1 to 3 Years of College</th>
<th>4 or More Years of College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total, 1966-71: 19.4% (60.3% of college) 13.2% 7.2%


The portion of soldiers with at least some college education increased significantly late 1960s as draft calls increased and most graduate school deferments ended. 1970 roughly 25 percent of American forces in Vietnam had some college education. Impressive as this increase was, it still fell well below the 50 percent for the age group as a whole, and it came as American troop levels in Vietnam were beginning to decline. Moreover, college education pre-service was no longer so clear a mark of privilege as it had been prior to World War II. Higher education in the post-War era expanded enormously, especially among junior and state colleges, the kinds of schools that enrolled the greatest number of working-class students. Between 1962 and 1972 enrollments in two-year colleges tripled. College students who went to Vietnam far more likely to come from these institutions than from elite, four-year, private colleges. A survey of Harvard's class of 1970, for example, found only two men served in Vietnam. College students who did go to Vietnam usually secured non-combat assignments. Among soldiers in Vietnam, high school dropouts were three times more likely to experience heavy combat than were college graduates. 31
Table 3. Percentage of Males Enrolled in School, 1965-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Blue-Collar</th>
<th>White-Collar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-17</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Young men have fought in all wars, but U.S. forces in Vietnam were probably, on average, the youngest in our history. In previous wars many men in their twenties were drafted for military service, and men of that age and older often volunteered. During the Vietnam War most of the volunteers and draftees were teenagers; the average age was nineteen. In World War II, by contrast, the average American soldier was twenty-six years old. At age eighteen young men could join or be drafted into the army. At seventeen, with the consent of a guardian, boys could enlist in the Marine Corps. Early in the war, hundreds of seventeen-year-old marines served in Vietnam. In November 1965 the Pentagon ordered that all American troops must be eighteen before being deployed in the war zone. Even so, the average age remained low. Twenty-two-year-old soldiers were often kidded about their advanced age ("hey, old man") by the younger men in their units. Most American troops were not even old enough to vote. The voting age did not drop from twenty-one to eighteen until 1971. Thus, most of the Americans who fought in Vietnam were powerless, working-class teenagers sent to fight an undeclared war by presidents for whom they were not even eligible to vote. 33

No statistical profile can do justice to the complexity of individual experience, but without these broad outlines our understanding would be hopelessly fragmented. A class breakdown of American forces cannot be absolutely precise, but I believe the following is a reasonable estimate: enlisted ranks in Vietnam were comprised of about 25 percent poor, 55 percent working class, and 20 percent middle class, with a statistically negligible number of wealthy. Most Americans in Vietnam were nineteen-year-old high school graduates. They grew up in the white, working-class enclaves of South Boston and Cleveland's West Side; in the black ghettos of Detroit and Birmingham; in the small rural towns of Oklahoma and Iowa; and in the housing developments of working-class suburbs. They
came by the thousands from every state and every U.S. territory, but few were from places of wealth and privilege.

The Draft And The Making Of A Working-Class Military

The Selective Service System was the most important institutional mechanism in the creation of a working-class army. It directly inducted more than 2 million men into the military, and just as important, the threat or likelihood of the draft indirectly induced millions more to enlist. These "draft-motivated" volunteers enlisted because they had already received their induction notices or believed they soon would, and thus they enlisted in order, they hoped, to have more choice as to the nature and location of their service. Even studies conducted by the military suggest that as many as half of the men who enlisted were motivated primarily by the pressure of the draft (table 4). Draft pressure became the most important cause of enlistments as the war lengthened.

The soldiers sent to Vietnam can be divided into three categories of roughly equal size: one-third draftees, one-third draft-motivated volunteers, and one-third true volunteers. In the first years of the American buildup most of the fighting was done by men who volunteered for military service. That does not mean they volunteered to fight in Vietnam. Few did. Even among West Point's class of 1966 only one-sixth volunteered for service in Vietnam (though many more eventually ended up there). As the war continued, the number of volunteers steadily declined. From 1966 to 1969 the percentage of draftees who died in the war doubled from 21 to 40 (table 5). Almost half of the army troops were draftees, and in combat units the portion was commonly as high as two-thirds; late in the war it was even higher. The overall number of draftees was lower because the Marine Corps—the other service branch that did the bulk of fighting in Vietnam—was ordinarily limited to volunteers (though it did draft about 20,000 men during the Vietnam War).

The draft determined the social character of the armed forces by whom it exempted from service as well as by whom it actually conscripted or induced to enlist. Because the generation that came of age during the 1960s was so large, the Selective Service exempted far more men than it drafted. From 1964 to 1973, 2.2 million men were drafted, 8.7 million enlisted, and 16 million did not serve. Of course, the millions of exemptions
Table 4. Percentage of Draft-Motivated Enlistments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enlistees</th>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>Reservists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5. American Draftees Killed in the Vietnam War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Deaths, All Services</th>
<th>All Services</th>
<th>Army</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1,369</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>5,008</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>9,378</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>14,592</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>9,414</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>4,221</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


could have been granted in a manner designed to produce a military that mirrored the social composition of society at large. A step in that direction was made with the institution of a draft lottery in late 1969, a method that can produce a representative cross-section of draftees. However, this reform did little to democratize the forces that fought in Vietnam because student deferments were continued until 1971, troop withdrawals late in the war lowered draft calls, and physical exemptions remained relatively easy for the privileged to attain.

Prior to the draft lottery, the Selective Service did not even profess the ideal of a socially and economically balanced military. Instead, it was devoted to a form of "human resource planning" designed to serve the
"national interest" by sending some men into the military and encouraging others to stay in school and seek occupational deferments. At the heart of this conscious effort at social engineering was the concept of "channeling." The basic idea was to use the threat of the draft and the lure of educational and professional deferments to channel men into nonmilitary occupations that the Selective Service believed vital to the "national health, safety and interest." The primary architect of this system was Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, director of the Selective Service from 1941 to 1968. According to his biographer, George Flynn, Hershey was at first ambivalent, if not hostile, toward student deferments, unsure of their value or fairness. However, this master bureaucrat, determined to build and maintain a permanent draft, was soon persuaded otherwise. The six advisory committees he appointed in 1948, during the creation of the first peacetime draft, all supported student deferments. They argued that virtually every academic field had contributed to victory in World War II and that the draft should protect at least the most successful college and graduate students. Many advisers were especially concerned that potential scientists be protected. As the nuclear age advanced, influential policymakers were increasingly persuaded that the outcome of future wars—whether hot or cold—might be determined not by masses of muddy combat soldiers but by teams of high-powered, white-jacketed scientists and engineers. Hershey quickly embraced student deferments, and by the mid-1950s he became their most important advocate. 35

Most of the class-biased draft policies of the 1960s were in place by the early 1950s. Still, the Korean War was not quite as class skewed as the Vietnam War, for two reasons. First, though there were student deferments during the Korean War, college graduates enlisted in rough proportion to their numbers (they did not do so during the Vietnam War). Second, for Korea, unlike Vietnam, the reserves were mobilized. Reserve units usually have a more balanced class composition than the regular army. During the period between Korea and Vietnam, draft calls were so low the military could afford to raise its admission standards and place more draftees in electronic and technical fields. These factors raised the class level of inductees. In fact, throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Selective Service System was commonly criticized not because it offered too many deferments to the privileged but because "the underprivileged were too often barred from the benefits of military service by unrealistically high mental and physical standards." 36

In 1963 Daniel P. Moynihan, assistant secretary of labor for policy
planning, learned that one-half of the men called by their draft boards for physical and mental examinations failed one or both of the tests and were thus disqualified for military service. Moynihan was particularly disturbed that poor boys were the most likely to be rejected. They were most commonly rejected for failing the intelligence test, the Armed Forces Qualification Test. In the early 1960s almost half of the men who failed this test came from families with six or more children and annual incomes of less than $4,000. Moynihan described this high rejection rate as a form of "de facto job discrimination" against "the least mobile, least educated young men." 37

Moynihan organized a presidential task force to examine conscription policies and to explore proposals by which the military might take responsibility for training men who initially failed to meet the military's mental standards. The task force study, One Third of a Nation (1964), called for the military to lower its entrance requirements and provide special training to those with mental or social handicaps. For Moynihan, the military seemed like a vast, untapped agent of social uplift with the potential to train the unskilled, to put unemployed youth to work, and to instill confidence and pride in the psychologically defeated. More than that, he believed the military could help solve the problem he claimed was at the heart of black poverty-broken, fatherless families. The military, Moynihan argued, would serve as a surrogate black family: "Given the strains of disorganized and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age, the armed forces are a dramatic and desperately needed change; a world away from women, a world run by strong men and unquestioned authority." 38

In 1964, in response to Moynihan's proposal, the military began a series of pilot programs to admit a small number of draft rejects who agreed to voluntary rehabilitation as part of their military training, but these programs had little impact on the social composition of the military. In 1965, however, as draft calls jumped to fill the troop buildup in South Vietnam, the military began to lower its admission standards quite radically. With no intention of engaging in any social uplift, the military simply accepted more and more men with terribly low scores on the mental examination. During the 1950s and early 1960s, men who had scored in the two lowest categories (IV and V) were rarely accepted into the military. Beginning in 1965, however, hundreds of thousands of category IV men were drafted. Most were from poor and broken families, 80 percent were high school dropouts, and half had IQs of less than eighty-five. Prior to American
escalation in Vietnam such men were routinely rejected, but with a war on, these "new standards" men were suddenly declared fit to fight. Rejection rates plummeted. Between 1965 and 1966 the overall rejection rate fell from 50 to 34 percent, and by 1967 mental rejections were cut in half. 39

The new-standards men were offered no special training to raise their intellectual skills. Most were simply trained for war. Yet, in 1966 Moynihan was still calling for lower military standards. That year Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara instituted a program that promised to carry out many of Moynihan's proposals. Called Project 100,000, McNamara's program was designed to admit 100,000 men into the military each year who failed the qualifying exam even at the lower standards of 1965. This program, McNamara claimed, would offer valuable training and opportunity to America's "subterranean poor." As McNamara put it, "The poor of America . . . have not had the opportunity to earn their fair share of this nation's abundance, but they can be given an opportunity to serve in their country's defense and they can be given an opportunity to return to civilian life with skills and aptitudes which for them and their families will reverse the downward spiral of decay."40 Never well known, Project 100,000 has virtually disappeared from histories of the Johnson presidency. It was conceived, in fact, as a significant component of the administration's "war on poverty," part of the Great Society, a liberal effort to uplift the poor, and it was instituted with high-minded rhetoric about offering the poor an opportunity to serve. Its result, however, was to send many poor, terribly confused, and woefully uneducated boys to risk death in Vietnam. There is an important analogy here to the way American officials explained the war itself. It was not, they claimed, a unilateral military intervention to bolster a weak, corrupt, and unpopular government in South Vietnam against revolutionary nationalism, but a generous effort to help the people of South Vietnam determine their own fate. But if governments were judged by their professed intentions alone, and not by the consequences of their actions as well, every state would bask in glory. Graham Greene might have said about Project 100,000 what he said about the well-intentioned Alden Pyle in his novel The Quiet American: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused."41

The effect of Project 100,000 was dire. The promised training was never carried out. Of the 240,000 men inducted by Project 100,000 from 1966 to 1968, only 6 percent received additional training, and this amounted to little more than an effort to raise reading skills to a fifth grade level. Forty
percent were trained for combat, compared with only 25 percent for all enlisted men. Also, while blacks comprised 10 percent of the entire military, they represented about 40 percent of the Project 100,000 soldiers. A 1970 Defense Department study estimates that roughly half of the almost 400,000 men who entered the military under Project 100,000 were sent to Vietnam. These men had a death rate twice as high as American forces as a whole. This was a Great Society program that was quite literally shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam. 42

Project 100,000 and the abandonment of all but the most minimal mental requirements for military service were crucial institutional mechanisms in lowering the class composition of the American military. Had the prewar mental standards continued, almost 3 million men would have been exempted from military service on the basis of intelligence. Under the lowered standards, 1.36 million were mentally disqualified.

Almost three times as many men, 3.5 million, were exempted because of their physical condition. One might expect men from disadvantaged backgrounds, with poorer nutrition and less access to decent health care, to receive most of these exemptions. In practice, however, most physical exemptions were assigned to men who had the knowledge and resources to claim an exemption. Poor and working-class men ordinarily allowed military doctors to determine their physical fitness. Induction center examinations were often perfunctory exercises in which all but the most obvious disabilities were overlooked. According to the best study of the subject, Baskir and Strauss's Chance and Circumstance, men who arrived at their induction physical with professional documentation of a disqualifying ailment had the best chance of gaining a medical exemption. Induction centers usually did not have the time or desire to challenge an outside opinion. The case of an induction center in Seattle, Washington, may be an extreme example, but it underlines the significance of this point. At that center, the registrants were divided into two groups: "Those who had letters from doctors or psychiatrists, and those who did not. Everyone with a letter received an exemption, regardless of what the letter said."43

Even very minor disabilities were grounds for medical disqualification. Skin rashes, flat feet, asthma, trick knees—such ailments were easily missed or ignored by military doctors, but they were legal exemptions that were frequently granted when attested to by a family physician. Even dental braces provided a means of avoiding the military. "In the Los
Angeles area alone, ten dentists willingly performed orthodontic work for anyone who could pay a $1000-2000 fee. Wearing braces was a common last-minute tactic for registrants who faced immediate call-up.  

According to Baskir and Strauss, men who were knowledgeable about the system and had the means to press a claim had a 90 percent chance of receiving a physical or psychological exemption even if they were in good health. Draft lore such as Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant" has made famous some of the more bizarre efforts at draft avoidance—loading up on drugs before the physical, fasting or gorging to get outside the weight requirements, feigning insanity or homosexuality, or aggravating an old knee injury. There is no telling how many men tried such things, but the majority who received medical exemptions through their own efforts probably did so in a far less dramatic fashion by simply finding a professional to support their claim.  

That the men who were most able and likely to seek professional help in avoiding the draft were white and middle class is not surprising. On many college campuses students could find political and psychological support for draft resistance along with concrete advice on how to get an exemption. In working-class neighborhoods, the myriad ways to avoid the draft were not only less well known, they had little, if any, community support. Avoiding the draft was more likely to be viewed as an act of cowardice than as a principled unwillingness to participate in an immoral war.

The onus of responsibility for claiming exemptions fell, except in obvious cases, on the individual registrant. Even those exemptions that were especially aimed at the poor, such as those for "hardship," were often ineffectual for men who were unaware of them or lacked the wherewithal to demonstrate their claim to the Selective Service. Much depended on the discretion of local draft boards. Though the national headquarters of the Selective Service provided the general framework of guidelines and regulations, the system was designed to be highly decentralized, with authority largely delegated to the 4,000 local boards across the country.

Draft boards were comprised of volunteers who typically met only once a month. With hundreds of cases to decide, board members could give careful attention to only the most difficult. The rest were reviewed by a full-time civil service clerk whose decisions were usually rubber-stamped by the board. One study found that the civil servant determined the outcome of 85 percent of the cases. Under this system, the advantage went to those registrants who were able to document their claims clearly.
and convincingly. What was persuasive to one board, however, might not be to another. There were, in fact, significant variations in the way different boards operated. Occupational deferments, for example, often depended simply on what local boards determined to be "in the national health, safety, or interest." 46

While local discretionary power produced a number of anomalies, 47 most local boards administered the system in ways that reinforced the class inequalities underlying the broad national system of manpower channeling. In fact, the decentralized system probably gave an added advantage to registrants with economic clout and social connections. Draft boards were overwhelmingly controlled by conservative, white, prosperous men in their fifties or sixties. A 1966 study of the 16,638 draft board members around the nation found that only 9 percent had blue-collar occupations, while more than 70 percent were professionals, managers, proprietors, public officials, or white-collar workers over the age of fifty. Only 1.3 percent were black. 48 Until 1967, when Congress revoked the prohibition, women were forbidden from serving on local draft boards because General Hershey "feared they would be embarrassed when a physical question emerged." 49

The student deferment was the most overtly class-biased feature of the Vietnam era draft system. Census records show that youth from families earning $7,500 to $10,000 were almost two and a half times more likely to attend college than those from families earning under $5,000. 50 Also, working-class boys who did go to college were far more likely to attend part time while working. This distinction is crucial because deferments were only offered to full-time students, thus excluding those trying to earn a degree by working their way through school a few courses at a time. These students were subject to the draft.

In addition, unsuccessful students with low class ranks could lose their deferments. The grades required to keep a student deferment varied according to the practice of local draft boards, but in 1966 and 1967 the Selective Service sought to weed out poor students systematically by giving almost a million students the Selective Service Qualifying Test. Many who scored poorly were reclassified and drafted. The irony, of course, is that the draft grabbed those students who were among the least qualified according to its own test. 51

While unsuccessful and part-time students were "draft-bait," successful full-time students could preserve their draft immunity by going on to graduate school. Those who were trained as engineers, scientists, or
teachers could then acquire occupational deferments. Though graduate students in every field received deferments, the primary intention of the inducement, according to General Hershey, was to bolster the ranks of scientists and technicians, many of whom would serve defense-related industries. In 1965 Hershey wrote, "The process of channeling manpower by deferment is entitled to much credit for the large number of graduate students in technical fields and for the fact that there is not a greater shortage of teachers, engineers and scientists working in activities which are essential to the national interest."  

The campus-based antiwar and draft resistance movements deserve much of the credit for exposing the class-biased system of channeling to public scrutiny. The antiwar critique of channeling is often neglected by those who glibly accuse movement participants of hiding behind their student deferments. As one draft resistance manifesto put it: "Most of us now have deferments. . . . But all these individual outs can have no effect on the draft, the war, or the consciousness of this country. . . . To cooperate with conscription is to perpetuate its existence. . . . We will renounce all deferments." Though most young men in the antiwar movement kept their deferments or found other ways of evading the draft (a small group did accept prison sentences for resisting the draft), the major thrust of their effort was to keep all Americans from fighting in Vietnam. By drawing attention to the inequalities in the system, they helped generate support for the draft reforms of 1967 and the draft lottery of 1969. The 1967 reforms included the elimination of deferments for graduate school. (Those who had already begun graduate school were, however, usually allowed to keep their deferments.) This reduction in deferments was a key factor in raising the portion of college graduates who served in Vietnam from about 6 percent in 1966 to 10 percent in 1970. 

Still, there were many ways to avoid Vietnam after graduating from college. In addition to seeking medical exemptions, one of the most common was to enlist in the National Guard or the reserves. In 1968, fully 80 percent of American reservists described themselves as draft-motivated enlistees (see table 4). The reserves required six years of part-time duty, but many men who joined believed correctly there was little chance they would be mobilized to fight in Vietnam. President Johnson rejected the military's frequent request for a major mobilization of the reserves and the National Guard. He feared that activating these units would draw unwanted attention to the war and exacerbate antiwar sentiment. Since these men were drawn from specific towns and urban neighborhoods,
their mobilization would have a dramatic impact on concentrated populations. Johnson also realized that reservists and guardsmen were generally older than regular army troops and were, as a group, socially and economically more prominent. By relying on the draft and the active-duty military to fight the war, Johnson hoped to diffuse the impact of casualties among widely scattered, young, and powerless individuals. He wanted, as David Halberstam put it, a "silent, politically invisible war." 54

During the war over a million men served in the reserves and National Guard. Of these, some 37,000 were mobilized and 15,000 were sent to Vietnam. As the war continued, thousands of men tried to enlist in this relatively safe form of military service. By 1968 the National Guard alone had a waiting list of 100,000. Throughout the country the reserves and the guard were notorious for restrictive, "old-boy" admissions policies. In many places a man simply had to have connections to get in. For the poor and working class it was particularly difficult to gain admission. In the army reserves, for example, the percentage of college graduates among the enlisted men was three times higher than in the regular army.55

For blacks, whatever their economic standing, to become a reservist or guardsman was nearly impossible. In 1964 only 1.45 percent of the Army National Guard was black. By 1968 this tiny percentage had actually decreased to 1.26. Exclusion of blacks was especially egregious in the South. In Mississippi, for example, where blacks comprised 42 percent of the population, only 1 black man was admitted to the National Guard of 10,365 men. In the North, the guard was only slightly more open. In Michigan, for example, only 1.34 percent of the National Guard was black, compared with 9.2 percent of the population. Thus, the safest form of military service almost entirely excluded blacks and was most open to middle-class whites.56

The Selective Service System's class-biased channeling, the military's wartime slashing of admissions standards, Project 100,000, medical exemptions that favored the well-informed and privileged, student deferments, the safe haven of the National Guard and the reserves—these were the key institutional factors in the creation of a working-class military. But these are not the only factors that encouraged working-class boys to serve so disproportionately. In many respects our whole culture served to channel the working class toward the military and the middle and upper classes toward college. We can understand some of the more complex influences by exploring the consciousness of young men who
fought in Vietnam—specifically, their prewar understanding of their place and purpose in American society and how they perceived the prospect of military service and war. That is the subject of chapter 2. However, before proceeding we need a brief account of common, middle-class assumptions about how working people thought about the Vietnam War, for these images and stereotypes still distort much of the thinking about our subject.

Wartime Images Of A Hawkish Working Class

That the Vietnam War was a working-class war may not be surprising news, but it has never been widely and publicly acknowledged or discussed. For that matter, class issues of any kind have rarely been a focus of common, explicit debate in American public life. Indeed, the very existence of class has been denied, diminished, or distorted by the institutions most responsible for establishing the terms of public discourse: the large corporations (including, of course, the major media), the schools, and the two major political parties.

During the war, the mass media gave little serious attention to the relationship of the working class to Vietnam. Instead, the subject was presented in an indirect and distorted way that reduced workers to a grossly misleading stereotype. Rather than documenting the class inequalities of military service and the complex feelings soldiers and their families had about their society and the war in Vietnam, the media more commonly contributed to the construction of an image of workers as the war's strongest supporters, as superpatriotic hawks whose political views could be understood simply by reading the bumper stickers on some of their cars and pickups: "America: Love it or Leave it." These "hard-hats" or "rednecks" were frequently portrayed as "Joe six-pack," a flag-waving, blue-collar, anti-intellectual who, on top of everything else, was assumed to be a bigot.

This caricature really began to crystallize in 1968 during the presidential campaign of George Wallace. The segregationist, prowar governor of Alabama surprised experts by winning 8 million votes for his third-party candidacy, many of them coming not only from white southerners, but also from white working-class voters in the North. Yet, this support was too easily taken as evidence that the working class was the most racist and prowar segment of American society. While those characteristics cer-
tainly drew many voters to Wallace, his success also reflected a deeply felt anger and disillusionment that had as much to do with class position as it did with race and war. Wallace appealed to the fear many working-class families had that their values—love of country, respect for law and order, religious faith, and hard work—were being ridiculed and threatened from above and below, by privileged campus protesters, ghetto rioters, and Great Society liberals who seemed always to talk about helping the poor without regard for the millions of working-class people just one rung up the economic ladder.

Wallace mobilized this anger, in both 1968 and 1972, by lashing out at "limousine liberals," "pointy-headed intellectuals," and "dirty hippies and protesters." Those were the people, Wallace claimed, who were running America, and who, in so doing, were always "looking down their noses at the average man on the street—the glass workers, the steel workers, the auto workers, the textile workers, the farm workers, the policeman, the beautician and the barber and the little businessman." 57

President Nixon courted these same "average" Americans when he called on the "forgotten Americans" to rally in support of his Vietnam policies. These people, he claimed, comprised "the great silent majority." The idea that workers formed the vanguard of this supposed majority and would break their silence to support Nixon became a media commonplace during the tumultuous month of May 1970. The month began with Nixon's announcement that American troops would invade Cambodia. Coming in the wake of reassurances that U.S. troops were being withdrawn, that the war was winding down for America, and that the South Vietnamese were taking over the fighting, Nixon's sudden expansion of the war generated an enormous new wave of antiwar protest. Students at more than 500 college campuses went on strike. At one of them, Kent State, four students were killed by national guardsmen. To Pentagon officials, Nixon described the student protesters asbums.

A few days later, on 8 May, antiwar demonstrators—most of them from New York University and Hunter College—held a rally in the financial district of New York City. Construction workers at several large building sites in lower Manhattan had heard about the rally a day or two in advance and planned, as one of them put it, to stage a counterdemonstration and "bust some heads." At noontime on the day of the rally, about 200 construction workers, wearing their yellow hard hats, carrying American flags, and chanting "All The Way USA" shoved through police lines and began beating the antiwar demonstrators with their fists and helmets.
Some used tools. At least a few police were seen standing by as the attack continued. 58

From Wall Street the workers, their ranks enlarged to 500, marched to city hall, where the American flag was flying at half-mast, on Mayor John Lindsay's orders, in memory of the four students killed at Kent State. The workers demanded that the flag be raised. When it was, the men cheered and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." Then, observing an antiwar banner at nearby Pace College, the workers broke down the glass doors of a Pace building and beat more students. Throughout the day, dubbed "Bloody Friday" by the media, about seventy victims were injured badly enough to require treatment.

Some workers reported that the attack was far from spontaneous and that it had been orchestrated by union leaders in the Building and Trades Council of Greater New York. Even so, the leaders seemed to have no trouble finding volunteers. Two weeks later the council, perhaps hoping to offset the violent imagery of Bloody Friday, organized a peaceful march to demonstrate their "love of country and love and respect for our country's flag." Time magazine described it this way: "Callused hands gripped tiny flags. Weathered faces shone with sweat. . . . For three hours, 100,000 members of New York's brawniest unions marched and shouted... in a massive display of gleeful patriotism and muscular pride . . . a kind of workers' Woodstock." 59 These events were crucial in shaping an idea that came to dominate middle-class thought about the war—that the "hawks" were workers and the "doves" were privileged. As the New York Times put it, "The typical worker—from construction craftsman to shoe clerk—has become probably the most reactionary political force in the country." 60

This stereotype received perhaps its most significant dramatization a few months later in the form of Archie Bunker, hero of the situation comedy "All in the Family." Archie could be counted on for mindless verbal swipes at blacks, Jews, feminists, and peace activists ("coloreds," "kikes," "libbers," and "pinkos"). But rail as he would against his long list of enemies and the liberal views of his "meathead" son-in-law, Archie's hostility was cushioned by a larger family devotion. While the nation came apart at the seams, the Bunkers kept their conflicts "all in the family." Part of the show's liberal condescension was to suggest that the working class, however retrograde in its views, does not really act out its hostilities and is therefore essentially harmless.

Of course, the image of the hawkish worker (be it Archie Bunker or the hard-hats of Bloody Friday) had enough surface familiarity to serve for
many as a sufficient model of a whole class. After all, many working-class people certainly did support the war. But was the working class as a whole really more provar than the rest of society? (Or more racist?) Not so. In fact, virtually every survey of public opinion on the war found little or no difference between the responses of the working class and those of the middle and upper classes. There were, in other words, at least as many hawks in corporate office buildings as there were in factories. Part of the problem with the hard-hat stereotype is that it made white, Christian males the symbol of the entire working class. The working class, of course, includes women, blacks, Hispanics, Jews—an enormous variety. Polls suggest that the three groups most consistently opposed to the war over time were blacks, women, and the very poor. Yet, even white, working-class men were far less conservative as a group than Archie Bunker. One survey, taken in the same year the media invented the term hard-hats (1970), found that 48 percent of the northern white working class was in favor of immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, while only 40 percent of the white middle class took this dove position. Moreover, while the New York construction unions continued to be provar, members of the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers had turned against it. In 1972, a higher percentage of blue-collar workers voted for peace candidate George McGovern than did white-collar professionals. 61

There was, however, one very telling difference between the war-related attitudes of workers and the middle class. More workers were openly opposed to antiwar demonstrators. One study found that even one-half of those workers who favored immediate and total withdrawal from Vietnam were nevertheless opposed to antiwar demonstrators. This, I think, indicates that working-class anger at the antiwar movement—primarily a middle-class movement—often represented class conflict, not conflict over the legitimacy of the war. The union men who marched in the New York City parade carried signs that said "Support our boys in Vietnam." The sign can be read quite literally. Many of their sons were in Vietnam. Working-class people opposed college protesters largely because they saw the antiwar movement as an elitist attack on American troops by people who could avoid the war. At its best, the antiwar movement tried to correct that perception by focusing its criticism on the people in Washington who planned the war and kept it going. But class division—inflamed by the politicians and institutions that ran the war—continued to muddy the ideological water. A significant segment of the student antiwar movement explicitly denounced the unequal distribution of power and
privilege in American society, but to many workers the demonstrators seemed at once to flaunt and deny their own privileges. How, they wondered, could college students possibly claim to be victims (of police brutality, of bureaucratic university administrators, of an inhuman corporate rat race that provided meaningless work) when they were so obviously better off than workers who endured far more daily indignity and mind-numbing labor? A firefighter who lost his son Ralph in Vietnam told Robert Coles:

I'm bitter. You bet your goddamn dollar I'm bitter. It's people like us who give up our sons for the country. The business people, they run the country and make money from it. The college types, the professors, they go to Washington and tell the government what to do. . . . But their sons, they don't end up in the swamps over there, in Vietnam. No sir. They're deferred, because they're in school. Or they get sent to safe places. Or they get out with all those letters they have from their doctors. Ralph told me. He told me what went on at his physical. He said most of the kids were from average homes; and the few rich kids there were, they all had big-deal letters saying they weren't eligible. . . . Let's face it: if you have a lot of money, or if you have the right connections, you don't end up on a firing line in the jungle over there, not unless you want to. Ralph had no choice. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live. They just took him—to "defend democracy," that's what they keep on saying. Hell, I wonder.

I think we ought to win that war or pull out. What the hell else should we do—sit and bleed ourselves to death, year after year? I hate those peace demonstrators. Why don't they go to Vietnam and demonstrate in front of the North Vietnamese? . . . The whole thing is a mess. The sooner we get the hell out of there the better. But what bothers me about the peace crowd is that you can tell from their attitude, the way they look and what they say, that they don't really love this country. Some of them almost seem glad to have a chance to criticize us. . . . To hell with them! Let them get out, leave, if they don't like it here! My son didn't die so they can look filthy and talk filthy and insult everything we believe in and everyone in the country—me and my wife and people here on the street, and the next street, and all over.

This man is not, by any thoughtful definition, a hawk. He wants the war ended, if not in victory, then by immediate withdrawal. He has serious
doubts about the purpose of the war. As his wife says, "I think my husband and I can't help but thinking that our son gave his life for nothing, nothing at all." But they can't abide "the peace crowd." The husband believed the demonstrators cared more about the Vietnamese than they did about ordinary Americans. His wife responded:

I told him I thought they want the war to end, so no more Ralphs will die, but he says no, they never stop and think about Ralph and his kind of people, and I'm inclined to agree. They say they do, but I listen to them, I watch them; since Ralph died I listen and I watch as carefully as I can. Their hearts are with other people, not their own American people, the ordinary kind of person in this country. Those people, a lot of them are rich women from the suburbs, the rich suburbs. Those kids, they are in college... I'm against this war, too—the way a mother is, whose sons are in the army, who has lost a son fighting in it. The world hears those demonstrators making their noise. The world doesn't hear me, and it doesn't hear a single person I know. 62

Since the Vietnam War, the world continues to hear very little from or about such women. In the Reagan era, however, it also stopped hearing about the experiences of people of any class who opposed the war. Lost in the silence was the awareness that a significant number of American troops themselves turned against the war in its final years. By the late 1960s, some soldiers in Vietnam began to write UUUU on their helmet liners, meaning the unwilling, led by the unqualified, doing the unnecessary for the ungrateful 63
Majority, p. 77. Data on the class backgrounds of American soldiers is presented in chapter 1, below. I use enlisted men to refer to all members of the American military who were not commissioned officers. The term includes both draftees and volunteers as well as noncommissioned officers. However, the major focus here is on the young, low-ranking, noncareer soldiers who comprised the great bulk of the American military in Vietnam. Also, while marines are not, properly speaking, soldiers, their mission in Vietnam was certainly that of soldiers, and I use that term to refer to all American ground troops in Vietnam. This is essentially a study of the men who served on the ground in the army and the marines. The air war was crucial to the experience of ground soldiers and is addressed in that context, but the experiences of pilots and crewmen are not examined. A further clarification is necessary: in chapters 5-7 the major focus is on combat soldiers—the grunts. Yet I have tried in a general way in those chapters, and more extensively elsewhere, to address the experiences of rear-echelon support troops as well. Still, frontline troops receive the closest scrutiny.

11. Hersh, My Lai 4, pp. 46-47.

12. Brende and Parson, Vietnam Veterans, p. 75; Hendin and Haas, Wounds of War, pp. 160-82. As early as 1971 the National Council of Churches estimated that 49,000 veterans had died from various causes after returning home.


14. Inaugural Addresses, pp. 336, 348. Though Vietnam was not named until 1981, it should be noted that Eisenhower, in his 1953 inaugural, saluted "the French soldier who dies in Indo-China" (p. 296).


Chapter One


2. Casualties by town were provided by Friends of the Vietnam Memorial (Washington, D.C.) from software derived from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Directory of Names; the Illinois study is Willis, "Who Died in Vietnam."

3. On Levittown, N.Y., see Dobriner, Class in Suburbia; also useful is Berger's Working-Class Suburb.


5. The Newsday quotation is found in Useem, Conscription, Protest, and Social Conflict, p. 83.
6. These towns are taken from random pages of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Directory of Names*, pp. 18, 77, 163, 754. Populations are taken from the 1970 census. The 8 percent figure is based on a random sample of 1,200 men listed in the directory.

7. Information about Talladega and Mountain Brook is from the 1970 federal census.


10. The discussion of "third country forces" is drawn primarily from Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 332-36.
11. This view is expressed in works as diverse as Kahin, Intervention; Herring, America's Longest War; Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie; Lewy, America in Vietnam; and Karnow, Vietnam.


13. As early as 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff drafted memos for Kennedy arguing that some 200,000 American troops might be needed in Vietnam. See Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:78-79, 108.


15. Helmer, Bringing the War Home, pp. 4-5.

16. Glick, Soldiers, Scholars, and Society, pp. 18-20; Moskos, American Enlisted Man, pp. 113-16; Binkin and Eitelberg, Blacks and the Military, pp. 75-78.

17. A full transcript of King's Riverside Church address can be found in Reese Williams's Unwinding the War, pp. 427-40.


19. Lewy, America in Vietnam, pp. 154-55; Gettleman et al., Vietnam and America, p. 320; New York Times, 29 Apr. 1968, p. 16. The conscious effort to reduce black casualties may have been unique to the army. In the marines, black combat deaths were about 13 percent throughout the war.


22. Figures on black officers can be found in Glick, Soldiers, Scholars, and Society, pp. 18-20; test scores for blacks are in Moskos, American Enlisted Man, pp. 116, 216.

23. The study that found 90 percent of black Vietnam veterans working-class or poor is Egendorf et al., Legacies of Vietnam, pp. 106-9; bonuses are in Glick, Soldiers, Scholars, and Society; disproportionate combat assignments for blacks who scored in the highest category can be found in Moskos, American Enlisted Man.

24. For how working-class jobs are often ill-defined as white collar see Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, pp. 283-411; also see Levison, Working-Class Majority, pp. 21-29.


26. Bane, Here to Stay, p. 119.


30. Ibid., pp. 105-9.


32. On two-year college enrollments see Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, p. 209, and Levison, *Working-Class Majority*, p. 119. For Harvard survey see Fallows, "What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy." For combat rate of high school dropouts compared to college graduates see Veterans' Administration, *Myths and Realities*, p. 10.


34. On the West Point class of 1966 see Atkinson, *The Long Gray Line*;


44. Ibid., pp. 36-48.

45. Ibid.


47. In some rural counties of Wisconsin, for example, the local boards gave occupational deferments to milk tank truck drivers and cheesemakers even though these jobs were not on the critical skills list distributed by the national headquarters.


52. Helmer, *Bringing the War Home*, p. 6.


61. Ehrenreich, Fear of Falling, pp. 107, 124. Though I had virtually finished this section before reading Ehrenreich's book, I am grateful for her fine analysis of the "discovery of the working-class" in the late 1960s.

62. Coles, The Middle Americans, pp. 131-34.

63. Cincinnatus, Self-Destruction, p. 27.

Chapter Two


2. Hodgson, America in Our Time, pp. 466, 482; Binkin and Eitelberg, Blacks and the Military, p. 68; Helmer, Bringing the War Home, p. 108.
