

# On the Phenomenon That Was the Vietnam Era

By BEN A. FRANKLIN

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To Kenneth J. Wittwer, a 24-year-old college senior from California and the son of a Vietnam veteran, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial here, its below-ground wall of black granite slabs engraved with the names of more than 58,000 American war dead or missing, seemed "like a dam, holding within it a reservoir of souls, emotion and knowledge."

Mr. Wittwer was among a group of students who have been studying the Vietnam War and made a special trip East just to see the memorial.

It is a measure of the depth of interest that students like Mr. Wittwer have in a subject their elders have largely tried to forget that he and about 40 classmates from the University of California at Santa Barbara paid their own way here so they could gather at the memorial on the Mall to share a common personal discovery.

All were members of a 937-student course, "The Impact

of the Vietnam War on American Values," a class so popular this year that almost 900 other students had to be turned away when they tried to enroll. The school's largest lecture hall could not hold them all.

The course is one of a growing number at colleges around the nation that look at the history of the war and its impact on the United States, according to the Project on the Vietnam Generation, a new, privately financed organization here that encourages such scholarship.

## From None to 300 in 6 Years

The project office has found that more than 300 university-level courses on various aspects of the Vietnam era were offered in the academic year that is about to end, covering everything from actual action in Southeast Asia to student demonstrations at home and the drives for civil rights and women's rights. Even more courses are expected to be offered next year. In 1980 there were almost none.

The project office was opened in donated office space (Room A-1040, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C. 20560) in the city where much of the tumult of the Vietnam period was played out.

The project began as a clearinghouse for inquiries from teachers, students and Vietnam veterans who want to join in what has gradually become a sorting out of conflicting perceptions of the war — to some an ex-

perience of national shame, to others a difficult duty, honorably done.

The work is expected to be expanded in the coming year by sponsored university research, by in-house studies at the project office here and by the annual publication of a volume of papers.

The research is described by John Wheeler, the project founder and president, as a review of "the dynamism and idealism of the generation that bore the brunt of the war, in Vietnam and at home — the 60 million people who, in round figures, are 32 to 49 years old today, and of whom 10 million were in uniform during Vietnam, 3 million actually went to Vietnam and 58,000 died there."

Mr. Wheeler, a West Point graduate and Vietnam veteran, started the project after serving as chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

There were ironies in the Washington visit of the Santa Barbara students, ironies that were not lost on them and, in fact, were part of the learning experience.

Had they come 15 years earlier, for example, they might have been here to show their feelings about America's longest war by "trashing the Pentagon." In the 1960's and early 1970's, Washington was thronged repeatedly by hundreds of thousands of angry, deeply alienated young people, self-styled yuppies, hippies, Trotskyites and radicals who came to de-

nounce the war and its leaders to the beat of tambourines.

Such protests, today's students of the era learn, reached a peak in the 1971 May Day protest that was designed "to shut down Washington and stop the Government." It brought the mass arrests of 9,500 people.

Stephanie Nelson, a 20-year-old sophomore among the visitors from Santa Barbara, said she had tried to learn about the protests from her mother but could elicit from her only

that "it was a bad time."

When she decided to write a paper on the public impact of the war, she said, she went to the library and asked if there were any books on Vietnam.

"It turned out there were aisles and and aisles and aisles of them," Miss Nelson recounted. "That's when it hit me: there was something there that people were not telling me."

"Remember," Mr. Wheeler said, speaking of the war and its impact on the United States, "it was not only the time of the sometimes violent anti-war protests, but also of the rise of rock music and the counterculture; sexual license and drugs; the unreined surveillance of anti-war activists by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, of Robert F. Kennedy and of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., followed by urban rioting. And then came Watergate."

But according to Mr. Wheeler, who left his post as the secretary of the Securities and

Exchange Commission to devote all his time to the Project on the Vietnam Generation, what is often overlooked is that the Vietnam era was not just Vietnam.

It was also, he points out, a time of rising idealism that infused the civil rights, women's rights and environmental movements, the War on Poverty and the Peace Corps.

The project, he said, is equally interested in that aspect of the Vietnam generation because it is equally important.



The New York Times / Paul Hosefros

**Impact of a war:** John Wheeler of Project on the Vietnam Generation and his deputy, Sandie Fauriol, visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.