



Waging Peace in Vietnam: U.S. Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War.

Ron Carver, David Cortright, and Barbara Doherty, eds.

New York: New Village Press, 2019.

“One of the least-known but most important chapters in the history of the Vietnam antiwar movement was the rebellion of troops within the military.” (1) So writes peace scholar David Cortright in his introduction to *Waging Peace in Vietnam*, a collection of essays, photographs, and oral histories chronicling the upsurge in antiwar activism among U.S. soldiers and veterans during the Vietnam War. Edited by Ron Carver, Cortright, and Barbara Doherty, this is a powerful contribution to the small, yet essential, body of literature that positions active-duty GIs and veterans as core contributors to the success of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Waging Peace in Vietnam begins with an overview of anti-war organizing and resistance as it “appeared first in the Army and Marines in 1968 and spread to the Navy and Air Force in 1970.” (2) It then proceeds to chart the movement’s development from its nascent beginnings in the mid-1960s through to the present day and the ongoing work of remediating the war’s legacies. Along the way, it covers a range of topics, including the antiwar GI press, the GI coffeehouse movement, war crime tribunals, military desertions, fraggings, and mutinies. All this is done in service of the book’s larger aim of discrediting the revisionist thesis that the military was in position to win the war in Vietnam but was betrayed by a coterie of politicians and journalists on the home front.

Officially, the collection was published as a complement to the 2018 exhibition “Waging Peace: U.S. Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed America’s War in Vietnam,” first installed at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, with subsequent showings in the United States. (According to its website, the exhibit continues to tour under the name “Waging Peace in Vietnam.”) However, one might also read it as a rejoinder to Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s much-contested documentary series *The Vietnam War* (2017) for its uncritical use of myths and stereotypes in its depiction of the antiwar movement generally and the relationship between soldiers and protesters specifically.

One of the themes woven throughout *Waging Peace in Vietnam* is the mutually reinforcing partnerships fostered among antiwar GIs and veterans and their civilian counterparts. The chapter on the GI coffeehouse movement—a constellation of antiwar-themed restaurants set up outside military bases by civilian activists and veterans—is a prime example of this. Framed by the historian David Parsons’s expert synopsis of the movement, in which he profiles two of the thirty-two locations established across the United States (The UFO in Columbus, SC, and the Ole Strut in Killeen, TX), it uses the personal reflections of former coffeehouse organizers and supporters to illustrate how antiwar soldiers and activists used these restaurants as planning sites for local “political projects and demonstrations.” (40)

Black soldiers in particular drew on the support and influence of antiwar civilians. As Cortright notes, African American GIs were the “most consistently rebellious troops in Vietnam and throughout the military,” (99) many of them finding inspiration in the words and deeds of anti-war critics like Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Similarly, the cultivation of Black consciousness among African Americans serving in Vietnam was predicated on the linkages between antiwar soldiers and the thriving Black Power movement on the home front. While the book would have benefited from more on the cultural interplay between active-duty soldiers and civilian activists, the editors nevertheless hit home this connection with the use of testimony from former Marine Clarence Fitch in the chapter “Uprisings and Rebellions”: “Things going on in the States affected our behaviour [in Vietnam]....We were growing Afros, expressing ourselves through ritualistic handshakes... African beads..., trying to eat up as much of the black music as we could get our hands on.” (105)

As with any edited collection, some chapters are stronger than others. The first-hand accounts by former soldiers and long-time activists (many of them drawn from William Short and Willa Seidenberg’s *Matter of Conscience* [1992]) are all very interesting and often quite affecting. Yet some felt shoehorned into chapters whose topics they are only tangentially connected to. (See, for example, some of the oral histories in Chapter 2 on the GI press.)

Additionally, while one of the book’s great strengths is its visual composition, comprised of countless photographs and facsimiles of antiwar ephemera (including a reproduction of the underground GI newspaper *Left Face* from August 1971), the editors sometimes let the images do the talking when more exposition is needed. This is especially so of the rather slim treatment accorded to Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) which is mentioned often, but typically only in passing. One cannot read the chapter “Marching for Peace,” for instance, without thinking there was a missed opportunity to address, beyond the photographs, VVAW’s 1970 and 1971 protests, Operation RAW and Dewey Canyon III.

The real success of this fine collection is the power with which it conveys the personal sacrifices of the soldiers who protested and resisted the Vietnam War. As the historian Christian Appy tells in his afterword, the military is an “authoritarian institution with a myriad of methods to instill obedience and punish dissent.” (191) And yet, despite the ever-present threat of reprisal, thousands of soldiers risked personal violence, court-martial, imprisonment, and state-organized harassment campaigns, not to mention ostracism from friends and family, as a matter of conscience, to participate in one of the most effective antiwar campaigns in U.S. history. That *Waging Peace in Vietnam* never loses sight of the personal costs of the soldiers’ activism makes the events chronicled throughout its pages all the more mesmerizing.

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