

Saltzman Lecture Report
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The Vietnam Grunt
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Dr. Kyle Longley of Arizona State University delivered a lecture entitled "The Vietnam Grunt," in reference to the typical American soldier fighting in the Vietnam War. Longley began his presentation by offering a series of statistics on the Vietnam War: According to Longley, 2.6 million Americans fought in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Twenty-five percent of the total U.S. forces, or 648,500 Americans, were drafted during the war (compared with 66 percent during World War II). In terms of racial composition, 88.4 percent of Americans who served in Vietnam were Caucasian (includes Hispanics), while 10.6 percent were African American. Seventy-six percent of the soldiers sent to Vietnam were from lower and middle-class backgrounds. Seventy-nine percent who served had a high school education or better (compared with 45 percent during World War II). The average age of a U.S. soldier in Vietnam was 19 years old (compared with 25 years old in World War II). Longley concluded that U.S. soldiers were better educated, but younger, in Vietnam than in World War II.

Enlistment during the Vietnam War can be attributed to a number of factors. According to Longley, the main "push factor" was the military draft, but Americans also enlisted both to "live up to their fathers' expectations" and as a result of the "John

Wayne image" of the masculine, brave American man. However, this mindset soon changed as soldiers began to doubt the purpose of their mission, asking themselves: "Why am I here? Who am I serving? Whom am I fighting?" Longley offers this example: A group of American soldiers in Vietnam was riding in a bus when they noticed that it was surrounded by chickenwire. At first, the soldiers mused that the chickenwire had been installed to prevent their escape, but they became even more dismayed when they realized that it was intended instead to prevent attacks from local Vietnamese. Events like this inspired the soldiers to question the validity of their presence in Vietnam.

Indeed, the challenges posed to the average American soldier in Vietnam were numerous. Longley cited a young soldier who wrote, "This is hell." However, despite the challenges, most American soldiers fought bravely within the context and restraints set out by their mission; they were not "baby killers," an epithet that would later be thrown at them upon their return by fellow Americans.

A number of factors perpetuated conflict in Vietnam, including the dehumanization of the Vietnamese people—an inculcation that began in boot camp—as

well as the frustration caused by the unidentifiable, hidden nature of the enemy. These factors led to extreme expressions of discrimination like that of the My Lai Massacre in 1968.

Longley considers 1968 to be a turning point in the Vietnam War. Frustrations became more acute as draft deferments from universities ended and as American criticism of the war intensified. Furthermore, according to Longley, this heralded the beginning of the breakdown of the U.S. army. By early 1970, U.S. soldiers were writing "UUUU" on their helmets, standing for "the unwilling led by the unqualified doing the unnecessary for the ungrateful."

Longley also discussed the return of troops after the war's end. While the majority of the soldiers came home and settled relatively quickly, not all were able to make this seamless transition. Veterans often had a great deal of trouble assimilating back into American society, returning from the war with severe psychological and emotional problems. While there is a traditional image of Americans spitting on Vietnam War veterans in disrespect, this was not a regular occurrence; the reality was even worse: they ignored them. According to Longley, the American psyche developed a collective amnesia, throwing veterans back into a mainstream society that was trying to bury its own head. This response was set in relief when compared to the parades and accolades offered in honor of returning World War II veterans. This stark contrast led to tension between World War II veterans and Vietnam War veterans, the "greatest" generation versus the "lost" generation.

Longley also drew connections between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, emphasizing a prevalence of cases of post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans. He closed his presentation with advice from

the Vietnam War experience, strongly encouraging Iraq War veterans to seek professional assistance in acculturating themselves back into American society.