

Fighting for a Just Cause in a War Without Fronts? Official Justifications For War and Combat Motivation in the Vietnam War

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This paper explores whether the American combat soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War were motivated by the cause. The paper analyzes the soldiers' attitudes towards the war in the years 1965-1967 and 1968-1973. By comparing these attitudes with the official justifications for the war, the paper discusses whether the soldiers were committed to the cause. The analysis is based on wartime letters by soldiers in combat and postwar interviews with veterans, and employs a grounded theory methodology to identify the different patterns of thought in the sources. Current research has generally downplayed the importance of the cause as a motivator for American soldiers in the Vietnam War. However, based on the different patterns of thought expressed by soldiers, this paper seeks to elucidate that the cause was actually an important motivator for many soldiers, particularly in the years 1965-1967, when many soldiers believed they were fighting a war against communist expansion, which had to be stopped before it reached American soil. On the other hand, after 1968, defeatism had found its way into the ranks of the military, and many soldiers no longer believed in the cause.

Since Antiquity, commanders and military theorists have reflected on the factors that contribute to soldiers' motivation and morale during combat. While technology has revolutionized the battlefield since this time, the combat soldier is still the essential element on the battlefield. Therefore, motivation will always be one of the fundamental factors for achieving success in combat.¹ Thus, it continues to be a pertinent question whether soldiers at war are committed to, or rather motivated by the cause for which they are fighting. Nancy Sherman posits, that American soldiers feel morally accountable for not only how they fight but also why they fight. They want to be assured that the war is for a good cause: *"But none want their willingness to serve exploited for a cause that is unworthy or for a war grounded in unjustified fear or waged for a pretext. When they believe that has happened, the betrayal felt is profound."*² All Americans expect their leaders to prove that war is right, necessary, and worth the sacrifice, but when justifying war, it is essential for the president to explain to the

¹ Rodrigues-Goulart, Fernando. "Combat Motivation." *Military Review*. (November-December, 2006), 93

² Sherman, Nancy. *The Untold War. Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Our Soldiers*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2010), 41



soldiers why they are fighting: “Obviously, no audience will make a greater sacrifice, so the president’s war rationale normally includes messages designed to motivate the military and acknowledge the contributions troops will make in the conflict to come.”³ Whether the cause is about fighting to make the world safe for democracy, maintaining the freedom of a people threatened by communism, or ensuring that a rogue does not have access to weapons of mass destruction, presidents must justify their decision to the American people to take the country to war.⁴ Soldiers who question the cause for which they are fighting are prone to commit various forms of dissent, such as desertion, rebellion, or even mutiny.⁵ This article aims to shed new light on this important aspect of America’s most controversial war, the Vietnam War.

From 1965 to 1973, approximately 2.5 million American soldiers fought in “a war without fronts”, which continues to haunt the American military to this day.⁶ The study of the soldiers’ commitment to the cause in the Vietnam War is still disputed. A leading scholar on American soldiers who fought in the wars of the twentieth century asserts that: “The conventional wisdom, however, is that few American soldiers even understood their country’s war aims, let alone were motivated by them.”⁷ This article analyzes whether and how the American soldiers fighting in Vietnam were motivated by the official justifications of the war. It compares the themes in the official justifications with the soldiers’ attitudes towards the war in the years 1965-73. Based on a wide array of sources, the article seeks to contribute to current research by elucidating that soldiers thought deeply about why they were fighting in Vietnam, and for a time, the cause was an important motivator.

Sources And Research Method

The analysis here is based on wartime letters from American soldiers serving in Vietnam and interviews with American Vietnam veterans. Firsthand accounts such as letters and diaries are useful sources in order to discover the common experiences of men at war. Out of the many individual perceptions emerge common themes and patterns.⁸ Interviews, or oral history, on the other hand allow evidence from a new direction, as the interviewer decides precisely what to ask about. According to Paul Thompson, “it is a primary merit of oral history that to a much

³ Brewer, Susan A. *Why America Fights. Patriotism and War propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3; Lordan, Edward J. *The Case for Combat: How Presidents Persuade Americans to Go to War.* (Santa Barbara: PRAEGER, 2010) 9-10

⁴ Johns, Andrew L. “Hail To The Salesman In Chief.” In: Osgood, Kenneth and Frank, Andrew K. (eds.) *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century.* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 3-6; Secunda, Eugene & Moran, Terence. *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror.* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 1; Paul, Christopher. *Marines On The Beach. The Politics Of U.S. Military Intervention Decision Making.* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 140

⁵ Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War. American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 206-207

⁶ Greiner, Bernd. *War without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam.* (London: Vintage, 2009); Asselin, Pierre. *Vietnam’s American War.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2

⁷ Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers. Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea and Vietnam.* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2003), 136

⁸ Fritz, Stephen G. *Frontsoldaten. The German Soldier In World War II.* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 7; Hynes, Samuel. *The Soldiers’ Tale. Bearing Witness To Modern War.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xiv

greater extent than most sources, it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated." However, with interviews about past events there is always the risk of a distorted point of view due to the distance of time. Interviews must thus be compared with other sources.⁹

In order to identify and analyze the themes and patterns in the sources, a grounded theory methodology will be employed. The central process in grounded theory is coding the data, which refers to developing codes, categories and concepts from the data or sources. This can be done by identifying chunks or segments from the sources. Afterwards, these data can be organized into categories based on common characteristics. Interpretation of the data is thus based on the patterns and themes emerging.¹⁰

The Cause As Combat Motivation

Combat motivation is basically the study of why soldiers fight. Anthony Kellett provided the following definition: "Hence, motivation comprises the influences that bear on a soldier's choice of, degree of commitment to, and persistence in effecting, a certain course of action."¹¹ The generally accepted theory has been that ideology is not a source of combat motivation.¹² The field of combat motivation has instead been dominated by the theory of the primary group as the chief source of motivation for ground combat troops. This theory suggests that a cohesive social unit, the 'primary group,' forms among combat troops, because of the daily face-to-face interaction of men. Proponents of the theory suggest that the 'primary group' provides the key impetus for men in battle. In short, the theory suggests that soldiers fight for the other members of their primary group. As Nancy Sherman posits, "What remains the central battle motivator in most wars is care for buddies and the knowledge that they care for you."¹³ Some scholars dispute this view, arguing instead that soldiers can be motivated by ideology. This does not necessarily imply a commitment to ideologies such as communism or democracy. However, commitment to such beliefs can have a stimulating effect on soldiers' fighting spirit.¹⁴

⁹ Thompson, Paul. *The Voice Of The Past. Oral History.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4-9, 100-134

¹⁰ Leavy, Patricia. *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38-47; Flick, Uwe. *An Introduction To Qualitative Research.* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2018), 435

¹¹ Kellett, Anthony. *Combat Motivation. The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle.* (Massachusetts: Kluwer Boston, Inc., 1982), 6

¹² Chacho, Tania M. "Why Did They Fight? American Airborne Units in World War II." In *Defense Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Autumn 2001), (pp. 59-94), 61

¹³ Chacho, Tania M. "Why Did They Fight, 61; King; Anthony. "On Cohesion." In: King, Anthony (ed.) *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in the Twenty-First Century.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6-7; DeRosa, Christopher S. *Political Indoctrination In The U.S. Army from World War II to the Vietnam War.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 10; Shils, Edward A. & Janowitz, Morris. "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II." In: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 12, Issue 2, SUMMER 1948, pp. 280–315; Sherman, Nancy. *The Untold War*, 40; Stouffer, S. A. et al. *The American soldier: Adjustment during army life. (Studies in social psychology in World War II).* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949)

¹⁴ Walendowski, Edmund. *Combat Motivation Of The Polish Forces.* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), 52

In general, the concept of ideology is defined as fighting for a cause.¹⁵ It refers to the soldiers' commitment to and belief in the values and goals of their nation and/or society.¹⁶ In his 1970 study of American combat soldiers, Charles Moskos explained the ideal concept of ideology as a source of combat motivation:

The effective soldier is motivated either by a sense of national patriotism, or by a belief that he is fighting for a just cause. Such a viewpoint holds that combat performance depends on the soldier's commitment to abstract values or the symbols of the larger society. The effective soldier, in other words, is an ideologically inspired soldier. Combat performance directly varies with the soldier's conscious allegiance to the stated purposes of the war.¹⁷

However, the soldier might not necessarily understand the purposes of the war. But he must at some level be committed to the values of the social system of which he is a member, thus possessing a latent ideology:

Although American combat soldiers do not espouse overtly ideological sentiments and are extremely reluctant to voice patriotic rhetoric, this should not obscure the existence of more latent beliefs in the legitimacy, and even superiority, of the American way of life.¹⁸

Hence, latent ideology refers to the attachment a soldier feels to his country, which he thinks is worth fighting for, despite renouncing displays of patriotism and rejecting attempts at ideological indoctrination.¹⁹ The question is whether soldiers are aware of the cause they are fighting for or whether they are motivated by a latent ideology.

Explaining The Official Justifications For War

In order to justify war, the president and his advisors must frame their policies in recognizable and digestible ways.²⁰ Thus, the president always frames his policy by employing war rhetoric. Rhetoric can be defined as the deliberate use of symbols to persuade, which first and foremost includes speeches.²¹ As Justin Gustainis posits, "Rhetoric during wartime is about the creation

¹⁵ Chacho, Tania M. "Why Did They Fight?", 62; Wong, Leonard et. al. "Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War." (USAWC Press, 2003), 17

¹⁶ Walendowski, Edmund. *Combat Motivation Of The Polish Forces*, 52;

¹⁷ Moskos, Charles C. *The American Enlisted Man. The Rank and File in Today's Military*. (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1970), 135

¹⁸ Moskos, Charles C. *The American Enlisted Man*, 147

¹⁹ Nuciari, Marina. "The Study of the Military. Models for the Military Profession." In: Caforio, Giuseppe (ed.) *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2006), 39; King, Anthony. "Combat Motivation." In: King, Anthony (ed.) *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 80

²⁰ Johns, Andrew L. "Hail To The Salesman In Chief," 3; Wolfe, Wojtek Mackiewicz. *Winning the War of Words: Selling the War on Terror from Afghanistan to Iraq*. (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 2; Lordan, Edward J. *The Case for Combat*, viii

²¹ Gustainis, Justin J. *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War*. (Westport: PRAEGER, 1993), xv

of consensus. Since wars tend to drag on, consensus among the citizenry is vital if victory is to be achieved.”²²

According to Edward Lordan, most presidents through history have employed a number of universal concepts, traditional themes and rhetorical forms in their war messages. The most important and closely interrelated themes in presidential war rhetoric include self-protection, the enemy as the aggressor, Just War Theory, moral superiority, the inevitability of conflict, and guaranteed victory. Self-protection and the enemy as the aggressor are based on the assumption that as a response to provocation the United States has been forced to take military action.²³ In other words, these themes emphasize the war as necessary to the national security of the United States. Andrew Johns claims that the perhaps most effective rhetorical tool is linking a war's importance to core national values and as intrinsic to national security. As he points out, it is, after all, difficult [for the public] to oppose a policy designed and marketed to keep America safe.²⁴

Just War Theory is traditionally viewed as encompassing the following tenets that must be satisfied for a state to justifiably go to war: just cause, competent authority, comparative justice, last resort, probability of success.²⁵ Just cause means that there is a legitimate and morally weighty reason to go to war. The war is about confronting real and certain danger to human life or defending basic human rights.²⁶ It is arguably the strongest of the tenets but also controversial. It could be argued that war is just as long as all tenets are met. However, three problems arise when determining whether a cause is just: First, the justice of a war can be mixed. Second, there can be more than one cause for a war, as explained by David Barnes: “Overthrowing a tyrannical regime, instituting democratic governance, and securing access to natural resources may all be intertwined into an overall cause or may be used as a menu for just cause convenience.”²⁷ Third, if the cause used at the beginning of the war suddenly changes during the conflict, the war's justice will be severely questioned.²⁸

In contrast to the themes emphasizing national security, Just War Theory thus refers to an ideologic purpose of the war. Some scholars posit that Just War Theory is the most important theme in presidential war rhetoric, and is thus the central mechanism employed by US foreign policy decision makers in ‘selling’ the decision to go to war to the American public.²⁹ Just War Theory is closely related to the moral superiority argument, which is based on the assumption that the United States is morally superior to its enemies, and that its actions are thus morally justified. Using the ideological language of American exceptionalism, freedom and democracy, and framing any conflict in stark “good vs. evil” discourse is very

²² Gustainis, Justin J. *American Rhetoric*, xv-xvi; Wolfe, Wojtek Mackiewicz. *Winning the War of Words*, 2

²³ Lordan, Edward J. *The Case for Combat*, 1-11

²⁴ Johns, Andrew L. “Hail To The Salesman In Chief,” 3

²⁵ Barnes, David M. *The Ethics of Military Privatization. The US armed contractor phenomenon*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 111; Lordan, Edward J. *The Case for Combat*, 4-11

²⁶ Cook, Martin L. *The Moral Warrior. Ethics And Service In The U.S. Military*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 28; Lordan, Edward J. *The Case for Combat*, 4-11

²⁷ Barnes, David M. *The Ethics of Military Privatization*, 111

²⁸ Ibid., 111

²⁹ Butler, Michael J. *Selling A ‘Just’ War. Framing, Legitimacy, and US Military Intervention*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 11

common for the president.³⁰ Susan Brewer asserts that in all of America's wars from the Philippine War to the present, the chief message in presidential rhetoric has been that Americans must defeat the enemy in order to create a safer, more prosperous world in which freedom and democracy will thrive.³¹ Through history, presidents have often employed a combination of themes, such as national security and just war, in their justifications for war. In particular, in each of the major wars of the twentieth century, the president of the United States spoke of fighting a just war. The rhetoric used was one of pitting the righteousness of democracy against the evil of aggression, expansionism, fascism, imperialism, or communism. When the United States entered World War I, President Wilson referred to trade, territorial security issues, making the world safe for democracy, and the ultimate goal of fighting a war to end all wars.³² As the United States entered World War II, it was also framed as a just cause and a fight for freedom.³³ President Roosevelt assured the Americans of 'a world victory of the forces of justice and of righteousness over the forces of savagery and barbarism.'³⁴ In the Korean War, the goal was to contain aggressive communism, and the war was justified as necessary to uphold the rule of law in international affairs.³⁵

The Cause as Combat Motivation in The Major Wars Of The Twentieth Century

First of all, the possible coherence between the soldiers' recruiting background and their commitment to the cause has been discussed. Tua Sandman and Bruce Newsome emphasize the need to distinguish between the will to serve and the will to fight. The reason why soldiers sign up for military duty is different from the reason why soldiers actively fight in battle.³⁶ In the same vein, Christopher Hamner asserts that ideology may be a potent force leading soldiers to join the military, but the pressures and confusion of ground combat are so intense that ideology is disconnected from soldiers' behavior in battle. Behavior in battle is rather circumscribed by the necessity of combat.³⁷ On the other hand, some scholars argue that there is a coherence between the reason for signing up for military service and ideological commitment to the cause. According to this argument, soldiers who've volunteered are generally more committed to the cause than conscripts who've been coerced into military

³⁰ Johns, Andrew L. "Hail To The Salesman In Chief," 3

³¹ Brewer, Susan A. *Why America Fights*, 3-4

³² Lorenzo, David J. *War and American Foreign Policy. Justifications of Major Military Actions in the US.* (Cham: palgrave macmillan, 2021), 112; Virden, Jenel. *Americans And The Wars Of The Twentieth Century.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3-6

³³ Butler, Michael J. *Selling A 'Just' War*, 39; Brewer, Susan A. "Fighting For Freedom: The Second World War and a Century of American War Propaganda." In: Welch, David et. al. (eds.) *Justifying War. Propaganda, Politics and the Modern Age.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

³⁴ Virden, Jenel. *Americans And The Wars Of The Twentieth Century*, 4; Lorenzo, David J. *War and American Foreign Policy*, 112, 133

³⁵ Virden, Jenel. *Americans And The Wars Of The Twentieth Century*, 4

³⁶ Sandman, Tua. "The Moral Component Of Fighting: Bringing Society Back In." In: Weissmann, Mikael et. al. (eds.) *Advanced Land Warfare. Tactics and Operations.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 204; Newsome, Bruce. *Made, Not Born. Why Some Soldiers Are Better Than Others.* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 107

³⁷ Hamner, Christopher H. *Enduring Battle. American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776-1945.* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2011), 17-18

service.³⁸ The soldiers' way into the military is a factor which must at least be considered when attempting to explain their (lack of) ideological commitment.

The question of the ideological motivation of American soldiers is highly disputed. Some scholars argue that cause is an important motivator. In his study of the American Civil War soldiers, James McPherson argued that the soldiers on both sides were motivated by the cause. These soldiers were neither professional soldiers nor coerced conscripts. Most of them were wartime volunteers from civilian life, which, according to McPherson, was an important reason for the soldiers' ideological commitment.³⁹ In contrast to the Civil War, World War I, World War II, The Korean War and The Vietnam War were fought primarily, but not exclusively by conscripted soldiers. From 1917 to 1973 the Selective Service System, or the draft remained in force, and military service was compulsory- for some. National Headquarters determined quotas, and local draft boards were created and were responsible for determining who should serve. Thus, not all Americans were drafted for military service, as some men were exempted. Furthermore, the likelihood of being drafted induced a significant number of men to volunteer for military service before they were eventually drafted. These were so-called draft motivated volunteers, and constituted a significant phenomenon especially during the 1950s and 1960s. By volunteering, or enlisting, they had more influence on the choice of service than soldiers that were drafted.⁴⁰ Some scholars assert that American soldiers were motivated by the cause in the World Wars. Edward A. Gutiérrez argues that, just as in the Civil War, patriotism and duty were important motivators for the American soldiers fighting on the Western front in World War I.⁴¹ Likewise, Stephen Ambrose argues that the American soldiers in World War II knew they were fighting for decency and democracy, they were proud of it and motivated by it.⁴² In the same vein, Tania Chacho provided credible evidence that many of the soldiers in the American elite airborne divisions in World War II were motivated by the cause, and espoused a patriotic rhetoric when explaining what they were fighting for.⁴³

In contrast, Peter Kindsvatter asserts that most soldiers in the world wars were not motivated by ideology, and had little understanding of what they were fighting for, especially in World War II. Surveys concluded that the American soldier did not have any strong beliefs

³⁸ Wong, Leonard et. al. *Why They Fight*, 54; Baker, Anni. *Life In The U.S. Armed Forces. (Not) Just Another Job*. (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 160; McPherson, James M. *For Cause And Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12-13

³⁹ McPherson, James M. *For Cause And Comrades*, 5

⁴⁰ Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers*, xiv, 1-13; Geva, Dorit. *Conscription, Family, and the Modern State. A Comparative Study of France and the United States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19-20, 110-130; Taylor, William A. *Military Service and American Democracy. From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*. (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 111-112; Bailey, Beth. *America's Army. Making the All-Volunteer Force*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11-12; Segal, David R. *Recruiting For Uncle Sam. Citizenship and Military Manpower Policy*. (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 1989), 33

⁴¹ Gutiérrez, Edward A. *Doughboys On The Great War. How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014)

⁴² Ambrose, Stephen E. *Citizen Soldiers. The U.S. Army From The Normandy Beaches To The Bulge To The Surrender Of Germany June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 14

⁴³ Chacho, Tania M. "Why Did They Fight?", 59-94

about national war aims and did not feel personally committed to the war effort.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, researchers at the time concluded that despite the reality that the soldiers apparently did not understand their country's war aims, they were still convinced about the legitimacy of the war and were convinced that the war was necessary. Thus, according to Kindsvatter *latent ideology* still was a motivator: "The sum of these theories is that the American soldier believed, at least implicitly, that he was fighting on the side of the good guys and that American society was materially and morally superior and hence worth fighting for."⁴⁵

In contrast to the world wars, ideological motivations are rarely discussed as a factor in why American soldiers served in Vietnam.⁴⁶ First of all, the soldiers who were sent to Vietnam could be divided in 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 war [after American combat troops had begun fighting in Vietnam] most of the fighting was done by soldiers who had volunteered for military service. However, this did not mean that they had volunteered for combat in Vietnam. According to Appy, few did so.⁴⁷ Still, as Kyle Longley suggests, during 1966-1967, 20% of the soldiers who had comfortable duty in Europe, requested a transfer to Vietnam.⁴⁸ As the war continued, the number of volunteers declined. From 1966 to 1969, the number of draftees killed in battle increased from 21% to 40%. Almost 50% of the army troops were draftees, and in combat units they constituted almost two thirds of the troops. Late in the war this number was even higher.⁴⁹ According to Christian G. Appy, soldiers throughout the war were deeply skeptical about the official justifications of the war. The official explanations of the American mission in Vietnam did not match the reality experienced by the soldiers. Thus, few soldiers found in the standard rationale a coherent or persuasive explanation for why they were fighting.⁵⁰

In his 1970 study of American combat soldiers in Vietnam, Charles Moskos observed through interviews with combat soldiers, that they displayed a significant skepticism of political and ideological appeals: "Somewhat paradoxically, then, anti-ideology itself is a recurrent and integral part of the soldier's belief system. They dismiss patriotic slogans or exhortations to defend democracy... In particular they have little belief that they are protecting an outpost of democracy in South Vietnam."⁵¹ Nevertheless, although few soldiers were committed to the official justification of the war, many of them, especially in the early years of the war, still supported the U.S. policy of containing communism and believed that stopping communism was the key objective of the war.⁵² Many of the interviewed soldiers in

⁴⁴ Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers*, 136-138; DeRosa, Christopher S. *Political Indoctrination In The U.S. Army*, 9

⁴⁵ Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers*, 139;

⁴⁶ Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers*, 5

⁴⁷ Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War*, 28

⁴⁸ Longley, Kyle. *Grunts. The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.: 2008), 5, 77-78

⁴⁹ Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War*, 28

⁵⁰ Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War*, 207-208

⁵¹ Moskos, Charles C. *The American Enlisted Man*, 148

⁵² Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War*, 218; Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers*, 5; Longley, Kyle. *Grunts*, 78

Moskos' study saw stopping communism as the purpose of the war, but they almost always expressed this view in terms of defending the United States, not the "free world" in general and particularly not South Vietnam. Despite the American soldiers' apparent ideological unconcern, they still displayed an elemental American nationalism and believed that they were fighting to protect the United States. They believed communism had to be stopped in Vietnam before it reached American soil.⁵³ In other words, latent ideology still contributed to the soldiers' combat motivation. While Moskos' study is still a fundamental source in the research of American soldiers in Vietnam, the empirical foundation is questionable, as it does not include the use of other contemporary sources such as wartime letters by soldiers.

When analyzing the attitudes of American combat soldiers in Vietnam, a useful historical division can be made between the soldiers serving before and after the North Vietnamese Tet offensive in 1968, which severely diminished the United States's will to fight in Vietnam. A majority of Americans turned against the war after the Tet offensive, and this also affected the soldiers' attitude. In the latter years of the war, there was a profound sense of the war's pointlessness. Because more and more of the replacements arriving in Vietnam at this time were reluctant draftees, and came from a society that had turned against the war, they were skeptical about the war. In 1969-70, a significant number of soldiers opposed the war, and voiced objections, avoided combat, and sometimes engaged in collective defiance of orders.⁵⁴ Christopher DeRosa explains this shift in the soldiers' attitude as follows: "Perhaps most dissenting soldiers did not find the war's justification wanting until after it became apparent that they were losing it...In this sense, the loss of morale is a result of defeat rather than a cause."⁵⁵

Since the abolition of the draft in 1973, some scholars assert that because today's soldiers are volunteers they are more likely to be committed to the cause. For instance, a study of American soldiers in the Iraq War [2003] concluded that some soldiers apparently were motivated by idealistic notions, especially the more fundamental liberation aspects of the war aims such as liberating the Iraqi people and bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq.⁵⁶

The American Soldiers' Commitment to the Cause in Vietnam

Official Justifications 1954-1965

The decision to send American combat soldiers to Vietnam in March 1965 was the result of a gradually increasing American commitment beginning in the 1950s. From the beginning, U.S. policy towards Vietnam was driven by its global postwar policy of containing communist expansion. The Eisenhower Administration's formulation of the Domino Theory in 1954 became central to presidential decision making about involvement in Vietnam and the rhetoric used to justify and secure these decisions. The theory suggested that if one country in a region fell to communism, all the others in the surrounding area would follow:

⁵³ Moskos, Charles C. *The American Enlisted Man*, 149-151

⁵⁴ Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War*, 208, 222; DeRosa, Christopher S. *Political Indoctrination In The U.S. Army*, 221; Kindsvatter, Peter S. *American Soldiers*, 146

⁵⁵ DeRosa, Christopher S. *Political Indoctrination In The U.S. Army*, 221

⁵⁶ Wong, Leonard et. al. *Why They Fight*, 54

Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.⁵⁷

According to Eric Patterson, the domino theory comprised at least three major justifications for considering the use of force in Vietnam and elsewhere: the doctrine of containing communism, the doctrine of spreading and/or holding democracy around the world, and the concept of demonstrating credibility in supporting one's allies.⁵⁸ American involvement began with the decision to finance the French in their effort to retain Indochina against the communist-nationalist Vietminh guerillas based in Hanoi.⁵⁹ In line with the Domino Theory, the United States officially intended to preserve the freedom (and democracy) of Vietnam and prevent a communist takeover, as Eisenhower explained in February 1954:

So what we are doing is supporting the Vietnamese and the French in their conduct of that war; because, as we see it, it is a case of independent and free nations operating against the encroachment of communism.⁶⁰

After the French defeat and the Geneva Peace accord in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily divided in a northern part held by the Vietminh and a southern part dominated by pro-French forces. The United States supported the creation of a regime in South Vietnam, and the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations provided political and economic support to South Vietnam as well as military advisors. The regime was unpopular however, and the NLF, the successor to Vietminh, continued guerilla warfare against the government in South Vietnam, recruited members among the population in South Vietnam, and encouraged its members to fight for national unification. NLF, named Vietcong by the Americans, was assisted by North Vietnam.⁶¹ When Lyndon B. Johnson succeeded Kennedy as president in 1963, he continued the same policy as his predecessors. As he explained in 1964, the United States was aiding

⁵⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 07 1954, *The President's News Conference*, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/233655> ; Secunda, Eugene & Moran, Terence. *Selling War to America*, 92-93; Brewer, Susan A. *Why America Fights*, 179-184; Gustainis, Justin J. *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War*, 4; Westheimer, James E. *The Vietnam War*. (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 2007), xi

⁵⁸ Patterson, Eric. *Just American Wars. Ethical Dilemmas in U.S. Military History*. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 11

⁵⁹ Kail, F.M. *What Washington Said. Administration Rhetoric and the Vietnam War: 1949-1969*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), 84-85

⁶⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The President's News Conference*, February 10, 1954, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/233282>; Kail, F.M. *What Washington Said*, 67-68

⁶¹ Westheimer, James E. *The Vietnam War*, xi; John F. Kennedy, February 14, 1962, *The President's News Conference*, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/236482>

South Vietnam in their struggle against communist subversion and aggression.⁶² In another speech he further asserted that: "This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity."⁶³ Johnson gradually escalated the American commitment to Vietnam, before he took the final step and committed American combat troops to Vietnam.

On March 8 1965, 3.500 U.S. Marines landed in Vietnam and began combat operations against Vietcong. Soon, more troops were to follow. By the end of 1965, 184.300 American servicemen were in Vietnam.⁶⁴ Since the United States was now directly involved with combat troops, Johnson had to justify his decision. According to David Lorenzo and F.M. Kail, Johnson linked the war in Vietnam to American security, values, credibility and a liberal world order.⁶⁵ In two of his speeches in April 1965 and in July 1965, Johnson employed these themes in his explanation for why American soldiers had now been sent to fight in Vietnam:

Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Viet-Nam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another...To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next.⁶⁶

Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace... The battle would be renewed in one country and then another country, bringing with it perhaps even larger and crueler conflict, as we have learned from the lessons of history.⁶⁷

Johnson indicated in these statements that the battle [against communist aggression] would just be renewed in other countries if the United States retreated from Vietnam. The theme was obviously the domino theory.

Our objective is the independence of South Viet-Nam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves--only that the people of South Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.⁶⁸

⁶² Lyndon B. Johnson, Joint Statement Following Discussions With the President of the Philippines, October 04, 1964, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/242529>

⁶³ Lyndon B. Johnson, June 24, 1964, The President's News Conference Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239273>

⁶⁴ Westheider, James E. *The Vietnam War*, xi, 78; Secunda, Eugene & Moran, Terence P. *Selling War to America*, 99-102; Brewer, Susan A. *Why America Fights*, 191-193, 223-224; Frankum Jr., Ronald B. "Swatting Flies with a Sledgehammer. The Air War." In: Andrew Wiest (ed.): *Rolling Thunder In A Gentle Land. The Vietnam War Revisited*. (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2006), 214-215; Prados, John. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 132

⁶⁵ Lorenzo, David J. *War and American Foreign Policy*, 175; Kail, F.M. *What Washington Said*, 112-113

⁶⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, Address at Johns Hopkins University: "Peace Without Conquest." April 07, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/241950>

⁶⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, The President's News Conference July 28, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/241349>

⁶⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, Address at Johns Hopkins University

But we insist and we will always insist that the people of South Viet-Nam shall have the right of choice, the right to shape their own destiny in free elections in the South or throughout all Viet-Nam under international supervision, and they shall not have any government imposed upon them by force and terror so long as we can prevent it.⁶⁹

The message in these statements was obviously freedom and democracy for South Vietnam, implied by the reference to “the right of choice” and “free elections”.

But we will always oppose the effort of one nation to conquer another nation. We will do this because our own security is at stake.⁷⁰

If we are driven from the field in Viet-Nam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise, or in American protection. In each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened, and an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States itself.⁷¹

By saying that “our own security is at stake” and “an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States” Johnson implied a vital connection between the war in Vietnam and the security of the United States. Furthermore, Johnson explained that the Americans fought for basic values in Vietnam, including peace: “Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending.”⁷²

Once again in man's age-old struggle for a better life and a world of peace, the wisdom, courage, and compassion of the American people are being put to the test. This is the meaning of the tragic conflict in Vietnam.⁷³

The official justification for America's war in Vietnam thus included a national security dimension and an ideological dimension. The following themes were employed by Johnson: self-protection, the enemy as aggressor and Just War Theory. American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam because it was vital to the security of the United States. Furthermore, the war was framed as a just cause, since the Americans fought for peace, freedom and democracy in South Vietnam.

⁶⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, The President's News Conference July 28, 1965

⁷⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, Address at Johns Hopkins University

⁷¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, The President's News Conference July 28, 1965

⁷² Lyndon B. Johnson, Address at Johns Hopkins University

⁷³ Lyndon B. Johnson, The President's News Conference July 28, 1965.

The Soldiers' Attitudes Towards the War 1965-1967

Since the Tet offensive in 1968 ostensibly led to the breakdown of morale, the analysis of the soldiers' attitudes towards the war is divided in two parts- 1965-1968 and 1968-1973.

A scrutiny of the sources reveals some different, but interrelated patterns in the American soldiers' attitudes towards the war in the years 1965-67.

Some soldiers consistently emphasized "freedom" and/or "free life" as part of the reason why they were fighting in Vietnam. There were, however, different variations of this point of view. Some soldiers emphasized freedom for South Vietnam whereas other soldiers believed the war was rather about the freedom of the United States. The following examples clarify these variations:

So we are here to help the South Vietnamese stay free, as they wish freedom.⁷⁴

Ostensibly, this soldier believed he was helping South Vietnam remain a free country. Other soldiers expressed this belief, which is evident in the following excerpts:

I'm helping my country to help another country to help itself. I'm the muscle in the arm that took the bull by the horns...These people need our help to stay free!⁷⁵

This soldier expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that he was helping "another country", obviously meaning South Vietnam, to stay free.

If more people realized that these people over here have been fighting for their freedom for over 35 years, and that they really look up to us guys over here, because to them we represent the freedom they want so badly...and you swear to God that you will (as does everyone here) give these people their freedom, no matter what the cost.⁷⁶

Similarly, this statement reflects the soldier's belief that he was defending South Vietnam.

Thus, considering the quotations such as "help the South Vietnamese stay free," "give these people their freedom," "these people need our help to stay free", these soldiers apparently thought the defense of South Vietnam's freedom [from communism] was the reason for the war. Judging from their statements, they believed they were fighting to help South Vietnam. This belief actually reflected part of President Johnson's justifications for the war, as he had also emphasized that the United States attempted to help defend South Vietnam's democracy and freedom from attack.

⁷⁴ A.M. Slussear to Steven Hejna, Undated, 1966, in: in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam. The American soldier writes about what this war is really like.* (New York: Parallax Publishing Co., Inc.: 1966),, 36

⁷⁵ J.F. Boughy SN to Chris, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 59-60

⁷⁶ William P. Twiggs to his wife and family, May 17, 1966, In: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam.* (New York: Presidio Press, 2003), 169

In comparison, some veterans who served at the same time express the same belief in interviews. For instance, one veteran recalls that:

we felt like that this was absolutely the correct thing to do. We have been asked to do this for our country and we felt like this was the correct thing to do, to add to the values that we held for the ideas of freedom and the freedoms that we have and just like we feel like that this is the freedom that we desire for all other people of the world.⁷⁷

This statement indicates the soldier's belief in fighting for the freedom for other people, which necessarily must include South Vietnam. Other veterans corroborate this point of view, asserting that they believed they fought to keep democracy alive for the South Vietnamese and defend them from communist aggression.⁷⁸ While there is an inherent risk of a distorted view in these statements, they nonetheless reflect the same belief as the aforementioned letters.

Other soldiers also emphasized "freedom" and "free life" in their thoughts about the war, but did not speak specifically about South Vietnam:

The fight is a worthwhile fight, and free life that we have in the United States is a worthwhile goal. Perhaps the only goal worth the price.⁷⁹

In contrast to the previous examples emphasizing freedom for South Vietnam, this soldier implied that the goal was free life in the United States. This must be interpreted as a belief that he was fighting in Vietnam to defend the freedom of the United States. Further examples corroborate this point of view among the soldiers and help establish a common pattern.

A machine gun opened up, and it almost scared me to death. When all was quiet again, I started thinking again of our country and our way of life...My buddies did not die in vain, and if I don't make it, I know that it was worth all the hardships and the price of life for the freedom that we have.⁸⁰

Since this soldier expressed that the war was for the freedom of Americans, it would seem that he also believed he was defending the freedom of the United States. While expressing

⁷⁷ Bennie G. Adkins Collection (AFC/2001/001/106206), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

⁷⁸ Interview with Richard Detra, OH0126. 1 July 2000, Richard (Dick) Detra Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0126>, Accessed 18 May 2023.; Interview with Thomas Striegler, OH0009. 1 August 2000, Thomas Striegler Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0009>, Accessed 18 May 2023.

⁷⁹ Donald B. Conaty to Mrs. Frank Amerling, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 10

⁸⁰ Name withheld, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 77

themselves differently, other soldiers ostensibly felt the same way. For instance, in a letter to his son, another soldier wrote that American soldiers were making their sacrifice in order for their children to have a free country to grow up in.⁸¹ Obviously, he also expressed the belief that he was defending American freedom.

I want my country to live for billions of years to come. I want it to stand as a light to all people oppressed and guide them to the same freedom we know. If we can stand and fight for freedom, then I think we have done the job God set down for us. It's up to every American to fight for the freedom we hold so dear. If we don't, the smells of free air could become dark and damp as in a prison cell.⁸²

This statement must also be interpreted as a belief in defending the freedom of the United States. Another example followed the same pattern:

I'm glad to be here just to make sure the States stay safe...there are guys dying over here for our freedom- your freedom as well as mine.⁸³

What these soldiers had in common was thus their emphasis on defending the freedom of the United States. In the minds of these soldiers, freedom must be interpreted as security, considering their statements. Keeping the United States free by fighting in Vietnam must basically be interpreted as a belief in defending American security. Then, the soldiers in these examples clearly believed the war was justified to defend the United States. This must further be interpreted as the belief in a coherence between Vietnam and the security of the United States. This pattern of thought reflected one of the key themes in President Johnson's justifications of the war- that American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam because the security of the United States was at stake.

Similar to the motif in these accounts, another pattern in letters from combat soldiers was the apparent perception of the war as a fight against communism:

Well we're stopping communism over here instead of in the people's backyard back home in the USA.⁸⁴

According to his letter, this soldier believed that if communism was not stopped in Vietnam, the United States would be the next battlefield against communist expansion. In other words, the war was necessary to prevent communist expansion from reaching the United States. This belief was evident in several other soldier letters written at this time. For instance, in another letter, a soldier also opined that communism had to be stopped in Vietnam, or else the Americans would risk fighting it on American soil:

⁸¹ James C. Kline to his son Ricky, March 14, 1966, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 151

⁸² Hiram D. Strickland to his family, Undated, 1966, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 193

⁸³ John Callahan to Mrs. John Callahan, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 116-117

⁸⁴ Joe Pais (USMC) to his mother, August 30, 1965, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 10

We are fighting communism, which cannot be allowed to spread. If we leave Vietnam it will only delay the war to another time and place. Next we would be fighting on home soil.⁸⁵

Further examples serve to elucidate the pattern in these letters:

Some people wonder why Americans are in Vietnam. The way I see the situation, I would rather fight to stop communism in South Vietnam than in Kincaid, Humbolt, Blue Mound, or Kansas City, and that is just about what it would end up being.⁸⁶

But every small, distant republic that is victimized by Communism brings the enemy closer to our shores- weakens our resistance.⁸⁷

Clearly, these soldiers also expressed the belief that they were fighting communism in Vietnam instead of in the United States, as implied by the references to “our shores” and different geographical locations in the United States. In exactly the same manner, another soldier opined that American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam to prevent the United States from becoming the next target for communist expansion:

The reason why we are here is to stop Communism...if we didn't stop Communism over here, in due time we would no longer live in a free country. Sooner or later after the Communists took Southeast Asia, the U.S. would be one of their next objectives.⁸⁸

The common pattern in these letters was obviously a belief that communism constituted a threat to the United States and therefore had to be stopped in Vietnam. Thus, just as the soldiers emphasizing freedom for the United States as the reason for the war in Vietnam, these soldiers also believed the war was, eventually, about American security. In comparison, other soldiers did not directly specify the perceived threat to the United States, but expressed nonetheless that they were in a war against communism:

We are here because we think this is where we must fight to stop a communist threat.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Emil Spadafora to his mother, August 30, 1965, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 174

⁸⁶ Jack S. Swender to his uncle and aunt, 20 September, 1965, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America. Letters Home from Vietnam*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 205

⁸⁷ Fred Martin to miss Carol Lundgren, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 107

⁸⁸ Vincent G. DePrinzio (USMC) to Mrs. Joseph DePrinzio, Undated, 1966 in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 111

⁸⁹ Marion Lee Kempner to his grandparents, August 9, 1966, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 206

I'd just like to say that every American should know by now that the war we're fighting in South Vietnam is a war against communist aggression, which is an ever-present threat to the free world today.⁹⁰

The message in these soldiers' statements was quite similar to the aforementioned examples. Since they described communism as a threat, they probably meant that it was a threat to the United States.

Thus, in all of these examples, the soldiers consistently talked about fighting communism, and particularly the risk of fighting communism on American soil if they failed to stop it in South Vietnam. The common pattern among these soldiers was thus the belief that they were at war in Vietnam to defend the United States from communism.⁹¹

The strong desire to keep America safe was evident in other soldiers' letters, although they did not refer to either communism or the United States in their statements:

That is why we are here. If the enemy wins here he will win other places too...So let's stop him here, so that wonderful people like you and your friends can have a happy life in the future.⁹²

This statement reflected a belief in stopping the enemy in Vietnam to prevent him from continuing his conquest. Indeed, "the enemy" is unspecified in the letter, contrary to the soldiers describing the war as a fight against communism, but this was not uncommon. In a similar letter from another soldier, it was also not explained who the enemy was:

Folks, don't let these men die in vain. Appreciate what they are doing over here in Vietnam. They died protecting you all, and all the people in the United States. We just cannot have the enemy get to the folks back home. We have got to stop them here, before that happens.⁹³

In both letters, the enemy must be interpreted as meaning communism, since both soldiers emphasize the need to stop the enemy in Vietnam instead of fighting him in the United States. This point of view corresponds to the other patterns of thought, which have previously been discussed. In a comparable example, a soldier referred to the enemy as the V.C.s [Viet Cong]: "If the V.C.s take over here, it will only be a matter of years before they try the same in our own back yard."⁹⁴ The reference to the V.C.s must also be interpreted as this soldier's belief in fighting communism. Just as in the other examples, he described the risk of

⁹⁰ Rodney Baldr to the Berkeley (California) Gazette, June, 1967, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 209

⁹¹For additional examples see: Don Moffet (USMC) to Mrs. R.J. Moffet, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 38; John Douglas Gallagher (USMC) to Mr. and Mrs. Jack T. Gallagher, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 106; John P. Murphy (USMC) to Miss Francine La Rose, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 125

⁹² Tom Fincher to Kim Kusamano, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 108

⁹³ Kenneth W. Bagby to his parents, November 17, 1965, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 42

⁹⁴ Peter C. Drummond to Mrs. Drummond, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 110

fighting the enemy on American soil. Thus, by referring to the risk of the enemy either trying the same thing in “our own back yard” or “have the enemy get to the folks back home” the soldiers in these examples were obviously thinking about American soil, and implied that the United States would be in danger if communism was not stopped in Vietnam. Basically, they thought the war was necessary to protect the United States.⁹⁵ Clearly, this can only be interpreted as the soldiers’ belief in protecting the United States from communist expansion. Many veterans who served at this time also insist they had similar beliefs about the war at the time. This is obvious in the following excerpts from interviews:

We felt like it was a crusade against communism.⁹⁶

We were there to fight Communists and stop the spread of Communism.⁹⁷

We really thought that we were going to stop the spread of communism. Communism was our enemy that was a war between us and them. We wanted and needed to stop them everywhere we could and that’s why we went to Vietnam.⁹⁸

As can be seen from these excerpts, these veterans also felt it was vital to fight and stop communism in Vietnam, and probably thought the ultimate goal was to prevent communism threatening the security of the United States. This point of view is very obvious in similar interviews with soldiers serving at the same time:

He [the president] was the boss of this country, and if he says we should fight the communist party in Vietnam than as far as I’m concerned that’s where we’ll fight it. I’d rather fight it in Vietnam than fight it in San Francisco and that was my feeling. I’d rather fight over their soil than my soil.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ See additional examples: Richard E. Marks to his mother, December 12, 1965, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 123; Jack S. Swender to Class C-4, May 21, 1966, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 206

⁹⁶ Interview with Larry Burke, OH0177. 21 April 2001, Larry Burke Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0177>, Accessed 18 May 2023.

⁹⁷ Interview with Gary Cummings, OH0162. 21 April 2001, Gary Cummings Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0162>, Accessed 19 May 2023.

⁹⁸ Interview with Patrick Curry, OH0434. 15 July 2005, Patrick Curry Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0434>, Accessed 18 May 2023.; for additional examples see Interview with Ted Cook, OH0098. 2 October 1999, Ted Cook Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0098>, Accessed 18 May 2023.

⁹⁹ Interview with Neil Couch, OH0124. 17 June 2000, Neil Couch Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0124>, Accessed 18 May 2023.

The obvious interpretation of this veteran's statement is, that he believed communist expansion had to be stopped in Vietnam, before it would become a threat to the United States. Other veterans express exactly the same belief:

We felt that it was a threat to our country that needed to be met and that we went over and tried to meet it in the way that seemed the most appropriate at the time...We were fighting communism at the time, which was a terrible enemy for us.¹⁰⁰

We saw the Communists involved in every third world country trying to overthrow it, overturn it and we saw that if we didn't try to defend ourselves and our allies, we could end up being surrounded by these folks that were hostile to us. So we felt like we had to do the things we needed to do for our country.¹⁰¹

Clearly, as in the previous examples, these soldier's statements also reflect the perception that it was a war against communism. Thus, the common perception among these veterans was that they were fighting the spread of communism because it constituted a threat to the United States. As they imply, they would rather fight communism in Vietnam instead of on American soil. In comparison, other veterans assert they specifically believed in the domino theory at the time. Basically, a belief in the domino theory is tantamount to the perception of the war as a fight against communist expansion.¹⁰² While the specific mention of the domino

¹⁰⁰ Interview with John Currey, OH0265. 05 February 2003, Lt. Col. John R. Currey Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0265>, Accessed 18 May 2023. See additional examples Interview with Alfred DeMailo, OH0262. No Date, Alfred S. DeMailo Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0262>, Accessed 18 May 2023.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Jim Ray, OH0352. 11 March 2004, James M. Ray Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0352>, Accessed 19 May 2023. For additional examples see Interview with Mike Mercer, OH0076. 13 January 2001, Mike Mercer Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0076>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Michael Morris, OH0263. 21 January 2003, Michael James Morris Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0263>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Antoine Roy, OH0255. 08 January 2003, Mr. Antoine Edward Roy Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0255>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Michael Sweeney, OH0239. 14 November 2002, Mr. Michael L. Sweeney Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0239>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Gerald Kumpf, OH0276. 10 March 2003, Gerald Kumpf Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0276>, Accessed 19 May 2023.;

¹⁰² Interview with Jim Donovan, OH0013. 10 August 2000, James Donovan Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0013>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Ron Ballweg, OH0296. 19 May 2003, Mr. John Ron Ballweg Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0296>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Tom Esslinger, OH0333. 21 August 2003, John Thomas Esslinger

theory might be a case of rationalization because of the distance of time, the pattern in these interviews nonetheless correspond to the view of the war expressed in the letters written at the time.

In contrast to these patterns, some soldiers were apparently skeptical about the war-already in 1965-1966. This is evident considering the following excerpts from letters written at the time:

I'm in Vietnam and every day I pray for only two things- to be out of this hell and back home or to be killed before I might have to kill someone.¹⁰³

I once said duty here isn't bad. I was wrong. It's HELL. I hope to leave this place and never see it again.¹⁰⁴

These soldiers clearly expressed their opposition to the war. This attitude can also be traced in other letters. Another soldier even questioned why American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam:

Why are we fighting in the first place? Do you know? Does anybody know? I don't.¹⁰⁵

These letters reflect an opposition to the war because these soldiers obviously didn't understand its purpose. A corresponding point of view is evident in a war diary from 1967. Shortly before leaving Vietnam, the soldier writes, that he never felt that he was fighting for a particular cause, but rather fought to stay alive and avoid getting killed.¹⁰⁶ Some postwar account by veterans serving at the same time corroborate the pattern in these sources. One veteran recalls his opposition to one of the fundamental justifications of the war: "I didn't really believe in the Domino Theory. I didn't really believe that communism in Vietnam was a threat to the United States."¹⁰⁷ In comparison, other veterans recall they had no idea at the time what the war was about or about the situation in Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁸ As the pattern in

Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0333>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with Jack O'Neil, OH0147. 16 September 2002, Jack O'Neil Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0147>, Accessed 19 May 2023.

¹⁰³ Name withheld by request, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 120

¹⁰⁴ Fred Martin to Miss Carol Lundgren, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 87

¹⁰⁵ Don Moffet (USMC) to Mrs. R. J. Moffet, Undated, 1966, in: Munson, Glenn (ed.) *Letters from Viet nam*, 119

¹⁰⁶ Parks, David. *G.I. Diary*. (New York: Harper and Row: 1968), 121

¹⁰⁷ Richard Gerald Smith Collection (AFC/2001/001/24520), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Richard Stephen Drake, OH0568. 23 January 2006, Richard Stephen Drake Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0568>, Accessed 19 May 2023.; Interview with David Hill, OH0167. 7 August 2000, David M. Hill Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0167>, Accessed 19

these sources indicate, these soldiers opposed the war as they simply did not understand or believe in its justifications.

As the patterns among the sources indicate, the soldiers serving in Vietnam in the years 1965-67 had different attitudes towards the war. A very significant pattern of the period was the belief in fighting for American security. Whether describing the war as a fight for the freedom of the United States, a war against communism, or a war to protect the security of the American homeland, the soldiers basically expressed the same perception of the war's justification. They believed they were at war in Vietnam to protect the United States against communist expansion. Thus, while expressing themselves differently, they shared a common belief in defending their homeland by stopping communism in Vietnam. Obviously, they believed in the domino theory, and feared that if communism wasn't stopped in Vietnam it would reach the United States. The soldiers thus expressed a commitment to president Johnson's claim that American security was at stake in Vietnam. Some soldiers instead expressed a belief in helping South Vietnam stay free. This contradicts the findings in Moskos' study, that the soldiers had no interest in defending South Vietnam. However, no soldiers really expressed any desire to defend basic values and principles such as democracy. On the other hand, while few in number, some soldiers clearly opposed the war's justification. Thus, even though many believed the war was justified to keep America safe, the soldiers were not in complete agreement about the war's justification.

1968: Peace With Honor

In March 1968, two months after the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had launched the Tet offensive, president Johnson announced a change in US policy towards Vietnam. He announced it was time to negotiate for a peaceful settlement, to pursue peace with honor.¹⁰⁹ Richard Nixon, who succeeded Johnson in the White House in January 1969 had also promised "Peace With Honor" in his election campaign.¹¹⁰ In a speech on November 3 1969 Nixon explained his plan for ending the Vietnam war. All American forces would gradually be withdrawn and instead leave the fighting for the South Vietnamese forces. This process was known as Vietnamization.¹¹¹ In his concluding remarks, Nixon emphasized how this plan was the best way to obtain peace:

Tonight I do not tell you that the war in Vietnam is the war to end wars. But I do say this: I have initiated a plan which will end this war in a way that will bring us closer to that great goal to which Woodrow Wilson and every American President in our history has been dedicated--the goal of a just and lasting peace.¹¹²

May 2023.; Interview with Robert Kreger, OH0448. 28 October 2005, Dr. Robert D. Kreger Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0448>, Accessed 19 May 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Virden, Jenel. *Americans And The Wars Of The Twentieth Century*, 125

¹¹⁰ Westheider, James E. *The Vietnam War*, xi, 78; Brewer, Susan A. *Why America Fights*, 224-227

¹¹¹ Richard Nixon, Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, November 03, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240027>

¹¹² Richard Nixon, Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, November 03, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240027>

Following negotiations, the withdrawal of all American combat troops was completed in January 1973. Two years later, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam and ended the war.¹¹³

The Soldiers' Attitudes Towards the War 1968-1973

Some common patterns can also be established in the last years of the American war in Vietnam. Some soldiers were obviously against the war, as the excerpts below exemplify:

The so-called heroes over here are the guys trying to do their jobs and get home from this useless war.¹¹⁴

Vietnam is one of our mistakes, and our generation will unfortunately be linked with this mistake unless we use the means available to rectify this situation.¹¹⁵

These letters clearly reflected the soldiers' opposition to the war, which apparently was based on the belief that the war was a mistake. This attitude is mirrored in other letters written at the time:

My position has not really changed. There is no reason to be here- and there is even less reason to see Americans dying here.¹¹⁶

After a while all I see just catches up with me and I begin to realize the futility of it all. I really don't want any part of it, so I participate as little as possible in all things Army.¹¹⁷

The focal point in these letters was the description of the futility of the war. This opinion corresponds to the aforementioned examples. Defeatism is the appropriate term for the pattern of thought among these soldiers, as they obviously believed there was no chance of winning the war and no reason to continue fighting.¹¹⁸ Some soldiers specifically referred to the political turmoil of South Vietnam in their criticism of the war:

This country is no gain that I can see, Dad. We're fighting, dying, for a people who resent our being over here...This war is all wrong.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Westheider, James E. *The Vietnam War*, xi, 78; Secunda, Eugene & Moran, Terence P. *Selling War to America*, 99-102; Brewer, Susan A. *Why America Fights*, 191-193, 223-224; Frankum Jr., Ronald B. "Swatting Flies with a Sledgehammer. The Air War." In: Andrew Wiest (ed.): *Rolling Thunder In A Gentle Land. The Vietnam War Revisited*. (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2006), 214-215

¹¹⁴ Phillip Arterbury to his mother, May 10, 1968, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 215

¹¹⁵ Edward Murphy to his friend, June 5, 1968, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 149

¹¹⁶ Thomas Pellaton to his friend, July 28, 1970, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 228

¹¹⁷ William J. Kalvas to his family, September 12, 1971, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 231

¹¹⁸ See the additional examples: Douglas McCormac to his friend, August 13, 1968, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 216; Joseph Morrissey to his brother, October 1969, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 223; Raymond Ebbets to his parents, September 20, 1972, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 158

¹¹⁹ Phillip Woodall to his father, April 5, 1968, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.) *Dear America*, 214

Evidently, this soldier opposed the war because of the contempt shown by the South Vietnamese towards the American soldiers. A corresponding attitude is also clearly expressed in the following letter:

It may not have been a terribly wrong theoretical idea at one time. But the foreign introduced offensive, the consequent corruption and then the contempt that developed between people and groups- it makes a mockery of the "noble" words used to justify this war.¹²⁰

Judging from this excerpt, the soldier in particular pointed out the Tet Offensive and the political problems in South Vietnam as the reason he'd lost faith in the war's justification. Thus, his opinion corresponds to the aforementioned example. Other soldiers expressed their opposition to the war as well, albeit not being quite as specific about the reason:

Why did he have to die for the sake of the silly games the politicians and the Army play- why?...What are we doing here?¹²¹

This letter indicated the belief that only the political and military leadership was interested in continuing the war- and not the combat soldiers. The pattern that can be established on the basis of these examples is that these soldiers believed the war was wrong especially because of the obvious problems and corruption in South Vietnam. As implied in their statements, they could not see any reason why they should fight for that country. This must also be interpreted as a sign of defeatism among these soldiers.

In comparison, some veterans who served at the same time express a similar opinion in interviews conducted after the war:

Even while I was over there I thought the war was wrong. I thought it was a big mistake. I was never a fan of the war at any time and I was just delighted it was finally ending. At no time did I ever think that we had any reason to be involved in it, and still do not.¹²²

Compared to the motif in the letters written at the time, this soldier similarly indicated a belief that the war was a mistake. The same attitude can also be traced in the following interview:

"So feelings about the war at the time ... not in favor of it, somewhat against it but hadn't participated in any anti-war activities at that point. Now I did when I got back."¹²³

¹²⁰ Douglas McCormac to his friend, August 13, 1968, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 216

¹²¹ Tom Pellaton to his friend, November 16, 1970, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 198

¹²² Interview with Marvin Mathiak, OH0011. 8 August 2000, Marvin Mathiak Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0011>, Accessed 03 Jun 2023.

¹²³ Interview with Donald Angus McBane, OH0043. 21 February 1990, Donald McBane Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0043>, Accessed 03 Jun 2023.; see also

Hence, compared to the letters written at the time these veterans also expressed a similar defeatist attitude, implying that the war was wrong and a mistake.

In contrast to this attitude, other soldiers still expressed a will to continue fighting, as the following letters exemplifies:

People may scorn and protest but know that we fight for all of you who wish to be free.¹²⁴

As a clear response to Americans taking part in protests against the Vietnam War, this soldier implied that the soldiers still fought for the American people. This must be interpreted as a sustained belief that he was defending the United States. Other soldiers apparently shared this opinion, sometimes even more obvious:

Although I can't agree completely with the way the war is going, I don't agree on just up and leaving because then the whole purpose, the very reason that all these men have died for, is lost... They are sent here to fight and possibly die protecting America and the other free nations.¹²⁵

This soldier plainly indicates that protecting his country was the reason for continuing the war in Vietnam. In comparison, another soldier was perhaps not as obvious, but nonetheless expressed a corresponding point of view:

We are trying to end the war so that our loved ones will never have to face the harsh realities of death in our own country.¹²⁶

In line with soldiers writing in the early years of the war, this soldier also referred to the risk of fighting in his own country if the war didn't end in Vietnam. In other words, he also opined that American security was at stake.

In this fashion, these soldiers expressed an opinion of the war which was very different from the soldiers who opposed the war. They spoke of fighting for those "who wish to be free," "protecting America," preventing death in "our own country." These statements must be interpreted as a belief in fighting for American security. Thus, they actually expressed a sentiment similar to some of the soldiers serving before 1968, who also feared that their own country would be threatened by communism if they failed to stop it in Vietnam. In other

Interview with James Matthews, OH0112. 1 October 1999, James Matthews Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0112>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.

¹²⁴ Charlie B. Dickey to his wife, June 1, 1969, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 239; see also Charlie B. Dickey to his wife, August 22, 1969, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 84

¹²⁵ David L. Glading to his wife, November 18, 1969, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 227; see also David L. Glading to his wife, September 22, 1969, in: Adler, Bill (ed.) *Letters from Vietnam*, 225

¹²⁶ Gregory Lusco to the editor of the Greenfield (Massachusetts) Recorder, July 23, 1970, in: Edelman, Bernard (ed.). *Dear America*, 226-227

words, at a time when Nixon had made a change in U.S. policy towards Vietnam, some soldiers still adhered to the original justifications of the war, which had emphasized Vietnam's importance to American security. In comparison, this pattern of thought can also be traced in interviews with veterans who served after 1968, as some of these also acknowledge that they supported the war effort at that time. For instance, some of them claim that they still believed in the domino theory at the time and the need to stop the spread of communism in Vietnam.¹²⁷

Other veterans believed in helping Vietnam, as exemplified in the following two statements:

what we thought was -- we were doing was doing the right thing, is to bring freedom to -- to all the people so that they could -- they could also enjoy freedom through their entire life.¹²⁸

at that time, we are looking and tried to bring freedom to the people of Vietnam and I saw that and the people was just really relishing that. They wanted us to help them. So, not only were we defending our own freedom, but we are trying to help another country with theirs.¹²⁹

The logical interpretation that can be deduced from these interviews is the veterans' belief that they were helping the South Vietnamese. Hence, as was evident among some soldiers in the first years of the war, these soldiers also still believed in helping Vietnam defending its freedom.

Apart from these patterns, some soldiers ostensibly didn't think much about what the war was about at the time, but still felt the war was right:

Not having any knowledge of the situation in Vietnam, in Southeast Asia, I do feel that it's honest to say that I was acting patriotically as I understood it at least at that time in my life as a nineteen-year-old kid. I felt I was doing the right thing by joining with other men to fight a cause. Now, right or wrong about the cause, that's what I did not think about.

¹²⁷ Interview with David Hause, OH0176. 21 March 2001, David Hause Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0176>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.; Interview with Elmer Hale, OH0247. 09 December 2002, Mr. Elmer Hale Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0247>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.; Interview with John McNown, Jr., OH0336. 13 September 2003, John R. McNown, Jr. Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0336>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.

¹²⁸ Donald E. Alexander Collection (AFC/2001/001/9667), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

¹²⁹ Harold A. Fritz Collection (AFC/2001/001/89846), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

For me the cause was just because it was American, if that makes any sense.¹³⁰

The war's purpose seems not to have been important to this soldier. Rather, a feeling of patriotism and of simply doing his part for his country seems to have been a sufficient motivator. This opinion can also be deduced from other interviews with veterans who served at this time, considering the following two excerpts from interviews:

I was glad to be a soldier, I thought we were doing the right things, but I did not know quite what was our real purpose and was, in fact, communism this great threat?¹³¹

I didn't much think about our mission at all. I had orders to go and I went and I, (coughing) excuse me, I knew I was going to do what I was ordered to do. That's the way it's always been in our family—when our nation called we went.¹³²

Obviously, these two excerpts reflect a similar attitude to the war. As their statements indicate, these soldiers did not think about the cause, the purpose or the mission, but still felt they were doing the right thing. They were still supporting the war effort, but the war's purpose was not important to them. Whereas some other soldiers at this time still believed in stopping communism in Vietnam instead of in the United States, this attitude can best be interpreted as a rather vague interest in the war's purpose and instead a belief in following orders and "just" doing what they believed to be their patriotic duty.

The patterns in the sources reveal that the soldiers fighting in Vietnam between 1968 and 1973 were divided over whether the war was right. While some soldiers clearly opposed the war, other soldiers still supported the war and clung to the belief that it was vital to American security. This division was not an entirely new phenomenon, as the soldiers fighting between 1965 and 1967 also displayed different attitudes. However, in the first years of the war, opposition to the war was based on lack of understanding, or rather commitment, to the war's justifications. In contrast, by 1968, defeatism had clearly found its way into the minds

¹³⁰ Interview with Robert Kreger, OH0448. 28 October 2005, Dr. Robert D. Kreger Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0448>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.

¹³¹ Interview with Ted Cook, OH0098. 2 October 1999, Ted Cook Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0098>, Accessed 05 Jun 2023.

¹³² Interview with Earl Hayes, OH0624. 4 August 2008, Earl Hayes Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0624>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.; see also Interview with Herbert Koenig, OH0317. 30 July 2004, Herbert Koenig Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0317>, Accessed 07 Jun 2023.; For additional examples see also Arthur T. Baltazar Collection (AFC/2001/001/97872), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; James Wayne Cecil Collection (AFC/2001/001/19915), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

of many American soldiers. Furthermore, the reversal in American policy towards Vietnam in 1968, and president Nixon's goal of obtaining peace with honor, does not seem to have had any influence on the soldiers. The soldiers who opposed the war had lost faith in winning, and the soldiers who wanted to stay and fight still believed in the original justifications of the war.

The main difference between the soldiers serving before and after 1968 was the level of commitment to the cause. Before 1968 many soldiers were deeply committed to the fight against communism, whereas many soldiers serving after 1968 opposed the war and were not committed to the fight against communism.

Conclusion

The American combat soldiers in Vietnam were never in universal agreement with the war's official justifications, as different opinions of the war existed among the soldiers throughout the war. However, considering the common patterns of thought that can be traced among the soldiers, it seems reasonable to posit that for many soldiers, the official justifications was an important motivator. Considering the different themes in the official justifications, the most important motivator was the national security dimension. Especially in the years 1965 to 1967, many soldiers were clearly dedicated to stopping communism in Vietnam before it reached the United States. Apparently, these soldiers displayed not "just" a latent ideology. They often voiced a very patriotic rhetoric and an overt commitment to the president's message of Vietnam's importance to American security. On the other hand, while some soldiers did express a desire to help South Vietnam, the majority of soldiers were not committed to fighting for democracy and freedom. Just Cause was not a significant motivator for the majority of soldiers in the first years of the war. After 1968, when many soldiers foresaw defeat and opposed the war, the national security dimension remained an important motivator for the soldiers who still believed in the war's original rationale. The possible correlation between the soldier's way into the military and his commitment to the cause is complicated to determine in the case of the Vietnam war. Obviously, there was a growing opposition to the war after 1968 at a time when the percentage of draftees fighting in Vietnam gradually increased. However, although for different reasons, some soldiers also opposed the war in the first years of the war when most of them were enlisted. Conversely, after 1968 some soldiers still wanted to stay and fight in Vietnam rather than leaving in defeat. Although tendencies can be pointed out, the soldiers' way into the military does not seem to provide a conclusive explanation for the soldiers' commitment to the cause.

Compared to the other major wars of the draft era, the Vietnam War shares some important similarities. The soldiers were not unconcerned with ideology. Fighting for democratic values does seem to have been an important motivator in a sense. As in the world wars, patriotism and a strong overt belief in defending the United States and its democratic values was a strong motivator for the combat soldier, and remained so for some soldiers, even at a time when they were facing defeat and retreat from a war without fronts.