

to leave the area so that U.S. bomber pilots could be sure to only kill enemy combatants—a tactic that rarely worked. (In free fire zones, the U.S. military was free to kill anything that moved.) In areas in which Viet Cong fighters were particularly active, U.S. troops forced entire villages to relocate into new fenced-in settlements called “**strategic hamlets**” that resembled prison camps. These efforts further alienated the local population, who experienced violence at the hands of both North Vietnamese troops and U.S. troops and their South Vietnamese allies.

In the end, even the so-called “best and the brightest” from Kennedy’s administration, along with military experts, found it impossible to fight a local communist and nationalist movement. The goal of winning hearts and minds while destroying anyone who might be Viet Cong was nearly impossible. An officer’s statement after the Tet offensive epitomized the U.S.’s dilemma in Vietnam: “We had to destroy the town in order to save it,” was a U.S. officer’s revealing explanation of one of his men’s operations in 1968.⁸² Asked whether the large number of civilian casualties was a concern, a senior American general responded late in 1966: “Yes, it is a problem...but it does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn’t it?”⁸³

The Draft: Race and Class

Johnson’s defense experts and military advisors generally remained far away from the actual fighting. About two-thirds of American troops who fought in Vietnam volunteered, but one-third was selected through the **draft**. Until the Nixon administration transitioned the U.S. military to an all-volunteer force in 1973, all young men had to register with local representatives of the Selective Service System within thirty days of their eighteenth birthday. Local draft boards initially exercised considerable power over who was exempted from the draft and who was selected for two years of military service.

While some tried to feign physical or mental illnesses to be relieved of the draft for health reasons, deferments were the most common way to avoid the risk of conscription. Students of middle-class backgrounds had a much better chance at gaining admission to—and the funds for—college, where they would be exempted from the draft for the duration of their education. Working-class men who went to college were more likely to attend part-time and work part-time, and as a result were not exempt from the draft. Due to the exemption rules that favored upper- and middle-class Americans, roughly twenty-five percent of enlisted men in Vietnam came from homes below the

poverty line, fifty-five percent came from working-class homes, and twenty percent were middle class. Very few enlisted men came from the upper class.

In addition, the threat of getting drafted caused many young men to enlist because they found it difficult to get work because potential employers did not want to waste training on men who might be drafted at any point. These young men who were “draft-motivated” made up roughly half of all volunteers. In addition, because of racial inequalities in the United States at the time, racial minorities were over-represented in the Vietnam-era military. Inequities of race and class also existed among those who volunteered for military service since many more men of color, from rural communities, or with working-class backgrounds saw enlistment as a chance to benefit from an increasingly meager G.I. Bill. Lack of better economic prospects played a role for African-American enlistees who were more than twice as likely to join the Marines or the Army for—as the opinion survey termed it—“self-advancement.”⁸⁴

In response to criticism of these inequities, in 1969 the United States adopted a national [lottery system](#) in Washington, D.C., where paper slips with birth dates were randomly pulled from a glass bowl and lined in numerical order. The lower the lottery number for the given birthday, the higher was the chance that all men registered for the draft with the particular birthday would be called for service.⁸⁵

The American Soldier in Vietnam

For those who did the fighting, Vietnam proved a confusing experience that had little resemblance to the “good war” their fathers had fought in World War II. Many U.S. forces received combat training from superiors whose experience came from the Pacific campaign or the invasion of Europe in World War II. Vietnam, however, was a different type of war. American soldiers were not pushing across territory against a foreign army. Instead, they often found themselves fighting guerilla troops that were difficult to identify and could either blend with the local population or enjoyed their support.

Although the U.S. military was technologically superior, American troops nonetheless kept fighting over the same territories over and over, failing to win the local population’s hearts and minds. This was because the U.S. goal was not to secure land against a rival army, but instead to kill enough Viet Cong (and gain enough civilian allies) that the South Vietnamese government could function. Additionally, heat, humidity, sickness, an utterly foreign language and culture,

