Military Service

I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives.

I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him.

—Abraham Lincoln

Patriotism... is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion,

but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

—Adlai Stevenson

A man's country is not a certain area of land, of mountains, rivers, and woods,

but it is a principle; and patriotism is loyalty to that principle.

—George William Curtis

This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless

we make it a good place for all of us to live in.

—Theodore Roosevelt, 1901

I have become the man I am largely because of living in the United States. Freedom. Opportunity. These are words that have shaped my moral fiber. Freedom and opportunity saved me from a difficult childhood. Freedom and opportunity are responsible for my success. I believe freedom and opportunity should be available to everyone, regardless of class, creed or sex. A nation where freedom and opportunity are offered equitably, to everyone, is worth defending.

War is never black and white. There are never any true winners, as the losses, even to those reported to have won, are far too staggering. It isn't just the loss of human life, but the loss of dreams, of morality—of ambition. Wars are fought by our youngest and strongest, those with

unlimited potential. We take them when they are still idealists, when they are most likely to stand up for those rights the privileged and entitled among us take for granted.

But what if the cause is questionable? What if that soldier is not convinced he is fighting to defend his country, or those ideals? What if those pulling the strings, deciding who fights, and who does not, are given a little more opportunity and freedom, and are able to skew the scales a little in favor of their children, or who they believe is more worthy?

Is patriotism defined by the soldier who fights without question, or by the one who does, but is still willing to die for his country?

The Vietnam War was fought by many who questioned. By those who didn't have the opportunity to go to college. By blacks and those not privileged to already have management or executive positions. By those who had no choice.

It made us question who we are, what we're fighting for, and why.

Overview of the Vietnam War

Prior to World War II Vietnam was a French colony. The Japanese took control of the area during WWII leaving the area with a power vacuum at the end of the war. Communist Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh wanted to escape French rule in favor of a free communist state, however the allies of WWII believed the area belonged to France. Ho's supporters rebelled against the French, and when they began winning the US started sending aid to the French in 1950.

By 1954 France realized they were fighting a losing battle and pulled out of Vietnam. The country was divided by North and South by those who supported communism, and those who didn't.

Once France left the area, The Vietnam War had technically become a civil war between North and South Vietnam over communism. However to many, if not most people, Vietnam was a proxy war between Russia and the United States. Proxy wars are fought in third world countries when

the stakes are too high for the real combatants to risk fighting directly. In the case of Vietnam, the risk of nuclear war instigated by either Russia or the United States was, at that time, a real threat in the cold war era. The North Vietnamese army was supported by the Soviet Union, China, and other communist allies with financial aid, military training, materials and logistics, but not with troops. South Vietnam enjoyed similar support by the United States, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and other anti-communist allies, however by 1961 the US was directly involved by providing military advisers to South Vietnam.

In 1963 the US made the mistake of interfering in the Vietnamese election, under the premise of averting communism. The leader they supported, Ngo Dinh Diem, was hated by many Vietnamese and was executed in November of 1963. Once two US Destroyers were attacked by the North Vietnamese in 1964, the decision to deploy armed troops to the area was justified to the American public. Operation Rolling Thunder was a fitting name of the US bombing campaign of North Vietnam in 1965, supported by the US's first official combat troops.

The Vietnam War raged on through jungles infested with mercenaries and guerrilla warfare rebels known as the Viet Cong, intent on collapsing Southern Vietnam support from within. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and finally, Ford all made their mark on the war, each with different approaches and mandates from saving face, to diplomacy. By 1970 over two thirds of the US public thought sending troops into Vietnam was a mistake. President Nixon's election platform was premised on leaving Vietnam honorably. Upon the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, President Nixon was finally able to start withdrawing US Troops. Unfortunately in 1975 South Vietnam succumbed to the North Vietnamese communists.

58,220 US soldiers died in Vietnam. Millions of Vietnamese died either in battle or in the crossfire.

My War

The first US soldiers to fight in Vietnam were drafted under the peacetime selective service quota system. Decisions on who was drafted, and who was not, were made by military officers on local existing draft boards. If you were in college, married, or in jail, you had an automatic deferment.

It was clear to me, and many others at the time, since the majority of draft board officers were white men of privileged backgrounds, their eligible family members were the last to be called. We later learned that 80% of conscripts at the time were either black, uneducated or from low income families. Since burning your draft card was a crime, many used this method as both a public protest, and a way to choose jail over going to Vietnam.