

The Vietnam War and the US Soldiers' Revolt¹

DEREK SEIDMAN

Much has been written about the American war on Vietnam and about the war's large and growing opposition movement at that time. Yet many people still don't know about the antiwar movement that flourished among many of the U.S. troops who served during that war, and the tremendous level of dissent, disobedience, and rebellion that was growing among troops in the late 1960s.

The unpopularity of the war, the backdrop of antiwar and civil rights protest at home, the influence of the counterculture, the dissatisfaction with military authority, the racism within US society and its armed forces – all contributed to a historic wave of soldier protests that began in 1965 and lasted nearly a decade.

Seeds of Dissent

The first acts of active-duty GI protest broke out in 1965 and 1966. They were isolated and individualistic, but they pioneered a set of aims and tactics that would shape the larger wave of protest to come.

In November 1965, Lieutenant Henry Howe was arrested after attending an antiwar demonstration near Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. Convicted and jailed for "conduct unbecoming an officer" and "contemptuous words against the President," Howe became the antiwar movement's first GI *cause célèbre*. Others soon followed, including Captain Howard Levy, a dermatologist who refused to train Green Berets headed for Vietnam, and the Fort Hood 3, army privates who refused deployment to Vietnam.

By the end of 1966, cases like these had established protest tactics and an agenda for GI dissent that centered around civil liberties, racism, and, above all, the war. Others soon built upon these. In 1966 and 1967, Private Andy Stapp organized a group at Fort Sill, Kansas, that became the American Servicemen's Union. The ASU framed GIs as the military's working class and aimed to unionize them along radical, anti-imperialist lines. Around the same time, the Black Power movement emerged within the ranks. In July 1967, William Harvey and George Daniels, two black marines from Brooklyn, organized a rap session with fellow troops, where they declared that black men had no place fighting a "white man's war" in Vietnam. The soldiers were court-martialed for "promoting disloyalty" and dealt long prison terms.²

Up to this time, antiwar activists mostly considered GIs as moral symbols whose participation in the movement could help counter pro-war arguments. But the bulk of the civilian movement did not initially see soldiers as a group to be organized.

By 1968, however, things had changed. The growing numbers of protesting GIs showed antiwar activists that soldiers could be much more than moral props or objects of sympathy; they could be agents for peace in their own right—a major, dynamic constituency of the antiwar movement. GIs offered the civilian movement a new kind of legitimacy, as well as a strategic front that struck at the heart of the war machine. And by the end of 1967, GIs and civilians were building a tighter relationship through common work near military bases from coast to coast.

The GI Movement Rises

All of this set the stage for the rise of the GI movement in 1968: a collective effort by soldiers, veterans, and civilian activists to build dissent within the military. It was united by the common goals of organizing troops, ending the war, fighting racism, and defending troops' civil liberties. Most organizing with the GI movement was local, shaped by

the immediate conditions soldiers faced. The different parts of the movement, however, were knitted together through common narratives, symbols, and tactics. The GI movement would be the first time in U.S. history that a mass antiwar movement tried to organize within the military in a sustained way, with soldiers as a core part of a radical mission of ending the war and re-envisioning foreign policy.

Two organizing breakthroughs in 1968 were crucial to the rise of the GI movement. The first was the creation of GI antiwar coffeehouses. Civilian activists established coffeehouses near military bases to attract and politicize GIs and give them an alternative, countercultural gathering space. They served as centers for local organizing and helped build solidarity between GIs and civilian activists. The first coffeehouse, the UFO, opened in early 1968 in Columbia, South Carolina, near Fort Jackson, the army's largest basic training base. Fred Gardner, the UFO's founder, believed that the army "was filling up with people who would rather be making love to the music of Jimi Hendrix than war to the lies of Lyndon Johnson."³ The UFO attracted these soldiers by the hundreds, and inspired the spread of coffeehouses across the U.S. and beyond.

The second breakthrough was the birth of the GI underground press. These were antiwar newspapers aimed at soldiers that circulated widely throughout the Vietnam-era military. The first GI paper, *Vietnam GI*, appeared in late 1967, and dozens of other papers soon followed. Their pages contained uncensored news about the war, heroic reports of GI protest, satiric cartoons that bashed military authority, information on legal help, and letters written by soldiers. More importantly, the production and circulation of the papers provided a common project for dissident soldiers and their allies across the world. Organizers of the GI movement distributed the papers deep into the ranks, and thousands of troops were exposed to their antiwar message. Through the GI press, troops stationed from Europe to Japan and from the U.S. to Vietnam could connect with the global effort to build soldier opposition to the war.⁴

A host of new soldier organizations also sprang up. Scores of dissident troops joined newly formed groups like *GIs for Peace* at Fort Bliss; *GIs United Against the War in Vietnam* at Fort Jackson and Fort Bragg; *The Soldiers' Liberation Front (SLF)* at Fort Dix; and the *Concerned Officers Movement*. These organizations engaged in a range of activities, from petitioning and protesting on bases to mobilizing turnout for regional demonstrations.

A burgeoning network of civilian support was also central to defending GIs against repression and expanding the GI movement. Groups like the United States Servicemen's Fund (USSF) spread the word about GI resistance and provided valuable solidarity, from organizers on the ground to material aid. The USSF raised hundreds of thousands of dollars that it distributed to fund local coffeehouses and underground newspapers. Organizations like the GI Civil Liberties Defense Committee provided top-notch lawyers to defend dozens of antiwar soldiers. This soldier-civilian solidarity was a counter to the myth of an antiwar movement that hated the troops. In fact, GIs and civilians worked together to make soldier organizing a key front within the antiwar movement by the end of 1968.

The GI movement continued to grow through 1969 and into the early 1970s. Soldier protest became a ubiquitous part of the peace movement, with thousands of troops leading mass marches, signing petitions, and participating in small-scale direct actions. For example, 1,365 GIs signed a November 1969 full-page *New York Times* ad against the war. Hundreds, including those stationed in Vietnam, showed their support for the 1969 Moratorium demonstrations. One GI, for example, wrote from Long Binh to say he was "enlisting the support of the soldiers" and included with his letter a signed petition that was "simply a statement of support for the Vietnam Moratorium."⁵

Troops also defended their civil liberties against military authority. The Uniform Code of Military Justice gave commanders arbitrary power to punish dissenters. Soldiers countered with "GI rights," a broad defense of the constitutional rights of servicemembers to express their opposition to the war, even as they served.

Vietnam was a working-class war, and most of the soldiers who resisted were the rank-and-file troops who bore its greatest burdens. In opposition to the “lifers” up top, soldiers formed groups, even unions, animated by the concerns and consciousness of the lower ranks. The class structure of the military was also deeply racialized. Top commanders were mostly white, while black GIs fought and died in disproportionate numbers and suffered an excessive amount of punishments. This racism existed against a backdrop of rising black political radicalism. Black GIs formed anti-imperialist organizations, refused riot duty in U.S. cities, wore African medallions, raised their fists in Black Power salutes, and sometimes spearheaded efforts at interracial GI organizing.

By the turn of 1970, scores of antiwar papers, written and produced by soldiers who had returned from Vietnam, were also circulating on dozens of U.S. military bases. Troops took it upon themselves to order bundles of these papers and distribute them across the globe. Producing, circulating, reading, and writing for GI papers were central unifiers for troop resistance from the United States to Europe and Japan to Vietnam.

In addition, GIs wrote thousands of letters to the underground papers that reveal the hidden world of Vietnam-era soldier resistance. For example, nearly a dozen soldiers signed a 1970 letter from Vietnam that declared: “We have all been fucked in some way by this Army. All of us would like to distribute copies of your paper. Some of us are draftees, the others enlistees, but we all agree that this war is immoral.”⁶

Meanwhile, coffeehouses and movement centers continued to spread. By 1971, close to two dozen had appeared across the United States, Western Europe, and the Pacific Rim. These continued to be hubs for organizing and the cultivation of GI-civilian solidarity that resisted the war and the military. Thousands of soldiers visited these establishments. Vibrant communities of resistance from Killeen, Texas, to Mountain Home, Idaho, sustained antiwar protest that brought the peace movement to military bases and towns. Even more, GI protest had gone truly global, with organizing efforts everywhere from West Germany to Japan to England to the Philippines.

The dynamism of the GI movement was displayed on May 15, 1971, when antiwar troops turned the traditional Armed Forces Day into “Armed Farces Day.” Creative protests involving hundreds of troops occurred at nineteen separate military installations, in some cases forcing commanders to cancel their planned festivities.⁷ Dissent extended into the Air Force and especially the Navy. In 1971 the “SOS Movement” (Save Our Sailors) spread along the California coast, with hundreds of soldiers and civilians organizing in attempts to prevent the U.S.S. *Constellation* and *Coral Sea* from sailing to Vietnam.

Troop Dissent In Vietnam

By the early 1970s, the US military in Vietnam was also beset with decentralized rebellion. Many combat troops felt that the unpopular war “wasn’t worth it,” and saw themselves being used as “pawns” and “bait” as their superior officers tried to advance their careers. To stay safe and sane, troops developed what Fred Gardner called a “vague survival politics” that responded to the immediate dangers they faced in Vietnam.⁸

The starkest form of survival politics was outright refusal of combat orders, but such mutiny was rare. More common were maneuvers to avoid combat without openly risking punishment. Soldiers used the “search-and-evade” tactic, in which they pretended to obey fighting orders while secretly avoiding armed contact. Troops also sabotaged military equipment: gears were jammed on ships and fires mysteriously broke out on deck, which prevented ships from embarking to Vietnam.

The most violent form of revolt was “fragging,” or the attempted murder of higher-ups. Nearly 600 instances were reported between 1969 and 1971, though more instances likely went unreported. Some fragging attempts happened in the field but many occurred in the rear, often because of anger over punishment for drugs or racial tensions.

Actual fraggings could take the form of a grenade explosion or feigned friendly fire, but more important was the widespread knowledge that they *could* happen. The practice of fragging, said one officer, was “troops’ way of controlling officers,” and it was “deadly effective.”⁹

Soldiers in Vietnam also waged a cultural rebellion that drew on the symbols and language of the 1960s American counterculture. They grew their hair out and wore protest decorations. They etched peace signs and psychedelic art on their Zippo lighters. They used drugs to relax and escape the stress of war. The rebellious identities that soldiers asserted were distinctly those of the lower ranks, of the ground troops who performed the thankless labor of the war.

One measure of the depths of GI rebellion is the sense of alarm that it generated among military and political elites. Military intelligence personnel closely monitored the activities of the GI movement, and even General Westmoreland worried about the GI coffeehouses. Army leaders openly lamented the scope of the crisis. Most famously, the celebrated military historian Colonel Robert D. Heinl published an article in the June 1971 edition of the *Armed Forces Journal* titled “The Collapse of the Armed Forces.” It began with the stunning words: “The morale, discipline and battleworthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States.”¹⁰

The media echoed this sense of crisis. “Not since the Civil War,” stated the *Washington Post* in 1971, “has the Army been so torn by rebellion.” In 1970, *Newsweek* wrote of “the New GI” who opposed the war, embraced the counterculture, and identified with protest politics. The crisis in the military that these “New GIs” created would soon lead elites to completely overhaul the armed forces.¹¹

Obstacles

As much as it thrived, the GI movement also faced serious obstacles, and several factors contributed to the decline of soldier resistance. Speaking out was risky, with harassment and punishment awaiting dissidents. Moreover, the military regularly transferred soldiers, and the grind of service could isolate and wear down individuals. Thousands of soldiers participated or sympathized with antiwar protest, but the finite nature of enlistment – the incentive to suck it up, wait it out, and get out – militated against many GIs acting on their beliefs.

Outright repression also hampered the GI movement. Local police and military intelligence closely monitored coffeehouses, and they were targeted with fines, arrests, and even paramilitary violence. Bullets were shot through the Shelter Half in Tacoma; the Covered Wagon in Idaho was firebombed. Protesters were given Article 15 punishments, courts-martial, or thrown into the stockade. GIs knew that association with dissent invited unpleasant consequences.

Most crucial was the winding down of the ground war itself in 1972 and 1973. Steady combat troop reduction and the end of the draft stemmed the channeling of social unrest into the ranks. As the ordeal of the Vietnam War diminished, so did the conditions that bred the possibility of a large wave of GI dissent.

A Movement’s Legacies

Nearly a half-century later, what are the legacies of Vietnam-era GI protest? First, dissident troops helped create a crisis within the military that contributed to the end of the draft and the war. In addition, protest by black GIs sparked major reforms within the armed forces to integrate the higher ranks and deal the final death blow to a racially-segregated military.

Second, Vietnam left a model of resistance for later generations. Since 2003, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have been inspired by the example of the GI movement. They have linked up with Vietnam-era movement veterans and borrowed many of their tactics, from public testimony and agitprop actions to coffeehouses and antiwar papers

Third, the history of the GI movement debunks the widespread myth of a civilian peace movement that hated U.S. troops. It is important to remember that the antiwar movement's orientation towards Vietnam-era GIs was mostly one of sympathy and solidarity. Some troops saw the antiwar movement, not the war's backers, as their biggest ally. As one soldier put it in a letter: "We troops here in Vietnam are against the war and the demonstrations in the States do not hurt our morale. We are very glad to see someone cares and is working to bring us home."¹²

Finally, the history of Vietnam-era GI resistance is a counter-memory that reminds us that many troops were not against protesters, but that they *were* themselves protesters; that thousands of working-class troops stood for peace over war and militarism; and that it was the war and military, not antiwar protesters, that demoralized many GIs fighting in Vietnam.

Derek Seidman is a historian and researcher who lives in Buffalo, New York. He holds a PhD in history from Brown University (2010) and was formerly an assistant professor of history at D'Youville College in Buffalo from late 2013 to the end of 2016, during which time he wrote the essay that this pamphlet is based on.

Notes

¹ This essay is an edited version of a 2016 article: Derek Seidman, "Vietnam and the Soldiers Revolt: The Politics of a Forgotten History," *Monthly Review* (Vol 68, No. 2, June 2016)

² "Two Marines Test Right of Dissent," *New York Times*, 7 March 1969.

³ Fred Gardner, "Hollywood Confidential: Part I," in *Viet Nam Generation Journal Online* Volume 3, Number 3.

⁴ For more on the GI underground press, see Derek Seidman, "Paper Soldiers: The Ally and the GI Underground Press" in *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

⁵ Long Binh Post, October 28, 1969, Vietnam, Vietnam Moratorium Committee Records, Box 1 Folder 7, WHS.

⁶ 86th Maint. BT to The Ally, June 20, 1970, Box 2 Folder 3, Clark Smith Collection, WHS.

⁷ David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance during the Vietnam War* (Chicago IL: Haymarket Books, 2005), 82-83.

⁸ Fred Gardner, "War and GI Morale," *New York Times*, 21 November 1970, 31.

⁹ "Fragging and Other Symptoms of Withdrawal," *Saturday Review*, 8 January 1972.

¹⁰ Col. Robert D. Heinl, Jr., "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 June 1971.

¹¹ "Army Seldom So Torn By Rebellion," *Washington Post*, 10 February 1971; "The New GI: For Pot and Peace," *Newsweek*, February 2, 1970, 24.

¹² "Dear People", 23 October 1969, Student Mobilization Committee Collection, Box 2 Folder 6, WHS.