

## The Political Legacies of the Vietnam War Era

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Current political parties, class political tendencies, and the relationship between the parties, classes, and war are heavily influenced by the Vietnam generation and the attitudes that emerged surrounding the Vietnam War. The impact of the war on shaping political opinions can be traced through the decades and witnessed today. The 1960s were an important contributing factor to the emergence of modern Republican and Democratic parties, conservatives and liberals, and their stances on war. Social tensions and perceptions inherited from the Vietnam War, within the context of the Cold War, underlie the motivations for designated political party support and existing divisions over war. The period of modern United States history from the 1960s through today is imprinted on America's wartime consciousness. The values that rightist and leftist groups decided to embrace in their politics and how social classes were attracted to and integrated into either side of the political spectrum bears significance to more recent military conflicts. The issue has integrated itself into the "culture wars" of America.

Geographic regions within the country, social classes, ethnicity, religion and age all had effects on which political sphere people gravitated to. Class was most important in shaping the overall social composition of the American army. Between 1964 and 1973, drafted men numbered 2.2 million, enlisted men 8.7 million, and 16 million didn't serve.<sup>1</sup> The greater part of young men who went to Vietnam had either working-class or poor upbringings. Numerous youths from middle-class families avoided the draft by using a liberal student deferment policy. As Stephen Gillon explains, "In 1969 *Newsday*

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Gillon, The American Paradox: A History of the United States Since 1960 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2003), 64.

traced the family backgrounds of 400 men from Long Island who had been killed in Vietnam. ‘As a group,’ the newspaper concluded, ‘Long Island’s war dead have been overwhelmingly white, working-class men. Their parents were typically blue-collar or clerical workers, mailmen, factory workers, building tradesmen, and so on.’”<sup>2</sup> Soldiers who were recruited from working-class backgrounds lacked political connections or special contacts that enabled them to evade the draft. The relatively small number of career professionals and college graduates who served in Vietnam, compared with the number of soldiers from blue-collar histories, fostered class resentments and created a schism both on the battlegrounds of Vietnam and at home. A large number of working-class Americans opposed the war, but they disliked student protestors even more. Parents had the impression that “rich kids... [got] off” on protesting when their sons were over in Vietnam fighting.<sup>3</sup>

American soldiers were far more likely to be southerners than northerners.<sup>4</sup> New England is historically antimilitary and anti-interventionist. Southerners represent a disproportionate amount of the leadership in the U.S military.<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning of the war most soldiers going to Vietnam were assured they were doing a good and patriotic thing. The memory of war heroes from World War II who came home decorated with medals was still close enough. Some men thought that they would make careers out of the military like their fathers. “‘There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans,’ wrote Philip Caputo, who joined the Marines

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<sup>2</sup> Gillon, 65.

<sup>3</sup> Gillon, 78.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Lind, Vietnam the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Lind, 272.

in 1960...”<sup>6</sup> Richard Moser explains, “this is a love story...we went where we were sent because we loved our country...we were proud of the opportunity to serve that country just as our fathers had served in World War II and our older brothers in Korea.”<sup>7</sup> Small town men who enlisted were taught that they could become “real men in the Army” and learn discipline.<sup>8</sup>

The majority of opponents to the Vietnam War were black and Jewish while white southerners supported the war more than other groups.<sup>9</sup> White Catholics are complex and divided because of the different ethnic groups in the religion who have diverse histories in the U.S. But, “Despite the prominence of Catholic anticommunist Republicans such as Senator Joseph McCarthy and William F Buckley, Jr., most American Catholics during the Cold War retained their allegiance to the Democratic party...” as well as during the Vietnam War. The American Council of Education did a nationwide survey in 1966-67 which revealed that “the best single predictor of campus protests was a high proportion of Jewish students.”<sup>10</sup>

According to a 1997 Boston Draft Resistance Survey, 33.3% of draft resisters were upper middle-class and 47.2% were middle-class, while working-class and lower middle-class resisters averaged about 10%. Of the draft resisters’ parents, 58.3% of fathers and 26.7% of mothers had professional occupations and 4.3% and 1.7% were semiskilled or unskilled. Their religious backgrounds presented that 25.4% of draft resisters were agnostic, 16.9% were atheist, 15.3% were Jewish, 9% were Baptist, and

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<sup>6</sup> Gillon, 64-65.  
<sup>7</sup> Richard Moser, The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During The Vietnam Era. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 251.  
<sup>8</sup> Moore, 252.  
<sup>9</sup> Lind, 107.  
<sup>10</sup> Lind, 109-110.

very low percentages were from other Protestant denominations. The draft resisters' fathers who were not veterans constituted 60.3%. Fewer than 2% of resisters were Republicans while 46.1% were Democrats.<sup>11</sup> Today, 43.1% of the draft resistance community from the Vietnam Era identify themselves as liberal Democrats now while only 4.8% identify themselves as any type of Republican.<sup>12</sup>

The 1960s saw the rise of the New Left and New Right movements. Both movements represented the Baby Boom/Vietnam Generation coming into adulthood. Both movements found followers among college students. The New Right was born when "Libertarians" who opposed limitations on individual rights and "moralists" who believed that maintaining moral standards was more important than defending individual rights, forced a fusion of the two strains by the end of the decade. In 1955, William F. Buckley founded *The National Review*, a conservative magazine. Circulation tripled to 90,000 between 1960 and 1964. During 1950s and 1960s, the conservative base of support was formed in suburban communities, especially of the South and West, among people concerned with decline of morality and heavily dependant on military contracts for their survival.<sup>13</sup> The New Left was powered by leftist radicals looking to challenge the established social and political order; they objected to the conformity and consensus of the 1950s and wished to organize and change social, political, and economic problems through creativity and a well-informed understanding of the country.

The most prominent organization founded in September 1960 to frame the ideals of the New Right was Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), a conservative group

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<sup>11</sup> Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 352-352.

<sup>12</sup> Foley, 359.

<sup>13</sup> Gillon, 79.

formed at the Sharon, Connecticut, family estate of William F. Buckley. The YAF Sharon Statement (1960) stressed anticommunism and strong national defense, stating that communism was the biggest threat to their liberties and pleading "victory over, rather than coexistence with" communism.<sup>14</sup> Viewing the Vietnam War within the context of the Cold War was important. The Cold War justified their support for the Vietnam War because it was a battle in the fight against communism. The new conservatives called for an aggressive foreign policy and substantial military spending to combat the global spread of communism from ever reaching the U.S.

Barry Goldwater, the father of modern conservatism, ran in the election of 1964 and also emphasized the need to maintain military strength and subdue civil unrest. He "taught Republicans how to appeal to the cultural frustrations of white voters by addressing such issues as racial quotas, law and order, and fear of moral decline. The message helped the Republicans make dramatic inroads into the once solidly Democratic South."<sup>15</sup>

Tom Hayden and Al Haber, college students, founded Students for a Democratic Society, a radical organization, in 1960. The New Left found its voice in the creation of SDS. In 1962, they issued their "Port Huron Statement" in Michigan, emphasizing diplomacy, and idealism, while stating that complacency was a threat to U.S., and the need to recognize that injustice exists and act on it. Two of the primary concerns that SDS addressed in the Port Huron Statement were the danger of the Cold War and "the presence of the Bomb" and the "racial bigotry" faced by African Americans, especially in

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<sup>14</sup> Gillon, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Gillon, 47.

the South.<sup>16</sup> SDS was antiwar and also became a voice for the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. Antiwar protest was largely confined to elite private colleges and large state universities.<sup>17</sup> SDS organized first national protest against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C. on April 17, 1965, and called for a second in November of that year. Students for a Democratic Society latched on to other causes such as the Civil Rights Movement. In one instance mostly middle-class white men and women of SDS worked in 1963 to organize poor whites and blacks in chapters of their organization, garnering 125 African American members.<sup>18</sup>

As the Vietnam War developed throughout the 1960s, YAF issued support for the war and the New Right gained more support from working class Americans because of their resentment of college protesters who avoided the war that their sons were fighting in. Meanwhile, SDS members rallied on college campuses, and protested and burned draft notices. At this time former President Bill Clinton opposed his draft notice while he was going to college at Oxford, England, and wrote his “Letter to the Draftboard” (1969). Because he is a Democrat today and the liberal Democratic Party inherited the New Left’s legacy, the perception of liberals being “draft-dodgers”<sup>19</sup> lingers today when conservative Republicans criticize Democrats.

Dissent within the military was taken up by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), formed by six Vietnam veterans in 1967. One member, John Kerry, testified before Congress in April 1971. The testimony of Kerry, a liberal Democrat, further

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<sup>16</sup> Students for a Democratic Society. “Port Huron Statement (1962)” in William H. Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff, and Beth Bailey, eds., *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 298-303.

<sup>17</sup> Gillon, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Gillon. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick J Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech” <<http://www.buchanan.org/pa-92-0817-rnc.html>>, 3.

contributes to the perception of modern Democrats being antiwar. In the 2004 presidential election, “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” formed and attacked Kerry because his stance was interpreted as disrespectful to the service and experiences of veterans. SBVT accused Kerry of distorting facts about events in the war and that he exaggerated his own service record. As a result, John Kerry appeared even less associated with supporting war or the military. In analyzing military dissent, an important fact to consider in was that “nearly 90 percent of all supporters came to draft resistance with a previous history of activism...34 percent were members of Students for a Democratic Society, 56 percent had been active with various peace organizations, and 62 percent came from a background in the civil rights movement.”<sup>20</sup> Whatever dissent there was in the military was heavily linked to the New Left, rather than the Right.

During 1960s and 1970s, Democrats gained party members from African American, American Indian, Chicano, homosexual and feminist civil rights movements.

Some chapters of the Black Panthers were formed in Vietnam. Due to representation and secrecy, it is difficult to determine how many Vietnam soldiers were members of the Black Panther party. In any event, it is more important that the Panthers enjoyed widespread sympathy from African American troops. In a survey conducted by Wallace Terry, 36 percent of the almost four hundred black combat soldiers questioned said they would join militant groups like the Black Panthers. Another 18 percent claimed they would ‘consider’ joining Black Power organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Black troops resented the Vietnam War because they felt they were fighting for a country abroad while there was a war for black civil rights against the same country at home.

Women who had protested for SDS broke away and took up the feminist movement while gays and minorities were inspired to launch their own civil rights movements by that of African Americans, who had the support of the New Left. Right wingers would

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<sup>20</sup> Foley, 179.

<sup>21</sup> Moser, 59.

later blur the line between these radicals and their liberal successors partially because much of the radical legacy settled within the Democratic liberal party of the 1970s, as the individual movements faded.

In the Richard Nixon era, conservatives helped craft and readily accepted the identity of the “silent majority” and Middle Americans. Many Middle Americans identified with Republican Nixon’s rise from humble origins, his public professions of support for traditional values and hard work, and his disdain for the eastern establishment.<sup>22</sup> Living a destitute childhood in Los Angeles, Nixon derived his outsider status and resentment of privilege, worked his way through college and won a scholarship to Duke University Law School.<sup>23</sup> In 1968 Richard Nixon was elected as president, and with the popularity of the Independent third-party candidacy of George Wallace, a blatant racist and anti-intellectual, it appeared as if most of the nation was on a “rightward drift.” A survey showed “that more than half of the nation shared Wallace’s view that ‘liberals, intellectuals, and long-hairs have run the country for too long.’”<sup>24</sup> Melvin Laird suggests, “Nixon’s reelection in 1972 and the defeat of his opponent, George McGovern, who made the war the primary issue of the campaign, claiming that Democrats – the party in power that had escalated the war to an intolerable level – would be the best folks to get us out... lost because the American people did not agree with him.”<sup>25</sup> Nixon, a Republican, called on the “silent majority” in a November 3, 1969, televised speech and his term referred to Americans not openly protesting the war to support Vietnamization.

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<sup>22</sup> Gillon, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Gillon, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Gillon, 102.

<sup>25</sup> Melvin R Laird, “Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs*. 84.6 (2005): 22-38. [Research Library](http://0-proquest.umi.com.library.daemen.edu/pqdweb?>). Proquest. Marian Lib., Amherst, NY. 12 April 2006 <<http://0-proquest.umi.com.library.daemen.edu/pqdweb?>>>., 26.

“A poll showed that nearly 75 percent of the public considered themselves part of the ‘silent majority.’”<sup>26</sup>

Nixon wanted to communicate a message that the cultural elite, which he correlated with the Democratic Party, had lost touch with the mainstream values of average Americans.<sup>27</sup> Nixon tried to buy time for his war policy by redirecting public anger against antiwar protesters.<sup>28</sup> He succeeded. Middle Americans “were convinced that a willful minority of violent youth, militant blacks, and arrogant intellectuals had seized control of the public debate, showing contempt for mainstream values and threatening social stability...[and] viewed the antiwar movement as an elitist attack on American troops by privileged students who had avoided the war.”<sup>29</sup> The 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami barred antiwar veterans, but Ron “Kovic’s appearance at the [Democratic] convention reflected the rise of peace sentiment within the Democratic party...”<sup>30</sup> This is another factor that lends support to the notion of Republican support for wars.

In the spring of 1970, thousands of New York City construction workers supported Nixon’s Vietnam policies in a march. Nixon saw a chance to drive a wedge within the Democratic Party between blacks and labor. Nixon chose to abandon racial quotas in an effort to win over unions.<sup>31</sup> In truth, workers were reportedly paid for their participation.<sup>32</sup> Nixon alienated African Americans further from the party and did not really have the support of union members who were part of the working class. In 1965,

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<sup>26</sup> Gillon, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Gillon, 105.

<sup>28</sup> Gillon, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Gillon, 110.

<sup>30</sup> Moser, 123.

<sup>31</sup> Gillon, 119.

<sup>32</sup> Moser, 133.

Trade Unionists for Peace was formed in New York City. “In 1966 National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) established a trade union division, and during May of that year, 173 union leaders from thirty unions attended the founding session.”<sup>33</sup> Politics of union members shifted to the left but as Thomas Frank noted in 2004, “labor unions are on the wane today...down to 9 percent of the private-sector workforce from a highwater mark of 38 percent in the fifties.”<sup>34</sup>

As the 1970s continued, the New Left radicals mellowed into liberals. An important factor was that “by the time Nixon entered the presidency, the peace movement was in disarray, demoralized by the Republican victory, splintered into rival factions, and reeling from the public backlash at protest.”<sup>35</sup> There was a decline in power for many social change movements. VVAW faced internal fractures that had to do with the influence of the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) within the organization. It had influenced leadership until 1978 and ended with the final split that created the VVAW-Anti-Imperialist (VVAW-AI).<sup>36</sup> The New Left was coming apart as Right managed to hold together, despite rifts on their own side. “Unlike their peers in the New Left, however, conservative youth did not reject the two-party political system, but instead attempted to capture the Republican Party and move it dramatically to the right.”<sup>37</sup> By contrast, Thomas Frank declared, “The New Left, with its gleeful obscenities and contempt for the flag, is extinct altogether.”<sup>38</sup> In the 1970s SDS decomposed into warring Marxist-Leninist sects. “‘The New Left no longer exists,’ SDS

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<sup>33</sup> Moser, 72.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Frank, What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 246-247.

<sup>35</sup> Gillon, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Moser, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Chafe, 304.

<sup>38</sup> Frank, 9.

founder Richard Flacks said at the end of the decade.”<sup>39</sup> Despite life within the New Right still, YAF also splintered and lost visibility toward end of 1960s.

Republicanism and a tradition of anticommunism continued to flourish under Ronald Reagan's presidency and into the early 1990's. According to Pat Buchanan, “the 1980s were not terrible years. They were great years. You know it. I know it... Ronald Reagan made us proud to be Americans again.”<sup>40</sup> Ronald Reagan is credited with ending the Cold War and doing it as a member of the Republican Party: “Under the Reagan Doctrine, one by one, the communist dominos began to fall...It was under our party that the Berlin Wall came down, and Europe was reunited. It was under our party that the Soviet Empire collapsed, and the captive nations broke free.”<sup>41</sup> The right was molded into the “Religious Right” and “Moral Majority.” These new right-wingers became embattled with liberals in what Pat Buchanan dubbed America's “cultural war”<sup>42</sup> in his speech at the 1992 Republican National convention for the nomination of George H.W. Bush. Such highly divisive issues such as abortion and gay rights had surfaced and in effect, “The movement’s basic premise is that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern...”<sup>43</sup> The Religious Right stood firmly in the Republican Party against abortion and gay rights while those who had fought for those rights as radicals in the 1960s and 1970s aligned themselves more securely with Democrats.

Over time, the Republican Party had developed a highly effective rhetoric to address the American people. Republicans have a “class-based language of the right, and while they made their populist appeal to blue-collar voters, Democrats were giving those

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, 319.

<sup>40</sup> Buchanan, 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Buchanan, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Buchanan

<sup>43</sup> Frank, 6.

same voters-their traditional base-the big brush-off...dropping the class language...left themselves vulnerable to cultural wedge issues..."<sup>44</sup> As Thomas Frank says, "While leftists sit around congratulating themselves on their personal virtue, the right understands the central significance of movement-building . . ." <sup>45</sup> and he realizes the images of Democrats that Republicans have sold to the people, especially the working class: "the stereotype of liberals that comes up so often in the backlash oeuvre: arrogant, rich, tasteful, fashionable, and all-powerful."<sup>46</sup> Patrick Buchanan's speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention is a perfect example of the language used to Americans:

The American people are not going to buy back into the failed liberalism of the 1960s and '70s—no matter how slick the package in 1992...but tonight I want to talk to the 3 million Americans who voted for me...I do believe, deep in my heart, that the right place for us to be now—in this presidential campaign—is right beside George Bush. The party is our home; this party is where we belong. And don't let anyone tell you any different . . . [Concerning the workers] My friends, even in tough times, these people are with us. They don't read Adam Smith or Edmund Burke, but they came from the same schoolyards and playgrounds and towns as we did. They share our beliefs and convictions, our hopes and our dreams. They are the conservatives of the heart. They are our people.<sup>47</sup>

The Republican Party has held the working-class and many middle-class Americans because of their terminology and dedication to projecting the image of being the party where they belong:

The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the organization that produced such figures as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Joe Lieberman, and Terry McAuliffe, has long been pushing the party to forget blue-collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues. The larger issues that the DLC wants desperately to court are corporations, capable of generating campaign contributions far outweighing anything raised by organized labor.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Frank, 243-44.

<sup>45</sup> Frank, 247.

<sup>46</sup> Frank, 240.

<sup>47</sup> Buchanan, 2-5.

<sup>48</sup> Frank, 243.

In the 1992 Presidential election, George H.W. Bush ran for a second term and was presented as a war hero against “draft dodger” Bill Clinton. Clinton won. He had a majority of the women’s, and minorities’ votes. The Cold War was over and America did not need a Republican to be tough on Communism. Furthermore, Bush was perceived as lacking vision and certitude and seemed to be too moderate to gain heavy support from either conservatives or liberals within his party. During George H.W. Bush’s first term, his call to repel Iraqi invasion of Kuwait with American troops was supported by mostly Republicans in Congress and opposed by mostly Democrats. “In 1989 pollsters found that 55 percent of Americans believed the nation was on the ‘wrong track’; only 36 percent said it was on the ‘right track’” because of public scandals on Wall Street and embarrassing revelations about Reagan aides.<sup>49</sup> These circumstances contributed to the election of Bill Clinton.

The traditional tendencies and associations of the rightists and leftists endured in the 2000 election between the Republican nominee, George W. Bush and the Democratic candidate, Al Gore. Joseph Lieberman, Gore’s vice-presidential Democratic nominee, was the first Jewish American nominated by a major party and it was in accordance with the history of Jews as liberals in the Democratic Party. The importance of appealing to standard Americans was in favor of Bush, who was preferred by many voters because he appeared more relaxed and personable than Gore in debates.<sup>50</sup> Also, Al Gore had been Bill Clinton’s vice president and had trouble escaping the unfavorable associations with the scandals of the later Clinton presidency. Bush got higher percentages of the popular vote in towns of 10,000-15,000, suburbs, and rural areas while Gore did better in cities;

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<sup>49</sup> Gillon, 258.

<sup>50</sup> Gillon, 329.

Regionally, Bush did better in the Midwest, South, and West and Gore did better in the East.<sup>51</sup> The image of Democrats as a cultural elite without the interests of middle-class America in mind continues to function; of the 2004 election, Thomas Frank said: “The poorest county in America isn’t in Appalachia or the Deep South. It is the Great Plains, a region of struggling ranchers and dying farm towns, and in the election of 2000 the Republican candidate for president, George W. Bush, carried it by a majority of greater than 80 percent.”<sup>52</sup>

In the conflict with Iraq today, Democrats continue to be opposed to the war as an overall group and Republican President George W. Bush presses on in a fight against terrorism. Bush and his father, a former president, are Texans and have been criticized for being war leaders. “. . . Texan politicians are irrational warmongers . . .”<sup>53</sup>

Terrorism easily replaces communism as the enemy to America in the eyes of conservative rightists: “Just as the spread of communism was very real in the 1960s, so the spread of radical fundamentalist Islam is very real today. It was a creeping fear until September 11, 2001, when it showed itself capable of threatening us. Iraq was a logical place to fight back, with its secular government and modern infrastructure and a populace that was ready to overthrow its dictator.”<sup>54</sup> September 11, 2001, spurred a revival of patriotism and gave Bush the highest sustained approval ratings since Franklin Roosevelt and overwhelming support for the military intervention in Afghanistan was shown.<sup>55</sup>

Because there is no longer a draft, war protest against this device no longer applies and

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<sup>51</sup> C. Trueman, “America – 2000 Election,” Online Posting, Feb. 2003, 1 May 2006  
<[http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/2000\\_USA\\_election.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/2000_USA_election.htm)>.

<sup>52</sup> Frank, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Lind, 214.

<sup>54</sup> Laird, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Gillon, 343.

the troops are “far more motivated to fight this war than were the average conscripts in Vietnam.”<sup>56</sup>

The Vietnam War marked a rupture in the history of the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century, altering the political culture of America. The war on terrorism and the response to it owes much to how Vietnam is forgotten and remembered. Leftist movements are discredited in the new culture wars and parties are deeply established. “A conscious effort by the Republicans and Democrats to represent all regions in their parties would benefit both the parties and the country as a whole.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Laird, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Lind, 272-273.

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