With each war come new changes to the military, changes that sometimes reflect broader society.

The Vietnam War was fought by a young, largely working class force which represented a shift from previous wars; today’s forces are in many ways similar, with a few significant differences that evolved from Vietnam.

This lesson plan will involve a review of the demographics of those who have served in the nation’s wars from Korea to today, with students examining the shift in the characteristics of those who comprise the military over the past 50+ years, as well as examining the broader shifts in society that came as a result of the military’s composition in Vietnam.

What Was the Makeup of the US Military in Vietnam?
**PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY**

**Veterans Interview**

A large-scale 1968 Department of Defense survey on motivations for enlistment in the military categorized potential motives as:
- 47% - draft-motivated (to increase choice and location of service by volunteering vs waiting to receive draft assignment);
- 20% - personal (for travel, excitement, to build maturity, etc);
- 20% - self-advancement (professional training and career opportunities);
- 6% - patriotism (serve the country);
- 7% - other

Ask students to interview someone in the community who has enlisted in the military within the past 15 years. Students might reach out to the local military recruitment center or office, for example, to find someone they can speak with. Ask students to get a sense of their interviewee’s main motivation for enlistment, then gather those responses as a class and see if you can break down those motivations into distinct categories. How do those categories align with the categories from the 1968 survey? Have motivations changed at all? Ask students: what motivation do they personally find most compelling? Why?

**IN THE CLASSROOM**

**Who Should Serve?**

Begin by asking students: Who do you think should serve in the military? Do you think there should be efforts to make the military a reflection of society in its makeup? Why or why not?

During the Korean War, 70% of draft-age men served in the military. During the Vietnam War, that figure dropped to 40%, with only 10% of draft-age men serving in Vietnam—making military service a less universal experience and setting those who did serve farther apart from society at large. The US soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War were different in many ways from those who had fought in earlier wars. The average age of a soldier in Vietnam was 19, and he was likely to be unmarried—a significant difference from, for example, the average age of 26 for a soldier in World War II (see slide 1, a group of young soldiers including Jan Scruggs, the founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.) The youth of the average soldier was in many ways related to the draft and the system of deferments for the draft—enrolling and staying in college became an incentive to many, as college
What Was the Makeup of the US Military in Vietnam?

Partly as a consequence of the system of deferments, the Vietnam War was largely fought by men from working class backgrounds—76% of soldiers in Vietnam came from working or lower class backgrounds. This has led many to characterize Vietnam as a “working-class war,” which served as a reason for some to demonstrate against the “rich man’s war” (see slide 2). Some of those soldiers, and many within the working class subset, were racial minorities. Slide 3 shows Melvin Morris, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient who was awarded the distinction for leading an advance across enemy lines to recover the body of a fallen sergeant. African Americans made up about 10% of all US soldiers in Vietnam, reflecting their numbers in the broader American population. However, African-Americans comprised about 20% of combat deaths in the early years of the war because they tended to be assigned to front-line infantry units.

The youth of American servicemen in Vietnam prompted a civic debate on whether it was appropriate to send a person to war who could not vote for representatives making decisions about war and peace. The voting age in the Vietnam era was 21 years old. Ask students to observe closely the poster included on slide 4, which seeks support for the lowering of the voting age to 18. “I go for all sharing the privileges of the government who assist in bearing its burdens.” —Abraham Lincoln

Compare the heat maps on slides 5 and 6, which compare the states of origin for casualties from Vietnam to casualties from Afghanistan and Iraq. Ask students: Do you see any significant differences? What kind of conclusions can you make by comparing the two maps? In terms of casualties, the geographic distribution is largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military has shifted south—percentages of service men and women from the Northeast and Midwest have dropped, while percentages from the West and South have risen. In 2000, 42% of all recruits came from the South. Ask students to observe the map of veteran populations on slide 7. What conclusions can you draw from this map? Do you think these maps give useful information about whether today’s military is representative of American society as a whole?

Regardless of the various backgrounds and circumstances that soldiers come from, it is important to recognize their service to the nation.

Today’s Military

Some characteristics of today’s professional military:
- 49% of the active force is between the ages of 17 and 24
- 15% of the active force is female—50% of those are African American, and 38% white
- 49% of enlisted service men and women are married
- 92% of new additions to active forces are high school graduates
- New recruits mostly come from middle or lower-middle class families
- African Americans make up 16% of new additions to active forces, and Hispanics make up 11%

Ask students to look up chart, and compare how these percentages line up with percentages of the same characteristics for the total US population—e.g., What percentage of the US population is between the ages of 17 and 24? Do you come to the conclusion that the military is representative of society as a whole? If not, is that an issue? Why or why not? What can be done to make the military more representative of society, if it is not?

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING


What do you think an appropriate voting age would be? Why?

Federal elections. The voting age for state and local elections is determined by state and not? How could someone make a case against the lowering of the voting age? In March 1971, support for the lowering of the voting age. Do you agree with the Lincoln quote? Why or why was 21 years old. Ask students to observe closely the poster included on slide 4, which seeks representatives making decisions about war and peace. The voting age in the Vietnam era on whether it was appropriate to send a person to war who could not vote for.

The youth of American servicemen in Vietnam—making military service a less universal experience and setting those who did came from working or lower class backgrounds. This has led many to characterize Vietnam as a “working-class war” (see slide 2). Some of those soldiers, and many within the working class subset, were racial minorities. Slide 3 shows Melvin Morris, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient who was awarded the distinction for leading an advance across enemy lines to recover the body of a fallen sergeant. African Americans made up about 10 % of all US soldiers in Vietnam, reflecting their numbers in the broader American population. However, African-Americans comprised about 20% of combat deaths in the early years of the war Vietnam, reflecting their numbers in the broader American population. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states. However, in terms of total service, since the end of the draft in 1973, the makeup of the military largely unchanged: the greatest number of casualties come from the most populous states.