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## Introduction

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# Introduction

by

William King, guest editor

*Bloods. Brothers. The Griot. Vietnam Blues. Black Bitches Dancing With Charlie.* These titles, and numerous articles, essays, poems, government reports, films, and related items, describe and detail various aspects of the black experience of the American war in Vietnam, the situation on the homefront during that conflict, and some of the things that happened to black veterans upon their return to the “world” in the postwar years. That only selected aspects of that experience are covered arises from the fact that blacks were not nearly as prolific in recapitulating their tours of duty, forcing us to get at that information indirectly. In this special issue of the *Trotter Review*, that story is continued.

In his 1972 book, *The Challenge of Blackness*, Lerone Bennett, Jr., observed that black people live in a different time and a different reality than do white people. This difference arises in part because, as a consequence of their historical experiences in the United States, and white economic, political, social, and psychological “control” of “American” culture, black people have been relegated to the periphery of the society. Too, at the same time that they have been devalued as a group, many of their contributions—music, art, literature, inventions, and thought—have been adopted by the societal culture often without attribution. If we are to progress, it is clear that we will need all of the talents of all of the people of this nation. No one can be excluded because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, place of origin, religion, or whatever.

In the articles which follow, the careful reader will find reports and suggestions that upon further consideration have the potential for reconstructing reality broadly conceived, and perhaps a hint or three for exploration along a different line than has been previously pursued.

These articles begin with an historical overview of the black military experience by Harold Horton. The intent of his essay is to provide a context for those that follow. The crucial item he brings out is that from its earliest days, there have been black troops in the armed forces of the United States even though their status as men under arms has often conflicted with their status in the larger society. In another essay, Liz Allen, a former army nurse in Vietnam, speaks of her loneliness, her alienation, her attempts to secure a sense of belonging that might accommodate her difference as she patched up the wounds of war. Here again, we see the kinds of conflict—personal, social, and related—affected by the differential status of black people in a white society. The poem by Etheridge Knight and the discussion of his work by Yusef Komunyakaa address the issue of how our experiences shape our perceptions of the world around us. For too long, we have been told that seeing is believing. What



these items and the titles listed above help us to realize is that believing is seeing; that truth is more a function of the belief systems we embrace than it is some absolutist ideal.

The articles by Ron Armstead and Erwin Parson ask us to examine in a more practical way the consequences of the military and war experience and how those experiences might be used to impact upon specific situations at the community level. In Armstead’s case, the issue is housing. In Parson’s case, the issue is mitigation of violence in the inner city and the destruction of life and property that follows in its wake.

Finally, there is the piece by Jacqueline Howard-Matthews, who asks us to consider what it is we have learned by focusing on the recently concluded conflict in the Persian Gulf. The statistics tell us that some one-third of the forces sent there were black men and women. Yes, the military is a total institution. But as we learned in Vietnam, even total institutions have a way of being affected by those whose presence was not planned for at the outset.

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