

Few people outside of Indian and Native communities realize the extent to which military service touches the lives of this special population. Numerous estimates indicate that, on a per capita basis, American Indians and Alaska Natives are the most heavily represented of all ethnic minority groups in the armed forces. Hardly a home — whether urban, rural, or reservation-based — is without several photographs proudly displaying family members in dress uniform. There is great irony in that a people who have suffered politically, economically, and socially at the hands of an often callous government should participate so willingly in its military. But, as one explores the meaning that such service has for Indians and Natives, a complicated array of rationales emerge, ranging from matters of personal identity, through familial tradition, to economic opportunity.

The participation of Indian and Native people in the military has steadily increased over the generations; indeed, those who saw combat duty almost doubled in number between World War II and the Vietnam War. To a significant degree, their experiences have paralleled those of the mainstream. For example, the Navajo Code Talkers, known for their role in radio communications throughout the Pacific, remain widely celebrated figures. Alternatively, Indian and Native Vietnam veterans have struggled to relocate themselves within the fabric of their communities. The latter's struggle has, however, been even greater than their contemporaries, especially in light of the far-reaching consequences that alienation implies for a people whose sense of self is inextricably linked to others. The silence cloaking their circumstances certainly has lasted longer, that is, until the May 1992 release of a hallmark report by the Readjustment Counseling Service Native American Working Group.

Reading that report, at virtually every turn I was struck by the enormous mental health problems — and potential solutions — revealed in stories told by the authors. Subsequent discussions with Dr. Alfonso Batres, regional manager, Western Mountain Region, Readjustment Counseling Services, who had facilitated the group's work, suggested that this important document might not be disseminated among the broader mental health audiences that could benefit from it. Thus, I inquired about the possibility of reprinting it here. Fortunately, he and the Working Group agreed. I trust that this readership will find the report as insightful, timely, provocative, and moving as I did.

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