

THE UNITED STATES MILITARY'S VENEREAL DISEASE POLICIES:  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE MILITARY'S REGULATION  
OF SEX FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE  
VIETNAM WAR

by

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## ABSTRACT

Twentieth Century wars led to spikes in venereal disease rates for American soldiers and civilians in nations that the U.S. military deployed troops to. This paper examines the U.S. military's response to rising venereal disease rates in World War II and the Vietnam War, including prophylactic treatments, education for soldiers, and attempts to limit prostitution, and how the military's response discriminated against women and people of color. The topic of this paper compares the military's response between the two wars based on different types of warfare and shifting American morality surrounding extramarital sex. This paper will argue that the U.S. military and U.S. government discriminated against and oversexualized women in their campaign to limit venereal disease rates among U.S. troops and protect the American war effort in World War II and the Vietnam War.

In the twentieth century, the United States military sent troops overseas for multiple wars from World War I through the Vietnam War. Each instance presented a challenge for the military to keep their soldiers safe, both from the dangers of combat and the dangers of venereal disease (VD). When the United States mobilized troops for each war in the twentieth century, VD rates amongst American soldiers skyrocketed. This paper will examine the sexual relationships between American GIs and American women, foreign women, and both domestic and foreign women of color, and the U.S. military's response to those relationships during World War II and the Vietnam War. The U.S. military's primary goal in both wars was to protect the U.S. war effort and foreign relations. Often that goal led to discrimination against and targeting of the women that soldiers had sex with, in an attempt to limit prostitution and the spread of venereal disease. While the military strove to limit cases of VD in both wars, it took different approaches each time that represented the changes in the type of warfare employed and shifts in American ideals surrounding the morality of sex. In both World War II and the Vietnam War the rapid spread of venereal disease among the military led to discrimination against women and people of color and the sexualization of women through the venereal disease policies created by the U.S. military and the U.S. government.

America's eyes turned to Europe in 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland. Despite isolationist sentiments at the time, the United States began to build up a war industry, initially to help supply Great Britain and France but eventually for the possibility of a declaration of war from the United States. Preparations for potential war mobilized the country and men and women began enlisting in the Armed Forces or moving to cities focused on war industry. The U.S. government and military began to focus on the nation's strength and preparedness for battle. As in World War I, venereal disease rates spiked with mobilization and the government

perceived a weakness. Men crippled by syphilis and gonorrhea would not be effective soldiers against the Axis Powers, so the government and the military began to implement policies designed to protect men from VD. As it had in World War I, the government cracked down on prostitution and discouraged citizens from extramarital sex. However, VD repression policies shifted the consequences of contracting VD from World War I to World War II because improvements in treatment made the contraction of VD less fatal and shifting morals regarding extramarital sex for white men led to less policing of their sexual encounters. Policies mostly focused on punishing women and people of color for the spread of VD while treating white men.

In 1943 as World War II continued to rage, Dr. John Mahoney discovered that doctors could use penicillin to treat VD. Despite the discovery of antibiotic treatments, the government and military faced similarly explosive VD rates during the Vietnam War as a result of a high concentration of American servicemen in South Vietnamese cities engaging in sexual relationships with Vietnamese women and fueling the prostitution industry. Once again, the U.S. military had to develop a strategy to combat the rising rates. While there were many similarities to the campaign against VD in World War II and the Vietnam War, including more serious consequences for women than for men, the US military did shift the rhetoric surrounding VD prevention. The new rhetoric focused on a more medical approach rather than the moral approach used in World War II. Additionally, race played an unprecedented role in the VD discussion since the women that American GIs were having sex with were Vietnamese instead of predominantly white women as was the perception in World War II. Therefore, the VD prevention approach by the military in the Vietnam War focused on the intersectionality of gender and race far more prominently than the response to VD during World War II had. While interracial sex was not a new phenomenon in the Vietnam War, the dynamics surrounding the

ideals and morality of interracial sex shifted from World War II to the Vietnam War in which interracial sex between GIs and prostitutes was seen as more justifiable. Overall, the consequences of the spread of VD continued to fall on the shoulders of women, but this time increasingly on the shoulders of women of color.

Both World War II and the Vietnam War included intense venereal disease response programs by the U.S. military. While the programs in each war differed based on the conditions of the war and the social culture of the time, the military used prostitution and VD repression campaigns as a means to discriminate against women while protecting the sexuality of white male soldiers. Educational materials and informational pamphlets painted women as sexually deviant and promiscuous, putting the blame for the spread of VD on women. Men faced few consequences in either war for their sexual liaisons whereas women were subject to legal consequences for the same interactions. Throughout both wars, the U.S. military used venereal disease repression campaigns to discriminate against women while simultaneously oversexualizing them and protecting white men.

As the United States prepared to enter World War II, and after Congress declared the United States at war with the Axis powers in 1941, venereal diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea spread at unprecedented rates among the civilian and military populations. Mobilization and total war created social upheaval as citizens moved to industrial areas and military bases to meet the demands of the war effort. This new mobility destabilized family structures due to men and women moving across the country, resulting in increased instances of extramarital sex. The unprecedented number of extramarital sexual encounters left the nation susceptible to increased rates of venereal disease.<sup>1</sup> The military tested each drafted man for venereal disease during the

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Fleming, "The Venereal Disease Problem in the United States in World War II," *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society*, 61, no 1/2 (August 1, 1945): 199.

routine medical inspection. Assistant Surgeon General Thomas Parran and Dr. R.A. Vonderlehr estimated the prevalence rate of syphilis in the entire male population of the United States, ages twenty-one to thirty-five, to be 4.7 percent and the overall prevalence rate including all age groups in the population to be 2.4 percent, meaning Parran and Vonderlehr estimated one in forty-two men had syphilis.<sup>2</sup> In the early years of mobilization, the military rejected men infected with venereal disease from serving in the armed forces because the medical service could not shoulder the burden of treating those men.<sup>3</sup> The spread of VD drew the attention of the U.S. government and military since the lack of treatment available for venereal disease at that time meant that men crippled with VD would subsequently cripple the U.S. war effort by taking potential soldiers away from the armed forces.

Before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the government held the view that the responsibility for the spread of venereal disease fell largely on the shoulders of prostitutes because the number of sexual encounters they engaged in increased their susceptibility to infection. The War and Navy Departments, the Federal Security Agency, and State Health Departments signed the Eight Point Agreement in 1940, that laid out a plan to control the spread of venereal disease in areas highly concentrated with armed forces and national defense employees. The control plan relied on a combination of prostitution repression, education about venereal disease, medical treatment for infected soldiers and civilians, and comprehensive attempts to trace sources of infection in order to isolate source individuals. When investigating the source of the spread of VD, health officials looked no further than the last woman that an infected man had had sex with. They never accused men of being the source, only women. The

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<sup>2</sup> Fleming, "The Venereal Disease Problem," 195-196.

<sup>3</sup> Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 169-170.

Eight Point Agreement was largely the same type of VD control plan used by the military during World War I.<sup>4</sup>

Following the Eight Point Agreement, the United States Congress signed the May Act into law on July 11, 1941, making it unlawful for any prostitutes to be within “a reasonable distance” of any military or naval camp, station, fort, base, or yard.<sup>5</sup> The May Act served as one of the first legislative steps to coordinate efforts between the U.S. government, the military, and local law enforcement to prevent the practice of prostitution surrounding military bases. Despite a slow start to enforcement of the act, following the attack on Pearl Harbor local officials and law enforcement began to adhere to the restrictions of the May Act. However, even with legislation in place, prostitution prevention was only successful in those cases where local governments supported the repression efforts.<sup>6</sup> The threat to states’ autonomy by the federal government, for not complying with prostitution repression, spurred all but Tennessee and North Carolina to focus on repression efforts without the invocation of the May Act.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the military attempted to increase recreation opportunities on military bases by organizing athletic competitions and other activities to occupy men and ward off boredom so that servicemen would

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<sup>4</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 162.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. House of Representatives. *To Prohibit Prostitution Within Reasonable Distance of Military and Naval Establishments*, 77 H.R. 2475 (Reported in Senate), 77-1 sess. (May 16, 1941).

<sup>6</sup> John Parascandola, “Presidential Address: Quarantining Women: Venereal Disease Rapid Treatment Centers in World War II America.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (2009): 440.

<sup>7</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 166.

not seek prostitutes as a form of entertainment.<sup>8</sup> The military displayed propaganda posters such as Figure 1 to warn against hiring prostitutes. The image depicts an innocent looking woman dressed in white, the color of purity, yet warns unsuspecting soldiers that even clean-cut looking prostitutes can spread VD. Despite an attempt by the military to divert soldiers' attention from and warn against sex and prostitutes, the only legal action taken was against the women. The military discouraged soldiers from extramarital sex, but authorities arrested and charged women who prostituted themselves, demonstrating that only women suffered legal repercussions for their part in the transaction.

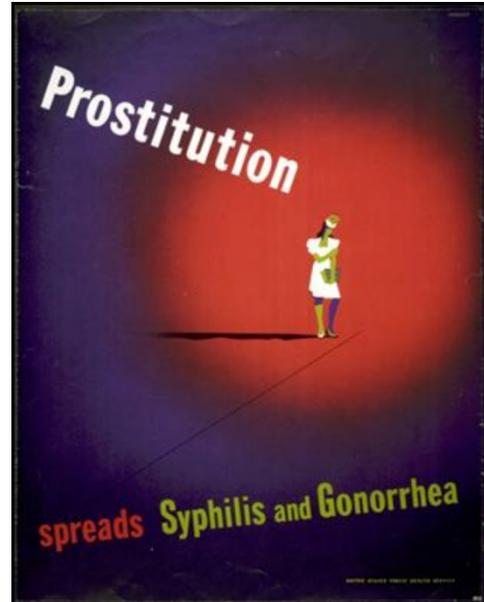


Figure 1: US propaganda poster from 1941 or 1942 warning that prostitution can spread VD. Source: Leonard Karsakov, Artstor

As local law enforcement and the military police began to successfully repress prostitution, sexual interactions continued to spread venereal disease. From 1942 to 1943, the number of reported cases of syphilis increased by almost 100,000.<sup>9</sup> Due to this continued spread, the military and government began looking for additional sources of infection. The predominant class of people to whom authorities turned their attention were women seen as “promiscuous” or “potentially promiscuous.”<sup>10</sup> Authorities could consider a woman “potentially promiscuous” merely because she was traveling alone or worked in a service industry. This low bar for identification as a “potentially promiscuous” woman led to heightened suspicion of many

<sup>8</sup> Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 188.

<sup>10</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 37.

innocent women since World War II was a total war in which the entire American economy and industry revolved around the war effort. Additionally, because many of the young, able-bodied men enlisted in the army, much of the domestic war effort fell to women. The acceptable sphere for women changed from domestic to industrial as women stepped up to fill the shoes of men sent overseas. This meant the entire country was in a highly mobile state with people migrating to industrial cities to work in the defense industries and women traveled unaccompanied in unprecedented numbers. Despite the necessity for women to travel unaccompanied and work in industrial sectors, local law enforcement still viewed these women as suspicious for breaking out of gender norms. For example, a woman alone in a train station easily aroused the suspicion that she could be a prostitute, regardless of whether or not she was going to visit her husband stationed at a military base elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> The greatest danger for these women following the enactment of the May Act was that authorities could arrest women merely on the suspicion that they might be a prostitute and then subject them to forced venereal disease testing under the pretense of preventing the spread of an infectious disease. Police departments especially discriminated against women of color and young women since those groups were the most likely to be mobile and working in the service industries, causing police to believe that those women seemed more promiscuous.<sup>12</sup>

The May Act and the Eight Point Agreement led to the arrest of many women on prostitution and suspected prostitution charges. Jails filled up to capacity, leading to a crisis for law enforcement officials as they continued to arrest women, but did not have a place to detain them for forced VD testing and treatment. To meet new detainment needs, the government used provisions of the 1941 Lanham Act, intended to provide federal funds for the creation,

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<sup>11</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 140.

maintenance, and operation of defense housing and community facilities that directly supported defense needs, to create thirty new VD detainment and treatment centers. These centers were located in isolated areas and lacked many amenities.<sup>13</sup> The nicer of the centers which health authorities reserved for white women sometimes included rehabilitation programs that taught women skills such as sewing or secretarial skills that they could use to help them find work once successful treatment concluded and keep them from returning to prostitution. The purpose of rehabilitation efforts was to keep women from returning to prostitution even though many of the detained women were not professional prostitutes. The venereal disease centers and wards of hospitals overflowed with detained women because at this point in the war, treating women for venereal disease was still a lengthy process that required recurring administration of medicine. Health officials attempted to justify detaining women with VD by claiming that women could not be trusted to continue and maintain their own treatment plans if released.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, health authorities gave men the power over their own treatment. Detainment in this way fundamentally violated a woman's constitutional rights. However, the authorities rationalized the violation by using precedents in which health authorities isolated people with a contagious disease, such as typhoid or influenza.

As the government created more military bases around the country it saw "camp followers" or amateurs as a new threat to venereal disease repression efforts. These followers were non-professional "pickup women" who rushed to military camps and bases, particularly on pay day, in search of pickups. Some were women with lower socio-economic status wanting to make money, others were young women without monetary need caught up in the excitement of

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<sup>13</sup> Parascandola, "Quarantining Women," 445.

<sup>14</sup> Parascandola, "Quarantining Women," 429.

the war, but despite different backgrounds they shared success in picking up and having sex with soldiers.<sup>15</sup> Government and military

authorities believed that amateurs posed a threat to VD rates as well and began issuing propaganda warning against them, in addition to continued anti-prostitution propaganda.

Figure 2 shows a U.S. propaganda poster of a soldier looking at an amateur with shaded

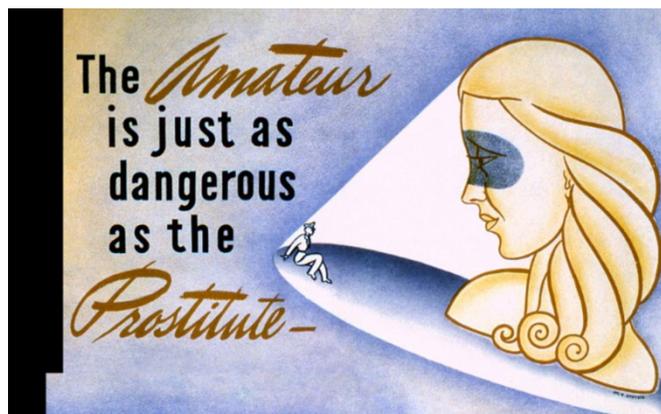


Figure 2: US propaganda poster warning soldiers that amateurs and prostitutes can both carry VD. Source: Boyo Press.

eyes, giving her a criminal appearance whereas the soldier in the poster is made to look small and defenseless against her. Posters such as these reinforced the idea that women were the sexual aggressor and men were the victims.

In Louisiana, Dr. George M. Leiby, head of venereal disease control for the Louisiana State Board of Health, created a treatment hospital to detain camp followers using state legislation that permitted the isolation of people with communicable diseases as his legal basis for detaining women against their will.<sup>16</sup> To stop women before they had a chance for a sexual encounter with a soldier that could potentially spread VD, the Louisiana health authorities routinely stopped women who worked as waitresses or in other jobs that frequently put them in close proximity to soldiers. Stopping women employed in the service industries specifically meant that most of the women targeted were members of the lower class who needed their jobs as a source of income, rather than women who took a defense industry job to aid the war effort. Additionally, police officers met each incoming bus to town and questioned all of the women debarking. If a woman could not provide sufficient justification for visiting the town, the police

<sup>15</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> Parascandola, "Quarantining Women," 433.

could detain the woman and require that she undergo an invasive VD examination.<sup>17</sup> Tracing sexual encounters that led to VD infections proved more difficult with amateurs than with prostitutes because amateurs did not demand compensation for sex and thus operated in different patterns from prostitutes. Due to the difficulty of distinction, local law enforcements considered it safer to classify young, unmarried, and mobile women as suspicious to avoid missing anyone who could be engaging in extramarital sex, and thus spreading VD.

Health and military officials knew that sex with both amateurs and prostitutes helped spread venereal disease throughout the entire war, yet they continued to emphasize repressing prostitution more prominently than all other VD control plans. In their controversial book *Plain Words About Venereal Disease*, Drs. Parran and Vonderlehr emphasized that the elimination of commercialized prostitution would decrease instances of VD far more quickly than treating those already infected. They recognized that the threat of commercialized prostitution increased during war time because “as several million young men have mobilized in our camps and defense industries, the prostitution army has mobilized too.” Parran and Vonderlehr then went on to estimate that prostitution was causing 75 percent of VD infections although they admitted that “no one would venture to speak authoritatively” on the matter.<sup>18</sup> This statistically unfounded estimation shows that even if prostitution was not the leading cause of the spread of VD infection, the government would continue to treat it as such. The military learned that merely arresting prostitutes would not be effective in stopping prostitution. The Office of the Surgeon General stated in *Preventative Medicine in World War II, Volume V Communicable Diseases* that “It was only when cities and communities emphasized the role of middlemen – facilitators,

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<sup>17</sup> Parascandola, “Quarantining Women,” 445.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Parran and R.A. Vonderlehr, *Plain Words About Venereal Disease* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), 96.

bellhops, cab drivers, and other individuals who procured customers for prostitutes – that any repression program could succeed.”<sup>19</sup> However, those facilitators were most often men, and therefore they suffered little, if at all, for the role they played helping prostitutes find customers, leaving the entire legal burden on women.

To supplement suppression campaigns, the government and military also began education programs to inform soldiers and civilians about the risks associated with venereal disease. The U.S. War Department distributed educational pamphlets to soldiers informing them of how VD spread while also addressing the men’s biological interest in having sex. The pamphlet explained how “germs of syphilis” could be present in a woman’s sex organs and infect the soldier during sexual intercourse.<sup>20</sup> The pamphlet described how to treat VD if contracted and leaves the reader with a list of eight points to remember, the fifth being that “A girl who’ll let you use her is probably infected.”<sup>21</sup> The language of the pamphlet discourages men from having sex until they are married, as was the prescribed ideal at the time, even though it was not always the reality. However, the language of the pamphlet still leaves the reader with the impression that the spread of VD is the fault of women because it describes syphilis and gonorrhea as being present in the woman’s sex organs, rather than acknowledging that both men and women can carry the infection. Additionally, while acknowledging a man’s biological interest in sex, women are shamed through language suggesting that if a woman is willing to sleep with a soldier, she has likely slept with many, and therefore the spread of infection is her fault.

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<sup>19</sup> John Boyd Coates Jr., ed., *Preventive Medicine in World War II*, Volume V: Communicable Diseases Transmitted Through Contact or By Unknown Means (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Surgeon General, Department of the Army, 1960), 174.

<sup>20</sup> War Department, United States. *Sex Hygiene and Venereal Disease*, September 30, 1942, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, The Gilder Lehrman Collection, 1860-1945, <http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/GLC09414.1640>.

<sup>21</sup> *Sex Hygiene and Venereal Disease*.

The War Department also attempted to educate soldiers about the risks of VD and the treatment options available through posters. If soldiers did choose to have sex, the military encouraged them to use condoms during the act and prophylaxis to treat themselves immediately after. To make treatment accessible, prophylactic stations were located at all army camps, train and bus stations. The military even gave soldiers their own personal kits in case they could not

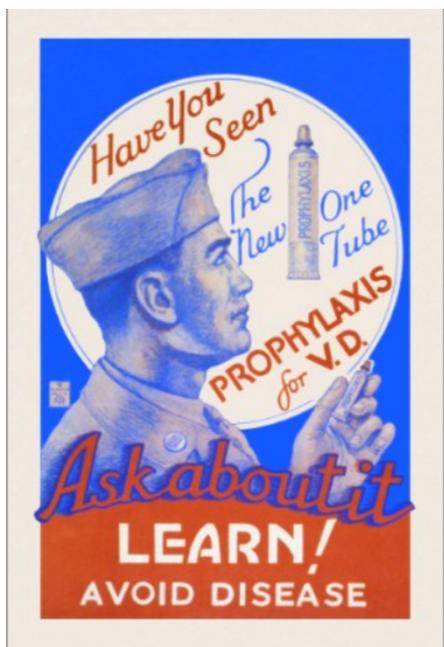


Figure 3: Military propaganda poster advertising for new one-step prophylaxis for VD treatment. Source: Boyo Press.

access the main station.<sup>22</sup> Despite easy access to prophylactic stations, many soldiers considered the chemical treatments with bichloride of mercury painful, messy, and shameful.<sup>23</sup> The embarrassment and pain associated with the treatments discouraged some men from having sex while also reinforcing the idea that having sex with women was dirty. The military then distributed personal tubes of prophylaxis, as seen in Figure 3, to combat some of the embarrassment and pain associated with prophylaxis in an attempt to increase use. The military used posters such as this one to entice soldiers to

protect themselves from VD. Also, each month during the war, “as many as fifty million condoms were sold or freely distributed.”<sup>24</sup> However, soldiers frequently complained about condoms, often claiming that they were too small, too thick, or that they slipped right off during intercourse. Therefore, the men were more likely to use them to cover their rifle barrels and keep the mud out than to wear them during sex.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 101-103.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 168-169.

<sup>24</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 164.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 168.

By early 1942, as the demand for manpower in the armed forces increased, the army reversed its initial policy and accepted individuals infected with “uncomplicated cases” of syphilis, gonorrhea, and chancroid.<sup>26</sup> The availability of prophylactic treatment and condoms showed a divergence from the venereal disease control plan executed in World War I which focused on exclusion from service as a punishment for contracting VD rather than prevention and treatment. Through the push for soldiers to use prophylactic stations and the distribution of condoms, the military acknowledged and accepted that soldiers engaged in sex. Furthermore, the military sent a clear message by providing the soldiers with easy and immediate treatment plans, that the military was in fact permissive of their soldiers having sex as long as they avoided VD and did not cause tension with the local population. This perceived acceptance of extramarital sex by the military drew criticism from groups with more traditional values regarding sex, such as Catholic and Baptist groups, creating dissent between military and health officials whose top priority was VD repression, and religious groups whose top priority was upholding traditional sexual morals.<sup>27</sup> Men had the means and responsibility to treat themselves for VD. In contrast, health authorities detained and arrested women until their entire treatment was complete. Therefore, women lost control over their own bodies to the government while men retained the privilege of control.

Soldiers were not the only targets for VD education. Community organizations such as the Dallas Council of Jewish Women and multiple Junior High Dad’s Clubs sponsored education programs and film viewings, and schools introduced more comprehensive sex education programs, many of which focused specifically on VD education.<sup>28</sup> Dr. Warren F. Draper,

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<sup>26</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 169-170.

<sup>27</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> “Venereal Disease Film Showings Scheduled,” *Dallas Morning News*, March 26, 1944, 12.

assistant to the Surgeon General, addressed the American Social Hygiene Association on February 6, 1941 on the topic “Protecting War Industry from Venereal Disease.” Draper discussed the boom-time conditions created by the rapidly increasing demand for military industry products and how syphilis and gonorrhea could prove fatally detrimental to the war effort in terms of lost productivity. He outlined the effect of untreated syphilis on the nervous system and heart and the dangers associated with those effects in the work place that could lead to “interruptions in production through labor replacement, damage to equipment, and workers’ compensation.”<sup>29</sup> Draper also suggested what employers and employees could do to combat the spread of venereal disease. Particularly, he believed employers should administer routine blood tests to their employees. However, Draper argued that positive blood tests should not result in termination of employment as long as the infected individual agreed to remain under treatment until he had received the maximum benefits from it. Draper only acknowledged men working in defense industries despite many women employed in the industry as well. Based on the detainment and arrest of women by other authorities, the leniency he proposed by allowing a man to keep his job even if he contracted VD likely would not have extended to women.

The U.S. government viewed instances of men and women contracting venereal disease in different ways. Men could keep their jobs if they continued to undergo treatment. In contrast, health authorities forcibly detained women merely suspected of having venereal disease and would not release them until they underwent supervised treatment. While the military and government publicly condemned soldiers hiring prostitutes and having sex with local women while abroad, their actions told a different story. Not only did the military provide ample ways for men to protect themselves from VD, both during and after having sex, by providing condoms

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<sup>29</sup> Warren F. Draper, “Protecting Industry from Venereal Disease,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 27:3 (March 1941), 99.

and prophylaxis, but in some cases high ranking military officials even encouraged the men under their command to have sex. This was a change from the World War I mentality. During World War II, the concept emerged that the military should not trifle or interfere with a white man's sexuality.<sup>30</sup> This idea led to a common narrative amongst men in power that so long as soldiers avoided or treated venereal disease, men had a need for sex that they had every right to satisfy.

Many high-ranking military officials such as Captain Joel T. Boone, M.D., of the U.S. Navy supported the new narrative. Boone published his opinions in "The Sexual Aspects of Military Personnel," stating that men are inherently sexual creatures and that the military environment fosters sexual aggression due to the strict discipline and rigid lifestyle. He also believed that there was nothing wrong with such sexual aggression because it served to strengthen the U.S. military. He claimed that only men who are sexually virile and possessing strong libido make good soldiers. Therefore, no efforts made by the military would stop the soldiers from having sexual encounters with prostitutes and amateurs. Boone believed that the main responsibility of the military was merely to curb the spread of venereal disease through the distribution of condoms, and rather than stigmatize soldiers who contracted VD, the population should pity them because a man who contracts venereal disease "is not punished for having sexual desire, any more than we would punish him for having hunger or thirst."<sup>31</sup> Boone was not the only high ranking man who supported the idea that sexual desire is completely normal and acceptable for men. War Department pamphlets such as *Sex Hygiene and Venereal Disease* encouraged soldiers that, "It's perfectly normal for you to want to go with girls – just as normal

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<sup>30</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotes*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Joel T. Boone, "The Sexual Aspects of Military Personnel," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 27:3 (March 1941): 113-124.

as to get hungry or sleepy.”<sup>32</sup> This type of language validated the sexual urges of men. In contrast, the language used to discuss women having sex classified them as dirty, and their urges as impure and in violation of their natural maternal instincts.<sup>33</sup>

Other military doctors, such as Colonel Arthur Parker Hitchens, M.D. of the Medical Corps of the U.S. Army, continued to prioritize the repression of venereal disease to protect the war effort and keep “men capable of rendering active military service.” Col. Hitchens believed that the best way to combat the spread of disease was to treat infected men without punishment. In the past, men could lose their wages or rank in the military from contracting an infection. Hitchens believed that punishing servicemen just led them to “quack-doctors” and “charlatans” rather than stopping the spread of VD.<sup>34</sup> While the government and military offered readily available treatment with no punishment for men, they forcibly detained women, clearly showing that repercussions for extramarital sexual conduct differed for men and women. Some perspectives, such as those of the high-ranking military officials, considered extramarital sex with prostitutes permissible, or at the least looked the other way, for men. The root of their concern and what they held as most important, morals aside, was that men could still serve their country through active military service. In contrast, the majority of points of view at the time categorized extramarital sex for women as sexual deviance and subject to legal repercussions.

American military officers condoned prostitution privately while condemning it publicly, in order to match the policy of the military at large. At the very least, this private condoning meant that officers knew that their soldiers were hiring prostitutes. In more extreme cases, generals would help their soldiers find prostitutes. General Charles Gerhardt was one of those

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<sup>32</sup> *Sex Hygiene and Venereal Disease*.

<sup>33</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotes*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Colonel Arthur Parker Hitchens, M.D., “Protecting Soldiers from Syphilis and Gonorrhea,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 27:3 (March 1941): 109.

generals. Gerhardt opened a brothel called “The Corral” for his men fighting in France. He claimed that his goal was to keep sex clean and safe for his soldiers. In reality, he wanted his men to have a prostitute readily available at all times. Gerhardt knew that the prostitutes hired did not pass health inspection and carried venereal disease. He allowed the brothel to open anyway.<sup>35</sup> General Patton was quite notorious for supporting his men’s supposed “need” for sex and prostitution as well.<sup>36</sup> In some cases, military police officers used their role to become pimps in military camps. They would bring prostitutes into the camps and all of the monetary transactions would go through the MP who served as the pimp.<sup>37</sup> By facilitating prostitution, the military bolstered a man’s sense of masculinity and strength tied to sexuality, something that the military found advantageous in a force of impressionable young men about to be sent to the front lines of a deadly war.

Some military officials continued to support prostitution despite the spread of VD, believing that men had an inherent “need” for sex. This supposed need required satisfaction so officials worried about where men would turn for sex if prostitutes were no longer accessible. Some medical professionals such as Dr. Sheldon Glueck, an advisor to the Social Protection Division of the Office of Community War Services, encouraged the continuation of prostitution with regulation. Dr. Glueck believed a lack of prostitutes would cause men to have sex with a “better class of girls,” middle and upper-class white women, and spread VD to them.<sup>38</sup> Despite the Army’s continued assertion that the rates of venereal disease fell when organized prostitution was shut down, some camp medical officers merely arranged for prostitutes in brothels near camps to undergo medical exams. If the women were healthy, the medical officials allowed them

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<sup>35</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 159-161.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 166.

to continue to prostitute themselves. The Surgeon General reprimanded such officials when their transgressions came to light.<sup>39</sup>

The Surgeon General realized that punishments for men in the armed forces were stopping them from reporting cases of venereal disease. To combat the lack of reporting, on January 18, 1943, the Surgeon General recommended that the military repeal the law in place prescribing the loss of pay or time as punishment for contracting venereal disease.

Encouragement for repeal from the Air Force increased once an investigation revealed that men were continuing to fly their planes while taking large amounts of sulfa treatments to try to self-medicate unreported instances of venereal disease. Military physicians believed that sulfa treatments inhibited one's ability to competently fly an aircraft. The Canadian War Department had also previously repealed punishment for contracting venereal disease, with much success for proper reporting to military doctors. The attempted self-medication and the success of the Canadian program were both major motivators for the Surgeon General's decision. However, the repeal of punishment remained one of the most contested issues within the Surgeon General's office because some believed that removing the punishment would make it seem as though the U.S. government condoned extramarital sex, leading to venereal disease.<sup>40</sup>

U.S. military officers also wanted to decrease stigma of venereal disease for men. Officers feared that if punishments were harsh or the stigma too great, men would leave instances of syphilis and gonorrhea untreated out of embarrassment, leading to permanent damage to their health which would weaken the soldiers and thus weaken the army as a whole. Additionally, military officials considered VD rates of companies when it came time to promote officers and the officers whose companies had higher rates were less likely to receive a

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<sup>39</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 167.

<sup>40</sup> Coates, *Preventive Medicine in World War II*, 143-144.

promotion, giving officers motivation to underreport instances of VD in their company.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, the stigma for soldiers hiring prostitutes remained low due to the military providing multiple ways to protect against VD, as well as the often blatant support of commanding officers.

The pamphlet given to soldiers upon enlistment, *Army Life*, instructed soldiers in all realms of their life as a part of the U.S. Army. In the section entitled “Sex,” the War Department emphasized “When you report for prophylactic treatment, no one will criticize you for exposing yourself. No report will be made to your unit... Your carelessness or ignorance has let down your Army, but nevertheless it will take care of you with the best medical treatment.”<sup>42</sup> The pamphlet also gives information on sex as a moral issue saying that “sexual intercourse without marriage is everywhere condemned as *wrong*.”<sup>43</sup> However, military posters such as Figure 4 spread the message that as long as a soldier uses prophylaxis and seeks treatment from military doctors, contracting VD will go without punishment. It

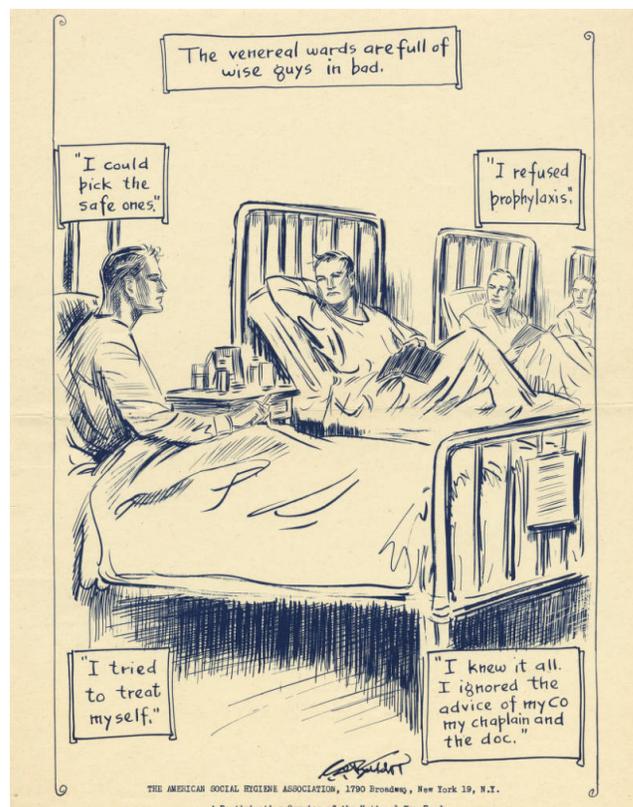


Figure 4: Military poster warning of common downfalls for soldiers when contracting VD. Source: University of Minnesota.

only became an issue once a man ignored treatment or tried to treat himself. Additionally, it perpetuates the stereotype that women are the source of infection through the caption, “I could pick the safe ones.” Despite continued official assertion that sex outside of marriage is wrong, it

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 172.

<sup>42</sup> War Department, United States, *Army Life* (War Department Pamphlet 21-13) (Washington D.C. United States Printing Office, August 10, 1944): 73.

<sup>43</sup> *Army Life*, 72.

was still quite common for those in power to ignore sex as an issue. If treatment could help contain venereal disease, then all that mattered was that the military could ensure that the soldiers were in good spirits to fight the war.

On the Western Front, Military officers often overlooked their soldiers' sexual escapades in France despite the detrimental effects to the American military's relationship with the French government. Before GIs traveled back home to the United States, many had sexual encounters with local French women, causing VD rates amongst French women to skyrocket. The sheer number of French VD patients overwhelmed the French government and the VD wards in French hospitals. Hospital officials had to send women to the next town over, only for that hospital to send them to a farther town, from which the final hospital would send them back to the original town because there was not enough room or manpower to treat them. Despite French government officials such as Pierre Voisin, mayor of Le Havre, reaching out to the U.S. military, the military commanders left the burden of high VD rates to the French.<sup>44</sup> Ignoring the issue of American soldiers spreading venereal disease was more convenient for the U.S. armed forces than confronting the issue directly. Due to the common thought pattern that men have an inherent "need" for sex, officers believed that hindering their soldiers' sexual desires would in turn hinder the war effort and their own potential military successes. Therefore, the only cases of venereal disease that they treated with leniency and acceptance were those of the white male soldiers.

In contrast, the messages that the government sent to women regarding sex were much more condemning. The attention paid to "promiscuous" and "potentially promiscuous" women led to hyper-sexualization of women in a war driven society already focused on using women's sexuality for the entertainment of soldiers. War time propaganda closely associated sexual allure

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<sup>44</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 189-90.

and patriotism, which in turn contributed to conflicting notions about female sexual availability.<sup>45</sup> Magazines and ads encouraged women to send pin-up type pictures of themselves



Figure 5: US Propaganda poster encouraging women to join the industrial war effort. Source: Boyo Press.

to the soldiers overseas to remind them what the good girls at home looked like.<sup>46</sup> The focus that wartime propaganda put on admiring the “girl-next-door” stereotype overlooked that VD was spreading from casual encounters with women who were not professional prostitutes. In addition, advertisements for women’s products intended to make a woman sexier and therefore more appealing to a soldier increased drastically.<sup>47</sup> The government also bombarded women with propaganda encouraging them to join the industrial work force in roles previously reserved for men such as the woman riveting in Figure 5. Even as the woman rivets, she maintains her femininity by wearing a dress and having her hair styled, perpetuating the idea that a woman’s traditional femininity must be protected, even in industrial roles. This closely drawn link between sexuality and patriotism led to a double-edged sword for women at the time. Society expected women to leave the home in order to support the war effort, yet as soon as they exited the domestic sphere, they aroused suspicion. Similarly, society expected women to boost soldiers’ morale through their own sexuality, yet when emphasizing their sexuality, authorities considered them an object of suspicion and potentially a source of venereal disease infection for the armed forces. Men who

<sup>45</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 112.

<sup>46</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 118.

wanted to have extramarital sex were just being men, whereas society stigmatized women who had extramarital sex and considered them sexually deviant.

American military magazines such as *Stars and Stripes* showed a sexualized liberation effort in Normandy with French women kissing American soldiers, yet men still worried about the faithfulness of their wives and girlfriends at home, creating another double standard that men had the luxury of exploring extramarital sexual affairs while their wives and girlfriends were beholden only to them.<sup>48</sup> Despite the standard, women at home did worry about the faithfulness of their husbands and sweethearts while they served. In a letter from G.I. Sidney Diamond, he reassures his sweetheart Estelle Spero that he

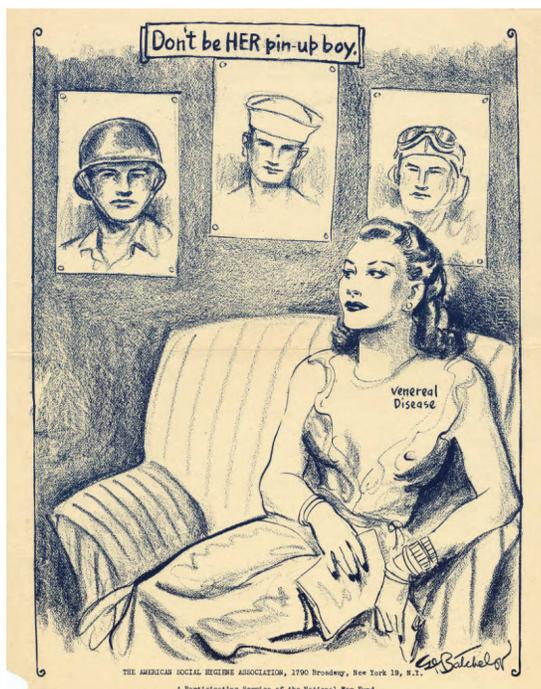


Figure 7: US Military propaganda poster. Source: University of Minnesota.

<sup>48</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 67-73.

<sup>49</sup> Sidney Diamond to Estelle Spero, March 15, 1943, GLC09120.201, in Collection of WWII Letters of Sidney Diamond to Estelle Spero, The Gilder Lehrman Collection (1860-1945), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, <http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/GLC09120.201>.



Figure 6: US propaganda poster warning men that one cannot tell if a woman has VD merely by her appearance. Source: Boyo Press.

does not have sex with “his women.” He only “practices old jokes,

eats and dances” with them.<sup>49</sup> American women at home did know about the opportunities for men to have sexual encounters while serving and the propaganda aimed at soldiers showed that the military worried about those same opportunities for soldiers.

Propaganda posters blaming women for the spread of venereal disease were common. Posters used

taglines such as “She may look clean but...” in Figure 6 with an image of a woman who appealed to the classic standard of beauty for the time to warn men that outward appearances are not indicative of whether or not a woman has VD. These posters created a double standard because the government did not produce any posters warning women against men who may have VD. These posters perpetuated the stereotype that women were the cause for the spread of venereal disease. In some cases, propaganda posters perpetuated the concept of women being to blame for the spread of venereal disease even further by illustrating VD as feminized or as a woman such as in Figure 7. Referring to venereal disease as “HER” further engrains the stereotype that VD is a women’s problem rather than a sexual health problem spread by men and women alike. Other posters such as Figure 8 portrayed the enemy agents as female prostitutes and pick-up women who toasted the Axis leaders by infecting soldiers with VD and crippling the American war effort. Not only did images like this blame women for the spread of VD, but they also categorized women engaging in extramarital sex as Axis agents.

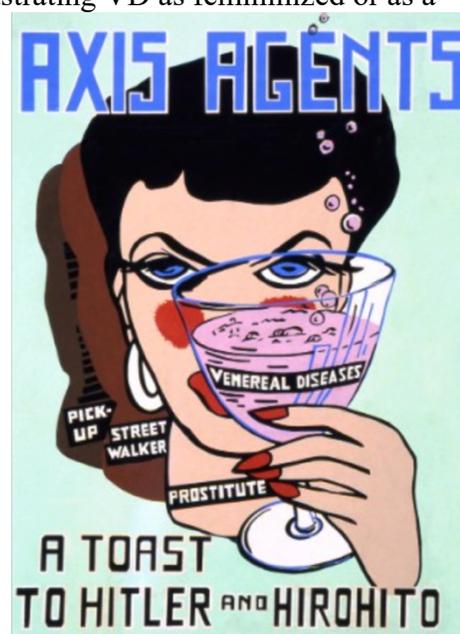


Figure 8: Propaganda Poster feminizing the Axis Powers. Source: Boyo Press.

The language used to describe women, both prostitutes and women merely viewed as potentially promiscuous, was demeaning and clearly intended to place all of the blame for the sexual act on the shoulders of the woman. A *New York Herald Tribune* article about Marie Barton’s sentencing to four years in prison and a two thousand five hundred dollar fine for transporting women for the purpose of prostitution exhibits this demeaning language. Judge James P. Leamy who was responsible for Barton’s sentencing said to her at the trial, “Yours is a

vile and filthy business. It is just your type of woman who surrounds military cantonments these days, looking to ruin young boys who come from homes where vice is unknown. I fully believe that more soldier boys are downed by venereal disease than by bullets.”<sup>50</sup> Rather than accepting that a consensual sexual act requires two parties, the legal system viewed women as deviant and the reasons that men suffered moral corruption and infection with venereal disease.

The government and military’s venereal disease repression programs also disproportionately affected people of color negatively. Military reports showed that rates of venereal disease were higher in military units comprised of black soldiers than those comprised of white soldiers. The higher rates of VD within units of black servicemen were partly due to the lack of access to both education on venereal disease and prophylactic stations to treat oneself after infection for black military units.<sup>51</sup> The military had little desire to provide more education and treatment for African American men because the military held the belief that black men were naturally sexually deviant and thus there was no point to educating them.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, racism at the time was so rampant that the military valued the life of a black man less than that of a white man. The military relegated African American men to support services rather than combat roles and viewed them as replaceable. Therefore, it was not a priority for the military to provide prophylactic treatment.

When the Social Protection Division (SPD), a government agency created during World War II specifically to combat prostitution, first began investigating the spread of venereal disease, statistics kept at military forts focused particularly on the rates of infection for “colored” troops. At Fort Knox Kentucky, the VD rate in 1942 was 20 per 1,000 white men but 124 per

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<sup>50</sup> “Woman Draws 4- Year Term in Mann Act Case: Judge Fines Marie Barton 82,500, Denounces Peril for Nation's Army Camps.” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 25, 1942, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 35-36.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 204.

1,000 African American men. The VD control officer, Captain Jones, stated that the reason for the disparity was that “60-70 percent of colored soldiers pay professional prostitutes who ply their trade in the colored district near 7<sup>th</sup> and Walnut.” Analysis like this from high-ranking VD control officers led the SPD to focus its VD repression efforts predominantly on communities of color despite the control officers not showing the SPD the whole picture. For example, while blaming the black soldiers for turning to prostitution for entertainment, the military did not address the concept of significant disparities in access to recreation facilities for black soldiers compared to white soldiers. The disparity was especially pronounced in the South where society observed segregation most rigidly so African American men did not have access to public recreation facilities either.<sup>53</sup> Even though there was a lack of quality data on the matter because VD rates amongst African Americans were allegedly high, the majority of the focus for controlling the spread of venereal disease in the military focused on black soldiers and black military units. Despite this focus, military doctors neglected to treat many African American men with syphilis.<sup>54</sup>

The belief that black men were inherently sexually deviant was long rooted in history. Since the early 1900s, many physicians, particularly those in the South, suggested that African Americans were more prone to contracting venereal disease than white people and thus physicians labeled African Americans as a “syphilis-soaked race.” Many doctors refused to treat black men because they were convinced that due to the natural promiscuity of blacks, treating them was pointless since doctors believed that African Americans refused to acknowledge the dangers of syphilis and gonorrhea and would thus contract them again.<sup>55</sup> The attitudes regarding

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<sup>53</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 157.

race and venereal disease made the Tuskegee Syphilis Study possible. The study, sponsored by the United States Public Health Service, ran from 1932 to 1972 to determine the results if doctors did not administer the treatment for syphilis. All of the individuals upon whom the USPHS conducted the experiment were African American, often without the consent of the patient, and many died from syphilis.<sup>56</sup> Black physicians attempted to dispel the inaccurate and racist information circulating about African Americans and syphilis, disputing frequently cited statistics that blacks suffered from syphilis at rates five to six times those of whites. They also objected to the idea that VD had a different pathology in white people than in black people.<sup>57</sup> However, African American physicians did not succeed in breaking down the pseudoscience used against African Americans during World War II. The incorrect idea that race determined the extent to which syphilis affected an individual persisted, leading to continued discrimination against black people by the venereal disease policies of the U.S. government.

Consequences for sexual behavior were greater for African Americans than white servicemen in the European Theater as well. American soldiers raped French women as the American Army advanced rapidly across the western front. French women often accused black men due partially to their own racial biases but also because the soldiers usually committed the crime at night and when the military produced a lineup of men for the woman to choose from, almost all of the men included were African American. The military courts convicted black soldiers at much higher rates than they convicted white soldiers. Additionally, military courts issued significantly harsher punishments, often amounting in public executions, for black men than for white men.<sup>58</sup> The only instances in which the court held the word of a woman above the

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<sup>56</sup> Rueben Warren, "Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 260-262.

<sup>57</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 158.

<sup>58</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 207.

word of a man was in the case that the accused was black. Military courts' rulings displayed a pattern where if a white woman accused a black man of rape, then the black man was a sexual savage. However, if a white woman accused a white man of rape, then the court categorized the woman as the sexual aggressor.<sup>59</sup> As the crisis of soldiers raping women spread across France in a wave in the late summer of 1944, black men became the scapegoat for those crimes. That is not to say that black men were not guilty of raping French women. However, the process of justice administered was prejudiced against black men in terms of convicting men in cases where little to no, and even contradictory evidence existed.<sup>60</sup> Similar to the way African American military units took the blame for high venereal disease rates in France, the military also used those units as scapegoats for the issue of rape in the armed forces.

Trials occurred more often when French women accused black men of rape than when they accused white men. The higher rate of trials involving black men was in part a result of the segregated nature of the U.S. armed forces. The military placed African Americans serving in the war predominantly in the service sector of the military, often in the stationary Communications Zone, because commanders denied them combat roles. Due to their stationary position compared to the highly mobile combat units, there was more time to bring an African American man to trial where the victim accused him than there was an opportunity to bring a white soldier to trial on a constantly moving battle front.<sup>61</sup>

In the United States, women of color suffered on two fronts. Authorities regarded them with suspicion for their status as women, coupled with the suspicion authorities had of them because they considered African Americans inherently sexually deviant. Black women were

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<sup>59</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 207.

<sup>61</sup> Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 202.

more likely to be arrested and detained for venereal disease than white women and when authorities did detain them, the conditions were worse. For example, venereal disease treatment facilities for black women lacked rehabilitation programs and were usually less sanitary and had less access to recreation. Additionally, doctors treating the women believed in racist stereotypes relating to the black woman's understanding of her venereal disease infection.<sup>62</sup> Even though health professionals denied black women access to education on the risks of sex in terms of contracting venereal disease, they still mocked the women's ignorance and used it as an unjustified basis for their own superiority.

The campaign against venereal disease changed in form following Dr. John Mahoney of the U.S. Public Health Service's discovery of penicillin as an effective antibiotic to treat syphilis and gonorrhea in 1943. The distribution of penicillin to treat syphilis and gonorrhea led to the most significant decrease in venereal disease rates in U.S. history up to that point in time.<sup>63</sup> Despite its effectiveness in drastically reducing venereal disease rates, penicillin led to controversy surrounding the feared impact it would have on sexual morals. Since the military had run its entire campaign against extramarital sex using the fear of contracting venereal disease as the main deterrent, an easy antibiotic treatment eliminated the effectiveness of that preventative strategy. Public health officials lost their reason to be involved in promoting public morals relating to sex. However, as public conception surrounding sex continued to change, many physicians still felt as though they had a moral and social responsibility to advocate for traditional family and sexual values. As venereal disease rates decreased, it was harder to hide that many people in positions of power sought to regulate sexuality.

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<sup>62</sup> Parascandola, "Quarantining Women," 49.

<sup>63</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 170-171.

The discovery of penicillin in 1943 and shifting morals surrounding sexuality during the 1960s led to a more muddled military approach to regulating sex and prostitution for American GIs serving in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. On one hand, the military maintained in its literature and education programs for men serving in the war that sex outside of marriage was wrong and should be avoided. On the other hand, as extramarital sex became more common in the era of the Vietnam War than it had been during World War II, the military and the American public more readily acknowledged that soldiers in South East Asia had sexual encounters with local women. The U.S. military continued to educate servicemen on avoiding and treating venereal disease. The most prominent similarity between the VD and prostitution policies of World War II and the Vietnam War was the United States military's lack of responsibility for the sexual actions of U.S. servicemen on foreign soil and its discrimination against women, particularly women of color.

In 1965 the U.S. military began sending increased numbers of troops to Vietnam and removed American dependents from the South Vietnam, creating a thriving military bachelor culture. Simultaneously, the war in the Vietnamese countryside pushed poor rural Vietnamese women into the cities, particularly Saigon.<sup>64</sup> Often out of economic necessity, the women turned to the growing entertainment and prostitution industry that served the needs of American men. These men were far more idle than they had been while serving overseas in World War II and the number of support staff in South Vietnam outnumbered combat troops, leading to bored men with a significant amount of leisure time to spend in Saigon.<sup>65</sup> The concentration of servicemen

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<sup>64</sup> Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 48.

<sup>65</sup> Kara Dixon Vuic, "Look, but Don't Touch: Sexuality and Entertainment in the Vietnam War," in *The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 188.

within cities marked another difference between the Vietnam War and World War II that allowed the creation of the position of a bar girl, a new class of women serving as entertainment for American servicemen. Proprietors ran bars in Saigon where the women worked to entertain American servicemen. These women were not always prostitutes and often GIs frequented the bars for the female companionship the bar girls provided. While they may not have been prostitutes, they were still overly sexualized and dressed provocatively in American style miniskirts.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the increased number of American men in South Vietnam with leisure time and the forces of war pushing rural women into the cities with no way to support themselves left a wide space open for a booming entertainment and prostitution industry in Saigon.

Similar to the conditions in World War II France, the Vietnam War took a major hit on the South Vietnamese economy. The American presence in Vietnam worsened the strain on the economy because the American GIs were flush with cash that they could pump into the economy and had access to goods that they could sell to Vietnamese people who otherwise would not have access to them.<sup>67</sup> The economic strain facing the Vietnamese people mirrored the economic strain on the French during World War II as the moving front ravaged their nation and similar to the women in France, the Vietnamese women turned to prostitution as one of the few ways they could earn money and support themselves. Not only did the American presence create the demand for the prostitution industry, but also the influx of American money and goods into the South Vietnamese economy coupled with the war, left the economy unstable creating a cyclical need for Vietnamese women to turn to prostitution as a means of supporting themselves.

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<sup>66</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 53-54.

<sup>67</sup> Amanda Boczar, "Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Policies in South Vietnam," *The Journal of American East-Asian Relations* 22, no. 3 (2015): 195.

The locals and government officials in South Vietnam despised the prostitution industry. As greater numbers of American men arrived on South Vietnamese soil, President Ngo Dinh Diem banned prostitution, adultery, and divorce in the 1961 Code of the Family and the 1962 Law for the Protection of Morality in an attempt to protect traditional Vietnamese values.<sup>68</sup> Despite these laws, the prostitution industry continued to boom. Due to the sheer profitability of the industry, local law enforcement was often corrupt and did not enforce the anti-prostitution laws.<sup>69</sup> Not only did the local corruption frustrate national government officials, it also gave the impression to American men that the prostitution industry was only nominally illicit.<sup>70</sup> The notion that prostitution was illegal only on the books, combined with the lack of punishment for purchasing sex for American men, did little to stop them from seeking out prostitutes. For example, when police raided bars and brothels, they arrested only the prostitutes and the owners of the establishment, meaning the largest inconvenience for the servicemen was finding a new place to go to purchase sex.<sup>71</sup> In the Vietnam War, American servicemen did not face any punishments for contracting VD, which marked a shift from the potential punishments such as loss of rank or wages that American soldiers could incur from contracting VD during World War II. Furthermore, the development of antibiotic treatment lessened the negative health implications of contracting VD and made the risk of infection less frightening to GIs. The exponentially growing prostitution industry and lack of consequences for American servicemen's sexual encounters led to huge spikes in VD for both Vietnamese women and American servicemen.

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<sup>68</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 195.

<sup>69</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 199.

<sup>70</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 212.

<sup>71</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 200.

As VD rates amongst American men in Vietnam skyrocketed to unprecedented wartime levels in the post-penicillin age, the U.S military began to examine the issue of servicemen infected with VD.<sup>72</sup> On October 27, 1964 U.S. Air Force Major General Sam Maddux, Jr. expressed concern that the incident rate of VD “for the past 60 days has risen most alarmingly... from an existing unacceptable high to a grossly higher and even more unacceptable high.”<sup>73</sup> The nature of the materials created by the military to educate servicemen about VD shifted from the internal and moral discussions about VD of the World War II era to more frank materials that acknowledged that sexual adventure with foreign women was an inevitable element of serving overseas.<sup>74</sup> American ideals and morals surrounding sex shifted during the Vietnam Era. Extramarital sex became more widely accepted, as did the shift away from the traditional nuclear family structure as American women entered the workforce. Due to loosening morals surrounding sexual encounters during this era, the U.S. military’s main concern was the spread of VD amongst GIs, not instances of extramarital sex. In 1965, U.S. Air Force Colonel Joseph Martin instituted compulsory venereal disease and first aid education for all personnel E-6 and below that included a lecture by Captain Koch of the 6251<sup>st</sup> Hospital Staff.<sup>75</sup> Despite education programs, VD rates continued to rise. The rise was partially because the availability of antibiotic treatment made VD seem significantly less threatening, since servicemen knew that the military could provide effective treatment if they contracted VD.<sup>76</sup> Even though the military did have treatment available for GIs, the increased VD rates had a negative impact on United States’

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<sup>72</sup> Boczar, “Uneasy Allies,” 196.

<sup>73</sup> Sam Maddux, “Venereal Disease Rate,” October 27, 1964, Dr. Calvin Chapman Collection, Box 02, Folder 28, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/71526](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/71526).

<sup>74</sup> Sue Sun, “*Where the Girls Are: The Management of Venereal Disease by United States Military Forces in Vietnam*,” *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 68.

<sup>75</sup> Joseph Martin, “Compulsory Venereal Disease and First Aid Education,” September 10, 1965, Dr. Calvin Chapman Collection, Box 02, Folder 28, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/71571](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/71571).

<sup>76</sup> Sun, “*Where the Girls Are*” 68.

relations with South Vietnam and the American public's perception of the U.S. military's role in Vietnam.

In an attempt to protect foreign relations between the United States and South Vietnam, the U.S. military implemented a Rest and Recuperation (R&R) Program for soldiers so that on their five-day leave they could travel to Taiwan, Sydney, Honolulu, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Bangkok, Manila, Singapore or Malaysia. While on these R&R trips, GIs would have access to many of the same services that they had become used to while in Vietnam such as bar girls and the United States-Taiwan Defense Command provided a handy brochure to those GIs visiting Taiwan explaining how to purchase the company of a Taiwanese bar girl for a twenty-four hour period and warning servicemen about rising VD rates.<sup>77</sup> Through the R&R Program, the military could continue to offer the opportunity for servicemen to satiate their sexual appetite while limiting the harm to the United States' relationship with the South Vietnamese government, showing that the military was not concerned with whether or not their soldiers were having sex. The military's primary focus was to protect soldiers from VD and maintain GIs' morale by continuing to allow access to sex while serving overseas without disrupting foreign relations between the United States and South Vietnam.

Many Vietnamese groups saw the American presence in South Vietnam as the root of many social problems during the war, but mostly the prostitution problem. The Committee of Women's Actions for the Right to Life called for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops and claimed that the presence of "U.S. aggressor troops" was the root of the high prostitution rate in

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<sup>77</sup> Sydney Gruson, "'R and R' Tours on Taiwan: American Servicemen Bring a Mixed Blessing to the Island," *New York Times*, February 14, 1968, 6.

urban areas in 1970.<sup>78</sup> Following the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, Vietnamese parents made a request in the Saigon People's Column of the Vietnamese newspaper *Saigon Giai Phong*, that the Administration "severely punish and completely eliminate evils left behind by the U.S. and its puppets" in 1975 as Vietnam tried to re-stabilize following the war.<sup>79</sup> These parents saw the continued prostitution industry as harmful to their children and a social evil left behind following the presence of U.S. troops. While the United States worried about its foreign relations with South Vietnam and the increasing VD rates among servicemen, it cared about the negative impacts of prostitution on the general populace only so far as to protect the United States' relationship with the Vietnamese government. Beyond the impact on the U.S. government, military, and troops, the United States had little concern for how the American presence affected the Vietnamese people. Since the United States saw itself as helping the Vietnamese people escape the clutches of communism, leaders within the military believed that the United States was doing more to help the South Vietnamese people than hurt them.

Some military officials suggested placing brothels near the American military bases in Vietnam to limit the number of men searching for sex in Saigon and to give the military increased control over the access that servicemen had to Vietnamese women in an attempt to decrease cases of VD. If the military concentrated prostitutes to a location near bases, those in support of the plan believed, then the military would be able to routinely test the women for VD and provide cards proving a clean bill of health after their tests. This proposition paralleled the military officers in World War II who sought to limit the risk of VD infection by establishing

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<sup>78</sup> "New Saigon Women's Movement Asks US Troop Withdrawal," October 26, 1970, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 - National Liberation Front, Box 11, Folder 3, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/133005](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/133005).

<sup>79</sup> "Parents Call for the Elimination of Houses of Prostitution," Military Affairs and Public Security, October 12, 1975, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 - Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 26, Folder 3, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/208715](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/208715).

brothels in France specifically for American GIs. However, many Vietnamese engaged in the industry disapproved of the idea to move prostitution out of the cities because it would cut many low-income Vietnamese off from one of the most profitable industries during the war.<sup>80</sup> Some Vietnamese students agreed with the proposal to move prostitution closer to the bases and additionally supported access to contraception in those centers to limit pregnancies and the detrimental effects that the prostitution industry had on Vietnamese family life.<sup>81</sup> Both of these opinions show that Vietnamese people recognized that American men would have sex with local women no matter what. Some regarded that inevitability as one of the only ways to make enough money to survive. Others recognized the inevitability of Americans' sexual interactions with local women and sought to limit the harm done to the Vietnamese family structure.

The American presence in South Vietnam and the subsequent growing prostitution rate disrupted the Vietnamese family structure. Due to the economic benefits of a relationship with an American man, Vietnamese women of all classes entered into relationships with American GIs. Carrying on a liaison with an American serviceman could allow a Vietnamese woman to earn more money than her father.<sup>82</sup> Inflation and the unstable economy left some "respectable" Vietnamese families in such dire financial situations that they relied on the financial support provided by a daughter's relationship with an American. The reliance became necessary because "a bar girl may make as much as \$40 a night while many a married petty bureaucrat with three children earns little more than \$30 a month."<sup>83</sup> The wartime conditions and inflation due to the influx of American money into the Vietnamese economy left families with little choice but to rely on Americans for financial support, even at the expense of traditional Vietnamese family

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<sup>80</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 201.

<sup>81</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 59.

<sup>82</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 58.

<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Randal, "Red-Light Limits Opposed in Saigon," *New York Times*, November 14, 1966, 13.

values. The financial reliance and degradation of values led to increasing resentment amongst the Vietnamese people towards Americans and their presence in South Vietnam.

The South Vietnamese government disagreed with the U.S. Military's emphasis on VD education and treatment as well as regulated prostitution because officials worried that education and preventative VD programs could give the appearance of tacit government approval of the prostitution industry.<sup>84</sup> So while the South Vietnamese government worked to completely eradicate prostitution, the United States focused on VD education and prevention but did not want to fully eliminate access to prostitution for fear that it would have a detrimental effect on soldiers' morale.<sup>85</sup> The United States Air Force commissioned a film called *Where the Girls Are* as a tool to educate new recruits and warn them against having sex with Vietnamese women by portraying the consequences of extramarital sex. In the film, a young Air Force Sargent Peter Collins went to a bar in Saigon with a fellow serviceman and contracted gonorrhea, leaving him unfaithful to his sweetheart back home, Julie.<sup>86</sup> In creating the film, the military stereotyped Vietnamese women as overtly sexual and dirty which reinforced the unequal power distribution between Vietnamese women and American men.<sup>87</sup> By emphasizing the idea that soldiers should save themselves for American women and that Vietnamese women were infected, the film perpetuated negative stereotypes of Vietnamese women and negatively impacted the relationship between South Vietnam and the United States.

While the military attempted to emphasize that GIs should save themselves for their American sweethearts at home, the U.S. government tried to bolster support for the Vietnam War on the home front by portraying Vietnam as a country in dire need of American intervention.

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<sup>84</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 200.

<sup>85</sup> Boczar, "Uneasy Allies," 190.

<sup>86</sup> Sun, "*Where the Girls Are*," 69-70.

<sup>87</sup> Sun, "*Where the Girls Are*," 67.

Americans feminized Asia and Asian countries to create the idea that those countries were like damsels in distress who needed saving.<sup>88</sup> The creation of the idea of a damsel in distress and the feminization of Vietnam led to Americans believing that the United States had the authority and obligation to go in and save Vietnamese women because Vietnamese men were not manly or capable enough to do so.<sup>89</sup> The perpetuation of the idea that Vietnamese men were not strong enough to protect their women mirrored the stereotyping of French men by Americans in World War II. In both cases Americans emphasized that women in a foreign country needed saving and that only Americans were strong enough to do so, leaving foreign women as theirs for the taking. While this stereotype may have helped gain support for the Vietnam War in the beginning, the feminization of the Vietnamese people also bolstered the American superiority complex amongst GIs serving in Vietnam.

Additionally, portraying Vietnamese women as damsels in distress in need of saving also made them seem more sexually available to American servicemen so the military then had to introduce a new narrative about Vietnamese women in order to limit sexual encounters between the women and soldiers. To warn American men against seeking out Vietnamese women for sex, the military and American culture worked to paint Vietnamese women as mysterious and dangerous. Because the Viet Cong used female guerilla fighters, it was easier for American

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<sup>88</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 31.

servicemen to view all Vietnamese women as potentially dangerous enemy combatants. Cartoons and drawings such as Figure 10 portrayed Vietnamese women as overly sexualized but also dangerous.<sup>90</sup> GI folklore spread legends that Vietnamese prostitutes and bar girls hid sharp objects within their vaginas to injure unsuspecting customers and that Vietnamese women



Figure 9: Cartoon of a sexualized Vietnamese woman that illustrates the stereotype that having sex with Vietnamese women was dangerous. Source: Stur, *Beyond Combat*

carried incurable forms of VD.<sup>91</sup> These stereotypes hurt Vietnamese women because once Americans saw the women as dangerous, it justified their lack of consideration for their bodies or their livelihoods. The portrayal of Vietnamese women as dangerous also marked a stark difference between how American servicemen viewed foreign women of color versus foreign white women. In World War II France, servicemen sexualized French

women and noted that they were often VD carriers, but they never saw the French women as inherently dangerous. In contrast, American servicemen viewed the Vietnamese women that they slept with as potential enemies, marking how race played a prominent role in their gendered worldview.

Race also played a role during the Vietnam War in the discussion of appropriate sexual behaviors. Due to a blossoming American understanding and openness about sexuality during the Vietnam era, the discussion of same sex relations also entered the arena of government

<sup>90</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 56.

<sup>91</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 40.

attention in a way that it had not been present in World War II. In *The Serviceman and Sex*, a pamphlet intended for American men entering the armed services published by the National Catholic Community Service, Reverend Edward V. Stanford O.S.A. wrote on the dangers of premarital sex with women and homosexual relationships. The pamphlet served as a guide for GIs of Christian faith on how to avoid the temptation of sex before marriage while serving in the military. In a section titled “Sex Perversion,” the pamphlet warns that “in military life no other sin against the Sixth Commandment of God is so vigorously condemned, run down, and disciplined” as the “grossly unnatural abuse of sex, called homosexuality.”<sup>92</sup> This pamphlet demonstrates the military’s prejudice at the time towards homosexual men and shows that even if the military had loosened its moral expectations regarding soldiers and sex since World War II, the military still demanded only heterosexual relationships of its soldiers. That demand showed the military’s continued role in the regulation of the sexuality of soldiers.

Despite the discovery of penicillin and antibiotics during World War II, venereal disease continued to be a problem for the United States Armed Forces throughout the Vietnam War. Therefore, keeping VD rates in check amongst servicemen became a major priority for the U.S. military. In contrast to World War II, the U.S. military focused less on abstinence education and increasingly taught soldiers in a frank manner how to avoid and treat VD during the Vietnam War. Additionally, the military was more openly acknowledged that servicemen would have sex with local women no matter what, so it tried to create programs such as R&R trips that would allow GIs to engage in sexual relationships with Asian women without harming the relationship between the United States and South Vietnam. However, at the end of the day, the policies that the United States used to monitor and attempt to contain the spread of VD during the Vietnam

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<sup>92</sup> Stanford, Reverend Edward V, *The Serviceman and Sex*. Washington, DC, National Catholic Community Service, October 1964, 11-12.

War were still largely harmful to women and people of color. In this case those groups were often one and the same. Americans sexualized Vietnamese women and stereotyped them as dangerous VD-carrying threats to the American war effort in Vietnam. While local police and government punished local women for selling sex to American men, the U.S. military did little to reprimand their soldiers, meaning that the women once again took on all of the blame for the sexual interaction. While the discovery of antibiotics shifted the nature of the conversation surrounding the war time spread of venereal disease, women continued to be the group that suffered the majority of the consequences for the spread of VD from World War II through the Vietnam War.

The programs used by the U.S. military to limit the spread of VD and discourage soldiers from hiring prostitutes ultimately did little to slow the spread of VD, even following the discovery of antibiotic treatment. VD continued to rage among the armed forces and the populations of the towns and cities American troops were located in and the spread harmed women far more than the soldiers that helped spread infection in both World War II and the Vietnam War. The U.S. military targeted women as the source of infection and based their repression policies around that misleading belief. Those policies restricted the rights of women in World War II and punished women for their looks, whereabouts, and sexuality. In the Vietnam War, Vietnamese women were also hypersexualized but then punished by law enforcement when military and government officials perceived that the women's sexuality served to lure in innocent American soldiers and spread VD. In both wars, the U.S. military forced women to take on the brunt of the repercussions for the spread of VD.

The U.S. military ignored the conditions it created that forced women into dire economic circumstances that left them with virtually no alternatives to prostitution in order to survive, and

then punished the women if they sold themselves. In Vietnam, the U.S. presence and money flowing into the economy helped cause massive inflation and created black markets that made it nearly impossible for middle-class Vietnamese people to maintain their livelihood without some form of support from Americans, which often came from Vietnamese daughters' relationships with American servicemen. In France, many women turned to prostitution for American soldiers as a way to keep food on the table for their families. Even in the United States during World War II, in an economy still recovering from the Great Depression where many of the young men had shipped out overseas, American women turned into camp followers in order to support themselves financially.

In both World War II and the Vietnam War, the U.S. military's presence created or fueled the conditions which forced women into prostitution or led to American servicemen raping foreign women. Prostitution, rape, and instances of consensual sex all contributed to the skyrocketing war time venereal disease rates. However, the U.S. military refused to acknowledge that it takes two to tango and throughout both wars it placed the blame for the spread of VD on the shoulders of women, leading to VD repression policies that targeted women by criminalizing prostitution for the prostitutes, not the buyers, by detaining women in treatment facilities, and by creating stereotypes that all women are dangerous sources of potential infection. The U.S. military also viewed soldiers' sexual encounters with women of color differently than soldiers' sexual encounters with white women. In both wars, American culture and the military perpetuated the idea that women of color were inherently sexually deviant and thus a greater risk to soldiers than white women. However, due to racism present at the time, many American servicemen still saw women of color as lesser than white women and thus were more likely to see women of color as theirs for the taking sexually.

The U.S. military's treatment of women during World War II and the Vietnam War shows inherent biases against women in military culture. These biases remain present to this day. There continue to be fewer consequences for servicemen who commit sexual assault against female military personnel and civilians. This research shows the history of discrimination within the U.S. Armed Forces that continues to perpetuate stereotypes of and actions against women despite the number of women who have served the military in capacities from army nurses, to civilians aiding the war effort, all the way to combat roles since World War I. Venereal disease repression became a very obvious manifestation of the military's biases against women as military policies targeted and discriminated against women and people of color during World War II and the Vietnam War.

## Image Credits

Figure 1:

Karsakov, Leonard. 1941 or 1942. Prostitution spreads syphilis and gonorrhea. Accessed September 27, 2019. [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.tcu.edu/asset/LOCEON\\_1039797196](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.tcu.edu/asset/LOCEON_1039797196).

Figure 2:

Mungia, Ryan, and Jim Heimann. *Protect Yourself: Venereal Disease Posters of World War II*. Los Angeles: Boyo Press, 2014.

Figure 3:

Mungia, Ryan, and Jim Heimann. *Protect Yourself: Venereal Disease Posters of World War II*. Los Angeles: Boyo Press, 2014.

Figure 4:

Batchelor, Clarence Daniel, 1888-1977. 1940. "The venereal wards are full of wise guys in bed." University of Minnesota Libraries, Social Welfare History Archives., Accessed October 22, 2019. <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll208:1140>

Figure 5:

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Figure 6:

Mungia, Ryan, and Jim Heimann. *Protect Yourself: Venereal Disease Posters of World War II*. Los Angeles: Boyo Press, 2014.

Figure 7:

Batchelor, Clarence Daniel, 1888-1977. 1940. "Don't be her pin-up boy." University of Minnesota Libraries, Social Welfare History Archives., Accessed October 22, 2019. <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll208:578>

Figure 8:

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Figure 9:

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