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AUTHOR Horan, Michael
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ABSTRACT

These four articles are part of an ongoing series of material directed to a statewide veterans group in Florida with regard to assessing the educational effects of the Vietnam Era GI Bill. Part 1 focuses on the manner in which the Veterans Administration (VA) relies on program starts as a measure of success rather than on completion rates. It reports that the VA does not identify Vietnam vets as a separate population, information without which analysis of the success or failure of the GI Bill is impossible. Part 2 addresses problems associated with assessing the GI Bill, particularly the inability of the VA to count accurately the number of Vietnam veterans who participated in the war. The article argues that without specifying the number of Vietnam veterans who served "in country," the VA cannot develop an accurate picture of who used the GI Bill. Part 3 highlights further problems associated with the GI Bill and the participation of Vietnam veterans. A particular focus is the extent to which Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) disrupted the lives of various subgroups within the total Vietnam veteran population and the effects of PTSD in preventing veterans from using their educational benefits. Part 4 takes a look at the difficulties of being a returning Vietnam veteran college student, especially the practically insurmountable psychological and social adjustments required of the returning Vietnam veteran. (YLB)

THE VIETNAM ERA GI BILL IN PERSPECTIVE

Michael Horan

THE VIETNAM ERA GI BILL IN PERSPECTIVE -PART ONE

By

Michael Horan, Ed.D.

The Vietnam Era GI Bill was passed into law in 1966 and has now passed into history. December 31, 1989 was the last day for this federally sponsored education program, and of course most individual veterans' entitlement under the bill ended years ago. Little attention has been paid to the demise of this program in the mass media. The common perception in most quarters is that Vietnam Era veterans have pretty much used their education entitlements from the GI Bill, that their rates of participation are higher than either World War II or Korean veterans, and that overall their experiences with this program have been satisfactory. There is another side to this story and it is less glamorous. We need to take a closer look at the success or failure of the Vietnam Era GI Bill. Only when through analysis of data as yet uncollected is completed, can we make a meaningfuldetermination about this program and what its value has been to Vietnam Veterans.

VIETNAM ERA GI BILL PARTICIPATION RATES

Participation rates are one of the primary methods by which the Veterans Administration has computed the overall usage and dispersal of funds from the GI Bill. These rates are arrived at by estimating the total number of eligible veterans and comparing the result against enrollment figures supplied by certified educational providers. A 1987 VA monograph shows a

total of 10,252,000 veterans eligible to use the Vietnam Era GI Bill, and that a total of 6,102,565, (or 59.5 percent) received some training benefit from participation in the GI Bill. The VA claims this is a substantial increase over previous participation rates of the WW II (50.5%) and Korean conflict (43.4%) GI Bills. These figures indicate a very positive usage rate for the GI Bill by all Vietnam Era veterans, but they tell us nothing about the utilization rates for Vietnam Veterans, or for that matter, about the rates for Era veterans as a separate group. Even if we assume a corresponding usage rate for Vietnam veterans, this would still be at odds with earlier estimates that put the rate much lower. A 1973 report of a study by the National League of Cities estimates the utilization rate at 46.1 percent. The same 1987 VA monograph reports that 54.0 percent of eligible Vietnam veterans or Era veterans received some college or other school training.

This is also significantly higher than WW II veterans (37.0%) and Korean conflict (37.6%) GI Bill usage. Once again these figures do not indicate whether the person was an Era or Vietnam theater veteran, nor do the figures tell us what level of schooling the veteran participated in (elementary, secondary, community college, four-year college, public or private). More importantly, these figures do not tell us what number, or what percentage, of veterans actually received an Associate (2 year) or Baccalaureate (four year) college degree. The only value of these figures is that they tell us that a specific percentage of veterans started a course of training.

The VA has provided partial statistics about Vietnam Era veterans and how they have used the GI Bill. In a 1983 report, the VA reported that the median amount of original net entitlement used is 38 percent. On the median, Era veterans who have terminated training have used slightly more than 13 months of training benefits. If all persons who according to the VA trained fewer than two months are deleted from the previous data, the average usage of entitlement increases to 18 months. The report also indicated that only one Vietnam Era veteran in eight who had maximum benefit entitlement (36 months before 1976 and 45 months after) used at least 36 months of training. For more than 60 percent of veterans who trained at the college level, this is four academic years, enough to obtain an undergraduate degree. At least half of those Era veterans who used more than two months of educational benefits used 50 percent or more of their earned entitlement. The report also estimated that of those Vietnam Era veterans who had ever trained under chapter 34 entitlement (GI Bill), 90 percent had used all of the entitlement they would be expected to use. The report does not specify the amount veterans would be expected to use, but evidently it is a very low amount.

What these figures show is that a high percentage of veterans start some type of training, but many terminate before completing two years of college. Since one Vietnam Era veteran in eight used the maximum benefit of 36 months, we can only conclude that there are many training starts but relatively few completions. This should be of concern to many persons and organizations who are interested in assessing the long-term value of the GI Bill, and specifically the readjustment problems of

Vietnam theater veterans.

There is sufficient reason to be concerned about the extent to which Vietnam veterans have participated in college education in the United States. No statistical information regarding "Nam vets" has been released by the VA. Vietnam veterans are not separated out from their fellow Era veterans and VA GI Bill usage rates focus on training starts as a measure of success, rather than completion rates. Unless figures are made available that identify Vietnam Veterans as a separate population, any analysis as to the success or failure of the use of the GI Bill is impossible. Why the VA does not provide such an analysis confounds many interested persons. The high prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among this groups of veterans should be reason enough for the VA to target them for special attention. It is a sad commentary that the VA has chosen not to do this. In the next essay the problem of counting Vietnam veterans will be discussed. This will highlight further problems associated with assessing the educational effects of the Vietnam Era GI Bill.

THE VIETNAM ERA GI BILL IN PERSPECTIVE PART TWO

By

Michael Horan, Ed.D.

In Part One of this series of articles about the Vietnam Era GI Bill, an analysis focused on the manner in which the Veterans Administration (VA) relied on program starts as a measure of success, rather than completion rates. In Part Two, further problems associated with assessing the GI Bill will get some special attention, particularly the inability of the VA to accurately count the number of Vietnam veterans who participated in the war.

Most people would think that figures released by the VA which show a59.5% utilization rate for the GI Bill should come from a fairly accurate data source. However, this is not the case, and it reflects even more negatively on how misleading the VA'S assessment of the effectiveness of the GI Bill has been. The VA makes it very difficult to count the exact number of Vietnam veterans who served in the war; this information does not exist! National figures which indicate the total men and women who served in Vietnam are based entirely on estimates and the VA uses them exclusively. Therefore, any estimate which indicates a very positive utilization rate for the GI Bill must also come under suspicion.

In his 1980 book titled, Post Traumatic Stress Disorders of the Vietnam Veteran, Tom Williams reported that approximately nine million individuals served in the U. S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam Era, 1964-1973. Nearly one-third, or 2.8 million

served in Southeast Asia. A Congressional Record report in 1982 reports a slightly larger figure based on a broader base of troop activities. This report indicates that 3,403,100 personnel served in the Southeast Asia Theater and includes Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the South China Seas. The question becomes one of determining which estimate the VA is using when calculating it's utilization rate. The VA does not give us this information about their research and we can only speculate about the estimate they have used to calculate their findings. The VA does tells us that 10,252,000 veterans were eligible to use the GI Bill, but they do not tell us how they arrived at this number, nor do they indicate the total number of Vietnam veterans in that figure.

The problems associated with counting Vietnam veterans have several implications worth discussing. The first problem is that Vietnam veterans are not identified as a separate group during the Vietnam Era. Why a specific category was not set up to insure an accurate count of "theater vets" is unclear, but it makes for increased difficulties when computing an estimate of these persons. Since an accurate count never occurred, any estimate of present Vietnam veterans is also difficult. This is information that is very much worth knowing, particularly if we wanted to try and estimate the number of "nam vets" who did not take advantage of GI Bill education benefits. Here again we must compute an estimate based on very flimsy information.

A second problem involved in counting Vietnam veterans involves the mixing of personnel in various wars. The VA tells

us that veterans who served in more than one wartime period are counted only once. A 1988 VA monograph estimates that 339,000 personnel served in both the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam Era. Personnel who served in the Vietnam Era, Korean Conflict, and World War II is estimated to be 269,000. The problem is not being able to know if a WW II or Korean veteran actually served in Vietnam as opposed to serving elsewhere. For statistical purposes, we would want to know which war each of these two additional groups of veterans were counted in. The VA does not explain its procedures for how it categorizes WW II and Korean Conflict veterans for GI Bill purposes. Until they disclose this information, or until the VA devises a more accurate reporting system, crude estimates will have to serve our purposes.

ESTIMATES OF PRESENT DAY VIETNAM VETERANS

How many Vietnam veterans are there in the United States and Florida? To arrive at an answer we also have to rely on estimates provided by the VA. For example, a 1988 estimate released by the VA indicates that the total veteran population in the United States and Puerto Rico is 27, 279,000. The VA tells us that Vietnam Era veterans comprise 30 percent of that total for an estimated figure of 8,183,700. No mention is made of estimating the total Vietnam veterans in that specific report. However, in a 1988 report by the Triangle Research Institute, titled the National Vietnam Veteran Readjustment Study, the authors estimate that the percentage of "theater vets" to "era vets" is 38 percent.

In an effort to overcome the lack of precision in estimating

total Vietnam veterans, it seems prudent at this time to develop a range of the estimated total for this article. The lower end of this range will reflect a 33.33 percent estimate by Tom Williams. The upper end of this range will be 38 percent and reflects the estimate released by the Triangle Research Institute. Therefore, of the 8,183,700 Vietnam Era veterans estimated to be in the U S. and Puerto Rico, the total number of Vietnam veterans is estimated to be from 2,727,627 to 3,109,806.

ESTIMATES OF FLORIDA VIETNAM VETERANS

Based on the same estimates provided by the VA and the Triangle Research Institute, we can calculate how many Vietnam veterans there are in the state of Florida. The VA tells us that Florida ranks fourth in the United States and Puerto Rico in total numbers of living veterans with 1,492,000. Vietnam Era veterans in Florida are estimated to total 447,600. Therefore, the estimated range of total Vietnam Veterans in the State of Florida is 149,185 to 170,088

The lack of precision in specifying the number of Vietnam veterans who served "in country" is yet another reason to be concerned about their use of the GI Bill. If the VA cannot arrive at a specific number who served in the Vietnam War, how can they possibly develop an accurate picture of who used the GI Bill? Further, how can the VA tell us with any degree of accuracy whether the GI Bill was or was not effective in educating Vietnam veterans? As far as assessing the useful of the GI Bill for veterans, if appears that once again Vietnam veterans are left out!

In Part Three of this series of articles, the problems experienced by "Nam vets" as they attempted to successfully adjust to life after "Nam" will be discussed. This will highlight further problems associated with assessing the educational effects of the Vietnam Era GI Bill.

THE VIETNAM ERA GI BILL IN PERSPECTIVE - PART THREE

By

Michael Horan, Ed.D.

The first two parts of this series analyzed the manner in which the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) measures the success of the GI Bill by establishing participation rates, and their inability to accurately count the number of Vietnam veterans who actually participate in this educational program. The third section of this story will highligh further prolems associated with the GI Bill and the participation of Vietnam veterans.

While the majority of Vietnam veterans have competently adjusted their roles from military to civilian living, many have not been so fortunate. There is a darker side to the readjustment difficulties of a large number of "Nam vets." A number of major research studies in the last decade document the frightful cost the war has exacted, and continues to exact, from those who served in Vietnam. A chronological summary of these studies helps us understand how those difficulties began to disrupt the lives of Vietnam veterans, severely impaired their ability to participate in the GI Bill, and alerted mental health professionals to the consequences and dangers of the illness known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:

- A 1978 Disabled American Veteran (DAV) study concluded that 500,000 Vietnam veterans suffer from such difficulties as survivor guilt, hyperalertness, problems with intimate relationships, sleep disturbances, depression, fantasies of retaliation, destruction, and suicide, and substance abuse.

- A 1981 landmark Veterans Administration (VA) study on combat related stress, titled "Legacies of Vietnam" made similar findings. It placed the number of Vietnam veterans with symptoms of PTSD at 600,000 - 900,000. One principal investigator, Dr. Arthur Egendorf, estimated that two million, of the estimated three million that served in Vietnam, could benefit from therapy in one form or another, even if that therapy simply consisted of talking to other veterans.

- In her 1983 study titled "Lives After Vietnam," Josefina Card found that 19.3 percent of all Vietnam veterans and 27 percent of combat veterans had severe adjustment problems.

- A 1985 study, conducted by Columbia University for the American Legion, reported that more than a million Vietnam veterans suffered nervous breakdowns or thought they would after they returned from the war. The research also found that Vietnam veterans earned $3,000 to $5,000 less per year that their peers, and that a significant number lived well below the poverty level.

- A 1986 special congressional committee placed the number of homeless Vietnam veterans at between 82,000 and 110,000.

- In 1988, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) concluded that Vietnam veterans were far more likely to suffer from depression anxiety, and alcoholism, with nearly 500,000 having experienced severe PTSD symptoms.

The extent to which PTSD disrupted the lives of various subgroups within the total Vietnam veteran population has also been documented extensively. Data from the 1982 Congressional Record shows that of the 3,403,100 estimated personnel who served in the Southeast Asia theater (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and the South China Seas) 88.4 percent were caucasian, 10.6 percent were black, and one percent belonged to other races. While blacks served in relative proportion to their numbers in the U.S. population, they suffer from PTSD at a higher rate than white veterans. A 1988 study titled the "National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study" found that for Blacks the prevalence

of PTSD is 19 percent, while that of white veterans is about 14 percent. This report states that "diagnosis of the black population is complicated by their frequent alcohol and drug abuse, medical, legal, personality, and vocation problems." Other studies have shown that black Vietnam veterans have higher rates of unemployment and perceived themselves as less able to control their personal world.

Hispanics also suffered extensively from their participation in the war. The rate of PTSD for this subgroup of veterans is as high as 27 percent. Another distinctive feature of this population is the high proportion of negative relationships with close family members, especially spouses. Hispanics with the symptoms of PTSD reported significantly smaller networks, fewer contacts outside the close family circles, more negative emotions directed toward family members, and appeared more alienated from their cultural heritage than other groups. Higher rates of unemployment and perceived loss of control over their lives are part of the postwar Hispanic veteran's experience.

Females also participated in the Vietnam war. 7,484 women served "in country." Of this number 6,250, or 83.5 percent were nurses. Other females served as administrators, officers, doctors, and journalists. Women experienced the same chaos, pain, and futility of the Vietnam war as did males. Eight women died as a direct result of the hostilities. Of the approximately 700 nurses who served in Vietnam and are still on active duty 3.3 percent are estimated to be suffering from PTSD. Current rates of PTSD for civilian veteran females is higher. A 1988 study estimates the prevalence rate to be 9 percent, representing a

total of 650 cases nationwide.

In a review of first-hand accounts from Vietnam veterans, as well as clinical research, Arthur Blank of the DVA, notes veterans' problems in intimacy with wives and lovers, and in relationships with children, and a sense of detachment from society, community, and friends, as effects of residual stress from their Vietnam war experiences. Other researchers have reported that Vietnam veterans with indications of PTSD scored significantly higher on the MMPI scales of Paranoia and Social Introversion than did combat veterans without evidence of PTSD. In the most recent effort to document the prevalence of PTSD among Vietnam veterans, the "National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study" estimates that 15 percent of all male theater veterans are current cases of PTSD and this represents about 470,000 persons.

Without question there is a considerable body of research that outlines the severity and the extent of PTSD among Vietnam veterans. It is quite likely that any attempt to become engaged in college level studies while using the GI Bill for this group of veterans was severely constrained by having to cope with PTSD. While it is obvious that PTSD likely interfered with one's college studies, it is also likely that PTSD made returning to college even less likely, even for those who had started. The serious nature of PTSD may have prevented an untold number of "nam vets" from being able to get themselves back on track as far as their education was concerned. This in turn undoubtedly had an effect on the total numbers of Vietnam veterans who might have

wished to pursue an education using their entitlement in the Vietnam Era GI Bill. This body of research material is yet another compelling reason to question the extent to which "Nam vets" have been able to take advantage of the GI Bill.

The fourth and final part of this series will outline the difficulties of being a Vietnam veterans and a college student during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

THE VIETNAM ERA GI BILL IN PERSPECTIVE - PART FOUR

By

Michael Horan, Ed.D.

This is the last in a series of four articles about the Vietnam Era GI Bill. Previous stories have outlined the difficultie associated with using the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs assessment measures in gauging the effectiveness of the GI Bill, the problems in counting the total population of "Nam vets", and the insidious effects of PTSD in preventing veterans from using their educational benefits. This last installment takes a look at the difficulties of being a returning Vietnam veteran college student.

The Vietnam veteran's process of disengagement from wartime experiences started on the plane-ride back home, and there was an expectation that he would be assisted in the process of social reintegration. To a very large extent the "re-entry process" was shaped by the sentiments and cognitive perspectives of the folks back home. Both the veteran and the home to which he returned were shaped by their related experiences; the war an its trauma for the veteran, and the war and its perceived unfairness by society. Eventually, the negative perceptions of the war and the warrior blended together, and an unflattering social picture of the Vietnam veteran emerged. The returning Vietnam vet bore the brunt of societal ambivalence toward the warand toward the men who fought it.

During the late 1960s, and for most of the 1970s, the "Nam

vet" experienced considerable difficulty escaping the images that social influences had constructed of him. Across the landscape of the United States, in almost every community, Vietnam veterans were labeled as drug-crazed baby-killers, violent and lawless persons, and alcoholics and drug addicts.

The psychological and social adjustments required of the returning Vietnam veteran were practically impossible to overcome. Everywhere the veteran turned there was a cold shoulder and a group ready to criticize him. The media and the film industry frequently capitalized on the myths, misconceptions, and distortions of fact that surrounded the veteran and his readjustment to peacetime America. The National Advisory Council of Vocational Education sums up the plight of the Vietnam veteran and the difficulty of not fitting the image of a returning hero:

> The unpopularity of the war places an additional burden upon the returning veteran. The young veteran finds himself referred to in the print and in conversation as a dope addict or trained killer. Often his own peer group tells him what a fool he was to go to Vietnam in the first place. In his absence they have moved ahead in their life pursuits, while the veteran must start from the beginning as though his military service made no difference.

More than anything else, Vietnam veterans wanted to be accepted by and to fit into society. A common method of starting over, or perhaps resuming their former lives, was to return to school. The educational opportunities afforded by the Vietnam Era GI Bill were an incentive that induced many Vietnam veterans to attempt a college education. However, the expectations of "fitting in" frequently clashed with the perceptions of social

reality and this further compounded the readjustment difficulties of these ex-warriors.

The college experiences of many Vietnam veterans was one of quiet desperation while they attempted to escape the reputation many people had of them. In many instances, collegial attitudes toward them took up where the enemy's bullets left off. Many Vietnam veterans entered the college environment with a perception that public opinion was against them and that negative feelings existed toward the military in general. They tended to place the responsibility for origination of these negative public perceptions with the media, whom they believed presented biased, unfavorable coverage of both the war and the men who fought it. Negative attitudes by college officials, staff, and professors affected their educational experiences as well, and to a large extent prevented many Vietnam veterans from achieving the full socioeconomic status that was gained by those not serving in Vietnam.

Upon entering college the "Nam vet" was apprehensive and generally kept a low profile. Unlike his peers in WW II who comprised over 50 percent of the typical university student population, Vietnam veterans represented less than 5 percent of the students. From the beginning of their post-secondary education, Vietnam veterans found themselves caught in a mental and social bind; the political left viewed them as dupes of American Imperialism, and the political right though of them as losers. Charles Figley, a noted author on Vietnam veterans, has written about the "Nam vet" as a student misfit. The veteran was a member of a discredited status group and tended to avoid

those situations that identified him as a veteran. By trying to assuage its guilt, society stigmatized the enlisted ex-soldiers as "they," the dirty workers who had become "killers." Vietnam veterans had negative status compared with the socially "clean" veterans of previous wars. In sum, "dirty soldiers" fight "bad wars" and suffer various forms of stigmatization.

Various researchers have explained the development of these social perceptions of Vietnam veterans with the use of the "social labeling theory." This is a process that defines deviance as a form of social control and always involves processes of social definition. Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

The stigma of being labeled a social "deviant" followed the Vietnam veteran everywhere on campus and contrasted with earlier social perceptions of the World War II veteran who was labeled the "good warrior." The social labeling theory helps us understand the dynamics of identifying Vietnam vets as "deviants," particularly within the context of the social and political turmoil that engulfed the United States in the late 1960s and well into the 1970s. It is therefore not surprising that many Vietnam veterans could not escape the negative social

perceptions that people had of them, and this in turn made their college experience all the more difficult. After all, colleges were the hotbed of social activism and resistance to the war in Vietnam, and the influence of activists on most campuses was very visible.

Perhaps it was indicative of the times, but in retrospect it seems clear that Vietnam veterans did not have the luxury of a viable support group as a campus resource. For the most part returning "Nam vets" participated in higher education as solitary individuals and little visible support to help their post-military re-entry efforts. Vietnam vets were not openly courted to attend American colleges and universities as were World War II veterans and this undoubtedly had an effect on the number of persons who considered college worthwhile, by reducing their numbers. Those that did attend college had to suffer the torment of being an outsider and those that did complete their education are the lucky ones. All in all, being a college student and a Vietnam veteran during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when most "Nam vets" returned from their tour of duty, was not a socially pleasant experience.

In summary then, this series of four articles has attempted to bring another perspective to bear when we talk about evaluating the success or failure of the Vietnam Era GI Bill. While the DVA touts the Vietnam Era GI Bill as a very successful education program there are many indications that is is not! The hostility on American campuses, the delayed effects of PTSD, the sloppy assessment measures utilized by the DVA, and the inability of the DVA to count with precision the number of Vietnam

veterans, all cast doubt on the success of this educational entitlement. The Vietnam Era Bill expired on December 31, 1989, and its passing should provide the impetus to fully investigate whether Vietnam veterans as a subgroup of all Era veterans, have benefited to the largest extent possible. My educated guess is that the men and women who bore the brunt of duty and service in the Republic of Vietnam have benefited the least - and they are the ones who needed it the most!