

## Documenting the Coverage

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The author conducted in-depth interviews with four leaders of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and also searched for and obtained poll data from the era. The key element of the research, however, was a search of the Television News Archive maintained at Vanderbilt University, using keywords such as “VVAW,” “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” “vets,” and “antiwar veterans.” The resulting stories then were copied onto videotape for review and critical analysis.

The Television News Archive has videotaped, indexed, and made available for scholarly use every network TV (ABC, CBS, and NBC) evening newscast since October 1968. Thus, the archive covers the time period of nearly every significant VVAW activity.

A quick summary of those activities will help the reader understand what is covered and what is not:

- February 1970—In its first major event, VVAW held hearings on American war crimes in Vietnam. Vietnam veterans assembled in Annapolis, Maryland, and Springfield, Massachusetts, to testify to atrocities they had participated in or observed (Lembcke 1998, 57).
- August 1970—VVAW members confronted American Legionnaires at that group’s national convention in Portland, Oregon (Thorne and Butler 1971, 8).

- September 4-7, 1970—Operation RAW (Rapid American Withdrawal) was a four-day “military sweep” across New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The 100 to 150 antiwar veterans, outfitted in combat fatigues and carrying plastic M-16 rifles, staged mock combat patrols and war atrocities along the eighty-mile route from Morristown, New Jersey, to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The route replicated much of Washington’s retreat to Valley Forge; the vets then joined fifteen thousand other antiwar demonstrators in a Labor Day rally (DeBenedetti 1990, 293-294; Prados 2002, 407). Vietnam Veteran Ed Damato (2000) recalled seeing Jane Fonda on a late-night talk show commenting on the upcoming Valley Forge march by VVAW. Damato joined the march. Later, he related that he “began a life of fighting against the war that I thought was wrong. Up to this point my big antiwar statement was giving the finger to President Richard Nixon while he rounded 50th Street in his limousine” on his way to a New York City event.
- January 31 to February 2, 1971—Winter Soldier Investigation: At a Howard Johnson’s motel in Detroit, a hundred soldiers and sixteen civilians testified about Vietnam War crimes that they themselves committed or observed other U.S. soldiers committing. VVAW leader Bill Davis (2007) later said that Winter Soldier “broke open the atrocities and the level of genocide that was being carried out in the name of the American people in Vietnam. It was so effective that it is still being attacked to this very day by the people it diminished.” As Tod Ensign (1999) pointed out, the road to a successful investigation was not easy; competing groups had different ideas about how to proceed and even celebrity supporters, such as actors Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda as well as JFK assassination lawyer Mark Lane, had to be dissuaded from distracting missteps.

The road to national coverage was even tougher. Senator Mark Hatfield entered the proceedings into the April 6-7, 1971, *Congressional Record*, but news media paid little attention (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, 355; Gitlin 1987). Jan Barry spoke at Winter Soldier and recalled that CBS sent a camera crew but never used the material. A *New York Times* reporter was there for the whole event, but only one brief story appeared. On the first day of the event, the *Detroit News* challenged the vets, relaying a statement that the Pentagon didn't even have any information that these people were real veterans. Barry recalls that after the first day much better newspaper coverage appeared in Detroit, Chicago, and the Midwest (Barry 1997b). The *Chicago Tribune* ran a seven-paragraph wire story summarizing some of the stated atrocities, minimized under the headline "Viet Nam 'Crimes' Told at Mock Probe" (Associated Press 1971).

Just before Winter Soldier, the *Chicago Tribune* also carried, in its "Action Express" column (1971), responses to reader questions, the following inquiry: "I wonder if you could supply Jane Fonda's address for me. I'm fed up with these 'sob sisters' and 'do-gooders.' I think it's about time for at least one member of the silent majority—me—to go into action!" The paper then explained its search process and gave 967 Emerson Street, Detroit, as the address, describing it as "the office of the Winter Soldier Investigation, an unofficial 'war crimes trial' being planned to condemn United States 'war crimes' in Viet Nam." One is struck immediately with the poor judgment of providing to an angry person determined to "go into action" a street address for the focus of that rage. The column also shows how easily VVAW events could be commingled with disdain for supporters. The VVAW message could have been lost by opponents redirecting the discussion to personal attacks on a controversial supporter, a technique honed to perfection in much of today's talk radio.

John Zutz (2008) recalls that despite sporadic media coverage of the Winter Soldier testimony, soldiers in the field in Vietnam got

enough news to know what was happening. “The Neanderthals in the company were beating on their chests to show how tough they were,” he wrote. “At the same time, a number of my buddies mentioned they were ashamed to be a member of the military. I believe they had good reason to feel that way.” Nearly three thousand GIs, just like John Zutz, joined VVAW in 1971 while still serving in Vietnam (Miller 2000).

In 1972, a documentary called *Winter Soldier* came out. The dramatic testimony was shown primarily on U.S. college campuses. In Europe, it became a hit, winning awards and appearing both on television and in theaters. The film’s director, Lucy Phenix (2009), declared, “We independent filmmakers were filming because we knew that the mainstream media would NOT cover what was going on there—which was, I think, epic and groundbreaking—young American soldiers willing and brave enough to tell the truth about a war against civilians.” The 2004 John Kerry presidential campaign brought renewed interest in the documentary. In Chicago, the film showed eight nights to packed houses at the Gene Siskel Film Center, followed by long question-and-answer sessions with VVAW members (Romo 2005).

From April 19 to 24, 1971, Dewey Canyon III, a series of VVAW protests in and around Washington, D.C., took place. These protests included flinging away medals on the steps of the Capitol, throwing medals over the White House fence, marching to the Pentagon, and attending congressional hearings. Vets roamed congressional office buildings to make their case. One “suit” yelled, “Get a job and make something of yourself” to a one-armed combat vet who proceeded to chase the man into the rotunda, where the coward found safety behind a guard (Hartford 2001; Longley 2008). Several congressmen, mostly without publicity, came to the veterans’ campground to listen to them.



Dewey Canyon III in front of the Capitol.  
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

On April 23rd, some seven hundred vets marched from their mall campsite to the west side of the Capitol. Each man solemnly announced his name and unit, and then threw his medals over a makeshift fence (DeBenedetti 1990, 309-310). The vets originally had considered putting their medals in a body bag but—“to our everlasting credit”—opted to toss the medals. This decision reflected well on the democratic operation and choices of the organization (Damato 2000).

George Moss (2010, 313) and Kyle Longley (2008) relay that VVAW membership at the time topped twenty thousand. Some of the thousand to two thousand vets participating in Dewey Canyon

III came in wheelchairs; some were missing arms or legs. With emotions that ranged from quiet weeping to angry rage, the hundreds of vets who tossed medals directed their actions toward a government that would not end this war. Carl Rogers recalled, “The words and emotions that poured out were the most poignant and angry words I had ever heard in opposition to that dirty stinkin’ rotten little war. . . . I walked away from that moment in tears, but never more proud to have been part of the founding group of brothers who created VVAW” (Barry 2007c). These Dewey Canyon III events had the added topicality in that less than three weeks earlier a military court had sentenced Lieutenant William Calley for mass murder for his role in the My Lai massacre (Moss 2010, 313).

Other events followed:

- May 31, 1971—Four hundred Vietnam Veterans inverted the Paul Revere ride and trekked twenty miles from Bunker Hill to Boston Common for a Memorial Day rally. Later, roughly a hundred vets and three hundred sympathizers were arrested for violating curfew in Lexington by sleeping on Lexington Green, the largest mass arrest in state history; it appears that riot police detained another hundred people, but no charges were filed (Kaledin 1999).
- July 4, 1971—Five hundred VVAW and supporters marched in a three-mile antiwar candlelight parade in Kansas City, Missouri.
- December 24, 1971—Vets rallied at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City to read aloud the names of the war dead. VVAW members also carried out simultaneous encampments at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; Berkeley, California; Killeen, Texas; and Chicago, Illinois (Prados 2002, 409).
- December 26-29, 1971—Fifteen VVAW members barricaded

themselves inside the Statue of Liberty, leaving only after a U.S. district judge ordered them to open the doors. While that protest was underway, twenty-five protesters, mostly VVAW, occupied the Betsy Ross house in Philadelphia for an hour. Eighty-seven veterans were arrested in Washington for blocking the Lincoln Memorial entrance. In San Francisco, a group barricaded themselves inside the South Vietnamese consulate (DeBenedetti 1990, 322; Prados 2002, 409).

Setting out for the Statue of Liberty protest, Don Bristow-Carrico asked Vin Maclellan from the *Boston Phoenix* what media coverage the protesters could expect. The answer was downbeat: arrested in fifteen minutes and maybe page nine of the *New York Times*, if they were lucky. The protesters planned to stay in the “Lady” for only a few minutes. They had to fashion a statement to satisfy the press when they ended up staying for three days, eating food found in the lounge refrigerator. “A reporter from France told us that if we took a flag up to the head he would get it in every paper in the world. We put it there and he did it! He rented a helicopter and got a great shot,” said Bristow-Carrico. “Our lawyers told us we could stay and get arrested or walk out free. They felt we had milked the press as much as we could and that it would end up costing a lot to defend the ‘Liberty Fifteen.’ We walked out to a press conference and a good meal.” The protesters later received Christmas cards from John and Yoko Lennon (Bristow-Carrico 1999). The flag photo even made it to the pages of *Stars and Stripes* (Longley 2008).



A second Statue of Liberty protest with a banners displayed from the crown.  
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

Numerous protests took place over the next few years:

- April 19, 1972—VVAW members occupied the U.S. Naval Reserve Center in North Hollywood for seven hours. Later in the month, sixteen VVAW members took over the Air Force recruiting office in San Francisco. A crowd of two thousand served as a buffer between the vets and police while the vets

watched recruiting films. Two days later, at the Naval District Headquarters in San Diego, fifteen members turned themselves in as war criminals (Hunt 1999, 145; “We Are Everywhere” 1972, 10).

- April 29, 1972—Four hundred people attended a VVAW rally at Fort Ord, California. The vets demanded an end to intensified bombing in Vietnam (Hunt 1999, 145; “We Are Everywhere” 1972, 10).
- May 10, 1972—In Fresno, California, VVAW’s Gary Alexander carried a flag as he led eight hundred protesters decrying the mining of Vietnamese harbors (Hunt 1999, 145; “We Are Everywhere” 1972, 10).
- May 11, 1972—Eight VVAW members and supporters took over the King County Republican Party Headquarters. They were charged with criminal trespass. Two days later, in Seattle, a thousand demonstrators marched in opposition to the mining of Vietnamese harbors. Earlier in the month, VVAW members from Western Washington State College “mined” Bellingham harbor with a hundred multicolored balloons (Hunt 1999, 145; “We Are Everywhere” 1972, 10).
- May 1972—Eight hundred members of the Potsdam, New York, chapter of VVAW led a takeover of a federal building. VVAW members in New England seized the captain’s quarters on the *USS Constitution*. A VVAW blockade in Boulder, Colorado, led to the closing of Highway 36 for twenty-four hours. Police used tear gas. The Greeley, Colorado, VVAW held a “forced march” forty miles to Denver to participate in a rally. In Laramie, Wyoming, thirty-five members participated in a silent vigil (Hunt 1999, 145; “We Are Everywhere” 1972, 10).

- July 6-14, 1972—Workshops and candidate education events took place at the Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach. The non-delegates were assigned to the Par 3 Golf Course for accommodations; VVAW selected a portion of the course separate and distinct from other demonstrators (“Come to Miami!” 1972, 6). At the Democratic convention, “the veterans were lionized, afforded opportunities to make public statements, [and] admitted to the convention floor” (Prados 2002, 410).
- July 29-August 23, 1972—Last Patrol. A series of VVAW convoys converged on Miami Beach to protest at the Republican National Convention. The VVAW’s Bill Davis said that one Last Patrol event, the march to the Fountainbleu, “is considered one of the all-time famous antiwar marches” (2007). For that reason, a detailed account of it appears in the next chapter.
- July 1972-August 1973—The Tallahassee Six, later the Gainesville Eight. Seven VVAW members and a supporter were accused of a plot to disrupt the Republican convention using bombs and violence. Indictments, pre-trial maneuvers, and a trial followed. Several embarrassing government tactics were revealed, not the least of which were two FBI agents found sitting in a closet next to the defense attorney’s office with electronic surveillance equipment. The judge refused to dismiss the case, but the jury acquitted all eight accused.



The Gainesville 8.  
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

Officially, the jury took four hours, but reports indicate that jurors actually needed only ninety minutes and that they spent the remaining time playing with a slingshot that was a prosecution exhibit (Shunas 2008). One juror said, “What was there to deliberate? They never showed us any evidence. We could have come back with a verdict in 10 minutes.” Another said, “I wish I had understood all these things about the government 20 years earlier” (“Gainesville 8 Innocent” 1973, 3). As Charles DeBenedetti (1990, 361) wrote, “This was the eighth major antiwar conspiracy case brought to trial and lost by the Justice Department’s Internal Security Division. It became increasingly clear that the administration’s attack on antiwar critics was only part of a broader pattern of arbitrary, secretive, and illegal activity.”

- January 20, 1973—VVAW joined other peace groups on a cold, muddy day in a giant protest of Nixon’s second inauguration (B. Davis 2007). Some demonstrators pelted the Nixon motorcade with tomatoes. The VVAW also chose to participate in the Nixon Administration’s “Peace with Honor” parade in New York City two months later. The selected military in the review stands turned their backs on the protesting “grunts” in the streets, inadvertently but effectively assisting the VVAW point (Prados 2002, 411).
- Fourth of July weekend, 1974—Five thousand VVAW members marched in Washington, D.C. to demand amnesty for war resisters (Moser 1996, 125).
- Dewey Canyons IV and V were held in Washington, D. C. Protests in later years were designed to draw attention to inadequate veteran benefits and the health problems from the war defoliant Agent Orange (B. Davis 2007).



1981 demonstration for veteran benefits and victims of Agent Orange.  
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

These events represent a set of antiwar veteran protests around which media could fashion news stories. The resulting coverage offers valuable insight not only about journalistic habits but also about the interaction of a heretical social movement with established and powerful news media.

### *Highlights*

The VVAW began major antiwar protests in 1970, though most of these events received only sporadic and skeptical coverage, generally restricted to the local media at the protest site.

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The VVAW made an important historical record of Vietnam War atrocities at the Winter Soldier hearings in Detroit in early 1971. A film documentary of the event reached European audiences, but U.S. coverage of Winter Soldier was minimal.

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The VVAW's greatest protest success was Dewey Canyon III, a week-long series of events in Washington, D.C., in April 1971. Established sources validated coverage by their reaction to the vets.

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As quickly as media attention rose during Dewey Canyon III, it fell off almost immediately afterwards. Some news attention came to the Gainesville Eight, a failed government attempt to prosecute VVAW members on very dubious charges.

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In the mid-1970s, VVAW turned its attention to veterans issues, notably Agent Orange exposure and health problems.