

## APPENDIX

### Social Movement Theory as Applied to VVAW *Co-authored with Dr. Catherine Luther*

This book looks at U.S. network television news coverage of Vietnam Veterans Against the War using social movement theory as a frame of reference. It critically analyzes how the organization and its activities during the early 1970s were represented by the news reports.

Roberta Garner and John Tenuto (1997, 1) define social movement theory as “the project of creating a unified and coherent definition and explanation of social movements and related phenomena. Social movements are usually defined as collectivities engaged in noninstitutionalized discourses and practices aimed at changing existing conditions of society.” These scholars compiled a guide to much of the research, and concluded that the theory has changed based on intellectual currents, changes in the phenomena themselves, and the volatile nature of such movements (Garner and Tenuto 1997, 1-6).

From 1945 to the early 1960s, social movements were analyzed as irrational psychological aberrations and were approached via psychoanalytic paradigms. From the mid-1960s until the late-1970s, researchers tended to be kinder to persons engaged in social movements, viewing them as rational actors within social structures. Here, the paradigm shifts to organizational structures and resource mobilization. From the late 1970s until now, however, analysis largely has taken a deconstructionist approach. “According to these new intellectual currents,” writes Garner (1997, 6) in her introduction to *Social Movement Theory and Research*, “all human phenomena are

socially constructed in ongoing processes of cultural discourse and interaction; hence there is no bedrock for human society, either in the individual or in social structures.”

If social movements are perceived as socially constructed, it becomes crucial to understand which societal actors are taking part in the construction of their realities and in what manner. Several scholars (e.g., McLeod and Hertog 1999; Putnam 2002) have asserted that, over the past few decades, the mass media, especially the news media, have played prominent roles in the contouring of images associated with social movement organizations.

This approach to social movements through their social construction will be less than satisfying to those in the field who prefer materialist approaches, especially examinations of resource mobilization. These past approaches contributed greatly to our understanding of social movements, especially in their recognition of the importance of elites. However, as Tarrow has detailed, many researchers and theorists recently have expanded the study of social movements to look at culture as an important “meta-narrative” in formation, operation, goals, symbols, and success of movements. He proposed the following valuable synthesis:

People engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change and then, by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, create new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of contention. When their struggles revolve around broad cleavages in society, when they bring people together around inherited cultural symbols, and when they can build upon dense social networks and connective structures, then these episodes of contention result in sustained interactions with opponents—specifically in social movements. (1998, 19)

This theoretical synthesis seems particularly descriptive of VVAW. The inherited cultural symbols were themselves—a country's noble warriors. The dense social network was the powerful bond of those who have shared combat. The broad cleavage in society was the Vietnam War. The VVAW learned how to use and to gain attention strategically for collective action. It became loosely affiliated with other war opponent groups, but maintained a separate identity, as part of a widening cycle of contention. The sustained interaction with opponents included a long-term struggle against the Nixon Administration. The changing patterns of political opportunities and constraints included a vast and idealistic youth population dissatisfied with the “establishment” and a relatively new and powerful news medium—television. At times the political patterns worked for VVAW, at times against.

### *Social Movements and the News Media*

Research on social movements suggests that the type of coverage these movements receive from the news media often reflects the needs of political and economic elites. Viewed as a part of the power elites in society, mainstream media are said to grant legitimacy only to those movements that are believed to pose no threat to the status quo. Those movements that are seen as undermining the stability of the established political and societal consensus are portrayed as deviant and lacking legitimacy.

In attempting to explain why journalists might assign deviant status to certain individuals or groups, Daniel Hallin (1986, 117, 162) created a model of the modes of journalistic coverage. Hallin contends that journalists operate within three spheres of journalistic coverage. The first is the sphere of legitimate controversy. Within this sphere, journalists attempt to be balanced and neutral in their coverage, mirroring the journalistic ideal of the watchdog model of

the press. The second is the sphere of consensus, in which journalists do not remain objective, but rather serve as advocates of what are viewed as consensus values. The third sphere of journalistic coverage is the sphere of deviance. Within this sphere, journalists act to silence or condemn those individuals or groups that are viewed as challenging political consensus. Through these models, Hallin argues that those individuals or groups, such as social movement organizations, that are striving to bring about change to the widely-agreed-upon political or societal stances encounter much difficulty in having their voices heard by the mainstream press.

Hallin's assertions are sustained by a number of studies regarding news coverage of social protest. In one of the earliest works, Breed (1955), in his analysis of newsroom practices, found that members of the press tend to establish informal organizational policies that are mainly aimed at promoting social conformity. He writes that by avoiding coverage of social actions deemed to be nonconformist, or by assigning these stories to staffers who will provide a certain slant to the actions, newspaper editors are able to maintain the deception of societal equilibrium and tranquility. Gitlin's (1980) study of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations showed that while the news media may at times concede to the need for certain reforms within the political system, it will disparage any movements that attempt to go against the system itself. He found that anti-Vietnam war demonstrators were often negatively presented, not in a manner reflective of the actual demonstrators.

McLeod and Hertog (1992; 1999), in several of their studies on social protests, found that demonstrators are often defined by the news media as being violent and criminal. The authors claim that journalists often use a violent crime narrative to set up a conflict scenario between protesters and law enforcement officers. Journalists' use of a conflict scenario in their coverage of social movements

has been found in other studies (e.g., Manoff and Schudson 1986; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000) as well. Conflict is said to boost the spectacle value of the coverage. By discussing the size of the protests, the presence of police, and clashes between police and protesters, newsworthiness of the protests is heightened. Newsworthiness is also heightened if protests are associated with issues already attracting news attention. With the increase in social movement coverage due to perceptions of newsworthiness, however, resistance to those changes being called for by the social movements also tend to rise (e.g., Gitlin 1980; Altschull 1984; Parenti 1986; Loewen 1996).

Justin Gustainis and Dan Hahn (1988) looked specifically at the social movements aimed at ending the Vietnam War, and asserted that those movements failed and that negative public reaction actually prolonged the U.S. role in the war. They argued that the protesters and protest groups made rhetorical errors, such as identifying with the counter culture and using immoderate protest tactics: violence, obscenity, and flag desecration. They argued that pro-war forces were very effective, with responses that tapped into the audience's fear of communism and opposition to protests in general and protest violence in particular. These authors make an important contribution, but one should note that only massive, noisy, and impolite protest garners mediated attention—and protesters must operate in that reality, and the smarter ones recognize and use that reality. Antiwar veterans, as this book demonstrates, wisely recognized the need to maintain an identity separate from the general antiwar movement, a separate identity that takes advantage of their hard-earned credibility.

It is impossible to determine precisely whether antiwar protest lengthened, shortened, or had no effect on the Vietnam War. There is no “control group” contemporaneous war done without protest for comparison. It seems likely that the war protests did some good by

breaking the “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann 1984). People who had doubts about the war (or any war sub-point such as cost, fatalities, congressional authorization, performance of South Vietnamese allies) had validation that they could express those doubts, even if at the same time they could express revulsion at the protesters bringing the message.

The Gustainis and Hahn article makes a stronger contribution when it points out that U.S. news media got to the antiwar protest story late, generally gave such protests negative coverage, and curtailed coverage when faced with criticism. CBS News, for example, never had antiwar protests comprise more than 20 percent of its overall Vietnam coverage (Hallin 1986, 192). Hodgson (1976) documented a decline in antiwar protest coverage following Vice President Spiro Agnew’s diatribes against television, press, and protest. Network executives, by nearly all accounts, certainly were quite concerned and even fearful about what the comments threatened, ranging from license challenges to FCC regulation (Schieffer 2003). NBC anchor and reporter John Chancellor admitted that, after the Agnew attacks, networks found themselves thinking “thrice not just twice” reaction pieces to presidential pro-war statements (Deane 1983).

The major findings from research on press coverage of social movements may be summarized as follows: the news media have been found to often: deny the existence of the movement, ignore the movement as meaningless or irrelevant, dismiss the cause as hopeless, stereotype the adherents as extreme or odd, create alternate and less threatening spokesmen, fragment the movement into competing groups, co-opt leadership, co-opt the least threatening ideas, prematurely declare the movement dead, recall the movement as an aberration no longer needed, and finally forget the movement ever happened.



By the 1980s, VVAW protests continued, but coverage waned.  
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

As a social movement, VVAW presents an intriguing case study because it is essentially made up of two often counter-opposing communities. As a veterans group, VVAW is part of a larger group that serves as a tribute to the nation and those who fought for the nation. At the same time, however, it is a group dedicated to the promotion of peace and social justice. Adam Garfinkle explained well how the VVAW were perfectly positioned to break through the implicit dilemma of coverage described by Gustainis and Hahn. Garfinkle wrote, “The reason is simple: veterans were by definition patriotic. They were not draft-dodgers. They did not and never had rooted for the enemy. They were not spoiled students on elite college campuses. They did not have long hair, wear beads, or openly smoke pot. In short the very fact that they appeared respectable helped earn their views respect” (1995 197).

Bob Ostertag noted, “By the early 1970s GIs opposed the war in proportionally greater numbers than students ever did, and at far greater risk to themselves” (2006, 118). Active duty antiwar veterans

could face dishonorable discharges, transfers to more dangerous duty, or even jail, often on trumped-up charges.

Adding to the credibility of antiwar veterans is their role as witness/convert. One survey of 172 of two thousand veterans who went to a VVAW protest in April 1971, Dewey Canyon III, found that most of those vets had either supported or had no opinion about the war before going to Vietnam; but solid majorities reported undergoing a drastic change in viewpoint while serving in Vietnam. Before the war, the respondents were evenly divided among self-described liberals, moderates, and conservatives. After Vietnam, 48.8 percent called themselves radical, 18.5 percent extreme radical, and fewer than 6 percent self-identified in the moderate to conservative range. Unsurprisingly, the vets listed personal experience in Vietnam with the Vietnamese, other GIs, and other Americans as the leading sources in forming their new attitudes (Mowlana and Geffert 1971).



An unidentified veteran, laden with medals, listens to speakers at the VVAW war protest event, Dewey Canyon III. Photo courtesy of VVAW.

Despite the unwillingness of many people to accept the fact, a majority of Vietnam era veterans opposed the war. In 1977 and 1979, Ellen Frey-Wouters and Robert S. Laufer surveyed 326 Vietnam veterans, 341 Vietnam-era veterans, and 592 non-veterans. The researchers reported that few American GIs went to war with antiwar attitudes, but while they served in Vietnam “a plurality of veterans were participating in a war they clearly opposed or to which they had a variety of confused responses that amounted to less than full support for the American involvement. Upon return home, opposition to the American role in the war often intensified. At the time of our interviews, a majority of Vietnam veterans agreed that we should have stayed out of the conflict” (1986, 87).

Time of service mattered. Most pre-Tet veterans supported the war; most post-Tet U.S. veterans did not. Branch of service also mattered. Only 23 percent of Marines opposed the war, but pluralities of army and navy veterans did. Combat itself was not a significant



Active Duty GIs and Ex-POWs supporting VVAW.  
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

factor in war opposition, but those directly exposed to “abusive violence” report that this violence affected their view of the war, almost always in the direction of opposition (Frey-Wouters and Laufer 1986, 79-87, 387-408).

Hipsher (2007) argues that VVAW can be regarded as a “heretical social movement organization.” She includes it with such groups as Veterans for Peace, Iraqi Veterans Against the War, Catholics for Free Choice, and the Pro-Life Alliance of Gays and Lesbians. These groups form a special class of collective struggle because they articulate positions and pursue goals contrary to what the larger community might presume is their identity group position. In the case of VVAW, the group was specifically created to contest the Vietnam War efforts of the U.S. and contradicted the position taken by the larger veteran community, similar to World War II vets in the American Legion, sympathetic to the U.S. cause.

Based on past studies on social protest, one can assume that VVAW would have encountered scant news coverage of its early and vibrant demonstrations. The group would not have been covered extensively except when official reactions, such as arrests and trials, led reporters to the story. Because the demonstrators themselves were war veterans, the coverage might have been slightly different from the type of coverage provided to most social demonstrations. The very existence of large numbers of antiwar veterans might have led to a form of cognitive dissonance for much of the public and a good many reporters and editors.

By examining the major U.S. network television coverage of VVAW in its early years, this book attempts to provide insight into how the VVAW as a heretical social movement might have been covered and whether the coverage can be considered distinct from standard social movement coverage.

### *Highlights*

Social movement theory suggests that as organizations grow more threatening to the status quo, mediated resistance also rises. This generally happened with VVAW.

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The VVAW may be viewed as a heretical social movement, one whose views may run counter to public assumption of its position. In the case of VVAW, this led to enhanced credibility through personal experience with the Vietnam War.

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News coverage of VVAW followed a pattern common to most social movements. News media miss the story, then downplay its significance, then distort its message, then co-opt certain messages or messengers, then dismiss it as no longer needed, and finally forget it happened.

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VVAW did not fall into the news trap experienced by other social movements, using violence to gain attention, only to have the violence swallow the message. VVAW stayed non-violent.

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Unlike some other social movements VVAW success did not flow from a breakdown of elite consensus. It largely was a working-class phenomenon, gaining attention well after elite consensus about the Vietnam War had fallen apart.

