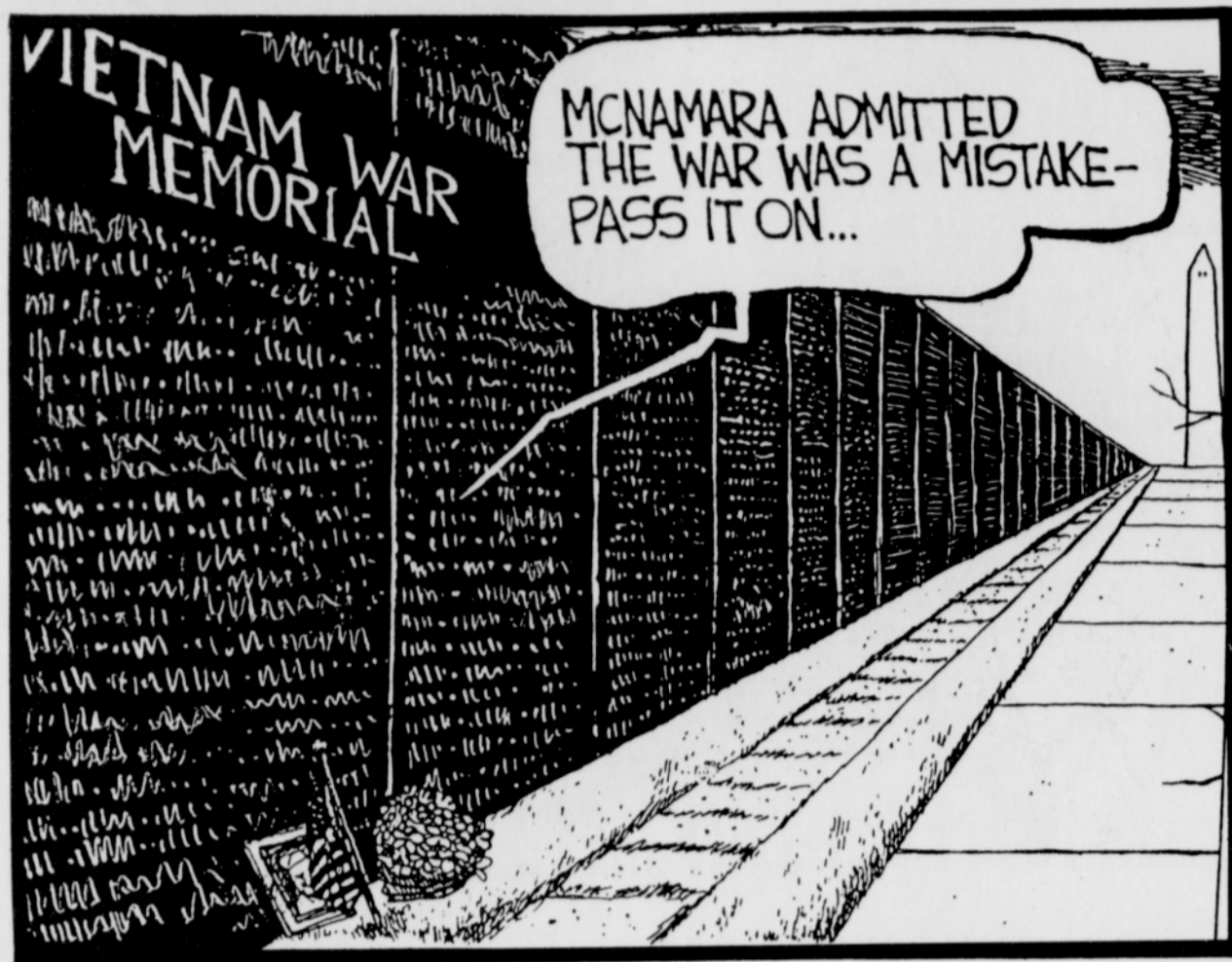


# WINTER SOLDIERS



MARK STEIN

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proved to the media they were with military discharge papers. Ordered off the mall by the Supreme Court, they refused to go, inspiring newspaper headlines such as "Vets Overrule Supreme Court."

Several hundred active duty soldiers standing riot duty in Washington (many of them Vietnam vets) threatened to join the VVAW vets if their units were mobilized against them. On the last day of Dewey Canyon III, more than a 1,000 vets threw their war medals at the Capitol steps — one active-duty Army lieutenant showed up to add the decorations of several officers including his commanding colonel.

Overnight, VVAW became national heroes; from then on the VVAW was acknowledged as a respected "loyal opposition" by a majority of Americans whether they supported or opposed the war. None of VVAW's demands toward ending the war were directly met, nor were they really expected to be; their main objective was to make their presence known to the American public, which they quite obviously accomplished.

Veterans who were unable to go to Washington for Dewey Canyon III held complimentary actions in their local regions all over the country. In Oregon, VVAW spearheaded demands for war crimes investigations by the state legislature in support of what was then called the Massachusetts Law which declared no draftees from any state were to fight in undeclared wars.

Following Dewey Canyon III more than 500,000 people marched against the war in Washington, D.C., almost the exact number of Americans serving in Vietnam, while several thousand marched simultaneously in San Francisco.

Then came May Day in which demonstrators from every state attempted to shut down the city, hundreds of whom were arrested and penned up in sports stadiums. Twenty VVAW members penetrated police and military defenses around the Pentagon and hurled bags of freshly gathered chickenshit on the front steps, and were arrested — for "chicken defecation distribution," one of them said.

Afterwards was M-16 Day with VVAW members working with active duty GIs in actions at military bases in the U.S. as well as overseas; VVAW members on active duty in Vietnam held demonstrations and sit-down strikes against the war.

Dewey Canyon III was the highwater mark of the VVAW. The last VVAW actions of national prominence were occupation of the Statue of Liberty by New York vets in early 1972 and participation in demonstrations that summer at the Republican National Convention in Miami, Florida. The government decided to judicially destroy VVAW and prosecuted veterans who were at the GOP convention, muzzling all publicity that might help their case. But as it turned out, the government depended on its own *agents provocateur* as witnesses against the vets; the defense predicated its case on those very same witness' testimony of infiltration and provocation, and the jury quickly acquitted the defendants.

VVAW did a number of other things beside oppose the war: it provided help for war wounded and traumatized vets who had no one else they felt they could trust; even if they might not oppose the war, they sought the counseling and companionship of Vietnam rap groups inaugurated by VVAW long before the

Veterans Administration recognized what was then called "Post-Vietnam Syndrome (now PTSD). VVAW researched the effects of Agent Orange as well as other toxic defoliants sprayed upon U.S. troops and Vietnamese, and helped bring so-far unsuccessful lawsuits against the government and chemical companies.

(The original organizers and initial members of Vietnam Veterans for America, which among many other activities, sponsored the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., were drawn from VVAW.)

VVAW deactivated before the Vietnam War ended. It had failed its quest to end the war yet notably contributed to its end by defiantly acting on the collective belief that no one knows about a war better than its veterans. By the time the counterfeit government of South Vietnam collapsed and the last American left Saigon, VVAW seemed to have disappeared.

Yet when VVAW had been consigned to history as a single issue aberration its opponents and critics undoubtedly hoped would never recur, newer wars in Central America in the 1980s and the first Persian Gulf War in the 1990s forced the apostate veterans out of languishment and VVAW reemerged in response, recruiting newer generations of disaffected veterans. VVAW remains in existence with a solid cadre nationally of

original and new members, and once again publishes its own newspaper, *The Veteran* as successor to *The Vietnam GI* which died with its editor/publisher Jeff Sharlet, an early victim of Vietnam induced disease.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War has been the only group of veterans formed against a war in which they fought while it was being fought — probably because the war seemed to interminably drag on for nearly a decade with more than half a million killed or wounded.

It is not often soldiers turn against their own armies. From a very small beginning the VVAW grew to about 20,000 members in four years — not many in comparison to the 2.5 million who are accounted to have served in Vietnam, but quite enough to have become the most vital antiwar veterans group in the nation's history.

"From its inception, Vietnam Veterans Against the War was a curiosity and an influential force in the Vietnam protest movement because of the novelty, and political potency, of antiwar demonstrators in uniform," *New York Times* reporter David M. Halbfinger wrote in a recent article (April 2004). "To this day, Vietnam Veterans Against the War remains controversial to some veterans who view its dissent as harmful to troops overseas." \*\*\*

VVAW is receiving nearly as much attention three decades after the fall of Saigon as a result of John F. Kerry's candidacy for President of the USA in 2004 as it once received when it was actively opposed to the Vietnam War. Spurious accusations are being made about VVAW to discredit Kerry, who emerged as a principal spokesman for VVAW following his return from Vietnam as a Navy lieutenant, and they are for the most part as trite as they are untrue.

"In the year and a half that Mr. Kerry belonged to the group, (VVAW) was loosely structured and had its share of revolutionaries and provocateurs — including many secretly working for law enforcement — who pushed the writings of Chairman Mao and talked of tossing grenades, though they seldom did worse than toss bags of chicken droppings at the Pentagon," *New York Times* reporter Halbfinger wrote.

It is ironic that although the Vietnam War is usually considered to have been at the very least morally corrupt if not fundamentally iniquitous, those who dissented against it are too often readily condemned — especially the veterans who protested the war upon their return. "By sending young men into an atrocious, mistaken war, (the powers that be) created a truth so distasteful to the public that its disclosure, by discrediting the discloser, keeps them in power," Jonathan Schell has written in a recent article, 'Politics & Truth'. Perhaps, as it was with the famously infamous Abraham Lincoln Brigade that fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War and were blacklisted by the American government for being "prematurely anti-fascist," the VVAW is damned for being prematurely anti-Vietnam War in addition to the ignominy of defying the omnipotence of the Presidency and Pentagon its members previously served.

Kerry has been both criticized and lampooned for remarks he made during his now notorious appearance at the Senate in 1971 — he said that American troops "raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones

## TRIANGULAR GRIDLOCK

BY DAVID A. HOROWITZ

Memoirs of Vietnam War protest help to describe the turbulent events of that period but not to understand them. As a young professor of American history at Portland State University I participated in antiwar protest, but unlike others of my generation subsequent experiences as both a teacher and scholar has led me to frame the past in different terms.

I believe the Vietnam War era produced a triangular gridlock in the United States that still has not been resolved. Antiwar protesters, most Americans, and the federal government all shared a tragic role in the public drama that tore this country apart.

First, antiwar activists were frustrated over failure to stop the government's involvement in a bloody civil war that initially pitted advanced military technology against poorly armed Vietnamese guerrillas and peasant villagers. We could only conclude that American leaders were building a global economic and military empire based on the ruthless suppression of the aspirations of the poor. Accordingly, the antiwar movement looked back to the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials after World War 2 and the example of the "good Germans" who followed orders and refused to acknowledge the evil done in their name.

Angry over our own political impotence, we identified with Vietnamese revolutionaries whom we saw as underdogs confronting the same American power structure we seemed unable to change here at home. Our inability to stop the war furthered the mistrust of government we had learned from the southern civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Unfortunately our bitterness sometimes carried over into a distrust of democracy itself, a stance which lent itself to disruptive tactics and in a few cases even bombings against symbols of American power. We also came to question many of the social values and practices that seemed to legitimize the system we had come to hate — capitalism, individualism, patriotic loyalty to the nation and military, and the elevation of obligation and duty over rights and personal freedoms.

Ordinary Americans constituted the second spoke of the national gridlock. Most turned against the Vietnam War as unwinnable after the Tet Offensive of early 1968. Some even believed it was immoral. But the same majorities continued to criticize the antiwar movement as self-righteous children of privilege who fantasized themselves as "the people" while targeting ordinary Americans as the enemies of social justice.

Many Americans resented the antiwar movement's tendency to identify with Vietnamese communists who ruthlessly sought to unify their society under party discipline. It was easy to believe that the movement was betraying American soldiers and the country's democratic principles by collaborating with a foreign enemy and dictatorship. These Americans harked back to another German city — Munich, a symbol of the appeasement that had resulted in the Nazi empire and World War 2. Other

Americans saw the antiwar movement's affinity for countercultural values as selfish and self-indulgent — a form of elite privilege associated with the universities and the intelligentsia. Still others feared that the disruptions fostered by the movement threatened democracy and social order itself.

The third element of Vietnam era gridlock was the government in Washington. The great irony of the war, as Robert McNamara now has demonstrated, was that antiwar protesters were actually doing the work of the Establishment — trying to extricate the country from an over extension of its power in a conflict that was not in its national interest. But Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon found themselves the prisoners of a Cold War ideology that held leaders politically accountable for the loss of any nation to communism. Each President feared that surrender in Vietnam would make the U.S. appear weak and unable to lead the coalition against global communism. Each also bonded with the majority of Americans who supported traditional values and saw the United States as the protector of ordinary people.

Richard Nixon sought to withdraw from Vietnam on terms which would preserve the image of Washington as a superpower led by a strong President. He could not let it appear that he was giving in to either Hanoi or the vocal antiwar demonstrators at home. The Cambodia incursion of 1970, the move into Laos in 1971 and the Christmas Bombing of North Vietnam in 1972 were all futile gestures by an out of control government seeking not to win a war but to flex American muscle in the process of defeat.

Nevertheless, Nixon did speak for most Americans when he used harsh rhetoric against disruptive elements of the antiwar movement in the spring of 1970. Like police actions at Columbia University and Chicago in 1968, the spontaneous attack by National Guardsmen at Kent State was part of a public ritual of reprisal against the antiwar movement. American society was not genuinely threatened by antiwar disruptions. Nor were elites taking the first step toward the creation of a militaristic state. Instead, political leaders simply set the climate for violent expression of rampant public fury toward young radicals whom a frustrated society saw as a symbol of its own decline.

One year short of three decades after the end of the war on the last day of April 1975, healing may or not be in order. Hopefully, however, all Americans can acknowledge their shared past and take it from there. Perhaps all three sides of the triangular gridlock can see their own role in the tragedy surrounding the Vietnam War and in the nation's costly but ultimate extrication from its grasp.

David Horowitz has been an American History professor at Portland State University since 1968. He is the author of a number of books, his latest *America's Political Class Under Fire: The 20th Century's Great Culture War*, published by Routledge Press. He is also a semi-regular contributor to the NCTE.

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