
When John Wayne Went Out of Focus: GI Rebellion and Military Disintegration in Vietnam

by Nick Jackson

For Americans who did not come of age in the early sixties, it may be hard to grasp what those years were like — the pride and overpowering self-assurance that prevailed. . . . [A]nd we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own political faith around the world. . . . So when we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost. (Caputo, 1977, pp. xiii-xiv)

Over the past few years a rash of commemorations have been held and memorials dedicated to honor Vietnam veterans. Overwhelmingly they have been less remembrances of historical reality than exercises in selective amnesia and official burials of the truth. The war in Vietnam may not always be explicitly upheld as a noble cause, but that is clearly the message. And in any event, Vietnam veterans are being honored for answering the call of duty and serving well.

Yet even the stated purpose of these commemorations — to heal the wounds and trauma of war and bring Vietnam-era vets back into the American fold — hints at the truth that they are designed to obliterate: the U.S. was not engaged in an honorable cause in Vietnam but a heinous war of aggression. And the troops did not all behave as loyal mercenaries for imperialism; many GIs hated or were tormented by their role as butchers for the U.S., and thousands actively revolted against the war. Overall the U.S. military faced the most severe internal crisis in its history — a disintegration of morale and fighting ability that impacted not only upon the U.S. performance in Vietnam but its global standing as well.

This is the truth that can't be buried; these are the

veterans that the proletariat will always cherish. "I think that the [veterans] who deserve to be honored and are honored by the revolutionary proletariat and the oppressed people of the world," Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, has stated, "are those who recognized what they were being forced to do, who stared straight in the face of what they were doing, recognizing it for what it was... and found it totally repulsive; particularly those who rebelled against it and joined in the struggle against those atrocities and against U.S. imperialism and some of whom actually became revolutionaries" (1986, p. 36).

Going into the Vietnam War it was taken for granted that America's obedient youth, the "flower of the nation," would eagerly answer the call to war, just as their fathers had in World War 2. But startling developments took place among these youth during the war, and rather quickly the U.S. military machine found itself severely hobbled from within: mutinies broke out in jungle gorges and on board the U.S.'s fighting fortresses; officers were killed by their own troops; hundreds of thousands of soldiers deserted the ranks before their tours were up; antiwar protests, organizations, and newspapers tormented the brass on every major U.S. military installation in the world.

When the first U.S. ground troops were sent into battle in March 1965, with the massive firepower and support capacity of the U.S. behind them, they were told that they were in Vietnam to crush a force which was politically isolated among the local populace and which militarily would prove to be easy pickings for the U.S. soldiers. But instead of this scenario unfolding, from the first the U.S. troops found themselves pitted against a determined, if outgunned, armed revolution which enjoyed massive popular support. Eight years, some \$120 billion and 3,000,000 troops later, the country which sent these soldiers to war had lost the war.

By the late 1960s the disintegration* of the U.S. military became so severe that the U.S. imperialists were forced to regard the very reliability of their troops as a major factor in the war's overall prosecution. This crisis, which peaked between 1969 and 1973, played havoc with more than a few commanders' assignments at the time, such as when soldiers refused to go out on patrols or when considerable resources had to be rechanneled to deal with skyrocketing desertion rates and discipline problems. A small and increasingly influential number of soldiers were refusing

*By "disintegration" is meant the internal decay and crisis of a military, whether in single units, whole armies, or somewhere in between. Disintegration does not necessarily mean the collapse of an army, nor is it automatically irreversible. During the Vietnam War it meant that disruptions and dislocations within the U.S. armed forces were severe and widespread enough that they became important elements in the formulation of military policy and strategy, while at the same time they never became so thorough that the U.S. was unable to field an army.

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orders in one way or another, while the majority of the troops were obeying orders often only with great reluctance or in name only. The minority of GIs who were still gung-ho were usually looked upon by the others as at best suicidal and at worst "traitors" within the enlisted ranks. And a significant section of the Armed Forces was consciously and often actively antiwar and linked — spiritually if not always organizationally — with the Black liberation and antiwar movements in the U.S.

The disintegration crippled the U.S. war effort in Vietnam and threatened to get much worse if something wasn't done about it. The potential for this crisis in the military to spread and deepen, coupled with the fact that in Vietnam U.S. imperialism was not in a do-or-die situation, ultimately helped force the mightiest armed force on earth to cut its losses and run in ignominious defeat.

The indispensable underlying cause of the disintegration of the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam was the persistent battering they were receiving at the hands of the Vietnamese liberation forces — the result of a people's war. The U.S. military was continually frustrated in its efforts to "pacify" and control South Vietnam and wipe out the Vietnamese liberation forces. If anything, the liberation forces grew in size and strength and were able to inflict heavy losses on the U.S. forces. This kind of battering created a profound crisis in the U.S. military, a crisis of widespread demoralization, with troops questioning and rebelling against everything from barracks discipline to what they were doing in Vietnam to what kind of a society had sent them to fight and die in Vietnam.

But this military battering was not the sole cause of the disintegration of the U.S. forces in Vietnam; it was also shaped by global political developments, most particularly the social and political upheaval that shook U.S. society in the 1960s and early 1970s. That is, on the basis of military factors, other related, political factors also contributed to this disintegration.

The disintegration of the troops in Vietnam came at a time of thunderous national liberation movements and revolutionary upheaval throughout the world. These developments, spurred in part by the heroic liberation struggle of the Vietnamese people, greatly weakened and exposed U.S. imperialism and helped spark unprecedented

social upheaval in the belly of the beast itself. This turmoil, most notably the Black liberation struggle, the antiwar movement, and the youth rebellion, along with divisions within the U.S. ruling class, had a tremendous impact upon the troops. The military situation in Vietnam, coupled with the political situation around the world and in the U.S., served to sharpen all the class and national contradictions that permeate the U.S. services; the realization spread among many GIs that they were not fighting a just war to "help the Vietnamese people help themselves" but a reactionary war to enslave them, and this pushed forward the growth of an antiwar movement among the troops.

This essay is not intended as a political or military history of the Vietnam War, but rather an examination of one feature of that war. The first section will survey the manifestations and scope of the disintegration. Those following will analyze the major factors behind the troops' revolt — from the military pounding the U.S. took in Vietnam to the social upheaval in the U.S. and the world during the '60s.

The Magnitude of the Contagion

In 1971 the *Armed Forces Journal* published a shocking (and now famous) article on "The Collapse of the Armed Forces." In a note accompanying the piece the *Journal's* editors noted that they had some reservations about running it, but they said these were minor when compared to the importance of solving what had become a dire problem for the Army. The opening lines of this article penned by Col. Robert D. Heintz capture some of the crisis atmosphere in the upper reaches of U.S. war planners at the time:

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. By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near-mutinous. Elsewhere than Vietnam, the situation is nearly as serious. (1971, p. 30)

In 1967 the U.S. was still speaking in confident tones about the fighting capacity of their troops. Four years later the situation had changed so drastically that official military journals felt compelled to publish such summations.

It would certainly be a mistake to call the disintegration of the U.S. armed forces in the Vietnam War anywhere near to complete, that is, a full collapse. But it would be a greater mistake not to grasp how very serious it was, in both scope and impact, and how severely it hamstrung the U.S.'s

military operations.

By 1969 a majority of the U.S. troops had turned against the war for many different reasons; the demoralization and questioning among the troops was profound. While the GIs and sailors who took part in any act of open protest (or blatant insubordination based on antiwar feelings) during the war remained a minority, this more conscious section had by this point gained the initiative among the rank-and-file and (together with the liberation and antiwar movements raging in the U.S.) set the tone of the political atmosphere in large sections of the U.S. military. And because this took place, even if it is true that many of the soldiers never went beyond thinking "this is the wrong war at the wrong time," these same soldiers took part in, or at least went along with, a lot of activity inspired by the advanced minority.*

Not only did most of the ground troops in Vietnam hold at least grudging respect for the enemy, being especially awed by its staying power and popular support, but by 1970 soldiers could easily be found who openly sympathized with the Vietnamese liberation struggle — that is, with "the enemy" — especially among Black and other oppressed nationality soldiers. And by then in many units the most backward sections among the troops, upon whom the military has always tried to base the life and spirit of its armed forces, often found themselves politically isolated and/or neutralized on the question of the war and many other social issues, from the American flag to racism.†

The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, in its "Investigation of Attempts to Subvert the United States Armed Forces," revealed some of the magnitude of the problems in the military as the bourgeoisie then saw it: "Drug abuse, the desertion rate, reports of so-called fragging of officers and accounts of virtual mutiny in the ranks of some units reflect adversely upon the reputation and dependability of American fighting forces" (1972, pp. 6381-82). A 1971 *New York Times* article declared, "The bitter Vietnam experience has left the United States Army with a crisis in morale and discipline as serious as any its oldest and toughest soldiers can remember. . . . [T]he men

*In other situations, when the authorities and the backward have the initiative, such intermediate-type thinking is more likely to find expression in a silent lack of enthusiasm while going along with the program. One much-quoted study following World War 2 found that "out of an average one hundred men along the line of fire during the period of an encounter, only fifteen men on average would take any part with the weapons. This was true whether the action was spread over a day, or two days or three. . . . In the most aggressive infantry companies, under the most intense local pressure, the figure rarely rose above 25% of total strength from the opening to the close of an action" (Dyer, 1985, p. 118).

†Another illustration of how at odds with the norm the political atmosphere in the military had become is provided by the fact that for several years in the early 1970s it was the radicals who dominated the political stage among Vietnam veterans and not the soldier-of-fortune freaks who lead the parades today.

themselves are fed up with the war and the draft, questioning orders, deserting, subverting, smoking marijuana, shooting heroin, stealing from their buddies, hurling racial epithets and rocks at their brothers" (Ayres, 1971, p. 1). When the most powerful state in the world calls into question the reputation and dependability of its armed apparatus, a serious situation is at hand. We will review in some detail many of the expressions of disintegration during its high tide, keeping in mind that these were the results of the disintegration and not its causes, a subject we will address in the second section of this essay.

Desertions and AWOLs. In 1971, seven of every 100 soldiers in the U.S. Army deserted, while another seventeen of every 100 went AWOL.* In real numbers this translated into 98,059 deserters in the Army in 1971, most of whom (around 67 percent) came from the lowest ranks, E-1s and E-2s. Further, most desertions and AWOLs took place not in Vietnam (an estimated 3 percent) but stateside (around 88 percent), for the simple reason that there were very few places for GIs to hide in Vietnam (see Bell and Bell, 1977, 435; Gabriel and Savage, 1978, p. 181, Table 1).

GIs in the Vietnam War deserted for very different reasons. For some it was a political stand against the war and the U.S., and these soldiers deserted to take part in the antiwar movement in the U.S. and Europe. For others it was simply a desire not to get killed in Vietnam; this was an especially prevalent sentiment after major troop reductions began in 1970. Probably the bulk of the deserters could at least agree on an FTA/FTW orientation — Fuck the Army/ Fuck the War. The military eventually had to establish no less than nine "personnel control facilities" on bases from New Jersey to California solely to house deserters and AWOLs.

But to understand the full import of this phenomenon, other figures must be added. In 1944, during World War 2, the U.S. Army's desertion rate was nearly as high as in 1971: 6.3 percent. (Further, the highest desertion rate to date in the Marine Corps occurred in 1975 — 10.5 percent, and that in the Navy in 1976 — 2.4 percent, both after U.S. forces were out of Vietnam.) While the real figures in Vietnam would undoubtedly have been higher if the army had not instituted the practice of charging many deserters with only being AWOL, it is very misleading to look only at figures from various wars and times when analyzing a military's morale and support for a war. More important is to examine the quality of the desertions by asking the question: what would it have taken to get the soldiers "back into the fold." In World War 2 the desertion rate mainly reflected war weariness in general, while in Vietnam it reflected much more profound opposition to the war itself, and not simply soldiers looking to save their own hides. This is revealed in the fact that desertion was often the strategy of choice among the most politically advanced GIs and sailors and in

the fact that many of the troops deserted *after* returning from Vietnam, not before going there.

Combat Refusals. According to one writer, "The latter stages of the Vietnam War produced no fewer than ten major incidents of mutiny" (Cortright, 1975, p. 35). According to another writer, "By 1975 there were 35 separate combat refusals in the Air Cavalry Division alone" (Rinaldi, 1974, p. 29). And for each of these major refusals, there were dozens of minor ones or situations in which combat orders were effectively thwarted.

Especially after 1969, when the ground fighting began to be cut away and the futility of the war stood out in starker relief, soldiers who remained in the field became more and more disinclined to accept combat assignments, especially ones they regarded as needless and recklessly hazardous. The watchword among the troops became "We will not be the last ones to die in this war." One military scholar lamented, "Once America began to pull its troops out of Vietnam, the average soldier simply wanted to get home alive and cared little for the ultimate fate of his formation or the accomplishment of the country's mission" (Stanton, 1985, p. 294).

In many infantry units by 1970 officers were often forced to "talk it out" or "work it out" with hesitant soldiers, rather than using the military standard operating procedure of harsh punishment for such recalcitrant troops. Simply refusing to fight became the main way the troops in Vietnam opposed the war.

Obviously combat refusals are not unknown in the annals of military history. Whole areas of military science are devoted to the question "What does it take to get a soldier to fight and perform in battle?", resulting in various proposals concerning buddy systems, unit cohesion, the role of junior officers, etc. To some extent the bourgeoisie expects combat refusals among large numbers of its troops. Among the ground troops in Vietnam, combat refusal generally took the form of "advancing only so far" rather than refusing to advance at all or refusing to "engage" the enemy ("search-and-destroy" missions were dubbed "search-and-avoid"). These combat refusals — both major and more limited — not only physically hindered the war (by 1971 the U.S. was forced to rely more and more on the air war, in part because of such refusals) but also manifested the larger disintegration and potential for collapse. This in turn relates to what is called "preservation levels" — the level of casualties after which a given army can expect a marked reduction in the willingness of its soldiers to operate aggressively, not just to shoot but to pursue an enemy. In Vietnam the preservation level of the U.S. military got extremely low, even by bourgeois standards. And more significant to the Pentagon than the combat refusals in infantry units which did take place was the *threat* of far more widespread mutiny if the war continued as it had been. Thus these refusals certainly influenced the imperialists' decision to cut back the war on the ground.

The motivations for these refusals varied. If the accounts

* Desertion is defined as being AWOL for thirty days or more.

of several of these combat refusals in infantry units are accurate, the combat refusals were often touched off by what the men saw as crazy operations and were not intended as political actions against the war (though, again, one could only relatively wall off one from the other, for they took place against the backdrop of widespread anger and disgust with the war). The same cannot be said of several mutinies which took place in the Navy.

When the U.S. cut back its troop strength and ground activity in Vietnam, it stepped up its bombing of North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. But the military's internal problems also shifted to those services most immediately connected with the bombing, especially the Navy. In San Diego, in the spring of 1971, sailors aboard the aircraft carrier *Constellation*, in conjunction with antiwar activists, initiated a series of protests against the ship sailing to Vietnam. In the fall the attack carrier *Coral Sea* was docked in California preparing for a tour off the Vietnam coast. A dozen sailors met, drew up, and began circulating a petition which read in part:

We the people must guide the government and not allow the government to guide us! The *Coral Sea* is scheduled for Vietnam in November. This does not have to be a fact. The ship can be prevented from taking an active part in the conflict if we the majority voice our opinion that we do not believe in the Vietnam war. If you feel that the *Coral Sea* should not go to Vietnam, voice your opinion by signing this petition. (Cited in Rinaldi, 1974, p. 44)

Within a few weeks 1,200 of 4,500 sailors on the *Coral Sea* signed the petition. The action quickly drew support from the antiwar movement and revolutionary groups, including the Revolutionary Union (predecessor of the RCP, USA):

The huge civilian peace rally in San Francisco on November 6 was used as a forum to focus attention on the struggle aboard the *Coral Sea*. At 5 A.M. on November 9, as the crew returned from prebarkation leave, over one thousand anti-war civilians gathered at the main gate of Alameda Naval Station to distribute anti-war literature and talk with the men about opposing the ship's mission. The following day, three junior officers publicly tendered their resignations and strongly condemned the war effort. On the morning of the *Coral Sea's* departure, November 12, fifteen hundred civilians again demonstrated before dawn at Alameda to support the dissenting sailors. When the ship sailed that day, thirty-five sailors stayed behind. (Cortright, 1975, p. 112)

A year later Black sailors revolted on the carrier *Kitty Hawk* demanding an end to racism on the ship and a withdrawal of the carrier from the war. A month later 150 Black, Chicano, and some white sailors seized control of

various parts of the carrier *Constellation* for twenty-four hours, fighting Marine MPs and gangs of backward whites, and eventually forcing the ship to return to its home port of San Diego.

Fraggings. Col. Heintz wrote in his *Armed Forces Journal* article:

Word of the deaths of officers will bring cheers at troop movies or in bivouacs of certain units. . . . Shortly after the costly assault on Hamburger Hill in mid-1969, the GI underground newspaper [of the somewhat elite 101st Airborne] in Vietnam, "G.I. Says," publicly offered a \$10,000 bounty on LCol Weldon Honeycutt, the officer who ordered (and led) the attack. (p. 31)

Officially there were 239 fragging attempts in 1969, 386 in 1970, 333 in 1971, and 58 in 1972 [see Gabriel and Savage, 1978, p. 183, table 3]. According to one reporter who investigated this question in 1971, only 10 percent of actual fragging attempts even made it to court, and therefore to the official statisticians, making the total number of fraggings astoundingly high (Linden, 1972, p. 12). Attempts to kill using rifles, automatics, claymore mines, "misdirection of hostile ambush" (i.e., shooting your officer in the back while in combat), and so on, did not count as fragging. Only killing by hand grenades counted. Approximately 80 percent of the official fragging attempts were against officers. Many more officers received "friendly warnings" like a grenade pin on their bunks. By the end of the war the situation had gotten so bad that many combat units had to turn in their weapons at the end of each day; but the officers were still not entirely safe. As one veteran recalled: "Nobody fucked with nobody in the field. An officer knows if he messed with you in the field, in a fire fight you could shoot him in the head. This was standard procedure in any infantry unit [by the end of the war]. Anybody tells you differently, he's shitting you" (Baker, 1981, p. 190).

The situation was unprecedented. (One writer noted that "the practice of 'fragging' . . . was statistically not a factor until the Vietnam War" [Veninga and Wilmer, 1985, p. 64]). While fraggings may not have been an everyday event in any combat unit, they did become an everyday topic of discussion in most of these units by 1970, which itself says a lot about the morale of the troops. And each instance of fragging had a "multiplier" effect; one Army judge warned that "once an officer is intimidated by even the threat of fragging he is useless to the military because he can no longer carry out orders" (Linden, 1972, p. 12).

Fragging was not necessarily carried out by, or at all limited to, the most politically radical elements among the troops; many of the more intermediate soldiers who were fed up with the war took it up spontaneously. Most were probably part of the broad grouping in the enlisted ranks called the UUUUs: "The unwilling, led by the unqualified, doing the unnecessary, for the ungrateful." This by no

means lessens its importance.

Dope. Of the approximately 1,000,000 GIs discharged from the army in 1971, the Veteran's Administration estimated there were between 50,000 and 100,000 drug addicts (see Hauser, 1973, p. 126). In 1970, 11,000 soldiers were charged with using hard drugs, and it was assumed that four of five GI addicts went undetected.

Widespread use of reefer reflected in part the cultural rebellion among youth both in and out of the service. But reefer and especially hard drug use also became a symptom of the all-around demoralization and collapse of the fighting will of GIs in Vietnam, as well as the depth and intensity of the ideological contradictions ripping many apart. Some tried to escape from the war in Vietnam through any means possible. Some of the complex reasons for starting on heroin were revealed by one GI junkie: "I really got along well with a girl there. . . . She was VC,* she told me; she made booby traps and laid them at night — and I'd be out there stepping clear of them — but she and I were in love. That's when I started on junk" (Helmer, 1974, p. 157).

An in-depth analysis of drug use in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War is beyond the scope of this article. If it may have had an aspect of alienation and even identifying with the cultural youth rebellion, it is also doubtless true that at least in part the brass consciously tolerated or even directly promoted this rampant drug use as a means of containing the rage of GIs in Vietnam, in much the same way that the bourgeoisie pumped drugs into Black ghettos during the same period to dissipate urban rebellions. Drugs may have helped some GIs carry on with their missions while floating above the ideological contradictions tearing at them. And the hand of various U.S. agencies in the drug trade in Southeast Asia has been widely exposed. (See for instance, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, by Alfred W. McCoy. McCoy notes that "Previously nonexistent in South Vietnam, suddenly no. 4 heroin was everywhere" in the late 1960s [1972, p. 181]. For this he blames the profiteering of various South Vietnamese generals and government officials.)

Fraternization and Joining the Enemy. There is little hard documentation by either the U.S. or Vietnam as to U.S. soldiers deserting, making contact with the enemy, and then turning around and fighting with the liberation forces

against the U.S. and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). The reticence on the part of the U.S. to reveal information about this subject is certainly understandable. Nevertheless, such things did take place, even if on a small and scattered scale.

The most celebrated example was the case of Robert Garwood, a Marine Corps private who defected to the NLF in 1965, actively collaborated with the liberation forces throughout the war, and was court-martialed for aiding the enemy upon his return to the U.S.* Numerous GIs during the war reported sighting a "salt-and-pepper" combo, a white and a Black GI who seemed to be fighting the U.S. troops all over South Vietnam. A GI underground newspaper reprinted the following order from the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam to the NLF fighters in the field:

NLF forces are . . . to welcome and give good treatment to those U.S. servicemen who cross over to the South Vietnamese people and the People's Liberation Armed Forces; to stand ready to help them go home or seek asylum in another country if requested by them. (Reproduced in Committee on Internal Security, 1972, p. 6806)

And Jack Anderson reported in his column in 1980:

According to military sources . . . as many as 500 American GIs actively assisted the enemy in Vietnam. About 30 prisoners of war went over to the enemy and played active anti-American roles in the POW camps. And as many as six Americans are believed to have taken up arms against U.S. troops in Vietnam. At least two of these — both Marine privates — are known to have joined in combat with the Viet Cong against American forces. (p. C-7)

Besides directly joining the "enemy" there were other much more widespread, though less extreme, forms of fraternization between U.S. GIs and the Vietnamese liberation forces. One important form was local "truces" between GIs and the local NLF or NVA fighters. While many such examples are more legendary than official, since such topics are largely banned from official discussions, examples drawn from the personal experience of Vietnam vets abound. For instance, in 1971 NVA and NLF troops received orders not to fire at troops wearing symbols of a rifle turned upside down or carrying their rifles in the down position on patrol. GIs tell of one American division which captured an NVA captain and told him they wanted to declare a truce in their area of operations. When the body count dropped to zilch, the unit was investigated.

The Vietnamese revolutionary forces placed a special

*VC was U.S. slang for the Vietnamese Communists (Viet Cong), or Charlie for short. Or as one Black vet later remembered: "Sir Charlie, that was what we called him. We respected Charlie" (Goff and Sanders, 1982, p. 130). But that was not what the GIs were supposed to say, nor what they were supposed to feel. Strictly speaking, "VC" applied only to the South Vietnamese freedom fighters, the National Liberation Front (NLF), also called the People's Liberation Armed Forces. Those from the North were members of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), "the regulars." In practice, VC was used by most GIs for all forces fighting against them.

*That Garwood has since come "home" and repudiated his actions in Vietnam in no way changes their significance at the time.

GI's !

What has Johnson said to you ? and what have happened (taken place) before your eyes in Vietnam ?
It is massacre no spare old folks children and pregnant women.

It is flattening villages, consuming tens of thousands of houses, digging out graves and destroying crops, pagodas and churches

Is it the " help " to the Vietnamese against communists and preserving " the Free world " ?

No ! It is action of aggression, of barbarity, of immorality.
It is action of a cornered wild beast flinging himself about frantically.

It is action contrasting with the will and traditions of civilization, freedom and Democracy of the United States. .
For your individual interests, conscience and honor of the Americans, you should :

- Oppose to orders of mopping - up operations, reinforcement !

- Don't commit crimes against the Vietnamese people !

- Press for your repatriation ! Don't get killed for the cannon - dealers !

- Cross over to the side of the NFL, you will receive humanitarian treatment and help to go home !

The National Front for Liberation.

emphasis on agitation among the troops in a righteous calculated attempt to sharpen certain political conflicts already present within the imperialist armed forces and thereby help foster their disintegration (see accompanying box). Such agitation often targeted Black soldiers. One Black vet later recalled his experiences in Nam:

The Vietnamese constantly appealed to blacks to get out of the war. They would leave leaflets laying all over the jungle. In perfectly good English, the leaflet would say, "Blacks get out, it's not your fight," or, "They call us gooks here and they call you niggers over there. You're the same as us. Get out, it's not your fight." In some ways those leaflets affected morale. It would make us wonder why we were there. Most of the people were like me; they were naive. We didn't know what the hell was really going on.

A favorite saying among Black troops in Vietnam became "No VC ever called me nigger." This vet continued:

Ho Chi Minh made a point that stuck in many of our minds. He said, "It's a civil war. The war is between the Vietnamese, between the North and the South." . . . Old Ho Chi made sense to most of us. This kinda idea especially made sense to me, because we had too many Americans dying. And it was obvious that we were the aggressors because we were fourteen thousand miles from home rather than vice versa. We were fighting Charlie in his own backyard. We

didn't really feel that we were fighting for our country; half the brothers felt it wasn't even our war and were sympathetic with Ho Chi Minh. (Goff and Sanders, 1982, pp. 131-33)*

GIs also report many individual ways in which they or their compatriots acted to obstruct the U.S. war effort and/or to show solidarity with the Vietnamese.† And in the context of Vietnam, even living among the Vietnamese (i.e., having an apartment off-base) was in a certain sense a form of fraternization or at least a phenomenon that helped break down part of the wall of chauvinism that the U.S. counted on to separate the troops from the Vietnamese. This was most prevalent among Black GIs, and it was often an expression of hatred for life on the base and sympathy with the Vietnamese.

*Because we will be using several quotations from the oral history of Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders, it is important to note that they both represent political views that were more in the mainstream of GIs than its radical advanced minority (and they were both highly decorated while in Vietnam). This itself says a lot about the seriousness of the disintegration, if views such as those above belonged to the intermediate soldiers.

†In 1969 the Navy and Marine Corps reported 365 acts of "wrongful destruction" (sabotage, arson, etc.) of military property; the figure jumped to 488 in the first six months of 1971 (Cortright, 1975, p. 123).

One General wrote, "Should senior commanders not be able to reverse the trend toward indiscipline, this country will, not long from now, lose its status as the world's first power and stand almost helpless against those who would humble it or destroy it."

Regulations and Discipline. The all-around breakdown of traditional military discipline was one of the most prominent signs of the crisis gripping the U.S. military. One author wrote that, by 1971, of 100 troops there were seven desertions, seventeen AWOLs, two discipline charges, twelve complaints to Congress, eighteen nonjudicial punishments, twenty pot smokers, and ten users of narcotics (Baskir and Straus, 1978, p. 110). In the same year the *New York Times* reported that "Court martial convictions for insubordination, mutiny and refusals to obey orders climbed from 230 in 1968 to 294 in 1969 to 331 last year. This year, convictions may exceed 450. These figures represent only the extreme cases. No statistics are kept on the less serious incidents, which occur almost daily in many units" (Ayres, 1971, p. 1).

Beginning in 1971, more in an attempt to cut losses and regroup with the future in mind than to salvage the splintered state of its armed forces in Vietnam, the military began brandishing new carrots and sticks. In December 1971 various unprecedented "reforms" were instituted, especially in the Army and Navy, in an attempt to do away with certain petty aggravations for the troops: hair regulations were loosened, a five-day work week was instituted in some places outside Vietnam, civilians were hired in some places to do KP, beer machines were allowed in the barracks and sleeping quarters on ships, and on-post and on-board ship coffeehouses were established (we shall see where they got that idea from). The coffeehouse at Ft. Carson in Colorado, known as the pacesetter in these "reforms," was called Inscape. In addition, a Defense Race Relations Institute was founded to train 1,400 military instructors annually. Needless to say, the soldiers and sailors were still expected to kill and die for the U.S. empire.

Far more important and indicative was the fact that 11 percent of the Marine Corps was unceremoniously booted in 1971 with "unsuitability discharges" for misconduct, unfitness, etc. The Army in December 1971 made the decision to discharge thousands of low-ranking GIs early for similar reasons. In December 1972, 3,000 sailors were given "administrative discharges," with an additional 3,000 given the same in the months following. Those targeted in the Navy were said to be "agitators and other malcontents," a

large percentage of whom were Black (Cortright, 1975, pp. 18, 91, 126).*

A prominent military scholar wrote around this time: "In the United States, the military establishment, and especially its ground forces, are experiencing a profound crisis in legitimacy" (Janowitz, 1972, p. 428). This crisis, he wrote, was centered in the U.S. infantry — in what had been a war geared to victory on the ground — and was twofold. First, the legitimate authority of the bourgeois state was challenged by the troops, and therefore the reliability of the armed forces was in question. Second, and related, because of the U.S. losses and the disintegration, the legitimacy of the U.S. military capability around the world was being called into question.

What concerned Janowitz and others familiar with the military's dilemma was that while the U.S. could, if it had to, face defeat in Vietnam, as great a loss as this would be it could not compare to the collapse of the U.S. armed forces. One general spelled out these concerns:

The military forces of the United States face a disciplinary situation which, if not already critical, is at least one of rapidly growing proportions. Should senior commanders not be able to reverse the trend toward indiscipline, this country will, not long from now, lose its status as the world's first power and stand almost helpless against those who would humble it or destroy it. (Quoted in Ayres, 1971, p. 1)

With the growing challenge to the U.S. in this period

*The wasting war inside the U.S. officer corps was another indicator of the crud creeping within the military during Vietnam. Narrow careerism within bourgeois officer corps is, of course, a standard phenomenon. While there were important instances of middle-ranking officers protesting the war, what stood out in Vietnam was the extent to which this careerism spread and came to be accepted, providing another sign of the magnitude of the disintegration within the U.S. military.

For officers planning a career in the armed forces a Vietnam service ribbon was *de rigueur* for further advancement, and they tried to make sure their personnel folders were "punched" as having served in Vietnam in some capacity, any capacity. Attempting to apply Napoleon's ditty that "a bolt of ribbon wins many battles," the officers also handed out medals ("gongs") to themselves and the soldiers by the truckload. "Statistics revealed that 1,273,987 awards for bravery... had been given by the Army in Vietnam... [This compared with 1,766,546 such medals in all of World War II and only 50,258 in Korea]" (Hauser 1973, p. 175). In fact, more gongs were shoveled out as the war on the ground waned: the Pentagon apparently hoped that medals could at least partially and temporarily buoy the sagging morale of the troops and junior officers. But in many ways it had the opposite effect — underlining for the troops the hypocrisy and careerism of the U.S. officer corps, as well as the hollowness of the war effort overall.

from the imperialist Soviet Union, some hard-nosed decisions had to be made. Bob Avakian, in "The '60s-'70s Shift," said of the defeat of the U.S. imperialists in the Vietnam War:

Vietnam became the tail of the tiger that they couldn't let go of. And in the long run, it contributed to greatly weakening U.S. imperialism. . . . [But while the U.S. tried to win,] when it became clear that wasn't really possible without throwing everything in and literally risking everything, the U.S. imperialists tried to extricate themselves, pull back, maneuver and regroup on a world scale as best they could. . . . to prepare for meeting the rising challenge that was coming from the Soviet Union. (pp. 11, 14, 16)

The decision to pull out of Vietnam was made in part to rescue the military from its seriously fractured state before things got qualitatively worse and to reconstitute it in preparation for the much more "life-threatening" clash even then beginning to loom on the horizon: that is to say, war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. This was the concern behind a blunt statement made by McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Kennedy and Johnson, when he spoke to the Council on Foreign Relations in 1971: "Extrication from Vietnam is now the necessary precondition of the renewal of the U.S. Army as an institution" (cited in Loory 1973, p. 385).

People's War Batters the U.S. Military

In early 1961, shortly after taking office, John F. Kennedy told a reporter: "Now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place" (quoted in Halberstam 1972, p. 76). Vietnam was, of course, the place for the U.S. to draw the line against national liberation movements around the world.

This was a time when every schoolchild was, and could be, taught that the U.S. had never lost a war (Korea was either avoided or declared a stalemate — in any case, it wasn't portrayed as a defeat). This was said to prove the righteousness of the U.S., its place in the world — and its duty to play an "activist" role internationally. The proposition that in terms of sustaining heavy casualties it might plausibly be said that the U.S. had never really fought a major war in the twentieth century — this was not mentioned. Many of the soldiers sent to Vietnam also initially had an overweening confidence in the invincibility of the U.S. military around the world—a consummate faith in the potency of American firepower, which was the *most* important thing for the U.S. officer corps. After all, if moral righteousness and an unbeatable military machine weren't responsible for the U.S. never having lost a war, what was? The GIs were taught that the Vietnamese would be quick to capitulate

when pitted against American troops, and most of them believed it.

Former prisoner of war (POW) George Smith later described the political rationale fed to the elite Green Berets early on:

The Communists were coming down from China to overthrow the legitimate government of South Vietnam, which had the support of the people but was helpless to defend itself — that's what they told us. It was even on the patch we had for Vietnam service — a picture of the Great Wall of China with a break in it and red streaming down: the Red Hordes of China streaming down into South Vietnam. (1971, p. 36)

As Smith indicated, the earliest troops were told they were there to stop an invasion from the north originating in China. Later, and for most of the war, the troops were told they were there to stop an invasion simply from North Vietnam, preserve the legitimate government of South Vietnam, and protect vital U.S. interests. It was anything but an indigenous revolutionary situation and a war of national liberation, they were told, and this view is still the dominant view pushed by the bourgeoisie in the U.S. (see, for instance, Summers, 1982 and Palmer, 1984).

Of course, there was more to the ideological and political glue holding together the U.S. military than puffed-up confidence in its might coupled with noble-sounding missions. Recruits "were dragged into uniform, shaved bald, and put through the systematic process of degradation, humiliation, and indoctrination known as 'basic training.' Drill sergeants worked 24 hours a day to stomp out any flicker of rebelliousness, to instill fear of and unquestioning obedience to military authority. 'I want to be an airborne ranger/I want to live a life of danger/I want to go to Vietnam/I want to kill the Vietcong' — this is what the recruits had to chant day in and day out, at 5:00 a.m. runs and forced marches; and anyone who didn't 'cat this shit up' was a 'maggot,' a 'pussy,' a 'dud'" (*Revolutionary Worker*, No. 364, p. 13).

All-American chauvinism and racism were drilled into the troops from the first day of boot camp. One vet recalled: "When you go into basic training, you are taught that the Vietnamese are not people. You are taught that they are gooks and all you hear is 'gook, gook, gook, gook'" (VVAW, 1972, p. 44). The backward GIs wallowed in this like pigs in shit throughout the war; and many other soldiers were often influenced by and practiced the same USA/Number-One mentality.

But this mentality was grounded in large measure on the empire that the U.S. carved out for itself following World War 2, an empire that was not going uncontested. Struggles raged in the oppressed nations in the world against imperialism. Popular wars, as often as not aimed at U.S. imperialism, flourished on every continent, and it was within this global conflict between imperialism and the oppressed nations that the liberation struggle in Vietnam took place.

Indeed the Vietnam War became the nodal point of the overall principal contradiction in the world at that time (which was between imperialism and the oppressed nations) and itself did much to fan the flames of liberation struggles worldwide. The U.S. troops were thus thrust onto the front lines of the most significant armed struggle of the day between revolution and counterrevolution — on the reactionary side.

But few of the lurking factors which brought these U.S. soldiers into the vortex of world events were clear to the troops in 1965 when the first Marines landed in Danang, South Vietnam. For significant numbers of them to even begin to get at the true nature of the war and their role in it would require a clash of swords with the Vietnamese revolution.

The victorious armed struggle of the Vietnamese people was an indispensable precondition and the principal agent for the disintegration of the U.S. troops in Vietnam. Words alone, or even words primarily, do not lead to the disintegration of armies. Simply put, bourgeois armies will not listen to words, unless and until they face a forceful armed struggle against them.

When the first Marines landed on China Beach, Danang, South Vietnam on March 8, 1965, images straight out of Hollywood D-Day movies danced in the heads of these happy warriors. Instead of machine-gun nests greeting the Marine Expeditionary Forces, however, there were Vietnamese girls to welcome them as "liberators" and give them garlands of flowers. The whole spectacle was staged by none other than the U.S. Navy.

Once the Marines landed they were assigned to guard Saigon and coastal cities in the South in an "enclave strategy." The puppet South Vietnamese Army was to carry the war into the countryside to exterminate the liberation forces. It is doubtful the U.S. ever intended to maintain this arrangement for long, as two reasons for sending U.S. troops to Vietnam in 1965 were that ARVN was in an advanced

state of disintegration itself and that the NLF controlled probably a third of the South and had a large influence in another third. The defensive role for the Marines (and several Army units which joined them in the summer of 1965) was canned within a year. In its place came a strategy of attrition and a succession of plans for securing territory in South Vietnam (the notorious "Strategic Hamlet" and other "pacification" programs), cutting the liberation forces off from their bases of support within South Vietnam and supplies and troops from the north, and most importantly wiping out the NLF and the NVA. Troop levels jumped from 23,300 in January 1965 to 385,300 two years later, to a peak of 542,000 in January 1969. Real war began, and John Wayne went out of focus.

Search-and-destroy missions were the cutting edge of U.S. military strategy and activity until the ground troops were withdrawn. Simply put, their aim was to find the enemy, engage the enemy, and then kill the enemy. Official tactical procedures stated that as often as possible the killing should be accomplished not by the troops on the ground but rather by strafing and bombing runs from helicopters and jets standing ready once the enemy was sighted. At least that was the ideal model for search-and-destroy and the main method used to produce corpses for the daily body count, which was the prime quantitative gauge used by the U.S. in the war.

These were some of the modern methods of warfare on the ground. Beyond these, with undying faith in their technological wizardry, the military commanders taught the troops to ultimately rely on superior weapons to defeat the enemy. That's the way imperialists try to fight. Not only was the success of search-and-destroy missions contingent on the troops' ability to call in firepower from the air, but the war from the air in its own right was of enormous importance in the U.S. effort generally.*

But the U.S.'s high-tech search-and-destroy strategy ran up against the reality of people's war, which deprived U.S. forces of the ability to fight "their way," as Bob Avakian put it, "to overwhelm and pound the enemy with superior technology and force" (1984, p. 76). As one critic of U.S. military tactics pointed out,

In actual practice there were probably as many divergences from this pattern as there were maneuver battalions and battalion commanders. Much depended on the enemy. The most difficult problem — and one that the army never resolved — was find-

U.S. MILITARY PERSONNEL IN SOUTH VIETNAM 1961-1972

January 1961	900
January 1963	11,300
January 1965	23,300
January 1966	184,300
January 1967	385,300
January 1968	498,600
January 1969	542,000
January 1970	473,000
January 1971	336,000
January 1972	133,200

Sources: Adapted from Cincinnatus, 1980, p. 217, Appendix E and Lewy, 1978, p. 147, Table 4-1.

*Vietnam was eventually a country with 21 million bomb craters and tens of millions of acres of land infected by toxic chemicals like Agent Orange, Agent Blue, and Agent White. 7,600,000 tons of bombs were dropped on North Vietnam alone in the war — three times the amount of all bombs dropped by all countries in World War 2. Three airports in South Vietnam in 1968, for example, recorded more takeoffs and landings than Chicago's O'Hare ("the world's busiest airport"), and this didn't even include helicopter traffic.

ing him. For the most part, search-and-destroy missions were fruitless. Plans would be laid for days and weeks. Penetration would be made. An FSB [fire-support base] would be established. Assault companies would comb the terrain and come back emptyhanded. The enemy had disappeared. Or, having found nothing, an American unit would suddenly be ambushed in an area that it had already searched and found to be clear of enemy troops. Hit when they least expected a fire fight, American soldiers could only huddle down into some semblance of a defensive formation and return fire while they called in Cobra [helicopter] gunships or protective artillery fires. Too frequently those fires had to be called down upon their own positions in order to make the enemy break contact. Then came the dust-off [medical] choppers to evacuate American wounded, and after that, if possible, the rest of the strike force would be airlifted out. Another search-and-destroy mission was over. (Cincinnati, 1980, pp. 77-78)

This brief sketch of a search-and-destroy operation capitalized many of the main features of the war on the ground in Vietnam. First, "the most difficult problem" was finding the enemy: not only did U.S. government statistics show that in 1967-68, for example, less than 1 percent of the approximately 2,000,000 small-unit operations saw contact with the enemy, but it was repeatedly noted by the military command in Saigon that in the majority of cases where contact was made it came on the initiative of the liberation fighters themselves, not the "good soldiering" of the U.S. and puppet troops (see Lewy, 1978, p. 83). U.S. ground troops were actually "used as scapegoats to find out where they were. That was all we were — bait. They couldn't find Charlie any other way. . . . Actually, they'd love for us to run into a regiment which would just wipe us out. Then they could plaster the regiment and they'd have a big body count" (Goff and Sanders, 1982, pp. 32-33). To the extent it was possible to record, U.S. figures for the war show that most of the enemy killed in action were not killed by the soldiers' standard issue M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns, or M-79 grenade launchers, but rather by U.S. helicopter gunships, bombs, and artillery.

And while U.S. troops had great difficulty in locating the liberation forces, the latter often knew precisely where the GIs were, thanks to both an intimate knowledge of Vietnam's terrain and the eyes and ears of a supportive population.

GIs learned about the extent of popular support for the NLF in sometimes dramatic ways. One vet described the following scene on the morning after an attack by the NLF on an Army base camp:

They left about 400 people on the barbed wire that night. When we pulled the bodies out, there was three people that worked in the kitchen in battalion

headquarters. They served food to the officers. One of the cooks from our mess hall was there. Some of the people that owned the little shops that was just outside the base. Some of the boom-dee-boom girls. Some of the owners of the boom-dee-boom clubs. Some of the guys that you see in the clubs that just seem to come in and just be sitting there. And the people that worked in the barbershop. Two of them. And the girls who polished our shoes and washed our clothes. (Terry, 1984, p. 128)

Further, while NLF and NVA troops could go where they wished in the South to a large extent, it was made painfully clear to the GIs that they could not. In particular the GIs met with mines, booby traps, and snipers wherever they went in the Vietnamese countryside. In 1970 Pentagon statistics were leaked which showed that *over half of U.S. casualties up to that point in the war came from mines and booby traps* laid by full-time guerrillas and part-time liberation fighters. Mines and booby traps did not kill nearly as many people as were killed by the U.S. in B-52 raids, for instance, but they killed thousands, and the thousands they killed were U.S. combatants, not civilians. Since the Vietnamese peasants always seemed to know where these devices had been laid and always seemed to avoid them, they also impressed upon the U.S. troops that their enemy was very popular indeed. By the end, the main aspect of technical superiority that bolstered the fighting spirit of the U.S. soldiers was the knowledge that if wounded they could generally count on speedy medical evacuation. The U.S. armed forces in Vietnam had a better medivac record than any other army in history. They needed it.

Another difficulty the U.S. faced was that Vietnam was a "circular" war. Battle lines are never straight or perfect in war, but in Vietnam there were *no* front lines in a strategic sense other than the borders of South Vietnam (and that was no absolute either). There were areas where fighting took place and areas where no fighting took place — at any particular moment. U.S. military doctrine and practice were ill-prepared for any but linear formations and assaults. So ground troops found themselves taking and retaking the same piece of ground, without gaining any advantage, which frustrated them no end.

The battle for Hamburger Hill came to symbolize American frustration with the "circular" war in Vietnam and its inability to win. In May of 1969 U.S. forces assaulted a suspected NLF base camp on Ap Bin Mountain about one mile from the border with Laos. After nine assaults over six days of heavy fighting, in which U.S. and ARVN forces took heavy losses, the hill was taken — "only to abandon the virtually worthless objective several days later" (Bonds, 1979, p. 178).

Administrative and organizational problems — which were rooted in the political character of the U.S. military — exacerbated U.S. difficulties. One was the ratio established at the beginning of combat to noncombat assignments (the "tooth-to-tail" ratio). Around 14 percent of the troops in

Vietnam at any one time were in combat situations, while fully 86 percent took up support duties in the major base areas. This tail-heavy arrangement drained resources overall, and again indicates how necessary massive, and rather constant, supply and support were to the imperialist combat troops. The U.S. dependence on a complex, tail-heavy organization also meant that any one snafu (by a resupply helicopter, a shoddy jet mechanic, a doped-up radio operator, etc.) could screw up the entire works for thousands of other soldiers.

The Tet Offensive in 1968 was the real turning point in the war and the disintegration of the U.S. armed forces. Whatever the shortcomings of this offensive by the liberation forces from a political and strategic standpoint, nothing showed the weaknesses of the U.S. position and the strength of the revolutionary armed forces more than Tet. Because of its pivotal role in the disintegration, it is worth describing briefly here.

In the early hours of January 31, 1968, tens of thousands of liberation fighters launched simultaneous and coordinated attacks on 100 cities and towns in the South, including Saigon and 39 of 44 provincial capitals. Specific targets hit included the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, the Presidential Palace and Joint General Staff headquarters in Saigon, and the U.S./ARVN headquarters of all four military regions in the rest of the South. The cities and towns in the South were the only locations the U.S. had previously been able to credibly advertise as 100 percent secure. But this bodacious Tet Offensive said more about the true situation in the South than a thousand military status briefings ever could. While the Offensive as envisioned by its North Vietnamese planners was marked by serious problems, it did demonstrate the courage and initiative of the guerrilla fighters in the South and the tremendous mass base on which they could rely, both to secrete them into the cities before Tet and to provide them refuge when the attacks were rebuffed and often even crushed.* And it also blew a gaping hole in U.S. propaganda about having "secured" wide areas of the countryside and seeing a "light at the end of the tunnel."

Tet may have been a physical ("military" in the narrowest sense) victory for the U.S., but the ultimate outcome was a severe political defeat. The focus of the U.S. troops was *not* generally on the NVA weaknesses but on the fact that "the U.S. nearly got its ass kicked." And Walter Cronkite showed how wide the rifts within the U.S.

*As planned, the Tet Offensive reflected strong revisionist currents in the North Vietnamese leadership which favored immediate regular warfare and urban insurrection ahead of their time, partly, it appears, as pressure in negotiating tactics. (For more on the lines and policies involved, see "Vietnam: Miscarriage of the Revolution," *Revolution*, July-August 1979.) All in all the errors made by the liberation forces were not directly relevant to the U.S. troop disintegration, except insofar as they hurt the Vietnamese revolution itself and thus perhaps slowed the disintegration.

bourgeoisie were off the Tet setbacks when he dramatically announced on CBS News February 27, 1968 that the best possible outcome in Vietnam would now be a stalemate. (On Tet, see Oberdorfer, 1971.)

Today there is a campaign afoot to cover up and reverse the reality of the U.S. defeat with an American version of the stab-in-the-back mythology: the U.S. wasn't "militarily" defeated in Vietnam, the war was "lost by the politicians" due to political considerations or merely a lack of "will." For example, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam 1964-68, said in 1980: "militarily we were successful... we didn't lose a single battle above company level" (quoted in Currey, 1984, p. 284). Col. Harry Summers in April 1975 bragged to a North Vietnamese colonel: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield." According to Summers, the Vietnamese officer replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant" (1982, p. 1). And on a more popular level, there are movies like *Rambo*.

These rewrites of the history of the Vietnam War are bogus from a number of different angles. They ignore the U.S.'s inability to crush the Vietnamese liberation forces or secure South Vietnam and most importantly the pounding taken by the U.S. forces in Vietnam. One Vietnam vet told this author of hearing of numerous "battles in which whole units were wiped out, or of battles like Ia Drang Valley in 1967, where dead American soldiers were carted out by the truckload. These were small and middle-sized battles — how many of these does it take?"

One recent semi-official history, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army, U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*, is apparently somewhat more realistic on this question at least. A reviewer notes:

As for always winning on the battlefield, anyone who actually believes that stuff will profit from a careful reading of this book. On page 169 can be found an account of how a company of the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry (Airborne), was virtually annihilated in a battle with a North Vietnamese army battalion; on page 175 one can read about the destruction of an entire battalion of the 173d Airborne Brigade; on page 186 one can find an account of a communist ambush that cost a Marine company 273 killed or wounded out of 300 engaged. There are plenty of other examples in this vein. (Spector, 1985)

The reactionary lament that the politicians lost the Vietnam War also conveniently ignores the fact that had the U.S. chosen to fight on in Vietnam, or go all out for "total victory," it would have courted the risk of greatly compounding its defeats: deeper crisis and division at home, the erosion of its global position (particularly in the face of the rising challenge from the Soviet Union), the possibility of more extensive defeats on the battlefield, and the further disintegration of its military forces. Extricating itself from

Vietnam didn't reflect a "lack of will" on the part of the U.S. bourgeoisie; rather it was crucial if the empire was to be preserved.

Shattered Illusions

Who were the troops sent to Vietnam? Where were the young men found who answered orders to wage a war that killed four million Vietnamese, and countless Cambodians and Laotians, in the U.S. holocaust (casualty figure from Karnow, 1983, p. 11)? How did these soldiers at the beginning approach the war that later so many of them would refuse to fight in one way or another?

The ground troops in Vietnam were mainly working class youth: a majority of them were white, but a high percentage were from the oppressed nationalities. As noted, numerous propaganda pieces appearing in the press in the mid-1960s tried to whip up patriotism among all these youth and explain why they owed it to "their country" to carry out its dictates. For those who balked at the idea, there was the draft.* The average age of the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam was between 19 and 20; in World War 2 it was 26.

The section of working class youth sent to Vietnam in 1965 and later was part of the generation that grew up in the 1950s and '60s, when a fairly broad section of workers in the U.S. began to experience fairly steady employment and relatively high (and rising) wages. These privileges represented the fruits of the U.S. victory in World War 2 and the U.S. bourgeoisie's resulting increased ability to bribe some sections of the masses within its national borders. The U.S. military was able to make good use of the illusions nurtured by the relative prosperity in the U.S. in the 1960s, not only among those youth who had enjoyed some of the spoils of World War 2 but even among some of the most oppressed youth who believed their turn was coming soon.

The early and earnest illusions of the soldiers sent to fight in Vietnam, both those that were based on the notion that the troops were in Vietnam to "help the people help themselves" and those that saw the enemy forces as easy pickings for the U.S. military machine, were vital in bolstering the fighting spirit of the armed forces at first.

*Two points are noteworthy here about the draft. One, thirty-two of the thirty-five years during which the U.S. has had a draft since 1776 were from 1940 to 1973 (no draft being held for a year between 1947-48), the period in which the U.S. first won and then ruled over the largest empire in the history of the world. Two, in order to pacify the middle class and because of U.S. imperialism's need for a larger trained body of professionals at home, many middle class youth were given deferments during Vietnam, and therefore the percentage of working class youth drafted into the Army was higher than in World War 2, for instance. This fact may have led to an even greater exacerbation of the Achilles' heel problem for the bourgeoisie in Vietnam, but the problem still remains latent in all drafts of youth for imperialism's wars.

They were also integrally involved in the later disintegration of the U.S. military. As the war dragged on with the U.S. increasingly on the losing end, its power was shown to be limited and its military methods bankrupt; and as the conflict became more and more a source of massive political protest and questioning in the U.S. and around the world, these illusions were ever more undermined and tended to boomerang back on the ruling class that had sent these troops to war.

The illusions among GIs that they would be regarded as saviors and heroes among the Vietnamese people were dashed in every rice paddy, village, and jungle trail. As one vet summed up:

Vietnam taught you to be a liar. To be a thief. To be dishonest. To go against everything you ever learned. It taught you everything you did not need to know, because you were livin' a lie. And the lie was you ain't have no business bein' there in the first place. You wasn't here for democracy. You wasn't protecting your homeland. And that was what wear you down. (Terry, 1984, p. 133)

At first some troops pointed to "the other war" — the massive "pacification" drives in the South such as Census Grievance and the Strategic Hamlet and Phoenix programs — as showing the good intentions of the U.S. in Vietnam, specifically its interest in a "political solution." But when experience showed that these programs meant the most ruthless assassination of tens of thousands of suspected liberation fighters, or the forcible imprisonment of the Vietnamese masses in strategic hamlets, the venal hypocrisy of U.S. claims to be acting on behalf of the Vietnamese masses stood out in even sharper relief.

The reality that the U.S. was trying to crush a popular liberation movement, not to assist it, became clear to some GIs by the very methods used by the U.S. to attain victory. As Carl Dix testified at the Mass Proletarian War Crimes Tribunals of U.S. Imperialism in New York City in 1981 about GIs in Vietnam:

You kill children, you kill women, you kill old people. They drop bombs and try to get the whole village. Because all the people over there are the enemy. It's not like, here's an army and there's an army and the Vietnamese people are in the middle. It's the people that's the enemy. And if you're gonna go over there, that's what you got to get ready to get down on and deal with. (*Revolutionary Worker*, No. 136, p. 12)

The troops were told by the brass that regardless of what area or unit they were assigned to in Vietnam, their primary military objective was the same: to produce a high body count. The body count for most of the war was, as mentioned, regarded by the brass as the most important indicator of the overall progress in the war. Contests were

held among the U.S. troops, with prizes like two-day passes, based on enemy Killed in Action (KIA) vs. U.S. KIA. Fistfights and worse broke out repeatedly over who would claim an arm or a leg after a firefight. Morbidity knowing no bounds among U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, graves were sometimes dug up to boost a unit's body count, while the officers intoned: "A dead Vietnamese is a dead VC."

Committing atrocities against the enemy is a component part of all wars waged by imperialism, official policy and standard operating procedure. Pillage, rape, plunder, and massacres — the "spoils of war" — are historically one way that imperialism boosts the morale of its troops. In Vietnam this practice ended up turning in large part into its opposite — undermining the troops' belief in the righteousness of the U.S. cause, turning many against the war, and tearing many so deeply with guilt that they couldn't function (some of whom later committed suicide). (In Vietnam these atrocities also became, especially as U.S. hopes for winning on the battlefield began to evaporate, a symptom of the decay and frustration rampant in the ranks of the U.S. military.)

The bourgeois-democratic illusions were so powerful initially among many of the GIs that especially when GIs began to see that they were considered the enemy by most Vietnamese many were forced to do some radical rethinking about the war as a whole; and the contradiction between illusions and reality provided added fuel for the disintegration of the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam. Many statements by Vietnam vets speak graphically to this point:

When I came to Vietnam, I thought we were helping another country to develop a nation. About three or four months later I found out that wasn't the case. (Terry, 1984, p. 22)

I was a prisoner of so many of the myths and misconceptions of an environment in which communism was the dirtiest word in the dictionary and in which democracy was a word to which one should kneel in divine supplication. . . . I fervently believed in America's role in the world as the policeman of democracy and the defender of freedom. I approached the shores of Vietnam confident that I was a member of the rescuing cavalry arriving at the nick of time to save the besieged wagon train of Vietnamese democracy from the hordes of communist savages. . . . When I witnessed "democracy" being applied to Vietnam through indiscriminate killing of peasants and napalming of villages; when I saw the ARVN defenders of Vietnamese democracy flee in terror at a single sniper's bullet and desert in droves at the first opportunity, and then faced the incredibly courageous opposition of men of the same nationality supposedly fighting for an alien and wicked cause, totally outclassed in numbers, firepower, logistics. . . everything but in raw courage and determination; when I saw how pitifully little the Vietnamese people benefited from

its Western style "democratic" government, I began to wonder about the validity and righteousness of our Vietnam crusade. (Clodfelter, 1976, pp. 9-10)

[ARVN] used to pick up and run. They would always shy away from fighting at night. They wouldn't even fight for their own country; we didn't see any reason why we should. . . . But I have to say one thing. Charlie himself — the North Vietnamese soldier — was tough, man. I mean, they really got down to it. What frightened me most of all was that it was a political war. Charlie had a philosophy; they'd say that we were aggressors, that we shouldn't have been there interfering in their affairs. To me, it seemed like it was between North and South Vietnam. It was sort of like a revolution they were fighting. A lot of Vietnamese didn't want us there. They didn't need anyone interfering. They believed that to the bone, that one grain of rice was worth one drop of blood. And many times, when you would kill an enemy, you could see they were little kids out there fighting you. Or women. Actually see them laying there dead. I would wonder what provoked a woman or a little kid to get out there and fight like this unless they honest to God felt that their beliefs were right. It was scary to me, waking me up, making me ask what I was doing there. I mean, what WERE we doing there? We weren't supposed to know anything or say anything — just keep taking orders and moving along. But still I had my own mind. I still had to think for myself about what I was fighting for. (Goff and Sanders, 1982, pp. 133-34)

It was there, on the blue-black floors of the jungle that I learned to root for the Vietcong. (Hamill, 1975, p. 18)

The disintegration of the troops was evident on many different levels, as morale was ripped apart from a hundred different directions. As the war dragged on and it became evident that the U.S. couldn't win, the bankruptcy of the U.S.'s military strategy became ever more apparent. And with Nixon's declaration that the U.S. was seeking "Peace with Honor," the whole U.S. rationale for being in Vietnam — defeating the Vietnamese communists — was undermined. The troops more and more felt they were shedding their blood for nothing, and that their missions were meaningless.

According to one vet, there was a "total lack of respect for most officers." This lack of respect reflected not only the failure of the war effort but the class contradictions within the military as well. GIs were outraged at the petty harassment and seemingly senseless rules and regulations (while buddies were being killed, officers harassed soldiers about the length of their hair); the military's gross incompetence (vets report numerous instances in which

U.S. forces bombed or shelled their own); the rampant corruption (selling U.S. equipment — including arms — on the black market was widespread, and it was universal knowledge that such transactions often ended up supplying the "enemy"); as well as the total hypocrisy of all the brass's statements about body counts, lights-at-the-end-of-the-tunnels, and the many other examples of "doublespeak" that became so infamous during the war. Many asked themselves why they should be enthusiastic about fighting for Vietnamese freedom when ARVN troops obviously weren't, or even what this freedom was supposed to mean, when the U.S. was turning Saigon into a giant whorehouse and supporting a thoroughly corrupt and brutal dictatorship. It was an experience straight out of the novel *Catch-22*.

For many vets, their experience in Vietnam triggered an avalanche of questioning not confined to what the war was all about, but to the whole gamut of "cherished beliefs" of what U.S. society was all about. The moral collapse and disillusionment among Vietnam vets went extremely deep. Even today, over a dozen years after the war's end, the so-called "healing" process has not smoothed over all the wounds: many vets still talk of the deep anger they feel over being used in a war they didn't understand; and for others — numbering literally in the thousands — their solution to the contradictions raging within them has been to take their own lives. If any Rambo's today want to free U.S. GIs from prison confines, they might try here at home. The prisons here are full of them.

In his book *Giant Steps*, the basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar describes the experience of one of his friends in Vietnam:

My man Munti, who had lived in my building, went to Vietnam all gung-ho. He was a point man on patrol in the jungle and loving it. Then one day his squad walked right into a horseshoe, a classic Viet Cong ambush where they let you move forward until you're almost encircled and then open fire from 270 degrees. Most of the guys in his unit were hit, and Munti got a flesh wound, some shrapnel in the mouth. They were pinned down, some guys dying, when the VC stopped shooting and yelled to them, in English, "Why are you fighting us, soul brothers?" As quickly as the ambush had begun, it dispersed.

Munti went wild after that. His political awareness had been magnified a thousand times; his life had been spared. From then on Munti decided he just wasn't going to fight anymore. He kept his rifle with him at all times, but said he just wasn't doing any more combat duty. He had only six weeks left on his active tour, so they said he had "combat hysteria" and sent him home. Munti came back and lived in New York for seven or eight years. Then one day he checked into a hotel, left a letter, and blew his brains out. (Abdul-Jabbar, 1985, pp. 238-39)

In Vietnam, of course, not all GIs reacted to the reality of the situation by coming to oppose the war. Some who were deeply stung by the humiliation of it all became even more vicious hitmen for U.S. imperialism, and even if these most backward soldiers often found themselves politically more isolated in many units towards the end of the war, they still objectively (and some consciously) helped to limit the scope of the disintegration:

It gave you a feeling of superiority. You walking through the village and you got your great big old flak jacket on. You got your helmet and bandoliers all over you. You got your rifle. You tower over most of these people. It got to the point where you just didn't trust none of them. You don't sweet-talk them, because they ain't going to be sweet-talking you — unless when you come back through here, there's going to be a booby trap to blow your fucking ass away. So we'd just try to scare the shit out of them. (Baker, 1981, p. 195)

Some people are just plain made to wave the stars and stripes.

The objective interests of proletarian youth inside an imperialist army are always opposed to those of their rulers. But it is not often that they can see this. In Vietnam conditions were such that large numbers of soldiers were able to grasp in a beginning way, especially through the agency of the Vietnamese people, that they were pawns in a barbaric crusade. When they did, things began to unravel, and this is a fact of no small significance.

The Impact of the Black Liberation Movement

The political mood and activity of the masses (as well as the ruling class) at home and throughout the world plays a key role in determining the will to fight of all armies. In imperialist wars that achieve a greater measure of support from the home population, such as World War 2 for the U.S., the morale of the troops is seldom a significant problem. (Such support, of course, is usually based on a prospect of victory.) This was not the case with the Vietnam War, in which millions of people in the U.S. (and around the world) actively opposed the U.S. genocide in Indochina. The disintegration of the troops wasn't simply a result of the defeat suffered by the U.S. in Vietnam; it was also linked to overall developments in U.S. society — themselves closely related to the Vietnam war. The shock waves of the war reverberated throughout the U.S. and rebounded back into Vietnam by way of many troops who had been influenced by the Black liberation struggle and the U.S. antiwar movement. The existence of conscious poles of opposition to the war and organized efforts to spread the "Movement" to the GIs had a tremendous impact on the political terrain within the military; it did much to transform the basic

hatred felt by many GIs for their predicament into more conscious opposition to the war.*

Among the important developments within the U.S. troops during the Vietnam War was the fact that the oppressed nationalities were mounting the political stage in revolutionary ways. As the civil rights movement among Black people gave way to urban uprisings, and as revolutionary sentiments developed among the basic Black masses, the bourgeoisie developed a systematic policy to get Black youth off the streets and into khaki.† Tens of thousands of these youth were press-ganged into the Army and Marine Corps, which also helped to alleviate the military's severe manpower shortage at the beginning of major troop commitments to Vietnam. As in other wars in U.S. history, ruling class ideologues were trotted out to promise Black people pots of gold at the war's successful conclusion. In July 1966 the *New York Times Magazine* ran an article titled "The Army and the Negro" to explain what a good thing the Army could be for Blacks. The closing line of the article was a quote from a Black sergeant: "We've got to start someplace to be part of America, and maybe the Army is the best place. The Army gave the Negro, at least, the chance to stand side by side and compete" (Grove, 1966, p. 52). Daniel P. Moynihan wrote in the *New Republic* later that year: "Acquiring a reputation for military valor is one of the oldest known routes to social equality" (Moynihan, 1966, p. 22). They were hackneyed lines, but no better could be offered.‡

The massive recruitment drive among Black and other oppressed nationality youth quickly came back to haunt the

U.S. rulers. The national oppression rampant in the U.S. military, coupled with and heightened by all the contradictions set loose by the losing effort in Vietnam, intersected with the Black upsurge in the U.S. in the late 1960s to unleash a storm of Black protest within the U.S. military — not limited to Vietnam. This was a central force in the disintegration of the U.S. military and the creation of anti-war and radical movements among GIs. It was a powerful example of the kind of strategic role the Black masses can play in revolution in the U.S.

Since the war began, Black soldiers (along with soldiers of other oppressed nationalities) had been routinely given the most dangerous combat assignments, the harshest punishments, and had been subject to constant racist abuse by officers, NCOs, and backward whites in the enlisted ranks. (Before 1966 Blacks accounted for over 20 percent of U.S. combat casualties in Vietnam. Officially the figure dropped to between 11 and 13 percent after this.) One Air Force report conceded:

Unequal treatment is manifested in unequal punishment, offensive and inflammatory language, prejudice in assignments of details, lack of prospects for blacks at the PX, harassment by security police under orders to break up five or more blacks in a group and double standards in enforcement of regulation. (*Congressional Quarterly*, 1976, p. 37)

Before the late 1960s, however, this hadn't given rise to open protest, and many Black soldiers still entertained the notion that if they only went off to fight for the U.S. things would look much better when (and if) they returned. But even early on when going along with the program was still the dominant current among them and radical stirrings and impulses had not yet taken root broadly, there was a section of Black troops who identified with Malcolm X, both his support for the Vietnamese revolution and his exposure of the hypocrisy from Washington that Blacks should "get violent" in places like Korea but stay nonviolent in the South of the U.S. These sentiments would have a powerful impact on other Black GIs and, through them, on the entire military as well.

The rebellions lighting the city skies across the U.S. in the spring of 1968 were a spark for even the intermediate among the oppressed nationalities to join in open rebellion against the military. A freelance reporter at the besieged Marine post at Khesanh near the DMZ (the border between North and South Vietnam) wrote later: "The death of Martin Luther King intruded on the war in a way that no other outside event had ever done. . . . [W]e stood around the radio and listened to the sound of automatic-weapons fire being broadcast from a number of American cities" (Herr, 1978, p. 158). There were protests, revolts, and/or racial fighting on every U.S. base in Asia following King's assassination.

By this time most of the Black troops "felt that the American Dream didn't really serve us. What we experi-

*This is illustrated by comparing the U.S. experience in Vietnam with that of other imperialist armies which suffered even more extreme military defeats. For instance, on July 1, 1916, in the Battle of the Somme in World War I, the British Army sustained 60,000 casualties, 20,000 of them killed, without any serious cohesion problems. An assault launched in mid-April 1917 by French General Nivelle against the Germans left over 100,000 French troops dead. Following this slaughter, mutinies took place in 54 of 116 divisions of the French Army. Yet three months after this enormous rupture in the cohesion of the French forces 99 percent of these same soldiers were back in the war. It is true that France and Britain were on the winning side of World War I, but that wasn't totally determined in 1917. The fact that the disintegration of the U.S. forces in Vietnam was much more severe, both qualitatively and quantitatively, than either the British or French armies during World War I speaks to the depth of the crisis gripping U.S. society in the '60s, as well as the power of people's war in disintegrating reactionary armies [see Pedroncini, 1967].

†One such effort called "Project 100,000" eventually brought in not 100,000 but nearly 250,000 youth, 40 percent of whom were Black, who were technically ineligible for military service because of low scores on so-called "intelligence" tests. This program was also called "New Standards Men" (See Binkin and Eitelberg, 1982, p. 34).

‡And such lines are being repeated today: a 1986 *New York Times* series on the military featured an article titled "Blacks and Women Find Roads for Advancement Through Life in Military" (Halloran, 1986, p. B24).

enced was the American Nightmare . . . We felt that they put us on the front lines abroad and in the back lines at home" (Goff and Sanders, 1982, p. 133). For many, the experience of being slammed against the wall by U.S. soldiers — while home on leave from Vietnam — broke the camel's back. Another Black vet recounted a discussion in Vietnam off the urban uprisings:

Captain one time asked Davis what kind of car he gonna have when he get back in the States. Davis told him, "I'm not gonna get a car, sir. I'm gonna get me a Exxon station and give gas away to the brothers. Let them finish burnin' down what they leave." It wasn't funny if he said it in the stateside. But all of 'em bust out laughing. (Terry, 1984, p. 41)

The Black Panther Party issued calls to Black GIs to "Either quit the Army, now, or start destroying it from the inside" (*The Black Panther*, 1970, p. 4). And many oppressed nationality GIs thought the time was right for violent revolution (one poll found that 76 percent of Black soldiers supported Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and were seriously dealing with the question of the armed overthrow of the U.S. state [Terry, 1973, p. 214]). While their convictions never led to an overall battle plan, that didn't mean that more than a few weren't making some concrete preparations. A Black Marine told a reporter that he knew guys from Detroit who were taking mortars back, breaking them down so that each one could get a piece into his duffel and then reassembling them when they got together back on the block. "You see that four-oh-deuce?" he asked. "Now that'll take out a police station for you" (Herr, 1978, p. 118).

Throughout Vietnam and the U.S. military, Black GIs launched protests against national oppression and were in the forefront of combat refusals (against being used as "cannonfodder" in "suicide missions"), antiwar protests, and other rebellions within the ranks.

The stockades in Vietnam and the U.S. became special centers of struggle among the Black troops (who made up 53 percent of the population in Air Force prisons and 30 percent in Army stockades in the early 1970s, while comprising only 12.1 percent of all enlisted personnel in the U.S. military and 11.7 percent of total Air Force strength [Cortright, 1975, pp. 203, 208]). On August 16, 1968 there was a major rebellion at the Marine brig at Danang. Two weeks later 250 GIs rose up at the Longbinh Jail near Saigon (a.k.a. LBJ), destroying buildings, battling guards, and holding the prison for almost a month. In the U.S., in 1969 alone, the stockades went up at Ft. Dix, Ft. Jackson, Ft. Riley (three times), and Camp Pendleton, among other places, with Black soldiers playing a central role in each uprising (Cortright, 1975, pp. 40-41, pp. 70-73). At Dix one of the prisoners' demands was: "Free Huey P. Newton, the New York Panther 21, the Presidio 27, and all political prisoners!"

In August 1968 one of the most significant mutinies of the Vietnam War took place at Ft. Hood, Texas. On August

23, 100 Black soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division met to discuss racism and the use of troops against civilians — forty-three GIs then publicly announced that if called they would refuse to go to Chicago for riot duty during the Democratic Party National Convention. Over half of the Ft. Hood 43 were Vietnam combat veterans. Technically guilty of mutiny, which is a capital offense in the U.S. military, the 43 were arrested. But given the political atmosphere in the military and U.S. society generally at that time, the brass decided to hush up the mutiny as much as possible and to give out light sentences and transfers to the 43.

Meanwhile in West Germany, where many commentators say "racial tensions" were the sharpest inside the military at that time, important developments also occurred. On July 4, 1970, for example, almost 1,000 GIs of all nationalities met at Heidelberg University for a conference called by Black GIs to discuss U.S. military and economic activities in Vietnam and around the globe as well as racism in the military. A little over two months later, at the U.S. Nellingen base in West Germany, following months of rising tensions,

black and white GIs threatened to blow up the entire base. Their warnings were not idle threats, for two fire bombs had already gone off in the early morning at an MP station near the base gate. Frightened commanders responded by mobilizing truckloads of MPs and imposing a 6:30 p.m. curfew. At about 9 p.m. that evening, however, approximately one hundred GIs deliberately broke the curfew and marched through the base shouting "Revolution" and "Join Us" to fellow GIs. (Cortright, 1975, p. 97)

A number of Black political organizations were formed in the military, including in Vietnam, Europe, and the U.S. One, called the "Black Liberation Front of the Armed Forces," staged the demonstration at Longbinh Jail in 1971 in support of the demand to free the Black political prisoners in the U.S. And there are reports of clandestine chapters of the Black Panther Party being formed in Vietnam.

There were also significant stirrings of protest and rebellion among other oppressed nationalities in the U.S. military. One particularly significant example of civilian protest that reflected this was the 1971 L.A. Chicano Moratorium. It demanded an end to the war and denounced the proportionally higher casualty rates suffered by troops of Mexican descent. When police attacked it, the Moratorium became a major rebellion.

Vietnam was the second war in U.S. history in which there were integrated companies, platoons, and squads (the first being Korca). While hundreds of thousands of Blacks enlisted in World War 2, with the exception of a few isolated formations, Blacks not only served in segregated units but they were used exclusively in support capacities. (In 1940, before the U.S. entered the war, there were only 5,000 Black soldiers and a total of five Black officers, three of whom

were chaplains, in the entire U.S. Army.) By 1968, 12.6 percent of the Army enlisted ranks and 11.5 percent of the Marine Corps enlisted ranks was Black. [Only 5 percent of EMs in the Navy was Black at that time.] The impact of the bourgeois integration of the U.S. military following World War 2, as stunted and oppressive as it proved, became a major factor in its later undoing, as many proletarian youth for the first time in their lives were thrown together with youth of other nationalities.

By the time Marines at Khesanh stood around a radio listening to broadcasts of uprisings in the ghettos "back in the world," there was no mistaking the fact that the Black upsurge had become a primary ingredient in the military disintegration. Especially in areas of Vietnam away from the heaviest fighting (where conditions more necessitated "sticking together" among the grunts, regardless of political views), the U.S. armed forces took on more and more the appearance of "two armies": one, the military proper; the other, Black GIs, other soldiers from the oppressed nationalities, and the "grays" (white guys sympathetic to the national struggles and general revolt back home) who identified more with the social upheaval in the U.S. than with the dominant order. The emergence of "two armies" partially reflected the split overall in the U.S. working class between genuine proletarians and the better-off section, and it often led to fights within units, especially in the rear areas. [The *New York Times* reported that "Racial tensions have so polarized whites and blacks in many units that fights break out periodically in bunk areas and latrines... between September, 1970, and August, 1971, the Army recorded eighteen racial incidents - gang fights, protests, riots - that required 'significant' police action" [Ayres, 1971, p. 1].

For the bourgeoisie, the post-World War 2 integration of the military came to pose a certain catch-22 conundrum. Remarkd one Vietnam veteran who joined the Black Panther Party after leaving the service:

I had a white guy in the team. He was a Klan member. He was from Arkansas. Ark-in-saw in the mountains. And never seen a black man before in his entire life. He never knew why he hated black people. I was the first black man he had really ever sat down and had a decent conversation with.... Arkansas and me wind up being best friends. (Terry, 1984, pp. 246-47)

One poll found that 76 percent of Black soldiers supported Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and were seriously dealing with the question of the armed overthrow of the U.S. state.

With Black troops during the war consistently playing an initiating political and organizational role in the disintegration of the troops of all nationalities, integration obviously posed its problems for the brass. At the same time, the following is also true (and illustrative of the mood among Black troops in the years after the Tet Offensive and rebellions in 1968):

It was indeed fortunate that the desegregation of the military service occurred before either the civil-rights movement of the late 1950's or the black-power movement of the 1960's. The very thought of a segregated army during those years is frightening. Outright organized mutiny or revolution might well have occurred had not the Army already been desegregated. (Walton, 1973, p. 64)

Thus, while the bourgeois spokesmen before the Vietnam War were pitching a call to proletarian youth who'd been "kept out of the mainstream of U.S. society" to join in the war effort and gain "social equality," the postmortems offered a different line. Commenting on military deserters, but clearly meaning to apply his conclusions more broadly, one military sociologist said that these troops suffered from a chronic "defective assimilation of such symbols of the national society and culture as are afforded by American high schools" (Shils, 1977, p. 430).

But this is all wrong. The assimilation and integration of these youth into bourgeois society, while certainly uneven among the troops entering the services, was not inconsiderable, including among the most oppressed youth (who at least early in the war often bought the line that military service might be a way to "get out of the ghetto," etc.). At least until 1968 the U.S. was able to count on a fairly patriotic and obedient pool of youth. What was at play after this point was not the continued inability to "fit in" but rather the *dissimilation* and *deintegration* of a large proportion of the previously loyal troops, deserters and others, from the "national society and culture." And this resulted in part from the experience in the war and in part from the related social turmoil in the U.S.*

*The composition of its military is a big problem for the bourgeoisie, and the brass had a decidedly terrified response to the Black and other proletarian youth they commanded. Remarkd one general about the "pride of the nation": "My analysis is that they came to us. They came out of the bowels of the big cities, and they lived by fist and knives and bludgeons, and they're trying to conduct their business here pretty much the same way" [cited in Hauser, 1973, p. 96]. And summing up recent lessons from Vietnam about these youth of all nationalities, a professor of military history at West Point warned of intrinsic problems in wars fought by the U.S. without all-out mobilization (which would presumably bring in more nonproletarian youth): "the brunt of the battle to defend the American society and way of life may be borne, until the average citizen gets into the fight, by those who have benefited least from that society and way of life" (Wesbrook, 1980).

Student Protest and the GI Movement

One after another in the spate of Vietnam vet reminiscences in recent years has talked of the contempt that GIs in Vietnam supposedly felt for the "longhaired antiwar protesters." Such sentiments were real enough among many, to be sure, although mainly early in the war. Of far greater importance in the long run was that the "fuck-you-you're-baby-killers" stand of radical students and others helped to shake and wake up many GIs to their reactionary role in the war. The fact that youth back in the U.S. (and, again, around the world) were not only rebelling against the war but the whole bourgeois status quo also certainly hit home to many of the troops, who found themselves in a highly authoritarian and repressive situation. In fact, the antiwar movement along with the Black liberation movement were crucial in the development of "a phenomenon never before experienced in the armed forces in the U.S.: an organized and sustained movement of political opposition and resistance to the war, with a strong anti-imperialist character" (*Revolutionary Worker*, No. 364, p. 13).

There was some lag time between developments in the civilian antiwar movement and the GI antiwar movement. This isn't surprising given the tightly controlled isolation of and threat of reprisal against antiwar GIs by the brass, and more importantly the fact that the Black liberation movement and the student and youth movement played a vanguard role in regard to developments in the U.S., bringing consciousness "from without" to the GI struggle. While the civilian antiwar movement in the U.S. and worldwide began to get going with the deployment of the first ground troops to Vietnam in 1965 (on April 17, 1965 over 20,000 students marched against the war in front of the White House) and the surge in young men getting drafted (reaching a peak of 382,010 in 1966), antiwar actions inside the military at this time were very small and isolated, often taking the form of individual protests. But they were only the first tremors of a growing revolt.

In November 1965 Lt. Henry Howe participated in a civilian peace march in El Paso carrying a sign denouncing "Johnson's fascist war." For this Howe was given two years

p. 275). The good professor is right to worry about the proletarian youth in his army, but we would like to point out that plenty of radical Vietnam veterans started out as "average citizens." Many youth from rural backgrounds, for example, were radicalized while in Vietnam and in the service. It might even be said that the U.S. military provided a kind of radical "road to the rural youth," as shown by the fact that in some Midwestern farm towns a majority of these former troops joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) when they returned.

In several respects this problem is greater today that it was then. This may be demonstrated in many ways, including quantitatively. In 1970, 13.5 percent of EMs in the Army were Black, while 11 percent in all services was Black. By 1981 the figures were 33.2 percent and 22.1 percent respectively (Binkin and Eitelberg, 1982, p. 42, table 3-1).

at hard labor at Ft. Leavenworth, the military penitentiary. In the summer of 1966 three soldiers at Ft. Hood in Texas refused to ship out to Vietnam. In October the same year Dr. Howard Levy refused to train Green Berets at Ft. Bragg in North Carolina, for which he eventually served twenty-six months at Leavenworth. In July 1967, in the middle of the Detroit rebellions, two Black Marines stationed at Camp Pendleton in California requested a "captain's mast" (a meeting between officers and enlisted personnel, normally a disciplinary hearing) to question why "Black men should fight a white man's war" in Vietnam. They were later convicted of making "disloyal statements" and "advising, urging, and attempting to cause insubordination, disloyalty, and refusal of duty." One was sentenced to ten years, the other to six (Cortright, 1975, p. 52). The brass came down very hard on such early protests to frighten others away from similar actions. Later treatment of GIs accused of much more serious "disloyalty" and "refusal of duty" (even by the time of the Ft. Hood 43 in the summer of 1968) was far lighter in comparison. By then the military was no longer dealing with relatively small, scattered actions but with widespread insubordination throughout the services and cracking down hard, the brass realized, would only deepen the rebellion.

The civilian antiwar and Black and other oppressed nationality movements, as well as the youth rebellion sweeping society, influenced and spurred a burgeoning antiwar movement among GIs. Early signs of these links included the widespread practice by GIs in Vietnam of drawing peace signs and Black Power fists on their helmets, of constantly flaunting hair regulations, and of dapping among the Black soldiers. By 1969 many soldiers newly arriving in Vietnam had not only been influenced by the social turmoil in the U.S., but some of them had been active in protest marches, urban uprisings, and even revolutionary organizations.

Despite repression, isolation, and the conditions of war, even in Vietnam soldiers found ways to act in solidarity with antiwar actions back in the U.S. On November 15, 1969, for instance, many soldiers on patrol wore black armbands in unity with a massive march that day in Washington D.C. A few weeks later fifty soldiers, many of them in uniform — which automatically made the action illegal — gathered in JFK Square in Saigon on Christmas Eve and distributed leaflets urging their fellow GIs to declare a cease-fire for the Tet holiday on February 6, 1970. There were many other forms of protest by Vietnam GIs, including combat refusals (the main form opposition took), petitions, letters to Congress (soldier complaints to Congress totalled 250,000 a year by 1971 [Cortright, 1975, p. 23]), and newspaper ads calling for an end to the war, including one placed in the *New York Times* November 9, 1969, signed by 1,366 active-duty servicemen, 189 of them in Vietnam (Cortright, 1975, p. 62).

At the same time, a large-scale, open, and organized GI antiwar movement took root and flourished in the U.S., largely due to the presence and support of the civilian anti-

war movement. The movement was centered around GI coffeehouses, which began springing up in early 1968 and eventually located near most major Army bases, the two key Marine Corps camps, and some Navy and Air Force installations. Civilians usually initiated these centers, generally as part of a conscious effort by radicals to spread the antiwar (and in some cases revolutionary) movement to the GIs — to "fight for the troops," as it were — with many vets later joining. These coffeehouses provided an atmosphere where rebellious GIs could "breathe," forums for political discussion, and a means of distributing protest literature. "The majority of guys who came to these storefronts were attracted by their anti-brass atmosphere, stuck around to rap with some people and perhaps read an anti-war paper, and generally got exposed to left-wing politics" (Rinaldi, 1974, p. 35). The House Committee on Internal Security heard testimony about one such coffeehouse in Seaside, California:

It displayed a red flag and banners on the front of it, and the walls were lined with various "movement" group posters, including the Black Panther Party posters and so forth. They had a large literature rack there with various underground newspapers; the sayings of Chairman Mao and other pamphlets from the Peking press were available free to GIs. They did the work on the galley sheets for several underground newspapers there and distributed these newspapers to the military, and they held programs for the viewing of films and had guest speakers there for the GIs on weekends. [Committee on Internal Security, 1972, p. 6487]

Numerous attempts were made by both military and municipal authorities to shut these centers down. When revoking business licenses didn't work, groups like the KKK were unleashed to firebomb the coffeehouses.

Out of these storefronts GI, civilian, and veteran activists published as many as 300 GI newspapers. They included *FTA* at Ft. Knox, *Attitude Check* at Camp Pendleton, *All Hands Abandon Ship* at the Newport Naval Station, and *Left Face* at Ft. McClellan. These newspapers came to be the most important organizing tool of the GI movement. "While the number of GIs who created these papers might total in the hundreds, the number who helped distribute them numbered in the thousands and the number who read them and related to them numbered in the tens of thousands" (Rinaldi, 1974, p. 36). *Bragg Briefs* in North Carolina, for instance, regularly had a run of over 7,000 copies. The contents of the papers varied considerably, from open support for the Vietnamese revolution to complaints about food rations. Some were put out for longer stretches by civilian and GI radicals, while others were printed for only an issue or two by GIs who just wanted to stir up some trouble any way they could.

Throughout the war the brass made strenuous efforts to politically quarantine the rank-and-file soldiers and isolate

Out of these storefronts GI, civilian, and veteran activists published as many as 300 GI newspapers.

"troublemakers." GI antiwar and radical activists were routinely given "punitive reassignment" (sometimes literally to Alaska), dope was planted on them, and some were even forcibly shipped to Vietnam in the middle of the night. Previously open bases were often closed to all but military personnel, and the military made major efforts to stem the tide of antiwar literature flowing to the soldiers: "In March 1971 the Army headquarters in Vietnam sent a message to all commanders telling them to confiscate antiwar mail addressed to soldiers, even first-class items for individual addressees." This action was justified legally on the grounds that this literature constituted a "clear danger to the loyalty, discipline, or morale of the troops" (Hauser, 1973, pp. 83-84).

Dozens of antiwar GI groups in the U.S. developed, one such group formed in Europe, and one national organization arose among junior officers (the Concerned Officers Movement). In the main these organizations were neither very cohesive nor stable, and they were generally not linked together except through the informal antiwar movement networks that developed spontaneously.

On April 15, 1967 a handful of Vietnam veterans marched in an antiwar protest in New York City carrying a banner which read "Vietnam Veterans Against the War." An organization which would play an important role in the antiwar movement was born. The first antiwar march led by a contingent of active-duty GIs took place in San Francisco on April 27, 1968. Six months later, on October 12, 200 active duty GIs and 100 reservists marched at the head of a massive antiwar demonstration in San Francisco despite strenuous efforts by the brass to prevent any troops from taking part. Two days later, partly inspired by this show of antiwar strength, twenty-seven prisoners at the Presidio army stockade staged a sit-down strike to protest the shooting death of a fellow prisoner, intolerable prison conditions, and the war. They were later charged and court-martialed for mutiny. In November a contingent of over 200 active-duty GIs headed an antiwar demonstration of a quarter million in Washington, D.C. (Cortright, 1975, pp. 57, 62).

In 1970, on Armed Forces Day, thousands of GIs rallied against the war. Local rallies drew 100 soldiers from Ft. Benning, Georgia, 750 from Fort Bragg, 700 from Fort Hood, Texas, 400 from Fort Riley in Kansas, 200 Marines from Camp Pendleton near San Diego, and 100 soldiers from Fort Ord in California as well as thousands of others at various locations across the country (Cortright, 1975, p. 67). A year later the GI movement was strong enough to declare its own Armed Forces Day, which resulted in the cancelling of most

of the official military celebrations. And as the GI movement mushroomed, the bonds between antiwar soldiers and civilians became even more problematical for the U.S. rulers; in one instance the DMZ coffeehouse in Washington, D.C. was able to find out which soldiers were being assigned riot duty for upcoming demonstrations on May Day 1971. Leaflets were then distributed to every affected base calling on the soldiers to join the demonstration instead.

Major political/legal cases involving GIs, such as the Ft. Hood 43, the Presidio 27, and the case of six GIs at Ft. Lewis in Washington state who refused orders to go to Vietnam became *causes célèbres* quite broadly. A sanctuary movement similar to that for Central Americans today also developed to help GI deserters.

Coinciding with the widespread support for antiwar GIs in the civilian U.S., an unprecedented shift in public opinion regarding the military in general took place. Military journals still talk about the hostility many in uniform faced, especially from the youth in this country. For the first time in the U.S.'s history, not only could a man in uniform not walk into the bar and get offered the customary free drinks, he might just get hooted out. Only the VFW types, it often seemed, were still willing to give a soldier a pat on the back. On some college campuses being seen in a ROTC uniform was flirting with a rumble. Between 1969 and 1972, thirty-eight ROTC units were forcibly closed down and overall enrollment nationally dropped from 128,000 to 72,500.

Due to both the duration of the war and the antiwar movement, many youth who left Vietnam with only nagging questions about the war later became staunch and vocal opponents. Thousands of these youth joined VVAW after leaving the services, and this group had an impact as no other could on those still in the military, as well as more broadly in society. The actions of VVAW members varied greatly, from petitioning Congress to inciting the troops to turn their guns around, but its activities in April 1971 helped ensure that its overall radical imprint on those times would not soon be forgotten. In Operation Dewey Canyon III, "a limited incursion into the country of Congress," VVAW and over 2,000 veterans carried out an envelopment of the nation's capitol. Fifty vets tried to get themselves arrested as war criminals, but no one would oblige them. The police and city council tried to run the vets out of town, but the vets wouldn't oblige them. The high point of the actions came on Friday morning, April 23. Wrote one reporter:

about 800 men walked up to a wire fence erected the day before to keep the April 24 anti-war march off the steps [of the Capitol Building]. There they threw their medals towards the statue of the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, John Marshall. It took two hours for all the men to throw down the Bronze Stars, Silver Stars, Purple Hearts and campaign ribbons they had been awarded in Vietnam. (Goldberg, 1971, p. 13)

It was a provocative and electrifying day, the significance of which was captured in the following short conversation during these goings-on. Said an elderly woman to a veteran handing out leaflets: "Son, I don't think what you're doing is good for the troops." Said the vet in response: "Lady, we are the troops" (cited in Emerson, 1976, p. 331).*

Divisions Within the Ruling Class

In early August 1964 the U.S. manufactured a confrontation with the North Vietnamese Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin, following which the U.S. Senate (88 to 2) and the House (unanimously) approved the famous resolution which thereafter provided the legal sanction for the Vietnam War. At this point in the game the U.S. bourgeoisie was firmly united behind an escalation of the military conflict in Vietnam. The only real issues being debated were how much and how long it would take to crush the Vietnamese revolution. There was religious harmony over the goal. Early on the troops went into battle, told that "the nation is behind you 100 percent" — meaning the ruling class was all for the war.

But at a later point significant splits did occur within the

*Almost every political tendency in the antiwar movement found a voice among GIs during the Vietnam War. The sharpest question facing the revolutionary and assorted left forces was whether the military should be reformed or whether the spontaneous radical activity of the GIs should be diverted toward revolution. The Communist Party, Socialist Workers Party, and Worker's World Party — who all made attempts to work among the troops — lined up behind the former program. Their activity was characterized by attempts to "democratize" the military through reforming the military system of justice, ending harassment of soldiers by officers, ending racism in the military, and so on. They pitched their calls for action at the mainstream of the GI movement, while they turned off the most politically advanced soldiers and sailors. With regard to the war they emphasized not exposure of U.S. imperialism's aggression and support for the liberation struggle but rather legalisms. Anything more would be "too alienating" for the "average GI."

Now it was certainly true that a lot of GIs spontaneously took up calls for "democracy," "freedom" from the most oppressive rules and regs, "the right to speak," and so on, as they were just coming into political life and they were grabbing at whatever ideas were most accessible. But it is one thing when such ideas are spontaneously born or even for revolutionaries to relate to such actions, and it is quite another thing for "socialists" and "communists" to promote such things as the road forward for the troops opposed to the Vietnam War, racism, and the like.

This was the case with the key point in the program of the American Servicemen's Union (an organization led by the WWP which received wide publicity in the bourgeois press at the time): GIs should not have to fight an "illegal" war in Vietnam (see Stapp, 1970, p. 90). This only fed illusions among broad sections of the troops that a formal declaration of war by the U.S. would somehow change the nature (or course) of the war. Such illusions should have

U.S. ruling class over the war, first over whether the war could be won quickly, and at what political and financial cost, and later, to a growing degree, over the best way to extricate the U.S. from a losing enterprise. These splits had a direct and marked impact on the political terrain in the U.S., and on the troops and their disintegration in particular, providing important openings for mass initiative from below.

When, following Tet, the then longest-reigning Secretary of Defense in the history of the U.S., Robert McNamara, resigned, when the commander of U.S. troops in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, was denied a request for over 200,000 additional soldiers, and when Lyndon Johnson himself was compelled to agree not to run for another presidential term, then clearly there were severe problems afoot within the U.S. ruling circles. Later developments — including the My Lai massacre exposure, the Pentagon Papers, etc. — were also significant. These conflicts contributed powerfully to the political freedom of the GI antiwar movement and to an awareness among GIs that major and influential sections of the bourgeoisie itself were becoming most pessimistic about the chances for victory in Vietnam, further spurring on the disintegration of the U.S. troops.

been addressed, of course, and their origins understood, but not in this way.

When the CP was not calling for U.S. troops to be pulled out of Vietnam and sent instead to Selma to enforce integration there — as if the problem was where the troops were stationed, and as if the military has ever protected the interests of Black people — it was siding up to those they declared the "anti-monopolist" sections of the ruling class. This was their answer to the pressing question of the day within society as a whole, as well as among GIs: Is the Vietnam War a policy mistake or is it rooted in the system of imperialism?

The SWP especially preached patriotic loyalty to the Constitution. One SWP GI was quoted favorably in the group's semi-official history of the war:

I appeal for support from all Americans who agree that GIs are citizens who are entitled to the right of free speech guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. Although I have never disobeyed an order, and have fulfilled all my duties as a soldier, my constitutional rights are now being threatened. [Halstead, 1978, p. 301]

Qualitatively different was the line and program put forward among the troops by radical Vietnam veterans, former members of Students for a Democratic Society, the Black Panther Party, and newly formed Marxist-Leninist organizations like the Revolutionary Union. Assailed by the likes of the CP for being "ultra-left," the distinguishing feature of the most advanced work with the troops was its revolutionary spirit which united the troops around anti-imperialism and open support for the NLF victory over the U.S. Although no general, systematic program emerged among these forces on the role of GIs in the revolutionary process, through the efforts of these radicals, masses of GIs gained their first understanding of imperialism and determined to join in its destruction.

Other Factors

A word here about some organizational questions that various bourgeois analysts have cited as having played a key role in the disintegration of the troops in Vietnam. Seeming strengths quickly turned into their opposites. Take, for example, the question of "unit cohesion." Lack of unit cohesion in Vietnam is blamed by some on the individual rotation system, in which Army enlisted personnel had a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, Marines had a tour of thirteen months, and officers routinely had six months in the field and six months behind a desk. This rotation system, which thus saw units constantly having their members coming and going, reflected the early notion that Vietnam would be a cakewalk for the U.S. (and that therefore the troops needn't be kept in Vietnam "til victory"). It also allowed the military to send its officer corps in particular through the sacred initiation ritual of getting "blooded," without sending millions of troops to Vietnam at any one time. But after the war the argument was made that

the performance of the American Army during the Vietnamese War indicates a military system which failed to maintain unit cohesion under conditions of combat stress... at virtually all levels of command and staff, but principally at the crucial squad, platoon, and company levels. The disintegration of unit cohesion had proceeded to such an extent that by 1972 accommodation with the North Vietnamese was the only realistic alternative to risking an eventual military debacle in the field. (Gabriel and Savage, 1978, pp. 8-9)

While there is much truth to the disintegration of unit cohesion in Vietnam, such an argument is oversimplistic and faulty. Another writer noted that: "It is an irony of sorts that the primary-group processes which appeared to sustain combat soldiers in World War 2 are close cousins to the social processes which underlay the vast bulk of the fraggings in Vietnam" (Moskos, 1975, p. 35). Said another scholar sympathetic to the disintegration: "where primary-group solidarity existed, more often than not it served to foster and reinforce dissent from the goals of the military organization and to organize refusal to perform according to institutional norms" (Helmer, 1974, p. 47). It might even be said that, as the war went on, the lack of unit cohesion in Vietnam was an advantage to the U.S. The chaotic personnel turnover in combat units, among other things, meant that soldiers who had already been in Nam six or eight

*The "primary-group theory" in bourgeois military analysis was launched by a paper in 1948 stating that the German army did not collapse in World War 2 ("as it should have") due to exceptional unit cohesion and a superior officer corps (see Shiels and Janowitz, 1948).

months and were turned against the war knew they would soon be leaving. Those just arriving usually had to learn the "lessons of Vietnam" all over again themselves.†

In the wake of the proving ground of Vietnam another administrative quandary discussed today is the loss of "gladitorial ethics" in the U.S. officer corps in Vietnam (Duty, Honor, Country, etc.), and their replacement with "careerist, managerial, me-first" ethics. (While the "big transformation" purported here is exaggerated, still it reflects something.) Ticket punching, massive medal-awarding to officers, and a lower ratio of officers to soldiers killed in Vietnam compared to World War 2 are pointed to as evidence of this trend. Some claim that the phenomenon of enlisted personnel questioning and challenging military orders in the war resulted from an officer corps too weak to impose itself and rendered the U.S. armed forces unable to carry through with the war. This in turn eroded the reputation of the military and military life. An imperialist army cannot operate properly when the grunts forget what World War 1 General Pershing (recently commemorated with a missile) taught: "All a soldier needs to know is how to shoot and salute." (One of the bitter complaints by the Navy after the *Kitty Hawk* mutiny in 1972 concerned the "general abandonment" of the phrase "Aye, aye, sir.")

Three points may be made in response to these arguments about the decay of the U.S. officer corps: First, it remained generally quite loyal to the war to the end. One reason almost all POWs stayed patriotic during their entire incarceration was that they were mainly elite Navy and Air Force pilots who'd been shot down. Second, there was certainly an element of the imperialists' ideological chickens (like me-firstism) coming home to their bourgeois roost in conditions of no marked progress in the war. Third, once again these analyses mix cause and effect. The disintegration of the U.S. armed forces began from the bottom up and not because of an officer corps too lenient to keep the troops in line.

The Vietnam War became such a quagmire for the U.S. imperialists that during that time one of the most popular songs about the war in the U.S. ridiculed "being the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box." Just as indicative of this quagmire was that among their troops in Vietnam: "The most popular broadcast on the transistors was that of Hanoi Hanna and her gleeful

predictions of American annihilation" (Clodfelter, 1976, p. 106). If politically united behind a war throughout its course, armies can sustain very heavy casualties and sacrifice. The Vietnamese revolution showed this. But in Vietnam not only did the good bulk of U.S. troops come to oppose the war, many came to oppose the very society that had sent them, and some even welcomed the forecasts on Radio Hanoi of their own defeat.

In part because the U.S. did not have it all on the line in Vietnam and was able to retreat and regroup, the disintegration never led to a full collapse of this central pillar of bourgeois rule. Nor did the masses of troops adopt a revolutionary defeatist position (although a small but significant minority who embraced the SDS spirit of "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win!" did). But the disintegration certainly played a serious role in the defeat of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, both by forcing itself into the calculations of the bourgeoisie in planning the war and, most significantly, by posing a threat of "eventual military debacle in the field" if it were not brought under control by the pull-out of troops from Vietnam.

Many of the alienated troops wanted the U.S. to lose the war, if only in the sense of getting the hell out of Vietnam, and the outlook that eventually came to predominate was a sort of limited defeatism: the Vietnam War was seen as the wrong war, at the wrong time, in the wrong place. As for "other times," the sentiments of the soldiers differed markedly and changed continuously in the course of the disintegration; this question indeed became a focal point of discussion and debate among the troops.

Beyond the objective limits of the crisis gripping U.S. imperialism in the 1960s, the disintegration did not go even further than it did politically and organizationally because there was no leadership able to divert the spontaneous shift in the loyalties of many soldiers in more thoroughgoing revolutionary directions. But how far it did go! And this *without* large-scale devastating military routs (though the bottom line was defeat by a protracted people's war), *without* the emergence of a real revolutionary situation, and *without* a vanguard leadership, all at a time in which the bourgeoisie was making demands for "ultimate sacrifice" on the part of these youth.

The depths of their Vietnam defeat certainly hasn't been lost on the bourgeoisie, which has over the past decade been restlessly casting about for the reasons for the debacle and relentlessly trying to bury and reverse the political damage it did. In particular much ink has been spent trying to assess the reasons for the U.S.'s military defeat and the demoralization of the troops, even attempting to draw lessons from the writings of the early nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, including his emphasis on the "moral factors" in warfare.

One of Clausewitz's principal dictums, however, was that war is a continuation of politics by violent means. Wars waged by imperialism will thus inevitably be stamped with reactionary politics. The bourgeoisie can never really change the fundamental character of its armed forces or the

†Based on concern over unit cohesion and the Vietnam experience there are now experiments in the U.S. military (such as the Cohort system) where recruits stay together from basic training on. Of special interest is the call by some to form companies and maybe even brigades by nationality and/or region in order to maintain "cultural and racial homogeneity" (see, for example, Wesbrook, 1980, p. 275).

weapons-oriented basis of its war machine. On the other hand, the Vietnamese were able to win, and to batter the U.S. military, principally owing to the fact they could fight a just, people's war. In fact, the conclusions most bourgeois analysts have reached as to why the U.S. lost have rather exclusively centered on the physical strategy and tactics used in the war, the internal administrative problems in the military, and the conflicts with other bourgeois institutions like the press.

Vietnam showed that under proper conditions — most importantly the military blows of an opponent, especially a revolutionary opponent — a strong bourgeois army can experience a tremendous shift to disloyalty by its troops.

Lenin once recounted a discussion he'd had with some Russian soldiers back from fighting the Germans in World War I:

I shall never forget the question one of them asked me after a meeting. "Why do you speak against the

capitalists all the time?" he said. "I'm not a capitalist, am I? We're workers, we're defending our freedom." You're wrong, you are fighting because you are obeying your capitalist government; it's the governments, not the peoples, who are carrying on this war. . . . [Such a soldier] doesn't understand the connection between the war and the government, he doesn't understand that the war is being waged by the government, and that he is just a tool in the hands of that government. (Lenin, 1974, pp. 407-8)

Soldiers in imperialist armies have seldom in large numbers come to understand their role as tools of their bourgeois governments. When a significant proportion of U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War came to see themselves as dupes, pawns, suckers, and tools, a most dangerous thing occurred: The Enemy was no longer the U.S. government's enemy, but the U.S. government itself. □

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