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**Elections in the Political Order.**  
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**What role did Vietnam play in the 2004 election?**

Although the American involvement in Vietnam has created a generation averse to political activity, those actively involved in politics were not averse to exploit it to their advantage. The issue started haunting presidential campaigns in 1964, before the United States had even become engaged in combat. The war affected the vote no less dramatically forty years later, when John Kerry's Vietnam record was scrutinized in the elections of 2004. The Vietnam War has affected presidential candidates in equivocal ways, helping and harming them at different stages in their careers. Voters expressed their views on Vietnam first by electing Lyndon B. Johnson's in 1964 and then by letting him know better than seek reelection in 1968. Vietnam and its veterans played a no less important role in the political career of Senator Kerry, first by lending him a hand in winning a Senate seat in 1985 against his rival James Shannon and then by preventing him from taking a presidential seat in the close election of 2004.

In 2004, foreign policy was an important issue for the voters whose ballots would follow their wallets in less worrisome times. American voters regarded military records of a candidate to be a good measure of his readiness to defend America as its commander-in-chief and win the Iraq War in the desert, in the media, and in Congress. John Kerry brandishing his Vietnam past, George Bush praising his response to 9/11 and Saddam Hussein's capture, and Osama bin Laden appearing on video in the last moment – all helped channel voters' decisionmaking in martial direction. In 1972, 25 percent of voters cited the Vietnam War as their most important concern. Thirty-two years later, the Iraq War was the most important concern for 18 percent of the electorate, and the Vietnam War had long ended. However, all military enterprises of the past were lumped together in minds of the voters who viewed Iraq as a legitimate part of the War on

Terror and candidates' military records as a good assessment of their leadership and determination (although it is far from certain that witnessing war atrocities, killing, and being wounded improves one's ability to guide the nation).

Kerry presented himself as a hero wounded in real combat as opposed to Bush, who safely served in the National Guard. In the difficult strategic situation created by the terrorist attack and capture of Saddam Hussein, Kerry's Vietnam record could prove his ability to handle security challenges better than the incumbent and to be beyond the charges of cowardice. With Kerry's tacit approval, Michael Moore called Bush a "deserter," and the Democratic national Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe accused the President of being "AWOL." Usually known for peace protests, the Democrats now brandished Kerry's medals and reminded voters of Kerry's wounds to counter the Republican charges that their candidate was soft on defense.

Unfortunately for Kerry, the Vietnam hero cape had to be hidden away after the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth briefly aired two ads calling his war records into question. "How could the man who renounced his country's symbols now be trusted?" contended the 527 group. The Veterans included snippets from Kerry's testimony in opposition to the Vietnam War before the US Senate committee in 1971, in which Kerry cited atrocities committed by American soldiers. Shaken by the realization that not everybody loves America and another terrorist attack may come any day, the voters hardly needed to hear any more criticism of the American ways, however objective and self-critical.

Kerry's throwing some ribbons over the fence of the United States Capitol in April 1971 to protest against the Vietnam War allowed the Republicans to blame him for the lack of patriotism decades later. The book *Unfit for Command* by one of the founders of the 527 groups John O'Neill also helped to antagonize the population. Although soon afterwards many reputable media like *the Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* called into question the Swift Boat

Veterans' claims, the damage to Kerry's image was done, and facts no longer mattered. An average voter would not read into the lengthy explanations; the succinct message that veterans did not trust Kerry and that Kerry's testimony blemished the fame of those risking lives for their country was what people's minds retained. When electing a head of state, it is not the facts but the impressions that matter.

The two short Swiftboat ads had effectively taken away Kerry's Vietnam security blanket, which he had used to rebut almost any charge. Because much of Kerry's campaign was centered on his biography, its success was hampered once his war record was attacked. Lack of money now that the officially nominated Kerry stopped spending private funds prevented him from efficiently countering the ad, but a timely response might have helped the situation. Kerry's delay in turning over his military record to *The Globe* put him in an even greater disadvantage against Bush who, after accusations that he had been AWOL from the National Guard, immediately released hundreds of documents on his service.

The military conflicts overseas uncover deep divisions in American society as well as the conflict between Republican and Democratic values. Veterans and hawks tend to vote Republican whereas Democrats are invariably seen as peaceniks. In an election year focused on national security, Republicans had an advantage regardless of what party was in power when 9/11 happened or how many battles their candidate had fought. Many Americans did not trust Kerry to handle terrorism, and the controversy over his Vietnam record only fed their misgivings. No Purple Hearts could have convinced voters that the candidate who opposed war would succeed at waging one. When Kerry hurled his decorations over the Capitol fence decades back he prepared the ground for Bush throwing him a curve by questioning his war record and defeating him in 2004 election.