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YOUR VOICE

Vietnam's class war and our wars

By David Paul Kuhn

A half-century ago, the cruelest case of legalized class privilege in modern American life was abolished. For America's "fortunate sons" and future leaders, attending college was such a common route to avoid the Vietnam draft, though the policy's inequity is now conveniently relegated to the footnotes of that fraught era.

With all the 50th anniversaries recalled in recent years, it's telling that Sept. 28, 1971, which marked the end of student deferment in the draft, passed unrecognized.

Unlike any war since the Civil War, Vietnam asked the least of those who came from more. The war's unjust burden combined with how the anti-war movement manifested on college campuses — especially elite campuses — led Vietnam to play an early role forming a class and cultural fault line that severs us still.

Most of the era's youth who came to lead us had a student deferment — including Presidents Joe Biden, Donald Trump and Bill Clinton and Vice President Dick Cheney. Other privileged sons, such as President George W. Bush, avoided combat by attaining a coveted National Guard slot.

Educational deferments were the lion's share of the more than 15 million men who legally evaded conscription. College graduates were roughly 6.5 times less likely to serve in Vietnam than other civilians of the same generation. (High school dropouts were twice as likely.) Fewer than a fifth of those with a student deferment came from modest circumstances. By comparison, 7 of 8 protesters in this era had at least one year of higher education.

A century after elites lawfully avoided the Union and Confederate drafts, there



Wounded and weary U.S. soldiers lie in a sandy trench near An Thi in Vietnam on Jan. 31, 1966. Two companies of the 1st Air Cavalry engaged joint Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces 10 miles north of Bong Son for a 24-hour fight in the rice paddies.

HENRI HUET/AP

was again an understanding that only a certain sort did most of America's fighting and dying in war. As Vietnam escalated in 1967, a majority of male collegians — and half of all students — considered themselves a war "hawk," but two-thirds of them objected to "the same proportion of college students" being drafted as non-college youth.

Rifts within that '60s generation lingered largely ignored while, polls show, the "generation gap" was overhyped. Blue-collar whites, in particular, were not more supportive of the war than upscale whites but they were exceptionally critical of the anti-war movement. It was their kin

and kind shouldering the bulk of the fighting in Vietnam.

Because the wealthy were almost exclusively white, white soldiers were "actually more likely than Black veterans to be drawn disproportionately from the working class," as one study noted. In fact, from their sense of "lost status" to most veterans' low opinion of "draft dodgers," veterans' views were more divided by class than by race.

Many of them resented "good boys" marred by the "bad war" and campus activists who lectured those with less status about social justice, even as their college sanctuary meant lowlier boys might die in their place.

After the war, James Fallows challenged the "bright people of my generation who made a cult of their high-mindedness" but "willingly took advantage of this most brutal form of class discrimination." At Boston's Navy Yard in 1969, Fallows saw his fellow Harvard and MIT students "deliberately failing (their) colorblindness tests," even as the next bus of the "white proles of Boston" arrived. "We knew now who would be killed."

Yet here we are, recently witnessing the end of another war that went on too long and asked too much of too few. The soldiers of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars disproportionately hailed from veterans' families and, as with Vietnam, rural areas.

Today's leaders hardly bat an eye at how the coastal enclaves that steward our politics, economics and culture contribute little per capita to the military power that, whatever its mistakes, helps secure their dominance.

Our small warrior class does choose to enlist. Though circumstances impact that choice. Struggling youth often still risk the worst in war to get somewhere better in life.

Yet most Americans who served and died in Vietnam were also volunteers. And conscription, however divisive, lessened the class divide. The potential to be drafted also invested America in the war's tragedy, unlike our 9/11 wars.

Still, even when the affluent served, they were the least likely to see combat. Draft resistance almost always paid off for those who could pay (for college or a draft-law lawyer). Occupational deferments favored upscale fields.

This overall inequity sparked an under-discussed class war that boiled beneath the real war and exacerbated America's emerging culture war. It also portended a working-class outlook that they bore unfair stigmas and unjust burdens.

"The critics are picking on us, just 'cause we had to fight this war. Where were their sons? In fancy colleges? Where were the sons of all the big shots who supported the war," one Vietnam veteran asked in Murray Polner's book "No Victory Parades." "For every guy who resists the draft one of us gotta go." After witnessing a protest, the veteran added: "One of their signs read: 'We've already given enough.' And I thought, 'What have they given?'"

Near the war's end, David Broder read the book and wrote that it highlighted what we "prefer not to think about ... the least democratic war of our century. There was no equality of sacrifice."

Fallows later asked, "Why ... especially in the atmosphere of the late sixties, people with any presumptions to character could have let it go on?"

And in some sense, why do we still?

David Paul Kuhn is a writer and political analyst. He is the author of "The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution."