The War Within a War: Dissent in the Vietnam-Era Military

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The signing of the Indochina peace agreements in early 1973 officially ended American participation in the Vietnam conflict. Military officials would probably be the first to admit that they, more than any other group in society, experienced the first sigh of relief. Throughout most of the war, the military was subjected to invectives emanating from a war-weary civilian sector, as well as disgruntled, antiwar, anti-military GIs. While civil-military relations have a well-documented tradition of animosity, organized protest within the ranks is without parallel in American military history. For military traditionalists, the presence of a small but vocal minority of soldiers raising the old ideal of a "democratic military" produced some acute anxiety. Contrary to its functionalist image of human nature and dissent, the military was forced to come to grips with the reality that internal discontent ran deeper than the mere disaffections of a few disruptive, "bad" individuals.

This essay describes and analyzes the effort by a minority of GIs to create an antiwar, anti-military movement within the Vietnam-era military. An attenuated chronology of the movement is presented along with an analysis of what appeared to be the major causal variables in its genesis and development.

The Military Fights Itself

Beginning in the latter part of the 1960s, an unprecedented movement of soldier dissent gathered momentum. Originating primarily as an antiwar movement, it escalated to a point where it was a force waging a battle against military authority and legitimacy. While desertion, AWOLs, drug use, and even fraggings have long plagued the United States military, organized resistance appears to be a uniquely Vietnam-era phenomenon. The social movement characteristics exhibited by the movement (e.g., a sense of group identity and solidarity, consciously articulated ideologies, movement organizations) distinguished it from other more spontaneous and transitory uprisings such as the "Back Home Movement" in the aftermath of World War II. Adjustment
responses such as drug use and various types of withdrawal reactions such as desertion and AWOL will not be discussed in the context of this article; the degree to which these various forms of dissent are politically motivated is open to debate.3

Although there was one well publicized instance of an officers' organization—The Concerned Officers Movement (COM), and antiwar group that disassociated itself from the more radical GI groups—and a lesser-known and smaller group—The Concerned Graduates of the Military, Naval, and Air Force Academies, headquartered in San Francisco and largely limited to ex-officers in that area—the GI movement was for the most part comprised of lower-ranking enlisted personnel (“enlisted” referring to status and not to mode of entry into the service), predominantly Army but cutting across all branches of the armed services. Short of revolutionary in outlook and ideology, the movement aimed primarily at institutional structural reform. There was no accurate measure of the numerical strength of the movement, and the estimates vary according to source—the military appears to underestimate while movement sympathizers tend to exaggerate.4 It is safe to say, however, that the movement represented only a small fraction of GIs.

The Early Years

Like other movements of the period, the GI movement emerged in a rather piecemeal and disorderly fashion. Movements tend to emerge as rather amorphous, poorly organized, and formless entities, develop in periods of cultural drift, and the early action tends to be individualistic in nature and lacking group consciousness. The GI movement witnessed its beginning in a series of individual acts of resistance against the war. These initial exemplary acts occurred during a period (1965-1967) in which the Vietnam conflict and American military involvement in it were becoming increasingly important concerns for both the civilian and military sectors.

One of the first publicized incidents of resistance occurred in November of 1965 when Lt. Henry H. Howe, Jr. participated in an antiwar demonstration in El Paso, Texas. Howe was court-martialed and charged with disrespectful utterances toward public officials for carrying a sign which read: “End Johnson’s Fascist Aggression in Vietnam,” and “Let’s Have More Than a Choice Between Petty Ignorant Fascists in 1968.” In December, 1965, Howe was convicted and sentenced to two years hard labor (later reduced to one) and dishonorably discharged. Howe’s conviction raised the ire of some because the military presented no clear evidence that Howe’s conduct threatened military discipline and order, particularly in light of the fact that he was off-duty as well as out of uniform.

The most celebrated case of GI antiwar resistance during 1966 took place on June 30, when three enlisted men at Fort Hood refused shipment to Vietnam on the grounds that it was an immoral war. The
refusal by Pvt. Dennis Mora, Pfc. James Johnson, and Pvt. David Samas was the first case of overt resistance against shipment to the war zone. All were given dishonorable discharges and forfeiture of all pay: Samas and Johnson were sentenced to five years at hard labor, Mora to three. The case of the “Fort Hood Three” gained broader significance when a number of civilian activists became involved in it in an effort to make it a cause célèbre. Although most civilian activists still viewed the GI with some disdain, a few were beginning to realize that the GI could be a potential ally in the antiwar struggle.

Perhaps the most significant and important individual act of antiwar resistance in the entire 1965-1967 period was the case of Capt. Howard Levy. Levy, a dermatologist, refused to train Green Beret medics for duty in Vietnam, citing the commission of war crimes by the special forces as one reason. Levy was accused not only of disobeying an order, but also of attempting to “crush the spirit” of enlisted men with his continued criticism of the war. On June 3, 1967, Levy was sentenced to three years hard labor and dismissed from the service. The Levy case received nationwide attention and the military had created a martyr. Less than two months after Levy’s conviction, two black marines, Pfc. George Daniels and Cpl. William Harvey, were arrested for taking part in a barracks discussion where they argued that blacks should not take part in the Vietnam war. They were convicted; Daniels was sentenced to ten years hard labor and Harvey to six. Their conviction and subsequent sentencing not only raised more questions about extreme military oppression but was also attacked as racist. Another case of officer resistance to the war also took place in 1967 when Air Force Capt. Dale Noyd was convicted and imprisoned for refusing to train pilots for Vietnam.

The above examples constitute only a select number of antiwar acts that occurred in 1965-1967. The formative years of the movement were typified by a number of different individuals engaging in similar behaviors, but acting independently of each other with no real communication existing among them. The early resisters played a key role by drawing attention to the possibility of political dissent in the military, and, perhaps more importantly, by using the war issue as a vehicle, they brought to the surface the larger issue constitutional rights for military personnel, particularly enlisted persons. They did, however, suffer a heavy toll for their actions as prison sentences and dishonorable discharges constituted the backbone of the military defense.

**The Big Year: 1968**

The individual acts of confrontation which characterized the 1965-1967 years continued throughout the duration of the war. Beginning in 1968, the frequency of individual acts of resistance declined, and dissent of a collective nature took precedence. It was also in 1968 that some of the defining traits of a social movement were first discernible.
What had been uncoordinated and disconnected acts of resistance began to coalesce around an organizational framework. The organizational network was decentralized (in that no central decision-making headquarters existed) and segmented (in the sense that a number of groups arose and operated essentially independent of each other, linked only by a common mission and communications network. Consciousness of membership and joint interaction were created by the establishment of the GI underground press—*The Bond, FTA, Vietnam GI, The Ally*—and coffeehouses—Mad Anthony's and the UFO. Movement cells, such as the American Servicemen's Union (ASU) and the FTA, developed programs and ideologies. The ASU and FTA were followed in 1969 by the GIs United Against the War in Vietnam (GIs—United), and the Movement for a Democratic Military (MDM). In May of 1969, the GI Alliance was constituted in Washington to serve as an umbrella organization with the intention of coordinating the actions of the various movement cells. While the specific ideological positions of the GI groups varied, their goals overlapped considerably and called for such things as an end to racism in the military, collective bargaining, federal minimum wage standards, and, most importantly, full constitutional rights for all enlisted people.  

1968 proved to be a banner year for the GI movement in a variety of ways. Collective resistance against the war came to the forefront and manifested itself in a variety of styles. In addition to the war-related protest, stockade rebellions added a new dimension to GI resistance. A new strain of antiwar resistance originated in 1968 as a number of military personnel across the country took sanctuary in various churches and universities. In July, nine GIs representing all four services chained themselves together inside a San Francisco church and held a 48-hour vigil in protest of the war. Army Pfc. Michael Locianto was arrested in August after he had taken sanctuary in a Greenwich Village church following his refusal to go to Vietnam. Also protesting the war, Marine Cpl. Paul Olimpieri took sanctuary in the Harvard Divinity School in the fall of 1968. In November, Army Pvt. John Michael O'Connor was arrested by military police after he had taken refuge in the Student Union at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; approximately 1,000 MIT students tried to shield O'Connor from the police in that instance. On November 8th, Army Pvt. William Brakefield and Airman David Copp were arrested after they had sought sanctuary on the campus of New York City College. The use of sanctuaries—particularly churches—by antiwar GIs was increasingly facilitated as more and more clergy adopted an antiwar stance. There was a dramatic growth in the number of GIs participating in antiwar demonstrations and teach-ins in 1968. The most significant participation occurred on October 12 when GI and civilian antiwar marches were held in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Washington DC, New York, and Chicago. *The Veterans Stars and Stripes for Peace* reported that an estimated 200 GIs led the march in Chicago. Approximately 700 GIs took
part in the October 12 march in San Francisco. At Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 35 GIs held an October 12th antiwar rally in sympathy with the nationwide protests. The stockade was turned back over to the authorities only after the military police were ordered to shoot to kill. An estimated 40-50 prisoners from the Navy, Marines, and Army held the stockade in Da Nang, Vietnam for three days in August, protesting poor conditions and military authoritarianism; once cell-block was burned to the ground in this eruption. Also in Vietnam during August, GIs revolted at the Long Binh stockade, and a GI was killed by the military police and another 59 were wounded. The most publicized case of collective resistance within stockades occurred in October when 27 inmates of the Presidio stockade (San Francisco) mutinied in protest over the slaying of a fellow prisoner. The trial of the “Presidio 27” brought massive criticism upon the military due to the severe nature of the punishment meted out to resisters. As a result of extreme pressure, the military reduced many of the sentences.

Stockade rebellions increased after 1968 and brought with them increased publicity over the less than adequate conditions under which inmates were forced to live. More importantly, stockade rebellions served to emphasize what a growing number of GIs were beginning to realize: the military’s basic denial of any kind of rights and freedoms for enlisted individuals.

Although the above account of resistance in 1968 deals only with a small number of cases, it does illustrate that resistance was not only taking on a collective nature but it also was no longer solely confined to the war issue. More and more enlisted people were defining the military per se as oppressive, and deciding to confront it rather than withdraw. As the self-generated protest increased, dissident GIs saw larger numbers of civilian radicals and antiwar groups taking an interest in them and willing to aid them in their struggle.

The Final Period

In 1969 and the following years, the issue of constitutional rights came to the forefront of the GI movement. The war, however, remained the most appropriate vehicle for confronting the issue. This larger concern had been precipitated by the military’s reaction to and handling of antiwar dissenters. The military inadvertently prickled the consciousness of some hitherto uninvolved GIs and civilians by its heavy-handed repression of initial dissent. The dilemma confronting the movement at that time was one of transforming what appeared to be a growing body of partisan support into active support. In general, enlisted personnel were aware that any gains made by the movement would be in the form of “public goods,” benefits which would accrue to all GIs regardless of whether or not they took an active role in the movement. Although initially direct confrontation of military authority, such as refusals of orders and distribution of “subversive” literature on
base, functioned as the main tactic, less risky behavior, such as rap sessions and political meetings in the barracks, were also employed with the hope that these relatively safe actions would increasingly involve larger numbers of GIs. Despite these efforts, the majority of the GIs preferred to remain sympathetic bystanders.

In 1970, GI participation in antiwar demonstrations was considerable. Although the possibility of punitive sanctions loomed large, the 1969 directive on dissent issued by the Department of Defense made such participation legal if the demonstration was off the base in the United States, and if GIs participating were off-duty and out of uniform. Various GI papers stressed the legality of participation and many advertised names and addresses of lawyers willing to defend any GI punished for participating. The largest nation-wide participation of GIs was in May, 1970 in what the GIs termed “Armed Farces Day.” This demonstration was held in conjunction with the tradition Armed Forces Day celebrations. GIs at Fort Hood, Fort Bliss, Fort Bragg, Fort Lewis, Fort Devens, and other bases turned out to protest the war and the military. Estimates of the numbers involved ranged from 1,500 at Fort Bragg and 500 at Fort Hood down to 20-30 at Fort Devens. Black soldiers continued to step up their fight against racism. In July, 250 black GIs revolted at Fort Hood, burning two “Re-Up” offices and a BEQ building. At Fort Carson, also during July, 200 black soldiers seized a section of the base while fighting off the military police. In Heidelberg, West Germany, 1000 black and white GIs held a July rally against racism in the army. While these demonstrations by black military personnel were not the first signs of growing antiracist sentiment, the expanding scope and intensity of this resistance in conjunction with the antiwar, anti-military position of many white enlisted people did present a formidable threat to the brass... at least the military defined it as such.

By 1971, there were approximately 26 anti-military and antiwar coffeehouses, along with an estimated 144 underground GI papers and a nationwide network of GI counseling services. The estimate of 144 newspapers may seem unreasonable, but a significant number of these papers were very short-lived due to financial problems, military harassment, and staff turnovers. The papers themselves fell into two general categories: 1) “base papers” which dealt primarily with the activities on a particular base and were generally confined to that specific military installation; and, 2) “national papers” representing more of a news service publication, which detailed resistance and court-martial cases at bases all across the country and overseas. The national papers were distributed all of the U.S. and abroad to GIs and interested civilians, largely through subscriptions and clandestine distribution networks, including to units in Vietnam. Through the GI press, activist GIs were aware that their colleagues at other bases were engaged in similar acts of resistance, and they were constantly informed of the responses of the military authorities. The papers continually published self-help items for GIs, informing them of various groups and lawyers willing to defend
them, as well as informing them about such things as conscientious objection and rights under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The establishment and proliferation of the GI press served to bridge some of the structural limitations GIs faced in regard to communication and mobility, and helped to foster a feeling a membership and interaction between activist GIs and movement cell organizations.

In 1971 and 1972 resistance directed against the military and the war continued. GIs joined civilians in demonstrations around the country, as well as conducting their own protests on posts. In addition to resistance and U.S. military installations, there were numerous reports out of Vietnam detailing refusals to engage the enemy on the part of some combat troops. While GI and antiwar civilian groups were quick to exploit the different protests as indicative of the strength of the GI movement, there remains some question as to whether these incidents were indeed related to the GI movement or more a result of the immediate situational contingencies of combat. While the GI movement may have been, in part, a motivating factor behind the sporadic instances of combat refusal in Vietnam, it is equally true that the movement was basically ineffectual in creating any type of massive resistance among combat troops. Similar examples of troop demoralization occurred in Korea as that war was winding down.

**The Dialectics of Resistance**

As was pointed out above, the initial phase of the GI movement (1965-1967) was characterized by a number of individuals protesting the war, with no real communication among themselves and probably not even any knowledge of each other's acts. These individual acts of resistance arose in a period of "cultural drift" symbolized by the beginnings of a serious questioning of the legitimacy and purpose of the Vietnam war by many segments of the American public. This growing sentiment combined with a Cold War ambivalence among many, particularly liberals, to the increasing size and dominance of the military establishment in American society. It was also significant that many of the initial acts of resistance by military personnel, especially the most publicized ones, were carried out by officers. Their dissent was given more credence by the public, and the severe sanctions by the military—in an atmosphere which was becoming increasingly hostile to the war effort and the military—created a number of heroes. In a climate of opinion where civil liberties and the right to dissent were increasingly brought to public attention through the civil rights movement and the beginnings of student dissent, the military's response of rather harsh sentencing did not go unnoticed. The military's decision to severely sanction some of its own kind (officers) for protesting a war which more and more civilians were coming to question was seen by many as a repressive rather than a justified disciplinary measure.
In 1968 antiwar sentiment increased as did antiwar confrontations. It was also the year in which the total number of active duty enlisted personnel reached its peak for the Vietnam conflict and the year in which draft inductions for the army hit the top level of 334,222. The military, particularly the Army, was confronted with a mass of young people, many of whom were in the military against their will, required to fight a war in which many of them did not believe. The fact that all of them had been exposed to and some had participated in antiwar demonstrations and they knew were all grouped together on various military bases gave rise to certain self-generated action among enlisted people. Resistance took place as some GIs acted against the war explicitly, and, in so doing, implicitly tested the degree to which enlisted personnel enjoy constitutional rights. Confronted with a situation which they perceived to be a real threat to discipline and morale, the military continued to respond in a manner best described as panic. Their immediate response, typical of a regime feeling itself threatened, consisted of swift and harsh punitive action. As resistance reared its head beyond the individual acts of 1965-1967, the Pentagon ordered a hard-nosed position against dissenters. The expressed rationale for a policy of harsh suppression hinged on the military's need for discipline and control, while the latent intention continued to be a scare tactic designed to intimidate other GIs.

For activist GIs, the military's policy of handling dissent not only increased the sense of struggle but also provided the movement with more publicity than they could generate themselves. The military, already under attack for Vietnam, was now roundly criticized for its handling of dissident GIs and its blatant denial of the constitutional guarantees of freedom of press, assembly, and speech. The handling of political activists helped to raise some fundamental issues that perhaps would not have surfaced had the military initially pursued a different policy.

It was at this time (1968) that civilian activists started to view the GI as a potential ally in the antiwar, anticapitalism struggle. Prior to 1968 those who accepted induction into the armed forces were written off as potential radical partisans. Antiwar organizations and other radical groups began to add GI names to their mailing lists, and coffeehouses were set up near military bases by civilians with the purpose of providing a place where GIs could congregate and vent their hostilities. The coffeehouses were also an attempt on the part of the largely middle-class antiwar movement to break down the barriers between themselves and their working-class counterparts in the military. Civilian groups provided GIs with legal defense as well. Quite cognizant that court-martials would be readily forthcoming for radical GIs, organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, National Emergency Civil Liberties Union, and the GI Civil Defense Committee offered their support. These organizations generated considerable publicity for the cases in which they were involved. Undoubtedly, more GIs were willing to run the risk of dissent with the realization that a
defense network was established to challenge any punitive action on the part of the military. In addition to some important legal victories, the adverse publicity directed against the military and its system of justice has led military authorities into a more rigorous scrutiny of both the case they wish to prosecute and the types of punishment they wish to dole out.

In response to growing dissent and mounting adverse publicity for the military, Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor issued a memorandum in May of 1969 titled “Guidance on Dissent.” The statement instructed commanders to adopt a more relaxed attitude with regard to GI coffeehouses, the GI press, and political resistance in general. Too liberal for some, especially the House Armed Services Committee, the guidelines were reissued in September, 1969. The revised statement in effect wiped out the recommendations for tolerance in the initial directive. The new directive de-emphasized constitutional restraints on commanders and at the same time added to their repressive options. Notably absent from the revised document was the phrase “to impose only such minimum restraints as are necessary to enable the Army to perform its mission.” The military found itself, or perhaps placed itself, in an unenviable position. In attempting to short-circuit what they considered to be a serious breakdown in discipline and morale, the inadvertently spawned a growing body of criticism of the military justice system and specifically of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

While the military’s inexperience with political resistance did lead them to err and overreact on many occasions, they did learn from their mistakes. In the years following 1969, they made greater use of administrative discharges and in general pursued a somewhat more tolerant position vis-à-vis dissent.

The GI Movement: An Assessment

In terms of its stated goals and objectives, which, aside from ending the war, involved mainly institutional structural reform, the GI movement was, not surprisingly, far from successful. It is difficult to believe that even the most die-hard GI organizers ever felt the movement could produce major changes in an organization as firmly entrenched as the military. The movement made a discernible, yet largely ineffective, attempt at fostering subversion within the ranks. There are a number of possible explanations for the movement’s failure to create an effective challenge on a mass scale against the Vietnam-era military. Some of the more glaring ones can be singled out here.

The GI movement was inextricably intertwined with the New Left. In the course of its development, the organized element of the movement found itself relying more and more on this sector of the civilian population. While the outside support was necessary if the movement was to transcend some of the limitations in political resources confronting it, the GI movement became to “civilianized,” particularly in its ideological
orientation. As the movement began to gather momentum and, correspondingly, the civilian input loomed larger and larger, the middle class ideological rhetoric of the New Left began to overshadow some of the more pragmatic day-to-day concerns of the GIs themselves. The feeling of helplessness and powerlessness that many GIs felt could not be adequately dealt with by sweeping references to "imperialism" and the "military industrial complex."

If one grants that an extremely inequitable Vietnam-era draft resulted in a predominantly lower-middle and working-class military, it seems reasonable to conclude that the middle-class emphasis that the organized element of the movement adopted under New Left influence lacked meaning for a significant number of GIs. As the movement strayed from issues directly related to the immediate self-interest of GIs, it increasingly reduced the possibility of mobilizing the discontent of large numbers of enlisted personnel. In a very real sense, the movement failed to integrate itself with the "ordinary" nonideological GI.

Another reason for the movement's failure to mobilize massive discontent stemmed from its own internal contradictions. Factionalism developed over tactics. There were also disputes over the proper role that civilian radicals should play in the GI movement. A major point of contention concerned those groups who, on the one hand, maintained that civilians should provide support to GIs but leave the actual control and operation of project to the GIs themselves (such as the Student Mobilization Committee, and United States Servicemen's Fund), and those groups who, on the other hand, wanted to function as a type of vanguard party leading the struggle against the military (such as the Socialist Workers Party/Young Socialist Alliance and the Youth Against War and Fascism). The orientation of the former groups appeared to be directed more toward democratizing the military, while that of the latter seemed more concerned with creating a broader revolutionary youth cohort. It was the latter who turned out to be more vociferous, and the GI movement came to be identified with them.

Although the GI movement claims to have been a significant factor in instigating troop dissent in Vietnam, there is little evidence to support this contention. The sporadic cases of troops refusing to go into combat, and acts such as fraggings appear to have been inspired by factors more or less separate from the stateside GI movement. Rather than viewing combat refusals as consequences of the GI movement, it seems more reasonable to interpret both phenomena as products of the anti-Vietnam war malaise affecting the larger society. As the war continued, reports from Vietnam indicated that more and more GIs were sharing the same disillusionment with the war as Americans at home were experiencing.

The GI movement was also ineffective in dealing with racial issues. Some of the organizations did have a multi-racial membership base, but the black participants seemed to be token members. Black soldiers began forming their own organizations in an effort to meet the
needs of black service personnel. For the most part, black GIs were waging a separate battle with military authorities. From the perspective of black GIs, their battle was qualitatively different from the one being conducted by the whites. Black soldiers discovered that the military was a microcosm of American society and that the problems confronting blacks in the military were not significantly different from those which faced them in the civilian world. Just as the New Left organizations failed to bring about a desired coalition with blacks and other minorities in civilian society, so the GI movement proved deficient in this realm as well.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The GI movement made a discernible, but largely ineffective attempt to foster subversion within the ranks. It failed to mobilize the discontent of the large bulk of GIs into a unified antiwar, anti-military force. To be sure, part of the failure stemmed from the fact that those who were most radical in the 1960s were also those who enjoyed deferments from military service. While a few entered the military with the avowed purpose of organizing, most remained on the outside and attempted to organize GIs from that vantage point. This not only engendered a certain degree of resentment on the part of GIs, but the “outsiders” were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to grasp the concerns of GIs. Though the movement had to rely on civilian support to get off the ground, civilian groups appear to have co-opted the movement in an attempt to exploit GI resistance for ideological purposes. The New Left was never able to overcome its elitism. The same mistake had been made in the abortive effort to radicalize workers. Even for GIs who were sympathetic to the GI movement’s aims, the lack of a clear-cut strategy and program of action resulted in the overshadowing of the hoped for gains by the very real risks involved in striving for them. In simple terms, it was not worth it.

Although the movement faltered partially because of its own internal contradictions, its inability to radicalize a large constituency of GIs was, in the final analysis, testimony to the military’s system of social control. The military went a long way in defusing dissent after it had learned from its initial mistakes.


Fred Halstead, GIs Speak Out Against the War (New York: Pathfinder) 1970.


Robert Sherrill, Military Justice is to Justice as Military Music is to Music (New York: Perennial) 1971.