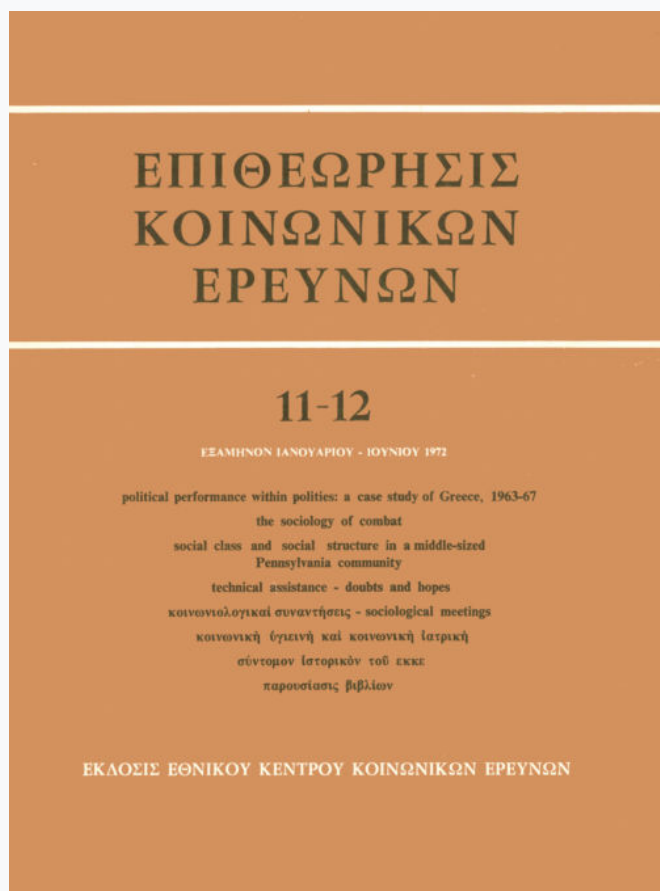


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### The sociology of combat

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# the sociology of combat

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That men too often find themselves fighting wars is a depressing commentary on both history and contemporary life. That many of these same men endure situations where they can be killed and kill others is a perplexing fact of human behavior. It is not surprising, then, that interpretations of the motivations of men in combat are many. From among diverse accounts, however, we can distinguish some recurring themes that seek to explain the bases of combat performance.

The viewpoint with perhaps the earliest antecedents finds combat motivation resting on the presumed national character of the general populace. The varying effectiveness of different national armies has often been popularly ascribed to the putative martial spirit of their respective citizenries. The use of national character explanations of military effectiveness, however, is not unique to popular folklore. In our own country's recent history, certain prominent spokesmen invoked such broad cultural determinants to explain the alleged poor performance of American prisoners of war in the Korean War as a result of a «softening» of the American character.<sup>1</sup>

A contrasting viewpoint sees combat performance as essentially resulting from the operation of the formal military organization. Combat motivation results from effective military training and discipline, and unit *esprit de corps*.<sup>2</sup> Although such a viewpoint is typically associated with traditionalist military thought, the importance of military socialization is similarly emphasized—albeit from different premises—by commentators concerned with the assumed deleterious consequences of military life on personality development.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we frequently find both supporters and opponents of the goals of the military organization giving great weight to the total or all-inclusive features of military life.<sup>4</sup>

Another interpretation of combat behavior holds

1. See especially Eugene Kinkead, *In Every War But One* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1959); and the rebuttal by Albert D. Biderman, *March to Calumny* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963).

2. See, for example, Field Manuel 22-100, *Military Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965); and Russell B. Reynolds, *The Officer's Guide* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Press, 1966), *passim*.

3. See, for example, Arthur J. Vidich and Maurice R. Stein, «The Dissolved Identity in Military Life», in Maurice R. Stein *et al.* (eds.), *Identity and Anxiety* (New York: Free Press, 1960) 493-506; and Carl Cohen, «The Military in a Democracy», *Centennial Review*, 7 (Winter, 1963), 75-94.

4. Thus two bestsellers on the American Special Forces in Vietnam are in central agreement on the socialization processes occurring among these troops, but have opposite conclusions as to the moral outcome. Cf. the romanticized view of Special Forces in Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York, Avon Publications, Inc., 1965), with the negative picture given in Donald Duncan, *The New Legions* (New York: Random House Inc., 1967).

that the effective soldier is motivated either by a sense of national patriotism, or by a belief that he is fighting for a just cause. Such a viewpoint holds that combat performance depends on the soldier's commitment to abstract values or the symbols of the larger society. The effective soldier, in other words, is an ideologically inspired soldier. Combat performance directly varies with the soldier's conscious allegiance to the stated purposes of the war. It is usually assumed in this regard that such allegiance preexists the soldier's entry into the formal military organization. The ideological explanation in its various forms has become the hallmark of virtually all official rhetoric as well as much of the conventional wisdom.

A quite different explanation of combat motivation, largely arising from the social science studies of World War II, deemphasizes ideological considerations (and, to a lesser extent, formal organizational factors as well). It focuses attention instead on the role of face-to-face or «primary» groups, and explains the motivation of the individual combat soldier as a function of his solidarity and social intimacy with fellow soldiers at small group levels.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the rediscovery of the importance of primary groups by social scientists paralleled corresponding accounts given by journalists, novelists, and other combat observers.<sup>2</sup> In its more extreme formulation, combat pri-

mary relationships were viewed as so intense that they overrode not only preexisting civilian values and formal military goals, but even the individual's own sense of self-concern.

Although I will refer here to the national character and formal military organization explanations, my major attention will be directed to the considerations raised in the ideological and primary-group interpretations of combat performance. Put most simply, I argue that combat motivation arises out of the linkages between individual self-concern, primary-group processes, and the shared beliefs of soldiers. The ideological and primary-group explanations are not contradictory. Rather, an understanding of the combat soldier's motivation requires a simultaneous appreciation of the role of small groups and underlying value commitments as they are shaped by the immediate combat situation.

#### collection of data

The information for the ensuing discussion is based on my observations of American soldiers in combat made during two separate stays in South Vietnam. During the first field trip in 1965, I spent two weeks with a weapons squad in a rifle platoon of an airborne (paratrooper) unit. The second field trip in 1967 included a six-day stay with an infantry rifle squad, and shorter periods with several other combat squads. Although I identified myself as a university professor and sociologist, I had little difficulty gaining access to the troops because of my official status as an accredited correspondent. I entered combat units by simply requesting permission from the local headquarters to move into a squad. Once within a squad, I experienced the same living conditions as the squad members. The novelty of my presence soon dissipated as I became a regular participant in the day-to-day activities of the squad.

The soldiers with whom I was staying were performing combat missions of a patrolling nature, the most typical type of combat operation in Vietnam, at least through 1968. Patrols are normally small-unit operations involving squads (9-12 men) or platoons (30-40 men). Such small units made up patrols whose usual mission was to locate enemy forces that could then be subjected to group, artillery, or air attack. Patrols normally last one or several days and are manned by lower-ranking enlisted men, noncommissioned offi-

1. Samuel A. Stouffer *et al.*, *The American Soldier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), II, 105-191; Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, «Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II», *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12 (Summer, 1948), 280-315; George C. Homans, «The Small Warship», *American Sociological Review*, 11 (June, 1946), 294-300; Paul F. Lazarsfeld, «The American Soldier—An Expository Review», *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13 (Fall, 1949), 377-404; Edward A. Shils, «Primary Groups in the American Army», in Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld (eds.), *Continuities in Social Research: Studies in the Scope and Method of «The American Soldier»* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 16-39; David G. Mandelbaum, *Soldiers Groups and Negro Soldiers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1952), 5-87; Norman A. Hilmar, «The Dynamics of Military Group Behavior», in Charles H. Coates and Ronald J. Pellegrin (eds.), *Military Sociology* (University Park, Md.: Social Science Press, 1965), 311-335; and Roy R. Grinker and John P. Spiegel, *Men Under Stress* (New York: Mc Graw-Hill, Inc., 1963), 443-460.

It should be noted, however, that caveats were introduced in several of the World War II descriptions of primary-group determinants in combat motivation. Thus, Shils and Janowitz, *op. cit.*, directed some attention toward the role of «secondary symbols» (e.g., respect for the *Führer*) among German soldiers. Also, Shils's discussion of *The American Soldier*, while generally stressing the importance of primary-group processes, nevertheless cautioned: «Yet it would be a mistake to say that the tacit patriotism of the soldiers played no significant part in disposing the men to acceptance, obedience and initiative. The widespread character of their acceptance of the legitimacy of the war although in itself not a strong combat motivation must still be viewed as flowing both directly and indirectly into combat motivation». Shils, *op. cit.* 24.

2. Among the better known of such accounts are: —>

—> S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1947); J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1959); Bill Mauldin, *Up Front* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1945); Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1948); and James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

cers leading squads, and lieutenants heading platoons.

In the vast majority of instances these patrols turn out to be a «walk in the sun», meeting no or only sporadic enemy resistance. Even when enemy contact is not made, however, patrols suffer casualties from land mines and booby traps. But it is primarily on those occasions when enemy forces are encountered that casualty rates are extremely high. Indeed, casualty surveys through mid-1967 report that 65 per cent of all American losses in Vietnam occurred on patrol-type operations.<sup>1</sup> Upon return to the permanent base camp, members of the patrol are able to enjoy a modicum of physical comfort. They live in large tents, eat hot food, get their mail more or less regularly, see movies, and can purchase beer, cigarettes, and toilet articles at field Post Exchanges. The bulk of the time in the base camp is spent on guard duty and maintaining equipment.

In both the 1965 and 1967 field trips, I collected data through informal observations and personal interviewing of combat soldiers. During the second field trip, however, I made an additional effort to obtain information in a somewhat more systematic manner as well. Toward this end, I conducted 34 standardized interviews dealing with some of the issues presented in this chapter. I interviewed not only the men of the particular squads I was living with, but also, when the opportunity arose, combat soldiers of other squads in the same company. Some of the information contained in these 34 interviews is amenable to tabular ordering and is so presented. Yet even when given in tabular form the data are not to be conceived as self-contained, but rather as supportive of more broadly based observations.

I know that it is hazardous, if not presumptuous, to generalize about the contemporary American combat soldier from observations of such limited scope. But I think it worthwhile. In the first place, I regard the men interviewed and observed as typical and representative of American combat soldiers. The attitudes expressed by the formally interviewed soldiers constantly reappeared in shorter conversations I had with numerous other combat soldiers in both 1965 and 1967. Again and again, I was struck by the common reactions of soldiers to the combat experience and their participation in the war. Moreover, since the data is not of the survey-sample kind, but relies instead on intimate interviewing and participant observations, the materials gathered allow certain kinds of qualitative inferences. What was being tapped were the deeply held values and world views of these soldiers. By being in the combat situation, I could go beyond ritualistic answers to pat questions. In any event, I assert with some confidence that the findings reflect a set of

beliefs widely shared by American combat soldiers throughout Vietnam during the period of the field work.

Before looking at the attitudes and behavior of American combat soldiers in Vietnam, some prefatory comment is in order on the proportional numbers of military personnel in combat situations and on the social composition of combat groups. How many men are actually combat soldiers? Despite a commonly held view that danger to American soldiers was widespread throughout Vietnam and pervasive for all echelons, the fact remains that in any large-scale military organization—even in the actual theater of war—only a fraction of men under arms personally experience combat. As in other modern American wars, nearly all casualties in Vietnam are suffered by that small group of men in the front of first echelon of the military organization: the soldiers taking part in patrols, major battles, and air operations. Although rear-echelon units may be subjected to occasional commando-type raids by the enemy as well as sporadic rocket bombardment, observers in Vietnam agree that only a small proportion of casualties occur in other than front-echelon units.

Interestingly, there is a strong element of formal organizational support for defining the conflict in Vietnam as a «no front war». Combat pay is given to all military personnel in Vietnam regardless of duties; income tax benefits and postal franking privileges are given to all soldiers stationed «in-country»; and, most important, the one-year rotation cycle applies equally to the supply clerk in Saigon and to the rifleman who has spent all his time in the field. Moreover, the notion that danger is widespread throughout Vietnam is one, as would be expected, that is informally fostered by many rear-area personnel. Yet, as has been true in other, if not all, wars, the front-echelon soldier makes a sharp distinction between his position and that of rear-area servicemen.

But coming up with definite figures on the proportion of men actually in combat is extremely difficult. The unavailability of casualty statistics by unit designation, conflicting definitions of what constitutes combat, and changing numbers of men, all preclude a final answer to how many men can be considered combat soldiers. Press reports in mid-1967 placed the proportion of American soldiers in the first echelon—that is, directly engaging with the enemy—at 14 per cent.<sup>2</sup> This estimate closely corresponds with the views of other informed observers. To this one can add about the same proportion of the total forces who are in close combat-support units. In other words, approximately 70 per cent of the men in Vietnam cannot be considered combat soldiers except by the loosest of

1. *The New York Times*, June 1, 1967, 15.

2. *Ibid.*, July 13, 1967, 16.

definitions. And the proportion of military noncombatants would be even higher if one added to the men physically stationed in South Vietnam those American military personnel assigned to bases in the wider war theater and naval units offshore. If the combat numbers in the Vietnam War were proportioned over the entire 3,400,000 men in the American armed forces for this period only about 2 per cent of the total active-duty personnel were directly experiencing combat.

At this point it is exceedingly important to reiterate a crucial set of findings documented earlier. Namely, once within the military organization, persons coming from the lower socioeducational levels and racial minority groups of our society are overproportionately assigned to combat units. This general state of affairs is directly reflected in the social composition of the combat squads I observed. The 34 soldiers interviewed had the following civilian backgrounds prior to entering the service: 10 were high school dropouts, only 2 of whom were ever regularly employed; 21 were high school graduates, 6 directly entering the service after finishing school; and 3 were college dropouts. None were college graduates. Eighteen of the 34 combat soldiers had full-time employment before entering the service, 12 in blue-collar jobs and 6 in white-collar employment. In terms of conventional categories, about two-thirds of the soldiers were from working-class backgrounds with the remainder being from the lower middle class.

As for other social background characteristics: 8 were black; 1 was a Navajo; another was from Guam; the other 20 men were white, including 3 Mexican-Americans and 1 Puerto Rican. Only 7 of the squad members were married (three after entering the service). All the men, except the 2 sergeants, were in their late teens and early twenties, the average age being 20. Again excepting the sergeants, all were on their initial enlistments. Twenty of the men were draftees and 14 were regular Army volunteers. Importantly, except for occasional sardonic comments directed toward the regulars by the draftees, the behavior and attitudes of the soldiers toward the war were very similar regardless of how they entered the service.

#### the combat situation

To convey the immediacy of the combat situation is hard enough for the novelist, not to say the sociologist. But to understand the way the soldier's attitudes and behavior are shaped, one must try to comprehend the extreme physical conditions under which he must manage. It is only in the context of the immediate combat situation that one can appreciate the nature of the primary-group processes developed in combat squads. For within the network of interpersonal relationships with fellow squad members, the combat soldier is also

fighting a very private war, a war he hopes to leave alive and unscathed.

*Absolute deprivation.* The concept of relative deprivation, as an interpretive variable, suggests that an individual's evaluation of his situation can be understood by knowing the reference group of comparison. We should not, however, lose sight of those extreme conditions where deprivation is absolute as well as relative. In the combat situation of absolute deprivation, the individual's social horizon is narrowly determined by his immediate life chances, in the most literal sense. The combat soldier, as an absolutely deprived person, responds to direct situational exigencies. He acts pragmatically to maximize short-run advantages in whatever form they exist. Though combat soldiers do not display what C. Wright Mills termed the «sociological imagination» (i.e., relating personal situations to broader societal conditions), this is not simply a default in political sophistication.<sup>1</sup> Rather, for the soldier concerned with his own day-to-day survival, the decisions of state that brought him into combat are simply irrelevant. It is in this sense that the pros and cons of the basic issues of national policy become meaningless to the combat soldier.

In the combat situation, the soldier not only faces the imminent danger of loss of life and, more frightening for most, limb, but also witnesses combat wounds and deaths suffered by «buddies». Moreover, there are the routine physical stresses of combat existence: the weight of the pack, tasteless food, diarrhea, lack of water, leeches, mosquitos, rain, torrid heat, mud, and loss of sleep. In an actual firefight with the enemy, the scene is generally one of utmost chaos and confusion. Deadening fear intermingles with acts of bravery and, strangely enough, even moments of exhilaration and comedy. If enemy prisoners are taken, they may be subjected to atrocities in the rage of battle or its immediate aftermath. The soldier's distaste of endangering civilians is overcome by his fear that Vietnamese, of any age or sex, can be responsible for his own death. Where the opportunity arises, looting often occurs. War souvenirs are frequently collected either to be kept personally or later sold to rear-echelon servicemen.

Once the combat engagement is over, the soldier still has little idea in a strategic sense of what has been

1. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). The emphasis in my discussion on the constraints of situational determinants on attitude formation is directly indebted to Allison Davis's description of «practical cultural systems» in his «The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker», in William F. Whyte (ed.), *Industry and Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1946), 84-106. For a rebuttal of the Davis position see, Lewis A. Coser, «Unanticipated Conservative Consequences of Liberal Theorizing», *Social Problems* 16 (Winter, 1969), 263-272.

accomplished. His view of the war is limited to his own personal observations and subsequent talks with others in the same platoon or company. The often-noted reluctance of combat soldiers to discuss their experiences when back home is not present in the field. They make a conversational mainstay of recounting battles and skirmishes with the enemy. They engage in such discussions not so much for their intrinsic interest but, more importantly, to specify tactical procedures that may save lives in future encounters with the enemy.

*Rotation.* For the individual soldier, the paramount factor affecting combat motivation is the operation of the rotation system. Under assignment policies during the period of the field study, military personnel served a twelve-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Barring his being killed or severely wounded, then, every soldier knows his exact departure date from Vietnam. The combat soldier's whole being centers on reaching his personal DEROS (from Date Expected Return Overseas). It would be hard to overstate the soldier's constant concern with how much more time—down to the day—he has remaining in Vietnam.

The Vietnam rotation policy differs importantly from previous wartime assignment policies. In the First and Second World Wars, men served for the duration until final military victory was achieved. In the war in Korea, a rotation policy was introduced, but Army men assigned to rear echelons served a longer period than those in combat units. In Vietnam, on the other hand, no distinction is made for rotation purposes between front-and rear-echelon units. In other words, a universalist assignment policy further compounds imbalances in sharing the risks of combat.

Within the combat unit itself, the rotation system has many consequences for social cohesion and individual motivation. The rapid turnover of personnel hinders the development of primary-group ties as well as rotating out of the unit men who have attained combat experience. It also, however, mitigates those strains (noted in World War II) when new replacements are confronted by seasoned combat veterans.<sup>1</sup> Also, because of the tactical nature of patrols and the somewhat random likelihood of encountering the enemy, a new arrival may soon experience more actual combat than many of the men in the same company who are nearing the end of their tour in Vietnam. In any event, whatever its effects on the long-term combat effectiveness of the American forces as a whole, the rotation system largely accounts for the usually high morale of the individual combat soldier.

During his one-year tour in Vietnam, the combat soldier undergoes definite changes in attitude toward

his situation. Although such attitudes vary depending on individual personality and combat experience, they typically follow this course. Upon arrival to his unit and for several weeks following, the soldier is excited to be in the war zone and looks forward to engaging the enemy. After the first serious encounter, however, he loses his enthusiasm for combat. The soldier becomes highly respectful of the enemy's fighting abilities and begins to develop anti-South Vietnamese sentiments. He is dubious of victory statements issued from higher headquarters and official reports of enemy casualties. From about the third to the eighth month of his tour in Vietnam, the soldier operates on a kind of plateau of moderate commitment to the combat role.

Toward the ninth and tenth months, the soldier's *esprit* picks up as he begins to regard himself as an «old soldier». It is usually at this point that the soldier is generally most combat-effective. As he approaches the end of his tour in Vietnam, however, he begins noticeably to withdraw his efficiency. He now becomes reluctant to engage in offensive combat operations. Stories are repeated of the men killed the day they were to rotate back to the United States. «Short-timer's fever» is implicitly recognized by the others and demands on short-timers are informally reduced. The final disengagement period of the combat soldier is considered a kind of earned prerogative which those earlier in the rotation cycle hope eventually to enjoy. In other words, short-timer's fever is a tacitly approved way of cutting short the soldier's exposure to combat dangers.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the rotation system reinforces a perspective that is essentially private and self-concerned. Thus, somewhat remarkably, I found little difference in the attitudes of combat soldiers in Vietnam over a two-year interval. This attitudinal consistency was due largely to each soldier's going through a similar rotation experience. The end of the war is marked by the individual's rotation date and not by its eventual outcome—whether victory, defeat, or stalemate. Even discussion of broader military strategy and the progress of the war—except when directly impinging on one's unit—appears irrelevant to the combat soldier: «My war is over when I go home».

When the soldier feels concern over the fate of others, it is for those he personally knows in his own outfit. His concern does not extend to those unknown persons who have preceded him or will eventually replace him. Rather, the attitude is typically, «I've done my time, let the others do their's.» Or, as put in the

2. In August, 1969, wide press coverage was given to the «Alpha Company incident» in Vietnam. This centered around the refusal of some men in the combat unit to return to battle. Although the incident was greatly overblown, it is significant that Alpha was known at the time to be a «short-timer's» company.

1. Stouffer *et al.*, *op. cit.*, II, 242-249.

soldier's vernacular, he is waiting to make the final entry on his «FIGMO» chart—«fuck it, got my orders [to return to the United States]». Whatever incipient identification there might be with abstract comrades-in-arms is circumvented by the privatized view of the war fostered by the rotation system.

*Primary groups and self-interest.* As a sociological concept, the notion of primary groups has been one of the most fruitful in furthering our knowledge of the makeup of human society and the operation of large-scale organizations. Indeed, the components of all institutions consist to some extent of small groups whose members associate with each other over extended periods of time, and develop some sense of shared cohesion and intimacy. In its pure-type formulation, the primary group consists of personal relationships in which the group's maintenance and ends are intrinsically valued for their own sake, rather than mechanisms which serve individual self-interests.

Descriptions of combat motivation in military organizations have heavily relied on the importance of social groupings governed by intimate face-to-face relations. I particularly have in mind the germinal studies of World War II found in *The American Soldier* by Stouffer and his associates, and the analysis of the *Wehrmacht* by Shils and Janowitz.<sup>1</sup> These and similar studies saw combat behavior as largely dependent upon the individual's identification and solidarity with fellow squad and platoon members. Little's participant observations in an infantry rifle company during the war in Korea, although within the general framework of primary-group analyses, differ by describing the basic unit of social cohesion as two-man relationships rather than following squad or platoon boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

My observations in Vietnam, however, indicate that the concept of primary groups has certain limitations in explaining combat behavior and motivation even beyond that suggested by Little. At least in Vietnam, the instrumental and self-serving aspects of primary relations in combat units must be more fully appreciated. If the individual soldier is realistically to improve his survival chances, he must necessarily develop and take part in primary-group relations. Moreover, as Little has pointed out, such reciprocal behavior is likely to be most intense at dyadic levels in the form of two-man «buddy» relationships. But even the

buddy relationship, at its core, consists of a mutually pragmatic effort to minimize personal risk. In other words, under the extreme conditions of ground warfare, an individual's survival is directly related to the support—moral, physical, and technical—he can expect from his fellow soldiers. He gets such support largely to the degree that he reciprocates to the others in his group in general, and to his buddy in particular.

Interpreting the solidarity of combat squads as outcomes of individual self-interest within a particular situational context can be corroborated by two illustrations. The first instance deals with the behavior of the man on «point» in a patrolling operation. The point man is usually placed well in front of the main body, thereby being in the most exposed position. Soldiers naturally dread this dangerous assignment, but a good point man is a safeguard for the entire patrol. What happens often as not is that men on point behave in a noticeably careless manner in order to avoid regular placement in that position. (At the same time, the point man must not be so incautious as to put himself completely at the mercy of an encountered enemy force.) In plain language, soldiers do not typically perform at their best when on point; personal safety overrides group interest.

The paramouncy of individual self-interest in combat units is also indicated by looking at the pattern of letter-writing. Squad members who have returned to the United States seldom write to those remaining behind. It most cases, nothing more is heard from a soldier after he leaves the unit. Once a soldier's personal situation undergoes a dramatic change—going home—he makes little or no effort to keep in contact with his old squad. Perhaps even more revealing, those still in the combat area seldom attempt to initiate mail contact with a former squad member. The rupture of communication is mutual despite protestations of lifelong friendship during the shared combat period. The soldier writes almost exclusively to those with whom he anticipates renewed personal contact upon leaving the service: his family and relatives, girl friends, and civilian male friends.

Do the contrasting interpretations of the network of social relations in combat units—the primary groups of World War II, the two-man relationships of the Korean conflict, and the essentially individualistic soldier in Vietnam described here—result from conceptual differences on the part of the commentators, or do they reflect substantive differences in the social cohesion of the American soldiers being described?

If substantive differences do obtain, particularly between World War II and the wars in Korea and Vietnam, much of this variation could be accounted for by the disruptive effects on combat solidarity caused by the introduction of the rotation sys-

1. *Ibid.*; and Shils and Janowitz, *op. cit.*

2. Roger W. Little, «Buddy Relations and Combat Performance», in Morris Janowitz (ed.), *The New Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964), 195-223. See also the chapter «Primary Groups and Military Effectiveness» in Morris Janowitz with Roger W. Little, *Sociology and the Military Establishment* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1965), 77-99.



tem in the latter two wars.<sup>1</sup> It is also relevant to note, however, that even in World War II certain students of American soldiers found the primacy of an individualistic ethos. In a comparison of the American and German armies, Spindler came to the conclusion that a central quality of the American's orientation toward the military was «self-interest to the point of domination of all other values».<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Rose attributed similar consequences to the American tradition of «looking out for Number One».<sup>3</sup>

### latent ideology

Even if we could decide whether combat primary groups are essentially entities *sui generis* or outcomes of pragmatic self-interest, there remain other difficulties in understanding the part they play in maintaining organizational effectiveness. For it has been amply demonstrated in many contexts that primary groups can serve to hinder as well as to serve attaining the formal goals of the larger organization. Thus, to describe effective combat motivation principally in terms of primary-group ties leaves unanswered the question of why various armies—independent of training and equipment—perform differently in times of war. Indeed, because of the very ubiquity of primary groups in military organizations, we must look for supplementary factors to explain variations in combat motivation.

I propose that primary groups maintain the soldier in his combat role only when he has an underlying commitment to the worth of the larger social system for which he is fighting. This commitment need not be formally articulated, nor even perhaps consciously recognized. But he must at some level accept, if not the specific purposes of the war, then at least the broader rectitude of the social system of which he is a member. Although American combat soldiers do not espouse overtly ideological sentiments and are extremely reluctant to voice patriotic rhetoric, this should not obscure the existence of more latent beliefs in the legitimacy, and even superiority, of the American way of life.

Although the heuristic utility of the concept of ideology has been a source of special controversy in a quite extensive literature, I want only to specify some of the more salient values held by American combat sol-

diers in Vietnam. At the risk of further compounding an already confusing lexicon, I have used the term latent ideology to describe the social and cultural sources of those beliefs manifest in the attitudes toward the war held by American soldiers. Latent ideology, in this context, refers to those widely shared sentiments of soldiers which, though not overtly political or even necessarily substantively political, nevertheless have concrete consequences for combat motivation.

This conception of combat motivation draws upon the recent emphasis in diverse social science writings on the nature of those underlying aspects of belief systems which may set the context for political behavior. In particular, I have in mind those ideas couched in such terms as political culture,<sup>4</sup> basic value orientations,<sup>5</sup> ideological dimensions,<sup>6</sup> central value system,<sup>7</sup> and political ideology.<sup>8</sup> These notions have been developed to bridge the gap between the level of microanalysis based on individual behavior and the level of macroanalysis based on variables common to political sociology. It is with this kind of understanding that we can best examine the dynamics of attitude formation among American combat soldiers. As Robert Lane has convincingly argued in his study of the «American common man», students of political behavior have too often asked questions which are important only to political scientists.<sup>9</sup> When the individual responds in a way that seems either ideologically confused or apathetic, he is considered to have no political ideology. Moreover, since an individual's involvement in the polity is usually peripheral, it is quite likely that his political attitudes will be organized quite differently from those of ideologues or political theorists. But by focusing on underlying value orientations, we may find a set of attitudes having a definite coherence—especially within the context of that individual's life situation.

*Anti-ideology.* Quite consistently, the American combat soldier displays a profound skepticism of political and ideological appeals. Somewhat paradoxically, then, anti-ideology itself is a recurrent and integral

4. Lucian W. Pye and Sidney Verba (eds.), *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

5. Seymour M. Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963), 1-11.

6. Philip E. Converse, «The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Politics», in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 206-261.

7. Edward A. Shils, «The Macrosociological Problem: Consensus and Dissensus in the Larger Society», in Donald P. Ray (ed.), *Trends in Social Science* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1961), 60-83.

8. Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

9. *Ibid.*, 439-459.

1. Uyeiki, in his discussion of the post-Korea peacetime Army, makes a similar point. He noted primary groups were weakened by rapid personnel turnover in units and the individual soldier knowing his own time of separation from the service. See Eugene S. Uyeiki, «Draftee Behavior in the Cold-War Army», *Social Problems*, 8 (Fall, 1960), 151-158.

2. Cited in Kurt Lang, «Military Organizations», in James G. March (ed.), *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1965), 868.

3. *Loc. cit.*



part of the soldier's belief system.<sup>1</sup> They dismiss patriotic slogans or exhortations to defend democracy with «What a crock», «Be serious, man», or «Who's kidding who?». In particular, they have little belief that they are protecting an outpost of democracy in South Vietnam. United States Command Information pronouncements stressing defense of South Vietnam as an outpost of the «free world» are almost as dubiously received as those of Radio Hanoi which accuse Americans of imperialist aggression. As one soldier put it, «Maybe we're supposed to be here and maybe not. But you don't have time to think about things like that. You worry about getting zapped and dry socks tomorrow. The other stuff is a joke».

In this same vein, when the soldier responds to the question as to why he is in Vietnam, his answers are couched in a quite individualistic frame of reference. He sees little relationship between his presence in Vietnam and the national politics which brought him there. Twenty-seven of the 34 interviewed combat soldiers defined their presence in the war in terms of personal misfortune (see Table 6.2.). Typical responses were: «My outfit was sent over here and me with it»; «My tough luck in getting drafted»; «I happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time»; «I was fool enough to join this man's Army»; and «My own stupidity for listening to the recruiting sergeant». Only five soldiers initially mentioned broader policy implications—to stop Communist aggression. Two soldiers stated they requested assignment in Vietnam because they wanted to be «where the action is».

Because of the combat soldier's overwhelming propensity to see the war in private and personal terms, I had to ask specifically what the United States was doing in Vietnam. When the question was rephrased in this manner, the soldiers most often said they were in Vietnam «to stop Communism». «To stop Communism» is about the only ideological slogan the American combat soldier can be brought to utter. Nineteen of the 34 interviewed soldiers saw stopping Communism as the purpose of the war. But when they expressed this view it was almost always in terms of defending the United States, not the «free world» in general or South Vietnam in particular. They said: «The only way we'll keep them out of the States is to kill them here»; «Let's get it over now, before they're too strong to stop»; «They have to be stopped somewhere»; «Better to zap this country than let them do the same to us».

1. As Biderman insightfully states in his study of American prisoners of war in Korea: «The most common attitude was not only relatively apolitical, it was *antipolitical*. The almost universal way of referring to Communist indoctrination and indoctrination matter was «all that political crap». It was «crap» not only because it was Communist, but because it was political». (Italics in the original.) Biderman, *op. cit.*, 258.

Fifteen of the soldiers gave responses other than stopping Communism. Three gave frankly cynical explanations of the war by stating that domestic prosperity in the United States depended on a war economy. Two soldiers held that the American intervention was a serious mistake initially, but that it was now too late to withdraw because of the national commitment. One man even gave a Malthusian interpretation, arguing that war was needed to limit population growth. Nine of the soldiers could give no reason for the war even after extensive discussion. Within this group, one heard responses such as: «I only wish I knew»; «Maybe Johnson knows, but I don't»; and «I've been wondering about that ever since I got here».

I asked each of the 19 soldiers who mentioned stopping Communism as the purpose of the war what was so bad about Communism that it must be stopped at the risk of his own life. The first reaction to such a question was usually perplexity or rueful shrugging. After thinking about it, and with some prodding, 12 of the men expressed their distaste for Communism by stressing its authoritarian aspects in social relations. They saw Communism as a system of excessive social regimentation that allows the individual no autonomy in the pursuit of his own happiness. Typical descriptions of Communism were: «That's when you can't do what you want to do»; «Somebody's always telling you what to do»; or «You're told where you work, what you eat, and when you shit». As one man wryly put it, «Communism is something like the Army».

While the most frequently mentioned features of Communism concerned the individual's relationship to higher authority, other descriptions were also given. Three soldiers mentioned the atheistic and antichurch aspects of Communism; two specifically talked of the absence of political parties and democratic political institutions; and one man said Communism was good in theory, but could never work in practice because human beings were «too selfish». Only one soldier mentioned the issue of public versus private property ownership.

It should be repeated and heavily stressed that the reasons given for the war and the descriptions of Communism offered by the combat soldiers were nearly always the result of extended discussion and questioning. When left to themselves, the soldiers rarely discussed the reasons for America's military intervention in Vietnam, the nature of Communist systems, or other political issues.<sup>2</sup>

2. Two revealing press reports further corroborate the non-salience of ideology for American troops in Vietnam. An executive of the Star Publishing Company (an American-owned Okinawa-based concern handling commercial book and magazine distribution for U.S. forces in Vietnam) stated: «A genre not popular are ideological books on the war itself». →

*Americanism.* The fact that the American soldier is not overtly ideological should not obscure the existence of those salient values which do contribute to his motivation in combat. Despite the soldier's ideological unconcern and his pronounced embarrassment in the face of patriotic rhetoric, he nevertheless displays an elemental American nationalism in the belief that the United States is the best country in the world. Even though he hates being in the war, the combat soldier typically believes—in a kind of joyless patriotism—he is fighting for his American homeland. As already reported, when the soldier does articulate the purposes of the war, the view is most often expressed that if Communist aggression is not stopped in Southeast Asia, it will be only a matter of time before the United States itself is in jeopardy. The suasion of the so-called «domino theory» is powerful among combat soldiers as well as the general public back home.

The soldier definitely does not see himself fighting for South Vietnam *per se*. Quite the contrary, he thinks South Vietnam a worthless country. Indeed, the soldier's high evaluation of his American homeland has its obverse side in a wide-spread dislike of the Vietnamese. The low regard in which the Vietnamese —«slopes» or «dinks»—are held is constantly present in the derogatory comments on the avarice of those who pander the GIS, the treachery of the Vietnamese people, and the numbers of Vietnamese young men in the cities who are not in the armed forces. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment is most glaringly apparent in the hostility toward the ARVN (from «Army of the Republic of Vietnam», pronounced «Arvin») who are supposed military allies. Disparaging remarks about the fighting qualities of the South Vietnamese forces are endemic.

→(Italics in the original.) Bestsellers among servicemen were, in descending order: westerns, mysteries, sexy novels, science fiction, war novels, and comic books. See Richard R. Lingeman, «Back At the Front», *New York Times Book Review*, February 25, 1968, 2-3. Similarly, Bob Hope and his writers confessed to surprise that servicemen in Vietnam did not enjoy jokes based on «political material». Rather, comedy routines centering on stock Army situations were the best received. Reported in the *New York Post*, December 20, 1967, 6.

In another context, the nonpolitical sentiments of GIS were shown in the testimony of former Major General Edwin A. Walker before a Senate subcommittee in 1962. Walker had, among other things, placed an announcement in the newspaper of the 24th Infantry Division requesting those under his command to call a telephone number to receive guidelines, based on the index of the rightist Americans for Constitutional Action, on how to vote. Questioned as to how many troops followed his advice, the General responded: «I did not answer the telephone, sir. A sergeant did. And we had, for your interest, which is sad, and I hate to admit, only five calls from 13,000 men». See United States Senate, *Military Cold War Education and Speech Review Policies*, Hearings before the Special Preparedness Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, 87th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), 1433.

In marked contrast to the ridicule and antipathy toward the ARVN is the respect American combat soldiers show for enemy forces, either Viet Cong or North Vietnamese regulars. In particular, the Viet Cong's ability to improvise tactically and make do with rudimentary weaponry is ruefully admired. There are frequent remarks along the line of: «If ARVN had only a couple of guys like the VC, we could go home today»; «Why do our Vietnamese fight so lousy and theirs fight so good». Yet, the American soldier is somewhat puzzled as to the reasons behind his opponent's excellent fighting abilities and valor in combat. One occasionally hears serious explanations attributing the bravery of the enemy to their using marijuana or narcotics.

*Materialism.* A variety of factors underlie the soldier's fundamental pro-Americanism, not the least of them is his immediate reliance on fellow Americans for mutual support in a country where virtually all indigenous people are seen as actual or potential threats to his physical safety. He also has deep concern for his family and loved ones back home. These considerations, however, are general to any army fighting in a foreign land. It is on another level, then, that I tried to uncover those aspects of American society as a unique whole that were most relevant to the combat soldier.

To obtain such a general picture of the soldier's conception of his homeland, I asked the following question: «Tell me in your own words, what makes America different from other countries?» The overriding feature in the soldier's perception of the American way of life is the creature comforts that life can offer. Twenty-two of the soldiers described the United States by its high-paying jobs, automobiles, consumer goods, and leisure activities. No other description of America came close to being mentioned as often as the high—and apparently uniquely American—material standard of living. Thus, only four of the soldiers emphasized America's democratic political institutions; three mentioned religious and spiritual values; two spoke of the general characteristics of the American people; and one said America was where the individual advanced on his own worth; another talked of America's natural and physical beauties; and one black soldier described America as racist. Put another way, it is the materialistic—and the word is not used pejoratively—aspects of life in America that are most salient to combat soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

1. This description of how Americans perceive their country based on interviews with a small number of combat soldiers is in direct opposition to that found in a large-scales survey measuring citizen beliefs in five countries. When asked what aspects of their country they were most proud of, American overwhelmingly mentioned governmental and political →

The soldier's belief in the superiority of the American way of life is further reinforced by the contrast with the Vietnamese standard of living. The combat soldier cannot help making invidious comparisons between the life he led in the United States—even if he is working class—and what he sees in Vietnam. Although it is more pronounced in the Orient, it must be remembered that Americans abroad, whether military or civilian, usually find themselves in locales that compare unfavorably with the material affluence of the United States. Indeed, in the hypothetical situation where American soldiers would be stationed in a country with a markedly higher material standard of living than that of the United States, it is very likely they would be severely shaken in their belief as to the merits of American society.

Moreover, the combat soldier, by the very fact of being a combat soldier, also leads an existence that is not only more dangerous than civilian life, but that is additionally more primitive and physically harsh. The soldier's somewhat romanticized view of life back home is buttressed not only by his direct observation of the Vietnamese scene, but also by his own immediate and personal lower standard of living. It has often been noted that front-line soldiers bitterly contrast their plight with the physical amenities enjoyed by their fellow countrymen, both rear-echelon soldiers as well as civilians back home.<sup>1</sup> While this is superficially true, the attitudes of American combat soldiers toward their compatriots are actually somewhat more ambivalent. For at the same time the soldier is begrudging the civilian his physical comforts, it is these very comforts for which he fights. Similarly, combat soldiers envy, rather than disapprove, those rear-echelon personnel who engage in *sub rosa* profiteering.

The materialistic ethic is reflected in another characteristic of American servicemen. Even among front-line combat soldiers, one cannot help but be impressed by the plethora of individually owned mechanical equipment. Transistor radios are practically *de ri-*

*gueur*. Cameras and other photographic accessories are widely evident and used. Even the traditional letter-writing home is becoming displaced by tape recordings. It seems more than coincidental that American soldiers commonly refer to the United States as «The Land of the Big PX».

*Manly honor*. Another factor that plays a part in combat motivation is found in the notions of masculinity and physical toughness which pervade the soldier's outlook toward warfare. Being a combat soldier is a man's job. Front-line soldiers often make invidious comparisons with the virility of rear-echelon personnel. A soldier who has not experienced combat is called a «cherry» (i.e., virgin). Likewise, paratroopers express disdain for «legs» (as non-airborne soldiers are called). This he-man attitude is also found in the countless joking references to the movie roles embodied in the persons of John Wayne and Lee Marvin. That the military organization seeks to capitalize on these tendencies in American life is reflected in such perennial recruiting slogans as «The Marine Corps Builds Men» and «Join the Army and Feel Like a Man».

In this regard, the observations made on the ethic of masculinity among *Wehrmacht* soldiers during World War II seem equally appropriate to American soldiers in Vietnam:

Among young males in middle and late adolescence, the challenges of love and vocation aggravate anxieties about weakness. At this stage fears about potency are considerable. When men who have passed through this stage are placed in the entirely male society of a military unit, freed from the control of adult civilian society and missing its gratifications, they tend to regress to the adolescent condition. The show of «toughness» and hardness which is regarded as a virtue among soldiers is a response to these reactivated adolescent anxieties about weakness».<sup>2</sup>

It should be underscored, however, that an exaggerated masculine ethic is much less evident among soldiers after their units have been bloodied. As the realities of combat are faced, more prosaic definitions

→ institutions. See Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 102. Yet the finding of a materialistic primacy among combat soldiers given here parallels those given in ethnographic studies of working- and lower-middle class Americans in civilian contexts. See, for example, Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960); Ely Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (Boston: Beacon Press, Inc., 1965); Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers* (New York: Free Press, 1965); and Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners* (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1966).

1. Nevertheless, the monetary rewards of combat service are not to be dismissed lightly. In 1968 an airborne staff sergeant, for example, earned monthly about \$ 210 more than his counterpart in rank (pay grade E - 6) stationed in the United States: \$ 270 income tax benefit, \$ 65 combat zone pay, \$ 55 «jump» pay, and \$ 20 overseas pay.

2. Shils and Janowitz, *op. cit.*, 293-294. For relevant discussions on the question of masculine identity in the American armed forces, see Henry Elkin, «Aggressive and Erotic Tendencies in Army Life», *American Journal of Sociology*, 51 (March, 1946), 408-413; D.W. Heyder and H.S. Wambach, «Sexuality and Affect in Frogmen», *Arch. General Psychiatry*, 11 (September, 1964), 286-289; and Peter G. Bourne, «Observations on Group Behavior in a Special Forces (A) Team Under Threat of Attack» (paper delivered at the Annual Meetings of the American Psychiatric Association, 1967). Furthermore, Bourne's observations of a Special Forces unit in Vietnam strongly corroborate my own findings on the essentially individualistic frame of reference of combat soldiers.

of manly honor emerge. (Also, there is more frequent expression of the male role in manifestly sexual rather than combative terms, e.g., the repeatedly heard «I'm a lover, not a fighter».) That is, notions of masculinity serve to create initial motivation to enter combat, but recede once the life-and-death facts of warfare are confronted. Moreover, once the unit is tempered by combat, definitions of manly honor are not seen to encompass individual heroics. Quite the opposite, the very word «hero» is used to describe negatively any soldier who recklessly jeopardizes the unit's welfare.<sup>1</sup> Men try to avoid going out on patrols with individuals who are overly anxious to make contact with the enemy. Much like the slacker at the other end of the spectrum, the «hero» is also seen as one who endangers the safety of others. As is the case with virtually all combat behavior, the ultimate standard rests on keeping alive.

This account of American combat soldiers in Vietnam has addressed itself to some of the prevailing assumptions on combat performance; particularly those social science viewpoints which deemphasized the salience of ideological considerations for combat soldiers and which stressed instead the determinative nature of primary relationships in combat groups. I have sought to demonstrate that these assumptions require modification in certain major ways. Moreover, rather than conceiving the ideological and primary-group explanations as mutually exclusive, our knowledge of combat motivation must be informed by an awareness of the manner in which both of these considerations are interrelated.

That the American soldier has a general aversion

to overt ideological symbols and patriotic appeals should not obscure those latent ideological factors which serve as pre-conditions in supporting the soldier to exert himself under dangerous conditions. For the individual behavior and small-group processes occurring in combat squads operate within a widespread attitudinal context of underlying value commitments; most notably, an anti-political outlook coupled with a belief in the worthwhileness of American society. These values—whether misguided or not—must be taken into account in explaining the generally good combat performance American soldiers have given of themselves.

The findings reported in this study also reveal that the intensity of primary-group ties so often reported in combat units are best viewed as mandatory necessities arising from immediate life-and-death exigencies. Much like the Hobbesian description of primitive life, the combat situation also reaches the state of being nasty, brutish and short. To carry the Hobbesian analogy a step further; one can view primary-group processes in the combat situation as a kind of rudimentary social contract; a contract which is entered into because of advantages to individual self-interest. Rather than viewing soldiers' primary groups as some kind of semi-mystical bond of comradeship, they can be better understood as pragmatic and situational responses. Furthermore, the American soldier's essentially individualistic frame of reference is structurally reinforced by the operation of formal organizational assignment policies—the rotation system—which sets a private terminal date for each soldier's participation in the war. This is not to deny the existence of strong interpersonal ties within combat squads, but only to reinterpret them as derivative from the very private war each individual is fighting for his own survival.

1. On this same point with regard to American soldiers in the Korean conflict, see Little, *op. cit.*, 202-204.

Here, then is a category of facts with very distinctive characteristics: it consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him. These ways of thinking could not be confused with biological phenomena, since they consist of representations and of actions; nor with psychological phenomena, which exist only in the individual consciousness and through it. They constitute, thus, a new variety of phenomena; and it is to them exclusively that the term «social» ought to be applied... These ways of thinking and acting therefore constitute the proper domain of sociology.  
Emile Durkheim, «The Rules of Sociological Method».