

Slay the Sam: Chains of Camouflage

by Cooper Taylor

What might you do for survival? Would you sell your soul to a prejudiced system that treats you as disposable? Could you bring yourself to fight for a country that ripped your ancestors from their homeland, that hung them from trees? What if it was framed as a spectacular opportunity and dangled before you like a carrot on a stick? For decades, the U.S. military has deployed a predatory sales pitch, planting the idea in young African Americans that enlisting is the only way for them to escape poverty—a deal that demands the sacrifice of their newly won freedoms. In Ice Cube's "I Wanna Kill Sam," the rapper pronounces his rage against this tactical cultivation of his people through vivid imagery, relentless rhythm, and the weight of lived experiences, comparing it to slavery in everything but name. The chains are gone, camouflage remains.

Hip-hop, a genre with traditions deeply rooted in protest, has long served as a voice for the oppressed. Ice Cube, born O'Shea Jackson, uses rap as a tool to expose systemic racism and government exploitation, riding the same waves as Public Enemy and N.W.A. Instead of simply saying "the government" or "the military," he uses the mascot that was used for military propaganda as the object of his commotion, "Uncle Sam." Personifying America as "Sam" allows for his consistent declaration of how he "wanna kill" to represent a symbolic rejection of American authority rather than literal violence. At its core, "I Wanna Kill Sam" is a wake-up call for the underprivileged whom the methodically deceptive recruitment methods target. Ice wastes no time exposing this manipulation, opening the track with a dangerously familiar sales pitch. He mimics the voice of a recruiter, declaring, "The army is the only way out for a young Black teenager. We'll provide you with housing. We'll provide you with education. We'll provide you with everything you need to survive in life" (Ice Cube). This deal sounds lucrative until you realize it comes at the cost of your autonomy and possibly your life.

When you sign that dotted line, your connection to the Bill of Rights is severed, and you become subservient to the UCMJ ("Uniform Code of Military Justice"). Military ownership means exclusion from a fair trial, meaning no jury of peers, just a single military judge. On top of this, punishments are far harsher than in civilian courts. Under article 88 of the UCMJ, you lose your freedom of speech, which outlaws speaking out against the president, Congress, or high-ranking officials — even online. If Ice Cube were in uniform rapping "I Wanna Kill Sam," he'd be court-martialed on the spot. Public protests are also strictly prohibited, and participation can lead to severe disciplinary action. Quitting isn't an option. If you go AWOL (Absent Without Leave), you will see jail time, dishonorable discharge, or even felony-level charges. The military can also force experimental drugs, vaccines, and dangerous conditions upon you. Your commanding officer can search your phone, room, and personal belongings whenever they feel like it. If the military's

negligence kills you, injures you, or destroys your future, the government cannot be sued for it. You don't get to say no; if you refuse an order, you risk court-martial, imprisonment, or, in combat situations, even execution. (U.S. Publishing Office, Uniform Code of Military Justice).

The time of release for "I Wanna Kill Sam" was no coincidence, being a period of heightened racial tension in America. This presents the idea that Ice knew exactly how important his message was. By writing this song, he incarnated Kairos. During the same time, in 1991, the Gulf War had just ended, and many African American soldiers returned from combat only to find that their sacrifices had not translated into societal advancement. The post- Reagan era also brought increased social stratification, economic disparity, aggressive policing, and countless instances of inhumane and discriminatory authoritative brutality. Ice Cube displays his awareness of this hypocrisy by rapping, "Now in ninety-one, he wanna tax me / I remember the son of a b*tch used to axe me / And hang me by a rope 'til my neck snapped" (Ice Cube). This highlights America's history of racial violence and links it to modern policies, arguing the government still profits from Black suffering.

Ice Cube grew up in South Central Los Angeles, which gives him firsthand experience in an area heavily targeted by recruiters. This provides extreme credibility to expose how enlistment disproportionately preys on young Black men. He feels no need to convey his natural ethos in the song, as his audience is likely familiar with his background. With this personal authority, he reinforces his argument through raw emotional appeal, producing an impossible-to-ignore composition. His violence and aggressive tones are not for shock value; they are unfiltered expressions toward a historically and presently oppressive government. An example of this is when he spits, "I wanna kill him 'cause he tried to play me like a trick / But you see, I'm the wrong n*** to f*ck with" (Ice Cube). Ice refused to allow the scheme to snatch him; he walks as a free man and capitalizes on that decision by displaying an openly hostile artistic expression against "him."

Ice Cube also intensifies his arguments through Logos. In the second verse of the song, Ice makes a direct comparison to slavery, describing being taken in a truck and packed like human cargo: "Tied me up, took me outside / And I was thrown in a big truck / And it was packed like sardines / Full of n**s who fell for the same scheme" (Ice Cube). Cube is dismantling the illusion of progress, showing that although slavery was abolished in name, its legacy persists in the exploitation of African Americans through military service, incarceration, and economic oppression. He then explicitly ties the military's control of Black soldiers to the forced dismantling of families during slavery, rapping, "Broke up the families forever / And to this day, Black folks can't stick together" (Ice Cube). These bars were meant to expose how systemic forces— whether through slavery, war, or poverty— have consistently worked to strip Black people of unity, stability, and autonomy.

Ice Cube then brings up broader systemic forces used to control Black communities. He draws attention to public health policies and economic sabotage, claiming that the government deliberately destabilized Black populations. He raps, "Try to give me the HIV / So I can stop makin' babies like me" (Ice Cube). This references conspiracies about medical racism and population

control. Though controversial, these lines reflect historical events, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, in which Black men were unknowingly left untreated for decades, fueling distrust in the medical system. He also connects government exploitation to the crack epidemic, which devastated Black neighborhoods in the 1980s: “And you’re givin’ dope to my people, chump / Just wait ‘til we get over that hump” (Ice Cube). This speaks to the widespread belief that the CIA played a direct role in drug trafficking, exacerbating the drug crisis. He expands on culturally suppressive practices when he asserts, “Can’t bury rap like you buried jazz” (Ice Cube). Here, he is talking about how Black art forms have historically been appropriated, diluted, and controlled by white institutionalism—further systems of power used to limit Black expressions and autonomy. “I Wanna Kill Sam” challenges official narratives and forces listeners to confront deeper systems of oppression at play.

While “I Wanna Kill Sam” is emotionally intense, which is obvious Pathos, Ice Cube’s argument is also supported by historical data and statistical evidence that makes it easy to see that there was a stark imbalance in military demographics. Census data collected from the 1980s reveals that despite making up 11.8% of the U.S. population, African Americans accounted for 22% of the enlisted personnel but only 5% of officers (United States Census Bureau). These figures align with Ice Cube’s critique that Black men are being used for war and pop the strategic illusionary bubble created by the false conception of upward mobility. A 1972 U.S. Army recruitment advertisement, titled “When was the last time you got promoted?” exemplifies this strategy. The ad, preserved in the National Museum of American History’s NW Ayer Advertising Agency Records, features four blue-collar workers taking a break on a loading dock, visually reinforcing that their only way out of dead-end jobs is through military enlistment. The accompanying text tells potential recruits, “It’s tough to get ahead when you have to start so far behind. No skills. No experience. No jobs to look forward to, except the ones anyone can do” (United States Army). This messaging preys on economic desperation, much like the false promises Ice Cube critiques in “I Wanna Kill Sam.” While promotion was all but guaranteed, remembering the data from earlier, African Americans only made up 3% of officers. Ice Cube rejects this deception when he raps, “So, b***, you can fight your own wars” (Ice Cube). This is the purest form of his message to young African Americans: No matter how much pressure, however good it sounds, you can say no; you have a choice. He deepens this premise using the American flag in the same vein Uncle Sam has been, unleashing “You can burn your cross, well I’ll burn your flag” (Ice Cube). This powerful juxtaposition directly likens the American flag to KKK cross-burnings. Throughout the song, Ice Cube uses parallel rejections to provide a comprehensive logical framework for resistance against all forms of institutional control.

Some may listen to this song and only hear violence and anger. Some may argue that service in the military has provided hope for a class with far fewer financial and educational opportunities. Some may even undermine his credibility by bringing up his conspiratorial references to HIV and the crack epidemic. For those people, I would say, he is angry. He does feel violent. Would you not be as well if, oh so recently, your ancestry was fractured, stolen, chained, and shipped across an ocean? Would you not be angry if there were people alive today who still deny your equivalence to them? Would you not feel violent if the government of that very same conglomerate

treated you as if that was all you were suitable for? I should also say that statistically, it is undeniable that some African Americans managed to transmute their time in the military to civilian life. However, I will ask, what of the countless who joined in hopes of doing the same and suffered gory death at the hands of an enemy not of their choosing for the country of kidnap? As for the conspiracies, could you trust the government that instructs fallaciously sinister promises to slither out of its military's mouths in hopes of amassing an army?

"I Wanna Kill Sam" is a sophisticated masterpiece. Ice Cube uses his direct experiences to emphasize the injustice imposed upon his community. He uses extreme emotion to vent his frustrations but uses logical comparisons and understandings to create layers of validity. Most importantly, he didn't wait decades to open this dialogue. He knew then that it was time to make himself heard. The song stands historically artifactual and continues as a call to resistance. It challenges listeners to recognize how camouflage is the modern replacement for the overt chains of the past. He exposes a system designed to exploit Black youth under the guise of opportunity. His message is potent: recognize deception, reject false promises, and reclaim autonomy. Chains to camouflage—the evolution may have been subtle, but Ice Cube makes it crystal clear.

Works Cited

Ice Cube. "I Wanna Kill Sam." *Death Certificate*, Priority Records, 1991.

United States Army. "When Was the Last Time You Got Promoted?" National Museum of American History, NW Ayer Advertising Agency Records, 1972.

United States Census Bureau. "Military Personnel Statistics." *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980s.

"Uniform Code of Military Justice." Title 10, U.S. Code, Chapter 47, U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2021.