

*Waging Peace in Vietnam: U.S. Soldiers and Veterans who Opposed the War  
What it means to me and lessons for today*

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When the last American helicopters lifted into the sky over Saigon, there was music playing. Though the month was April, the song was "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." It had been selected to alert Americans and their allies in the city to the beginning of the evacuation, but the choice could hardly have been more incongruous. The Vietnamese-American poet Ocean Vuong pictures the moment this way:

Snow on the tanks rolling over the city walls.  
A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach.<sup>1</sup>

While precipitation fell, the last Americans lifted into the sky. The others in the city were left to whatever happened when the music ended.

As incongruous as this scene is, it was in keeping with what preceded it. From the beginning of the war the stated end of the American government, democracy and freedom in Vietnam, and the way it carried out the war were at odds. This irony became evident to many as the conflict continued, but the first Americans to detect it were active duty military personnel. They were also the first to oppose it. "Waging Peace in Vietnam" reminds its viewers of this fact. It shows how soldiers and veterans exposed the incongruity at the heart of the war and, through campaigning, refusing to fight, and protesting, helped to end it.

All this happened before I was born. But I'm old enough to know the military entanglements that followed. Afghanistan and Iraq, Libya and Syria—the list quickly becomes tedious. Their stories blend together. In each conflict, American military action was premised on freedom and protecting civilian safety. Yet in the course of these conflicts the means of warring eventually contradicted these premises. The image that comes to mind is the picture from the Abu Ghraib prison, a man in a shroud with electrodes attached to his limbs. I learned from this exhibit that, just as in Vietnam, veterans and soldiers in subsequent conflicts have been the first to alert their fellow Americans to the betrayals of our nation's ideals. They have spoken up about what they saw. For this service they have been called traitors and cowards. The stories and photos on display show the truth: that these are people brave enough to speak up when the ideals of our common life come under threat.

The conflicts chronicled in "Waging Peace in Vietnam" will not be the last in my lifetime. There will be others, near and far, and with them, betrayals of the ideals of our nation. But looking over these stories, I'm convinced that there will also be men and women in uniform who alert us to these betrayals and who point our feet toward the way of peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Ocean Vuong, "Aubade with Burning City," available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56769/aubade-with-burning-city>