

War in Vietnam

PRIMARY SOURCE READING

The Return of Vietnam Veterans

For the United States, the war in Vietnam brought up many new issues about warfare, the physical and mental health of the returning veterans, and the moral and ethical questions of U.S. involvement in conflicts around the world. All of these questions rose in significance as the surviving U.S. soldiers returned home after the war. In the following excerpt Dr. Robert J. Lifton of Yale University describes the plight of the Vietnam veteran upon return to American society.

“What Are We Doing to Ourselves?”

—Dr. Robert J. Lifton

Personally, I’ve been talking to Vietnam veterans for the last 18 months or so, individually and in groups, and some of us have formed informal rap sessions, in New York, at which we’ve discussed in some detail and thoroughness, the emotions, feelings, difficulties, and possibilities that Vietnam veterans feel. Some of this I’ve discussed also before a senatorial subcommittee on veterans last year. I think the first point I’d like to make, and make very strongly, is the psychological difference of this war, for a veteran, as compared to other wars.

One way that the American public, or some of the American public, tries to slough off the depth of harm this war is doing to all of our society, is to say, well, war is _____, it happens in war, people become dehumanized, this is just the way it is with war. But I think one has to look at certain features of the experience in this war that are very special to Vietnam. I can name one or two of them and they are decisive, it seems to me.

There is no structure of fighting in this war that gives it any meaning or psychological satisfaction for the participants. In other words, in most wars, one suffers, one loses buddies, one becomes what we think of as a survivor. But then one has some means of finding the survivor’s significance, which is the task of a survivor, getting over the guilt one feels about staying alive while one’s buddy dies, by getting back at the enemy in some structure of warfare. Battle lines, a way of being brave, and so on. Here, as all of you know, much better than I do, there is no clear enemy; he’s everywhere and nowhere. One can’t find him and there are no battle lines, certainly.

There is no psychological satisfaction in any self-respecting form with which to cope with the enormous confusion and guilt that one experiences. One is under great danger in Vietnam, as an American GI, and one does undergo this guilt with the loss of buddies. Moreover, when one comes back to the society, it is quite clear that one does not return a hero, either in others’ eyes or one’s own eyes. It’s more than just not being a hero. There’s an overall sense, shared by the larger society, whatever its position about the war, and the vets themselves, that this is a dirty war.

It has no justification, no inner necessity. So the returning veteran, who has a psychological need, as he returns from any war, to make his difficult transition into civilian life by in some way giving significance to what he did in his war, has no such opportunity, because he can’t, in any way, inwardly approve of what he has done in this war. Nor can the rest of society find sources of pride for him or acceptance or necessity about this war. Both the veteran and the larger society see [on] him the taint of this filthy, unnecessary, immoral war. That aspect of the war itself has a lot to do with the way in which veterans experience their psychological

difficulties just as the experiences in Vietnam leading to atrocities are directly related to the illusions of the political conduct and military conduct of the war.

Now, let me explain what I mean by that. If we think of the burdens that the Vietnam veteran brings back with him into society, inner burdens he carries, I think the most immediate and the one that everyone is aware of most, is a burden of convoluted guilt. It's been, in a

sense, imposed upon the GI, the veterans who fought the war, because he cannot, in any sense, justify or give any rationale or formulation for having fought the war.

From "What Are We Doing to Ourselves?" by Dr. Robert J. Lifton from *Winter Soldier Investigation: Testimony given in Detroit, Michigan, on January 31, February 1 and 2, 1971*. Copyright © 1971 by **Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc.** Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

■ UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. What message does Dr. Robert J. Lifton claim that American society sends Vietnam veterans?

2. What does Lifton point out about the structure of warfare in Vietnam?

3. Why do you think Lifton says that in Vietnam the enemy is "everywhere and nowhere"?

4. Why do you think Vietnam veterans lacked the sense of pride usually possessed by veterans of a war?

5. According to Dr. Lifton's argument, what are the reasons for which Vietnam veterans feel guilty upon returning to America?

ACTIVITY

With several classmates, hold an informal rap session about the war in Vietnam. Using information from the chapter and from the readings, discuss your ideas and feelings about this war and its aftermath.

5. an inter-tribal organization without influence or control by the Indian Bureau

ACTIVITY

Students' posters or flyers should use images or words to get the reader's attention, inspire interest in the meeting, and encourage people to attend.

BIOGRAPHY

1. She was the first African American woman to be admitted to the Mississippi Bar Association.
2. Answer should include any of the following: Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, 1990 Act for Better Child Care, State Children's Health Insurance Program, Stand for Children organization.
3. Having a philosophy like the one with which Edelman was raised—a philosophy of serving others—is an essential aspect of life.
4. One possible answer is that her father and mother both stressed the importance of living with a sense of community and responsibility to others.

ACTIVITY

Personal statements will vary but should reflect an interest in child welfare.

CHAPTER 33

LITERATURE

1. The soldiers bent forward and their helmets clanked against each other.
2. Answers will vary, but many students will respond that the narrator, being afraid, felt very alone. The touch of another human being was most likely comforting because it reminded him that he was *not* alone.
3. He moved his gun to the firing position.
4. Their reaction was confusion and robot-like behavior.
5. The narrator describes them as unable to move because they had lost all sense of time and direction. But then, suddenly, without any command, the entire unit

began to move forward at the same time, inching along on their bellies.

6. Students may have a wide variety of responses, including tension, excitement, sadness, anxiety, and sorrow.

ACTIVITY

Students' letters should use plenty of details from the story. They should also express a distinct point of view. Encourage students to think about who the recipient of the letter is supposed to be: mother, sister, or best friend.

PRIMARY SOURCE

1. Lifton feels that Americans gloss over the pain and suffering experienced by the returning veterans by claiming that all war is dehumanizing and that Vietnam is no different from past wars.
2. He claims that there is not a structure—that the rules of war are not followed in the Vietnam War and therefore atrocities are commonplace.
3. Lifton is most likely referring to the dense jungles of Vietnam where much of the fighting took place. Soldiers could often hear but not see the enemy.
4. One possible answer is that neither the soldiers themselves nor the society to which they were returning felt good about U.S. military action in Vietnam.
5. They could not justify the American presence there; thousands of soldiers died for no reason; and there were many wartime atrocities on both sides of the conflict.

ACTIVITY

As you move around the room listening to students' informal rap sessions, look for intellectual and emotional involvement in the discussion. The readings in this section should give students plenty of food for thought. Encourage them to put themselves in the place of the soldiers and to view the soldiers' predicament from a wartime as well as a post-wartime perspective.

BIOGRAPHY

1. The theft of his bike brought about the occasion of meeting Martin, who intro-