



# Waging Peace in Vietnam

## Protest Movements and Social Change

Thursday, November 11, 2021

Wallis Annenberg Hall, University of Southern California

### KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- During the U.S. war in Vietnam, tens of thousands of GIs and veterans created a movement against the war.
- *Waging Peace in Vietnam: An Exhibition of Protest Movements and Social Change* is on view in Wallis Annenberg Hall from November 11 to December 3.
- The exhibition is based on the book *Waging Peace in Vietnam: U.S. Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War*, edited by Ron Carver, David Cortright, and Barbara Doherty.

### THE AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM

The U.S. War in Vietnam (1954–1975) was a long conflict between the communist government of North Vietnam and its allies in South Vietnam (the Viet Cong) and the government of South Vietnam and its ally, the United States. What had started as a Vietnamese war for independence from French colonial rule turned into a civil war that was then used by U.S. and Soviet powers as part of a Cold War power struggle.

The U.S. poured massive resources—including the lives of a vast number of young people, many of whom were forced into service—into the conflict. U.S. society was divided around the war, and a massive antiwar movement, involving civilians as well as members of the military, galvanized young people especially to protest the war as well as injustices from racism to imperialism.

More than 3 million people were killed in the war, about 58,000 of whom were members of the U.S. armed forces. More than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians.

While commonly known as the Vietnam War in the United States, in Vietnam it is known as the American War.

### THE DRAFT

A draft is compulsory military service, also known as conscription. Drafts have existed in many nations, dating back to 27th-century BCE Egypt. The U.S. had drafts on both sides of the Civil War and during World Wars I and II. During the war in Vietnam, about 2 million Americans were drafted.

“The Vietnam generation came of age with the threat of military service hovering in the background,” and “[f]ew pieces of mail ever incited the same combination of panic, anticipation, and resignation as a draft notice,” wrote historian Amy J. Rutenberg.

The draft was also a mechanism through which inequities were structurally perpetuated and exacerbated during the Vietnam War, as the Selective Service system allowed men who were in college or working in professional fields to apply for deferments—which in effect meant poor and working-class men, men without college degrees, and men of color were disproportionately sent to war.

As opposition to the war grew, and U.S. casualties in Vietnam mounted, draft resistance reached a peak. Some men evaded the draft by fleeing the country or by not registering with the Selective Service system, and some openly rebelled against it, burning draft cards and staging protest actions. President Nixon ended the draft and shifted to an all-volunteer military force in Vietnam in 1973. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter pardoned all Vietnam War “draft dodgers.”

## THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT INSIDE THE MILITARY

“One of the least known but most important chapters in the history of America’s encounter with Vietnam was the internal rebellion that wracked the U.S. military ... military morale and discipline sank to record lows. Antiwar committee and underground newspapers appeared everywhere. ... in the Army in 1971 there were seventeen AWOLs and seven desertions for every one hundred soldiers. Harsher forms of rebellion also occurred—drug abuse, violent uprisings, refusal of orders, even attacks against superiors. ... By 1969 the Army had ceased to function as an effective fighting force and was rapidly disintegrating. ... The strongest and most militant resisters were black GIs. ... a reaction to the pervasiveness of racial discrimination within the military.”

—David Cortright, “Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War”

“Three larger factors combined to create the context for the rise of the Vietnam-era GI protest. The first was the nature of the Vietnam War itself. It was widely unpopular within U.S. society ... In Vietnam, the war was deeply disorienting: troops faced harsh natural elements and guerrilla-style tactics, and they often could not distinguish between civilians and soldiers. Few knew why they were fighting; once they arrived in-country, the Cold War rationale for the war felt like a vapid distraction ... Second was the conflict between the institutional culture of the Cold War military and lower-ranking soldiers. The military’s conservative, traditionalist norms clashed with the sensibilities of many GIs of the era ... racism was prevalent ... soldiers felt they were used as pawns ... Third was the mass appeal of protest politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s.”

—Derek Seidman, “Vietnam and the Soldiers’ Revolt”

## A TIMELINE OF THE MOVEMENT

Adapted from [wagingpeaceinvietnam.com](http://wagingpeaceinvietnam.com)

**1965:** Major escalation of U.S. ground troops begins. In January, Lt. Richard Steinke becomes the first U.S. serviceman to refuse to fight after arriving in Vietnam. In November, Lt. Henry Howe of Ft. Bliss, Texas, attends an antiwar protest in El Paso and is sentenced to two years of hard labor.

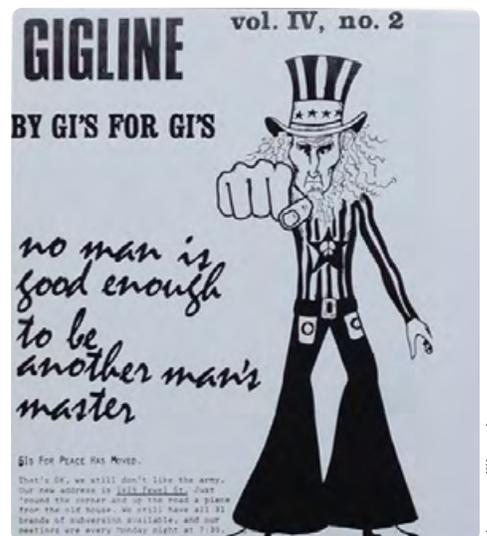
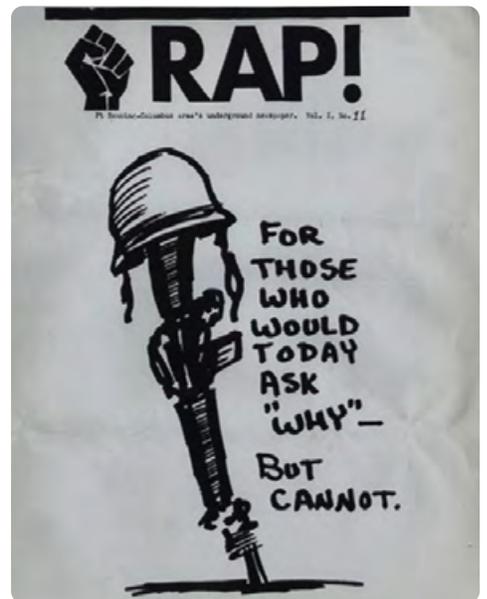
**1966:** Privates James Johnson, Dennis Mora and David Samis publicly refuse orders to Vietnam. They become known as the Ft. Hood Three. Captain Howard Levy, MD, refuses orders to train Green Beret combatants at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

**1967:** Andy Stapp and others at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, form the American Servicemen’s Union and organize chapters at dozens of military installations and ships. *Vietnam GI*, one of the first known GI antiwar newspapers, begins publication. Hundreds of other GI papers will appear throughout the military over the next five years.

**1968:** U.S. troop presence in Vietnam exceeds 500,000. Over the next two years, the intensity of combat and casualties among frontline ground units will reach levels equivalent to the heaviest combat in U.S. military history.

The first GI antiwar coffeehouse, the UFO, opens near Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. Veterans and civilian activists launch the “Summer of Support,” opening coffeehouses around other military bases.

Soldiers rebel at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, and Long Binh jail in Vietnam. Navy nurse Susan Schnall leads a GI antiwar march in San Francisco. Twenty-four people incarcerated at the Presidio stockade in San Francisco, including four AWOL soldiers who turned themselves in after an antiwar march, hold a sit-down strike against the war and in protest against prison conditions following the fatal shooting of an unarmed fellow incarcerated person.



Photos: William Short



The first GI antiwar coffeehouse, the UFO.



A New York Daily News headline reads "Sir, My Men Refuse to Go!"



President Richard Nixon addresses the nation in April 1970 to explain the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia.



U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger shakes hand with Le Duc Tho, leader of North Vietnam delegation, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on January 23, 1973 in Paris, France.

**1969:** President Nixon announces the beginning of troop withdrawals. A New York *Daily News* headline reads "Sir, My Men Refuse to Go," describing an incident of mass mutiny by an Army unit of the 196th Infantry. Soldiers at military bases in the U.S. and in some units in Vietnam join millions of Americans in locally based Vietnam Moratorium protests. A full-page ad calling for an end to the war, signed by 1,365 active duty service members, appears in the *New York Times*.

Hundreds of active duty soldiers join hundreds of thousands of protestors in a massive antiwar march in Washington, D. C.

**1970:** Antiwar resistance spreads to the Navy as naval air operations intensify along with the scale of U.S. bombing in Southeast Asia. In a period of less than two weeks, six students are killed by state police and National Guardsmen during protests at Jackson State University in Mississippi and Kent State University in Ohio. The shootings spark a massive wave of antiwar resistance across the United States. Students rally for peace at more than a dozen military bases. Nearly 1,000 soldiers, most of them Black, gather in a rally protesting the war and racist oppression.

**1971:** Antiwar dissent increases in the Air Force as underground newspapers appear at dozens of bases in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Nixon announces the beginning of the transition to an all-volunteer military. Statements on the floor of the U.S. Senate express concern as reports multiply of violent soldier attacks against superiors in Vietnam. Crew members on the U.S.S. *Coral Sea* form an organization called Stop Our Ship (SOS) in protest against the war. More than 1,000 civilians gather at Alameda Naval Station to protest the sailing of the aircraft carrier, and when it departs, 35 sailors stay behind.

**1972:** The largest mass rebellion in Air Force history occurs at Travis AFB in California, led by Black Air Force personnel protesting "the stress of deployment to Nam, poor housing, petty harassment, and racist discrimination against Black airmen," reports the antiwar newspaper *Travisty*. Later in the year, Congressman Ron Dellums holds hearings at Travis on racism in the military.

Two aircraft carriers are put out of action by sabotage.

Racism provokes a large-scale rebellion on the U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk*. Sailors aboard the U.S.S. *Constellation* protesting racist conditions are returned to shore at San Diego. A few days later, more than 100 sailors raise clenched fists at a dockside rally and refuse to board as the ship departs. *Time* magazine calls it a mass mutiny.

Nixon unleashes massive bombing attacks against Hanoi, Haiphong, and other cities in North Vietnam. Some pilots refuse to fly and join a lawsuit against the bombing filed by Congressman Elizabeth Holtzman.

**1973:** The Paris peace agreement is signed, ending the war. POWs return and the last U.S. ground troops leave Vietnam.

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Did this event change or expand your perspective on war, military service, or antiwar movements in any way? How so?
- How did structural racism shape who went to war and the experiences of those who served in the military during the Vietnam War?
- Why were the late 1960s and early 1970s a time of large-scale protest movements in the United States?
- How are today's protest movements like, and different from, the protest movements of the 1960s and '70s?

## IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- ◉ Waging Peace in Vietnam  
[wagingpeaceinvietnam.com](http://wagingpeaceinvietnam.com)
- ◉ Veterans for Peace  
[veteransforpeace.org](http://veteransforpeace.org)
- ◉ United States Veterans' Artists Alliance  
[usvaa.org](http://usvaa.org)

## DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

**Robert Labaree** of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about this event. Electronic resources are accessible through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu) but may require the user to log in using their USC credentials.

### BOOKS

- ◉ Fred Gardner, *The Unlawful Concert: An Account of the Presidio Mutiny Case* (New York: Viking, 1970).
- ◉ Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1999).
- ◉ James Lewes, *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers During the Vietnam War* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).
- ◉ David L. Parsons, *Dangerous Grounds: Antiwar Coffeehouses and Military Dissent in the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2017).
- ◉ Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997).
- ◉ Norma Sue Woodstone, *Up against the War: A Personal Introduction to U.S. Soldiers & Civilians Fighting against the War in Vietnam* (New York: Tower Publications, 1970).

### DATABASES

- ◉ [America: History and Life](#)
- ◉ [Military and Intelligence](#)
- ◉ [ProQuest History Vault: Vietnam War and American Foreign Policy, 1960–1975](#)

### STREAMING VIDEOS

- ◉ *Disobeying Orders: G. I. Resistance to the Vietnam War* (Filmmakers Library, 1990).
- ◉ *Sir! No Sir! The Suppressed Story of the GI Movement to End the War in Vietnam* (Bullfrog Films, 2014 [originally produced by Displaced Films, ca. 2005]).

## VOCABULARY CORNER

“GI” is a nickname for a member or former member of the U.S. armed forces. It’s not entirely clear how this term evolved, but here’s one theory, posited by Patricia T. O’Conner and Stewart Kellerman in *Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language*: In the early 20th century, the U.S. Army used the abbreviation “GI” for “galvanized iron” in inventories of military supplies. During World War I, somehow “GI” started to be used “to refer to all things military . . . In the minds of many, ‘galvanized iron’ obligingly became ‘government issue’ or ‘general issue.’” By World War II, GI was used as an adjective to describe members of the U.S. Armed Forces (GI Joe and GI Jane) as well as all manner of items they used (“GI cans” were heavy artillery shells). By the Vietnam War, “GI” was used as both an adjective and a noun to describe the service members themselves.

