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Reflection of Interview with Colonel Zinni

At the beginning of the year when I heard we would interviewing a Viet Nam War veteran for this course, I was both excited and nervous. I was excited about the opportunity to interact with someone who lived through such a tumultuous time. Also, as a history major, I understand the importance of compiling and studying primary sources. Primary sources are the core of any historical analysis, and there are few better primary sources than first-hand accounts from people who experienced historical events. However, I was nervous about conducting this interview because I did not know what to expect. Although the class was adequately trained for the interview, there is only so much "learning" one can do to prepare themselves for something as foreign as conducting a personal, hour-long interview. Each narrator was going to have a different experience in the war, be it somewhat positive or very negative. I was wary I would ask a question about a sensitive topic and, subsequently, negatively impact the rest of the interview. However, although the interview required substantial preparation and effort, the discussion that Han and I had with Colonel Zinni was enjoyable and productive.

The preparation leading up to the interview, especially the seminars and training sessions, was successful in increasing my comfort level for the interview. This comfort allowed me to ask personal questions, which Colonel Zinni readily answered. The interview with the

Doctor Kelly E. Crager was especially useful. Because Doctor Crager is the head of the Oral History Project at Texas Tech University, he is an expert in conducting interviews. Consequently, the class took his advice seriously. Also, the live interview he conducted with a Viet Nam veteran allowed us to see the type of demeanor we should have while holding our discussion, the kind of questions to ask, and the variety of responses we will receive. This training session was the most helpful part of the preparation for the interview. While the preparation was adequate, Han and I experienced an unexpected conflict. The greatest challenge that both Han and I encountered was scheduling our interview with Colonel Zinni. Han and I had trouble contacting Colonel Zinni at the beginning of the interview process. Following this, Colonel Zinni was suddenly and unexpectedly hospitalized. This caused us to postpone the interview process until early December. However, while we did experience some adversity at the beginning of the process, the interview itself was compelling and incredibly educational.

One of the most significant conclusions I drew from the interview itself was the importance of compiling these stories that veterans have. In the case of the Viet Nam War, every person who participated in the War, be it in an active combat role or not, they each have their own story to tell. Reading academic texts can dehumanize a conflict by providing statistics and analyzing the conflict through a broad scope. When interviewing these veterans, one begins to understand that each casualty in the War was a person who had friends and a story to tell. Colonel Zinni told Han and I a moving tale where he was forced to identify the bodies of two of his deceased friends. In textbooks, these two soldiers would just be two of the over 58,000 American casualties in the Viet Nam War, instead of two of Colonel Zinni's close friends.

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Analysis of Interview with Colonel Gabriel Zinni

"Thank you for your service." These words can be heard in any grocery store, airport, or public place when a uniformed soldier is present. This statement of gratitude is the result of a culture that sees military personnel as those who make the sacrifice to protect the United States of America. There is a type of hollowness to this statement today because the perception of the military has changed dramatically. In the interview I conducted with Colonel Gabriel Zinni, he frequently commented on the military culture of his age and how prevalent it was in his life. Upon further consideration, this theme is what drove Colonel Zinni to join the army and what defined his Viet Nam War experience. Because of the Greatest Generation and more ubiquitous military laws and customs, there was a stronger, more respectful culture surrounding the military during Colonel Zinni's early years than we have today. However, there was a drastic shift in this culture towards the end of the Viet Nam War due to both several atrocities committed by the U.S. military and public misinformation.

Before examining how military culture manifested itself in his life, it is essential to have a summary of what was said in the hour-long interview. To begin, Colonel Zinni told us about his upbringing, his family situation, and education. He was a first generation American, as his parents were both immigrants from Italy. He was born in 1941, and he was 20 years younger than his older brother because he was born during his mother's second marriage. Zinni grew

up in Philadelphia and went to LaSalle College for his undergraduate degree, where he participated in ROTC during all four years of college. After college, he enlisted in the military and underwent his basic training in both Fort Sill and Fort Knox. In both the ROTC and in basic training, Colonel Zinni was trained as an artillery officer. However, when he was deployed to Viet Nam in 1965, he was assigned to be an advisor to the South Vietnamese Army. To prepare him for this new assignment, he was sent to Fort Bragg to be trained as an advisor and to take a crash course in Vietnamese. Following his arrival in Viet Nam and his promotion from a First Lieutenant to Captain, he undertook a variety of missions. However, he primarily went on "search and destroy" missions where he would go to villages throughout Southern Viet Nam to kill any members of the Viet Cong in the village (Zinni 7). He spent one year in Viet Nam and returned home in 1966, and obtained his MBA at Temple. He then established *Richard Gabriel Associates*, where he was the President and CEO. Understanding Gabriel Zinni's background and story are important in contextualizing and analyzing the motives for his actions and the culture of the time. For example, Gabriel Zinni's childhood exposed him early on to the military life.

Colonel Gabriel Zinni grew up surrounded by soldiers, thus causing him to be exposed to the military culture of the time. Because Colonel Zinni was 20 years younger than his brother, his brother was the right age to have participated in World War II. In addition to his brother, Zinni states that several of first cousins participated in the Korean War. As one can see, Zinni was surrounded by military personnel while growing up, and this normalized military service for him. During the interview, I asked Colonel Zinni if he would "say that because of your brother's and your first cousins, that kind of helped shaped your view going (into Viet

Nam)" (Zinni 2). His response spoke not only of his upbringing but of society as a whole. He said "There's no question about that, yeah. And it wasn't just mine, it was the culture… of the time. It was just understood" (Zinni 2). During this period, the military was prevalent in people's lives. Everyone knew someone who served or perished in World War II. The generation that fought in World War II, the so-called Greatest Generation, is idolized both today and at the time of Colonel Zinni's childhood. Today's culture idolizes this generation because they fought against the Nazis during World War II and protected freedom around the world. Gabriel Zinni's generation idolized them because the soldiers in World War II were their fathers. Although his father did not serve during World War II, Zinni does state that his brother, who did serve, "could have been my… father because there was a 20 year gap" (Zinni 2). However, this idealization of a whole generation does raise the question as to exactly why this generation was honored above others. The idealization of the Greatest Generation went beyond the family and became ubiquitous in society. The Greatest Generation was idolized because they left such a significant impact on the United States.

The widespread presence of World War II veterans allowed both there to be a significant amount of people to instill change and a strong day-to-day presence in people's lives. According to the National World War II Museum, there were, in total, about 17,867,000 military personnel involved in World War II across all branches.[1] In comparison, the population

[1] "Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers." *The National WWII Museum | New Orleans*, The National World War II Museum, www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers.

of the United States was only 139.9 million people, according to the census.[2] This means that, roughly, thirteen percent of the population fought during World War II. This percentage increases when one realizes that the census includes both incarcerated people and minors. Furthermore, this war had a powerful emotional impact as well. According to the National World War II Museum, there were 1,078,594 casualties in World War II. Considering both the percentage of military personnel and the vast number of casualties, one can understand why the Greatest Generation is much respected for their military service. It was incredibly likely that a person would know someone, be it a relative, friend, or neighbor, that served in the War. Therefore, there was an intimate connection between the service people and the civilian population. However, this was not the only reason the Greatest Generation was idolized.

Further supporting the claim that there was an extreme idealization of the Greatest Generation, there is an article published on the Forbes website titled "The G.I. Generation and the "Triumph of the Squares." This article provides several important statistics and interesting analysis. One quote details with both the civilian and militaristic aspect of the life of this generation.

> By the mid-1920s on college campuses, cynicism and selfishness were out; optimism and cooperation were in. In the years that followed, G.I.s became the CCC dam-builders and tree-planters, the heroes of Iwo Jima and D-Day—in fact, the most uniformed generation per capita in American history.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau (2004*). Population Division; Resident Population plus Armed Forces Overseas--Estimates by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1945*, Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/pre-1980-national.html

In this quote, the author, Neil Howe, describes how the Greatest Generation impacted the greater community of the United States. They brought camaraderie in a time where there was both an economic depression and a war unlike anything the world had ever seen. Also, to return to the military, the quote states that this generation was the "most uniformed generation per capita in American History." Therefore, the values the values of "optimism and cooperation" became so closely tied to the military, since, in this generation, they were thoroughly connected. Between both this positive, enduring attitude and the military service, the Greatest Generation was revered by those that followed it.

Two quotes, one from Howe and one from Colonel Zinni accurately represent this sentiment, both from an academic and personal standpoint. Howe writes, "Today, most of this generation has passed on. But they live on vividly in the public imagination of younger generations as the one that everyone counted on to team up and push forward." Zinni said, "All my first cousins were all World War II, so I'm growing up almost 20 years younger than them, grew up in that shadow of the Greatest Generation, commitment to service" (Zinni 2). Even Colonel Gabriel Zinni, a man who received both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star, recognizes that he is living in the shadow of that generation. They had a strong "commitment to service," as shown by the 13% of the population of the United States that served in World War II. Also, 38.8% of all military personnel were volunteers, showing the willingness of this generation to serve. However, moving away from the big picture, the Greatest Generation had other impacts on Colonel Zinni besides his family.

While much of his family was involved in the military at some point during his childhood, Colonel Zinni was also surrounded by the military in his academic environment. When

discussing his college career and his involvement in ROTC, Zinni mentioned that there was substantial support on campus for the ROTC program. He partially attributes this to the "faculty, university, Board of Trustees, and all the students because most of the professors, many of the professors, not most, were all World War II" (Zinni 5). Even in an academic setting, Colonel Zinni was influenced by military personnel. However, Colonel Zinni was not the only one. This was not an occurrence isolated on LaSalle College's campus. The Greatest Generation was supported by the GI Bill, which assisted service members and veterans in obtaining an education.[3] The GI Bill, formally known as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, was created in 1941. Howe provided a statistic on the impact of this bill in his article. He writes,

> They represented the single biggest gain in educational attainment in U.S. history—from 10% of their first cohorts getting high school diplomas to 50% of their last-born cohorts. After the war, thanks to the G.I. bill, they also became the first generation whose middle class could enter college in large numbers.

This increased education of veterans meant that they could obtain more jobs in academic fields, thus making some of them the professors that Colonel Zinni had in college. Because of the enormous number of military personnel involved in World War II and the education that was affordable for the veterans when they returned home, Colonel Zinni stated that it was not unusual or noteworthy to have a professor who was a veteran. When asked if he remembered any specific lesson a professor taught him, he stated, "Not really. Only because it was the norm.

[3] Military.com. "GI Bill Overview." *Military.com*, Military.com, www.military.com/education/gi-bill/learn-to-use-your-gi-bill.html.

It just wasn't like, 'Oh, wow. He was a World War II veteran.' Just so many" (Zinni 5). This statement supports the quote from Howe. They both state that there was an increase in the quantity of educated veterans, and this led to professors who were veterans of World War II becoming the norm. Besides his professors, Colonel Zinni's college career was defined by another militaristic aspect: ROTC.

Colonel Zinni's participation in ROTC during college allowed him to be prepared to join the armed forces as an officer immediately after graduation. Zinni stated that "all the major schools (had ROTC programs) … the first two years, freshman and sophomore year, you were, it was mandatory to wear uniform" (Zinni 4). He says that this was a carryover from both World War II and the Korean War. Also, each school specialized in a certain aspect of the military. LaSalle College, for example, specialized in artillery training, hence Colonel Zinni's initial career path. Even though students could choose not to continue ROTC after two years, the requirement reflects a powerful quote that Colonel Zinni said late in the interview. He said, "When I was first commissioned, it was just service. Everybody was expected to pull some weight. It was not an uncommon thing, and back then you still had the draft and the young lads who enlisted" (Zinni 15). "It was just service." This section of the quote is especially impactful. Today, service in the military is seen as a sacrifice. It is something that others do, and, thankfully, most people don't have to do. However, this positive perception of both service and the military quickly deteriorated towards the end of the Viet Nam War, causing public opinion to shift.

When Colonel Zinni returned home from Viet Nam, he said that there was not much of a response, but he said this as if it were a positive occurrence. He explained himself when he said

"When I came home, there was nobody welcoming me, but there was absolutely no arrows being slung at me, either" (Zinni 18). The arrows he is referring to are the insults and condemnations directed at the soldiers who fought in Viet Nam. In an article on Encyclopedia.com titled "Coming Home: Vietnam Veterans in American Society," there is a quote that explains why there was this hatred directed at these men who were drafted to go fight. "Some people who opposed American involvement in the Vietnam War treated U.S. soldiers and veterans poorly. They tended to blame American troops for the tragic situation in Vietnam, instead of blaming the government leaders who had sent them there." There were numerous tragic situations in Viet Nam, one such tragedy being the horrible massacre of My Lai and the subsequent cover up. However, as Colonel Zinni mentioned numerous time throughout the interview, both him and the rest of the soldiers were just following orders from those above them. They had no choice in the plan of attack or whether to bomb a village. The insults of "baby killer" and hearing that people were spat on when they came home infuriated Colonel Zinni. Although one could tell he was angry during this section of the interview when he recalled how his fellow veterans were treated, he still was calm and insightful throughout the whole interview.

Colonel Zinni's statements regarding the military culture of his time are all valid and supported by various facts. However, what makes his military culture so fascinating is how different the current culture around military is. For example, it is uncommon to encounter a teacher who was a veteran. A quote that supports this claim states that just "2.1 percent of U.S. teachers in 2016 were veterans, according to federal data. In 1960, during the post-World

War II era when Trump was a teen, 59 percent of male teachers had military service."[4] Veterans are not becoming professors in this modern climate. This could be due to a distrust or fear of the military, veterans are not using the GI Bill as much, or the rising cost of colleges and universities. Either way, there is a decrease in the number of professors that are veterans. This limits the constant exposure to veterans that Colonel Zinni had. Consequently, this makes veteran professors, as Colonel Zinni said, not "the norm."

Also, like the end of the Viet Nam War, the public perception of current armed conflicts is not the same as the perception of World War II. There are no parades to welcome home veterans. While there is nowhere near the type of abuse that Viet Nam War veterans received when they got home, there is not the same fanfare as World War II veterans received. Also, in any city in the United States, you will find a plethora of homeless veterans. There are a variety of reasons for this, such as PTSD, the failure of the government to properly take care of its veterans, or drug addiction, but the result is always the same. This problem has created this image or stereotype of the homeless veteran, which is far different than the idealized World War II veteran. Finally, Colonel Zinni discussed the current political climate and how divisive it is. He stated, regarding the politics of his time, that "it wasn't a big distinction as it is today. I mean, people had their differences, but it was never growing up in grade school and high school, never what you guys are experiencing today… It's a shame" (Zinni 3). Unfortunately, one of these political divides is the military. Support of the military or the funding of the

[4] Hefling, Kimberly, and Tucker Doherty. "Trump Sees Veterans as the Perfect Armed Teachers, but They're Divided." *POLITICO*, POLITICO, 2 Mar. 2018, www.politico.com/story/2018/03/01/trump-armed-teachers-veterans-373732.

military is now something that divides the right and left. Therefore, soldiers and veterans are dehumanized, and they are transformed into political tools.

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