

to human genitals and turned up the power, blew up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam," all of which he added were war crimes under Geneva Conventions — but these allegations were culled from direct statements by Vietnam vets at the Winter Soldier War Crimes Testimonies. Kerry's most relevant remarks to the Senate were:

We are asking here in Washington for some action, action from the Congress of the United States of America which has the power to raise and maintain armies, and which by the Constitution also has the power to declare war.

We have come here, not to the President, because we believe that this body can be responsive to the will of the people, and we believe that the will of the people says that we should be out of Vietnam now.

We are here in Washington also to say that the problem of this war is not just a question of war and diplomacy. It is part and parcel of everything that we are trying as human beings to communicate to people in this country, the question of racism which is rampant in the military, and so many other questions — the use of weapons, the hypocrisy in our taking umbrage at the Geneva Convention and using that as justification for a continuation of this war when we are more guilty than any other body of violations of the Geneva Convention in the use of free fire zones, harassment interdiction fire, search and destroy missions, the bombings, the torture of prisoners, the killing of prisoners, all accepted policy by many units in South Vietnam. That is what we are trying to say. It is part and parcel of everything.

"We were sent to Vietnam to kill communism, but we found instead that we were killing women and children," Kerry wrote in a book about Dewey Canyon III, *The New Soldier*. "We knew the saying 'War is hell', and we also knew that wars take their toll in civilian casualties. In Vietnam, though, 'the greatest soldiers in the world', better armed and better equipped than the opposition, unleashed the power of the greatest technology in the world against thatched huts and mud paths. In the process we created a nation of refugees, bomb craters, amputees, orphans, widows and prostitutes, and we gave new meaning to the words of the Roman historian Tacitus: *Where they made a desert they called it peace.*"

The criticism Kerry has received for his Senate testimony is invalidated by the tortures of Iraqi prisoners by a new generation of Americans on foreign soil. As a letter writer to *The Oregonian* said recently about the "moral damage" to friends who had been in Vietnam (comparing then with now), "Aside from a few who arrived as sadists, ordinary soldiers trained and licensed to kill, equipped with extreme firepower amidst relatively helpless locals, living for months with unending fear and threats from a population they were there to serve, often had their sense of right and wrong shoved aside or just ground down. They did unthinkable acts, finding real excuses then. But when the dust settled, excuses couldn't save them as they lived on, knowing what they did."

Among caustic allegations made about VVAW is that it was communist inspired or at least infiltrated by communists — it was infiltrated with quantum more undercover agents from nearly every government agency in the country, from CIA/FBI to local police moles. Another canard is that VVAW was bankrolled by — multiple choice: Moscow and/or Red China; Jane Fonda, with whom the rightwing has a very unhealthy, even psychotic fixation; various leftwing "terrorist" groups (most VVAW vets would say their personal participation in terrorism ended with discharge from the military); and perhaps by even Ho Chi Minh himself, whose May 10 birthday would have made him 114 years old had he not died 35 years ago in 1969, six years before his dream of reuniting Vietnam became real.

Various conservative or rightwing publications as the *Washington Times* accuse "Kerry and his men" (VVAW) of having "work(ed) in behalf of the interests of the North Vietnamese." That accusation was by Wesley Pruden, who also wrote "Kerry's work with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War may turn out to be the most explosive landmine of the campaign." Columnist Mona Charen wrote (paraphrasing B.G. Burkett's *Stolen Valor*) "that many of those so-called Vietnam vets had never been to Vietnam. Among those who had, many had never seen combat but had technical or service jobs."

Joseph Farah writes that John Kerry "is a traitor to his country" because of his involvement in the VVAW and thinks he is "a sleeper agent for some totalitarian foreign country."

Perhaps the most onerous aspersion against VVAW is the matter of possible assassination some of its members discussed, perhaps endorsed. Pro-war politicians as well as war profiteers were allegedly targeted, but in each instance the notion was turned down. The fact such proposals were discussed has more to do with the fact many of these men were adept in killing, despite claims that VVAW was made up primarily of rear echelon veterans. To the contrary, a great many, possibly even a majority were combat vets — how else to explain the crippled, armless and legless vets who were at Dewey Canyon III. Whenever a prospect of assassination might have been discussed it was probably dismissed as impassively as it was thought about. VVAW was not a Boy Scout troop. Its membership consisted of killers whose most intense purpose was to stop the killing even if sometimes they thought about killing as a means of ending it. Some of the former "killing machines" thought violence a reasonable option as well as assassination; but others said, "We don't do that anymore."

**The American Legion was created in 1919 following World War 1 to forestall the participation of veterans in the growing postwar labor rebellions, which were labeled "Bolshevik." Veterans were in essence manipulated against their own best interests and became in fact the strongest force suppressing the labor movement in the 1920s, and the Legion has since been a virtual rubber stamp for anything Pentagon. A lesser, almost subsidiary organization is the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which was formed after World War 2. At first liberal in contrast to the Legion, the VFW became so closely identifiable with it that during the Vietnam War its national leader denounced VVAW members demonstrating against the war in Washington, D.C., as traitors, which has over the years become synonymous with dissent against military policy.*

***Turning against a war in wartime might have a side-effect of aiding an enemy, but it would have helped humanity immensely if a few more soldiers had turned against Hitler during World War 2.*

****The word veteran presumes combat service, or at least military service in a war; but it has become virtually all-inclusive, denoting military service at any time, including peacetime; or in time of war but not participating in it, such as "Vietnam-era veterans."*



VVAW/WSO

Kerry plays down his opposition to the Vietnam War and his presence within VVAW. He does say that after more than a year in the VVAW his disagreements with a more radical agenda others wanted to follow was cause to quit — he never denied he was ambitious for a political career.

Jonathan Schell points out the principal paradox of Kerry's candidacy: "One might think that Kerry's good sense and bravery in opposing the Vietnam War three decades ago might stand him in good stead today. (How many Americans now think getting into Vietnam was a good idea?) But...just the opposite is the case. It is Kerry's bravery...fighting the mistaken war, not his bravery as a veteran opposing it, that helps him in his bid for the Presidency."

Though Kerry distances himself from VVAW, it is the presence of the vets who have encompassed him who have set fire to his campaign and made him the Democratic contender — and in their company he is not as aloof or starchy as he often appears to be in public events and speeches.

Kerry made his political bones with VVAW — his association with VVAW gave him national prominence. His jump start, whether he wishes to proudly acclaim it or dismiss it as youthful idealism, was provided by his brief embrasure of a controversial antiwar veterans movement.

Antiwar veterans movements have been virtually unnoticed in American history. Yet that history abounds with veterans taking arms against their military masters from the very start. Former colonial veterans of the French & Indian War fought against their old army and set up a republic two centuries ago. The Army split down the middle in 1861 and comrade fought comrade for four immensely bloody years until the Union was restored. Of more subtle consequence was the 'Whiskey Rebellion' of 1796. Revolutionary war veterans banded together to protest the taxing of whiskey. Their methods were radical yet peaceful, but the new U.S. Army was sent to suppress them with force at the order of President George Washington. Confederate veterans formed armed groups after the Civil War to resist the plundering 'Reconstructionist' governments that took up occupation in the South — an entire Southern army division defected intact to Mexico but dissipated before it could fight because neither Juaristas nor occupation French wanted it: the luckless ambition had been for its officers

to lead a combined Confederate/Mexican army back across the border to fight Yankees again.

In 1932 the 'Bonus Army', made up of World War 1 veterans, marched on Washington, D.C. to demand promised war benefits as a desperate attempt to survive the Great Depression. They built a shanty-city outside the Capitol and were forcibly dispersed by the Army; a few were killed, many beaten.

In World War 2 an Army division in Europe went on strike until some of its demands against intolerable conditions were met. The ringleaders were arrested.

Following the war, almost the entire Pacific command nearly mutinied when it was learned several army divisions as well as naval forces were to be sent to China to combat the communist forces of Mao Tse Tung. The mutiny was quickly averted by keeping the promise made at the start of the war that troops would be sent home when it was over.

Also after World War 2 thousands of servicemen angrily protested a year-long continuation of the draft and were only appeased when they were told that new draftees would replace them and they would get home sooner as a result.

There have undoubtedly been countless such revolts against the military system, however limited in scope and action, whether or not successful. With the exception of renegade officers leading military coups and setting up dictatorships, the actions of soldiers turning against their nations' military in the name of peace and anti-militarism have largely gone unknown — in that context it would seem that the only combat veteran in Western history known to attempt the philosophical collapse of militarism was Socrates.

If there has ever existed a well-researched and documented history of rebellion within military institutions objecting to militarism and the ethic of war, it has been well hidden from curious eyes. What information is known has been confined to obscure texts and memoranda. However important the specifics may be in piecing together the pattern, the greatest importance is the fact that revolt within the military machine is an enduring tradition in itself. Just as radical opposition has always existed at the core of every civil/political system, so it has inside every military arm of those systems.

Within this tradition of revolt can be understood both the roots and vacuum of the rebellion against the Vietnam War by a number of its veterans. The roots lie in the constant insurrection throughout military history; the vacuum exists in the suppression of that history. Vietnam veterans who opposed the war had to start from scratch with little workable knowledge of precedent in what they attempted. Yet because they were left to their own imaginations, the members of VVAW instigated the most significant revolt against war by war veterans in American history.

The United States could use a newer group of disaffected soldiers and veterans to act as a conscience to the raw and sordid perpetuation of warfare.*** Perhaps it is an explanation for the vicious attacks upon the VVAW — the dread that today's war veterans will form a similar opposition and have more force and support from lessons learned as a result of the precedent VVAW set. At the same time, VVAW should probably change its name to reflect its newer crops of veterans, perhaps American War Veterans Against War to encompass future wars as well as the most recent.

"We believe that service to our country and communities did not end when we were discharged," a statement in the VVAW newspaper *The Veteran* declared. "We remain committed to the struggle for peace and for social and economic justice for all people. We will continue to oppose senseless military adventures and to teach the real lessons of the Vietnam War. We will do all we can to prevent another generation from being put through a similar tragedy, and we will continue to demand dignity and respect for veterans of all eras."

In a review about a recent book on VVAW, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, by Andrew E. Hunt, Holy Cross professor Jerry Lembeck (author of *The Splitting Image: Myth, Memory & The Legacy of Vietnam*) wrote for *Humanity & Society*, "The most remarkable feature of the VVAW story (is) it hasn't ended. The only '60s-generation antiwar organization that lived to see the new century, VVAW is still a force for peace. Its obituary has yet to be written."

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BEN TRE SUBURB

You ask us why we're out here, carrying signs
Out in this god-forsaken asphalt shopping center
You who sent us to level the verdant jungles of
Vietnam.

A man takes a leaflet
and rips it up without reading it.
A woman faces us so bristling with hate
that her glasses shake to the end of her nose.
"You communists," she finally
manages to squeeze
out her contorted mouth.

Communists like those
we were sent over to fight?

Go home, you shout.
But we have none.
You sent us abroad
And now the world is our home.

Now wherever you send us
We meet our brothers,
Not our enemy.

Why are we here
in front of the supermarket, the auditorium,
the theater, your favorite restaurant?
We're here because it's the only way to reach you —
Before the next war.

~MICHAEL BERKOWITZ

from *'Demilitarized Zone: Veterans After Vietnam'*, published by East River Anthology/First Casualty Press (VVAW), 1976.