

Why Did the Black Community Strongly Oppose the Draft Conscription During the Vietnam War?

Xiankang Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Japan Institute of Culture and Economics, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, 710128, China*

a. newsxisu@xisu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper studies the protests of black groups against the US government draft conscription during the Vietnam War. The paper analyzed the motivations of the people involved in this movement and the reasons for the US government's adoption of the draft by introducing the background of the times and listing real examples. In order to provide readers with a clearer understanding of the situation at that time, the paper recorded speeches by individuals who had witnessed the event, such as Stokely Carmichael and Mohammed Ali, and cited media reports of protests against black groups back then. Finally, the paper summarized the impact of this movement on the United States and the world, as well as its connection with the Northern African soldiers who fought for freedom during the Civil War.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Draft Conscription, Racial Discrimination, Human Rights

1. Introduction

In the 1960s, the United States was deeply involved in the crisis of the Vietnam War. Black groups and low-ranking college students were sent to the front lines, while the rich and powerful were exempted from military service or sent to the safety of the rear of the battlefield. The world-famous boxing champion Muhammad Ali was also a victim of this bill. Who would have thought that the boxing champion would receive such unfair treatment. As a celebrity among blacks, Ali delivered a series of anti-war speeches to protect the rights of black groups after the draft was passed. He said in his speech: "I'm not going to help nobody to get something my Negroes don't have. If I'm going to die, I'll die now, right here fighting you, if I'm going to die. You are my enemy, my enemy is the white people, not Viet Congs, or Chinese, or Japanese" to express strong dissatisfaction with those in power and white people [1]. This anti-war movement reflected the serious racial problems in American society at that time, and largely promoted the black affirmative movement led by Martin Luther King in the 1960s. I would say something like: "protest against the draft was a major component of Black activism in the 1960s and 1970s."

During the Vietnam War, the American conscription draft was a policy that compelled young men aged 18 to 25 to register for military service. They were selected through a lottery system or criteria set by local draft boards. Once drafted, they served for about two years, often being sent to Vietnam. The draft faced widespread opposition and protests, leading to its discontinuation in 1973 when the U.S. transitioned to an all-volunteer military. Black Americans strongly protested the Vietnam Draft, which they believed was racially inequitable.

2. Black Attitudes towards Draft Conscription during the Vietnam War Era

This topic has been studied by multiple historians in the past. In *Confronting the war machine: Draft resistance during the Vietnam War* [2], the historians Michael Stewart Foley studied transcripts from protests against draft conscription by Americans during the Vietnam War. And in *Draft Resistance in the Vietnam Era* [3], another historian Jessie Kindig studied excellent resistance cases conducted in Seattle.

The problem with these analyses is that they neglect that scholarship on the draft has not focused on race, so that will be my focus here. During the Vietnam War era, African Americans faced significant and systemic unfair treatment, both within the military and in American society at large. This period was marked by the Civil Rights Movement, which sought to end racial segregation and discrimination, but racial inequalities persisted, particularly for black men serving in the armed forces. In this paper, I will explore Black attitudes to the draft by using a wide variety of sources: first, a speech from a political leader; second, an account of an anti-draft action in Michigan; third, a report of a rally against the draft in Philadelphia.

3. Stokely Carmichael said no

Stokely Carmichael, born in 1941 in Trinidad and Tobago, was a prominent civil rights activist and a key figure in the Black Power movement during the 1960s. He became deeply involved in the struggle for racial equality while attending Howard University, where he joined the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) and later became a significant member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As a charismatic and influential speaker, Carmichael was known for his passionate advocacy for black liberation and empowerment. He played a crucial role in popularizing the phrase "Black Power," which became a central slogan of the movement he championed. Carmichael believed that the nonviolent and integrationist approach of the Civil Rights Movement had its limitations and that a more assertive and confrontational stance was needed to address the enduring issues of systemic racism, economic inequality, and social injustice faced by African Americans.

The first source we'll explore is a speech by Stokely Carmichael: "we've got to build so much strength in building our community that if they come to get one person they are going to have to mess with us all. That's what we got to do. We've got to build so much strength inside our community, so that when LBJ says, "Come here, boy, to my war." we say, "Hell no, we ain't going. [4]"

In this source, we can see that Stokely Carmichael calls for the African American community to unite and build strength to resist oppression. He emphasizes the importance of supporting each other, asserting their identity, and rejecting involvement in the Vietnam War. Carmichael urges the community to stand together against external pressures and injustices, asserting their agency and saying "Hell no, we ain't going" to the war. The speech embodies the spirit of empowerment and defiance that characterized the Black Power movement during the civil rights era.

4. Post at Wayne State University

Meanwhile, at Wayne State University in Michigan, Black activists put up a confrontational poster. The bulletin board display at Wayne State University featured posters urging African Americans to avoid the draft, claiming that both the Vietnam War and the draft were racist. The display outlined various ways to evade military service, including becoming a conscientious objector or moving to Canada. However, the offensive language and content, such as racial slurs and promoting violence, deeply offended seven students at the university.

The display was associated with a newly-formed counseling service led by Reverend David Gracie from St. Joseph's Episcopal Church. The counseling service aimed to assist young men who had

objections to participating in war, particularly the Vietnam War. Rev. Gracie explained that speaking out against the immoral war also meant helping those who did not wish to partake in it.

The second source we'll explore is the news report: "Once we saw that we had to begin to speak out against this immoral war, we realized that we had an accompanying responsibility of aiding youth who did not want to participate in that war. [5]" Rev. David Gracie, St. Joseph's Episepal church, 31 King.

In this report, we can see that there was a growing recognition among some individuals or groups during the Vietnam War era that speaking out against the war's immorality was not enough. They felt a sense of responsibility to support and aid young people who were opposed to participating in the war, presumably referring to those who were conscientious objectors, war resisters, or draft dodgers. The statement suggests that these individuals or groups saw their opposition to the war as not just a matter of personal belief but also a call to take action and provide assistance to others who shared their convictions. This could have included offering guidance, resources, or support networks for those seeking ways to avoid military service or fulfill alternative roles during the war.

5. Blacks in Philadelphia rally against the war

And lastly, in Philadelphia, African American participants at an anti-draft and anti-Vietnam War rally took place in Dec 16, 1967. The Third source we'll explore is also a new report called *Philly Youths Blast Vietnam War Policy and Draft: Negroes Should ...* : Greg. Allen, 21, 3121 Walnut ave, North Hills, Pa, student at Montgomery County Community College: "Why should I fight in Vietnam when I, as a black man, cannot live where I want to or go to school where I want to? Furthermore, this war is a senseless war. It's a perfect example of President Johnson's complete ineptness in foreign affairs. He has never told us the truth about the murder of civilians or about the real reason why we're in Vietnam or about a million other things, like the fact that the so-called enemy wanted to negotiate a couple times, but Johnson turned them down. [6]"

In this report, Greg Allen, a 21-year-old black student at Montgomery County Community College, voices his opposition to fighting in the Vietnam War. He refuses to participate because he believes he cannot enjoy basic rights and freedoms as a black man in America, while being asked to fight overseas. Greg criticizes President Johnson's handling of foreign affairs, labeling the war as senseless and questioning the lack of transparency about civilian casualties and the true reasons for U.S. involvement. He also points out missed opportunities for negotiations. His statement reflects the sentiments of many who opposed the war, highlighting racial discrimination, distrust in the government, and moral dilemmas faced by young draftees.

6. Conclusion

The protests of black individuals against the conscription draft during the Vietnam War remind us of the historical struggles of black soldiers in the North during the Civil War, revealing the persistent theme of systemic inequality and discrimination faced by black communities during times of national conflict. From the Civil War era, where black soldiers fought for the Union while enduring racism, segregation, and unequal treatment, to the Vietnam War, where black Americans were disproportionately drafted and sent to the front lines, the recurring pattern of injustice highlights the urgent need to confront and eradicate systemic racism. Honoring the bravery and sacrifices of black soldiers from both periods requires collective efforts to dismantle discriminatory systems and promote a more just and equitable society that recognizes and protects the rights and dignity of all its citizens.

References

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