

Redefining Patriotism: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam War

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Introduction

The “sixties” as historians tend to call it, was a time of instability and social change for the United States and many other parts of the world. The Civil Rights Movement was transforming race relations, women were fighting for liberation, men were growing out their hair and singing rock n’ roll, university students were advocating for free speech, and the United States continued its war against communism in Vietnam which would cost millions of lives and billions of dollars. While historians like James Kilpatrick Davis and Mitchell Hall have largely considered the social activists of the 1960s to be upper- or middle-class college students, and New Left activists, one important group emerged that defied many stereotypes. To oppose the draft, share stories with other veterans, and seek an end to the war in Vietnam, active-duty soldiers and Vietnam veterans created means of dissent in many ways including, an active underground GI press, coffeehouses for antiwar discourse, and a bold organization of veteran organizers, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Together, each sect worked to increase antiwar rhetoric and provide a space for military members who could not always find a place within other aspects of the antiwar movement. The GI movement was formed out of a necessary need for active military and veteran voices within the larger Vietnam-era American antiwar movement. Soldiers, veterans, and volunteers worked together to amplify GI voices, giving credibility to the antiwar movement and redefining what it means to fight for freedom. Through grassroots organizing, public assembly, and political statements, military antiwar activists were able to grow the movement and be a voice for American troops who experienced the horrors of the Vietnam war up-close and personal.

Vietnam-era antiwar literature tends to focus on radical New Left and student organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), or dramatic protest events

like the Kent State massacre. Given less attention is the work of active-duty soldiers and veterans who worked at great risk to spread the antiwar message and encourage dissent within the military. Some historians have done important work in telling the story of the GI movement like James Lewes, Andrew E. Hunt, and Gerald Nicosia. James Lewes's *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers during the Vietnam War* gives the history of the underground GI press and some of the challenges that those involved faced. Andrew Hunt's *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* and Gerald Nicosia's *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veteran's Movement* discuss the veteran movement through Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the fight for veteran's rights after the war that continued for decades. There is, however, not widely available literature that examines both the active-duty underground press, and the veteran movement as a coalition within the larger antiwar movement. Because they experienced the war firsthand, military members could be an especially powerful voice against the war, making their experience critical to understanding both veterans and the antiwar movement.

This paper seeks to bridge the gap between literature on Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the underground GI press, and the larger antiwar movement. By evaluating existing scholarly research, and collecting primary sources, the findings that follow demonstrate the unique influence and collaboration of military members in the Vietnam-era antiwar movement. This paper does not begin to cover the full depth of the activism in which military members and veterans engaged in during and after the war; it only scratches the surface. One important aspect of military resistance that was left out of this paper is the acts of draft-resisters. Although their decision came with great risks and in the face of immense pressure, their stories are not told here. Instead, this paper seeks to highlight the experiences of those who served directly in Vietnam or

in the military more generally, who experienced the horrors of war firsthand and oppose the war at great risks of punishment. In addition, this paper does not attempt to suggest that the GI movement was mainstream, nor a universal experience. Hundreds of thousands of men served in Vietnam without engaging in antiwar activities. Nonetheless, those who did join the antiwar movement provided an invaluable voice to the resistance. Because this paper seeks to engage with the underground GI press, and veteran organizations as deeply ingrained with one another, when referring to “the GI movement”, it is meant to include the work of both active-duty GIs working on the production and distribution of the underground press, and of the work of Vietnam Veterans Against the War which primarily involved men after they had served. While members of the military did not always fit the mold of a radical, 1960s protestor, GIs and veterans brought an invaluable voice to the antiwar movement through their difficult experiences and petitions for peace.

Historical Context

Although the United States had been involved in Indochina for many years through military aid and advising, the American Vietnam War did not officially begin until 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.¹ The United States had largely funded the first Indochina war which left Vietnam fractured with communist leader Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam, and American-backed capitalist Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam.² With the United States in a high-tension Cold War with the Soviet Union, American politicians could not afford to be soft on communism and were committed to preventing Vietnam from uniting under communist Ho Chi Minh.³ To ensure that communism did not expand globally, the United States provided military aid, advising, and

¹ Kyle Longley and Jacqueline E. Whitt. *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*. 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2020), xiv.

² Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 169, 173.

³ Gordon Kerr, *A Short History of the Vietnam War*. (Herts, AL: Oldcastle Books, 2015), 48.

eventually millions of troops to South Vietnam to fight what would become (at the time) America's longest war. At the height of the war, in 1968, the United States peaked with 550,000 troops in Vietnam. They men were largely young, working-class draftees who were fighting a gruesome guerilla war thousands of miles from home.⁴ While the war was generally supported in the United States at its inception, moods began to shift as the war waged on for many years.

At the beginning of the war, leading officials thought the war in Vietnam would be won fairly easily and quickly because the United States had positioned itself as a strong military power during World War II. In 1965, President Johnson approved large bombing campaigns and 100,000 more troops to be sent to Vietnam which escalated the conflict and created a need for more soldiers in the military to support the war effort.⁵ Historian H.W. Brands argued, "not till Johnson escalated the war in 1965 and Americans started dying in large numbers did the antiwar movement broaden and deepen."⁶ When soldiers arrived in Vietnam, they found their objectives and the enemy to be unclear. Although American troops were told they were protecting the Vietnamese from communism, they found that the revolution already had support in Vietnam and many locals were in fact hostile to the American presence.⁷ In addition, the environment and warfare were difficult. The dense made it challenging for American troops to move around and to take cover because their surroundings were unknown and tough to navigate. The Vietnamese used the terrain to their advantage and hid many booby traps throughout the country to target the unknowing American troops. At the end of the war, around twenty-five percent of allied casualties were the result of mines and booby traps which were hidden in the

⁴ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. (United States: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 18.

⁵ H.W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 7.

terrain.⁸ In total, around 58,000 American troops and 1.5 million Vietnamese were killed during the fighting in Vietnam.⁹ Large numbers of Vietnamese civilian casualties and American deaths sprung the antiwar movement into action as the war escalated. By 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara emphasized to President Johnson in a memo, “The Vietnam War is unpopular in this country. It is becoming increasingly unpopular as it escalates.”¹⁰ As Americans learned more about the war from their nightly news, journalists, activists, and eventually veterans, support for the war faded steadily.

The roots of the Vietnam-era antiwar movement in America run deep, originating from a variety of perspectives and existing movements. Certainly, for every war in American history, there have been those who advocated for peace instead of conflict. In 1964, before the Vietnam War had even officially begun, activists from War Resisters League and Committee for Non-Violent Action organized small antiwar rallies in cities across the United States.¹¹ These organizations worked to promote peace and advocate against war more generally. As the war continued though, different existing social movements began to oppose the Vietnam War for various reasons. In 1967, for example, Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out about the war saying he was “increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor” because the war effort was taking valuable funds from President Johnson’s “Great Society” which was supposed to provide different government assistance to America’s vulnerable populations.¹²

⁸ Gregory A Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men’s Adventure Magazines*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 144.

⁹ Longley, *Grunts*, 76 and Appy, *Working-Class War*, 17.

¹⁰ Robert McNamara, “Draft memo to Johnson”. May 19, 1967 [Accessed on page 91 of Hunt, Michael, *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspective*. United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.]

¹¹ James Kilpatrick Davis, *Assault on the Left: The FBI and the Sixties Antiwar Movement*. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers: 1997), 27.

¹² Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” Speech, New York City, April 4, 1967.

King went further though by sympathizing with the Vietnamese and critiquing America's policies in Vietnam while calling for an end to the war. University students and other New Left radicals similarly spoke out about the war. University of Michigan and Berkley were among the several college campuses who hosted teach-ins which sought to provide information about the war through lectures and debates for students and community members.¹³ Student organizations like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) felt that Vietnam was just the surface of America's fundamental flaws and that major reforms were needed within American society and politics.¹⁴ Other organizations though were less politically radical and focused on more specific issues. Stop the Draft Week for example, gathered fifty thousand people in 1967 to call for an end to the military draft that disproportionately affected poor and working-class Americans.¹⁵

Although many early petitions for peace were primarily from civilians, a growing number of veterans began to talk about their difficult experiences in the war upon returning home from their year-long tour of duty in Vietnam. By 1967, Vietnam Veterans Against the War was founded and the first underground GI newspaper had been published, indicating that some military members did in fact have an antiwar message to spread.¹⁶

To understand Vietnam veterans better, it is important to examine who was called upon to serve. Throughout the course of the war, 27 million men came of draft age, the baby-boomer generation born into post-World War II prosperity.¹⁷ Of the 2.5 million enlisted Americans who

¹³ Mitchell K. Hall, "The Vietnam Era Antiwar Movement." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 13–17., 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13

¹⁵ Anderson, Terry H. "Vietnam Is Here: The Antiwar Movement." In *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*, edited by David L. Anderson and John Ernst, 245–64. (University Press of Kentucky, 2007)., 253.

¹⁶ Andrew E Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War*. (United States: New York University Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁷ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 6.

served in Vietnam, “roughly 80 percent came from working-class and poor backgrounds.”¹⁸ Historian Christian Appy has been extremely influential in shaping the way historians and the general public understand veterans. While many who write about the antiwar movement tend to highlight the experiences of university activists, working-class veterans had vastly different experiences in life and in war. Historian Andrew Hunt said of members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War members, “almost none went to Vietnam as radicals.”¹⁹ In fact, veteran antiwar activist Ron Kovic vowed to sign up for the marines on the day he turned seventeen. Of him and his friends growing up in the working-class suburbs, Kovic said, “just as we dreamed of playing for the Yankees someday, we dreamed of becoming United States Marines and fighting our first war.”²⁰ Kovic’s experience mirrors many young men who came of age consuming Cold War military propaganda and celebrating the heroic victory of World War II. At the same time though, many men who served did not do so excitedly. It is estimated that at least one-third of those who served in Vietnam were drafted, in addition to large number of men voluntarily enlisting out of fear of being drafted.²¹ Although their experiences are not universal, going to war involuntarily (or out of immense pressure) likely came with more apprehension than those who willingly served in Vietnam. Beyond their reason for serving, when and where someone served also impacted their experience, as around “seventy-five percent of American troops in Vietnam never saw combat.”²² The experiences of someone who served in a support role or the early advising years would be vastly different than those of a combat soldier at the height of the Tet Offensive in 1968. Nonetheless, as the war continued and dissent arose, members of the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 2.

²⁰ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*. 3rd ed. (New York: Akashic Books, 2016), 71.

²¹ Longley, *Grunts*, 17.

²² Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam*, 144.

military from a diverse range of ages, backgrounds, ranks, and locations worked to form the GI movement.

The Underground GI Press

Perhaps most important to the GI movement was a means by which to communicate and spread antiwar rhetoric. Because of this, GI and veteran dissent took on some forms similar to student protests of the day. Particularly relevant to college campuses and the counterculture, a common form of dissent and information spreading during the 1960s and 70s was the use of the underground press. These were newspapers which were not printed by official outlets. Instead, the papers were often created and printed by activists and then distributed locally or nationally. Active-duty soldiers, veterans and even some civilians mobilized to create underground newspapers as an outlet for military dissent and information for veterans and active-duty members. The papers were created out of a need for GIs to share their experiences, gain advice, and speak “out against the war and against injustices and racism within the military.”²³ Known interchangeably as the GI underground press, the GI antiwar press and the GI press, the amount of newspapers published “range[s] from 144 to nearly 300” with some being short-lived, and others lasting beyond the war.²⁴ By spreading information and creating an outlet for dissent, the GI press played a valuable role in the advocacy of soldiers and veterans as well as contributing to the larger antiwar movement.

The GI press began in 1967 with early publications like *Vietnam GI* and *The Bond*.²⁵ Many papers started as a way to reach other veterans and soldiers who shared antiwar ideas and quickly created large networks of readers and participants. Because of this dynamic, many

²³ Derek Seidman et al., “Writing for Peace: The GI Press.” In *Waging Peace in Vietnam: US Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War*, edited by Ron Carver et al., 17–34. (NYU Press, 2019)., 17.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

publications relied heavily on readers sending in letters to be included in the newspaper. In fact, *Vietnam GI* which was first produced in 1968 was written entirely by soldiers and veterans, typically through featuring letters sent in by GI readers.²⁶ From sharing their war stories, to critiquing the career military “lifers”, and sharing their acts of resistance, GIs sent in thousands of letters that would be published throughout the war. Soldiers were excited to read the stories from men like themselves: rank-and-file. One soldier who was stationed 40 miles from Da Nang wrote into *Vietnam GI* in the spring of 1970 to share the fears of his division saying, “our men are dying senselessly.”²⁷ Writing letters to the GI press was a way to give war updates, share fears or complaints, encourage resistance, and engage with their fellow soldiers. More than that though, the underground press became a way for GIs to ask hard questions, receive help legally and for post-service benefits, and learn about the antiwar movement. The papers varied in how radical they were, whether the paper was more local or global, and the issues that they felt were most important.

In general, the papers were put together and printed by “a combination of GIs, veterans, and antiwar civilians”, but they relied heavily on active GIs to contribute stories to the paper and distribute them.²⁸ After the papers were printed, they would be circulated on military bases, towns, transportation hubs, and popular GI and veteran hangouts like coffeehouses. The GIs circulated the papers at great risk of harassment and punishment if they were caught. Many GI newspapers were printed and distributed in the United States and relied on distribution between

²⁶ Bob Ostertag, *People's Movements, People's Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press. 2006), 127.

²⁷ McNamara, “Memo to Johnson”.

²⁸ Seidman, *Waging Peace in Vietnam*, 18.

soldiers and the aid of civilian coffeehouses and activists to get papers in the hands of GIs.²⁹ Getting newspapers all the way to Vietnam, however, proved to be more difficult. The *Vietnam GI* for example, relied on civilian committees and activists around the country who would mail “care packages” covered in brown paper to disguise the newspapers.³⁰ Underground paper volunteers and employees and soldiers in Vietnam would both have to change return addresses regularly to avoid being caught for creating and distributing the antiwar material.³¹ Once the package of papers arrived at either a military base in the United States, or in Indochina, antiwar soldiers worked to distribute the papers and encourage antiwar conversations that would grow resistance within the members.³²

Importantly, the GI press “spoke the everyday language of the rank-and-file GI” which helped the papers gain traction quickly on military bases around the world.³³ The newspapers were filled with news about the war, updates about soldier and civilian protests, information on legal advice for GIs, and political cartoons. A 1969 issue of *Counterpoint* for example, gave an update for the GI-Civilian Alliance for Peace conference where the group introduced an action plan for antiwar mobilization that was to take place that fall. The paper told GI’s that “a majority of the American people are opposed to the war” and that they must “mobilize that sentiment to end it.”³⁴ This was an important point of encouragement for antiwar protestors and especially GIs who juggled high risks by being involved in antiwar activities. The *Counterpoint* issue also gives insight into the grassroots organizing of the GI movement. The authors of the paper

²⁹ Harry W. Haines, and James Lewes. “Soldiers Against the Vietnam War: Aboveground and The Ally.” In *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2*, edited by Ken Wachsberger, 1–46. (Michigan State University Press, 2012)., 12.

³⁰ Ostertag, *People’s Movements, People’s Press*, 126.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Haines, *Soldiers Against the Vietnam*, 12.

³³ Seidman, *Waging Peace in Vietnam*, 17.

³⁴ “GI’s Against the War in Vietnam,” in *Counterpoint*, vol. 2 no. 14 (August 1969).

reported that they needed to “step up [their] local organizing and then all meet together in national action against the war”, revealing that local organizing was important to growing the movement and providing the numbers for large displays of opposition.³⁵ Lastly, the update and call to action ended in, “Bring your ideas, and tell your friends about it” which is consistent with the GI movement in that they worked to grow their movement through word of mouth on the local level.³⁶

Despite this open invitation, GIs were not able to freely express their antiwar or radical views. In fact, the underground press was an important outlet for highlighting censorship issues within the military. Underground GI newspapers would regularly highlight stories of GIs being censored for their speech, like a 1970 issue of *Aerospaced* which gave a report of GI broadcaster Robert Lawrence who was court-martialed for information he gave during his news report in Vietnam.³⁷ The military regularly censored what GI broadcasters said not because of military intelligence, but to maintain morale among the soldiers. GIs of course, could be held to a different standard of free speech because of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).³⁸ The code attempted to align the military law with the constitution by making military leaders the interpreters of the constitution. Practically, this system created a “routine violation of GI’s First, Fourth, Fifth, and Eighth Amendment rights.”³⁹ GIs could be court-martialed for censorship violations, denied proper counsel and a fair trial, and be sentenced to hard labor for their crime. Although those practices are unconstitutional, “federal courts ruled that GIs were no longer

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ James Lewes. *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers during the Vietnam War*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 51.

³⁸ Ostertag, *People’s Movements, People’s Press*, 135.

³⁹ Lewes, *Protest and Survive*, 52.

protected by the Constitution because they had ‘willingly [given] up their constitutional rights when they enlisted.’⁴⁰

Many GI newspapers were created as a direct result of censorship issues as a way to spread information about the war and the antiwar movement. The papers spread rapidly on military bases and in many cases, were the first antiwar literature that many GIs had experienced.⁴¹ The censorship added a unique element to the GI movement as members had to be open enough about their antiwar sentiments to spread the message without violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Veteran and participant in the underground GI newspapers, Harry Haines said, “allies had to be quiet and anonymous, something that our civilian comrades could not fully appreciate.”⁴² This is an important distinction that activists made, and historians must consider. Military members could be sentenced to jail, hard labor, or be dishonorably discharged, GIs were participating in the antiwar movement at much higher stakes. Because of this, dissent was more hidden in the GI movement than in civilian student or New Left activism. Nonetheless, the underground press was a valuable tool in spreading the antiwar message and breeding dissent in the military ranks.

Although dissent is present to some degree in every war, dissent in the military is particularly noteworthy during the Vietnam War because of the large number of dissenters, and the lengths that officials went to examine the level of dissent. The Pentagon commissioned the Research Analysis Corporation in 1971 to identify reasons for dissent among service members during the war. Drawing from 884 GIs at five different bases within the US, they found that “more than half of all soldiers... became involved in some sort of resistance activity.” When

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Chad Painter, and Patrick Ferrucci. “‘Ask What You Can Do to the Army’: A Textual Analysis of the Underground GI Press during the Vietnam War.” *Media, War & Conflict* 12, no. 3 (September 2019): 354–67., 365.

⁴² Haines, *Soldiers Against the Vietnam*, 10.

asked why they participated, “58 percent cited their opposition to the Vietnam War and 38 percent blamed ‘the way the army treats the individual.’”⁴³ The underground GI press helped to fuel both of these sentiments through antiwar pieces and also writing about social issues like race and equality both within the military and the wider United States. Antiwar-veteran David Cortright claimed that by the fall of 1969, there was an activist group at every major military base “[who] bravely attempt to publish journals, organize rallies, and establish peace centers”.⁴⁴

As the GI movement grew, it diffused into smaller groups who were interested in other issues and to varying degrees. Some groups focused on the military justice system, others on military imperialism and the inequality of military service, and some simply wanted a withdraw from Vietnam.⁴⁵ At the same time, the GI press helped highlight the larger antiwar and counterculture movement that was going on around the world. Where the hippies sometimes seemed far off for working-class draftees, the underground newspapers helped connect people through the fight for peace. The newspapers bridged the gap between general dissent and antiwar activism by letting soldiers and veterans know that their dissent wasn’t ‘unamerican’. For example, the editor of GI newspaper *Bragg Briefs* wrote, “Being a Patriot was not easy in 1776 and it is no easier today... We who have spoken out declare our willingness to be patriots in the true, historical sense of the word.”⁴⁶ Relying on military ideals, activists were able to encourage GIs to join the movement. Nonetheless, it was true indeed that being a patriot in this way was not

⁴³ Lewes, *Protest and Survive*, 4.

⁴⁴ David Cortright, untitled report prepared for the National Convention of the U.S. Antiwar Movement held in Chicago in December 1970, p. 1. (Found among the David Cortright Papers housed at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.) [Accessed in Lewes, James. *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers during the Vietnam War*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

⁴⁵ Lewes, *Protest and Survive*, 62.

⁴⁶ “The Patriotism of Protest,” in *Bragg Briefs* 2, vol 4 no. 3 (November 1969) [Accessed in Lewes, James. *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers during the Vietnam War*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003., 4.

easy. Although the underground press did allow the GI movement to grow, being antiwar or antimilitary came with serious risks of harassment and punishment for soldiers who were caught consuming or distributing underground newspapers.

Roger Priest was a seaman stationed at the Pentagon who published a GI newspaper, *OM*. Despite the risks, Priest published the paper with his name on it, choosing not to conceal his identity. After only his third publication, he was investigated and court-martialed in 1970 for spreading his antiwar message.⁴⁷ The case received a lot of attention as Priest wrote to his audience often, even raising money for legal support by selling souvenirs. Although Priest was threatened with thirty-nine years of hard labor, the publicity of the case forced the military to implement a policy for dissent.⁴⁸ The new policy placed stricter guidelines for military official on which literature and gathering places could be restricted from GIs, requiring the officers to provide evidence of unlawfulness to deny circulation of information.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the fact that Roger Priest could have been sentenced to decades of hard labor for publishing a newspaper on his own time, with his own money, certainly worried underground publishers.⁵⁰ Many people, especially in the earlier years of the war were given harsh labor sentences because of their dissent. Private First-Class George Daniels was found guilty of disloyalty by the armed forces in 1967 and was sentenced to ten years of hard labor.⁵¹ Towards the end of the war though, due to activism and increased media attention, sentences tended to be less severe, or GIs were discharged from the military instead of being sentenced to hard labor. Nonetheless, participating in GI dissent came with a risk that soldiers had to keep in mind.

⁴⁷ Ostertag, *People's Movement, People's Press*, 133.

⁴⁸ Lewes, *Protest and Survive*, 86.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁰ Ostertag, *People's Movement, People's Press*, 138.

⁵¹ Lewes, *Protest and Survive*, 94.

Coffeehouses

While the underground GI press made major progress for the GI movement, it did not do so alone. Another major facet of the GI movement and the distribution of underground newspapers was coffeehouses. The GI movement was coming at a time of social movement in the nation as a whole, and many civilians were interested in supporting military dissent and ending the war in Vietnam. Fred Gardner, a journalist and activist from San Francisco spent time writing stories about the antiwar movement and sought a way for civilians to support the GI movement.⁵² Gardner dreamed up the idea of a coffeehouse as a place to discuss counterculture and antiwar literature, invite activist, and create a space for open discourse beyond the constraints of military authority. Similarly, some within the underground GI press also hoped to build community with civilians who protested the war and spread social and political ideas. The two groups, worked to “forge a radical community based on shared experiences and interest” by organizing on the local level through the coffeehouses as a means for newspaper distribution.⁵³

Fred Gardner hoped that if several coffeehouses were opened, there could be a network of spaces for “antiwar conversations and energy, working to support and build a powerful movement of antiwar GIs.”⁵⁴ The first GI coffeehouse opened at Fort Jackson in South Carolina in the fall of 1967, and it was “an instant hit” among GIs.⁵⁵ By creating a physical space off the military base for young soldiers to gather and discuss radical ideas, the coffeehouses became an instrumental aspect of the GI movement. The coffeehouse became a trendy spot for GIs to gather, talk, and escape military responsibilities. Over the course of the war, over twenty-five GI

⁵² David L. Parsons, “Introduction.” In *Dangerous Grounds: Antiwar Coffeehouses and Military Dissent in the Vietnam Era*, 1–14. (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 3.

⁵³ Painter, *What You Can Do*, 363.

⁵⁴ Parsons, *Dangerous Grounds*, 3-4.

⁵⁵ David Parsons et al., “Resistance HQ: GI Coffeehouses.” In *Waging Peace in Vietnam: US Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War*, edited by Ron Carver et al., 35–46. NYU Press, 2019., 35-36.

coffeehouses were opened in the United States near military bases and a several were opened overseas.⁵⁶ Coffeehouses became a vital part of the GI movement as a place where civilian activists, veterans, and active-duty soldiers could collaborate to plan protests, further the GI movement within the active-duty members and distribute underground newspapers.⁵⁷ The coffeehouses also had the support of larger antiwar organizations such as the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (Mobe) who helped the fundraise for more coffeehouses and advocate for their role in the antiwar movement. As the movement grew and more coffeehouses were built, they became important meeting grounds for major events like the “Fort Jackson Eight”.⁵⁸

In 1969, eight GIs who were leaders of GIs United Against the War in Vietnam were arrested for an illegal demonstration at Fort Jackson.⁵⁹ The coffeehouses mobilized quickly to create media attention and raise money for legal funds to defend the “Fort Jackson Eight”, as they came to be called. The story earned national media attention which pressured military officials to drop all the charges.⁶⁰ In an article about the Fort Jackson Eight, a soldier who was discharged after the case said, “As long as there’s no publicity, there are people serving five to ten years for saying we should not be in Vietnam.”⁶¹ Clearly, GIs were comforted by the attention that military injustices were receiving because the public pressure helped hold the military accountable if punishments were egregious. By putting stories in the underground GI press about the Fort Jackson Eight and other military members who were censored for their

⁵⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁷ Ashley Elizabeth Miles, “The GI Coffeehouse Movement, 1968-1972: Class-Based Activism in the Vietnam War.” Order No. 28016029, Auburn University, 2020., 12.

⁵⁸ Parsons, *Waging Peace in Vietnam*, 37.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Parsons, *Waging Peace in Vietnam*, 37.

⁶¹ “Ex-G.I. Speaks on Civil Rights of Soldiers.” Bay State Banner (1965-1979), Jul 17, 1969., 9.

antiwar views, the newspapers were able to amplify the antiwar message and ensure that the public understood what was happening within the armed ranks. The decision not to charge the Fort Jackson Eight with a crime was a major win for the GI movement and the fight for reform in the military justice system. Much like those who participated in the underground GI press, people in the coffeehouses advocated for reform within the military justice system and fought for the free speech afforded to American citizens, including GIs.

Although a safe haven for many GIs, coffeehouses were not often supported by people in their communities. Military officials naturally did not appreciate coffeehouses or that their GIs were hanging out with antiwar activists. While military officials tried to limit underground newspapers and the literature that soldiers could consume, they also tried to keep GIs away from areas of town where there was a coffeehouse. The military wasn't the only group that disapproved of the coffeehouses though; law enforcement and FBI investigators tried to infiltrate the coffeehouses and local communities would harass the GIs and activists.⁶² Particularly in working class communities and military towns where the coffeehouses were located, local people did not always agree with views of the New Left or counterculture, and certainly not a soldier who was antiwar. Because of this, some locals violently opposed the coffeehouses. In 1970 at a coffeehouse in Fort Dix, New Jersey, a grenade was thrown through a door into a celebration which left two soldiers and one civilian seriously injured. Just one year later, a coffeehouse in Mountain Home, Idaho was burned to the ground after being a target of harassment by the community.⁶³ Despite the violence, coffeehouses persisted as a necessary place of refuge for GIs and movement leaders to organize.

⁶² Parsons, *Waging Peace in Vietnam*, 37

⁶³ *Ibid.*

The coffeehouse was the connecting point for the student antiwar movement and the GI movement. Sometimes the two movements were worlds apart: long haired hippies talking to working class grunts about the world, society, justice, and peace. The GI coffeehouses created a unique environment for organized activism to meet soldier resistance. By using the coffeehouses as a point of refuge and of organizing, GIs were able to spread the antiwar message more efficiently to more people, and to access the resources from activists which helped to prop up the underground GI press and attract media attention for soldiers who opposed the war in Vietnam. In addition, coffeehouses were important organizing points for GIs because they could engage with civilian and veteran antiwar activists. Once the war had gone on for several years and veterans began coming home from Vietnam, they too began gathering at coffeehouses to exchange stories and ideas and begin organizing for an end to the war. While at times relying on the active GI movement, the veteran movement became a force of its own as more men returned home from their tours in Vietnam.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War

Speaking out to become a voice for those who had experienced war firsthand, veteran antiwar organizations were created to fill a need for additional military opposition to the war and create a community for struggling veterans. While GI newspapers and coffeehouses were invaluable tools to spreading the antiwar message among active-duty soldiers, GIs had to be much more careful about their dissent because they could be apprehended by the military. Veterans, on the other hand, were freer to organize and participate in public dissent, and be a direct voice to people in America about the horrors of war in Vietnam. Created in the late 1960s in the same years as the underground GI press, Vietnam Veterans Against the War became an

active part of antiwar dissent through elaborate demonstrations and open conversations about war and guilt.

Before veterans of Vietnam had begun returning home, there were smaller organizations of veterans from Korea and World War II who worked to promote peace and bring young men home from war. In fact, veteran groups organized some of the first acts of protest against the Vietnam War and suggested burning draft cards as a means of protest.⁶⁴ In January 1966, a group primarily made up of World War II veterans gathered in Chicago to found Veterans for Peace in Vietnam.⁶⁵ One founding member of Vets for Peace said, “No one is better qualified than veterans to make the public aware that it is patriotic to oppose the war in Vietnam.”⁶⁶ His use of the word “patriotic” is important because many Americans dismissed the antiwar movement as radical, communism, or unamerican early on in the war. Activists were tasked with convincing military members that speaking out about injustice in the Vietnam war was in fact patriotic because it exposed the lives and freedoms that were lost during the war.

Veterans for Peace in Vietnam quickly got to work to connect with other veterans, specifically those newly returning from Vietnam. In 1967, the organization created *Veterans Stars and Stripes for Peace*, an underground newspaper aimed at reaching both veterans and GIs for the antiwar movement.⁶⁷ Clearly, in this example of veteran organizing, direct connections can be made between activist organizations and the use of the underground GI press to spread information. In addition to writing, Veterans for Peace also organized demonstrations and gatherings for veterans to share and express antiwar sentiment. At a large event that came to be

⁶⁴ Lembcke, Jerry. *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York, USA: New York University Press, 2000.,29.

⁶⁵ Hunt, *The Turning*, 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

known as the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade, on April 7, 1967, veterans gathered to protest outside the United Nations building.⁶⁸ Among the attendees was Jan Barry who upon arriving at the event was told to hold a sign that read, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War.” Inspired by the event and compelled by the amount of Vietnam veterans who shared his antiwar beliefs, Jan Barry began working to create an organization for the antiwar movement which expressed the views of those who had served in Vietnam.⁶⁹

On June 1, 1967, Barry met with five other Vietnam veterans to officially establish the organization, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).⁷⁰ Although Vietnam veterans had the option to join existing veteran groups, early organizers wanted to capitalize on their experience in Vietnam as both reasons and credibility to end the war.⁷¹ To expand the organization, Barry began making contacts with other Vietnam veterans and seeking signatures and funds to put an ad in the *New York Times*. The statement said,

We believe that the conflict in which the United States is engaged in Vietnam is wrong, unjustifiable, and contrary to the principles on which this country is founded. We join the dissent of the millions of Americans against this war. We support our buddies still in Vietnam. We want them home alive. We want them home now. We want to prevent any other young men from being sent to Vietnam. We want to end the war now. We believe this is the highest form of patriotism.⁷²

Barry’s statement is direct and stern: VVAW fundamentally opposed the war in Vietnam, sought to join the antiwar movement, and importantly, wanted to support those who had served.

Additionally, like other veteran activists, Barry addressed the issue of patriotism. By saying that

⁶⁸ Gerald Nicosia, *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veteran’s Movement*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 16.

⁶⁹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 10, 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 17.

⁷² Jan Barry, “Vietnam Veterans’ Voice,” unpublished, circa October 1967, VVAW Papers, Box 11, SHSW, Madison. [Accessed in Hunt, Andrew E. *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War*. United States: New York University Press, 1999.]

veterans participating in dissent was the “highest form of patriotism”, Barry was in a way inviting his fellow veterans to question the war and speak out about its injustices. No longer was the antiwar movement a place for radicals and students, because VVAW created an outlet for working-class veterans who had served their country to participate in civil discourse and mobilize against the war.

Very decidedly, Barry and other VVAW organizers wanted to establish themselves as antiwar and pro-soldier. While the organization opposed the war and the actions in Vietnam, they wanted to do so in a way that still honored their fellow soldiers and give respects to the horrors that they experienced. Vietnam Veteran Against the War member Ron Kovic said of the group, “we were men who had gone to war. Each of us had his story to tell, his own nightmare.”⁷³ Many Vietnam Veterans came home from the war harboring traumatic experiences and difficult thoughts about the war they were a part of. Vietnam Veterans Against the War became a powerful outlet for veterans to share their stories, reconcile their guilt, and be a voice for peace. While many members of VVAW, like Ron Kovic, joined the war effort in the name of patriotism, they found that their most patriotic actions occurred when they became an advocate for change in the United States.⁷⁴

Although Vietnam Veterans Against the War was founding in 1967, the organization was rather small until the larger antiwar movement began to take off a few years later. By 1969, in the wake of the disastrous Tet Offensive, high casualties, and an ever-increasing war cost, “the majority of Americans had turned against the war” to some degree.⁷⁵ As war resistance was continuing to grow, Vietnam Veterans Against the War began organizing for their first major

⁷³ Kovic, *Fourth of July*, 159.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁵ Elise Lemire, “Paul Revere’s Ride.” In *Battle Green Vietnam: The 1971 March on Concord, Lexington, and Boston*, 5–32. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021., 8.

event, Operation RAW. In response to Richard Nixon's plan to gradually remove troops from Vietnam, veteran organizers chose RAW to stand for "Rapid American Withdrawal."⁷⁶

Operation RAW was a plan for an eighty-six mile walk from Morristown, New Jersey to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania over Labor Day weekend in 1970 where VVAW protestors hoped to stage a search and destroy simulation like the military technique that American troops were using in Vietnam. The route for the march was intentional and says much about what the organization hoped to convey. Not only did organizers think it was important to bring the war to the doorstep of local communities, much like the war was brought to the Vietnamese; they also wanted to send a patriotic message about their activism. The route from Morristown to Valley Forge is the one that Continental troops took in the dangerously cold winter of 1779.⁷⁷ VVAW activists used this route and an allusion to the struggles of the Revolutionary War "where American loyalty to the cause of liberty had been dramatically tested" to convey their message that opposing the war was the truest sense of patriotism.⁷⁸

Operation RAW was a dramatic protest used to draw attention to Vietnam Veterans Against the War and to help the American people understand what was happening in Vietnam. Protestors were vetted before the event to be sure that they were in fact Vietnam veterans, and then they were told to arrive in their combat uniform with a pistol belt. Organizers gave the veterans fake M-16 rifles to carry through the march, volunteers came along to pose as victims, and purple heart recipients were told to wear bandages to signify their wounds.⁷⁹ In Vietnam, the American military was employing a strategy of search and destroy which involved US troops

⁷⁶ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 56.

⁷⁷ Lemire, *Battle Green Vietnam*, 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 60.

entering a village and killing or capturing anyone with communist ties within the village.⁸⁰ News of the My Lai massacre and other American war crimes had begun to surface, and the dramatic demonstration was a way to cast extra light on war issues and bring the war to the Homefront for Americans who may be indifferent about the war. Participants in Operation RAW would plan a “raid” on a public events, setting off fake gunfire, and pretending to capture people while other veterans handed out leaflets which provided information about the war.⁸¹ The intention of the demonstration was never to hurt anyone, but only to convey the feeling of military presence within the community, and to display antiwar sentiment.⁸² When the group made it to Valley Forge at the end of their three-day journey, they were met by two thousand additional protestors who came to support the veterans. The men carried body bags with the number of men who had been killed so far in the war: 43, 419 as a way to draw attention to the cost of war on the other side of the world.⁸³ Ultimately, the demonstration drew national media attention from the *New York Times* which offered updates and interviewed veterans who were involved. Although the attention was modest at best, organizers felt that the demonstration “raised some questions” for the American people regarding what was truly happening in Vietnam.⁸⁴

In 1971, Vietnam Veterans Against the War turned much of its attention towards uncovering war crimes that were being committed in Vietnam. Veteran activists understood that stories of war crimes could validate the war movement and expose Americans to the truths of war. In 1969, when news of the My Lai Massacre broke providing evidence of the slaughter of over 500 Vietnamese civilians by US troops, the Nixon administration hoped to avoid the issue

⁸⁰ Hunt, *The Turning*, 50.

⁸¹ Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 57.

⁸² Nicosia, *Home to War*, 56.

⁸³ Hunt, *The Turning*, 52.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

by saying the massacre was an isolated occurrence.⁸⁵ Members for Vietnam Veterans Against the War of course knew that was not the case, and that many veterans witnessed or participated in crimes themselves. VVAW then, wanted to allow veterans a space to heal; to tell their war stories instead of hiding them, and to explain to the American people why the war in Vietnam should be stopped. To do so, organizers including well-known veteran John Kerry set up interviews known as the “winter soldier investigation” which were held in Detroit from January 31 through February 2, 1971.⁸⁶ Over the days, a little over 100 veterans testified about things they had witnessed in Vietnam including rape, murder, maiming of bodies, and other inhumane acts.⁸⁷ Although the testimonies were not for legal purposes, organizers did hope to receive media attention for the testimonies. Telling war crimes so publicly was an act of bravery for many veterans who wanted their stories validated without being villainized for their experiences or actions. Founder of VVAW Jan Barry reflected on his time in Vietnam in the *New York Times* in 1971,

“We were not prepared to go to Vietnam to help institute and supervise perhaps the world’s most deadly efficient police state – to slaughter and lay waste to intimidate and kill ‘communist’ bushes and trees and pigs and rice and thatched huts and women and children and old men and babies by the hundreds of thousands all in the name of ‘democracy.’”⁸⁸

Barry’s words resonated with many young men who went to Vietnam and returned home traumatized by their experiences in war. His use of quotation around “communist” and “democracy” reveal that many veterans did not believe the reasons that the United States was in Vietnam, typically enlightened by their service in Vietnam. More than that though, Barry calls the United States’ presence in Vietnam a “police state”, clearly representing the power dynamic

⁸⁵ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 74.

⁸⁶ Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 59.

⁸⁷ Hunt, *The Turning*, 72.

⁸⁸ Jan Barry, “Why Veterans March Against the War.” *New York Times*, Apr 23, 1971.

and war atrocities that Barry experienced between the Vietnamese people and the American soldiers. The Winter Soldier Investigation hoped to be a voice for young veterans to tell their stories in order for Americans to know what men were really experiencing in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the investigation saw little media attention at the time, and the eventual publicization of war crimes did create some negative perceptions of veterans.⁸⁹

Although major news networks didn't give the Winter Soldier Investigation much time, the Nixon administration certainly took notice. Similar to the investigations that went into underground GI newspapers and antiwar communications, the federal government kept a watchful eye on Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In fact, in 2004, news organizations obtained previously classified FBI files which included 20,000 pages that mention John Kerry who was influential in the Winter Soldier Investigation and Vietnam Veterans Against the War for many years.⁹⁰ Nixon officials, primarily through the FBI, worked to undermine the antiwar movement, especially those that involved who were active or past military. Undercover agents infiltrated VVAW ranks and by 1972, "infiltrators working for the FBI controlled three out of five of VVAW's southern regions."⁹¹ Interference from the government and fracturing within the group among political ideologies ultimately caused the organization to slowly dwindle in followers as the war ended. Nonetheless, smaller groups and individual veterans worked for decades for a variety of reasons like memorialization, benefits, and proper mental health care. In a much smaller capacity, Vietnam Veterans Against the war still exists and works to support veteran issues and ending wars abroad.⁹²

⁸⁹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 72.

⁹⁰ "F.B.I. Papers Describe Role of Young Kerry Against War." *New York Times*, May 6, 2004.

⁹¹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 149

⁹² "VVAW: Where We Came From, Who We Are." <http://www.vvaw.org/about/>

At one of the organizations strongest points, in early 1972, Vietnam Veterans Against the War boasted a little over 20,000 members.⁹³ The organization was diverse, coming from a wide range of political ideologies and backgrounds. Although most veteran activists likely anticipated serving their tour of duty and returning home to normal life, “those who built VVAW regarded their commitment as an extended tour of duty, a struggle to find meaning and compassion in the human experience,”⁹⁴ Unwilling to let their experiences go unheard, veteran activists became a powerful voice for change within the antiwar movement. Although many people who served in Vietnam did not see combat, more than fifty percent of the veterans in Vietnam Veterans Against the War had been in combat in Vietnam.⁹⁵ This undeniably added credibility to their claims against the war. While government leaders almost unanimously supported the war at its inception, many veterans who had experienced the war firsthand did not support the effort. Their voices became hard to counter and even more difficult to silence as veteran activists organized their collective voice.

Conclusion

The American antiwar movement cannot be discussed accurately without including the work of tens of thousands of military members who exhibited great vulnerability and power in speaking out about their experiences and thoughts on the war. Without the testimony and presence of veterans within the antiwar movement, the American public may have never known about the many war atrocities, inequalities of the draft, or restrictions of rights which existed within the lives of young military members. On an even smaller level, the active-duty underground press and Vietnam Veterans Against the War should be evaluated together. While

⁹³ Hunt, *The Turning*, 143

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4

⁹⁵ Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam*, 163

historians of both the underground GI press and VVAW acknowledge the existence of the other as examples of an active GI movement, they tend to not be discussed together as collective agents within the antiwar movement. In reality, both facets of the GI movement worked together to connect military members who opposed the war.

Intuitively, the underground GI press and veterans' organizations should be considered together because they had similar audiences. Although some men were not radicalized or convinced of the antiwar movement until after their service, a number of men began their dissent with GI newspapers and later became involved in veteran activism once they served their term of duty. To reach the most military dissenters, activists needed to reach both groups. The greatest example of this is Jeff Sharlet's *Vietnam GI* which historian Andrew Hunt argued, "became the most influential GI newspaper in the country."⁹⁶ Sharlet served in Vietnam in 1963 as a translator where he was able to speak to the locals and hear the effects of the American presence in Vietnam from the perspective of civilians. In 1967, Sharlet joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War and a year later, in 1968, he founded *Vietnam GI* to spread the antiwar message to troops.⁹⁷ In this way, Vietnam Veterans Against the War was aiding in the creation and production of antiwar ideas and the newspapers themselves so that their message could be spread throughout the ranks.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War, too, relied on members of the underground press to spread antiwar ideas and updates about events. The national VVAW office sent out a letter to members asking for a message to be included in their publications about the Winter Soldier Investigation because they "cannot fully rely on the 'regular' media to publicize" the event.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Hunt, *The Turning*, 23

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ "Vietnam Veterans Against the War." *Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, January 1, 1971.

Despite the work Vietnam Veterans Against the War was doing, they did rely on the media to publicize their event in order to spread their message to the public. The underground GI press served as a necessary tool for spreading the work of veteran and antiwar activists which encouraged soldiers in their own efforts to oppose the war.

With consideration of the full number of people who served in the military during the Vietnam War, those who participated in dissent make up only a small number. Nonetheless, the war in Vietnam caused more veterans and soldiers to oppose the war than ever before in American history.⁹⁹ The GI movement came at an important moment in the antiwar movement when spirits were low, and the activism was beginning to tire. Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the underground GI press awoke the movement and gave a new backing to the antiwar movement.¹⁰⁰ Unlike draft resisters, veterans had been to Vietnam. Unlike college students, veterans weren't scared of being sent off to war; they had already been. Unlike New Left radicals, many veterans came from working-class, patriotic roots before going to Vietnam.¹⁰¹ Because of this, active-duty military and veterans were a unique and powerful voice within the antiwar movement; they had experienced the war themselves. In addition, the movements should be evaluated as coexisting and interconnected if for the simple fact that veterans were once GIs and GIs would become veterans. Their struggles were largely the same, they wanted to see an end to the war in Vietnam, for American troops to return home, and for veterans to be compensated for their sacrifices, if possible. After all, no one knew better than the soldiers and veterans what their own needs were and so they became their own voice, to protest injustice and redefine what it means to stand up for freedom.

⁹⁹ Nicosia, *Home to War*, 47

¹⁰⁰ Hunt, *Turning Point*, 200

¹⁰¹ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 6

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