

Maligning Black Veterans

By Lee Sloan

Each summer from 1964 to 1968, large-scale ghetto rioting swept the nation's cities. Those were days that gave rise to revolutionary and apocalyptic visions of American race relations. Some people argued that black Vietnam veterans, trained and skilled in guerrilla-warfare tactics, would resort to violence if their sacrifice and service to the nation went unrecognized and unrewarded. In the summer of 1980, new riots rekindled fears of potential violence from black former servicemen.

After the rioting in Miami last May, law-enforcement officials there suggested that they had been confronted by guerrillas who were black veterans and who could be organized nationwide.

Despite the problems and the legitimate grievances of black Vietnam veterans, there is virtually no evidence of their involvement in political violence.

Data collected in the Northeast by the Vietnam era research project indicate that relative to white veterans, blacks returned home with more prob-

lems and their problems were more persistent. Especially those who served in Vietnam were convinced that they had "paid their dues" and had every right to demand racial justice. These heightened expectations contributed to adjustment problems when blacks returned from the military to the segregated, economically depressed, and socially disorganized settings of their home communities, only to discover limited opportunities to transfer their military skills.

The economic problems have been especially marked. In 1977, at the time of our interviews, 28 percent of the black veterans in the study population (those who served in Vietnam or elsewhere) were unemployed; unemployment for white veterans was only 3 percent. Among those who were employed at the time, white veterans earned approximately \$81 more per week than did black veterans. Persistent economic problems generate stress that contributes to other problems, including drugs and drinking, alienation, psychopathology, and a lack of life direction.

It was facts such as these that led to predictions that black Vietnam veterans would resort to violence, perhaps even revolution. But the decade from 1969 was actually characterized by the absence of ghetto rioting. It appears that black Vietnam veterans were not involved in ghetto rioting for the same reasons that other blacks were not involved. It had become evident that white Americans were committed to whatever repressive violence was necessary to control black protest. The most militant black organizations had been suppressed or destroyed. And by 1968 it had become increasingly evi-

dent that the major victims of ghetto rioting were blacks themselves.

All publicly available evidence for the assertion that black veterans are urban guerrillas is circumstantial and exceedingly flimsy. It is furthermore a sensationalist charge that diverts attention from both the underlying social and economic conditions that made Miami riot-prone and the precipitating incident itself. Despite the house-of-cards character of the evidence, officials in Miami have recommended that others "familiarize" themselves with black veterans' organizations "so they will know what to expect."

It is imperative that the civil and political rights of black Vietnam-era veterans not be violated out of fear. Unwarranted and illegal surveillance of black veterans' organizations possibly could produce a self-fulfilling prophecy of the charge that black veterans have organized as urban guerrillas across the nation.

Despite their problems, the great majority of black Vietnam veterans are reasonably well-adjusted and productive members of society. Black and white veterans who are activists are involved in the same interest-group politics. Black veterans' organizations are involved in nothing more revolutionary than seeking veterans' benefits, obtaining upgraded discharges, seeking Government action on the Agent Orange issue, assisting their fellow veterans in prison, etc.

It would be extraordinarily risky to predict whether or not black Vietnam veterans will come to be involved in organized violence as hypothesized. What is known is that despair, anger, rage and estrangement can be found among these former black service-

men. All black Americans are legitimately concerned with the recent resurgence of activities by the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi Party, and other racist organizations.

It should be evident that if black veterans eventually do resort to organized political violence, it will be because we have failed to remedy the social, economic and political problems tied to white racism.

Lee Sloan is associate director of the Vietnam era research project at the Center for Policy Research, in New York City.