

Key to Student Handout 11.9

Letter from Robert Allen[8]

After receiving a draft notice, Robert Allen, a Black graduate student and resident of the Bronx in New York, submitted this letter on August 1, 1965, refusing to submit to induction. Excerpts from the letter and a glossary in footnotes are below (bold, underlines, and footnotes added), with directions on the next page.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: At this moment the U.S. is conducting a genocidal[9] war against an heroic people who have struggled against foreign oppression[10] for more than 25 years. The pretext[11] for this aggression is the claim that the U.S. is protecting “freedom and democracy”[12] in South Vietnam. This “protection” consists in propping up a dictatorial regime[13] which was never elected to office and does not enjoy the support of the Vietnamese people. It consists in bombing the homes and fields of thousands of innocent peasants. It consists in attacking North Vietnam in an undeclared and illegal war of aggression. . . . It is clear that the U.S. is involved in this war not to benefit the Vietnamese but to provide itself with another secure military base in the encirclement of China. . . . It is the “yellow hordes” of China who are the target of this war, even though the Chinese have not attacked anyone and have no troops abroad. The Vietnamese, being a poor colored people, are dispensable[14] in the brutal effort to achieve this objective. The racist nature of this war cannot be ignored.

To conduct this war the U.S. is drafting thousands of Black men to fight for “freedom” abroad while their freedoms at home are denied. These Black men are forced to fight for white imperialism in its attempt to destroy colored nations. They are forced to fight for the sole benefit of their former slave-masters. These Black men go to war knowing that their brothers and sisters at home will continue to be subjected to violent attacks by racists which will go unpunished. An army which will not protect. Black citizens at home and instead attacks colored people in Vietnam is not an army in which self-respecting Black men should serve.

It is for these reasons that I refuse to accept induction into the U.S. Armed Forces. I would not allow myself to be drafted into the Ku Klux Klan and I will not allow myself to be drafted into the U.S. Army to fight a racist war. . . . I believe that the Black man in America — a minority — cannot be free until the colored peoples of the world are free of white oppression and take their rightful place as the democratic majority.”

Directions: Some of the major participants (people or subjects discussed) in Allen’s letter are listed in the first column of the table below. Highlight or mark each participant with a different color or symbol. Go back to the letter itself and highlight or mark each underlined noun phrase according to which participant from the chart it seems to most closely match. (This will help you to focus on the details and descriptions applied to each participant and to figure out Allen’s feelings about each.) Fill out the chart and answer the questions on the next page.

Participants in Allen's letter	Details and descriptions (from the text)	Summary of Allen's characterization of each participant
The war itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "genocidal" - hurting innocent people - not really protecting - "illegal" - "racist" - "brutal" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unjust, cruel, and oppressive
Black people in the U.S.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "freedoms at home denied" - "forced to fight" - "subjected to violent attacks by racists" - minority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consistently treated unfairly - not in a position of power

<p>People of color outside the U.S.</p> <p>(including the Chinese and Vietnamese)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “heroic” - have fought for a long time for freedom - “innocent” - “target” - “poor” 	<p>- innocent and relatively helpless victims of oppression</p>
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1. The **bolded** words in the letter are instances of passive voice in which Allen did not directly say who does each action. Who do you think he meant in each of these instances? (For example, Black men’s freedoms “are denied” by whom?)

All of these instances seem to refer to either white Americans or the US government (which Allen characterizes as behaving in the interest of only white Americans).

2. Looking at the data you gathered on your chart and your response to question 1, how do you think Allen’s experience as a Black man in the United States shaped his view of the war? On what grounds did Allen object to the war?

Allen has faced oppression as a black man in the United States. He compares this oppression to that faced by the Vietnamese and Chinese as a result of the war and suggests that the US government is only seeking to expand its power, particularly over people of color. Allen saw the war as racist and wanted no part of it.

3. Using what you’ve learned in this letter, but also thinking about the unit as a whole, what influence do you think the war in Vietnam may have had on movements for equality in the United States?

The disproportionate number of American minorities fighting and dying in Vietnam highlighted issues that these marginalized groups faced in the United States. This fueled antiwar protests which in turn fueled more energy to fight for justice at home.

[1] Letter from Robert Allen, August 1, 1966. "It's Not Our War!" *Viet Report* 2, no. 8 (Nov./Dec. 1966): 30.

[2] *genocidal*: related to the deliberate killing of many people of a particular group

[3] *oppression*: cruel or unjust use of power or authority

[4] *pretext*: an untrue reason given to justify an action

[5] Allen is using quotation marks around certain words throughout this letter to show these words are from the official US viewpoint (and to imply that he does not agree).

[6] *dictatorial regime*: a government ruled by a leader with total power

[7] *dispensable*: easily thrown away or cast aside

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