

At first the government wanted to play what was known as 'The Daley Game' after the late mayor of Chicago who kept antiwar demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic National Convention on the run, allowing them no place to settle and dialogue their opposition to Vietnam. The tactic did not work with us, essentially because we refused to move and many of us were veterans of Chicago. We managed to get an appeal of an initial injunction to throw us off the mall, then Supreme Court Chief Justice Burger threw out the appeal. Efforts to overrule him through legal means (including representation on our behalf by a former attorney general) failed.

We voted to violate the stringent conditions of our being allowed to stay: we were not allowed to sleep or make preparations for sleep such as unrolling bedrolls, nor could we have fires or pitch tents. There was never any question about not staying. The vote was only whether we would sleep pretending to stay awake or sleep in outright civil disobedience. The federal park police sided with us and pretended they did not see anyone sleeping. The next day the order was rescinded. The mall was ours. A headline that day summed it well:

VETS OVERRULE SUPREME COURT!

Columnist Mary McGrory wrote that our stubborn band of ex-warriors successfully stood off the government. In the meantime several hundred active-duty soldiers promised they would throw down their rifles if they were mobilized against us.

So we stayed. On the last day we threw our combat medals over a barricade onto the steps of the U.S. Capitol.

One man screamed out the names of his dead before he ripped the flashy pieces of tin off his tattered GI shirt and threw them like a long shot from left field. Another threw the cane he limped with from a wounded leg. Their faces were hard and angry as one by one they threw away their rewards for causing and surviving death. "The next time I pick up a rifle it'll be to take this place," shouted one. "These are just garbage," said another. "I've got all these medals," a vet cried, "but the one I'm most ashamed of is my 'good conduct' medal. I'm ashamed of my fucking good conduct."

They walked and limped and passed by in wheelchairs. Some had empty sleeves, one or two patches over empty eyes.

A young Army officer read off the names of 34 officers who were resigning from the Army because of the Vietnam War, from a full-bird colonel down, then dumped the contents of a box of their collective medals.

The statue of John Marshall was slung with half a dozen articles of military uniforms dripping like green blood from his face and arms. Later the medals were swept into a long pile in the form of a coffin and a soldier's helmet was stuck on a long stick at its head.

Throwing our medals at Congress was the last act of our show, which I underestimated as overly showy: a goodly portion of the American people thought our finale was an audacious and tragic gesture that "won their hearts and minds." The day after we threw our medals a huge march of 500,000 people from just about every type of job, union, church and political group from all over the USA tramped through the streets of Washington in opposition to Vietnam (the official bodycount of U.S. forces in Vietnam). We dug in for May Day, which was a week away.

The last major demonstration of the old New Left was planned for May Day 1971 and was intended to commit mass civil disobedience by creating mass chaos in Washington. The city was to be shut down, for a morning at least. War resisters migrated into the city from all over the country in the following week. Although most of the vets had gone home a few of us stayed and maintained a bunker watch over Algonquin City, a growing encampment in a park on the banks of the Potomac River (and site of the Depression 'Bonus Army' of World War 1 veterans). When cops finally raided us on the day before May Day most of the ersatz medics were vets. No heads were broken because almost everyone left and set up scattered camps in three startled universities, half a hundred churches and hundreds of private homes, and anywhere else anybody could find a place to wait for the next day's attempt to close down the government.

Few expected to seriously interrupt the government or that the war would end as a result. What mattered was that several thousand American citizens were determined to commit civil disobedience on a scale never attempted in this country, with the possible exception of the Civil War. They intended to be arrested so that they might take the war to court.

Most of the Vietnam veterans who stayed for May Day were scattered among various delegations that planned to blockade the main targets of highway bridges into Washington and traffic circles inside the city to prevent as long and as often as possible federal workers from reaching their jobs. Those of us who wanted to act together as vets planned the chickenshit strike on the Pentagon. A few wanted to blow up the bridges and highways — the idea of throwing chickenshit was an acceptable compromise. Just after midnight a group of us prowled softly through dark Maryland fields to a chicken farm and filled several plastic bags with slimy odoriferous substances from open coops.

At dawn we were on the road in a rented van. I don't remember which traffic circle we jumped into but it was right in the middle of a large bust, cops and gas everywhere. We surprised the police by charging into them, which was how we survived ambushes in Vietnam. We ran down several streets with cops in pursuit, evading police vehicles and blocking forces setting up in front of us — pure slapstick; a gaudy gang of movie villains chased by Keystone Kops.

We finally got onto a highway bridge after escaping a squadron of motorcycle cops popping off pepper gas clouds and managed to tie up traffic for a few minutes. Foot cops behind us shouted and blew whistles and tried to run through honking stalled cars. In front of us a skirmish line of soldiers was attempting to sweep down on us.

We responded as if we were back in combat. We took advantage of what was there, and it happened to be a stretch of railroad track. We jumped down onto the tracks and ran toward the river while cops and troops bumped into each other and acted confused about chasing us or staying in position on the bridge. Some finally came in pursuit but by then we were far ahead. We didn't bother to dusk reconnaissance helicopters, nervously assuring ourselves that they wouldn't hit us with rockets or machinegun fire. Several of us extended arms and upraised fingers at the pilots and we cut a fast march across the long railway bridge over the Potomac River into Virginia.

We moved in a single file at a fast clip in case we were thought dangerous enough to shoot at, a combat patrol penetrating the Pentagon. At a distance behind a force of soldiers and cops was attempting to catch up with us. Overhead the helicopters buzzed like crazed raptors unable to get at their prey. Behind us in the city clouds of pepper and tear gas grayed the sky, sirens screamed like hurt children. On the river below a patrol boat swung around in tight circles while a man standing on deck shouted threats into a bullhorn, ignored



by the twenty of us strung out on the long bridge from D.C. to Arlington, Virginia.

Cops waited for us on the opposite shore a hundred yards down the spur. We took a different track. We went right around the edge of an Army headquarters camp and by the time soldiers started climbing a few fences to get at us we were long gone.

The helicopters overhead went crazy. Voices from the air shouted at us to stop.

We approached an underpass and on the highway above police cars began to form up, but they were also too late. We dashed under the bridge and around a few boxcars standing on a siding along a high wire fence. Soldiers were on the other side of the fence but they just looked at us. We climbed a grassy knoll and directly in front of us across a two lane highway was the low flat Pentagon building.

With hardly a word we formed into a skirmish line and ran across the highway and onto the Pentagon lawn.

We laughed and cheered until tears were in our eyes, hugging each other and dancing wildly. We had made it through every defense, past hundreds of cops and soldiers. Out of thousands who tried to penetrate the Pentagon that day we were the only ones who reached it. The rest had been busted or turned away at the bridge with tear gas and clubs. The aging Dr. Benjamin Spock was among the gassed and arrested.

We stopped laughing and formed into a column of twos and began to march. One counted cadence.

Armed with a small plastic grenade or two of chickenshit apiece we marched past two surprised security cops who yelled frantically into 2-way pagers. Whoever was in charge of Pentagon security that day seriously neglected the inner defenses in favor of a tight ring outside. We marched around its sides past several shocked and enraged military officers, past a window from which a smiling woman formed a peace sign with her hand, past two more cops who tried to stop us. One of them grabbed at a bag and it emptied on his white uniform. We rounded a corner and suddenly found ourselves at the Pentagon's main entrance. The porch was crowded with high ranking officers, a squad of bewildered cops and several secretaries.

We came to an orderly halt, executed a right face and snapped to attention. Then we attacked. Screams and shouts burst into shocked cadence with the nauseating plop of plastic bags smashed on cement as officers, cops and secretaries scrambled for a single door in wild-eyed panic. An army major stepped forward to bark an order at us, then tore through a group of frightened women like a bowling ball in his haste to get inside the building.

We went mad, the twenty of us, hurling our smelly little bombs everywhere. With our wild maddened eyes and hoarse laughing curses, we must have seemed berserk Vikings. I began grabbing globs of chickenshit in my bare hands and running up the steps throwing it at windows, the glassed door, the walls, heaping piles of it on the porch, slinging it at horrified faces pressed against the inside windows.

Our attack lasted only a few minutes. After we depleted our ammunition, the porch and windows resembling a scarred battlefield, we regrouped on the sidewalk, turned to the left and began to march off. Our pursuers finally caught up with us. Armed soldiers came at us from front and rear but a squad of club wielding police reached us first.

And so we were busted.

"...for fowl defecation distribution," one of us laughed.

We were searched (one ex-grunt dropped two joints into an FBI agent's coat pocket), loaded onto a bus from which we jeered at passing Army officers and various government employees, and sent off to a federal prison in Virginia although an Army enlisted driver purposely got us lost a few times. He winked at us while FBI agents frowned over a map. At the

prison we teased grim U.S. Marshals who were dressed in blue jump suits with shiny scarlet scarves tucked into their collars and shiny black boots on their feet. We assumed positions of POWs, hands flat atop our heads, giving out only names, dates of birth, rank and serial numbers as specified in the U.S. Code of Military Justice. Our rallying cry became

"FREE THE CHICKENSHIT 20!"

and our bail was set at \$50 apiece with a direct order we get out of D.C. within three hours or the minimum sentence would be thirty days and most probably ninety, according to a reproachful federal magistrate whose grim bespectacled face resembled a Grant Wood portrait.

It took us eight hours to get out of jail and by then more than 7,000 had been arrested for May Day "disruptions." It was the largest mass arrest ever made in any American city in a single day and the jails and courts broke down. People were shoved into sports stadiums in the manner of South American countries during public roundups, and fences were broken down allowing many to escape. The stadium was gassed several times when the prisoners got too unruly, and once the crowd toppled a goalpost.

The next day more than 3,000 submitted to arrest at the Justice Department. That day, thinking of ninety days, I was not especially interested in being caught again and slipped out of the trap just before the back door slammed shut. Cops chased a friend and I down a block but we lost them in a crowd. I was unable to get to the Capitol the following day. Cops were hard on the prowl for everybody on the move. I got a face full of gas but managed to evade arrest by ducking into a drugstore. A second try got more gas in my eyes so I settled for a glass of red wine instead.

The immediate reaction to our raid on the Pentagon was for the most part respectful, from both soldiers standing picket line along D.C.'s streets and the freaks ducking in and out of trouble. "You vets got your shit together," was the usual term of approval. It was, of course, only a symbolic act carried out with a good deal of relish and humor. I believe that almost everyone who has spent time in the military, that old chickenshit outfit, has wished to do what we did. I thought throwing chickenshit at the Pentagon was a fitting and unmistakable escalation of throwing our war medals at Congress, a passionately robust and irreverent declaration of independence from the bloody brotherhood of war.

The Vietnam War ended April 30, 1975 when the North Vietnamese Army extinguished the army and government of the South. Twenty years later, in 1995, Robert McNamara, Pentagon chief (under two Presidents) most of the decade the war was fought, admitted it was "terribly wrong" and that the American public was consistently deceived to justify the deaths and maiming of its young sons and daughters, not to mention the million or more deaths of Southeast Asians, which includes Laotians and Cambodians as well as Vietnamese.

McNamara's *mea culpa* inspired me to write letters to newspapers in almost every city or town I antiwarred in, requesting "every cop and National Guardsman who clubbed, maced or arrested me and every politician and 'patriot' who called me a traitor and threatened my life because I protested the war, to apologize." Of course, none repented.

I was denied a job with Census 2000 as a legacy of my antiwar arrests, in particular by the federales for the *Chickenshit 20* episode thirty years ago. Dissent is not yet a crime in the USA, but it is never forgotten nor forgiven.

The history of protest and dissent in this country is largely neglected (except for the Revolution and the Civil War), and there is a pervasive tendency in American society to rapidly move on from anything past as if nothing will stick if only we move hurriedly enough.

Ironically, the state of New Hampshire is embroiled in a controversy over a memorial to a dozen now deceased soldiers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade that fought against Franco's fascists during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. The Lincoln Brigade's veterans are fervently denounced as communists by mainstream veterans groups that seem to overlook their defacto defense of the Nazis and Mussolini's Italian Fascists who aided Franco's military coup against the 'Republican' government.

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade is indeed on the U.S. subversive list, indicted as "prematurely anti-Fascist." My hope is that Vietnam Veterans Against the War is added to the list and that we might be defined as "prematurely anti-Vietnam War."

There are a million histories in the USA. The story of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War is one of them.



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