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Harry W. Haines

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HEGEMONY AND THE GI RESISTANCE: INTRODUCTORY NOTES

HARRY W. HAINES

Now the sons-of-bitches are killing us back home.
—Army combat medic at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam,
reacting to the *Newsweek* report of the killings of war
protesters at Kent State University, his alma mater,
1970.

*I put in for three tours of duty. I was in a position to keep
people alive. I had influence over an entire province. I put my
men to work helping with the harvest. They put up buildings.
Once the NVA understood what I was doing, they eased up. I'm
talking to you about a de facto truce, you understand. The war
stopped in most of the province. It's the kind of history that
doesn't get recorded. Few people even know that it happened,
and no one will ever admit that it happened.*
—U.S. Army Colonel, in a university library, 1974.

*We learned how to cheat on the numbers. We worked with the
computers that were used to call in artillery shells and we
cheated. And we were good! We put those shells where they
couldn't hurt anybody. Some people probably got killed, but
not as many, and not in the villes.*
—Vietnam veteran, on a train between San Francisco
and Salt Lake City, 1974.

Anecdotal data. A combat medic weeps for the Kent State war dead, a career officer speaks proudly of soldiers who avoided battle, a son of a pioneer Mormon family takes patriotic pride in misguided missiles. The Vietnam war's ideological contradictions produced experiences which were so fractured and seemingly disconnected from the on-going story of America that Peter Ehrenhaus suggests it was "the first postmodern war."¹ And so perhaps Rick Berg expects too much when he complains that cultural forms have failed to adequately represent the war's meaning:² perhaps our culture is simply unable to process the debris of ideological crisis. Still, some of us who survived the Vietnam war both at home and abroad have some reason to hope that a broader range of interpretations might one day unfold in American films, television series, and novels and—most importantly—in the public rituals central to our national political life. And that hope guides the writers whose essays are presented in this special issue of *Vietnam Generation*.

4 VIETNAM GENERATION

I have astonished my students and angered some of my fellow veterans by pointing out that many American soldiers opposed the Vietnam war and took action to limit U.S. military effectiveness. This action included the refusal of orders, the assassination of officers, the distribution of antiwar propaganda, union-like organizing, desertion, sabotage and a general noncompliance with military objectives. By 1970, American political and military leaders could no longer depend on U.S. troops to perform their mission in Vietnam. There developed an amorphous, often uncoordinated "GI Resistance," reflecting a broad ideological spectrum and including soldiers who took action individually or in groups. This important component of our national experience in Vietnam is part of the war's submerged history. It is not well documented. And it is subject to revisionist interpretations which identify television news coverage of the war, civilian antiwar activists, or some other factor as the "cause" of "morale problems" among the troops. To identify the GI Resistance as a significant component of the Vietnam war experience is to risk the incredulity of the young, the charge of hostility from certain veterans' groups, and the accusation of partisanship from revisionist academics. The hegemonic process whereby a discredited political elite re-establishes its ideological dominance has resulted in the positioning of the Vietnam veteran as a sign of consensus; discussions of antiwar soldiers go against the grain, because such discussions threaten the positioning of the Vietnam veteran as a sign—a witness—of ideological crisis.³

This special issue of *Vietnam Generation* is intended to provoke debate and to encourage continued scholarly examination of the GI Resistance. Many of the contributors conceptualize this special issue as an attempt to bring the GI Resistance from the margins, to position it as a major topic within the ongoing struggle over the war's meaning.⁴ Additionally, some of us conceptualize this effort in explicitly ideological terms. We are laying claim to aspects of the lived social experience of the Vietnam war, and we mean to help set the circumstances in which the Vietnam veteran can expand his or her range of postwar interpretations and subjectivity. The importance of this objective requires some explanation of the Vietnam veteran's developing role as a sign within the ideological struggle over the war's meaning.

David Rabe's 1972 play, *Sticks and Bones*, predicted the immediate postwar fate of the Vietnam veteran.⁵ Adapting the conventions of the television situation comedy, Rabe located the war's ideological crisis within the family relationships of Ozzie, Harriet, David and Rick, characters borrowed from the radio and TV series, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Older brother David returns from Vietnam, and his war stories shatter the family's complacency. David challenges the family's unthinking commitment to anticommunism and racism. Harriet vomits when she learns about his Vietnamese lover, whom Ozzie calls "some yellow fucking whore." David is the quintessential pain-in-the-ass, and he identifies the contradictions of American policy in Vietnam.

Body bags pile up on the living room floor. Unable to withstand his stories and unwilling to accept the ghost of his Vietnamese lover, his family conspires to kill David or, rather, they convince him to commit suicide. Ever the good natured younger brother, Rick asks, "Do you want to use my razor, Dave?"

But, as Ozzie says, David "only nearly dies," and the play's final scene reduces his presence to an extreme close-up of his face, projected on a color slide. Identified as "somebody sick," the projected image signifies both David's removal from discourse and the veteran's decontextualized maladjustment. The Vietnam veteran "dies" in the sense that he no longer speaks. His lived experience of ideological crisis is muted. David's troublesome memories become products of his own psychosis, disconnected from any sociological or political realities.

Rabe's play was considered "controversial" in the early 1970s, and CBS postponed the broadcast of a television adaptation when the original air-date coincided with the return of American POWs from Hanoi. At the same time, CBS and other television networks felt free enough to represent Vietnam veterans as psychopathic murderers and witless victims in prime-time adventure dramas of the period.⁶ The war's ideological crisis made the veteran a volatile sign, just as Rabe's play predicted, and cultural forms operated to constrain this sign as best they could. The veteran emerged as the product of an elaborate therapeutic discipline, composed of strategies which played out in a variety of communication channels, ranging from the political speech to prime-time television. These strategies produced the veteran's immediate socio-political niche: inexplicably troubled, haunted by a war we will never understand and—above all—in need of periodic therapy or sedation to keep him from doing violence. Under these conditions of ideological containment, antiwar soldiers were easily positioned as merely one component in a population of crazies. They, like David Rabe's protagonist, were removed from discourse in a period labeled by *New York Times* reporter Fox Butterfield as our "trance of collective amnesia."

The rituals associated with the introduction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial provided the veteran an opportunity to again speak. The Memorial returned Rabe's protagonist to discourse, and other cultural forms soon positioned him as the object of political rehabilitation. Belated homecoming parades (reenactments of V-J Day), films, television crime-adventure series, and political speeches signaled a new respectability for the Vietnam veteran. No longer the psychotic or victim, he emerged as a World War Two poser, a sign of heroic commitment to fundamental principles. The veteran's new respectability demonstrates the process of hegemony, the process whereby an ideological bloc establishes a dominant position within an array of social institutions.⁷ Here is the Vietnam veteran's newly attained niche: while others (namely, reporters, civilian antiwar activists and weak-kneed politicians) lost faith in American principles (specifically, anticommunism), the Vietnam veteran remained doggedly committed to the war effort; he is

6 VIETNAM GENERATION

now the warrior hero *betrayed* by the nation which sent him to fight. This position is closely aligned with what historian Jeffrey Kimball identifies as the "stab-in-the-back" explanation of the U.S. policy failure in Vietnam.⁸

The Vietnam veteran's repositioning suggests the therapeutic nature of hegemony. The veteran's rehabilitation is dependent upon his or her *compliance* with the role of ideological certainty. Vietnam veterans who resist this role risk an even more marginal position: embittered nonconformist, ungrateful for the nation's belated respect, wallowing in self-pity, looking for a handout, probably still crazy. Given the appeal of the veteran's rehabilitated position, a sensible question emerges: Why should Vietnam veterans *not* accept the role which society now offers?

I believe that this role helps facilitate an American foreign policy which assures the continued suffering of the people of Indochina. Fifteen years after the fall of the Saigon government, American policy in the region remains "shaped... not by objective reality but by policymakers' dislike for Vietnam, the only country ever to defeat the United States."⁹ As a sign of ideological certainty, the veteran helps maintain the politically potent delusions which brought so much pain to the Vietnamese and American people. Surely, a deeper historical analysis of the GI Resistance would not in itself encourage a more rational American policy in Indochina, but such an expanded analysis would contribute to a broader understanding of the war's ideological crisis and make it easier to set aside the legacy of animosity which exacerbates the grave problems of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Another generation is coming of age in Indochina, and Vietnam veterans can take no pride in the knowledge that our generation is handing-off the wages of our war to the young.

This special issue on the GI Resistance begins with James R. Hayes' overview, written from a sociological perspective which many antiwar veterans may dispute. Hayes identifies several failings of the movement. Barbara L. Tischler provides a wide ranging historical overview which draws upon GI underground newspapers as primary documents. David Cortright, author of *Soldiers in Revolt*, discusses the activities of black soldiers in the GI antiwar movement. Gerry Nicosia's essay on the Presidio mutiny (perhaps one of the most significant events in the history of the GI movement) is taken from a work-in-progress. The oral histories and photographs of antiwar veterans are excerpted from a forthcoming collection compiled by Bill Short and Willa Seidenberg. Poet and essayist W.D. Ehrhart provides some reflections which may encourage future debate in this journal. A valuable bibliography, compiled by Skip Delano, cites several sources of additional information on the GI resistance. Larry Rottmann's poem, "Lieutenant Hatfield," suggests the ideological crisis which many Americans experienced during the Vietnam war.

The generation which defines itself largely by the experience of the Vietnam war seems to be always counting its losses. Here, we identify with a recent one, with the hope that he will signify the others. Michael Patrick Madden was an assault helicopter pilot who took part in the invasion of Cambodia. He also flew defensive missions for aircraft which spread Agent Orange on Vietnam. "The stuff came in through our vents," he told me. He died from cancer last December. Madden was highly decorated, and the Central Intelligence Agency courted him for postwar work in Central America. Instead, he adapted the warrior spirit to graduate work and earned a doctoral degree from the University of Iowa. He became fascinated by the communication strategies which praised the Vietnam veteran as a warrior hero, a role he regarded with alarm. He spent his last months working on an oral history, a comparative analysis of American veterans of the Vietnam war and Soviet veterans of the Afghanistan war. He brought veterans of *both* wars to his classes at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. Madden feared that the Vietnam war might eventually be used to justify some future American aggression, a fear shared by many Vietnam veterans, and this is the reason we dedicate this special issue of *Vietnam Generation* to his memory.

¹ Peter Ehrenhaus, "Shooting the War: Vietnam Images by Army Photographer Ken Pollard," a paper presented at the meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Sacramento, CA (Feb 1990).

² Rick Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," *Cultural Critique* 3 (1986): 46-78.

³ Harry W. Haines, "They Were Called and They Went: The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran," in L. Dittmar and G. Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press) 1990.

⁴ *The Lessons of the Vietnam War*, a modular textbook produced by the Center for Social Studies Education (Pittsburgh, PA) makes reference to GI opposition to the war. Very few of the standard histories of the Vietnam war mention the GI Resistance.

⁵ David Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* (New York: Samuel French) 1972.

⁶ Berg: 101.

⁷ A. Gramsci; Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, eds. and trans., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International) 1971.

⁸ Jeffrey Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14 (1988).

⁹ John McAuliff and Mary Byrne McDonnell, "Ending the Cambodian Stalemate," *World Policy Journal* 7 (1989): 99.