

WE GAVE THIS COUNTRY OUR ALL, AND WE RECEIVED LIES, BETRAYAL, AND
NEGLECT! VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR IN THE ANTI-VIETNAM WAR
MOVEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The Vietnam War is arguably the most controversial war in American history. The motives, rationale, and methods used to fight the war stir great controversy within the U.S. public. To some, the United States would have won the Vietnam War if it had not “been fighting with one hand behind its back” due to the anti-war movement, but to others, the United States could never achieve victory in the Vietnam War because of the determination of the North Vietnamese state and the Viet Cong. This debate sparked hostility against Vietnam veterans in America during the war as well. American popular culture and myth commonly portray Vietnam veterans as brash, impulsive, and sometimes even violent people received with hostility by the leftist anti-war protestors like the hippies and draft card burners. However, veterans who fought in the war made up one significant part of the anti-war movement, many of whom enlisted. Though the common view is that the military is largely conservative, Vietnam veterans received hostility from conservatives as well because they were considered ineffective fighters and losers in some cases. Vietnam veterans sought out other veterans they could relate to as a way to socialize during the war, and veterans’ groups were something like therapy for veterans. Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) was the first veterans’ organization created by and for disgruntled Vietnam veterans to demand an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The VVAW was one piece of the vast anti-war movement against the Vietnam War, but a very significant one because of the backgrounds of its members, their grievances against the war, and the size and scale of its protests. The VVAW played a substantial role in showing the American people the horrors of Vietnam and why the war was wrong, and the organization became an advocate for issues in America like veterans’ issues and U.S. foreign policy.

The Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) formed a unique group within the Vietnam anti-war movement because this group consisted mostly of the white working class who had served on the front lines in Vietnam. They were not draft dodgers, nor communist sympathizers (at least initially), and most believed America fought in Vietnam for the right reasons, such as to fight communism, defend the freedom-loving people of South Vietnam, and make sure Southeast Asia did not fall under the communist umbrella which endangered American interests in the area and the world. Many did not come from privilege, they were the children of the 1950s, and of Nixon's silent majority, and many of World War II veterans. When they spoke out on the war, questions revolved around their credibility rather than their loyalty as Americans. They spoke out on the wrong actions the American military committed in Vietnam from experience. For example, they demonstrated how soldiers treated the South Vietnamese, explained how military leaders instilled prejudice in soldiers, and shed light on atrocities committed by U.S. military personnel. For these anti-Vietnam War veterans, before military service, patriotism meant obeying your government, joining the military, and fighting communism without questions asked. Upon coming home, patriotism meant questioning the intentions of their government, holding their government accountable, and speaking out against the government when they felt it is doing something wrong. VVAW spoke out on issues such as U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the quality of care in the VA hospitals, veterans' issues, racism, and U.S. involvement in unjust foreign wars as a whole. When veterans spoke out on the war they fought in, that posed a problem to the U.S. government's ability to wage war in Vietnam because they possessed a credibility the other anti-war protestors lacked.

Veteran defiance against the Vietnam War was a rarity in the mid-1960s. Most veterans, like most Americans, strongly supported American policy in Vietnam, and people were not

suspicious of the government trying to hide anything.¹ Veteran defiance against the war originally was rooted in individual acts of protest.² Some of the first veterans to protest Vietnam in the streets of American communities actually were not Vietnam veterans. Veterans for Peace in Vietnam, another anti-Vietnam War organization, formed in January 1966 by a group of veterans (mostly from World War II) in Chicago. They later staged a large anti-war parade of several hundred veterans (of World War I, World War II, and Korea) and more than twenty thousand demonstrators.³ Veterans for Peace became actively involved in the anti-war movement. A little more than a year later, protestors planned the April 15 Spring Mobilization of 1967 in New York City. This demonstration was reportedly the largest anti-war protest ever, and Veterans for Peace displayed a banner saying, “VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR!”. Organizers hoped Vietnam veterans sympathizing with the cause would show up. Some did, including Jan Barry, the future founder of VVAW.⁴

Barry was born in Ithaca, New York, with his family later moving to a small town outside Ithaca called Interlaken. Growing up, Barry was fascinated with the military, which led to his desire to attend West Point. After he failed to get a civilian appointment, he joined the Army with the plan of attending after his service, an alternate path of admission available at the time.⁵ Barry served as a manager of radio and navigation equipment for a unit of planes that linked Vietnam with Thailand and flew personnel and supplies to all the Special Forces and Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam outposts.⁶ Interacting with the Vietnamese people who worked in the hangars, he discovered that students feared for their lives because the Saigon

¹ Andrew Hunt, *The Turning* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 9.

² Richard R. Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 69.

³ Hunt, *The Turning*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ Hunt, *The Turning*, 12-13.

government was a “police state,” and America had “nasty allies” in the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). In addition, Barry observed Buddhist protests in the streets of Nha Trang in May 1963, incited by Saigon’s repressive policies towards Buddhists. He became appalled by the Saigon government turning tanks and machine guns upon its citizens and rolling out barbed wire all over the country. As the first Vietnam veteran at West Point, he enrolled in courses shortly after the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964. After the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder and the U.S. stationing troops in Da Nang, he dropped out of West Point in 1965 as a result of disgust towards the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.⁷ Through his desire to create an organization by and for Vietnam veterans, Barry formally created VVAW with five other veterans in downtown New York City on June 5, 1967.⁸ The organization’s origins were quiet with growth largely occurring through word of mouth.⁹

Barry, however, was not the first Vietnam veteran to go public with his views against the war. One example was Ex-Green Beret Donald Duncan. Duncan wrote for *Ramparts*, the Berkley-leftist monthly as its military editor. In February 1966, Duncan appeared on the cover of *Ramparts*, and in a piece, critiqued U.S. involvement in Vietnam as being to oppose communism, “The whole thing was a lie. It’s not about democracy we brought to Vietnam-it’s anticommunism.... Anticommunism is a lousy substitute for democracy.”¹⁰ Barry and Duncan were both significant because they were veterans who spoke out against the war prior to 1968, when both much of the American populace and many Vietnam veterans turned against the Vietnam War.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ryan J. Kirby, “Dramatic Protests, Creative Communities: VVAW and the Expressive Politics of the Sixties Counterculture,” *Peace and Change* 40, no. 1 (January 2015): 37.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

While VVAW had humble beginnings, membership skyrocketed in the early 1970s with the consequences of the Tet Offensive, the GI coffeehouse movement, the GI press, the Kent State shooting, and Nixon's invasion of Cambodia. These factors made many Vietnam veterans turn against the war. Barry initially tried to grow VVAW membership through word of mouth, but starting with six members, VVAW struggled to recruit Vietnam veterans until about 1970. In fact, VVAW went bankrupt after the 1968 Democratic National Convention, moved out of its office in Fifth Avenue and lost contact with its members.¹¹ Between 1968 and 1970, though, VVAW started up again. In this timeframe, the Tet Offensive by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Viet Cong revealed the horrors of Vietnam to the American people, and the offensive marked a turning point in the Vietnam War.

VVAW conducted anti-war activity prior to its spike in membership in the early 1970s, but after the Tet Offensive, anti-war veterans were invited to debate representatives of the State Department and the Pentagon at public venues, where they critiqued the Vietnam War.¹² Also, coffeehouses (the first opened in 1967) that activists located near military bases became sites where GIs discussed anti-war literature. Underground newspapers gradually grew in number, such as *Veteran Stars and Stripes for Peace* and *Vietnam GI*. These newspapers targeted military bases in both the United States and Vietnam. Also, anti-war soldiers eventually looked for places to preach their activism, so Jan Barry re-launched VVAW with Mobilization leaders of the anti-war movement donating space to the VVAW in their office complex in Fifth Avenue.¹³

Vietnam veterans became outraged with Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 because Nixon dragged on the war despite his promise to end it through "Vietnamization" and

¹¹Ibid., 30.

¹²Hunt, *The Turning*, 23.

¹³Ibid., 34.

did not acknowledge that the U.S. government had been bombing Cambodia since March 1969.¹⁴ In response to the invasion, students at universities nationwide protested. At Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, National Guardsmen opened fire for thirteen seconds against protesters for throwing rocks at them and taunting them. The Guard killed four students and injured nine, an event that had an immense effect on veterans who felt that the Vietnam War affected life at home.¹⁵ Multiple veterans who became VVAW members recall powerful feelings upon hearing the Kent State news. VVAW member W.D. Ehrhart recalled, “The war was a horrible mistake, and my beloved country was dying because of it. America was bleeding to death in the rice fields and jungles of Vietnam, and now the blood flowed in our streets. I did not want my country to die. I had to do something. It was time to stop the war. And I would have to do it.”¹⁶ Ehrhart felt that the madness from Vietnam had come to America, and the war impacted America. Also, VVAW member Ron Kovic recalled, “I was sitting alone in my apartment listening to the radio when I first heard the news about Kent State. Four students had just been shot in a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia. For a moment there was a shock through my body. I felt like crying. ... I remember saying to myself, the whole thing is coming down now. I wheeled out to my car. I didn’t know where I was going but I had to find other people who felt the way I did.”¹⁷ Distraught after Kent State, and Kovic felt that he needed to speak to people to express how urgently America needed to end the war in Vietnam to prevent more chaos and violence.

After Kent State, the VVAW grew substantially, reaching its zenith towards the end of 1971 and beginning of 1972.¹⁸ In the spring of 1971, VVAW had nearly 10,000 members and

¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹⁶ W.D. Ehrhart, *Passing Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 88.

¹⁷ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 40th Anniversary ed. (Brooklyn: Akashic Books, 2016), 148.

¹⁸ Hunt, *The Turning*, 120.

chapters emerging in all fifty states. In the early months of 1972, VVAW had over 20,000 members.¹⁹ Though there were many forces in the anti-Vietnam War movement, VVAW was notable. Many of the Vietnam veterans who spoke out against the war were white, male, and working class.²⁰ Many of these veterans also enlisted in the military. According to a survey filled out by 172 VVAW members at the Dewey Canyon III protest coordinated by VVAW in April 1971, 65.7% enlisted in the military.²¹ Vietnam Veterans Against the War formed a significant group in the anti-Vietnam War movement because of the background of its members, their original grievances against the war, and size and scale of their protests against the war. As a credible voice in the anti-war movement, the VVAW would show the American people the horrors of the Vietnam War as well as the immorality of the war. After the Vietnam War, the VVAW would become an advocate for veterans' issues as well as U.S. foreign policy. The VVAW consisted of young men who grew up with faith, family, conservatism, and idolization of the U.S. armed forces. They were by no means affiliated with the counter-culture until after military service, and because these were veterans who went to Vietnam and not long-haired kids who did not serve, the U.S. government took these protests very seriously, making VVAW a credible protest group.

Most VVAW members came from typical backgrounds prior to military service in Vietnam. Like in many communities in post-war America, military service was a status symbol within the families of VVAW members. Fighting in the "good war", which was World War II against fascism and tyranny, veterans received much respect in America, and family history of military service is how many VVAW members became exposed to the military and what it

¹⁹ Ibid., 143.

²⁰ George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 6th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 214.

²¹ John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The New Soldier* (New York: Collier Books), 173.

represented. Many young men decided to fight in Vietnam because they wanted to follow in the steps of those who fought in World War II. Barry Romo was the regional coordinator of VVAW in California, Nevada, and Hawaii.²² He explained that his father served in World War II as a sergeant who cooked and managed a mess hall.²³ VVAW member Jack McCloskey explained, “Everybody in my neighborhood, all my relatives, all uncles, my father, everybody was in the military during the Second World War,” His father was in the merchant marine while his uncles were spread out across the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps.²⁴ McCloskey respected and emulated these men in his family in that they fought in World War II and served their country, and he wanted to do the same by serving in Vietnam.

VVAW member John Musgrave explained that growing up, the respect and appreciation World War II veterans received inspired him to become a Marine. He explained, “My father was a World War II vet, a pilot. Veterans got respect. I wanted that respect.”²⁵ VVAW member Ron Kovic’s parents met while serving in the Navy in World War II.²⁶ VVAW member Mike McCain’s father was a pilot during World War II as well. McCain explained, “I grew up in the Air Force. My father was a lifer in the Air Force, a World War II fighter pilot and one of the original members of the Air Force.”²⁷ These men admired and emulated the male figures in their lives who had served their country by fighting in World War II, and Musgrave and McCain wanted to serve their country by fighting in Vietnam.

²² Hunt, *The Turning*, 79.

²³ Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 34.

²⁴ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 30.

²⁵ John Musgrave, Interview at Baker University. November 27, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VJEnuzcql0&t=553s>. Accessed October 3, 2019.

²⁶ Ron Kovic, interview by Oliver Stone and Robert Scheer. *Veterans Ron Kovic, Oliver Stone in Conversation with Robert Scheer*, University of Southern California, November 9, 2017,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjcSxWkibAY&t=795s>, Accessed October 31, 2019.

²⁷ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 34.

VVAW members, as kids, were also fascinated by the military, played soldier, and grew up in a society that largely glorified war because of the triumphant victory of World War II. Musgrave explained that his father's experience inspired a lifelong fascination with the military, and that the media made him believe that real men killed people.²⁸ Reflecting on his childhood, Ron Kovic explained that he would fight "battles" with his friends in the woods with toy guns and sticks, fantasizing about becoming soldiers as men.²⁹ Military service was a part of masculinity because fighting was masculine and brave, and real men were soldiers in the eyes of boys growing up in postwar America. Following in the footsteps of all the men that joined the military in his family, Jack McCloskey explained that he believed that the military was a big part of becoming a man.³⁰ W.D. Ehrhart also played with toy guns as a kid, and he did not really think much of it prior to becoming a Marine and serving in Vietnam.³¹ Growing up in a society that largely glorified war and fighting, many VVAW members thought the military experience in Vietnam would be an enlightening, dutiful, and noble one.

Not only did these boys play soldier growing up, but they grew up watching the stories of World War II depicted in Hollywood films showing the toughness, patriotism, and majesty of the U.S. Armed Forces. John Wayne and Audie Murphy were the two biggest movie stars of American World War II films, and many Vietnam veterans who joined VVAW explained that Wayne and Murphy were big parts of their childhood. These veterans grew up watching Wayne and Murphy fight bravely and tenaciously against the Nazis and Japanese of World War II on the big screen. The culture, bravery, and daringness of these soldiers in films fascinated young boys, and instilled in them a sense of admiration of the U.S. military and desire to be part of it. In

²⁸ Musgrave, interview at Baker University.

²⁹ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 70-71.

³⁰ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 37.

³¹ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 236-37.

addition to military films, the children of the 1950s who would become Vietnam veterans watched cartoons, westerns, secret agent shows, and police shows. John Musgrave recalls that growing up, “All my cowboy heroes killed people. All my police heroes killed people. All my secret agent heroes killed people. James Bond, the coolest guy in the world, had a license to.”³² Ron Kovic explains that going to the theater to watch John Wayne and Audie Murphy films was an influential part of his childhood. On John Wayne, Kovic recalls how watching the *Sands of Iwo Jima* was a thrilling and enthralling experience that made him admire the U.S. Marine Corps.³³ On Audie Murphy, Kovic recalls that as a boy, he wanted to be Audie Murphy fighting in *To Hell and Back*.³⁴ The heroics by these actors enthralled the kids of the 1950s, and they made these kids view the military in a positive light.

As to how influential Wayne and Murphy were, VVAW member Danny Friedman once explained that the American boys of the 1950s were exposed to the John Wayne mystique through entertainment. In the words of Friedman, the John Wayne mystique is: “You’ve got to do the right thing. Yours is not to question why; yours is to kick ass on the commies and win the pretty girl.”³⁵ VVAW member John Kniffin once said, “I think every Texas boy thought about being like Audie Murphy at one time.”³⁶ Most Vietnam veterans cite *The Sands of Iwo Jima* as the film most important to their military education.³⁷

World War II films were critiqued by some Vietnam veterans. In fact, in the words of anti-Vietnam veteran Steve Shuey, “The way World War II was being projected in the movies is one of the things that screwed up a lot of Vietnam veterans. They never showed torn limbs or

³² Musgrave, interview at Baker University.

³³ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 69-70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁵ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 46.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁷ Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 30.

blood. The actors never project the terror that goes right to your guts... But when you might die or be injured, you start looking for meaning in the war.”³⁸ Because these films never showed the blood, guts, carnage, and terror of fighting in war, young kids who served in Vietnam were naïve to a degree. They never saw the intensity of the horrors of war over the big screen due to these films hardly showing any graphic violence or unsettling scenes. In the Vietnamese jungles, young American soldiers were vulnerable to a determined enemy that knew the terrain well and how to fight guerilla warfare. It was nothing like the films American soldiers grew up watching. Moreover, Vietnam veterans never received the glorification and respect that soldiers who served in World War II received from both society and the media (like films, which influenced many young men to serve in Vietnam). This contrast added to their negative feelings about serving in Vietnam. Their attitude was by no-means anti-military, the landmark view of many within the U.S. counterculture.

VVAW members came backgrounds that were largely conservative. Joe Urgo, VVAW secretary and member of VVAW’s board of directors, worked for the Barry Goldwater campaign at its New York City office after school in 1964.³⁹ W.D. Ehrhart also recalled that he campaigned for Barry Goldwater in 1964 as a 10th grader because he believed Lyndon Johnson was too soft on communism.⁴⁰ It is important to acknowledge that the founder of VVAW Jan Barry grew up in a very conservative setting because the anti-war movement is typically seen as a movement sponsored and run by people influenced by liberal ideas. In fact, Interlaken, New York was “a Cowtown outside Ithaca where everyone votes Republican.”⁴¹ Ron Kovic recalled that his father was a conservative growing up as well, but the Vietnam War changed his father’s

³⁸ Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 32.

³⁹ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 36.

⁴⁰ Malo, *Ehrhart in Conversation*, 205.

⁴¹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 12.

thinking. Kovic recalled that his father was the last one in his family to conclude that the Vietnam War was wrong. In addition, a political survey of 172 VVAW members staying at the Washington D.C. Mall for the Dewey Canyon III protest cited that 29.5% of VVAW members identified themselves as conservatives before the war, and 29.5% identified themselves as moderates.⁴² This survey points out that antiwar veterans who were liberals before the war were in the minority, showing that they likely believed in staunch anti-communism, and initially supported American military involvement in Vietnam.

VVAW members came from religious backgrounds as well. Joe Urgo grew up Catholic, being educated at Catholic schools and working as an altar boy.⁴³ Ron Kovic had a strong connection to his Catholic faith as well, recalling, “With God anything was possible. I made my first Holy Communion with a cowboy hat on my head and two six-shooters in my hands.”⁴⁴ Barry Romo was a devout Catholic as well, recalling that his parents were Catholics, he was educated at Catholic schools, and he admired Catholicism from a young age.⁴⁵ Romo even cited his Catholic faith as a reason he served in Vietnam. He explained, “I thought I was going to Vietnam to save my Catholic brothers and kill communists, who were the new Nazis in the world. My republicanism was based on Catholic anticommunism.”⁴⁶ In the same political survey of 172 VVAW members from the Dewey Canyon III protest, nearly 25% said they were Catholic. In addition, W.D. Ehrhart grew up in a religious household with his Protestant minister father.⁴⁷ Religion and conservatism are important elements to the backgrounds of VVAW members. Also, though Vietnam saw American troops on the ground under a Democratic

⁴² John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The New Soldier* (New York: Collier Books), 174.

⁴³ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 35.

⁴⁴ Kovic *Born on the Fourth of July*, 65.

⁴⁵ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁷ W.D. Ehrhart, “Biography,” <https://www.wdehrhart.com/biography.html>, Accessed October 31, 2019.

president with Lyndon Johnson, staunch anti-communism was more of a conservative policy in the 1950s, many hawks in Congress were conservative, and Nixon, a Republican, escalated the Vietnam War during his presidency. Democrats shared much of the hawkish anti-communism of Republicans and though a Democratic president started the American phase of the Vietnam War in 1965, Nixon's attitude towards communism and Vietnam policy made many Democrats take a dovish stance towards the Vietnam War. Being pro-Vietnam War was considered a Republican ideology during the Nixon presidency.

Many Vietnam veterans who turned against the war also grew up in patriotic households, and many of the veterans who joined VVAW volunteered for military service in Vietnam. Ron Kovic cites that he proudly shared his birthday with that of America, July 4th.⁴⁸ Also, Kovic acknowledges that growing up, he was the "All-American boy" to his parents and their "Yankee Doodle Dandy."⁴⁹ The assassination of John F. Kennedy was a very sad event in Kovic's life. He explained, "The pain stuck with me for a long time after he died. I still remember Oswald being shot and screaming to my mother to come into the living room. It all seemed wild and crazy like some Texas shootout, but it was real for all of us back then, it was very real."⁵⁰ He also cites JFK's words in his autobiography *Born on the Fourth of July*, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." In addition to his feelings about JFK, Kovic truly believed communism was a threat to the United States in his younger years like many of the American kids of the 1950s. He and his childhood friend Castiglia believed that, "The Communists were all over the place back then. And if they were not trying to beat us into outer space, Castiglia and I were certain they were infiltrating our schools, trying to take over our

⁴⁸ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

classes and control our minds. We were both certain that one of our teachers was a secret Communist agent and in our next secret club meeting we promised to report anything new he said during our next history class.”⁵¹ Regarding communism, Kniffin cites that, “I was brought up to believe that the communists were the Antichrist; you know-they were going to destroy western civilization. The worst thing in the world was red.”⁵² The members of VVAW grew up in the 1950s believing that communism was the greatest evil facing the world, the Soviet Union directed communist revolution everywhere, and communism posed a massive threat to the physical safety of the United States. They correlated patriotism with anti-communism during the Cold War.

While Vietnam veterans who spoke out against the war cited patriotism as what inspired them to serve in Vietnam, patriotism among many of these veterans developed something of a negative meaning. It developed a meaning of simple obedience, ignorance, and naiveté. Upon protesting the war, patriotism to anti-Vietnam War veterans meant speaking one’s views, holding one’s government accountable, and speaking one’s mind if the government is doing something wrong. Nationalism and duty inspired them to serve in Vietnam, though some later said that they were naïve to believe in those ideas and serve in Vietnam. Like Kovic, Ehrhart served in Vietnam because of his belief in duty to his country. Ehrhart reflects on that duty with great regret though. “God almighty, I’d only tried to do my duty as my duty had been taught to me by my parents, teachers, and elders at every stripe. I had done what my nation had asked of me.”⁵³ McCain also cites nationalistic ideology inspiring him to serve in Vietnam. He explained, “I bought the program, that it was about the containment of the spread of communism. That was the

⁵¹ Ibid., 75-76.

⁵² Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 42.

⁵³ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 83.

ideology I had grown up with. It was very pro-capitalist, pro-American, very knee-jerk reaction to anything that was different.”⁵⁴ In addition, VVAW member Robert “Bobby” Muller cites obligation to country as his rationale for serving in Vietnam. He explained, “I felt that it was my duty as a citizen of this country, the country that I considered the greatest in the world, to join the service and fight for my country... This was something instinctive in me. I had total faith and had always pledged allegiance to my government.”⁵⁵ This “blind” sense of patriotism is something Vietnam veterans reflect on in hindsight. Many anti-war Vietnam veterans later believed that their military service was tied to a sense of this “blind” patriotism so turning against the war was a way to show the bitterness they felt because of deception by the U.S. government and society that they grew up in.

While numerous grievances against the Vietnam War surfaced spanning the entire duration of the war, including but not excluded to, abuse of executive power by the President, Vietnam being unimportant to American interests, and the Vietnamese fighting for their independence, rather than spreading communism. To those against the war, the President abused executive power because President Lyndon Johnson started the U.S. phase of the Vietnam War without a declaration of a war, and President Nixon kept the U.S. bombing of North Vietnamese strongholds Cambodia in 1969 secret from the American people and Congress. To those against the war, Vietnam was unimportant to American interests because the country contained no vital natural resources or goods, and communism was not strong enough to pose a threat to the United States in Southeast Asia. To antiwar advocates, the Vietnamese were also fighting for independence rather than communist revolution. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as well as their Vietnamese sympathizers wanted one Vietnam, and they wanted a country free from

⁵⁴ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 41.

⁵⁵ Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 38.

foreign influence. They had fought the Chinese, Japanese, and French before the Americans. VVAW members are unique because their grievances against the war resulted from first-hand experience serving in Vietnam. While some VVAW members grew even more against the war as a result of research on their own, VVAW members cite their time in Vietnam as the reason they turned against the war. In the words of Ron Kovic, “We thought the war was going to be like the John Wayne movies, but it wasn’t. It was different.”⁵⁶ Before issues like racism, class discrimination, militarism, economic imperialism, and support of right-wing dictatorships in underdeveloped countries received more attention from activist Vietnam veterans, Vietnam veterans grew against the war from what they witnessed and experienced. Grievances of Vietnam veterans included the police state in South Vietnam the U.S. government was supporting, their idea that communism was a fictional threat, and betrayal by the U.S. government against its own soldiers. Serving in Vietnam, Vietnam veterans witnessed repressive policies and actions by the police state in South Vietnam, realized that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were nationalist fighters desiring freedom and independence rather than worldwide communist revolution, and experienced betrayal the U.S. government was committing against American soldiers.

To begin with, the police state in South Vietnam caused many Vietnam veterans to turn against the war. The South Vietnamese state was brutally repressive (especially towards Buddhists and communists), corrupt, and extremely unstable. Barry, VVAW’s founder, was vocal about how repressive the South Vietnamese government was, citing the Buddhist pagoda raids orchestrated by the South Vietnamese government in August 1963.⁵⁷ Ehrhart also cited that the police state of South Vietnam should deter people from supporting the war. He explained that

⁵⁶ Ron Kovic, interview by Bill Boggs, *Ron Kovic Author of Born on the Fourth of July*, 1977, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8gAlxNNiIU&t=83s>, Accessed October 31, 2019.

⁵⁷ Hunt, *The Turning*, 11.

North and South Vietnam were nothing more than an artificial construction of the Western powers created at Geneva in 1954, and Ngo Dinh Diem was not a “miracle of democracy” but a tyrant hated by all but the Americans and a few upper-class French-educated Vietnamese Catholics. Ehrhart writes, “And I’d seen with my own eyes the filth and corruption and brutality of the Saigon regime, first under Nguyen Cao Ky, then under Nguyen Van Thieu.”⁵⁸

Not only was the United States supporting an autocratic and repressive regime, but the enemy ideology known as communism was a fictional threat to the members of VVAW. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were fighting for independence and unity. The domino theory of the U.S. government, which explained that communism would spread everywhere in Asia after Vietnam, would also never hold true in the aftermath of Vietnam War. Though communism had a strong presence in Laos and Cambodia during and even after the war, the rest of Southeast Asia would remain under the Western umbrella. To Vietnam veterans against the war, the Vietnam War was not a war against communism, but a war against the Vietnamese people. In many cases, this idea was shown by the difficulty present in actually identifying the enemy because there were no clear battle lines, and American soldiers could not always distinguish allies from enemies. One reason was because South Vietnamese citizens helped the communists in many cases. While traveling through the Cam Lo Refugee Village and being under constant fire, Muller found that South Vietnamese people often displayed hostility towards Americans. “This is not Viet Cong that we’re fighting; it’s not North Vietnamese,” he concluded. “These are the people of South Vietnam that we are here to help that are shooting at us, that are setting up the booby traps... And they allow us to get hurt and they allow me to lose my men, and I don’t understand why.”⁵⁹ This experience led Muller to realize that the South Vietnamese did not want

⁵⁸ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 162.

⁵⁹ Kerry, *New Soldier*, 104.

the U.S. military in their country. Kovic strikes a similar tone with his assessment of the war. He remembered how difficult it had been when he had first come to the war to tell the villagers from the enemy. He hoped that the Vietnamese knew the Americans were there to help save their country from the Communists.⁶⁰ Identifying enemies within the ranks of the Vietnamese people was extremely difficult because there was the North Vietnamese, and there were both Viet Cong and sympathizers of the group in large number among the South Vietnamese. This dynamic made fighting difficult and dangerous.

Anti-Vietnam War veterans also explain that a communist Vietnam was not as big a threat as the U.S. government made it sound. For example, Ehrhart did research on international affairs after his military service. He explains that a communist Vietnam was a threat exaggerated by the U.S. government because Ho Chi Minh was just a revolutionary looking to build a new Vietnam, and Russia and China did not cause revolutions across the underdeveloped world (such as in Vietnam) though they might have provided support.⁶¹ Barry specifically said that the United States was backing the wrong side in the Vietnam War because the Soviet Union was not the main threat in the war, and it was really a civil war occurring in South Vietnam. He also found it hard to believe that the North Vietnamese would deliberately attack U.S. warships during the Gulf of Tonkin incident.⁶² Prior to the American chapter in the Vietnam War, Vietnam also had a long history of revolution and fighting foreign invaders. Before fighting the Americans, the Vietnamese were experienced fighters who had fought the French, Japanese, and Chinese. Anti-Vietnam War veterans indicate that the United States really should not have been in Vietnam, and the war was a struggle for Vietnamese independence. Ehrhart actually explains

⁶⁰ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 209.

⁶¹ Malo, *Ehrhart in Conversation*, 170-72.

⁶² Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 92.

that U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was parallel to the American Revolution, but the Americans were the Redcoats and it was the Vietnamese who were fighting for their independence.⁶³ Thus, Vietnam was not about communism, but about independence and freedom to the Vietnamese people.

In addition, the anti-Vietnam War veterans believed that U.S. government betrayed them constantly during the war, which costed lives. Musgrave cites one example of the defective M-16 rifle issued to American troops in Vietnam. The rifle jammed frequently, and Musgrave explains that he had seen the bodies of Marines who had been killed at point-blank range because their rifles would not work. Also, because the strategy of the enemy was to get as close as possible to limit the effectiveness of U.S. air strikes, the stakes were that much higher if your rifle failed.⁶⁴ Musgrave explains that the U.S. government had sweetheart contracts with Colt, meaning Colt had to replace all defective rifles.⁶⁵ While U.S. soldiers used the ineffective M-16, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were firing their durable AK-47s. Musgrave mentions that the U.S. government's refusal to give them a rifle that worked was criminal and immoral, and Musgrave is still bitter about it.⁶⁶ In addition to using a defective rifle, U.S. forces engaged in missions with tremendous ambiguity and no clear sense of direction or purpose. Musgrave explains that war is a real estate business, and the Vietnam War was tremendously flawed because progress was simply measured by enemy deaths, and soldiers were used to draw enemy troops.⁶⁷ As a Swift Boat Captain, former VVAW member and Secretary of State John Kerry explained that his crew's typical mission in Vietnam had no sense to it. They shot at any "targets of opportunity."

⁶³ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 200.

⁶⁴ Musgrave, interview with Baker University.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

They were always ambushed, and their only protection was the boat's half-inch of aluminum. In addition, soldiers were asking questions about the purpose of their being in Vietnam, and "We weren't winning the hearts and minds of anyone."⁶⁸ This ambiguity of missions and goals when fighting the enemy, along with fighting in the brush against a tough enemy who knew the terrain was bad for morale for the U.S. soldier who had no sense of direction, used a defective rifle, and was highly vulnerable to hostility by an enemy who knew the land and terrain extremely well.

If soldiers were seriously wounded in Vietnam, they were eventually sent to VA hospitals to receive care. The conditions at these hospitals were reportedly horrid, and they caused much resentment against the U.S. government. After becoming paralyzed in Vietnam by being shot once in the foot and once through the back, Kovic received care at the notorious VA hospital in the Bronx where he met Bobby Muller, who also received care after he became paralyzed as a result of injury in Vietnam.⁶⁹ Kovic said about his stay at the Bronx VA, "The wards are filthy. The men in my room throw their breadcrumbs under the radiator to keep the rats from chewing on our numb legs during the nights... It never makes any sense to us how the government can keep asking money for weapons and leave us lying in our own fifth."⁷⁰ VA hospitals actually became a fertile recruiting ground for VVAW because Vietnam veteran patients told their horror stories of the wretched conditions of VA hospitals nationwide.⁷¹ Care at the VA hospitals caused many Vietnam veterans to turn against the war because of the horrid treatment that made them wonder how the U.S. government could not take care of the people it sent to fight this war in Vietnam while paying for expensive weaponry. While the U.S. government could not provide

⁶⁸ John Kerry, Interview in *Vietnam: A Television History*, Directed by Richard Ellison, Boston, MA: WGBH-TV, 1983.

⁶⁹ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 154.

⁷⁰ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 55.

⁷¹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 40.

basic care to soldiers in Vietnam, it was paying for airplanes, helicopters, napalm, and small arms among other things to fight the war.

Kovic became a prominent VVAW member who called out the U.S. government for its treatment of veterans at the VA hospital. After getting wounded, Kovic not only cited the filth in the Bronx VA, but also caretaker negligence. Kovic recalled once when in his room, “I have been screaming for almost an hour when one of the aides walks by. He sticks his head in the door, taunting me and laughing.” Kovic told him, “I’m a Vietnam veteran, I fought in Vietnam, and I’ve got a right to be treated decently.” Kovic recalled that the aide responded loudly, saying, “Vietnam, Vietnam don’t mean nothin’ to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass.”⁷² The quality of care at the Bronx VA was so bad that *Life* magazine discussed the horrible conditions there in May 1970.⁷³ In 1974, some years after Kovic rehabilitated his injuries at the Bronx VA hospital in 1968, he received care at the VA hospital in Long Beach, California, which he claimed was just as bad as the one in the Bronx.⁷⁴ He recalled, “The first thing that hits you in this place is the smell. It is a terrible odor of urine and feces, of human bodies all crammed into these depressing little cubicles. There are no private rooms, just these filthy green curtains separating the paralyzed men in their hospital beds. It is like a huge warehouse of human refuse, a storage center for the living dead. There is talk of building a new facility but the funds just are not there ... a war where young men continue to die and are maimed for nothing, for a lost cause.”⁷⁵

Kovic finally decided that he had enough of how the VA hospitals were treating Vietnam veterans. While at the Long Beach VA, he conducted interviews to hear from veterans about the

⁷² Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 143.

⁷³ Ron Kovic, *Hurricane Street* (New York: Akashic Books, 2016), 39-40.

⁷⁴ Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, 76.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

treatment they were receiving. Fearing potential repercussions, Kovic hid his tape recorder under the pillow on his gurney. On his interviews, Kovic explained, “Many complain of overcrowded conditions while others say something must be done before another patient dies. ‘It’s fucking scary in here,’ a patient from D ward tells me one afternoon as he leans forward to whisper in my microphone.” In addition, Kovic cited how veterans explain equipment constantly breaking down, and aides threatening them so they can extort their substantial tax free checks from the government. One veteran explained how he was slapped by one aide, while another recalled being dropped by two drunk aids who transported him from his bed to a gurney.⁷⁶ Armed with this info and with several fellow Vietnam veterans, Kovic staged a sit-in in the office of California senator Alan Cranston in 1974 to demand better treatment for veterans in VA hospitals nationwide. After taking over the office, Kovic told Senator Cranston over the phone while being filmed by KABC news, “We want the American people to know what’s going on in those hospitals, senator. We want them to know the truth that their most seriously wounded veterans are being abused and mistreated!” Kovic also demanded that bedding and food be sent to the veterans for their stay in the office, which Cranston agreed to, but he told Kovic he could not come to his office immediately.⁷⁷ Soon after, Kovic turned the protest into a hunger strike, demanding that he and his fellow veterans meet with the head of the VA in Washington Donald Johnson immediately.⁷⁸ After seventeen days, Johnson agreed to fly in, and meet with Kovic and the other veterans. The federal government also announced that the VA would be investigated. Allegedly, the publicity Kovic and his fellow veterans received led to Nixon being asked if he would let those protesting veterans in LA starve to death.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 40-41.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 180.

When Johnson came into the office, Kovic cited how angry he and his fellow veterans were, considering their emotions were pouring out after seventeen days without food. Kovic recalled that he and his fellow veterans yelled at Johnson, “What took you so long Mr. Johnson? When is the VA going to stop abusing its veterans? This is a national veterans’ crisis! All we’re asking is to be treated like human beings! We served this country. We fought for this country! I gave three-quarters of my body in that war.” To these remarks, Johnson responded, “That is untrue. We have never mistreated our veterans. We provide the highest quality care for our veterans.” Kovic’s fellow veterans lambasted Johnson for this response, and Johnson insisted he empathized with veterans because he came from a family with a rich military tradition and had a disabled veteran son.⁸⁰ After this protest, Kovic took his movement to Washington D.C. in the same year. He and his fellow veterans took over the Washington Monument, and he called the Associated Press to say that they are the veterans who did the sit-in in at Senator Cranston’s office in Los Angeles, and they demand to meet with President Nixon to discuss the VA crisis.⁸¹ Shortly after, they were arrested, and spent one night in a DC jail.⁸² Kovic saw Johnson several years after his protest in D.C., and he asked Johnson if he remembered him. Kovic was not aware that Johnson served with General Patton in World War II, but neither he nor his fellow veterans could see past their image of Johnson because of how angry they were at their situation having experienced the horrors of the VA hospitals.⁸³ Kovic explained how the VA still has many problems, but many “troublemaker” aides have been fired or they retired, and current aides genuinely care.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁸¹ Ibid., 208.

⁸² Ibid., 210.

⁸³ Ibid., 232-33.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 235.

The attitudes of Vietnam veterans against the war who demonstrated towards the other anti-war protestors is a bit of an ambiguous subject because many felt resentful towards these protestors as servicemen, but they came around to their perspectives upon coming home and turning against the Vietnam War. Veterans (those who did and did not protest) received backlash from both liberals and conservatives throughout the war. Vietnam veterans who spoke out against the war allegedly received backlash initially from the Left as irredeemable “baby killers” being received by boos and jeers at anti-war rallies, but VVAW activists usually encountered more bitter hostility from war supporters and fellow veterans.⁸⁵ Many veterans acknowledge that while in the service, they held animosity towards those who were protesting the war in the United States. Ehrhart explained that he thought of various ways to torture the anti-war protestors including decapitation, castration, dynamite, and boiling oil.⁸⁶ He had even said, “We’d thought of everything: trampling them with elephants, shooting them into deep space, force-feeding them chocolate chip cookies, sending them to Russia in lead boats.”⁸⁷ At a Jane Fonda rally at Widener University in Pennsylvania, Ehrhart explained the bitter hatred he and his fellow Marines once had for her as an anti-Vietnam War activist. “I tried to listen to her, but I couldn’t concentrate. I kept having flashbacks: How many times in Vietnam had we sworn to cut off Dr. Spock’s penis and stuff it down Jane Fonda’s throat if we ever got the chance?”⁸⁸ Though Vietnam veterans initially hated for those that demonstrated out of a sense that the demonstrators were entitled, clueless, and unappreciative of their service, the Vietnam veterans that spoke out against the war began to realize that the U.S. government was wrong for getting involved in Vietnam.

⁸⁵ Hunt, *The Turning*, 21.

⁸⁶ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 89.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸⁸ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 93.

Kovic's initial attitude towards the anti-Vietnam War protestors was also hostile. He and his fellow marines swore that the demonstrators against the war would pay for speaking out against them. Kovic forgot all his grievances with the protestors and any positive feelings he had about the war in Vietnam when he got to the Bronx VA hospital though.⁸⁹ In contrast to initial hostility towards left-wing protestors, many veterans who did activist work saw conservatives and the war supporters in a more negative light. For example, Ehrhart explained, "I encountered a great deal of disrespect when I got back from Vietnam, but it wasn't from the sources made famous in popular mythology- the anti-war movement, the hippies-it was from middle class America and the government thereof: I couldn't buy a car in my own name; I couldn't get insurance except as a dependent child; I couldn't buy a beer in my home town. And when I got out of the marines and started college, the Vietnam War-era GI Bill I got barely covered the costs of books and beer (as opposed to the free ride World War II and Korean War veterans got.)"⁹⁰ After being an activist, Ehrhart believes that many veterans who claim left-wing hostility are delusional, and Jane Fonda is now a source of displaced anger among Vietnam veterans.⁹¹ It is important to acknowledge though that being against the Vietnam War was not exactly parallel to admiration for the hippies. In fact, hippies were seen by anti-Vietnam War veterans in some cases as naïve and entitled. Andrew Levinson recalled a Vietnam vet saying to another vet (Levinson's friend from blue-collar Milwaukee), "I just can't take these damn kids who don't know what we went through saying we're all a bunch of killers and that the Viet Cong are all saints."⁹² In other words, anti-war veterans believed the hippies were in the right for being against the war. However anti-war veterans believed that much of the activist critique of soldiers

⁸⁹ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 147.

⁹⁰ Malo, *Ehrhart in Conversation*, 103.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 135

and the war was done out of naivety, entitlement, and even their wanting to avoid the draft. Blue collar whites and African Americans (veterans from these groups too) perceived dissent as something of a privilege because students were shielded from violence and legal penalties that often accompany protests.⁹³ Much like the hippies, students were seen by anti-war Vietnam veterans as holding a place of privilege because education was shielding them from military service, and they could speak their mind without backlash. Thus, though anti-war Vietnam veterans came around to identifying with the anti-war demonstrators for being against the war, anti-war Vietnam veterans did not always perceive the anti-war demonstrators themselves positively.

Research upon returning home, assimilating to civilian life, and reflecting back on Vietnam made many anti-Vietnam War veterans realize that their original grievances against the war were tied to greater issues. VVAW members became vocal about these issues, as VVAW grew from an organization devoted to ending the Vietnam War to one devoted to fighting for social issues for veterans and critiquing U.S. foreign policy among other things. During the Vietnam War, VVAW members tied the war to American Empire, imperialism and prejudice, specifically against Asians. On American Empire, Ehrhart told a friend, “Shit man, Vietnam’s just the tip of the iceberg. The United States doesn’t give a big rat’s ass about freedom or justice or democracy for anybody, and we never have. What we want is freedom to do business on our terms and as much of the damned pie as we can grab.”⁹⁴ Ehrhart explained this American motive to go Vietnam by citing American colonization of the United States, American imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th century, and American support of right-wing dictatorships in the Cold

⁹³ Ibid., 135-36.

⁹⁴ Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, page 181.

War-era. Also, VVAW member Bill Perry explained, “The whole American policy is nothing but what you might call cultural imperialism.”⁹⁵ Prejudice, specifically against Asians, was another grievance the VVAW tied to the Vietnam War. American soldiers called Vietnamese slurs like gooks, dinks, slants, slopes, and zips, and U.S. military leaders allegedly forced this bigotry onto their soldiers. Japanese VVAW member Steve Shimabukuro recalled, he was called a gook all through training camp.⁹⁶ Kovic also recalled this type of bigotry during boot camp, recalling his superiors telling him, “I want you to believe this thing out there is a commie son of a bitch and wops and spics and chinks and japs and get in front of your racks.”⁹⁷ In other words, Kovic was allegedly taught to hate anything different by citing use of racial slurs like wop (Italian), spic (Hispanic), chink (Chinese), and jap (Japanese) by his superiors. The military used racism to make the Vietnamese enemy seem subhuman. Vietnam veterans against the war recalled that racism was strongly tied with the U.S. military’s agenda for turning young men into “killing machines.” Musgrave described his time in the military as Racism 101 because American soldiers never described the enemy as someone human.⁹⁸ The U.S. military also considered Asian women as similar to dolls, or useful toys, and instructors explained that they were inferior to white women with vaginas that were slanted like their eyes.⁹⁹ This animosity against Asians, specifically Vietnamese, as “inferior sub humans” allegedly made them easier for American soldiers to kill.

When the Pentagon Papers were released in 1971, veterans against the war in Vietnam were “vindicated” for using the words they so frequently used to describe the U.S. government-

⁹⁵ Kerry, *New Soldier*, 106.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁷ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 105.

⁹⁸ Musgrave, interview at Baker University.

⁹⁹ Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 28-29.

“war criminals,” “conmen,” and “plunderers”- because of the U.S. government’s actions in Vietnam. They were not telling the American people the entire truth about the Vietnam War. The United States had undermined democracy in Vietnam by installing Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister of South Vietnam, and waged covert warfare in Vietnam for many years through the CIA, military advisors, and military support. The bitterness and resentment these veterans felt towards the U.S. government led to a large-scale and effective mobilization of veterans for the anti-war movement by VVAW.

The third reason the VVAW was so significant was the size and scale of their protests, and as veterans who experienced the war firsthand, they had great credibility as opposed to long-haired hippie kids in the eyes of lawmakers. The protests of the VVAW literally reached or were heard by the powerholders in Washington D.C. with their most significant protests including Operation Rapid American Withdrawal (RAW), the Winter Soldier Investigation, Dewey Canyon III, and the 1972 Republican National Convention protest. Many VVAW members explain that speaking out against the war was difficult because of backlash from family and friends, especially parents who did not believe the U.S. government lied about the war. Their parents were never the victims of such betrayal and deception by the U.S. government, and the “good war” World War II allowed their parents a sense of ignorance.

Vietnam veterans were ostracized whether or not they protested the war. In many cases when they spoke out against the war, Vietnam veterans were shunned for their views, sometimes by those in their own family. Ron Kovic’s parents stood by him, despite his protesting of the war. He recalled meeting his parents, shortly before his protest in Washington D.C. in 1974 to demand better conditions in the VA hospitals, “They stood by me when I was arrested for protesting the war, and when I shouted down President Nixon with two other disabled veterans

during his acceptance speech at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. Even when our neighbors back in Massapequa rejected me, telling their children to stay away from me, afraid I might influence them with my ‘radical ideas’; and after the many nights I came home drunk from Arthur’s Bar, tormented by the war, crying out and bitterly cursing God and my country, blaming God, blaming everyone... I cried and shared the terrible things I had done in the war.”¹⁰⁰ In contrast, VVAW member Ron Ferrizzi said during the Dewey Canyon III protest, “My parents told me that if I really did come down here and turn in my medals, that they never wanted anything more to do with me. That’s not an easy thing to take. I still love my parents. My wife doesn’t understand what happened to me when I came home from Nam. She said she would divorce me if I came down here because she wanted my medals for our son to see when he grew up.”¹⁰¹ Ron Kovic also explained how the father of one his friends disowned his friend when he found out he joined VVAW, citing how his friend’s father called his friend a traitor and refused to take his friend’s phone calls.¹⁰²

W.D. Ehrhart was ostracized as a veteran even by those he knew. Ehrhart visited a high school friend who was on a field trip with his class in Washington D.C. When having breakfast with his friend, the chaperones were all present, and they were people Ehrhart knew and grew up with. When eating his western omelet, one chaperone went up to Ehrhart, asked him to leave, and threatened to call the police if he did not leave and stay away from the school group.¹⁰³ Ehrhart also explained how the father of one of his Marine friends was a Philadelphia cop harassed by other cops in the department telling him that his son was an embarrassment to the

¹⁰⁰ Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, 201-02.

¹⁰¹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 113.

¹⁰² Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, 77.

¹⁰³ W.D. Ehrhart, *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon’s America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 40-41.

department. Ehrhart's friend engaged in a protest where he and fellow veterans unfurled an upside down American flag from the Statue of Liberty. The other cops threatened Ehrhart's friend's father if he did not quit so he did. This same friend explained how to Ehrhart also how his marriage was rocky because he was arrested frequently, and he would always have stoned veterans come to his house.¹⁰⁴ Being a veteran with powerful feelings upon returning from Vietnam, Ehrhart's relationship with his mother was also affected. His mother could not connect with him to talk about his experience in Vietnam, and Ehrhart even got angry with her. Ehrhart recalled how his mother took notice of his feelings about Vietnam, and he could only put his frustration and anger into words after being home for an extended period of time. He blasted U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam to his mother by citing how Ho Chi Minh wanted an independent Vietnam since 1919 when he talked with Woodrow Wilson, how the Viet Minh were U.S. allies in World War II, and how South Vietnam was invented by the U.S. government. He explained how his mother teared up because she was kind and was hurt, and he apologized, citing how their schools kept them naïve about the U.S. foreign policy.¹⁰⁵ All of these incidents made Ehrhart resent his government, and he felt his society was ungrateful for his service by the way it treated him.

The coming home process was extremely difficult for many Vietnam veterans. Not only were they ostracized both before and when they spoke out against the war, many were tormented by what they did and experienced. These feelings, along with lack of attention to those feelings at home by the VA and even family and friends who could not understand what Vietnam veterans experienced, led many to turn to alcohol and/or drugs. In 1973, New York City alone

¹⁰⁴ Ehrhart, *Busted*, 113-14.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 141-43.

had an estimated 30,000 Vietnam veterans on drugs.¹⁰⁶ Ron Kovic explained how the conditions at the VA hospital in Long Beach make patients feel trapped and are dependent on others, making some of them turn to alcohol and drugs like marijuana, cocaine, uppers, downers, and LSD.¹⁰⁷ Kovic also had a friend at the VA in Long Beach who worked as a caretaker that became a heroin addict when he served with the U.S. Air Force in Saigon who became homeless, depressed, and jobless when he came to the U.S. due to his heroin addiction before he joined VVAW in his home state of Indiana and became clean.¹⁰⁸ W.D. Ehrhart justified his marijuana usage to his mother by explaining that he was a mean drunk, but marijuana mellows him out and helped him with getting used to civilian life.¹⁰⁹ Ehrhart was arrested for marijuana possession as a merchant seaman after serving in Vietnam, and he explained to his attorney that wanted him to use his military service record in the case, “Look, we’ve got a government that’s trying to burn me for less than half an ounce of pot, and I’m supposed to use a bunch of junk I got from that same government for committing murder and mayhem to believe that I’m really a swell guy.”¹¹⁰ Though Ehrhart was arrested for marijuana possession, his attorney was able to prove that there were breaks in the chain of custody with the marijuana authorities confiscated from Ehrhart. They could not tell how much marijuana was taken, and there were errors in the lab report determining how much marijuana Ehrhart actually possessed.¹¹¹ He was utterly shocked that the U.S. government wanted to punish someone for smoking pot while at the same time in his view, it was committing war crimes in Vietnam.

¹⁰⁶ Chaim F. Shatan, “The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans’ Self-Help Movement,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 43, no.4 (July 1973): 640.

¹⁰⁷ Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, 35.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰⁹ Ehrhart., *Busted*, 20-21.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

VVAW provided a venue where veterans could talk and confide in each other. They shared experiences, and many were traumatized by a war. They felt that they had been cheated, swindled, and betrayed by the government they fought for in Vietnam. Dr. Chaim F. Shatan coined the term Post-Vietnam Syndrome to describe various emotions experienced by Vietnam veterans upon returning home. One was a guilt feelings and a propensity for self-punishment meaning many Vietnam veterans felt survivor's guilt and even an urge to atone for their wrongdoings through physical punishment. Physical punishment took the form of starting self-defeating fights or single-car, single-occupant car accidents. Another was the feeling of being scapegoated. Many Vietnam veterans felt bitterness against their government for having them fight such an illogical and immoral war. In addition, Vietnam veterans carried the burden of the war's unpopularity among the American people because these veterans fought the war. In addition, veterans of other wars associated lack of American progress in Vietnam to Vietnam veterans because they could not defeat the communists, and they failed to win "their war." John Kerry explained that one Midwest American Legion post refused to admit Vietnam veterans because "they have lost the war." Rage and other violent impulses against indiscriminate targets was another symptom, meaning counter-guerrilla training for combat in Vietnam made veterans experience violent impulses.¹¹² Combat brutalization and its "psychic numbing" was another symptom, meaning Vietnam made veterans feel dehumanized and show racist tendencies. Alienation from one's own feelings was another symptom, which was caused by combat that made Vietnam made veterans disconnected from reality and others and from other people. Doubt about the continued ability to love and trust others was another symptom, explained as the

¹¹² Shatan, "Grief of Soldiers," 645-46.

nature of the Vietnam War making trust and love for others difficult because allies and enemies could not always be distinguished by American soldiers.¹¹³

VVAW members discussed these feelings in group forums. The Post-Vietnam Syndrome that many Vietnam veterans experienced would be one of the precursors of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The agony these Vietnam veterans felt with these problems deepened as they developed the idea that the VA had little compassion for them, and they felt that it was part of the corrupt society that sent them to Vietnam.¹¹⁴ Also, if Vietnam veterans wanted to get psychiatric care from the VA, the problems they experienced had to be considered service-related. Thus, if there was a delay in Vietnam veterans experiencing symptoms of psychiatric problems, they were considered ineligible for psychiatric treatment from the VA.¹¹⁵ One of Ron Kovic's friends at the Long Beach VA survived Vietnam as an army combat medic, but he could not sleep at night, could not keep a job, lost his money, and became homeless. He went to the VA for psychiatric help, and he claimed that the assistance he received was not effective. He then had a breakdown and ended up in a psychiatric ward with a straitjacket where he took psychiatric drugs. When he was released, he was living in his station wagon and being hungry, broke, desperate, and without gas, he tried to rob a liquor store in Compton, California with an unloaded gun he got from a pawn shop. One of the clerks shot him in the back, paralyzing him for life. With an exemplary military record, his charges were dropped however.¹¹⁶ In conclusion, not only was psychiatric care from the VA not accessible for veterans if there was a passage in time from when they served in the military, but if the VA provided psychiatric care it was not always effective in resolving the mental issues of Vietnam veterans.

¹¹³ Shatan, "Grief of Soldiers," 646-47.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 649.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 644.

¹¹⁶ Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, 36-37.

In the absence of effective psychiatric treatment from the VA, the VVAW pioneered the first “rap groups,” where peers talked and counseled each other. Psychologists such as Robert Jay Lifton throughout the 1970s reproduced this concept all over the country by because it proved effective.¹¹⁷ Because of a connection and the shared experience of having served in Vietnam, Ron Kovic recalled the warm reception he received when he first joined VVAW in 1969. He explained, “I remember how kind they were when they were from the moment they arrived. When I got there, a bunch of veterans were in front of the house waiting to carry me up the stairs in my chair. ‘Hi brother,’ they said to me warmly. ‘Can we help you brother? Is there anything we can do?’ All of a sudden everything seemed to change- the loneliness seemed to vanish.” Kovic could be open with his fellow VVAW members, and they were like brothers. They could reflect on and discuss death and the war with a sense of gentleness. These meetings relieved and alleviated Kovic’s sense of loneliness coming home from Vietnam.¹¹⁸

RAW was VVAW’s first national demonstration, and it was John Kerry’s first exposure to the organization.¹¹⁹ VVAW vice-president Scott Moore coordinated the route of the protest from Morristown, New Jersey to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania because VVAW was based in New York City, and the area had great historical significance because of the American Revolution. The demonstration lasted from September 4th to September 7th, 1970.¹²⁰ To protest the war, the VVAW coordinated with actors to stage Guerilla Theater. Guerilla Theater was a showcase intended to communicate the daily injustices American soldiers committed and witnessed in Southeast Asia, specifically search and destroy missions in Vietnamese villages. Guerilla Theater was meant to bring the war home to the American people, and to achieve realism, 150 veterans

¹¹⁷ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 130.

¹¹⁸ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 158-159.

¹¹⁹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 49.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-49.

marched in jungle fatigues carrying pistol belts, C-rations, canteens, sleeping bags, and toy M-16 rifles with no flags or posters. Campsites were decided on beforehand by VVAW, and VVAW actually hired a drama troupe known as the Philadelphia Guerilla Theater for assistance. These actors were dressed as South Vietnamese peasants in interrogation reenactments.¹²¹ While RAW gathered much attention and media coverage, VVAW was upset that it did not lead to an end to the Vietnam War, with Nixon still wanting to fight in Southeast Asia.¹²² The VVAW demonstrated the cruelty that American soldiers brought to South Vietnamese villages by bringing to life how American troops threatened, intimidated, harmed, and interrogated residents of South Vietnamese villages, but the organization was unable to make the Nixon White House change its policies regarding the war.

While many VVAW members thought highly of their fellow comrades in battle and had no desire to criticize them, they decided that bringing light to American atrocities in Vietnam could lead to an end to the Vietnam War.¹²³ The Winter Soldier Investigation, coordinated by the VVAW, was a media event in which VVAW members were interviewed about atrocities that they had witnessed or took part in. The Winter Soldier Investigation took place in Detroit, Michigan and lasted from January 31st, 1971 to February 2nd 1971.¹²⁴ The VVAW chose Detroit because of its proximity to Vietnamese refugees living in Windsor, Canada that the VVAW wanted to have testify for the investigation, but the Canadian government denied them visas to discuss atrocities in the war that they witnessed firsthand.¹²⁵ Also, Barry explained that Detroit possessed strong symbolism as the heart of the working class, and people in VVAW wanted

¹²¹ Kirby, "Dramatic Protests," 40.

¹²² Hunt, *The Turning*, 53.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69-71.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

something rooted in the background of the working class.¹²⁶ This event received public attention because actress and anti-war activist Jane Fonda promoted the event, staging a performance, “Acting in Concert for Peace” before the event.¹²⁷ Also, *Playboy* magazine promoted VVAW leading to the Winter Soldier Investigation. *Playboy* gave VVAW a free full page of advertising in its February 1971 issue with a coupon inviting Vietnam veterans to join VVAW.¹²⁸ Though minimal media coverage occurred, actress Jane Fonda’s reputation as an anti-war activist and *Playboy*’s reputation as the leading magazine in men’s entertainment certainly gave VVAW public attention.

According to the VVAW, atrocities were largely a result of U.S. military leadership turning young men into killers, teaching them how to hate the enemy, and how to fight with no mercy and with utter relentlessness. Atrocities allegedly included blindfolding POWs with safety wire (cutting into the eyes and nose), tossing people from helicopters, burning of villages, shooting of civilians, shooting of women and children, disembowelment, decapitation, raping of young Vietnamese girls (sometimes in front of their families), and cutting off ears.¹²⁹ Specific instances even included decapitation of Vietnamese by U.S. soldiers who later placed the heads on stakes, a U.S. soldier shoving an e-tool up a Vietnamese woman’s vagina, an M-16 shoved up a prisoner’s nose and twisted, a game called “ears for beers”, in which U.S. soldiers earned one beer for each Vietnamese ear they cut off, and U.S. soldiers burning the facial hair off of Papasans (Vietnamese old men).¹³⁰ The VVAW believed that publicizing this barbarism and cruelty displayed by the U.S. forces in Vietnam would help bring an end to the war in Vietnam.

¹²⁶ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 236.

¹²⁷ Hunt, *The Turning*, 67.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

¹²⁹ *Winter Soldier*, directed by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Detroit, Michigan: Millarium Zero, 1972).

¹³⁰ *Winter Soldier*, 1972.

However, while the Winter Soldier investigation received some attention, media coverage was minimal.¹³¹ Controversy circulated because some people claimed these soldiers fabricated the incidents they recall witnessing, doubted these soldiers' credibility, and some called them unpatriotic Americans and communist sympathizers. Even some in the U.S. military claimed that the soldiers participating in Winter Soldier Investigation did not tell the truth about the U.S. military as a whole and its condoning of atrocities.

The protest that followed the Winter Soldier Investigation, Dewey Canyon III, is arguably the landmark VVAW protest. Dewey Canyon III saw hundreds of veterans protest the war in Washington D.C. from April 20th, 1971 to April 23rd, 1971.¹³² VVAW lobbied lawmakers on Capitol Hill and discarded their war medals for all to see. Barry Romo explained, "We lobbied; all of us lobbied. I didn't believe in lobbying at this point. I thought they [elected officials] were all scum."¹³³ The most memorable testimony was made by John Kerry to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22nd when he critiqued how the U.S. was fighting the war.¹³⁴ Kerry explained, "We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum. We learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals." In addition, Kerry explained his desire to make Vietnam a place of meaning so mistakes like Vietnam will not be repeated.¹³⁵ Kerry had given voice to the concerns of VVAW members about the Vietnam War and why it was immoral.

¹³¹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 74.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 223-25.

¹³³ Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers*, 246.

¹³⁴ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: An International History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 149.

¹³⁵ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 149-150.

Dewey Canyon III also saw many veterans discard the war medals they had earned for their service in Vietnam. They threw them over a wire fence marked “Trash” in front of the Capitol Building.¹³⁶ Nearly everyone spoke briefly into the microphone, before discarding their medals.¹³⁷ VVAW member and former marine Jack Smith was the first to throw his medals for the fence explaining the damage the U.S. government inflicted on the Vietnamese people.¹³⁸ VVAW member Peter Branagan said, “I got a Purple Heart, and I hope I get another one fighting these motherfuckers.”¹³⁹ Branagan’s quote exemplifies how he (like many anti-war Vietnam veterans) wanted to confront the U.S. government and combat what it was doing in Vietnam because of their strong feelings of the war’s immorality. The protest was so moving that it drew the attention of the American public.¹⁴⁰ Also, the protest was so powerful that VVAW member Rusty Sachs recalled that, “We wouldn’t have been surprised if somebody said, “Hey, Nixon just announced that all the troops will be out of Nam and back by suppertime.”¹⁴¹ The U.S. government heard critique of the war from some of the soldiers it sent to fight that war, and those soldiers discarded the medals they earned. Because American society values military honors, Dewey Canyon III was a moving and vibrant protest by the VVAW heard by the American people.

Following Dewey Canyon III, a major protest was organized by VVAW at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Florida. Though Johnson was the first president to send U.S. ground troops to Vietnam, Nixon sent more troops to Vietnam in his presidency, and it was one reason VVAW members had a strong contempt for Nixon among others. Like most

¹³⁶ Joe Pilati, “Vietnam Veterans’ March on Washington.” *Boston Globe*, May 30, 1971, 6.

¹³⁷ Pilati, “Vietnam Veterans’ March on Washington,” 6.

¹³⁸ Thomas Oliphant, “Antiwar Veterans Discard Medals,” *Boston Globe*, April 24, 1971, 2.

¹³⁹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 114.

¹⁴⁰ Hunt, *The Turning*, 118.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

VVAW members, W.D. Ehrhart hated Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia, his refusal to pull out of Vietnam, and the high casualty figures of American troops in Vietnam despite troop reductions.¹⁴² In the eyes of many VVAW members, Nixon's secrecy and militancy showed tendencies of a war criminal. About 800 VVAW members, including Ron Kovic and Bobby Muller went to Miami to protest the 1972 Republican National Convention.¹⁴³ The VVAW and left-wing protestors had a run-in with a counter-protest by conservative Cubans near a local high school.¹⁴⁴ Also, VVAW members got into a skirmish with the American Nazi Party.¹⁴⁵ These confrontations reflected how the war had divided America on its perceptions of the Vietnam War in Vietnam and the anti-war movement. Ron Kovic explained that attending the convention he said, "I gave America my all and the leaders of this government threw me and the others away to rot in their VA hospitals."¹⁴⁶ Kovic also explained that he was called a communist by Nixon supporters, and they spat in his face also.¹⁴⁷ Kovic remarked that that protest was the biggest moment of his life.¹⁴⁸ Though Nixon would win the 1972 election in a landslide, VVAW had spoken its mind, confronted the president, and disrupted the president's acceptance speech.

The 1972 Republican National Convention also saw the VVAW come under great scrutiny and controversy because of the Gainesville Eight, a group of eight VVAW members (Scott Camil, John Kniffin, William J. Patterson, Alton C. Foss, Peter Mahoney, Donald P. Perdue, Stan Michelsen, and John Briggs) who were arrested on charges of conspiring to cause unrest at the 1972 Republican National Convention by using firebombs, automatic weapons,

¹⁴² W.D. Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 203-05.

¹⁴³ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 189.

¹⁴⁴ John Kifner, "Veterans Face Guardsmen in Protest at Miami Beach," *New York Times*, August 22, 1972, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Hunt, *The Turning*, 156-57.

¹⁴⁶ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 189.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 101-03.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

slingshot-propelled fireworks, slingshots, and crossbows. They were also charged with intending to use “fire teams” to attack stores, police stations, and automobiles and of attempting to “disrupt communications systems in Miami Beach.”¹⁴⁹

Scott Camil of the Gainesville Eight had a story much like other VVAW members but also distinct. Camil grew up in Florida, and his grandmother told him stories of his relatives who had been killed in concentration camps by Nazi Germany. As a Jew, Camil was bullied in his hometown of Hialeah (outside Miami) for “killing Jesus.” Camil fought Cuban students at his high school when they cheered President Kennedy’s assassination, and his stepfather was a policeman who taught him duty to the U.S. government. When recruiters came to his high school, Camil wanted to be a U.S. Marine to show he was a man and to find himself. He claimed that the military made him hate the Vietnamese.¹⁵⁰ Camil explained that he was taught Vietnamese women were “commie baby factories,” and as a Jew, Camil explains that Americans were doing to the Vietnamese what the Nazis were doing to the Jews. He also hated the anti-war movement because he worked in crowd control for the U.S. Marine Corps having to control many protests in Washington D.C., and he despised how Joan Baez and Communist sympathizers sent blood to North Vietnam. He felt tricked and used when as a student at the University of Florida, he learned that Ho Chi Minh was a U.S. ally during World War II, the U.S. promised independence to Vietnam, and the U.S. broke its promise to have democratic elections in South Vietnam when Vietnam was split. These realizations made Camil bitter towards the U.S. government because of its lies about its conduct in Vietnam. Camil was motivated to join the anti-war movement when he was a student at the University of Florida, and Jane Fonda came to talk, she explained how the U.S. government was lying to the American people, and American

¹⁴⁹ Hunt, *The Turning*, 154.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

troops had to speak out on what they were doing in Vietnam. Camil's first exposure to VVAW was when he participated in the Winter Soldier Investigation.¹⁵¹

In the run-up to the 1972 Republican National Convention, the U.S. government had to be careful when dealing with the VVAW because these were veterans who could not easily be dismissed as hippies, Communist sympathizers, as were other groups in the anti-war movement. So, the U.S. government infiltrated VVAW, and it largely tried to portray its members as violence-prone. If the VVAW was violent, it would lose credibility as a bastion in the anti-war movement. Scott Camil explained that undercover agents in VVAW encouraged them to do illegal activities to discredit them. In 1972, Camil was arrested for kidnapping for ransom and assaulting federal officers when he was not speaking out against the war. He considered the arrests positive reinforcement because he got off on all those charges and believed that if the U.S. government was trying so hard to arrest him, it must have been because he was effective at protesting the war.¹⁵² Though VVAW members could not always identify FBI infiltrators, they suspected that they were some of the most "devoted" and "radical" members. VVAW member Richard Huggins (recruited through *Playboy* magazine) once received information from a fellow VVAW member that multiple government informants were at a current meeting by showing him a photograph of them. One of the government informants pictured chanted, "Kill the pigs!" during the meeting.¹⁵³ Also, Ron Kovic cited that when he demonstrated in the 1972 Republican National Convention, two long-haired supposed VVAW members were LAPD informants. Kovic recalled that the informants are typically the most dedicated and hardest working members

¹⁵¹ Transcript, Scott Camil, Oral History Interview by John Paul Lorie, November 15, 2016, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program Collection, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

¹⁵² Camil interview by Lorie.

¹⁵³ Transcript, Scott Camil, Oral History Interview with John Paul Lorie, January 23, 2017, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program Collection, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida. As above

of the group, and he believes that the government might have been involved in dismantling his effort to protest the VA hospitals because of how one of his friends abolished the American Veterans Movement (Kovic's organization for protesting the VA hospitals) during a meeting in 1974. He even suspected his ex-girlfriend Carol was a government informant.¹⁵⁴

The Gainesville Eight case arose because Scott Camil organized the VVAW protest at the 1972 Republican National Convention. He got intelligence from VVAW member Bill Lemmer (who turned out to be an FBI informant) that the government would shoot someone at the convention and blame it on the demonstrators. The government would then raise the drawbridges in Miami then blow up the mechanisms and shoot the anti-war demonstrators. For contingency, Camil planned on the protestors attacking police stations, fire stations, and federal buildings in the area not to harm others but divert attention so the government could not box the anti-war demonstrators in and they could evacuate wounded demonstrators. Camil explained that the move was purely defensive. He said that on the plans, "On every fucking line, I wrote for defensive purposes only!" Twenty-three VVAW members were subpoenaed by the federal government to go to trial for conspiracy to disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention with violence.¹⁵⁵ The case lasted from June 1972 and continue into 1973, when the trial occurred.¹⁵⁶ Prosecution by the U.S. government fell apart because the defendants caught the FBI eavesdropping on them talking with their lawyers in a room the judge allowed them to use. According to juror Lois Hensel, some witnesses avoided eye contact during cross examinations of witnesses by the defense, and some witnesses also contradicted themselves during cross-

¹⁵⁴ Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, 215.

¹⁵⁵ Transcript, Scott Camil, Oral History Interview with John Paul Lorie, January 23, 2017, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program Collection, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

¹⁵⁶ Hunt, *The Turning*, 173.

examinations,¹⁵⁷ In addition, when it came to concern about the weapons the Gainesville Eight were supposed to wreak havoc with and violent intentions, one self-proclaimed “air force weapons instructor” who testified for the prosecution could not tell the difference between M-14 and M-16 rifles or real and toy M-16 rifles, the defense proved their clients’ slingshots could not fit in their clothing, and the “fried marbles” to be shot by VVAW slingshots could not penetrate rabbit skin. Not only that, but Cuban informer Pablo Fernandez who attempted to sell weapons to VVAW members testified that the veterans repeatedly refused his offers, and FBI informant and former VVAW regional coordinator Carl Becker, said he never recalled use of the word “riot” during any VVAW meetings, and did not remember any mention of plans to use violence to disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention. On August 31, 1973, after about three and a half hours of deliberation, the jury deemed the Gainesville Eight not guilty.¹⁵⁸

The Gainesville Eight was a big rallying cry for VVAW.¹⁵⁹ Vietnam veterans were aware that the Gainesville Eight case was an effort to discredit VVAW’s activity against the war by the Nixon administration. W.D. Ehrhart explained that a friend of his was a member of the Gainesville Eight that could not get his job back at an auto parts store since he had been arrested and went broke paying legal fees. He also explained his feelings about the Nixon administration and the Gainesville Eight. “Crazed Viet Veterans Plan Bloodbath, they got what they wanted. They got what they wanted. Headlines. They wanted to make the dumb-fuck Silent Majority believe that the whole antiwar movement was a bunch of violence junkies out to destroy America.”¹⁶⁰ The Gainesville Eight was an attempt, according to anti-war Vietnam veterans, by the federal government to antagonize veterans, paint them as crazed people trying to cause

¹⁵⁷ Transcript, January 23, 2017, University of Florida. As above

¹⁵⁸ Hunt, *The Turning*, 176.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁶⁰ Ehrhart, *Busted*, 115.

violence, and thus damage the veterans' credibility as critics of the Vietnam War. Ehrhart even compared his being arrested for marijuana possession to the Gainesville Eight, explaining to his attorney how damage can be done to innocent people in a court of law without being found guilty.¹⁶¹ However, the VVAW pulled off a victory over the Nixon administration and the Justice Department though the case was very expensive for VVAW, and it showed how rampant government infiltration of the VVAW was.¹⁶²

The VVAW had humble beginnings, but developed a following of over 25,000 due to the passionate feelings Vietnam veterans had.¹⁶³ Though the organization started apolitically, radicalization grew, and the organization struck a leftist tone. Some VVAW members were communists, Maoists, and anarchists. In addition, some allegedly cheered when the U.S. Embassy in Saigon fell in May 1975.¹⁶⁴ The Nixon administration proactively investigated VVAW as a group of violence-prone veterans.¹⁶⁵ However, the Nixon administration never deemed VVAW as "communist-dominated."¹⁶⁶ VVAW went on after the Vietnam War, speaking out on veterans' issues and critiquing the foreign policies of the Regan and Bush administrations in Central America and the Middle East, respectively.¹⁶⁷

The VVAW may not have ended the Vietnam War, but it was significant. VVAW members came from largely conservative and religious backgrounds, possessed grievances against the war that were not tied to an agenda by the other counterculture groups, and assembled protests with size and scale that reached the highest level of the U.S. government. The Vietnam veterans who made up VVAW were the children of the 1950s whose parents were Nixon's Silent

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶² Hunt, *The Turning*, 176-77.

¹⁶³ Hunt, *The Turning*, 167.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 182.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 184.

Majority and World War II veterans in many cases. Growing up, patriotism meant listening to the U.S. government, resisting communism, and serving in the military. Communist revolution threatened everywhere. People did not consider Vietnam a “good war” by any means like World War II, and Vietnam veterans came home to a different America than World War II veterans did. The experience of fighting in Vietnam made many American soldiers speak out against it, and some even turned into political radicals as a result of their experiences in Vietnam. Patriotism developed a different meaning for veterans who spoke out against the war. Patriotism meant disagreeing your government, holding the government accountable for its mistakes, and demanding the government does something in the interest of the people. The VVAW showed the American people the horrors of the Vietnam War, why the war was wrong, and it was the first time veterans ever actively protested a war they were sent to fight in while that war was still going on. Even after the Vietnam War ended, the VVAW shed light on the social issues of veterans, the health care they received, and America’s involvement in other foreign wars. Anti-war Vietnam veterans explained to America the importance of being cognizant of the costs of war (both financial and nonfinancial), how the American people should be cognizant of foreign wars and their motives, and why attention should be heeded to various issues like racism, class discrimination, and militarism in America.

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