

“AN EVERYDAY AFFAIR”  
Violence Against Women during the Vietnam War

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## **Abstract**

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Despite decades worth of analysis and investigation into the Vietnam War, violence against civilian women throughout the conflict has been largely overlooked by historians. Most accounts of the war include references to abuses perpetrated against civilian women by American servicemen, but this phenomenon is rarely the focus of individual study by historians. This thesis reexamines the history of violence against women during the war through the lens of women’s liberation and the #MeToo movement. In an endeavor to answer the question of why otherwise normal American men participated in violence against women throughout the war, I analyze testimony from more than 60 men and women who witnessed, experienced, or participated in sexual violence in Vietnam. I also rely on the broad body of literature surrounding war crimes and atrocities during the Vietnam War. The argument proceeds in three parts. First, I demonstrate that sexual violence, although not ubiquitously common, was a key aspect of many people’s experience in the war. Then, I argue that the conditions of the conflict facilitated this violence by providing the environment and culture for it to take place. Finally, I show that the culture within specific units made sexual violence more common.

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## Introduction

“AN EVERYDAY AFFAIR”:

### Violence Against Women during the Vietnam War

Joe Bangert was 22 years old when he testified as part of the Winter Soldier Investigation. He had spent three years in Vietnam with the Marine Corps, but in 1971 he joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War in Detroit to publicize atrocities they had witnessed overseas. Bangert testified about abuses against civilian Vietnamese women. “You don't even think of them as human beings, they're ‘gooks.’ And they're objects; they're not human, they're objects. The general rule was a Vietnamese who is dead is confirmed Viet Cong and one who is living is a Viet Cong suspect.” Bangert described watching another soldier disembowel and skin a Vietnamese woman. Bangert attributed this behavior to the war. “I think the person involved was a freaked out sexist ... He had to be — he was in the Army for 20 years.”<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. war in Vietnam stands out in the American consciousness as a war gone bad. Unlike other major conflicts, the Vietnam War seemed to lack a clear purpose or a noble outcome. The war was divisive from the start, and historians’ understanding of the war reflects this complexity. Vietnam occupies a strange space in American memory. For many, the war is an example of a failure of leadership — men in power forced Americans overseas to fight with one hand tied behind their backs.<sup>2</sup> For others, it’s a potent example of the inherent cruelty of war and

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999.)

[http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter\\_Soldier/WS\\_entry.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_entry.html)

<sup>2</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997). Former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster argues that high ranking military and political leaders were responsible for America’s

the dangers of becoming ensnared in the problems of distant, alien societies.<sup>3</sup> Widely publicized atrocities like the My Lai massacre helped turn the public against an already unpopular war, and veterans spoke out about the cruelty they witnessed or participated in overseas.<sup>4</sup> While this narrative about the Vietnam War is well-known, some aspects of the story have been overlooked in historical examinations of the darker side of the American war in Vietnam. In particular, violence against Vietnamese civilian women, while largely ignored by historians and journalists, was a crucial aspect of the conflict for Vietnamese and Americans alike.

Sexual violence often runs rampant in wartime. Historically, the abuse of women occurs in almost every war. Reports of wartime rape exist from the Revolutionary War, the English Civil Wars, the American Civil War.<sup>5</sup> American soldiers in World Wars I and II abused enemy women, as did the Germans, the Russians, and the Japanese.<sup>6</sup> Yet in American history, this aspect of the war in Vietnam seems to stand out. Perhaps the nastier sides of the war were better documented than they were in prior wars — Vietnam was of course “the first televised war,” as American journalists had unprecedented access to the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the generation of men who survived Vietnam were more willing to discuss their failures than were previous generations, as the rise of the women’s liberation movement at home made speaking up about violence against women more common. But an examination of the evidence certainly indicates that rape was a common feature of many people’s experience in Vietnam.

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failure in Vietnam. He writes that President Johnson and his chiefs of staff failed to adequately engage militarily, fearing the political consequences of doing what was necessary to win.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1975), 31, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: Virago Press, 2007.)

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Steinman, “The First Televised War.” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2017.

During the war, veterans spoke openly about sexual abuse they had witnessed or participated in overseas. In February 1971, Vietnam Veterans Against the War hosted the Winter Soldier Investigation, in which 109 Vietnam veterans gave testimony about the atrocities they had witnessed overseas. Fourteen of them spoke explicitly about rape, and many reported witnessing or participating in several instances of assault against Vietnamese women. In response to a question about the prevalence of rape in Vietnam, one veteran said it was “pretty usual over there. Cause you'll be out in the bush and you'll meet women out on the trails. And the Marines over there, just like the Army and the Navy, are human. But they just don't go about it the right way — they might stick a rifle in a woman's head and say, ‘Take your clothes off.’ That's the way it's done over there. Cause they're not treated as human beings over there, they're treated as dirt.”<sup>8</sup> Other veterans, including many who did not participate in the Winter Soldier Investigation, said that such behavior was common. Of those who spoke openly about it, most blamed the war.

How do we explain the seemingly common experience of otherwise normal American men participating in sexual violence against Vietnamese civilians? What was it about the American war in Vietnam that created the conditions for sexual abuse to take place?

In this thesis, I argue that sexual violence against Vietnamese women was a common aspect of the war for many, but that this prevalence depended heavily upon context. By examining the context for individual instances of violence, I argue that specific aspects of the guerrilla war in Vietnam, as well as the culture within units where violence against women was common, made sexual violence more likely.

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<sup>8</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

The argument proceeds in three parts. First, I will demonstrate that sexual violence, although not ubiquitous, was a key aspect of the war. Then, I will argue that the conditions of the conflict facilitated this violence by providing the environment and circumstances for it to take place. Finally, I will show that the culture within specific units made sexual violence more common.

I will begin by addressing the question of prevalence. Any definitive assessment of the prevalence of sexual assault in Vietnam is impossible. Too few victims survived or made reports, and Americans rarely made reports against each other. But the existing evidence shows it was an undeniable aspect of the war. Of those who report either witnessing or experiencing sexual violence, all of them say that this behavior was common. While we can't say for certain how common sexual assault was across services or units, individual reports show eerily similar contexts behind numerous and unrelated assaults. Elements which appear across many accounts show how the war in Vietnam created the conditions for sexual violence to take place, especially within units where veterans say sexual violence was common.

The nature of guerrilla warfare and the military objectives in Vietnam made sexual violence more likely. In guerrilla warfare, the enemy is hidden. Unlike the more traditional battles of past conflicts, many American military engagements with the North Vietnamese happened on a small scale against a hidden opponent. This meant that American military victories in Vietnam were measured in body counts. With no real territorial goals, American success meant eliminating as many Vietnamese fighters as possible. Without a clear understanding of who the enemy was, and where civilians' loyalties lay, sexual violence — and violence against civilians more generally — became a military tactic. Servicemen report using sexual abuse as an interrogation technique, either against the women in question or by

threatening rape in order to get information from male family members.<sup>9</sup> The unique breed of fear generated by the threat of sexual violence became a potent weapon against the civilian population and the North Vietnamese fighters thought to be hiding within it. Several servicemen reported that their interpretation of their mission — “search and destroy” — meant they were supposed to destroy the will of the enemy to fight back, and sexual abuse was a powerful way to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Revenge also became a key factor in sexual abuse. Booby traps and mines killed and wounded many American soldiers in Vietnam, and this kind of assault left soldiers without a clear target for retaliation. Several servicemen report an unconscious need to attack the civilians in reaction to these kinds of attacks, and sexual abuse was often a part of this retaliation.<sup>11</sup> Because of the nature of guerilla warfare, American men had a unique fear of Vietnamese women.<sup>12</sup> It was easy to assume that healthy men were fighters on one side or the other, but servicemen were warier of women. They didn’t know if Vietnamese women were fighters or not, and this uncertainty often manifested in a desire to express dominance or eradicate the possibility that these women posed a threat to their safety.

Cultural conditions within specific units made their members more likely to believe this kind of behavior was acceptable, or at least normal within the boundaries of war. Since the prevalence of sexual violence appears to be highly variable between units, it’s worthwhile to examine what cultural conditions were present in units where individuals thought violence

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<sup>9</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai: A War Crime and its Aftermath* (London: Viking, 1992), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Michal R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

against women was commonplace. While many of these characteristics were common throughout the US military in Vietnam, the concentration of certain cultural norms was identified by individuals as the cause or condition of violence against women. Hypermasculine understandings of men's roles and male bonding are common throughout accounts of abuse. Masculine ideas of aggression and insensitivity to women were common, and some reported that disrespect for Vietnamese women was ingrained in the culture of their units from the beginning.

Other hypermasculine ideas dictated sexual abuse as a means of getting what they needed. Many testimonials display the belief that servicemen needed sex to function, consensual or not. This idea was sometimes echoed by commanders, who turned a blind eye to abuse if it meant their men were getting what they needed.<sup>13</sup> Many individuals reported that rape helped to bond their unit together. Gang rapes, in my research, were more common than individual assaults, and several men said later that they felt participation was essential to maintaining their status in the group.<sup>14</sup> Along with masculine bonding, sexual abuse also provided a sense of group unity. Participating in sexual violence as a group made consequences less likely. Men risked either implicating themselves in the assault or alienation from the group if they came forward. This kind of group solidarity also acted the other way, as intense closeness of a unit could make retaliation after a loss much more likely.

In a similar way, shared racial hatred within a group served to distance American servicemen from Vietnamese civilians, often in gendered ways. Racial othering is not directly linked to sexual violence, but an analysis of how men who admit to participating or witnessing sexual violence talk about Vietnamese women shows that they often held racist attitudes toward Vietnamese women. This dehumanization process appears to result from gendered ideas about

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<sup>13</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 129.

<sup>14</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

women, particularly Asian women, as well as the atmosphere of fear and resentment created by the conflict. The role of prostitution during the war also reflects this, as some noted that they were accustomed to having access to Vietnamese women's bodies.

The conditions within the military at this time made sexual violence logistically easy. The difficulties in reporting made standardized discipline impossible, even within units where leadership actively admonished this behavior. I have not found a single account in which a Vietnamese woman reported an assault to American leadership, and almost all of the servicemen say they would not or did not report assaults involving their fellow servicemen. Perhaps most consequentially, almost all of the men whose testimonies I have reviewed say that the leadership within their unit either directly encouraged sexual violence or passively allowed it to exist. Above all of the other conditions, this is most often identified by individuals as a reason for their behavior. On a much more basic level, the environment of Vietnam made getting away with abuse easy — most civilians did not speak English, and it was easy to get lost in the terrain. As one reporter described it, "It was an anonymous situation."<sup>15</sup>

I focus my analysis on individual testimony and descriptions of events, as well as on the existing body of literature surrounding the nature of sexual assault during wartime and war crimes during the Vietnam War. For individual testimony, I have collected accounts of more than 60 individuals who heard about, witnessed, experienced, or participated in sexual assault. These testimonials come from servicemen across the armed forces, American journalists, and Vietnamese civilians. The accounts I have collected describe different incidents throughout the war, and I will be relying on these first-hand accounts to establish an understanding of prevalence, motivations, and context. For establishing the motivations of individuals who committed sexual violence, I am relying exclusively on individual testimony. Seventeen of these

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<sup>15</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98.

accounts come from individuals who admitted to committing sexual abuse, and each of them discussed their reasons why the crime took place. I suspect that the line between witness and participant is blurred, as I have found a few instances where someone identified himself as a witness while others identified him as a participant. For this reason, I'm treating witness testimony and participant testimony equally in terms of the merit of their conclusions about why the act occurred.

For secondary sources, I use the existing body of literature surrounding war crimes and sexual abuse during war. While sexual assault is undeniably distinct from general mistreatment of civilians, there is some overlap between the two, and analyses of war crimes often include allusions to sexual assault. Works examining the war's darker side more broadly often include important context for this specific kind of abuse, even if it is not their focus. Christian Appy's *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* provides the soldier's perspective on atrocities, including sexual violence. His examination is particularly useful to me, because he expresses a great deal of empathy for the servicemen involved and thus tries to understand why these acts were committed. While sexual violence plays only a small role in his book, his analyses on that topic are very helpful. Similarly, Nick Turse's *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* focuses more broadly on the negative impacts of the war for American servicemen. However, Turse provides a great deal of insight into the issues surrounding the average soldier's awareness and experience with sexual violence, and how these experiences shaped people's understanding of the war. Although sexual abuse is categorically different from most of the violence described in these books, understanding soldiers' experiences more generally provides context about the cultural and disciplinary context of the war. Finally,

Martha Hess' oral history of Vietnamese survivors of the war, *Then the Americans Came*, provides crucial understanding of the civilian experience of sexual violence.

I use specific terms and definitions throughout this paper. War crimes and atrocities refer to unlawful violence or mistreatment of civilians, including sexual abuse. I do not use the terms interchangeably, although it's important to note that crimes against civilians often include — and do not preclude — sexual violence. Sexual abuse and sexual violence are umbrella terms which include all forms of sexual degradation, assault, and violence. Sexual assault refers to physical attacks or coercion of a sexual nature, and rape refers exclusively to situations in which penetration takes place.<sup>1617</sup> I will primarily use the terms sexual abuse and sexual violence, unless a greater degree of specificity is necessary.

While the scholarship on war crimes and on sexual violence is extensive, I have failed to find any dedicated analysis of sexual violence against civilians during the Vietnam War. Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* — arguably the pivotal text examining rape as a tool for political or military power — includes some analysis of Vietnam, but this is a small section of a much larger work. Joanna Bourke's *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present Day* also offers some insights into Vietnam, but the focus of the book lies elsewhere. Almost every analysis of the war includes some allusion to sexual assault, but rarely do these texts focus on these accounts or make any distinction between sexual abuse and other crimes against civilians. Rice University philosopher Gina Marie Weaver's *Ideologies of Forgetting* is perhaps the only work focusing solely on sexual assault against Vietnamese civilians by American

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<sup>16</sup> Krug, Etienne G., et al., World Report on Violence and Health (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), 149.

<sup>17</sup> United States Department of Justice Archives, *An Updated Definition of Rape*, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/updated-definition-rape>.

servicemen, but she is mainly concerned with how American culture has responded to this history through film.

While sexual violence seems like a pervasive aspect of the war in Vietnam, the conflict is not unique. Most conflicts feature some level of sexual abuse, but rarely do historians focus on this as a notable element of war. Especially in the wake of the #MeToo movement that began in 2017, it's important to reevaluate established historical narratives from perspectives which have traditionally been excluded. Examining the conditions surrounding sexual violence during wartime, especially in such a recent American war, can provide key insights into preventing sexual violence in future conflicts. Similar analysis has recently been conducted on the Second World War which illuminates an aspect of history that is often ignored despite intense scrutiny of the war more generally. In particular, recent scholarship about the Second World War has focused on the role of masculinity and sexuality as it contributed to atrocity during the Holocaust.<sup>18</sup> This work yields essential background and understanding as to why such atrocities take place, and how they can be prevented. Since this analysis has not yet been conducted into the Vietnam War, my research will provide insight into how the conditions of the war — unique or not — contributed to sexual violence against civilians. Analysis of the conditions which contributed to violence against women, especially in the units where it was thought to be common, can shed light on how specific circumstances contribute to this violence and how they can be avoided.

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<sup>18</sup> Edward B. Westermann, "Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 30.1 (2016): 1-19.  
Person, Katarzyna. "Sexual Violence during the Holocaust: The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto." *Shofar* 33, no. 2 (2015): 103-21.  
Sinnreich, Helene J, and Samuel Totten. "Women and the Holocaust." In *Plight and Fate of Women During and Following Genocide: Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, 7:25–46. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2009.

## Chapter One

### “STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE”?

#### How the Prevalence of Sexual Violence Varied across Vietnam

Over the course of this thesis, I argue that certain components of the American conflict in Vietnam laid the foundations for sexual abuse against civilians. But this conclusion rests on an understanding that this behavior was common enough throughout the conflict to merit analysis. While any definitive assessment of prevalence is impossible, the available evidence indicates that sexual violence was a common part of many people’s experience in Vietnam. Some witnesses report that it was “an everyday affair,”<sup>19</sup> while others heard only rumors.<sup>20</sup> An analysis of the existing evidence shows that it was common in some regions and some units and apparently uncommon in others, but anything definitive is unattainable. Regardless, it was certainly an important part of many people’s experiences, and enough evidence exists to create a rough picture of its prevalence.

Sexual violence was a striking aspect of the US war in Vietnam, but determining the prevalence of this behavior is tricky. Formal reports were rare. Many victims of sexual assault were executed shortly afterwards.<sup>21</sup> Many of the existing accounts describe assault followed by a murder, a practice one veteran said was so common it had its own name — men who raped and then murdered women were called “double veterans.”<sup>2223</sup> Vietnamese women who survived

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<sup>19</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Transcript, Jack O’Neil Oral History Interview, September 5, 10, 16, 2002, by S. Maxner, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

<sup>21</sup> Very few of the accounts I have found describe instances of abuse in which women survived, and sexual abuse was often seen as a precursor to murder.

<sup>22</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam*, Translated by Anne Wyburd and Victoria Fern, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 152-9.

sexual violence were unlikely to report to American authorities. Power dynamics between American servicemen and Vietnamese civilians were skewed, so many avoided reporting out of fear of reprisals or of Americans in general.<sup>24</sup> The language barrier alone would present an insurmountable hurdle for Vietnamese women who wanted to report to American authorities. Few reported to Vietnamese authorities either, a phenomenon some scholars attribute to a deep sense of shame surrounding sexual violence in Vietnamese society.<sup>25</sup> Formal reports were certainly filed for sexual assault over the course of the war, but there doesn't appear to be any consistency of reporting across units. All of the reports I have found come from within the military, wherein Americans complained about the behavior of their fellow servicemen — which was undoubtedly rare. Many servicemen reported feeling too afraid to report on the misbehavior of their companions, as they worried about reprisals. In a warzone, group unity often meant survival, and few were willing to endanger themselves by reporting an assault. Off the battlefield, sexual violence is rarely mentioned. Some veterans felt compelled to confess to writers after the war, but few historians or journalists have investigated sexual violence specifically.

The politicization of the war makes determining the prevalence of violence against women even harder. Proponents and opponents of the war alike have demonstrated a desire to play up or down the worse aspects of the war, either to elicit outrage, downplay its severity, or dismiss instances of criminality as the work of a few bad seeds. Exaggerations of the atrocities in Vietnam are well documented. The belief in widespread drug use among the US armed forces

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<sup>24</sup> Martha Hess, *Then the Americans Came* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 130.

<sup>25</sup> Gina Marie Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting: American Erasure of Women's Sexual Trauma in the Vietnam War* (Houston: Rice University, 2006), 73.

has been exposed as at least problematic if not totally exaggerated in recent decades.<sup>26</sup> Stories about American civilians spitting on returning servicemen have also been debunked.<sup>27</sup> In the aftermath of the highly divisive conflict, individuals of all persuasions sought to spin the story of the war for political or cultural gain, so it's reasonable to look at any characterizations of the war as broadly good or broadly bad with skepticism. While it is certainly possible that individuals have overemphasized the prevalence of violence against Vietnamese civilian women, sexual assault definitely took place in Vietnam but was underreported for a variety of reasons. For Vietnamese women who experienced it and for veterans who participated, many identify this abuse as one of the most lasting aspects of their experience with the war.

Existing statistics are conflicting, but American military records show that rape was a facet of the war, albeit vastly underreported. US Army court martial statistics show that from January 1965 to January 1973, 38 servicemen were tried for rape and 24 were convicted. Five men were tried for rape and assault as a combined charge and only three were convicted. Eight were tried for assault and attempt to commit rape and four were convicted. For the Marine Corps, only 13 marines were convicted of rape between 1970 and 1973. In the Navy, only two.<sup>28</sup> These records seem to conflict with other characterizations by veterans and observers who say that rape was common in their experience. Underreporting rape was common on the part of both Vietnamese women and servicemen, but these records still show that sexual violence was a part of the war. It happened, and military leadership was aware that it happened. It's important to note that these official figures are strikingly low. In my research, I have collected accounts of almost twice as many assaults as are detailed in the official record, and I doubt I have found a

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<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Jerry Lembck, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98.

written record of every assault which took place throughout the war. These figures demonstrate less the full sense of the problem and more that it was something American officials were aware of, no matter how overlooked.<sup>29</sup>

Americans at home were aware of sexual violence overseas. Major news outlets published stories detailing sexual assault. In August 1969, *Esquire* published “An American Atrocity,” which chronicled a gang rape and murder of a Vietnamese woman and the murder of her family by American marines.<sup>30</sup> In October of the same year, *The New Yorker* followed suit with “Casualties of War.” This story examined a different case; here, one marine described how his commander ordered he and three of his fellow servicemen to take a Vietnamese teenager with them on patrol as a companion. The other men kidnapped, raped, and then murdered the woman after 24 hours.<sup>31</sup> Lang expanded his article into a book of the same name, and the story later inspired a blockbuster film starring Michael J. Fox and Sean Penn in 1989. The popularity of Lang’s article and the pursuant film emphasize the fact that many Americans were aware of sexual violence, at least in third party representations of the war.

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<sup>29</sup> Underreporting rape is common on the homefront as well. The Bureau of Justice Statistics within the Justice Department maintains records of crimes that are reported to police throughout the country, and the BJS has only recently started evaluating how many victims of crime report to law enforcement. Over the last few years, BJS has estimated that only between a quarter and a third of rape victims report to police. Undoubtedly, the figure was much lower prior during the period of the Vietnam War, as the definition of rape and the methods for responding to it have changed drastically in the decades since. Records from the late 1970s and early 1980s indicate an occurrence rate of about 0.05 per 100 women based on what was reported to police. However, countless studies in the decades since have consistently shown that the actual occurrence rate of sexual assault is around 15-20%.

Bureau of Justice Statistics, *An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault: Sex Offenses and Offenders* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 1997).

Morgan, Rachel E., and Grace Kena, *Criminal Victimization Report: 2016 Revised* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018).

National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, *Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women Survey* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Norman Poirier. "An American Atrocity." *Esquire*, August 1, 1969.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Lang. "Casualties of War." *The New Yorker*, October 10, 1969.

During the war, some veterans spoke publicly about sexual abuse overseas. In 1971, the activist group Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized the Winter Soldier Investigation, in which 109 veterans gave testimony about the abuses they had witnessed overseas. Fourteen veterans described sexual violence against women. Some of them spoke about more than one incident and several said that this kind of conduct was common. David Bishop, a marine in the second battalion, described the rape, torture, and murder of four North Vietnamese Army nurses by his captain.<sup>32</sup> Scott Camile, a veteran of the Marine Corps, testified that he witnessed rape. Infantryman Jamie Henry said that rape was “SOP” — standard operating procedure — in his unit. One infantry veteran, Joe Galbally, testified that he knew of ten to fifteen incidents where men in his unit raped young Vietnamese girls.<sup>33</sup> While the Winter Soldier Investigation was deliberately political, these testimonies still provide insight into how sexual violence became a part of some people’s experience in Vietnam. These accounts aren’t representative of the average soldier’s experience, as most did not join Vietnam Veterans Against the War. But more than 20,000 veterans did join, and a 1974 psychological survey of the anti-war movement found that seven percent of veterans who opposed the war did so because of sexual violence they witnessed overseas.<sup>34</sup>

Outside of the Winter Soldier Investigation, other veterans have said that sexual violence was common in Vietnam. During journalist Seymour Hersh’s investigation into the My Lai Massacre, one squad leader described rape as “an everyday affair. You can nail just about

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<sup>32</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>33</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>34</sup> John Helmer, *Bringing the War Home: The American Soldier in Vietnam and After* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 206.

everybody on that — at least once.” He explained, “the guys are human, man.”<sup>35</sup> In the 1989 documentary film *Four Hours in My Lai*, filmmakers Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim interviewed veterans about the conditions which led to the My Lai massacre. Several of the men recounted witnessing or hearing about sexual violence in their unit. One member of the 2nd Platoon said that there were rapes every time the company passed through a village. One said: “Rape? Oh, that happened every day.”<sup>36</sup> A member of the Americal Division, in the weeks leading up to the group’s perpetration of the My Lai Massacre, said that he heard men in his unit raping a girl “on the average of once every third day.”<sup>37</sup> Veterans who spoke to historians as part of Texas Tech University’s Vietnam War Oral History Project also reported witnessing sexual violence and some said that it was a common aspect of the war in their experience.<sup>38</sup>

Journalists also witnessed sexual violence by American servicemen. CBS reporter Dan Rather told author Susan Brownmiller that “everybody who passed through a village did it — steal a chicken and grab a quick piece of ass, that sort of thing.”<sup>39</sup> Peter Arnett, reporting on Vietnam for the Associated Press, confirmed that rape was common by American soldiers and added that Americans were more likely to participate in gang rape than individual assault.<sup>40</sup> Not only were veterans aware of abuse, but journalists picked up on it as well.

Voices from the Vietnamese side of the war certainly asserted that sexual violence by American servicemen was common. The North Vietnamese Army used rape by Americans as a propaganda tool, making many of these accounts suspect. Nonetheless, NVA propaganda consistently details rape by American men. An American intelligence summary from 1957

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<sup>35</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 104.

<sup>36</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/oralhistory/>

<sup>39</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98.

includes quotes from a Vietnamese propaganda leaflet detailing the gang rape and murder of a 12-year-old Vietnamese girl by Americans. The leaflet says that “American officers continually force women into jeeps, drive them to secluded areas, and rape them.”<sup>41</sup> A North Vietnamese book published in 1967 asserts that “in the districts of Hoa Vang, Dien Ban, Duy Xuyen and Dai Loc (Quang Nam province) from March 1965 to August 1966 ... 750 cases of rape took place.”<sup>42</sup> One North Vietnamese letter to the Australian government lists reports of rape — “You will recall the case of Miss Nguyen Thi Xuyen, who was raped, stabbed, and wounded by the US aggressors at Phu Nhuan Saigon, in June 1959; the case with the two girl students who were raped together by some ten US aggressors in My Tho in 1963.”<sup>43</sup> These accounts were used as propaganda against American and South Vietnamese forces, so determining their reliability as testimony of actual events is unrealistic.

Some Americans were aware of these representations of them by the North Vietnamese and thought they weren't accurate. One veteran who participated in the Vietnam War Archives Oral History Project said that men in his unit had to be particularly careful around women and children, since he knew North Vietnamese propaganda accused Americans of rape and that this kind of behavior was particularly offensive in Vietnamese culture.<sup>44</sup> Propaganda is a poor tool for evaluating anything objectively, but these accounts demonstrate that people on both sides of the war were discussing sexual assault by Americans. Americans' denunciations of North

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<sup>41</sup> Document, Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory, Vietnam, 1950-1964, Part 1: Adjutant General, Security Classified Files, 3/15/1957, Box 0009, Folder 0040, Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive Collection, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

<sup>42</sup> Document, US Imperialists “Burn All, Destroy All, Kill All” Policy in South Vietnam, 1967, Douglas Pike Collection, Box 10, Folder 14, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

<sup>43</sup> Document, Test from Hanoi To South Vietnam: American Soldiers Breaking Laws But Not Being Charged, 6/8/1965, Ronald B. Frankum, Jr. Collection, Box 02, Folder 36, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

<sup>44</sup> Transcript, Jack O'Neil Oral History Interview, September 5, 10, 16, 2002, by S. Maxner, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

Vietnamese assertions about sexual violence also adds credibility to a patchwork understanding of sexual violence in Vietnam — for some servicemen, rape was something they heard about only in North Vietnamese propaganda, while others say that it was common in their own experience.

Vietnamese civilians, however, confirm that in some areas sexual violence was pervasive. Martha Hess' *Then the Americans Came: Voices from Vietnam* is the only English-language oral history of Vietnamese civilians' experience during the war. This collection of oral accounts of the war is separated geographically. Few of the North Vietnamese accounts include sexual violence by Americans, which makes sense because Americans did not occupy North Vietnamese territory during the war.<sup>45</sup> However, a third of the 47 southern histories include mentions of sexual violence against Vietnamese civilians. Some of the women interviewed describe their own trauma, while others reference abuses against friends or loved ones. One woman described a mass rape at Bin Duong village, across the river from her own. "Twenty-one women were raped in an afternoon by Americans, not just once but one after the other. Some died on the spot, and others died later."<sup>46</sup> Others simply said the practice was common, without mentioning specific trauma. Two men said that the Americans and the South Koreans would rape women.<sup>47</sup>

Several of those interviewed implied that the prevalence of sexual abuse varied widely dependent on location and context. Mrs. Ngo Thi Dao said that "The American and South Korean soldiers, and sometimes the South Vietnamese, raped the women, especially in the countryside. They would rape them and then cut their breasts off. Sometimes they would kill the

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<sup>45</sup> A handful of the North Vietnamese accounts in Hess' book describe sexual violence by Americans, although only insofar as they had heard rumors from the South. Since Americans never occupied any North Vietnamese territory, it seems unlikely that any such violence took place there.

<sup>46</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 169.

<sup>47</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 147.

women, and sometimes they got away.”<sup>48</sup> Mr. Nguyen Thanh Khiem said that in the countryside, “the civilians were afraid and the Americans did whatever they wanted,” adding that, “in our village they didn’t normally burn the houses or rape the women because we were very near their base, and they wanted to maintain good relations.”<sup>49</sup> This amplifies the sense given by the spread of these testimonies that treatment was highly dependent on geography. It depended on proximity to bases and proximity to other Americans, as well as the specific units involved. If leaders within a unit were permissive about sexual abuse, violence against civilian women could continue unchecked. Meanwhile leaders who took harsh stances against this behavior created a culture of accountability and made sexual violence less likely. This creates a patchwork sense of prevalence, in which civilians from some regions escape fairly unscathed and others walk away feeling that sexual assault by Americans was common.

Some units had reputations for sexual violence. Historian Bernd Greiner writes that Task Force Oregon, an Army reconnaissance unit operating within a region of South Vietnam dubbed a “Free Fire Zone,” had a reputation within the armed services for sexual violence. Task Force Oregon would later become a part of the Americal Division, which was also well-known for violence against civilian women.<sup>50</sup> Greiner also writes that Tiger Force exhibited a disproportionate hostility toward women. The 9th Division, the division within Americal to which Lieutenant Calley (famous for his unit’s perpetration of the My Lai massacre) belonged, is identified in other accounts as a hotbed of this activity.<sup>51,52</sup> Many other accounts implicate

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<sup>48</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 192.

<sup>50</sup> Greiner, *War Without Fronts*, 152-9.

<sup>51</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 97.

<sup>52</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

specific units, but few units had such well-known negative reputations within the rest of the armed forces.

Civilians suspected of being allied with the North Vietnamese reported especially poor treatment by Americans. One woman reported extensive torture and rape by American and South Vietnamese soldiers while she was incarcerated for her suspected Viet Cong affiliation.<sup>53</sup> She told Hess, “They took me to a little house, like this [one], and one American tried to rape me. I started screaming, and he took my hair, which was very long, and he dragged me and beat me. A Vietnamese interpreter came and said, ‘Why do you struggle against the Americans? It won’t do any good.’” She reported being sexually assaulted on at least two occasions during her incarceration.<sup>54</sup> According to these accounts, sexualized torture was common practice against suspected North Vietnamese allies. One man, a leader in the 1968 Tet Offensive in Hue, said that he remembered American cruelty very clearly. “Thousands and thousands of people were injured, especially women. I can tell you, many women are now paralyzed, they have half a body, because they were beaten and tortured by the Americans.” This again reinforces the idea that the prevalence of sexual abuse varied dependent on where the individuals lived, where their allegiance lay, and how they were perceived by American forces.

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<sup>53</sup> Analysis of rape during the Vietnam War differs wildly depending on the perpetrators. Susan Brownmiller asserts that rape by South Vietnamese soldiers was much less common than rape by Americans, but that it became more common as the war became more brutal over time. However, AP reporter Peter Arnett told Brownmiller that the South Vietnamese were less likely than the Americans to participate in gang rape, because their culture placed a higher premium on privacy and they weren’t trained in the buddy system like Americans. Interestingly, various accounts suggest that rape by North Vietnamese soldiers was rare by comparison, which some attribute to a higher sense of privacy, or even prudishness. One South Vietnamese woman described the shock that her peers expressed when she told them she was not assaulted while she was held prisoner by North Vietnamese forces. Across the board, however, accounts allege that the South Koreans had the worst tendency toward sexual violence of all the participants in the war.

Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 88-9.

Bourke, *Rape*, 375.

<sup>54</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 151.

Stories of sexual trauma exist in other accounts by Vietnamese civilians as well. Vietnamese-American memoirist Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* details her upbringing and adolescence in war-torn Vietnam, where the threat of sexual violence loomed large. She wrote that “[her] mother and sister mixed red vegetable dye with water and stained the crotches of their pants. They said it would make the soldiers think they had their periods and discourage any ideas of rape. Unfortunately, a few soldiers didn’t care what stains were on a woman’s pants, but that was every girl’s risk in Ky La.”<sup>55</sup> English-language translations of Vietnamese accounts are hard to find, as the Vietnamese government restricts the publication of works critical to the regime, but some of the existing testimonies mention similar stories of abuse or fear.<sup>56</sup>

While any definitive assertions about the prevalence of sexual abuse by American servicemen during the Vietnam War are elusive, it is reasonable to conclude that this behavior was common in some regions of the conflict. Methodological hurdles prevent us from ever realizing a complete picture of this facet of the conflict, but what remains demonstrates that sexual violence was not common across the board. Some Americans and some Vietnamese people say that it was common in their experience of the war, while others say that it was not. Given the information I have collected, I assert that the prevalence of sexual violence varied widely based primarily upon location -- proximity to a city seems to make rape less likely, as did proximity to a base or to other Americans. The accounts also seem to vary based upon units, since some servicemen say that it was common within their unit and others say they rarely heard about it. While one serviceman said that it was “standard operating procedure,” another said he heard of only one rumor throughout his entire tour.

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<sup>55</sup> Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 21.

While we cannot say that sexual assault was common throughout the war, we can examine the accounts we have in order to draw conclusions about the conditions which drove this behavior in certain contexts.

## Chapter Two

### “FAIR GAME”:

#### How Guerrilla Warfare Facilitated Violence Against Women

Few veterans who admit to witnessing or participating in sexual assault knew exactly why those events occurred. If they provided any explanation at all, most of them simply said that was how it was over there, that sexual violence seemed like a natural product of the war. Some of them went into more detail about how the war impacted their decision-making. Many simply said that was the nature of war, especially that war.

The war in Vietnam was strange by American standards. The generation that fought the Vietnam War had grown up in the shadow of an idealized version of the Second World War, where the enemy was obvious and the objectives were clear. But the conflict between the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the southern Republic of Vietnam had neither. The US slowly became involved in the civil war over the course of a decade, beginning with Truman’s decision to financially support the failing French regime in 1950 and shifting toward direct military engagement when LBJ deployed American troops to support the southern regime in 1965.<sup>57</sup> The nature of the terrain and the two governments involved made the objectives of the war murky. Both governments had ruled over their respective populations, divided at the 17th parallel, since the Geneva Convention decided this boundary in 1954. The northern regime went on the offensive to gain southern territory in 1960, aided by so-called “stay-behinds” — communist sympathizers who had stayed below the 17th parallel when the country divided in

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<sup>57</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 6-10.

1954.<sup>58</sup> These attempts devolved quickly into guerrilla warfare throughout the southern countryside. The conditions in Vietnam made traditional battlefield warfare untenable, and the environment was foreign to American soldiers who arrived there. Although the U.S. military had fought innumerable guerrilla-style wars in the course of American history, the Second World War and the Cold War led U.S. planners to concentrate almost entirely on major conventional operations on well-defined battlefields. The North Vietnamese recognized that their strength lay in their stealth, so they rarely sought to engage directly with enemy troops and relied heavily on insurgents operating as the Viet Cong.

This environment created the conditions for a guerrilla war, in which success for U.S. forces was measured in the number of enemies killed rather than territory gained and where the enemy was elusive. Almost all combat incidents involved units of fewer than 200 people,<sup>59</sup> and most Americans on the front lines spent their time looking for enemies to fight — a practice known as “search and destroy.”<sup>60</sup> The unique nature of guerrilla warfare set the stage for a much crueler conflict than Americans expected, having largely forgotten the grueling guerilla campaigns on the American frontier, the Philippines, Haiti, and numerous other places across the previous century.

Many of the veterans who tried to explain sexual violence during the war said that it was just the nature of war. Michael Farrell, a former infantryman who participated in the Winter Soldier Investigation, described “the brutalizing effect that war has on people and that the Army helps to foster.” This brutalizing effect, he says, may be necessary for combat but it had

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<sup>58</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. 3rd ed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 71.

<sup>59</sup> William L. Horsch, ed., *The Korean War and the Vietnam War: People, Politics, and Power* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2009), 122.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: An International History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97.

unfortunate consequences. “Our platoon sergeant told us (I’m going to gentle down the language, I’m not going to say it the way he said it), he said, ‘If there’s a woman in a hootch, lift up her dress, you know, and tell by her sex; if it’s a man, kill him; and if it’s a female, rape her.’ You know, like this man, this was his third war.”<sup>61</sup> Farrell does not expand on this final point, but it’s clear he is identifying this brutalizing effect in his sergeant. The sergeant’s attitude toward rape, according to Farrell, is a natural product of being exposed to three wars.

Another veteran who spoke with a historian as part of the Vietnam Oral History Project gave similar testimony. When the historian asks him which of the books and movies about the war are the most accurate, he describes a scene in a book wherein Americans soldiers rape and murder a Vietnamese sniper. He says the book “said something about what happened to humans when we’re immersed in war and what can happen to [any of] us.”<sup>62</sup> For this veteran, being immersed in war can lead people to extreme violence, at least in theory. A nurse who spoke with Mark Baker for his anonymous oral history, *NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*, recalls a patient who was wracked with guilt about participating in a gang rape. According to the nurse, the man said, “I never thought I’d do anything like that, Lieutenant. But I guess you do stuff like that in war, don’t you?”<sup>63</sup> Either as a way of justifying his actions or as a legitimate explanation for his behavior, this man thought that sexual violence was a product of the war he was involved in. While the idea that war brings out the worst in people is by no means unique to guerrilla warfare, other veterans link specific elements of the war in Vietnam to violence against women.

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<sup>61</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>62</sup> Transcript, Anthony Borra Oral History Interview, March 25, 2003, by R. B. Verrone, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Baker, *NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (New York: First Cooper Square Press, 2001), 213.

The guerrilla nature of the war muddled the concept of enemy, which led some Americans to turn against civilians. Many veterans report a unique fear of Vietnamese civilians — their loyalties could lie with the North Vietnamese, and Americans were sometimes attacked by Viet Cong fighters who appeared at first to be unsuspecting civilians. Historian Christian Appy wrote that “[Americans] were ambushed, sniped at, and booby trapped, yet the enemy was either absent or in flight. Often the only Vietnamese encountered were villagers. In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that Americans and Vietnamese peasants viewed each other with hostility and suspicion.”<sup>64</sup> Sergeant Michael McCusker, a Marine who gave testimony in the Winter Soldier Investigation, said, “that whole Vietnam thing is based on fear. You’re scared to death all the way over there. You’re told continually that you’re going to die if you don’t [do] this, if you don’t [do] that. That every Vietnamese is going to kill you; that booby-trapped babies are going to be sent against you and old grandmothers are going to throw bombs at you.”<sup>65</sup> Americans on average interacted far more with civilians than with insurgents or enemy fighters, so some transferred their fear onto the civilian population.

The direct role which many Vietnamese women played in the war exacerbated this fear. Unlike the traditional battlefield conflicts to which Americans were accustomed — where women rarely held combat roles and were often entirely removed from war — women played a direct role in the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. The North Vietnamese encouraged women to participate, and an estimated 2.5 million Vietnamese women answered that call, with

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<sup>64</sup> Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 201.

<sup>65</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

as many as 1.5 million of them in combat roles within the Viet Cong.<sup>66</sup> Part of this stems from a deep-seated belief within Vietnamese culture that responsibility for fighting off invaders fell on every citizen. Vietnam has a long history of conquest and rebellion, and at this point in history had been at war with imperialist powers for two decades. An old Vietnamese adage held that “even the women must fight” to protect the homeland from invaders.<sup>67</sup><sup>68</sup> Women’s participation in combat was also a product of the guerrilla character of the war, as the Viet Cong had little reason to reject the assistance of women, especially when they could surprise unsuspecting Americans. This reality was unusual to American servicemen; in no American conflict to date have women been allowed to hold combat roles. The duality of women in the war — they could be peaceful peasants or communist fighters — unsettled Americans who interacted regularly with Vietnamese women, exacerbating an atmosphere of distrust and apprehension.

American servicemen report being unnerved by the role of Vietnamese women throughout the war. They didn’t know where they stood, as one veteran put it. A panelist in the Winter Soldier Investigation said that “it seems to me that the philosophy over there is like somehow or another we’re more afraid of females than we are of males, because ... you never knew where you stood, so you went overboard in your job with her in all your daily actions. You doubled whatever you would do for a male.” In explaining why he treated female civilians worse than males, he referenced women’s roles in combat. “We always heard these stories that, like,

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<sup>66</sup> Helen E. Anderson, "Fighting for the Family: Vietnamese Women and the American War." In *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, edited by David Anderson, 297-316. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 298.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson, "Fighting for the Family," 297.

the fiercest fighters were the females over there. You know, we didn't want to be embarrassed by getting our asses kicked by a bunch of females.”<sup>69</sup>

At least some Americans reacted with hostility to women they perceived as threatening, and the fact that the North Vietnamese employed both women and men as insurgents made American soldiers especially nervous. Women were not fighters in large scale during the Second World War or Korean War or on the American side in Vietnam,<sup>70</sup> so it was unnerving for Americans to have to reevaluate their accepted notions about a woman's role during wartime. In this environment, it made sense for them to be especially wary of female civilians, who may be their enemies. Journalist Nick Turse wrote that rural women were considered “fair game” because they “were generally assumed by Americans to be secret saboteurs or the wives or girlfriends of Viet Cong guerrillas.”<sup>71</sup> Under these conditions the lack of a clear enemy made striking out at Vietnamese women seem like a rational reaction to the conditions of guerrilla war.

It appears this unique fear of women translated into sexual abuse. Susan Brownmiller famously wrote that rape is about power, not sex in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, arguably the definitive work regarding the history and culture of sexual abuse.<sup>72</sup> This idea is corroborated by recent psychological studies. Psychologists Karol Dean and Neil Malamuth study sexual aggression, and they have found that many sexually aggressive men are expressing general aggression through sexual acts, not necessarily looking for sexual

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<sup>69</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>70</sup> Approximately 800,000 Soviet women held combat roles in World War II, but most of them worked as sharpshooters or tankers on the eastern front against the Germans. Few Americans on the western front had any interaction with female fighters. For more information, see Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*.

<sup>71</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 167.

<sup>72</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 256.

satisfaction.<sup>73</sup> Other psychologists have agreed with this conclusion, although it's important to note that there is wide variability reported in why certain individuals commit sexual assault.<sup>74</sup> This understanding of rape as a display of dominance helps to explain Americans' actions in Vietnam. Historians and journalists have described retaliation against civilians as a means of dealing with frustration about the war or about American casualties.<sup>75</sup> Some of the existing accounts of violence against women fit within this understanding as well. Soldiers could retaliate against civilians after losses as a means of trying to assert dominance in a situation where they felt powerless. A veteran who participated in the Vietnam Oral History Project recalls some of his peers bragging about raping an old woman, which he doesn't believe because, as he says, "She's all fucking dried up. Who would touch her?"<sup>76</sup> He attributes this assault to sexism — which is certainly present — but it also demonstrates that sexual assault is not purely driven by sexual frustration or desire. Instead, it often functions as a way of expressing or claiming power, which would be emotionally necessary for American men who possessed a deep-seated fear of Vietnamese women.

Another explanation is simpler: American men had more exposure to Vietnamese women than to Vietnamese men, and gendered abuse was a natural result of this circumstance. Young

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<sup>73</sup> Karol E. Dean and Neil M. Malamuth. "Characteristics of Men Who Aggress Sexually and of Men Who Imagine Aggressing: Risk and Moderating Variables." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72, no. 2 (February 1, 1997): 449–455.

<sup>74</sup> Heather Murphy. "What Experts Know About Men Who Rape." *The New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Some veterans also report directing their anger at children, as well as women. In Appy's *Working Class War*, one veteran describes building resentment toward the Vietnamese being expressed through violence against children. "When they originally get in the country [Americans] feel very friendly toward the Vietnamese and they like to toss candy at the kids. But as they become hardened to it and kind of embittered against the war, as you drive through the ville you take the cans of C-rats and the cases and you gem 'em at the kids; you try to belt them over the head. And one of the fun games that always went was you dropped the C-rats cans or the candy off the back of your truck just so that the kid will have time to dash out, grab the candy, and get run over by the next truck." (p. 294)

<sup>76</sup> Transcript, Calixto Cabrera Oral History Interview, May 3, 12, 26; June 14; July 5, 13, 27; August 25; November 15; December 21, 2005; March 1, 2, 30; May 1, 4, 30; July 24, 2006, by R. B. Verrone, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

South Vietnamese men were either drafted into the ARVN or fled to join the North Vietnamese forces. So the only people left in most villages were women, children, and the elderly. These were the only Vietnamese civilians Americans encountered, so it makes sense that women would bear the brunt of the violence against civilians. Since Americans rarely interacted directly with the North Vietnamese and many of their casualties resulted from booby traps or mines, their anger was often directed at the only Vietnamese people they saw — women. This kind of misdirected anger came out of the guerrilla war, as some Americans blamed the Vietnamese for the fear and loss they suffered.

In the absence of a clear enemy Americans used sexual violence as a means of retaliating against Vietnamese people. Some of these attacks were a deliberate response to casualties suffered by a specific unit. A Vietnamese man identified in Hess' oral history only as Bao told her that "when the Americans first came in 1964, a few military trucks were blown up by mines. And so, in retaliation the American soldiers killed every family they found in the shelters. They rounded up the women. They cut off their hair and cut off their ears, and they raped them."<sup>77</sup> Accounts like this exist from the American side of the war as well. Legal historian Michal Belknap's book about the My Lai massacre chronicles the weeks leading up to the attack. He writes that "mounting casualties had infused Charlie Company with a thirst for revenge. Some took out their hostility on the Vietnamese women."<sup>78</sup> According to Belknap, sexual violence existed within the company since the beginning, but incidents became more frequent after an explosion in a minefield killed two men and wounded more than dozen others. A member of Charlie Company, Fred Widmer, told documentarians Bilton and Kim about this phenomenon as well. "There were increasing numbers of women being raped. Out in the field it was an everyday

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<sup>77</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 161.

<sup>78</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 55.

occurrence for some people.”<sup>79</sup> In some instances, sexual violence directly followed casualties, as Americans sought to get revenge for their losses. Especially in instances of booby traps or bombings, they didn’t have the opportunity to confront their enemy directly, and some took out their anger on the civilians.

Some veterans describe a more general sense of retaliation against civilians, as they resented the Vietnamese not only for specific casualties but for the war itself. Appy wrote that “all the fear, frustration, and pressure generated by the American effort to make contact with the NVA and the Viet Cong was heightened by the mysterious role of the Vietnamese people.”<sup>80</sup> One veteran told him, “In Vietnam you identify every gook with the enemy ... You feel it’s their fault we’re there. If it weren’t for the Vietnamese, we wouldn’t be there.”<sup>81</sup> For others this anger translated into a feeling that the Vietnamese people owed Americans for fighting their war. Some thought they were owed anything they wanted, including sex. One veteran who admitted to sexually assaulting Vietnamese women explained that “the general attitude was, we are over here helping these people. The least they could do was lay a little leg on us.”<sup>82</sup> Some felt they were owed sex because they were participating in the war on behalf of the South Vietnamese. The resentment which some Americans held toward the Vietnamese people occasionally turned into hostility. One veteran, immediately after describing how he and some of his comrades raped and murdered a Vietnamese girl in front of her father, complained that the Vietnamese weren’t more appreciative of American help. “We expected them to run out and welcome us like that World War II type of thing ... But they were a little standoffish.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 81.

<sup>80</sup> Appy, *Working Class War*, 270.

<sup>81</sup> Appy, *Working Class War*, 270.

<sup>82</sup> Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, 130.

<sup>83</sup> Baker, *NAM*, 210.

Still others saw violence against civilians as a deliberate tactic in the fight against the North Vietnamese. Some veterans have even said that violence against civilians was a direct order they were tasked with carrying out. In *Working Class War*, Appy interviews Jerry Samuels, a veteran of the 65th Engineers Battalion, about his interpretation of his orders. Samuels told him, “you can assume, especially in a free-fire zone, that you can fire on everything that moves.”<sup>84</sup> Appy said that Samuels’ orders were vague and that Samuels felt that his officers either encouraged or invited the shooting of villagers, and certainly did not give clear orders not to. The Army photographer who documented the My Lai massacre — perhaps the most egregious example of violence against civilians, including rape — told filmmakers Bilton and Kim that the unit had interpreted their orders as a directive to kill civilians. “It was like they were fixed on one thing — search and destroy — and that meant killing civilians.”<sup>85</sup> This search and destroy directive facilitated the atmosphere for violence against civilians in areas where soldiers accepted this interpretation of policy, especially combined with a lack of clarity about where a given individual’s loyalties lie.

As guerrilla warfare animated Americans to attack civilians, sexual abuse against civilian women was another result of this interpretation of the “search and destroy” policy. Some Americans reported using military aims to justify sexual abuse, such as searching for weapons. Scott Camile, who testified in the Winter Soldier Investigation, was called upon to elaborate on his testimony before an ad hoc congressional hearing organized by South Dakota senator George McGovern. In his second testimony he said, “When women were searched ... [t]hey would be stripped naked, and kind of a game was made out of it. Like, men would put their fingers up their vaginas, supposedly searching for articles. And they would say, ‘I think my penis is a little

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<sup>84</sup> Appy, *Working Class War*, 269.

<sup>85</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 133.

longer, and I will try with that and see if there is anything there.”<sup>86</sup> While this is an absurd interpretation of any sort of essential task, it demonstrates a phenomenon in which legitimate needs were obfuscated in order to justify sexual abuse of civilians. In this scenario, men explained sexual assault as a military necessity. Another veteran alluded to this practice as a part of his training: “They have a class on when you interrogate a POW or a villager what to look for — where they hide things. They stress over and over that a woman has more available places to hide things.”<sup>87</sup> Some servicemen certainly believed that this kind of behavior was an extension of military policy.

Other veterans say that sexual violence actually functioned as a weapon of war, and they report using rape or threats of rape as a tactic for evoking fear within a potentially hostile population. The same veteran who testified in the Winter Soldier Investigation about “doub[ling] whatever you would do for a male” when interacting with female civilians said that this treatment of women also helped assert power over men. He said, “It makes a lasting impression on some guy — some ‘zip’ — that’s watching his daughter get worked over. So we have a better opportunity of keeping him in line.”<sup>88</sup> Joanna Bourke, in *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present Day*, wrote that in the Vietnam War, “Raping or killing civilians sent out a warning to the guerrillas (and people suspected of helping them.)”<sup>89</sup> In this way, violence against women functioned as a signal to potential enemies in the area. In the aftermath of the My Lai massacre, one officer said that he thought rape was an effective tactic because “if you scare people enough,

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<sup>86</sup> Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>88</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>89</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 362.

they will keep away from you.”<sup>90</sup> In this way, sexual violence has a purpose in the minds of those who committed it. They can warn their enemies or assert power over a population through fear.

Sexual violence, or the threat of sexual violence, was explicitly used by Americans as a means of torturing suspected Viet Cong. Reports from both Americans and Vietnamese people confirm that sexualized torture was, in some areas of the conflict, a well-known practice. At the 1967 International War Crimes Tribunal organized by philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell, one American lawyer recalled the experience of a Vietnamese woman who was subjected to “the tortured learned from Americans.” The woman, Tran Thi Van, remembered one man “stripped her, tied her arms, and thrust his hand into her vagina until blood came and she cried out in pain.”<sup>91</sup> She testified as well that her sister and her niece were tortured in similar ways, her niece fatally. Some American units were well-known for such practices. The 172nd Military Intelligence unit had a reputation for using sexual violence as a tactic for torturing Vietnamese women.<sup>92</sup> Don Dzagulanes, an interrogator with the American Division in Southern I Corps, said after the war that threatening rape was an effective interrogation technique.<sup>93</sup>

Vietnamese voices reflect the other side of this practice. Several women interviewed for Martha Hess’ oral history of the war, *Then the Americans Came*, talked about their experience with sexualized torture. Truong Tho Mong told Hess, “I am the only one still alive. They killed the others. I was nineteen. They used electricity and metal sticks and they raped me, many soldiers.” Le Thi Dieu, in addition to being raped, was also tortured with electricity — “they put electricity in my vagina, on my nipples, in my ears, in my nose, on my fingers. Le told Hess she

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<sup>90</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 362.

<sup>91</sup> Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 184.

<sup>93</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 368.

still suffers from the torture she sustained during the war. “More electricity inside my body and again and again they raped me. Even now I bleed.”<sup>94</sup> This kind of torture was used to root out suspected Viet Cong agents and gather information about enemy whereabouts. However, the sexualized nature of this torture reflects something more sinister than a desire for information. Here again Americans used military objectives or military necessity as a means for committing violence against women.

Vietnamese people were certainly unlikely to report an assault. Of all of the accounts I have seen, not a single one mentions or includes a Vietnamese woman reporting an assault to American authorities. But this absence is telling. There were a number of barriers to Vietnamese women reporting. To start, some of the victims of rape by American servicemen did not survive. In fact, many American accounts of sexual assault end with murder. If the victim did survive the encounter, she would also need to overcome significant cultural barriers to reporting. Even more so than in American culture, Vietnamese culture at the time saw sexual violence as extremely shameful. While by the 1970s American women were beginning to declare their equality and a so-called sexual revolution was underway, Vietnamese culture had much stricter views on sexuality, and rape was still considered extremely shameful. Of the many Vietnamese accounts in Hess’ oral history which mention sexual assault, several of them include an element of secrecy. One man said, “Many women were raped, but they never talk about it.”<sup>95</sup> Even the ostensibly progressive, communist North Vietnamese placed a high value on chastity for women, and sex (even forced sex) was seen as unvirtuous. Even if someone could overcome the stigma surrounding assault, pragmatic hurdles stood in the way of reporting.<sup>96</sup> The language barrier between Vietnamese peasants and Americans was hard to overcome. On top of that, few

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<sup>94</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 151.

<sup>95</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 108.

<sup>96</sup> Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, 74.

Vietnamese people would have known how to find someone with power, and the practical risks involved with trying to approach an American camp seem insurmountable. It makes sense that few Vietnamese women spoke up, and this left Americans to report on their comrades, which of course few of them did.

The conditions of guerrilla warfare created an environment in which it would have been very easy to mistreat civilians without retribution. Peter Arnett told Susan Brownmiller that “it was so easy to rape on a squad level,” because “there were no fixed targets, no objectives, no highways to take — it was patrol and repatrol, search and destroy. Anything outside the perimeter of the base camp or the nearest government-controlled village was enemy territory, and all civilians were treated as enemy ... Soldiers would enter a village without an interpreter. Nobody spoke Vietnamese. It was an anonymous situation.”<sup>97</sup> Another veteran said, “In a war situation where we have so much authority and where we’re questioned so little about what we do and how we do it, it’s real easy to rape amongst other crimes.”<sup>98</sup>

The conditions of guerrilla warfare in Vietnam facilitated sexual abuse against Vietnamese women. American soldiers in Vietnam fought an unfamiliar kind of war on foreign terrain against an enemy they could not see. The lack of a clear enemy or target for their aggression led to an attitude of fear, which was often misdirected toward civilians. Americans sought revenge for losses they had sustained or even for the war itself, and sometimes this desire for revenge led them to lash out against civilians, particularly women. Some Americans used military ends as an excuse for sexual violence against women. Finally, the chaos of the conflict

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<sup>97</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98.

<sup>98</sup> Transcript, Calixto Cabrera Oral History Interview, May 3, 12, 26; June 14; July 5, 13, 27; August 25; November 15; December 21, 2005; March 1, 2, 30; May 1, 4, 30; July 24, 2006, by R. B. Verrone, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

allowed men inclined toward this kind of abuse easy access to civilians, with very little oversight.

## Chapter Three

### “THE BIGGEST ANIMAL THERE”:

#### How Culture Influenced Servicemen’s Treatment of Women

While we can’t say with certainty how common sexual violence was throughout the war, it’s clear that the prevalence of violence against women varied across units. Veterans have testified that it was “an everyday occurrence,”<sup>99</sup> while others say they only heard rumors or perhaps nothing at all.<sup>100</sup> What was it about these units that made sexual violence more likely than others? A lot of this has to do with geography and context — some areas were more conducive to unauthorized violence than others. Rape was less likely in crowded urban areas, or where it was likely other Americans would see. However, another element that separated different units may be even more important here: culture. Some units had cultural commonalities which helped to dehumanize the Vietnamese people and encouraged violence against civilians, especially women.

Sexual violence was explicitly tolerated in some units. This allowance made men feel more at ease committing acts of violence against women. Several of the veterans whose testimonies I have reviewed described leaders turning a blind eye to assaults committed by their men. One veteran who spoke in the Winter Soldier investigation said that his commanding officer would condone everything. “Nobody told you that it's wrong. This hell changed him around. And he would condone rapes. Not that he would do them, but he would just turn his head

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<sup>99</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 81.

<sup>100</sup> Transcript, Jack O’Neil Oral History Interview, September 5, 10, 16, 2002, by S. Maxner, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

to them because who was he in a mass military policy.”<sup>101</sup> Scott Camile (who also testified about “doubling everything” for a woman) described his commanding officers’ reaction to rape. He said, “Too great a frequency of violations might result in a mild reprimand ... they brass would say, ‘Well, look, cool it for a little while,’ you know, ‘at least let it happen with a little more time in between.’ But we were never discouraged.”<sup>102</sup> Another described his own process of becoming desensitized to the violent acts committed by his men: “You don’t give up your morals, but you become a lot more tolerant. We believed this behavior was pretty commonplace. I didn’t think we were doing anything different from any other unit.”<sup>103</sup> The lack of decisive condemnation of rape and violence against civilians directly facilitated the My Lai massacre, as leaders ignored violence when they heard about it. Rape became increasingly common in the weeks leading up to the attack, but nothing was done to interfere.

Permissive leadership plays a key role, especially in units with a reputation for violence against women. In his analysis of the My Lai massacre, legal historian Michal Belknap argues that the failure of leadership within Charlie Company to check the abuse of Vietnamese women directly contributed to the massacre, because the men learned that they could get away with the abuse of civilians.<sup>104</sup> Other groups within the Americal Division faced leaders who refused to discourage violence against women, which undoubtedly contributed to the Division’s reputation for rape.<sup>105</sup> In most instances where veterans say that sexual violence was common in their unit, few or no official reports substantiate their claims.<sup>106</sup> While it’s impossible to say for sure, this

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<sup>101</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>102</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>103</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 79.

<sup>104</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 55-78.

<sup>105</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 368.

<sup>106</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 17.

absence seems to indicate that there was little action on the part of leadership in these units to reprimand men who abused civilian women.

Some leaders even actively encouraged rape. In Daniel Lang's 1969 New Yorker article *The Casualties of War*, which later became a blockbuster film, Lang chronicles the experience of a soldier whose commanding officer instructed him and four of his comrades to kidnap a woman for entertainment on their patrol. The men raped and murdered the young woman they had captured after 24 hours.<sup>107</sup> In this instance the leader seemingly believed that sexual violence was an acceptable way of rewarding his men, or of letting them blow off steam. Some certainly believed that sexual gratification was necessary for soldiers to perform well, and they didn't much care how their men got it.

On the contrary, some Americans knew that their commanding officers did not condone this behavior and took steps to prevent getting caught. A Vietnamese veteran described Americans "rap[ing] women in secret, one at a time, because they didn't want to get caught by their officers."<sup>108</sup> Some of the veterans who interviewed for the Oral History Project asserted that their commanding officers would have been strict about it, and also that they thought it wasn't very common or that they had only heard rumors from other units. It's clear that the attitudes of those in power toward violence against civilian women at least in part affected how their men treated Vietnamese women. Where leaders condoned this behavior, it was seen as commonplace. In less permissive units, some men thought sexual assault by Americans was rare.

Aside from permissive attitudes toward sexual violence, racism and sexism proliferated in units where violence against women was common. Racism toward the Vietnamese is commonly expressed in accounts of wartime sexual violence. Racialized dehumanization of the

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<sup>107</sup> Lang, "Casualties of War."

<sup>108</sup> Hess, *Then the Americans Came*, 159.

Vietnamese was often triggered by the fact that they were viewed as the enemy. Scott Camile, in his testimony for the Winter Soldier Investigation, tried to explain the phenomenon of sexual assault by saying, “It wasn’t like they were human . . . . They were a gook or a Commie and it was okay.”<sup>109</sup> Racial epithets like “gook,” “dink,” “dope,” and “slope” are common in descriptions of sexual violence, especially when those describing the act are trying to justify the behavior of those participating. Lieutenant Calley, the man held publicly responsible for the My Lai massacre, believed that it was not like they were raping and killing humans. Instead, the Vietnamese were “animals with whom one could not speak or reason.”<sup>110</sup> One veteran who testified in the Winter Soldier Investigation, Joe Bangert, said that “in regards to the women in Vietnam, first of all, you get this feeling sometimes when you’re over there that you don’t even think of their sex. This is really disgusting. You don’t even think of them as human beings, they’re ‘gooks.’ And they’re objects; they’re not human, they’re objects.”<sup>111</sup> This sort of attitude was commonly described as a result of the insurgent component of the war. There is certainly a belief expressed by those who have committed violence against civilians, especially civilian women, that all Vietnamese people were the enemy. In describing the attitude of Charlie Company upon entering My Lai one veteran told Seymour Hersch, “They’re all VCs, now go in and get them.”<sup>112</sup> Here, the line between enemy and civilian is blurred, and some Americans assumed that all Vietnamese civilians were the enemy.

In some units, this assumption translated into the dehumanization of Vietnamese civilians. Chris Simpson, in the Winter Soldier Investigation, said that “[rape] was pretty usual over there. Cause you’ll be out in the bush and you’ll meet women out on the trails. And the

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<sup>109</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 21.

<sup>111</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>112</sup> Appy, *Working Class War*, 274

Marines over there, just like the Army and the Navy, are human. But they just don't go about it the right way -- they might stick a rifle in a woman's head and say, 'Take your clothes off.' That's the way it's done over there. Cause they're not treated as human beings over there, they're treated as dirt."<sup>113</sup> This dehumanization of the Vietnamese appears to be the result not only of the war, but also of the fact that Americans did not see themselves reflected in the Vietnamese. The average Vietnamese civilian lived a very different life than Americans were accustomed to. They lived in a different environment, spoke a different language, wore different clothes. For many Americans these differences made it harder to empathize with the Vietnamese, and sometimes even to see them as human on the same level as Americans. In one of the internal files relating to the investigation into My Lai, one soldier is interviewed about his thoughts on raping Vietnamese women. He said he did not rape anyone, but that he felt the incident was funny because he "did not like the Vietnamese."<sup>114</sup> The process of racial othering allowed some Americans to commit violence against civilians with impunity. It's important to note that these attitudes were not ubiquitous. Some soldiers undoubtedly had positive feelings toward Vietnamese people. But some did not, and there were pockets of the armed forces where these attitudes were especially prominent.

In addition to racist attitudes, sexism was common among accounts of violence against women. The resentment that some Americans held toward the Vietnamese was magnified toward Vietnamese women. Some Americans resented the Vietnamese for the war and thought Americans were only involved in Vietnam because the Vietnamese couldn't fight for themselves. A minority of American soldiers believed that they deserved something in exchange for their

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<sup>113</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>114</sup> Document, Witness Statement, My Lai Collection, 1/19/1970, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

service, including sex. Vietnamese women, some believed, should be willing to have sex with American soldiers, and when they weren't some Americans got angry. One GI expressed his resentment toward the Vietnamese, saying, "The men can't fight and the women can't \_\_\_\_." The last word here is censored, but presumably the missing word is "fuck." When another American spoke to Congress, he sanitized the comment: "The women can't do their thing."<sup>115</sup> This paraphrase only exaggerates the belief that Vietnamese women's role in the war was sexual gratification of American men.

The view of Vietnamese women's bodies as sex objects for American men was further compounded by the outsized role of prostitution within the war. The monetization of women's bodies through institutionalized prostitution exacerbated existing sexist attitudes about the role of women, especially in this environment. AP reporter Peter Arnett described what he called "the McNamara theory," in reference to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. "In 1965 the main idea was to keep the troops contented and satisfied. Ice cream, movies, swimming pools, pizza, hot dogs, laundry service and hootch maids. The hootch maids were brought in as maids, not prostitutes."<sup>116</sup> Prostitution was explicitly encouraged by some within military leadership, who believed it allowed a necessary release. One Marine Corps general even advocated for bringing beer halls and brothels onto the base.<sup>117</sup> By extension a vast network of prostitution arose in major urban areas and near bases, where scores of Vietnamese women realized they could make more money than the average Vietnamese worker through prostitution. By the end of the war, half a million Vietnamese women made a living as prostitutes.<sup>118</sup> Military historian Elizabeth Hillman links the rise in prostitution to sexual violence, writing that "the attitudes toward women

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<sup>115</sup> Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, 131.

<sup>116</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 94.

<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Lutes Hillman, *Defending America: Military Culture and the Cold War Court-Martial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 103.

<sup>118</sup> Hillman, *Defending America*, 103.

and sexuality endorsed by military culture put women at risk of violence if they did not behave in the manner that servicemen expected.”<sup>119</sup>

When the use of women’s bodies became commonplace through widespread prostitution, this sometimes translated into violence when women were unwilling to engage. Hillman writes, “Sex workers were at greatest risk, but frustrated servicemen might direct their rage — whether the result of the losses experienced during war, unfulfilled sexual desire, or martial aggression — at virtually anyone who might cross their path at an inopportune time.”<sup>120</sup> Prostitutes certainly were at risk for sexual violence. A marine serving in Quang Tin Province described witnessing the rape and murder of a prostitute. Army veteran Mickey Carcille described forcing hootch maids into sex. One GI bragged, “Boy did I beat the shit out of a whore. It was really fun.”<sup>121</sup> The widespread nature of prostitution throughout the war — sometimes explicitly encouraged by the armed forces — facilitated an understanding of Vietnamese women as existing for the sexual gratification of Americans.

Some within the military embraced dangerous understandings of masculinity. As a natural consequence of warfare, particularly close-quarters guerrilla warfare, men wanted to appear to be the toughest, strongest, and consequently most masculine fighters. In this environment acting aggressively was a means of asserting dominance. In particular, men feared being treated as weak or feminine for failing to be adequately aggressive. According to some veterans, this intense drive to be masculine began in boot camp. One recruit said that “every feminine trait was routinely denigrated” as a function of policy.<sup>122</sup> Another said that “virtually every sentence, every description, every lesson embodies this sexual duality, and the female

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<sup>119</sup> Hillman, *Defending America*, 107.

<sup>120</sup> Hillman, *Defending America*, 107.

<sup>121</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 166.

<sup>122</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 367.

anatomy provides a rich field of metaphor for every degradation. When you want to create a solidary [sic] group of male killers, that is what you do, you kill the women in them. That is the lesson of the Marines. And it works.” Some veterans said that their instructors promoted rape as a recruitment tool for young men.<sup>123</sup> Others said that the denigration of women and femininity was common throughout basic training. Veteran and novelist Tim O’Brien wrote that the message in training was clear: “Women are dinks. Women are villains. They are creatures akin to Communists and yellow-skinned people.”<sup>124</sup> This attitude facilitated a culture of hostility toward women through dangerous understandings of the role of masculinity and femininity in conflict.

Hypermasculinity became extremely toxic when soldiers learned to identify power with violence. One veteran told Mark Baker:

You take a group of men and put them in a place where there are no-round-eyed women. They are in an all-male environment. Let’s face it. Nature is nature. There are women available. Those women are of another culture, another color, another society. You don’t want a prostitute. You’ve got an M-16. What do you need to pay for a lady for? You go down to the village and you take what you want. I saw guys who I believe had never had any kind of sex with a woman before in that kind of scene. They’d come back a double veteran. There were not men who would normally commit rape. They had not had psychological problems. Being in that kind of environment, you give a guy a gun and strange things happen. A gun is power. To some people carrying a gun constantly was

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<sup>123</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 367.

<sup>124</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 166.

like having a permanent hard on. It was a pure sexual trip every time you got to pull the trigger.<sup>125</sup>

Not only does he make a distinction between white (“round-eyed”) women and Vietnamese women, he also makes clear that some aspects of the war made otherwise normal men commit rape. He demonstrates this sense of connecting violence with masculinity, which is in turn connected to sex and, in this case, rape. When he says, “A gun is power,” he’s showing how sexual violence against Vietnamese women was closely associated with a sense of power, found through violence. He even explicitly links arousal and violence when he says that war “was like having a permanent hard on.” Earlier in his interview he said, “It was like I was a god. I could take a life, I could screw a woman.” For at least some in Vietnam, violence imbued a sense of masculine power which led to violence against women.

Others simply said that rape was a natural expression of men’s desire for sex. One veteran who interviewed as part of the Vietnam Oral History Project described in detail an incident in which he had intended to rape a Vietnamese girl because he thought she was “a cutie.” He said that he couldn’t go through with it, but that he understands why other men could. “I think rape exists in the heart of a lot of men, but only a few of them will let themselves play it out under the right conditions. Some of them of course are extreme. They’re going to create conditions ... I know that sexual fantasies are also pretty prevalent as hell. I know that rape as one of those sexual fantasies is also pretty prevalent.”<sup>126</sup> Most of the men in my research who have justified sexual violence have implied that it’s a normal desire for a man to have — that

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<sup>125</sup> Baker, *NAM*, 191.

<sup>126</sup> Transcript, Calixto Cabrera Oral History Interview, May 3, 12, 26; June 14; July 5, 13, 27; August 25; November 15; December 21, 2005; March 1, 2, 30; May 1, 4, 30; July 24, 2006, by R. B. Verrone, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

society can't blame a few of them for slipping up. One said, "The guys are human, man."<sup>127</sup> Another implied that soldiers were "human" when they raped women on patrols.<sup>128</sup> To be human in this context meant to be normal. And operating under this understanding of the roles of women and men in the war, being normal meant wanting sex no matter where it came from.

In this environment, men could bond with each other through violence against women. In my research, gang rapes are described much more frequently than individual rapes. Peter Arnett, who reported on the war for the Associated Press, thought that gang rapes were more common within the American ranks, "because the Americans were trained in the buddy system, for security. They were warned against the dangers of individual fraternizing on operations."<sup>129</sup> This assertion fits within my research on the topic, as most of the accounts I have found describe group activity. Not only did this serve the practical purpose of mitigating safety risks, it also promoted a sense of bonding and male unity. One veteran described a gang rape and murder of a Vietnamese girl in which he participated. "After we raped her, took her cherry from her, after we shot her in the head ... we literally start stomping her body. And everybody was laughing about it. It's like seeing the lions around a just-killed zebra. You see them in these animal pictures, Wild Kingdom or something. The whole pride comes around and they start feasting on the body."<sup>130</sup> He describes himself and his comrades as pack animals, uniting for a kill. Others described similar instances in which men from the same unit would all participate in an assault. One said, "They only do it when there are a lot of guys around. You know, it makes them feel good. They show each other what they can do."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 104.

<sup>128</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>129</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98.

<sup>130</sup> Baker, *NAM*, 210.

<sup>131</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 107.

Another side of this is that men feared being ostracized from the group if they did not participate. One veteran recounted participating in a gang rape because he was afraid his comrades would mock him as “queer” or “chicken.”<sup>132</sup> One commanding officer said, “I was in charge of a group of animals, and I had to be the biggest animal there.”<sup>133</sup> Here a sense of masculine bonding and the need for group unity facilitated violence, as remaining part of the in-group required participation in acts of sexual aggression. Especially in conflict, men felt that it was important to maintain group unity. One said that speaking out about the behavior of your comrades was akin to suicide.

The ease of committing assault was aided in part by an absence of reporting. Americans were loath to report incidents involving their comrades. One veteran remembered feeling torn about reporting violence against civilians, “There was a different set of rules and I don’t think any of us quite knew what those rules were ... But there wasn’t any way to [report] it and you certainly had second thoughts about taking that kind of a stand.”<sup>134</sup> Indeed several veterans explained that speaking out against the behavior of your comrades was a risky stand to take. In “Casualties of War,” the five men who participated in the assault fear speaking ill of their comrades more than anything else. One said that if he gave harmful testimony against his fellow soldiers “he would have it on his mind the rest of his life,” an attitude which he does not express about the assault itself.<sup>135</sup>

Others felt that their safety would be at risk if they spoke out. One veteran described a near-miss he witnessed involving some of his fellow men, where some of the men almost assaulted a young girl while he was nearby. He was conflicted about it even after war, saying “I

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<sup>132</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 367.

<sup>133</sup> Bourke, *Rape*, 366.

<sup>134</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 82.

<sup>135</sup> Lang, "Casualties of War."

don't know what I would have done with that sort of thing. I don't think I would have taken part in it, but I also don't think I would have tried to stop it." He explained his reasoning: "These are the guys who get in firefights with you. It would have been too easy to get blown away."<sup>136</sup>

Others simply felt that the sense of group unity was too pervasive. One veteran who interviewed as part of the Oral History Project described an incident in which a nurse reported some in the unit for murdering (and presumably assaulting) a Vietnamese woman. The men were court martialed and went to prison. "But the moral of this story was that, 'You can't trust your buddies not to turn you in.' That was to me the first indication that something's just not quite right here. To me, that wasn't what the moral of that story should have been."<sup>137</sup> This attitude also helps explain the prevalence of gang rapes. Not only did this "buddy system" promote a physical sense of security and power, it also decreased the chances of a report being filed.<sup>138</sup> If everyone within a group participates, the likelihood of a complaint is much lower because more members of the group are implicated in the abuse.

The existence of a toxic culture within specific units facilitated violence against women. Racist attitudes toward the Vietnamese, and Vietnamese women in particular, allowed American soldiers to dehumanize civilians and made lashing out at them easier. Sexist beliefs about the role of women as sex objects, or as necessary only as a means to sexual gratification, ran rampant throughout the ranks and fueled violence against women. A heightened importance of masculinity and warped understanding of masculinity as an expression of outward power made some men feel compelled toward aggression, while others believed that violence was a natural product of male sexuality. Groups bonded through violence against women, and exclusion from

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<sup>136</sup> Baker, *NAM*, 189.

<sup>137</sup> Transcript, John McNown Jr. Oral History Interview, September 19, 2003, December 12, 2003, December 18, 2003, January 28, 2004, January 30, 2004, by R. B. Verrone, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

<sup>138</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98.

the group was anathema to the conflict at hand. All of these laid the foundations for a culture of violence, not only toward the enemy but also often focused on civilian Vietnamese women. It's important to note, however, that these attitudes were not ubiquitous. Some units, and many veterans, lacked most or all of these understandings of the role of men and women in war. However, where these attitudes festered, sexual violence was culturally permissible. If anything, this may help to explain why some units and parts of the military have worse track records for sexual assault than others.

## Conclusion

### RAMIFICATIONS

Violence against women was a striking aspect of the US war in Vietnam. Perhaps even more striking, however, is how little the topic has been explored by historians who study the war. The war itself is fascinating, and a huge literature of work examines it from almost every angle. Yet very few historians have looked at this element of the war in depth. Those who have are almost always feminist scholars, mostly women, who study sexual assault and who occasionally turn their focus toward Vietnam. Sexual violence was an indisputable part of the war, and undercurrents of gendered violence appear in almost every historical account of atrocities in Vietnam. Popular movies from the 1970s and 1980s feature prominent instances of abuse, including some of the most famous movies about Vietnam such as *Casualties of War* and *Platoon*. Certainly, historians have known that sexual violence took place since before the war was history, but it has yet to be explored as its own subject of focus by mainstream historians.

The topic is uncomfortable, to be sure. But it's no more difficult to read or write about than any atrocity, many of which are the focus of expansive scholarship. The My Lai massacre, which included the rape and murder of hundreds, has always been one of the most thoroughly examined and debated episodes of the Vietnam War.

In the past several decades, changing attitudes toward gender in the United States have forced a reckoning on sexual violence. In the 1970s, second wave feminists sought to bring so-called women's issues into the forefront of American politics and culture. While second wave feminism achieved remarkable changes for American women — women gained the right to access contraception and abortion care and no-fault divorces in some states during this period —

little progress was made regarding gendered violence. The 1990s saw widespread (although not particularly forward-thinking) discussion of sexual harassment following Clarence Thomas' contested nomination to the Supreme Court and the passage of the Violence Against Women Act, which tried to address disparities in the criminal justice system regarding sexual assault and domestic abuse. However, it wasn't until the 2010s that the national conversation shifted fully toward sexual assault and harassment. The 2017 #MeToo movement sought to put faces behind statistics which were well-known at the time — one in three American women have been sexually assaulted<sup>139</sup> and four out of five of women have experienced sexual harassment<sup>140</sup>. The movement led to widespread rejection of formerly beloved men who had abused women, and many saw it as a turning point in our collective understanding of sexual assault and harassment. Culture writers like to say that we are living in a “post-#MeToo” world now, where sexual assault and harassment are more widely acknowledged and women's trauma is respected.

In light of changing attitudes, a reexamination of accepted historical narratives is in order. American history is surely scattered with unexamined female narratives. In particular, there's a need for reexamining established narratives surrounding women's role within society. I am particularly interested in how America's history changes when viewed through the lens of women's liberation and the #MeToo movement.

The Vietnam War is by no means unique in its cruelty to women. American soldiers in Vietnam were no more brutal than soldiers in any other major conflict. Perhaps because the war is more controversial than others like it, Americans tend to see the Vietnam War as uniquely brutal, either on the part of American soldiers who were let down by their superiors or on the

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<sup>139</sup> Centers for Disease Control. *Sexual Violence is Preventable*.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/sexual-violence/index.html>

<sup>140</sup> R. Chatterjee “A New Survey Finds 81 Percent of Women Have Experienced Sexual Harassment.”  
*NPR*. February 21, 2018.

part of civilians who suffered at American hands. The belief that Vietnam was somehow inherently crueller is likely exaggerated. But with regard to sexual violence against women, one aspect of the war in Vietnam is completely unique: Veterans talked about it.

Unlike the Civil War or the Second World War or any other major American conflict prior to the Vietnam War, soldiers who returned from Vietnam talked openly and honestly about violence against women. There are myriad potential reasons for this willingness, most of which have to do with changing attitudes toward women and war on the homefront.

Perhaps veterans were influenced by the women's movement. The Vietnam era saw attitudes toward women change at a dizzying speed. When the US first sent troops to Vietnam in 1964, American women were still largely confined to the home, contraception was only recently made legal for married women,<sup>141</sup> and rape was, as far as I can tell, not the subject of very much discussion. By the time Saigon fell in 1975, American women had gained the right to unabridged access to contraception<sup>142</sup> and abortion was recognized as a constitutional right.<sup>143</sup> On the fringes of the women's movement, activists sought to redefine sexual violence and bring attention to its prevalence.<sup>144</sup> In 1975, Susan Brownmiller published *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, a book I relied heavily upon for this project and which is still the definitive work on the subject. These shifting mores undoubtedly influenced Vietnam veterans, some of whom participated in the same moment of activism through anti-war protests and Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Due to the success of the women's movement in changing the national conversation on gender and sexuality, veterans who spoke out against the war had, for the first time, the vocabulary for describing the abuses they had seen. This helps to explain why some of the veterans who spoke

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<sup>141</sup> Oyez. "Griswold v. Connecticut." <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1964/496>

<sup>142</sup> Oyez. "Eisenstadt v. Baird." <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1971/70-17>

<sup>143</sup> Oyez. "Roe v. Wade." <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1971/70-18>

<sup>144</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 8.

out against the war in the Winter Soldier Investigation and other outlets sometimes borrowed the language of women's liberation — words like “sexist,” which were not commonly used prior to the 1970s.<sup>145</sup><sup>146</sup> Veterans who spoke out about sexual violence they had witnessed overseas did so using the vocabulary of the women's movement, and it's hard to imagine that veterans would have been so open about sexual assault without the influence of these expanding attitudes toward women on the homefront.

Perhaps veterans spoke more openly about this aspect of the war precisely because the war was so controversial. An upsurge in patriotism during other major conflicts of the twentieth century made public dissent or criticism unpalatable, but Vietnam was unpopular enough that veterans felt comfortable being open about their reservations. Historians know now that sexual violence was a facet of the Second World War, even on the part of American soldiers.<sup>147</sup> However, the popularity of the war at home meant that few veterans spoke out about the conflict at all, much less about this specific aspect of the war. The Vietnam era was unique among American conflicts because the war coincided with a broader proliferation of activism and social change at home, which the anti-war movement embraced and expanded. The war was unpopular for lots of reasons — President Johnson's attempts to disguise the character of the conflict left Americans feeling misled and suspicious, many Americans didn't feel connected to the cause of the South Vietnamese, and many doubted that the loss of American lives in Vietnam was justified — and criticism of the war was welcomed by many Americans. This environment may have made veterans more willing to describe abuses they had seen or participated in in Vietnam.

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<sup>145</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*.

<sup>146</sup> Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, 113.

<sup>147</sup> J. Robert Lilly, *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe During World War II* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.)

Maybe the widespread characterization of the war as misled — the result of malpractice by those in charge — gave veterans a sense of absolution for crimes they may have committed abroad. The view of the war which holds that those in power failed those on the ground puts little agency on veterans who behaved badly in Vietnam. Public opponents of the war rarely blamed individual soldiers for their role in what critics saw as an unjust war. Instead, most critics focused on political leaders such as Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, who were blamed for forcing American men into a cruel war. This attitude toward the war, although far from universally accepted, was common within anti-war activist circles. The same people who opposed the war but not the soldiers who fought it organized the Winter Soldier Investigation and events like it, providing the most prominent platform where veterans spoke out about violence against women in Vietnam. Certainly many of the accounts of wartime sexual abuse carry the tone of confession, and maybe veterans were comfortable confessing because they understood that few Americans saw the dark side of the war as the fault of those who directly participated.

Most likely, all of these conditions combined to create an environment in which veterans felt they could be open about abuses they had seen overseas. Vietnam veterans have spoken openly and honestly about the violence against women they participated in or witnessed, and many of them at least tried to explain why they did what they did. This allows us a unique opportunity to make key inferences about why this took place. When it comes to the motivations and experiences of men who tolerate or perpetuate violence against women, the testimony of Vietnam Veterans is some of the best evidence available. While the war presents very specific conditions in which this abuse took place, the amount of evidence available is unparalleled. Understanding the conditions which facilitated violence against women, even in a very specific

context, can still yield insights into the phenomenon of abuse more generally. In Vietnam, conditions that were specific to the war created an environment where violence against women was in places considered acceptable. Understanding how an atmosphere of fear, of racism and sexism and toxic masculinity, can push people toward gendered violence provides significant insight into how these crimes take place and perhaps how they can be prevented.

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## **Author Biography**

Liza Anderson is passionate about using policy to correct historical gender imbalances, particularly with regards to sexual violence and harassment. Throughout her time at UT, she focused on addressing these issues within the realm of higher education. As editor-in-chief of The Daily Texan, she wrote numerous investigative editorials about the University's mishandling of sexual misconduct investigations involving professors. Anderson also sat on the Provost's Misconduct Working Group, through which she worked with a legal team to rewrite UT's sexual misconduct and harassment policies. She graduated in 2020 with degrees in Plan II Honors and History and will pursue a joint degree in law and public policy.