

SALVAGEABLE MANHOOD: PROJECT 100,000  
AND THE GENDERED POLITICS  
OF THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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## ABSTRACT

In 1966, the Department of Defense under the direction of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara implemented a program called Project 100,000. Project 100,000 aimed to induct 100,000 men per year into the military, men previously unqualified for mental and physical reasons. A “War on Poverty” program, and part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, the goals of Project 100,000 were to give men jobs, provide skills training, and to inculcate a sense of obligation to country. From 1966 to 1972, nearly 400,000 “New Standards Men” were drafted into the military under Project 100,000.

While Project 100,000 is often discussed under the rubrics of race and class, this thesis argues that gender is the key variable to understanding the program. Project 100,000 must be understood within the context of a post-World War II culture dominated by warrior manhood and the belief that the military produced strong men. To policymakers, Project 100,000 was about salvaging, rehabilitating, and saving men from a future of poverty and marginalization. While the program failed to deliver widespread training in military occupations that could translate into the necessary skills to compete in the civilian workforce, this thesis finds evidence that tempers past assessments of Project 100,000 as a complete failure. Although the idealism that led the Johnson Administration to create Project 100,000 was overtaken by the exigent circumstances of the Vietnam War, salvaging manhood remains a crucial function of the post-Vietnam military.

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## INTRODUCTION

At the 1967 convention of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara declared, "I want to talk to you this morning about the unused potential of the Department of Defense -- a potential for contributing to the solution of the social problems wracking our nation." How, McNamara asked, can its "vast resources be used to contribute to our nation's benefit beyond the narrow -- though vitally necessary -- role of military power?" Mired in an ever-escalating war in Southeast Asia, McNamara suggested that the Defense Department open a new front in President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Project 100,000, dubbed "McNamara's Moron Corps" by its critics, aimed to induct 100,000 men per year into the armed services who were mentally unqualified (draft category IV) for military service due to poor performance on aptitude tests. McNamara's vision for these "New Standards Men" matched the loftiest goals of the broader Great Society. He told the convention, "Project 100,000 [will] salvage the poverty-scarred youth of our society at the rate of 100,000 men each year—first for two years of military service, and then for a lifetime of productive activity in civilian society." He believed that if America did not rescue these men from a future of futility, "they, their wives and their children would almost inevitably be the unproductive recipients of some form of the dole 10 years from now."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert McNamara, "Remarks by Secretary McNamara to the National Association of Educational Broadcasters" (Denver, Colorado, November 7, 1967).

The New Standards Men of Project 100,000 generally were recruited from America's poor. Nearly a third earned less than \$60 a week. Most were poorly educated, barely able to read at a sixth-grade level.<sup>2</sup> More than likely, they had not completed high school (53 percent), were from the South (47.6 percent), were disproportionately black (38.2 percent), and collectively, averaged in the thirteenth percentile on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). With the military's "experience in educational innovation and on-the-job training," McNamara believed that these men could break the cycle of poverty. In McNamara's view,

These young men... can be rehabilitated, both inwardly and out. They are men, we concluded, who... placed in an atmosphere of high motivation and morale, could be transformed into competent military personnel... Many are poorly motivated when they reach us. They lack initiative. They lack pride. They lack ambition.<sup>3</sup>

The Selective Service inducted 49,000 of these men in 1966, and 100,000 annually after that. In all, nearly 400,000 men who failed to meet the minimum requirements of the armed services prior to 1966 either received induction notices or enlisted under Project 100,000.<sup>4</sup>

Critics point out that the Defense Department implemented Project 100,000 shortly after Lyndon Johnson dramatically escalated America's involvement in Vietnam.

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<sup>2</sup> According to a September 1968 Department of Defense document, the percentage of those earning less than \$60 a week dropped to 18 percent. Still, 38 percent of New Standards Men were unemployed at the time of their induction. Office of the Secretary of Defense, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), *Project One Hundred Thousand: Characteristics and Performance of "New Standards" Men*, (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare), v. Over 40 percent of New Standards Men could barely read at a sixth-grade level. Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, The War, and The Vietnam Generation* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 129. Baskir and Strauss wrote *Chance and Circumstance* based upon their experiences with President Gerald Ford's Clemency Boards that reviewed for pardon draft offenders from the Vietnam War. Part of their reasoning for supporting clemency stemmed from the number of Project 100,000 men who deserted or went absent without leave (AWOL) during the war.

<sup>3</sup> McNamara, "Remarks."

<sup>4</sup> Janice H. Laurence and Peter F. Ramsberger, *Low-Aptitude Men in the Military: Who Profits, Who Pays?* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 15-61. See also: Thomas G. Sticht, William B. Armstrong, Daniel T. Hickey and John S. Caylor, *Cast-off Youth: Policy and Training Methods From the Military Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1987); G. David Curry, *Sunshine Patriots: Punishment and the Vietnam Offender* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*.

Fresh souls strapped into combat boots bound for Southeast Asia was the order of the day. However, the Selective Service System already churned out sufficient numbers of draftees to meet manpower requirements without having to tinker with enlistment standards. Why did military service become the means to *salvage, rehabilitate, and save* these men from themselves? Why did the Defense Department become an instrument of social welfare? To understand the nature of Project 100,000, it must be placed in the context of a post-World War II culture shaped by concepts of masculinity and war. How did officials construct manhood? What importance did they place on military service in building male citizenship? What experiences did they share that shaped their understanding of masculinity? If Project 100,000 was about *making* men out of those who they felt lacked the initiative, pride, and motivation to become men by themselves, what did war and military service mean to its creators?

Writing in 1993, Vietnam historian Christian Appy remarked that despite its prominent role in the Great Society, “Project 100,000 has virtually disappeared from the histories of the Johnson presidency.”<sup>5</sup> When New Standards Men are discussed in the historiography, it is under the rubrics of class and race. In his book, *Working-Class War*, Appy argues that Project 100,000 was one of several institutional mechanisms that significantly lowered the class composition of the military. The Selective Service system’s medical exemptions and student deferments that favored the more affluent, and the existence of safe-havens in the National Guard and Reserves created a working-class military. Lowering admissions standards through programs like Project 100,000 further shielded middle and upper class men from the draft. Lawrence Baskir and William

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1993), 32.

Strauss, in their influential monograph on the draft, *Chance and Circumstance*, argue that class politics motivated the Johnson Administration to create Project 100,000. They contend that Project 100,000, by expanding the working class manpower pool, limited dissension by reducing pressure on the middle class. The administration also shielded itself from criticism by portraying the program as an antipoverty measure designed to lift the disadvantaged out of the ghettos and into the military.<sup>6</sup>

Issues of race interact with, and often exacerbate, conditions of class. Baskir and Strauss note that black men were prime targets of Project 100,000. Despite protests from civil rights leaders, Baskir and Strauss stress that administration officials believed military service would fast track equality for black men. In *Pawns: The Plight of the Citizen-Soldier*, Peter Barnes shows that once standards were lowered, military recruiters targeted black men in urban ghettos. In one year in the San Francisco Bay area, Marine Corps recruiters enlisted five residents from white Piedmont and Berkeley, and 120 from black Oakland. The military sent African American recruiters to “rap with the brothers” about the benefits of military service and told young black men that the military was a colorblind place.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond race and class, scholars have begun to look at the history of the Cold War and Vietnam through a gendered lens. Gender is the wide set of fluid characteristics that

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<sup>6</sup> Appy, *Working-Class War*, 37; Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 122-123. See also G. David Curry, *Sunshine Patriots*. Curry challenges the image of the stereotypical Vietnam “draft dodger,” arguing that most were poor, uneducated, and came from broken families rather than “pampered,” unpatriotic, middle class boys from the suburbs. To Curry, Project 100,000 exposed socially maladapted men to hazardous military duty to shield more politically vocal middle class men from service in an unpopular war.

<sup>7</sup> Floyd B. McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality, said in 1966 that Project 100,000 was “a cynical method to punish black youths for the social ills imposed on them by the major [sic] society.” Quoted in “Rights Leaders Deplore Plan to ‘Salvage’ Military Rejects,” *New York Times* (August 26, 1966), 3; Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 125-127; Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984), 560-61; Peter Barnes, *Pawns: The Plight of the Citizen-Soldier* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 44. See also Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 319-20.

define social roles for men and women. While the categories male and female are biologically determined, masculinity and femininity are defined, negotiated, and constrained by time, place, and culture. According to historian Joan Scott, gender is useful because, “[it] is a primary way of signifying relationships of power... politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics.”<sup>8</sup> Historian Robert Dean writes that, “ideals of ‘manhood’ or ‘womanhood’ held by a society are circulated through the culture and, to a large extent, are individually internalized in the form of narratives.”<sup>9</sup>

Continuously and constantly, an individual’s gender identity is recognized and reinterpreted in relation to others in society. Events in men’s lives that coincide with hegemonic narratives, or those with the most currency, are retold more frequently.

Lyndon Johnson’s World War II service exemplifies this process. Although Johnson only participated in one brief combat mission during the war, he constructed a robust warrior identity. Depending upon the crowd and the context, Johnson changed, rearranged, and exaggerated the details of this story. John F. Kennedy, too, retold his heroic tale in different ways depending upon the audience and the circumstance. Often, a nation’s leaders are held up as role models, their experiences framing ideals of true manhood. In families, schools, and by popular culture outlets, masculinities are defined, shaped, and interpreted.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986), 1069-70.

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> For gendered interpretations of the Cold War, see: Susan Clark, *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000); K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*; Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1999); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Revised (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

Foreign policy decision makers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were subject to similar influences as lifelong participants in “manhood framing” institutions such as boarding schools, Ivy League fraternities, men’s clubs, and of course, the military. Dean writes, “Imperial traditions of ‘service’ and ‘sacrifice’ are invented and bequeathed to those” who participate in these institutions.<sup>11</sup> Men absorbed these narratives and gained access to elite institutions of power: Congress, the Departments of State and Defense, policy think tanks, top-tier academic establishments, and the White House. Seldom did a man possess all the requisite experiences (although Kennedy stands out as one, having attended elite boarding schools, Harvard, and heroic participation in World War II). Yet each involved in the creation of Project 100,000 was shaped by military experiences. Grounded in society’s expectations of masculinity, they gained prestige and a sharpened gender perspective from their military service. Gender, then, is critical to understanding not only identity, but also authority and citizenship. Gender offers an essential framework to consider the masculinities most admired in American culture and the means used by those in power to shape a new generation.

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<sup>11</sup> Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 4.

## FRAMING MANHOOD

The postwar world denied Americans the fruits of their victory. In the 1950s, the threat of a competing superpower and the danger of nuclear annihilation brought uncertainty and fear. Enemies were within, as well, and loyalty, once so clear, was now confused. Transition from war to peace raised questions of individualism and manhood in both domestic and public life. Books about contemporary society, such as Sloan Wilson's *The Man In The Gray Flannel Suit* (1955; made into a movie starring Gregory Peck in 1956) or William H. Whyte's bestselling *The Organization Man* address these central issues. Traditional male roles like head of household and breadwinner became unstable: how can a man establish a name for himself amidst a corporate bureaucracy that rewards "yes men" and punishes independence? In *The Organization Man*, Whyte argues that there can be no manly fulfillment within a structure that reinforces conformity and subservience. In the film *The Man In The Gray Flannel Suit*, a man's home, his sanctuary, crumbles at its foundation. The protagonist, Tom Rath, comes home each day to find that his children refuse to obey him and his wife barely respects him. Although Rath's World War II experiences haunt him, he still reflects on them fondly, yearning for a return to a more secure manhood.

In response, in searching for greater certainty and old verities, a warrior tradition became pronounced. It was apparent in the rebirth of popular westerns where lone men went on a quest to save civilization and themselves. It was particularly visible and even

more palpable in the cult of World War II. America's memory of the war epitomized military strength, security, and solidarity. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the warrior tradition, as a requisite for leadership as well as an idealized cultural principle, was ubiquitous. Dwight Eisenhower was the first general elected president in the twentieth century. World War II service played a prominent role in the political campaigns of Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, John Kennedy, Barry Goldwater, and Lyndon Johnson. Whether in politics or business, veterans wore their service as an emblem not only of patriotism but also their masculinity.

At a time when the authority of other traditional masculinities waned, popular novels and films refortified the military service narrative. Searching for emulative concepts of masculinity in novels about World War II, such as *The Naked And The Dead* (Norman Mailer, 1948) and *The Thin Red Line* (James Jones, 1962), may seem difficult, steeped as they are in themes of regret, cruelty, and futility. Near the beginning of *The Thin Red Line*, a group of soldiers gleefully conduct a treasure hunt to a shallow mass grave of decaying Japanese soldiers, pulling gold teeth from bodies and robbing the dead of their worldly possessions. Compassion and innocence are the first casualties of war. Young Lieutenant Hearn in *The Naked And The Dead* spends his days pondering the morality of warfare and the cynical motives of soldiering. His interlocutor, General Cummings, rewards his conscientiousness by transferring him to a combat unit where he is abruptly killed in an ambush, senselessly betrayed by the callous, war-hardened Sergeant Croft. The men in these novels become barbaric, ruthless, and wanton killers—such is war. But these novels also conveyed powerful lessons in American manhood. A reviewer of *The Naked And The Dead* wrote in 1948, “The generation that grew to

manhood on the eve of the last war was not ideally suited to saving the world for democracy. Its minorities--two of the characters are Jewish, one a Mexican-American--had not yet been assimilated fully into the national dream.”<sup>12</sup> To save their nation, they had to change. They killed for a cause that none could doubt. In coming together from many races, religions, and regions, they proved their mettle and the truth of the melting pot. These Americans, these new men, had triumphed. In spite of the authors’ best intentions to question men’s actions in fighting, they also reinforce the belief that men persevered. War is hell, but it is a hell survived. In novels about World War II, such as *The Young Lions* (Irwin Shaw, 1948), *From Here To Eternity* (James Jones, 1951), and *Battle Cry* (Leon Uris, 1953), America is reaffirmed by the sacrifice of its young men.

These lessons are apparent when looking at World War II films. Film scholar Jeanine Basinger argues that it was essential for World War II combat movies to portray a group of men, comprised of mixed backgrounds, who come together to complete the mission. Films such as *A Walk in the Sun* (1946), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Battleground* (1949), and *The Longest Day* (1962) are representative. Led by a tough, no-nonsense leader, of which John Wayne (*Sands of Iwo Jima*, *The Longest Day*) is the archetype, a familial bond of brotherhood is created. Characters like Sergeant Stryker or Lt. Colonel Vandervoort stand in as father figures. On the screen, men bicker over small things, even get into fights, but when the shooting starts they all unite. Those who survive combat are changed men. At the end of *Sands of Iwo Jima*, after Stryker is killed, the men read an unfinished letter to his son. Stryker’s men feel like he is writing to them, conferring on his military sons the nobility of masculinity. Their pledge to finish the

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<sup>12</sup> David Dempsey, “The Dusty Answer of Modern War,” *New York Times* (May 9, 1948), <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/04/reviews/mailler-dead.html> (accessed August 29, 2010).

letter is a promise to return home after the war and make it a better place. For the American audience, Basinger contends, what is important is the ritual of watching war together. Through this shared experience, Americans made sense of the war and celebrated its satisfactory conclusion and their survival. “The war was now war movies,” so crucial to understanding the construction of warrior masculinities.<sup>13</sup>

Building on this understanding of Cold War masculinity, it is essential to consider the gendered arguments, military experiences, and identities of the men who created Project 100,000. The centrality of the military service narrative in the personal stories of men such as Kennedy, Johnson, McNamara, and members of the defense establishment framed the ideological foundation for Project 100,000. The personal became political in the language they used to defend the project from critics and in extolling the virtues of military service. Analyzing their words within the context of the decision-makers personal narratives will help establish a gendered interpretation of Project 100,000 and a better understanding of America, masculinity, and the Vietnam War.

John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson came from remarkably different backgrounds. One was the son of a destitute farmer from Texas, the other was born to a wealthy businessman and ambassador. Johnson attended a backwater community college; poor boys could afford little else. Kennedy attended Eastern prep schools and graduated from Harvard. Johnson spent half of his life running from the Hill Country of Texas. Kennedy was a Boston Brahmin, bred to carry the family standard. Johnson’s father, Samuel Ealy, was a member of the Texas House of Representatives, sent to Austin by impoverished farmers on a populist platform. Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. held a number of positions in the

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<sup>13</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 156.

Roosevelt Administration, most notably Ambassador to Great Britain. Johnson's political pedigree was born of frustration from generations of men eking out a living in subsistence farming and cattle ranching. Kennedy's career was rooted in his father's ambitions and fortune.<sup>14</sup>

The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 occurred at different points in the two men's lives. Johnson, nearly a decade Kennedy's senior, had already established himself as head of the Texas National Youth Administration (NYA) under the New Deal, as a staffer to Congressman Richard Kleberg, and finally, through election to the United States House of Representatives in 1937. According to historian Robert A. Caro, Johnson's ambition for high office began at an early age; he told teachers and schoolmates, "Someday, I'm going to be President."<sup>15</sup> War service was a necessary ingredient to ambition. In Congress, where Johnson rarely took a firm stand on bills under debate, he was a vociferous ally of President Roosevelt in passing the Selective Service Act in 1941. At the time, isolationist sentiments were still strong in American political discourse. The popular opinions of Father Charles Coughlin and America "Firsters" like Charles Lindberg resonated with many members of Congress, and the Act passed by a razor-thin majority, 203-202. Johnson, despite growing up in a house where the writings of socialist Eugene Debs were gospel, began to believe that peace could only be achieved through war. Rejecting the policies of "the old men of yesterday," Johnson

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<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path To Power*, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, Vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy. 1917-1963* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2003); Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997); Edward J. Renehan, *The Kennedys At War: 1937-1945* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Caro, *Path To Power*, 100.

declared, “Every one of us is a soldier in the heat of Democracy’s battle against the Nazi world.”<sup>16</sup>

While politics weighed heavily on Johnson’s decision to join the military, Kennedy’s reasons were more complicated. Most Kennedy biographers agree that his decision hinged on several factors, manhood and duty to country chief among them. Declared Kennedy, “I am rapidly reaching a point where every one of my peers will be in uniform... and I do not intend to be the only one among them wearing coward’s tweeds.”<sup>17</sup> Kennedy also felt that he spent much of his youth in the shadow of his older brother, Joseph Kennedy, Jr. Finally, most of young Jack’s decisions revolved around his complex relationship with his father. Joe Kennedy, Sr. held military service in disdain, calling it a “suckers’ game,” and during World War I he gave up several lucrative banking positions to run a shipyard at a fraction of his annual income to avoid the draft. While at Harvard, the two sons mirrored their father’s isolationist views in their writing and political activism. Torn between his father’s antipathy for war and his growing concern that he might miss out on his generation’s defining moment, Jack Kennedy had a difficult choice to make in 1941. The decision to join the military became Kennedy’s opportunity to prove himself.<sup>18</sup>

Johnson and Kennedy spent the first half of 1942 wearing the military uniform of a country at war, albeit far from any real danger. While Kennedy worked at Naval Intelligence in Washington D.C., Johnson inspected naval bases in California, or in “the

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<sup>16</sup> “President Calls For ‘Naked Force,’” *New York Times* (August 22, 1941).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Renahan, *The Kennedys At War*, 191.

<sup>18</sup> Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 61-68, 81-82; Reeves, *A Question of Character*, 48-55; Renahan, *The Kennedys At War*, 123-125, 191-192.

Pacific” according to friendly newspapers in his congressional district.<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, meanwhile, maintained an active social life befitting a young bachelor in uniform. Both men worked in the usual wartime positions doled out to well-connected men. Yet, after several months of serving stateside, Kennedy and Johnson used these connections to be assigned overseas. Certainly Johnson, who possessed an undeniable knack for politicking, saw the benefits of combat. After all, he was fighting for reelection. His aides filed his congressional candidacy papers on the same day that Johnson shipped off to the Pacific. According to historian Doris Kearns, who interviewed Johnson years later about World War II, his foray into the Pacific “would make a decisive impression. For him, as for most others of his generation, it would be the event that resonated in their minds whenever they thought about international affairs: the decisive lesson.”<sup>20</sup>

Lieutenant Commander Johnson received orders for Australia on April 29, 1942. At Johnson’s request, President Roosevelt tasked him to report on the war effort, which at the time (prior to the Battle of Midway) was going badly. Two Lieutenant Colonels, Samuel E. Anderson and Francis R. Stevens, accompanied Johnson to Australia. Johnson was shocked at how disorganized the military effort was in Australia, remarking in his diary that U.S. and Australian servicemen were “all fighting each other” and that “indecision, delay, and procrastination” were real problems.<sup>21</sup> Once in Melbourne, General Douglas MacArthur unenthusiastically briefed the trio and remarked wryly to Johnson in particular, “God only knows what you’re doing here.”<sup>22</sup> From there Johnson toured military facilities in Melbourne, Sidney, and Brisbane, keeping brief notes in his

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<sup>19</sup> Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 23-26.

<sup>20</sup> Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 95.

<sup>21</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Diary” (81 pages of handwritten notes in a small notebook written during his time in the Pacific), LBJ Library.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 237.

diary about troop levels and equipment conditions, while jotting down observations on the morale of the men he encountered. Despite its brevity, the diary gives an impression that the men Johnson met truly inspired him. Little notes such as, “Poor mail service. Good Food—lots of guts [referring to the men]” or “One of the best, General Aiken” are scattered throughout.<sup>23</sup> He seemed genuinely impressed with how the men maintained their spirits despite occasional mail, poor quality food, and difficult living conditions.

Not satisfied with merely inspecting airfields, Johnson insisted that MacArthur allow him to participate in a bombing run to “see personally for the President just what conditions were like.”<sup>24</sup> Observing officers were generally barred from participating in bombing missions, given the lack of space on the flights and the likelihood that the planes would encounter real danger. Least likely to be permitted to go would be high profile men like Johnson. Yet, he persisted and convinced MacArthur to let him fly. Before boarding a B-26, the *Heckling Hare*, a crewmember gave him a final warning: “You’re out of your goddam mind. This ain’t no milk run, believe me! You don’t need to come along and get shot up to find out about conditions here, or the things we need: we’ll *tell* you that.”<sup>25</sup> Johnson, undeterred, took his place in a spare jump seat.

Shortly into the bombing run, Japanese Zeros attacked the B-26s in Johnson’s formation. The right engine of the *Heckling Hare* stalled and quit, causing the plane to dive. Pilot Walter Greer began evasive maneuvers to shake the three Zeros that fired on the wounded bomber. Amidst the fire and confusion Johnson, “cool as a cucumber,” according to one crewmember, stood on a stool so he could see out of a plexi-glass dome

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<sup>23</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Diary.”

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 238.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 40-41.

in the ceiling of the plane. Not satisfied with watching, Johnson assisted in spotting targets for the gunners. Smiling throughout, he gestured with three fingers to one of the gunners, saying calmly, “There’s three out there to the left.” With a bad engine and taking numerous shots to the fuselage, the *Heckling Hare* had to jettison its payload and limp back to base without dropping its bombs. After the Zeros broke off their attack, Johnson laughed and said to the radioman, “Boy, it’s rough up here, isn’t it?”<sup>26</sup>

Johnson’s ambition might have resulted in his death, but his decision to go on that mission gives us insight into his character and the type of man he envisioned himself to be. He saw himself as a courageous man of action. He insisted on flying and once he was in the firefight he refused to be an observer. In that brief moment when he calmly pointed out targets for the gunner, Johnson felt like he was a warrior in the heat of “Democracy’s battle.” Far from the safety and the routine of his Congressional office, surrounded by bullets, chaos, and roaring engines, Lieutenant Commander Johnson felt alive. One could easily write off his campaign statements about being “in the trenches” as political grandstanding, but politics or not, Johnson took serious risks to carry out those promises. Blind ambition may have made Johnson a warrior, if only for a moment, but he was aspiring to a masculine ideal he had only dreamed of before.

Several officers, who were anxious to see if the Congressman had made it back, met the crew on the runway. Johnson’s only remark: “It’s been very interesting.”<sup>27</sup> Ten of the eleven bombers returned from that mission. Lt. Colonel Stevens, one of Johnson’s comrades from Washington, died along with the crew of the *Wabash Cannonball*. Johnson reflected briefly in his diary on the courage he witnessed, “Boys unshaven,

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 41-43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

breath smells, they haven't bathed but Crockett, Bowie, Bonham, and Travis had nothing on them but guts [sic],” and also the tragic loss of his friend, “Couldn't get my mind off Steve... and other fine boys.”<sup>28</sup>

General MacArthur, who was more than a little relieved that the Congressman had returned unscathed, summoned Johnson to his headquarters. When MacArthur asked why Johnson had been so reckless, Johnson responded, according to a witness, “many of the airmen knew that he was a Congressman from Texas—that many were his constituents—and that he wanted to show them he would face the same dangers they had to face.”<sup>29</sup> MacArthur awarded Johnson and Lt. Colonel Anderson Silver Stars for heroism. Lt. Colonel Stevens was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart, posthumously. Johnson was the only person aboard the *Heckling Hare* to receive a medal. Silver Star in hand, he was shortly on a plane bound for the States and back in Congress—and out of uniform—by midsummer 1942. He wore the Silver Star pin on the lapel of his suit jacket for the rest of his life.<sup>30</sup>

By this time, Ensign Kennedy had grown tired of fighting the war behind a desk. Despite his quiet routine, Kennedy checked into Chelsea Naval Hospital in early summer 1942 suffering from back pain. While convalescing for nearly two months, Kennedy first heard about PT boats. The PTs were heavily romanticized in the press despite being utterly ineffective in combat. From his hospital bed, Jack listened to radio broadcasts recounting the daring deeds of PT skippers. Kennedy was drawn to the idea of commanding his own vessel. On his decision to forsake the safety of Washington D.C.

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, “Diary.”

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Caro, *Means of Ascent*; Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*. Dallek argues that Johnson's Silver Star may have been political back scratching on the part of General MacArthur. MacArthur saw the Congressman as a political ally in Washington, one who could champion his position to the President and in the press, 240-41.

and request active service with the fleet, his life-long friend and fellow veteran Lem Billings offered this poignant explanation,

He was always so behind the eight-ball with his health, that he would engage in this bravado—right? —to overcompensate and prove he was fit when he really wasn't. So, he turns into a killer football player and he turns into a voracious womanizer, a stud. Then what's next? Well, of course, he turns into a voracious warrior, hungry for a fight. It was the logical next step given the times. Nothing surprising. I always thought it was kind of interesting that Jack read Hemingway an awful lot, with all those flawed heroes coming on strong: striving, enduring, spoiling for fights and for opportunities to prove themselves. That was Jack.<sup>31</sup>

Kennedy received appointment to the Naval Reserve Midshipman's School at Northwestern University on July 27, 1942 along with 1,023 other candidates, a "cross-section of American manhood" according to one reporter, simply "a good bunch" in Kennedy's eyes.<sup>32</sup>

Now a Lieutenant, junior grade, Kennedy reported to the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron Training Center in Rhode Island. It was here that he realized the inglorious truth about PT boats, a dose of reality conspicuously missing from the romantic accounts circulating in the press. The PTs were about eighty feet in length, wooden-hulled, and powered by three gasoline engines totaling about 4,500 horsepower with a top speed of about forty knots. Woefully under-armored and lacking effective weaponry (usually a combination of .50 caliber machine guns, 40mm cannons, depth charges, and torpedo tubes that fired antiquated torpedoes), the number of Japanese ships or aircraft destroyed in combat was zero when Kennedy entered school. Due to a lack of live munitions for training, most PT crewmen never fired a torpedo until they reached combat.

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Renahan, *The Kennedys At War*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Renahan, *The Kennedys At War*, 221.

Lieutenant Kennedy took command of PT-109 and her crew on April 25, 1943. Nightly patrols in the waters near Tulagi Island followed. For the most part, these patrols were uneventful and served as a respite from the constant blackouts and frequent air raids on Tulagi. Now Kennedy realized the disconnect between the war and how it was reported in the press back home. The news stories, filed by reporters “seldom out here,” angered Kennedy. “People get so used to talking about billions of dollars and millions of soldiers that thousands of dead sounds like drops in the bucket.”<sup>33</sup> Kennedy despised the absentee leadership of high-ranking admirals and generals, warning his father, “Don’t let any one sell the idea that everyone out here is hustling with the old American energy. They may be ready to give their blood but not their sweat, if they can help it, and usually they fix it so they can help it.”<sup>34</sup>

Kennedy’s disconnectedness from the home front, coupled with his disdain for ineffective military bureaucrats, tightened his ties to those around him. The isolation of war, the routine of nightly patrols, and the inability to relate to those in higher positions of command were the building blocks of camaraderie. It was this close bond with his men that Kennedy cherished most. As a son of the elite, he should have felt comfortable with the rigid customs and courtesies that surround generals and admirals. Yet, he was far more at ease in his rat and cockroach infested PT boat, eating food that unsettled his troubled stomach, and rubbing elbows with his mostly blue-collar crew. Although his wealth and social standing were well known in the squadron, it was never important according to accounts of those with whom Kennedy served. His men, who knew about

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<sup>33</sup> Letter, John F. Kennedy to parents, undated (received September 12, 1943), “Correspondence 1943-Family” folder, Personal Papers 1917-1963, box 5, John F. Kennedy Library.

<sup>34</sup> Letter, John F. Kennedy to parents, May 14, 1945, “Correspondence 1943-Family” folder, Personal Papers 1917-1963, box 5, John F. Kennedy Library.

his poor health, protected Kennedy from scrutiny. Thus, his first commanding officer once said, “As far as I can remember, his health was good. If there had been any serious problems I would certainly have relieved him of command of the 109.”<sup>35</sup> His men, however, would remember their skipper sleeping most nights on a wooden plank because of his bad back and eating gallons of ice cream for his troubled stomach. Brotherhood also kept Kennedy from trouble on a number of occasions. After one routine patrol, Kennedy and another PT skipper played chicken on their way back to base. Kennedy flinched late and rammed his boat into the dock damaging the 109. His close relationship with his commanding officer saved him from a court martial and his men fondly dubbed him “Crash” Kennedy after the incident. Removed from the empty rhetoric in the press and innocent conversations at home about valiant men marching silently and heroically into battle, Kennedy learned the truth about war: survival is all that matters. More importantly, the bond with his men was the key to survival.

In late spring 1943, Squadron Two was ordered to the Russell Islands, near the Japanese stronghold of New Georgia. The New Georgia campaign had turned into a two-month-long bloodbath for the Marines fighting the heavily entrenched Japanese. Nightly convoys of Japanese destroyers, frigates, and troopships ran supplies and reinforcements through Ferguson Passage and Blakett Strait—or “the Slot”—bound for the islands of New Georgia, Kolombangara, and Vella Lavella. Called “the Tokyo Express” by Admiral Halsey, the PTs were tasked with interdicting Japanese movement. Within a week, Kennedy’s crew on the 109, along with those from the 105, 106, and 161 sustained casualties. Despite the constant attacks and austere living conditions, morale was high on

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Reeves, *A Question of Character*, 61-62.

the 109. He wrote his parents, “What is interesting though is that some of the mildest most unassuming fellows—stand up & do the best job—and another pleasant surprise—the tougher it gets—the less beefing you hear.”<sup>36</sup>

On the night of August 1, 1943, the 109 sat idling in “the Slot,” waiting to ambush Japanese vessels returning from resupplying troops on a nearby island. Against squadron policy, Kennedy had the gears to only one of his three engines engaged, thus making his boat less maneuverable. When the destroyer *Amagiri* struck, it split the 109 in half. The impact threw Kennedy forward into the cabin, where he landed on his back. According to the official report, scarcely ten seconds elapsed between sighting and impact. Two crewmen died in the crash and the boat’s engineer was badly burned. Kennedy and five others clung to a piece of the hull left floating in the water. Kennedy and two crewmen found the five other survivors and brought them to the relative safety of the floating hull. Getting his bearings, Kennedy directed his men to swim to a deserted island. Swimming on his stomach, he towed his burned shipmate by clenching the straps of his life jacket in his teeth. This ordeal took five hours of hard swimming.

Stranded on a deserted island, Kennedy’s men soon exhausted the supply of coconuts from the few trees growing there. After a failed attempt to swim out into the strait and flag down a passing PT boat, Kennedy and his men swam to Olanana Island a half mile away on August 4. His crew safe, Kennedy and another crewman swam to a nearby island in hope of finding help, when natives in canoes spotted them. They waved their arms and yelled, but the natives paddled away without stopping. Although Kennedy did not know it, the natives worked for the Allies and reported to a coast

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Renehan, *The Kennedys At War*, 260.

watcher. The natives returned to meet Kennedy, who carved his famous message in a coconut for them to deliver: NARU ISL NATIVE KNOWS POSIT HE CAN PILOT 11 ALIVE NEED SMALL BOAT KENNEDY. Kennedy's squadron launched a rescue and all survivors of the crash were saved.

Kennedy's emotions were mixed. He was angry that his fellow PT skippers left him and his men for dead. He was embarrassed at losing his boat. Most of all, he was bitter about the deaths of two of his men. Shortly after the rescue, he wrote to his parents, "It was a terrible thing... losing those two men." He told his parents that one of them "had a feeling that something was going to happen to him. I don't know whether it's just coincidence or what. He had a wife and three kids." The other "was only a kid himself."<sup>37</sup> However, the resentment he had in the first few months of combat was gone. He wrote his father, "I had become somewhat cynical about the American as a fighting man. I had seen too much bellyaching and laying off. But with the chips down—that all faded away."<sup>38</sup>

His own modesty aside, Kennedy's heroism made national headlines. A front-page article in the *New York Times*, "Kennedy's Son Is Hero in Pacific As Destroyer Splits His PT Boat," made reference to Kennedy's desperate swim out into "the Slot" and his coconut message.<sup>39</sup> The Navy, perhaps needing a human-interest story, cleared Lieutenant Kennedy of any wrongdoing or negligence and awarded him the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for saving his men's lives. An article, "Kennedy Cited as Hero by

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<sup>37</sup> Letter, John F. Kennedy to parents, received September 12, 1943.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "Kennedy's Son Is Hero in Pacific As Destroyer Splits his PT Boat," *New York Times* (August 20, 1943), 1.

the Navy For Saving Men of PT Crew in Solomons,”<sup>40</sup> reprinted the medal citation in full. Despite the headlines, whenever Kennedy spoke he put the spotlight on his men and talked of their courage. He never thought his actions were extraordinary. Regardless, the story of the son of an ambassador saving the lives of his fellow sailors struck a chord with the American people. This is what they expected of their fighting men.

World War II was significant for Kennedy personally, not simply for his political future as critics were quick to point out. Like most men who participated in the war, he returned to the world changed. He was different physically—significant weight loss and jaundiced skin—and his health continued to worsen. His poor health became visual evidence of his personal sacrifice. Importantly, Jack had also undergone a psychological transformation. During those first few months in the Pacific, he expressed cynicism toward ideals of American manhood and felt concerned that the United States lacked the resolve to win. He saw ineptitude, “bellyaching,” and laziness. Yet shortly after his rescue, he wrote to his father, “I can now believe—which I never would have before—the stories of Bataan and Wake.” He had seen resolve, sacrifice, courage, and had felt the close bond of men.<sup>41</sup>

Jack Kennedy came from war knowing that the military could transform men, and while combat sobered Kennedy, it revitalized Johnson. Perhaps lacking the modesty of Kennedy and certainly possessing a knack for storytelling, Johnson never missed an opportunity to retell his experiences, show footage of himself in uniform to friends at a dinner party, or remind people of his war service. Johnson boastfully exaggerated until

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<sup>40</sup> “Lieut. Kennedy Cited as Hero by the Navy For Saving Men of PT Crew in Solomons,” *New York Times* (June 12, 1944), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Letter, John F. Kennedy to parents, received September 12, 1943. For criticism of Kennedy, see Reeves, *A Question of Character*, especially pages 67-68: “The perpetual inflation of the PT-109 story for political purposes reveals a basic lack of integrity on Jack’s part.” For Johnson, see Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 45-53.

his version of the story did not resemble the truth. The routine bombing run became a “suicide mission.” A shot-down Zero became fourteen kills: Johnson even gave a nickname to his warrior persona, telling people “the boys” called him “Raider.” Johnson’s embellishment of his war record reveals how he wrapped himself in a warrior image, one that was seamlessly woven into the tapestry of the man and the politician.

Kennedy also surrounded himself for the rest of his life with reminders of his war service. The tale of the PT-109 became a critical narrative in his political career. His former crewmembers appeared at campaign rallies, staff members issued literature touting their candidate’s naval service, and a life-sized PT-109 float featured prominently in Kennedy’s inaugural parade. By constructing narratives and enveloping themselves with visual reminders of their warrior pasts, Kennedy and Johnson conformed to dominant American cultural mores about masculinity. In doing so, they gained prestige, influence, and power. Yet, they were more than passive figures. They role modeled a warrior masculinity and were prepared to act on it.

Once in office, both presidents invited men who had served in World War II to their administrations. Kennedy and Johnson knew these men possessed the right stuff to carry out their ambitious agendas. Kennedy believed that the willingness to sacrifice, a characteristic he witnessed during the war, stood above all other qualities: “Where else...but in the political profession is the individual expected to sacrifice all—including his own career—for the national good? [In] public life we expect individuals to sacrifice their private interests to permit the national good to progress.”<sup>42</sup> Reflecting in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, Johnson wrote in his memoir, “My perceptions

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<sup>42</sup> John F. Kennedy, *Profiles In Courage* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 7.

of America persuaded me that three separate conditions were required before social change could take root and flourish in our national life—a recognition of need, a willingness to act, and someone to lead the effort.”<sup>43</sup> In the minds of Kennedy and Johnson, military men possessed the qualities necessary to transform the nation. The majority of their cabinet secretaries were prior military. Robert McNamara, who wrote that his time in the military “had a great impact on my life,” worked as a systems analyst for the Army during the war.<sup>44</sup> His service in the Army led McNamara, still in his uniform, to an interview at Ford Motor Company where he later became president. In 1961, he became Secretary of Defense. Daniel P. Moynihan, an architect of the War on Poverty, joined the Navy during the war. His work in the Department of Labor contributed to what would later become Project 100,000. Undersecretary of Defense for Manpower Alfred Fitt, whose job was to oversee Project 100,000, served in the Army. World War II veterans filled the ranks of government, but had particular cachet in defense-related posts. The warrior tradition—built upon personal sacrifice, courage, leadership, and the bond of camaraderie—was well represented among the best and the brightest.

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<sup>43</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 70.

<sup>44</sup> Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 8-11.

## SALVAGING MANHOOD

The tradition of warrior manhood is vital to understanding how Kennedy, Johnson, and the men in their administrations interpreted the rights and obligations of male citizenship. Moreover, the power that the warrior tradition held over postwar Americans fueled the belief that the place for making better men was within the structure of the military. This was not new to the 1960s. The military as a site for building strong and productive men has deep roots in the American experience. The military's role in social welfare can be traced back at least to the Great Depression. Under the New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was created to put idle young men to work. Because it possessed the manpower and logistical capabilities, the War Department outfitted, trained, and led what one historian called "Roosevelt's Forest Army."<sup>45</sup> Each CCC recruit, after passing a physical, went through a modified "boot camp" to be conditioned for hard labor. They were issued military uniforms and gear. Reserve officers and noncommissioned officers from the Army ran the CCC camps, maintained discipline, and ensured that the men worked diligently. To President Roosevelt, the goal of the CCC was explicitly about salvaging men. He wrote to Congress in 1933, "More important, however, than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work.... We can eliminate to some extent at least the threat that enforced idleness brings

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<sup>45</sup> See Perry H. Merrill, *Roosevelt's Forest Army: A History of the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Montpelier, VT: Perry H. Merrill, 1981).

to spiritual and moral stability....”<sup>46</sup> Given the right tools, motivation, and a military environment, Roosevelt believed that men’s self-worth could be salvaged. Of course, social welfare programs from the New Deal to the Great Society were designed to ameliorate conditions of poverty, stem job loss, and later to confront racism. In those goals, gender’s role is implicit: to give a man a job is to give him back his livelihood, his manhood.

The American people widely accepted the view that military service was an essential obligation of (male) citizenship. Patriotism meant “answering the call” when the nation was threatened. Doves in Congress prior to World War II, when the Selective Service Act passed by a mere vote, quickly transformed into hawks after Pearl Harbor. We know that the Kennedys were staunch critics of intervention, yet all of the sons donned the uniform of their country. Patriotic service was the standard during the 1960s, and politicians called upon their fellow Americans to fulfill their obligations as citizens in new and creative ways. Said Kennedy, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” The Peace Corps, Job Corps, and VISTA were shining examples of citizen engagement in a decade marred by assassinations, violence, and war. However, to policy makers and their constituents at the time, military service was an integral part of the New Frontier and the Great Society.

Much like the government’s experience with the CCC during the Great Depression, the military became the obvious choice for saving America’s poor. On September 30, 1963 President John F. Kennedy wrote, “I am deeply concerned about the fact that half of the young men who have been reporting for pre-induction examinations

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in David D. Draves, *Builder of Men: Life in C.C.C. Camps of New Hampshire* (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1992); 7. Draves’ book on the CCC uses oral history as its primary source. For references to the regimented lifestyle in the CCC, see especially Chapter 2, “Hey Rookie”, 13-37.

under the Selective Service System are being found unqualified for military service.”<sup>47</sup> Kennedy established a task force to investigate why so many men were rejected and to create solutions. The president’s rationale was rooted in his New Frontier agenda to eradicate poverty in America. He wrote, “Today’s military rejects include tomorrow’s hard-core unemployed.”<sup>48</sup>

In January 1964, the taskforce published “One-Third of a Nation: A Report on Young Men Found Unqualified for Military Service,” the title a homage to the words of Franklin Roosevelt a generation earlier: “one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” According to the authors, “[We have] a unique opportunity to identify those young men in our Nation who are—for reasons of education, or health, or both—not equipped to play their part in society.”<sup>49</sup> According to the experts, those who failed to meet the Selective Service’s standards for mental reasons were the victims of poverty. The authors found that four out of five were school dropouts, most quitting in order to work. For those who had a job at the time of their rejection (only 69 percent, or four times greater than the national unemployment average), their average weekly earnings were \$56. The report argued that the qualities found among soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines were the same as those needed to compete in the modern workforce. The taskforce, Secretaries Wirtz, McNamara, Celebrezza, and Selective Service Director General Hershey, all believed military service was essential to putting poverty-stricken

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<sup>47</sup> President's Task Force on Manpower Conservation, *One-Third of a Nation: A Report on Young Men Found Unqualified for Military Service*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education (Office of Education, 1964); A-1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

men onto the right track. They wrote, “Far too many of these young men have missed out on the American miracle,” of the military.<sup>50</sup>

A little more than a month after he convened his taskforce, Kennedy was killed. Somber newsmen held up images of a gaunt and pale Lyndon Johnson taking the oath of office aboard *Air Force One*, flanked by Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson. According to McNamara, the next six months were tumultuous, filled with “uncertainty, confusion, and error.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, members of the new administration rallied to the memory of the fallen president. There is an insightful passage in Lyndon Johnson’s memoir, *The Vantage Point*, which captures his sentiments and governing philosophy in the wake of Kennedy’s death:

I eventually developed my own programs and polices, but I never lost sight of the fact that I was the trustee and custodian of the Kennedy administration. Although it was my prerogative to do so, I would no more have considered changing the name of the *Honey Fitz*—the name Jack Kennedy had given one of the Presidential yachts— than I would have thought of changing the name of the Washington Monument. I did everything I could to enhance the memory of John Kennedy....<sup>52</sup>

Johnson seized the promises of Kennedy’s New Frontier to eradicate poverty and combat racism. On January 8, 1964, in his first State of the Union address, Johnson announced his War on Poverty. The bellicose title for his initiative was no accident: he meant to rally the people to the cause of eliminating poverty. Again, rehabilitating manhood was central to the goal of economic prosperity. Johnson said in his speech that “One thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth today can return

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 89.

<sup>52</sup> Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 19.

forty thousand dollars in his lifetime.”<sup>53</sup> Several months later, during the '64 campaign against Senator Barry Goldwater, Johnson laid the foundation for the Great Society. Johnson believed that the Great Society was an extension of the Bill of Rights. Its twin pillars, eradicating poverty and fighting racism, became the focus of every cabinet official. Johnson feared “that as long as these citizens were alienated from the *rights* of the American system, they would continue to consider themselves outside the *obligations* of that system.”<sup>54</sup>

Nowhere was the disparity between rights and obligations more acute, believed Johnson, than among the African American community. The administration feared that the burgeoning movement for civil rights could explode into violence and even rebellion if black people continued to feel like they did not have a stake in the system. Furthermore, policy makers did not believe that jobs and welfare programs alone would fix the “Negro problem.” Guaranteeing the right to vote, also, would only go so far to incorporate African Americans into the mainstream of American society. In March 1965, the Department of Labor’s Office of Policy Planning and Research, under the direction of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, published “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action.” Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz sent an abridged version to the President, noting that, “The attached memorandum is nine pages of dynamite about the Negro situation.” The president, impressed with the article that became known as “The Moynihan Report,” included its findings in a major civil rights speech at Howard University.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 160 [emphasis his].

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Steve Estes, *I Am A Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); 107.

In the report, Moynihan argued that addressing the “Negro problem” required a radical rethinking of poverty policies and strategies. Hundreds of years of slavery and the persistence of racism and segregation had made equality unattainable for most black Americans. Worse, Moynihan felt that for African Americans, centuries of mistreatment fundamentally changed the structure of the black family. “The white family has achieved a high degree of stability [in the twentieth century] and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable.”<sup>56</sup> Black marriages too often ended in divorce and children were raised without the father present. The rapidly increasing percentage of babies born out of wedlock was unprecedented. Women were the heads-of-household, and to Moynihan, matriarchy meant marginalization for black men. “A matriarchal structure... seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male...”<sup>57</sup> Having lost their place as husbands and fathers, black men were less likely to do well in school and were more likely to drop out of high school than black women. Only 4.5 percent of black men went to college, compared to 7.3 percent of women. While the ratio of black males to females in the workforce was four to one, women were more likely to have a skilled job than men. Moynihan thought it was “extraordinary” that black people had survived at all, stating, “a lesser people might simply have died out, as indeed others have.”<sup>58</sup> While he conceded “there is... no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement,” Moynihan felt “it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one

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<sup>56</sup> Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, United States Department of Labor, Office of Planning and Research (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

principle” while the majority followed another.<sup>59</sup> But the problem was more than economics. There was a crisis in black manhood that threatened not only the current generation, but also all those to follow.

The failure of black masculinity translated into hunger, poverty, violence, crime, and drug use. To rehabilitate black men, Moynihan suggested that the government heed the advice of “One-Third of a Nation.” He believed, “The ultimate mark of inadequate preparation for life is the failure rate on the Armed Forces mental test,” which stood at 56 percent for African Americans. Moynihan saw a direct relationship between the rights and obligations of citizenship, as did Johnson. He argued that the present system excluded black men from military service, the notional duty of male citizens. Furthermore, Moynihan saw the military as a colorblind space where black men would be treated as the equals of their white comrades. Most important to Moynihan, the military would provide black men a refuge from domineering black women:

There is another special quality about military service for Negro men: it is an utterly masculine world. Given the strains of the disorganized and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age, the Armed Forces are a dramatic and desperately needed change: a world away from women, a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority....

A masculine world would rehabilitate black manhood. “Strong men of unquestioned authority” would replace female role models. “In the U.S. Army,” so the contemporary slogan went, “you get to know what it means to feel like a man.”<sup>60</sup> Black men only needed discipline and exposure to the camaraderie found in the military’s homosocial

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* Moynihan continued to make this argument long after publishing “The Negro Family”: “... family structure may now prove to be the principle conduit of social class status.. The system of social stratification is only a measure of conformity in the behavior of social groups; inequality becomes the dynamic impulse that serves to keep social structures alive.” Daniel P. Moynihan, *Miles To Go: A Personal History of Social Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 218-24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

environment. After their service, economically and psychologically stable black fathers would lift their families from poverty. The military would build men to be the fathers of a generation able to find the American dream.

These were not empty words to the men of the Johnson administration. They appear too frequently to be dismissed as rhetoric. To these policy makers, a man who could not pass the minimum requirements for military service lacked something essential. He was “unqualified,” “ill equipped,” and “unstable,” and thus, “alienated” from society. Manhood, especially of the warrior type, was critical to Johnson’s men. Like their efforts to rebuild crumbling urban slums, masculinity could be restored and refortified. In his memoir, Lyndon Johnson tells a story about an antipoverty project in Philadelphia that converted a dilapidated jail into a community center for training unemployed men. He quotes the project’s leader, Reverend Leon Sullivan, “[The jail building] is the most dank, most dismal place in town, a symbol of tragedy. If I could transform that building, I could transform men.”<sup>61</sup> Salvaging manhood through military service was central to Johnson’s mission. Here was the means to impart a sense of duty to country, so essential to citizenship. Further steeling Johnson’s resolve was his landslide victory in the 1964 election over Barry Goldwater. Johnson believed that the ’64 election was a referendum on the Great Society. In Johnson’s words, the election equaled a “mandate for unity... a mandate for action, and I meant to use it that way.”<sup>62</sup>

Following the recommendations of “One-Third of a Nation,” Robert McNamara introduced the Special Training Enlistment Program (STEP) in 1964. This program targeted potential enlistees scoring between fifteen and thirty on the Armed Forces

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 86.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

Qualification Test (AFQT), which required a minimum score of thirty-one for enlistment. The goals of the program were to enlist 15,000 men annually and send them to Fort Leonard Wood for intensive educational training prior to their completion of boot camp. The Defense Department estimated that the additional cost per trainee would be \$2,100.<sup>63</sup>

McNamara reintroduced STEP to Congress in 1965. Critics argued that job programs already existed and there was no need. Some, such as South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, believed that STEP would drain the Army's training resources. On the Senate floor, he asked Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, "Does not the Senator feel that these young men should be trained in the educational fundamentals by the Job Corps rather than to place this responsibility upon the Army, which has its hands full training soldiers?" Nelson responded, "We provide education in our schools, which education [sic] helps young men enter the Army.... The Army is the biggest single educator in America.... This is a function the Army could handle very well."<sup>64</sup> While the House voted to allow the Defense Department to proceed with STEP, the Senate balked at the price and the program died.

According to Undersecretary of Defense Alfred Fitt, McNamara was furious. Fitt recalled that, "[He] was quite put out at having met this defeat... of a project that seemed to have a very high potential for good without any real degradation in military readiness."<sup>65</sup> Believing that congressional rejection was merely about dollars and cents, McNamara devised a program that did not require additional funding. This new program would lower the induction standards to allow rejected men in, send them straight to boot

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<sup>63</sup> Laurence and Ramsberger, *Low-Aptitude Men in the Military*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Congressional Record*, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. (August 25, 1965), Senate 21719-20.

<sup>65</sup> Transcript, Alfred B. Fitt Oral History Interview by Dorothy Pierce, Interview 1 (October 25, 1968), LBJ Library.

camp, and merely monitor their progress. In essence, McNamara envisioned a STEP-like program without the need for separate or additional training facilities. Worried that Congress would see this as a ruse to initiate STEP through the back door, Fitt advised McNamara to wait until year's end to make any announcements. McNamara refused, and in fact, had already issued orders to lower the requirements on the AFQT in April 1966, something he deemed the Defense Department could do without congressional approval. He told his undersecretary to write a speech outlining the project, which McNamara gave before a convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in the summer of 1966, immediately after Congress came back from recess. Project 100,000 was officially born October 1966 without further response from either the House or Senate.<sup>66</sup>

Despite its artful inception, the Johnson administration soon publicized Project 100,000 in earnest. With Project 100,000, the goals of eradicating poverty and ending racism were merged with national service. The president brought this message to Congress on March 6, 1967 in a speech on the Selective Service System. He reminded Congress of the sacrifices that freedom required: "The knowledge that military service must sometimes be borne by—and imposed on—free men so their freedom may be preserved is woven deeply into the fabric of the American experience." Project 100,000 would allow, "disadvantaged youths with limited educational backgrounds" to share in the benefits and burdens of service. His words echoed his many speeches on the importance of the Great Society: "The nation can never again afford to deny to men... the obligation—and the right—to share in a basic responsibility of citizenship."<sup>67</sup> Project

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<sup>66</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*; Laurence and Ramsberger, *Low-Aptitude Men in the Military*; Fitt Interview, 11-12.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in, "Text of President Johnson's Message to Congress on the Selective Service System," *New York Times* (March 7, 1967), 32.

100,000 was part of Johnson's dream of universal national service. Like such Great Society programs as VISTA or Kennedy's Peace Corps, opening the doors of the military to a broader spectrum of society was a means toward mobilizing the country in pursuit of the "national interest." In Johnson's words, "two great streams in our national life converged—the dream of a Great Society at home and the inescapable demands of our obligations halfway around the world. They were to run in confluence until the end of my administration."<sup>68</sup> According to Fitt, "It was put together in a way which made it very difficult to criticize from the outside," including "elements [that] are readily understandable and acceptable."<sup>69</sup>

Roughly 40,000 New Standards Men were inducted in 1966, and 100,000 in both 1967 and 1968. Critics of STEP, who argued that New Standards Men would drain Army resources, were silenced when 96 percent completed boot camp, which was only 2 percent less than other recruits. Feeling somewhat vindicated after Congress's rebuke, McNamara proclaimed, "The plain fact is that our Project 100,000 is succeeding beyond even our most hopeful expectations."<sup>70</sup> As Fitt said, the program was "very difficult to criticize." Meanwhile, congressional rhetoric often blended the practical with reasons of character. Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee in May 1967, Senator Edward Kennedy quoted a Project 100,000 trainer:

The Army is the last chance for many of them, if they are rejected from the Army, they have nothing left.... They roam the streets. They get in a group, something develops, and the next thing you know they are in the courts. On the other hand, those who have served, maybe in Vietnam, are very proud of their service. Many want to go back and serve in Vietnam for their nation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 324.

<sup>69</sup> Fitt Interview, 11-12.

<sup>70</sup> McNamara, "Remarks."

<sup>71</sup> *Congressional Record*, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong, 1<sup>st</sup> sess. (May 4, 1967), Senate 11854-55.

Senator Kennedy argued for the continuation of Project 100,000, noting, “preliminary results” were “highly satisfactory... particularly from the standpoint of the military, because of the high military motivation of this group.”<sup>72</sup> When Kennedy testified, no data on the performance of Project 100,000 recruits existed, and none was ever collected on the “motivation” or morale of New Standards Men while they were in the service. To solicit the opinions of New Standards Men would have violated McNamara’s policy to protect Project 100,000 men from unjust scrutiny and ridicule: New Standards Men were not to know that they were part of “McNamara’s Moron Corps.”<sup>73</sup> When Kennedy spoke about “high military motivation,” he championed the commonly held belief that the military produced motivated men.

Like Ted Kennedy, defenders of Project 100,000 could not help but speak of the program in terms of masculinity. Men in the administration and supporters in Congress used strikingly similar language to describe the benefits of Project 100,000. Ideals of manhood that held currency within society were circulated and repeated. In a speech to Congress in January 1968, President Johnson came prepared to talk about the statistical success of Project 100,000. He told Congress that 96 percent of New Standards Men had graduated basic training. Some had proudly joined the ranks of noncommissioned officers in the service. Based upon the first year’s success, Johnson declared that he had authorized McNamara to continue Project 100,000 in 1968. However, Johnson quickly turned to metrics of success that were less concrete, declaring, “All have gained self-

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> McNamara believed that protecting the identity of New Standards Men was the key to Project 100,000’s success. However, many in each recruit’s chain of command had access to personnel files, which made deducing who was a New Standards Man relatively easy. Also, in the early stages of Project 100,000, New Standards Men were assigned a service number beginning with “67.” Although the DoD quickly fixed this problem, New Standards Men were referred to derisively as “sixes and sevens,” which ironically is an old English idiom, meaning a state of confusion and disarray.

confidence and a sense of achievement” from their service in the military. “It is the man who must be the focus of our concern and attention.”<sup>74</sup> After the President’s speech to Congress, Speaker of the House John McCormack observed, “Like the glorious sun breaking through dark clouds on a stormy day, the President’s message lights up a clear and welcome path ahead.” Speaker McCormack believed that Project 100,000 would “[remove] the cancer of doubt and hopelessness that has been gnawing at the Nation’s vitals.”<sup>75</sup> When McNamara spoke to the Educational Broadcasters Association, he proclaimed, “The Defense Department is the world’s largest producer of skilled men. [There are] 1,500 different skills, in more than 2,000 separate courses. And each year we return about three-quarters of a million men to the nation’s manpower pool.” Using the same words as the president, McNamara told the audience what was most important: the military could deliver a “vital sense of achievement and self-confidence.” In 1967 and 1968, the Defense Department collected mountains of data on New Standards Men. Reading and mathematical abilities, criminal records, employment histories were studied. Boot camp completion rates, military occupation assignment statistics, and performance evaluations were collected. Yet, each time members of the Johnson administration spoke about Project 100,000, they highlighted character transformation, personal achievement, and self-confidence. Thus, McNamara concluded his speech by saying, “Hundreds of thousands of men can be salvaged from the blight of poverty, and the Defense Department... is particularly well equipped to salvage them.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *New York Times*, March 7, 1967, 32.

<sup>75</sup> *Congressional Record*, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. (January 30, 1968), House 1409.

<sup>76</sup> McNamara, “Remarks”

This is not to say that Project 100,000 was without its critics, or that the virtue of military service was without a counter-narrative. African American Civil Rights leaders deplored the program. Representative Adam Clayton Powell of New York called Project 100,000 “brutal” and tantamount to “genocide.” He stated, “It’s nothing more than killing off human beings who are not members of the elite.”<sup>77</sup> The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) issued a statement to condemn the program arguing that it would “increase the imbalance of black Americans in the war in Vietnam.”<sup>78</sup>

However, gender complicates the politics of race. While Civil Rights leaders criticized Project 100,000 in particular and the Vietnam War in general, many African American men volunteered for combat duty in Vietnam. For example, nearly 30 percent of airborne units were African American (airborne personnel were volunteers) and reenlistment rates for blacks were three times higher than those for whites. Of course, inequalities in the draft system pressed more black men into the military because they were less likely to receive deferments. African Americans also performed poorly on the AFQT, and Project 100,000 increased the number of low-scoring black men in the military. Patriotism explains some of these data, yet facing unemployment that was twice as high as that of whites, the military was an attractive option to many African Americans. More important to some black veterans was the psychology of feeling like a man. According to one black ex-Marine, “For some goddamned reason I believed that the U.S.M.C. made a man out of anybody. And I wanted to be a MAN more than

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in “Rights Leaders Deplore Plan to ‘Salvage’ Military Rejects,” *New York Times* (August 26, 1966), 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* See also: Sol Stern, “When the Black G.I. Comes Back From Vietnam,” *New York Times* (March 24, 1968), 27. While African Americans in the military were proportionally represented, their share of combat deaths was often disproportionate, reaching a height of 20 percent in 1967. On the whole, however, black casualties during the war averaged 12.5 percent, and the precipitous decline can be attributed to the backlash from those in the Civil Rights community. See: Appy, *Working-Class War*, 20-22.

anything in this whole goddamned world.”<sup>79</sup> If some black men saw the military as a steady job, to many military service meant taking on the burden of citizenship and being a man.

From 1966 to 1968, 240,000 New Standards Men were inducted into the military.<sup>80</sup> Although McNamara promised to provide Category IV (the bottom third percentile group on the AFQT) men with the necessary training to qualify for jobs within the military, thus giving men the skills to compete in the civilian economy, this trust was broken almost immediately. McNamara argued that Congress had tied his hands: funding for major rehabilitative training was not forthcoming. Still, 96 percent of New Standards Men succeeded in completing basic training, compared to 98 percent service wide. A 1968 government report on Project 100,000 boasted that 62 percent of New Standards Men were assigned to noncombat military occupations, which “have direct or related counterparts in the civilian economy.” This is a remarkable statistic in light of the fact that only 6 percent of New Standards Men received any serious remedial training to help them qualify for noncombat assignments. In comparison, 70 percent of all other draftees were assigned to noncombat roles. Of the nearly 40 percent assigned to combat units, the Department of Defense reasoned that “New Standards Men perform significantly better in combat-type training courses” than those that required “significant reading and mathematical abilities.” “Failure rates” they concluded optimistically, “have been

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Estes, *I Am A Man!*, 166.

<sup>80</sup> Project 100,000 draftees dwindled from a height of 100,000 a year in 1967 and 1968 to 75,000 in 1970 and finally 50,000 in 1971. Nearly 400,000 New Standards Men entered the service prior to the institution of the All-Volunteer Force.

dropping as a result of better assignment procedures.”<sup>81</sup> If some New Standards Men were more likely to be assigned to combat, the majority found in the military a potential job training facility. They, and their brothers in combat units, were also enmeshed in the environment administration officials believed essential to building masculinity.

How did the Project 100,000 men fare in this environment? In 1986, government researchers sent surveys to hundreds of New Standards Men requesting their employment history, yearly earnings, and educational progress since Vietnam. New Standards Men were compared with non-Project 100,000 veterans, as well as men who never served. The study found that 85 percent of New Standards Men worked full-time, slightly less than the 90 percent employment for nonveterans. While all Vietnam veterans made significantly less money on average than those who never served, New Standards Men had the same average annual income as other veterans. 14 percent of New Standards Men attended college, or marginally less than their civilian counterparts.

The researchers concluded, “Project 100,000 was less than successful in...providing low-aptitude and disadvantaged youth an avenue for upgrading their skills and potential through military service.”<sup>82</sup> However, their research suggests that *all* Vietnam veterans, not just New Standards Men, fared worse than men who did not serve. In the words of one *New York Times* columnist, “War may make men out of boys. It does not seem to make them better breadwinners.”<sup>83</sup> However, the fact that the majority of those who served in Vietnam came from the working poor weakens the usefulness of their conclusion. For New Standards Men in particular, it is stunning that a cohort that

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<sup>81</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 129; Office of the Secretary of Defense, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), *Project One Hundred Thousand: Characteristics and Performance of "New Standards" Men* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare).

<sup>82</sup> Laurence and Ramsberger, *Low-Aptitude Men In the Military*, 109-138.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Passell, "Economic Scene; War is No Way to Start a Career," *New York Times* (May 23, 1990).

could barely read at a sixth-grade level and whose unemployment averaged at four times the rest of the nation fared only slightly worse than all Vietnam veterans. The question still remains, did Project 100,000 “make men out of boys?” The survey also asked New Standards Men to rate their feelings about military service. Nearly half of all New Standards Men, and 60 percent of African Americans, stated that military service helped them later in life, and only 13 percent said it hurt them in the long run. Those who viewed military service positively often cited maturity, leadership, discipline, and motivation as the characteristics they most cherished and found reinforced in Project 100,000.

Project 100,000 was attended by other drawbacks. New Standards Men were three times more likely to go Absent Without Leave (AWOL) during boot camp than other soldiers. Category IV troops were two and a half times more likely to be court-martialed, and approximately 80,000 were given Undesirable, Bad Conduct, or Dishonorable Discharges. However, these numbers must be weighed against the overall breakdown in military discipline, especially in the later years of the war. Of the roughly 8.5 million men who served in the military during Vietnam, 563,000 received less-than-honorable discharges. Still, the government would later cite Project 100,000 as a primary reason for granting clemency to Vietnam War deserters under the Ford administration.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 5, 122-131.

## CONCLUSION

Gender is a cultural construct, bred in social circumstances, that shapes self-perception and ideals of the wider society. From their knowledge of, and experience with, the military as a place for building manly character, the men of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations devised Project 100,000. They believed that the military could give men jobs and the necessary skills to lead successful lives. More importantly, they felt that the military would instill a sense of pride, motivation, and self-worth in those lacking a true manhood. These are the principles and traditions that drove Project 100,000. In part, they recreated the World War II crucible that had so shaped their vision of masculinity. War changed men, confronting them with challenges that demanded courage and elicited new strengths. Yet, the reality of the Vietnam War and wartime necessity trumped well-intentioned idealism. Too many New Standards Men were handed an M-16 rather than a hammer or a welding torch. Too few received remedial training in reading and mathematics. The disappointment of Project 100,000 is that it was overtaken by the tragedy of Vietnam. In the words of Christian Appy, “This was a Great Society program that was quite literally shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam.”<sup>85</sup>

In 1995, when Robert McNamara broke decades of silence on his involvement in shaping the policies of the Vietnam War, he wrote, “I want to put Vietnam in context.”

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<sup>85</sup> Appy, *Working-Class War*, 33.

We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why.<sup>86</sup>

Explaining why has encompassed interpretations based upon bureaucracy, myth, race, and class. Little explored are the gendered identities of these cold *warriors* and the gendered basis of their policies. They believed that they embodied a confident, virile, and self-sacrificing manhood. They manned the deck of a ship of state that would yield to no other nation or ideology. The history of Project 100,000 is a mirror of their gendered selves. The world that made them men could be recreated for a new generation that many believed was broken by racial and class prejudice and discrimination. The military could make them able-bodied and whole, ready to take their places as full citizens of the republic. If Vietnam was America's test of will, for the men of Project 100,000 it was their test of manhood. Project 100,000 is a lens that allows a gendered focus on Vietnam and the Great Society. Gender, with race and class, is crucial to our understanding of the politics that drove a nation in both war and peace.

America's experience in Vietnam fundamentally changed the relationship between the government and its citizens. The traditional belief that every (male) American had a moral obligation to serve his country in a time of war seemed to vanish from the national consciousness. The foundational ideal that propelled men to the pinnacle of power in post-World War II America shattered under their misuse of that power. The men of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations subscribed to a culture of masculinity that placed a premium on self-sacrifice and service to country. While these ideals faltered, the post-Vietnam volunteer military reflected some continuity with the

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<sup>86</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, xvi.

idealized past. Although the institution of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973 made a choice of what was an obligation, the military remains a site for building character and salvaging manhood. The Marines are still “looking for a few good men” and the Army encourages recruits to “be all you can be.” The present remains a prisoner of the past.

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The Vietnam War was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. More than 3 million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians. Did you know? According to a survey by the Veterans Administration, some 500,000 of the 3 million troops who served in Vietnam suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and rates of divorce, suicide, alcoholism and drug addiction were markedly higher among veterans. When Did the Vietnam War Start? "Project 100,000 was implemented to produce more grunts for the killing fields of Vietnam," wrote Colonel David Hackworth, who fought in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars and became one of the most highly decorated warriors in American history. "It took unfit recruits from the bottom of the barrel and rushed them to Vietnam. The result was human applesauce." McNamara's intentions to use video instruction to raise the intelligence levels of Project 100,000 may have been sincere, but few men actually received it. There was a bloody war raging, and army and marine units in Vietnam desperately need 1961-1968 Project 100,000 to rehabilitate the "subterranean poor." Although he was a prime architect of the Vietnam War and repeatedly overruled the JCS on strategic matters, McNamara gradually became skeptical about whether the war could be won by deploying more troops to South Vietnam and intensifying the bombing of North Vietnam, a claim he would publish in a book years later.