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# A Divided Front: Military Dissent During the Vietnam War

## **Abstract**

Emerging from a triumphant victory in World War Two, American patriotism surged in the 1950s. Positive images in theater and literature of America's potential to bring peace and prosperity to a grateful Asia fueled the notion that the United States could be the "good Samaritan of the entire world."<sup>[1]</sup> This idea prevailed through the mid-1960s as three-quarters of Americans indicated they trusted their government. That positive feeling would not last, and America's belief in its own exceptionalism would begin to shatter with "the major military escalation in Vietnam and the shocking revelations it brought."<sup>[2]</sup> The turmoil in social and economic spheres during the 1960s combined with contradictions about America's role in Vietnam and realization of the government's deception regarding the nature and progress of the war itself fueled the largest movement of servicemen and veteran dissent in this nation's history.

[1] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2015) 13.

[2] Appy, *American Reckoning*, xv.

## **Keywords**

Vietnam, Vietnam War, Military history, Civil Rights, Military integration

# A Divided Front: Military Dissent during the Vietnam War

By  
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Emerging from a triumphant victory in World War II, American patriotism surged in the 1950s. Positive images in theater and literature of America's potential to bring peace and prosperity to a grateful Asia fueled the notion that the United States could be the "good Samaritan of the entire world."<sup>1</sup> This idea prevailed through the mid-1960s as three-quarters of Americans indicated they trusted their government. That positive feeling would not last, and America's belief in its own exceptionalism would begin to shatter with "the major military escalation in Vietnam and the shocking revelations it brought."<sup>2</sup> The turmoil in social and economic spheres during the 1960s combined with contradictions about America's role in Vietnam and realization of the government's deception regarding the nature and progress of the war itself fueled the largest movement of servicemen and veteran dissent in this nation's history.

The year 1965 would be pivotal in turning public opinion against the war as three significant events coincided to raise public consciousness. First, *Ramparts* magazine, founded in 1962 as a liberal Catholic quarterly, published its first article on the war in Vietnam in January of 1965 highlighting the contradictions

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<sup>1</sup> Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2015) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Appy, *American Reckoning*, xv.

between what America had been told about Vietnam and what was actually occurring there politically.<sup>3</sup> Second, President Johnson announced in July, that he would increase the number of troops sent to Vietnam by 50,000. This would necessitate a doubling of draft calls, seemingly in contradiction to the administration's stated goal of peace.<sup>4</sup> Finally, America was exposed to its first shocking images of the war's reality through television. CBS correspondent Morley Safer, while accompanying US Marines on a search and destroy mission, produced what is considered to be one of the most controversial reports of the war. With images of US soldiers torching civilian houses as a backdrop, Safer simply stated, "This is what the war in Vietnam is all about."<sup>5</sup> For the first time, Americans saw that their troops were capable of committing atrocities. These events galvanized civilian activists and sparked the beginning of a dissent movement within the armed services.

GI resistance to the Vietnam War began in 1965 similar to a ripple; it started with "individual acts of conscience," but then spread into collective acts of organized dissent within the ranks.<sup>6</sup> The earliest known example of GI protest occurred on November 6, 1965 in El Paso, Texas. Lieutenant Henry Howe joined a small civilian peace demonstration, carrying a sign that stated, "End Johnson's Facist [sic] Aggression."<sup>7</sup> Although Howe was not in uniform, not on duty, and in apparent compliance with military

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Scheer, "Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley," *Ramparts*, January 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Pomfret, John D. "Johnson Orders 50,000 More Men to Vietnam and Doubles Draft; Again Urges U.N. to Seek Peace." *New York Times*. July 29, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Morley Safer's Cam Ne News Broadcast. Accessed February 29, 2016. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNYZZi25Ttg>.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996) 69.

<sup>7</sup> David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1975) 52.

regulations, he was court-martialed and sentenced to two years hard labor. In February of 1966, former Green Beret Donald Duncan became the first Vietnam Veteran to publicly speak out against the war. In his *Ramparts* magazine article entitled, “The whole thing was a lie!” Duncan praised antiwar protestors, arguing they were “opposed to people, our own and others, dying for a lie, thereby corrupting the very word democracy.”<sup>8</sup> In October 1966, Army doctor Howard Levy refused to train Green Beret medics headed to Vietnam. His court-martial defense was based on the Nuremberg principle requiring non-participation in war crimes or genocide. Despite a protracted and publicized trial process, Levy was convicted and sentenced to three years at Fort Leavenworth.<sup>9</sup>

Before the summer of 1966, soldiers operated as individuals in their dissent to the war. However, on June 30, 1966, PFC James Johnson, PVT Dennis Mora, and PVT David Samas—later known as the Fort Hood Three—became the first soldiers to collectively oppose the war. They refused direct orders to board a ship bound for Vietnam and stated in a press conference, “We have decided to take a stand against this war, which we consider immoral, illegal, and unjust.”<sup>10</sup> In an article published in *The Peacemaker* periodical, Private Samas is quoted as saying during his court-martial, “The Nuremberg trials established that soldiers have the obligation to use their consciences in following orders.”<sup>11</sup>

The GI resistance movement further grew to include issues of racial identity. Marines William Harvey and George Daniels—both African American—were the first Marines to openly question

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Duncan, “The Whole Thing Was a Lie!,” *Ramparts* 4, no 10, February 1966.

<sup>9</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> “Long Sentences for Three GI Refusers,” *Peacemaker*, September 17, 1966, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Box 14 Folder 1, 5.

whether African Americans should fight at all in Vietnam. The two men were arrested for asking to speak with their commanding officer, charged with “insubordination and promoting disloyalty,” and sentenced to prison.<sup>12</sup> African Americans again rose up as a group on the night of August 23, 1968 in response to an executive decision to send troops to the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Over one hundred African American troops gathered at Fort Hood to “discuss their opposition to Army racism and the use of troops against civilians.”<sup>13</sup> The forty-three African American GIs arrested became known as the Fort Hood Forty-Three.

While civilian peace activists had organizations to promote their cause, it was not until April of 1967 that Vietnam veterans had an organization of their own. In the streets of Manhattan, over 100,000 protestors gathered for what would be the largest rally in New York since the war began. Vietnam veterans were asked to march at the front, and the six who did so conceived Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). One of the six veterans, Jan Barry recalled how the organization came to be during the march:

Just as we got close...somebody said, “Vietnam veterans go to the front”...Somebody had provided a banner that said Vietnam Veterans Against the War...So I tracked down this Veterans for Peace group, went to one of their meetings, and discovered there was no Vietnam veterans group, they just brought along the sign, hoping some Vietnam veterans would show up.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 104.

Early statements of the VVAW claimed Vietnam was a civil war with no American solution, and that the American people were lied to about the nature of their country's involvement.<sup>15</sup> GI resistance was now represented by an official organization comprised of men who had fought in the conflict and witnessed first-hand the realities of the war.

The GI movement continued to grow and gain momentum in 1968 as the war effort in Vietnam suffered. In April, forty GIs led an antiwar demonstration in San Francisco, marking the first time active-duty soldiers were at the head of a protest march.<sup>16</sup> Outside Fort Hood in Texas, soldiers gathered for a "love-in" to listen to rock music and antiwar speeches. Again in San Francisco, nine enlisted men went AWOL and took sanctuary in a church "in moral opposition to the war."<sup>17</sup> Later that year, twenty-seven inmates from the Presidio stockade in San Francisco held a "sit-down strike" to protest the shooting of a fellow prisoner. The goal of this "Presidio Munity" was to call attention to the unbearable living conditions in the stockade.<sup>18</sup> The GI movement was now widespread and organized. Americans, both outside and within the military ranks, became increasingly disillusioned with their country's war effort in Vietnam.

Dissent and disobedience took many forms. Single protests, collective demonstrations, and organized actions were not the only ways for soldiers to dissent. Other effective ways of undermining support for the war within the ranks were through the publication of underground GI newspapers and through the founding of coffeehouses near large military bases. GI newspapers were a fundamental expression of political opposition within the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 57

<sup>17</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> *Sir No Sir!*, DVD, Directed by David Zeiger (Displaced Films, 2005).

military. By 1971, there were an estimated “144 underground newspapers published or aimed at U.S. military bases” written by active duty GIs, veterans, and civilian supporters.<sup>19</sup> These underground newspapers were successful in reaching thousands of service members, with some of the largest papers, such as *Vietnam GI*, *Camp News* and *The Bond* claiming to reach tens of thousands.<sup>20</sup> The GI Press Service was formed in June of 1969 as an “associated press” of GI underground newspapers, functioning as a national center for the distribution of articles.<sup>21</sup> The primary function of most underground newspapers was to spread news of the GI movement, acts of resistance, the military responses, and general war news. Many of these papers were short-lived, but the impact of their message was not.

August 1969 was a milestone in military underground newspaper publishing when the antiwar paper *Rough Draft* gained permission to be openly distributed at Fort Eustis in Williamsburg, Virginia. Approval came from Major General Howard Schiltz after a four-month-long effort by *Rough Draft* representatives.<sup>22</sup> In an issue of the local newspaper, an army spokesman emphasized, “This action cannot be construed in any way as an official endorsement of the contents of the newspaper.”<sup>23</sup> On August 28, 1969, the *Rough Draft* was openly distributed on post. Future permission for distribution would be granted on an “issue-by-

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<sup>19</sup> “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, Marvin E. Gittleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, H. Bruce Franklin (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 326.

<sup>20</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 96.

<sup>21</sup> “GI Movement: Timeline, 1965-1973,” *Antiwar and Radical History Project—Pacific Northwest*, University of Washington, 2009, Accessed February 28, 2016, [http://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/gi\\_timeline.shtml](http://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/gi_timeline.shtml).

<sup>22</sup> Dale M. Brumfield, *Independent Press in D.C. and Virginia: An Underground History*, Charleston: The History Press, 2015, 183.

<sup>23</sup> “‘Rough Draft’ Distribution at Ft. Eustis Pleases Editors, Astonishes Some GIs,” *Rough Draft*, September/October 1969, Accessed February 29, 2016, 1.



issue” basis.<sup>24</sup>The *Rough Draft* was fulfilling part of its stated mission “to be a forum and a rally point for dissent” and “to destroy the negative influence of apathy among the servicemen of the armed forces and encourage them to stand for their rights.”<sup>25</sup> As a result of the victory at Fort Eustis, more antiwar papers were allowed distribution on bases across the United States. The underground newspaper no longer had to be underground.

In the absence of official approval for distribution on post, newspapers found their way out to the soldiers through a series of off-base coffeehouses, which served as a relaxed setting for GIs to interact with each other and to read antiwar material. The dissenting GIs who supported underground newspapers and coffeehouses were not officers, but enlisted soldiers. Army veteran Fred Gardner wanted the mainstream peace movement to see GIs as potential antiwar allies instead of enemies. In January of 1968, Gardner opened the first coffeehouse in Columbia, South Carolina outside of Fort Jackson, and named it the UFO. Within a few months of its opening, “an average of six hundred GIs a week were visiting the place and antiwar activities were beginning to develop.”<sup>26</sup> Gardner went on to open two more coffeehouses: the “Oleo Strut” near Fort Hood, Texas and “Mad Anthony Wayne’s” near Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The coffeehouses were strategically located outside major military training bases to attract unhappy GIs and give them an environment to voice their complaints. Often staffed by civilians, coffeehouses fostered a bond between soldiers and civilians, and served as a place where they could come together and work collaboratively.<sup>27</sup> By 1971,

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<sup>24</sup> “Ex-Servicemen, Wives Distribute Antiwar Papers,” *The Bee* (Danville, VA), August 29, 1969, 4.

<sup>25</sup> “The Mission,” *Rough Draft*, September/October 1969, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 99.

there were as many as twenty-six established coffeehouses.<sup>28</sup> The network of coffeehouses and the proliferation of underground newspapers reflected the growing frustration and disillusionment over the stalemate that war in Vietnam was becoming.

Racial and economic inequalities in the country during the 1960s provided motivation for dissent within the ranks as military service did not eliminate the injustices of society at large. The draft itself was biased against the poor and those without powerful connections. The draft was appropriately compared to a regressive tax, “falling on individuals whose income is low.”<sup>29</sup> Most often, the drafted soldier belonged to the working class. The wealthy could choose alternate avenues for service, afford full-time college draft deferments, and obtain medical exemptions from private physicians. Vietnam veteran Ronald Spector writes, “The consideration that most determined a man’s chances of fighting and dying in Vietnam was not race but class. It was the poor who bore the lion’s share of the fighting and dying.”<sup>30</sup> The American Serviceman’s Union (ASU), organized in trade union style to lobby for more equitable conditions within the military, established “a clear tradition of working-class resistance to military authority and unjust war.”<sup>31</sup>

Economic exploitation was only one issue raised within the ranks as evidence of injustice. Racial prejudice and inequality would prove to be a powerful source of dissidence and disobedience, reaching crisis levels in 1968 and the following years. The antiwar movement brought increased attention to racial

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *The Report of the President’s Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, February 1970.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York, The Free Press: 1994) 38.

<sup>31</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 71-72.

issues within civilian society as well as within the ranks. African American soldiers' antiwar sentiments were encouraged by leaders such as Mohammed Ali, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., who all spoke out against the war.<sup>32</sup> One of the main issues raised was whether African American soldiers should risk their lives for a country that denies them basic rights at home. Civil rights leader Julian Bond echoes this feeling in his graphic novel as he writes, "Why are we always first citizens on the battlefield and second class citizens at home."<sup>33</sup> These were valid questions, as discussion of the condition of American society and of the armed forces in the mid-sixties will show.

Vietnam was the first war in American history in which the military was fully integrated, and thus African American men could see the potential for greater career opportunities and mobility in the armed forces than in the civilian sector. In one study of volunteer enlistments, African American soldiers often cited "self-advancement" as the reason for enlisting while white soldiers cited draft avoidance.<sup>34</sup> Once in the military, however, black soldiers experienced the continuing consequences of racial discrimination and institutionalized segregation and found "that educational deficiencies barred them from qualifying for many of the highly skilled or highly technical jobs."<sup>35</sup> They felt discriminated against in promotions, and they felt they were disproportionately represented in combat units. These factors combined to spur African American troops to be among the first antiwar advocates

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<sup>32</sup> David Cortright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 2, Article 5, 1990, 2.

<sup>33</sup> "Vietnam: An Antiwar Comic Book," *University of Virginia*, 4, Accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Charles C. Moskos Jr., "The American Dilemma In Uniform: Race in the Armed Forces," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1973, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, 37.

inside the military.<sup>36</sup> Because many black men could not afford deferment status, African Americans were over-proportionately drafted. The disproportionate assignment of blacks to combat arms in a supposedly equal and desegregated military reflects the continued impact of inequality in education.<sup>37</sup> Between 1961 and 1966, blacks accounted for 16% of soldiers killed in Vietnam, a number out of proportion to their participation.<sup>38</sup> By 1967, the military took action to reduce the number of black casualties by reducing their numbers in front-line combat units.<sup>39</sup> By 1972, black representation in the military (11%) and in casualty lists (12%) was in proportion to their presence in the total population (11-12%).<sup>40</sup> While racial unrest was making headlines in the United States, racial tension did not reach crisis levels among soldiers in Vietnam until the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. After that, “signs of racial polarization and tension became clear and unmistakable.”<sup>41</sup>

African Americans were not the only minority group to be affected by heightened racial consciousness and subjected to the racial injustices of the Vietnam War. Latino and American Indian communities had similar frustrations and offered a strong antiwar presence as they found ways to collaborate with the black community to voice their dissent. GIs United Against the War was a dissent organization founded by African American Joe Miles that

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<sup>36</sup> Appy, *American Reckoning*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Moskos Jr., “The American Dilemma In Uniform: Race in the Armed Forces,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 99-101. Army statistics show that 16% of those drafted between 1960-1970 were black.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>39</sup> Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Moskos Jr., “The American Dilemma In Uniform: Race in the Armed Forces,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 99.; “Statistical Information About Fatal Casualties of the Vietnam War,” National Archives, Accessed February 29, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, 249.

included black, Latino, and some white soldiers. Private Mora of the Fort Hood Three was Latino, and at his trial stated, “We lived in a tenement because we were Puerto Ricans” and implied that he was limited in career opportunities because of his race.<sup>42</sup> While an integrated Armed Force might have been able to soften the social and educational deprivations suffered by minorities, it could not eliminate them. In the heat of a highly- contested war, these differences became magnified as race-based dissent within the military was clearly linked to greater civil rights struggles for minority and oppressed groups.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, the war effort in Vietnam was floundering. In January 1968, the Tet Offensive revealed how desperate the situation in Vietnam really was. On January 30, forces from North Vietnam “struck seven major South Vietnamese cities, burning government buildings, freeing prisoners, and lobbing rockets and mortars onto military installations.”<sup>44</sup> This massive attack repudiated any idea that a victory for the United States was within sight. Tet exposed the government’s propaganda about the success of the war, destroyed the sense of optimism about the war’s progress, exposed the lies about the support of the South Vietnamese for the American presence, served as a catalyst for increased veteran resistance, and, in the words of Walter Cronkite, demonstrated that “it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.”<sup>45</sup> While deemed a military success, the Tet Offensive convinced many

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<sup>42</sup> “Long Sentences for Three GI Refusers,” *Peacemaker*, September 17, 1966, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Box 14 Folder 1, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Scovill Currin, “An Army of the Willing: Fayette’Nam, Soldier Dissent, and the Untold Story of the All-Volunteer Force,” PhD diss., Duke University, 2015, 64. Accessed February 20, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Cronkite’s ‘We Are Mired in Stalemate’ Broadcast, February 27, 1968,” *University of Richmond*, Accessed February 28, 2016.

Americans of the war's futility and is considered to be a significant turning point in the war, one that decimated troop morale and galvanized veteran resistance.<sup>46</sup>

Following revelations from the Tet Offensive, two additional events served as key catalysts for increasing antiwar activism among veterans. From December 1968 to May 1969, the United States undertook a major offensive to gain control of a large and heavily populated region of the Mekong Delta.<sup>47</sup> The success of Operation Speedy Express was measured, as all ground and air missions were, by body count of those killed. This created a "single-minded focus on killing" which filtered down from a command level through the ranks. The body count as a measurement system was later denounced by one general as "A great crime and cancer in the Army in the eyes of young officers."<sup>48</sup> By official standards, Operation Speedy Express was a success because of the high body count. Later investigation would reveal that many of those killed were noncombatant civilians, exposing the indiscriminate brutality of this war. The second incident occurred in 1969 in the village of My Lai when American soldiers murdered hundreds of unarmed civilians. Once the story was exposed in 1971, Americans were appalled that their "boys" were capable of such violence. Antiwar veterans were further frustrated by the lack of accountability at a command level and the prosecution of low-level officers such as Lieutenant William Calley, who was perceived as a scapegoat. This incidence of brutality at My Lai led the Vietnam Veterans Against the War to conduct the Winter Soldier Investigation, a hearing on war crimes, in 1971. Their goal was to prove that "the use of terror and mass destruction tactics against Vietnam's civilian population was a

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<sup>46</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 41-42.

<sup>47</sup> Appy, *American Reckoning*, 179-181.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

pervasive phenomenon directly resulting from U.S. war policy.”<sup>49</sup> Operation Speedy Express and the My Lai Massacre exposed the brutality of tactics, the failure of leadership, and the utter immorality of the body count strategy that could no longer be overlooked.

Men serving in the Armed Forces, by this time, had seen enough hypocrisy, deception, and immorality in their leadership to justify dissent and outright disobedience. Over in Vietnam, soldiers saw clear evidence that the United States was neither supporting democracy nor the will of the South Vietnamese people. One Marine wounded in Vietnam recalled, “I think any other war would’ve been worth my foot. But not this one. One day, someone has got to explain to me why I was there.”<sup>50</sup> American soldiers were demoralized by the war’s brutal tactics and senseless casualties.<sup>51</sup> Army veteran James D. Henry explained why he became an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam: “My sole motivation was and is to stop the atrocities and to stop the taking of otherwise average young Americans and transforming them into people capable and willing to perform atrocities.”<sup>52</sup> Embittered by immoral rules of engagement, veterans returned home from the war, “dehumanized by the senseless and indiscriminate destructiveness of American policy.”<sup>53</sup> Additionally, tension between drafted soldiers and career men created an environment of distrust. Draftees made up half of the US Army by the summer of 1968, and as people who did not choose service; they found the

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<sup>49</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 111.

<sup>50</sup> Murray Polner, “Vietnam War Stories,” *Special Collections at Gettysburg College, Radical Pamphlets Collection* Box 16, Folder 1, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Appy, *American Reckoning*, 211.

<sup>52</sup> James D. Henry (as told by Donald Duncan), “The Men of ‘B’ Company,” *Gettysburg College Special Collections, Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Box 17 Folder 1, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 27.

strict regimen of military discipline to be overwhelming.<sup>54</sup> Career officers resented the dissenting draftees. As the war dragged on, resistance exploded, eventually reaching Vietnam itself.

The antiwar movement in the United States focused on politics and thus differed from the antiwar movement that occurred later in Vietnam, which focused on practical aspects of survival. Instead of marching in protests or reading literature in coffeehouses, soldiers in Vietnam protested the war by refusing orders, avoiding the enemy, or by violently attacking the officer in command. One of the most effective forms of GI resistance was combat refusal, when soldiers refused, disobeyed, or negotiated an order.<sup>55</sup> The first incident of combat refusal to appear in the news occurred in August 1969. Alpha Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry refused a direct order to attack, and the story appeared in the *New York Times*.<sup>56</sup> Instances such as this brought about a democratic form of military decision making with soldiers having power over command. As a result, many commanders found they would have to negotiate with their units over what they were willing to do under certain circumstances. However, if negotiations failed, antiwar soldiers would resort to fragging—a term used to describe violence directed at superiors.<sup>57</sup> It was organized and deliberate, with many of these attacks occurring on base instead of during the fury of battle. By the time the last American troops were leaving Vietnam in July 1972, the total number of fragging incidents has escalated to 551 with eighty-six

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<sup>54</sup> Scovill Currin, “An Army of the Willing: Fayette’Nam, Soldier Dissent, and the Untold Story of the All-Volunteer Force,” 85; Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Horst Fass and Peter Arnett, “Told to Move Again on 6th Deathly Day, Company A Refuses,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1969, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 48.



soldiers dead and over seven hundred wounded.<sup>58</sup> Mutinous or rebellious soldiers were imprisoned, and as a result, “prisons became schools of resistance and sites of rebellion.”<sup>59</sup> The most notorious prison riot occurred in 1968 at the Long Binh Jail, with soldiers rising up to protest the poor living conditions they were subject to. The unrest lasted for over one month, and is considered to be the largest and most explosive episode of soldier resistance in Vietnam.<sup>60</sup>

Other GIs who opposed the war expressed dissent in a less violent and direct way. The most pervasive kind of antiwar activity in the military was known as “combat avoidance,” where “search-and-destroy missions were turned into search-and-avoid missions.”<sup>61</sup> Instead of going out and fighting the enemy, soldiers would go out and do their best to avoid any contact with the enemy. One soldier recalled, “The military teaches you mission first, man second. But because I felt the mission was stupid...the men were much more important to me than the mission.”<sup>62</sup> This was part of a larger nonviolent resistance movement that included shamming: “the use of deception, stealth, ruse, and petty sabotage.”<sup>63</sup>

Soldiers also turned to drug use as a form of passive resistance. Smoking marijuana was symbolically tied to the antiwar movement back home, so soldiers were using drugs to connect themselves to an antiwar stance.<sup>64</sup> By 1967, more servicemen in Vietnam were arrested for marijuana charges than

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<sup>58</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 63.

for any other major offense.<sup>65</sup> Colonel Robert Heintz reported that a Congressional investigating subcommittee found that drug addiction in the Armed Forces was “of epidemic proportions.”<sup>66</sup> When mental escape through drug use would not suffice, GIs would simply walk away from the war they no longer believed in. In 1967, American soldier William Percell applied for political asylum in Sweden. He stated, “The United States war in Vietnam is not my war. I have no wish to be an American any longer.”<sup>67</sup> He was not alone. Between 1966 and 1971 army desertion rates increased nearly 400%.<sup>68</sup> The Army desertion rate peaked in 1971 and steadily decreased afterward as internal reforms were implemented and the burden of war shifted from ground assaults to air assaults. Other branches of service then experienced internal disruption with Air Force desertion rates peaking in 1972 and Navy desertion rates peaking in 1973.<sup>69</sup> These branches also experienced the same kind of dissent that had plagued the Army: combat refusals, mutiny, and sabotage.<sup>70</sup>

As the war effort was winding down and ground forces were being withdrawn, dissent within the Army began to wane. With fewer ground troops needed, the number of draftees was likewise reduced and fewer men were pressed into service against their will. On January 27, 1973, a peace agreement was signed that officially ended America’s involvement in the war. On that same

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<sup>65</sup> “Marijuana Termed Big Problem Among U.S. Troops in Vietnam,” October 26, 1967, *Gettysburg College Special Collections, Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Box 15, Folder 4.

<sup>66</sup> “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, H. Bruce Franklin, 325.

<sup>67</sup> “US Soldier Asks Asylum in Sweden,” December 1, 1967, *Gettysburg College Special Collections Radical Pamphlets Collection, Box 15 Folder 4*.

<sup>68</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 13.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

day, the Secretary of Defense announced that the draft would end.<sup>71</sup> The Army would move towards an all-volunteer force, one that would theoretically breed less dissent and disobedience. The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force predicted, "Problems raised by the forced military service of those who are unwilling or unable to adjust to military life will be largely overcome by voluntary recruiting."<sup>72</sup> The Armed Forces would have stable ground upon which they would reconstruct themselves after being nearly destroyed from within. The divisive Vietnam War sparked radical dissent movements first from civilian activists and then from activists within the military itself. What began as isolated incidences of protest grew into collective acts of dissent and disobedience within the ranks.

By the early 1970s the Army was no longer an effective fighting force in Vietnam. Marine Colonel Robert Heinl wrote that "by every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous."<sup>73</sup> False and hypocritical war justifications, deception about progress, indiscriminate brutality against civilians, immorality in leadership decisions, and preexisting social inequalities all combined to threaten the cohesiveness of the service. This gave rise to the largest movement of servicemen and veteran dissent in this nation's history, one that would play a

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<sup>71</sup>Currin, "An Army of the Willing: Fayette'Nam, Soldier Dissent, and the Untold Story of the All-Volunteer Force," 293.

<sup>72</sup>*The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force*, February 1970. <sup>73</sup>"The Collapse of the Armed Forces," in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, H. Bruce Franklin, 323.

significant role in the decision to end the war and one that would lead to lasting change in the armed services.

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