

## Featured then Forgotten

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News coverage of VVAW eventually waned. The four leaders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Barry Romo, Bill Davis, John Lindquist, Peter Zastrow) who were interviewed for this research all claimed that news attention to them peaked during Dewey Canyon and slumped into nearly nothing by the time of the Last Patrol. Analysis using the Vanderbilt Television News Archive and articles from periodicals confirms that claim. The findings from this study are in line with what has been found in other social-movement-related research. Several studies have shown that the mainstream news

Kelly Daugherty and Barry Romo on the “Legacy of GI Resistance” panel at the 2008 Winter Soldier event. Photo Courtesy of VVAW.



organizations have a tendency, despite initial attraction to the unusual, to uphold the status quo (Donahue, Tichenor, and Olien 1973; Olien, Tichenor, and Donahue 1989; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948).

Threats to the dominant ideology or even to policies maintained by the societal and political elite often are disparaged or ignored. News coverage of dissent increases and expressions of opposition become voiced only during times of intense controversy and within the context of a particular idea or policy. If a majority of the elite is in agreement regarding an idea or policy, then the opposition experiences a “blackout” or vilification (Cagan 1978; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991; Morris 1973). Bennett’s indexing hypothesis (1990) looks at this point in the inverse, namely that elite conflict leaves an opening for mediated attention to discordant social movements. Bennett’s claim does not square with idealist, materialist, or constructionist views of social movements, but fits nicely with Sidney Tarrow’s (1998) concept of political opportunity structure, the synthesis of social movement theories with the cultural meta-narrative.

The network coverage of VVAW generally followed along the lines predicted by Bennett’s indexing hypothesis, and the decline in coverage followed well what one would expect from Patricia Hipsher’s (2007) understanding of heretical social movements. The attention paid to Dewey Canyon and the subsequent decline in VVAW coverage fit well into Jules Boykoff’s point (2006) about the news media penchant for the novel, Andrew Rojecki’s (2002) observation about “evolving sympathy,” and findings from Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples (2002) about symbolic violence.

For all this general support regarding past work on social movements, this research found some patterns at odds with the specific claims regarding elite consensus. A review of available polling data from that era is particularly instructive.

The American National Election Study in 1964, 1966, 1968, and 1970 asked what Americans should do now in Vietnam. In 1964,

almost half the respondents said we should “take a strong stand” while 38 percent opted for “keep trying to get a peaceful settlement.” Only 13.5 percent of the respondents said “pull out entirely.”

By 1966, however, the figures for Strong Stand and for Peaceful Settlement were nearly identical (44.6 and 44.2 percent); Pull Out was just 11 percent. In 1968, after the Tet Offensive, Strong Stand fell to 37 percent; 41 percent hoped for Peaceful Settlement, but Pull Out doubled to 22 percent. Pull Out achieved a plurality by 1970 with 36.7 percent, 36.2 for Peaceful Settlement, and 27.1 clinging to Strong Stand.

Public opinion showed a brief surge in war support in reaction to the January 1968 Tet Offensive, but the change did not last long. A Gallup poll found that two weeks after Tet, 61 percent called themselves “hawks” on the war, wanting to step up the U.S. military effort. In December, the figure was 52 percent. Seven in ten favored continued bombing of North Vietnam, up from 63 percent in October. However, in one sign of wavering, more than six in ten thought the war would end in a compromise. Only two in ten thought the war would end in a decisive U.S. victory. A Harris poll found a post-Tet jump in war support, from 61 to 74 percent, but six weeks later, support had fallen to 54 percent. In March, Gallup found almost half the respondents saying the U.S. had made a mistake by getting involved in Vietnam, doubling the percentage who said so in August 1965 (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, 155-156).

CBS News polls also documented the dramatic shift. In 1969, only one in four respondents favored immediate withdrawal of all American troops; 67 percent opposed. By May 1970, the percentage favoring immediate withdrawal was up to 36 percent, and opposition slumped to 58 percent. By the end of the next month, the numbers had swung even more, 47 percent choosing immediate withdrawal and 49 percent opposed. Further, of those who opposed immediate withdrawal, only 29 percent said “stick it out in Vietnam, and do

whatever is necessary to win.” Nearly two-thirds wanted a gradual withdrawal, letting South Vietnam take on more of the fighting. Among all respondents, 53 percent thought “we are in a war in Asia that we can’t get out of,” while four in ten disagreed (Chandler 1972, 182).

One should caution that these shifts in public opinion were not necessarily because of the efficacy of antiwar protests or because the change in public opinion moved Congress. Doug McAdam and Yang Su (2002) found that extreme tactics by protesters had some limited effect in attracting media attention and even in moving public opinion but that extreme measures produced something of a backlash in influencing the House and Senate to not vote on war matters. Large, peaceful demonstrations were linked with more congressional voting on war items, but actually correlated with a depressed likelihood of pro-peace outcomes. Hawks like Senator Bill Brock (1971), a Republican from Tennessee, caricatured antiwar protests as “partisan caterwauling” and “crying wolf” against what he argued were valuable tactics like bombing Cambodia and Laos. Brock twisted the protests into impediments to the return of POWs and a negotiated settlement to what even he was calling a “tragic war.”

Certainly by 1969, despite congressional hesitation, Vietnam War consensus had broken down, if not outright shifted to a new position. It’s hard to see, however, that the breakdown overall was elite-driven. The researcher cross-tabulated the American National Election Study (SDA 2008) results with education levels and discovered that people with only grade school educations were the leading war opponents. College-educated respondents were the strongest war supporters. These findings are consistent with past research (Hahn 1970; Hamilton 1968; O’Brien 1974; Lunch and Sperlich 1979). Bruce Franklin (2008) points out that “every study of class composition of the antiwar movement has concluded that opposition to the war was inversely proportional to both income and education.”

The same pattern held true in a 1972 exit poll during the Florida primary (Meyer 1972). Overall, 79 percent of respondents opted for “mostly agree” with the statement “The U.S. government should be moving faster to get out of Vietnam.” This sentiment, once again, was strongest among those in the lowest income (87%) and the least educated (86%) groups. The highest income group (71%) and the college educated group (75%) actually were the slowest to decide against the war.

Slowly growing disillusionment with the war also may be found among respondents to an April 1973 poll of business and military elites, specifically among executive vice-presidents of major United States corporations and military officers attending the five war colleges (Russett and Hanson 1977). Not surprisingly, military elites thought it was correct for the U.S. to send combat troops to Vietnam: 434 to 171. Business elites tilted in the opposite direction: 210 to 299. Some 286 said they’d held their current position since the beginning of the war, but almost as many (264) picked a year between 1965 and 1972 when their opinion formed or changed.

At least in this case study, elites were not driving the breakdown of consensus. Rather, they were trailing a lower class that had endured the bulk of the draft, danger, and death of the war.

By 1968, U.S. public consensus about the Vietnam War already had fractured. Polling in April showed identical percentages: 41 percent calling themselves hawks, and 41 percent doves (Gallup 1968a). In February, 49 percent thought the U.S. made a mistake by sending troops to Vietnam, compared to 42 percent who disagreed (Gallup 1968b). Two polls in September found the “mistake” percentage had risen to 54 in 1968 (Gallup 1968c), then to 58 percent in 1969 (Gallup 1969a).

When VVAW was presenting media-savvy antiwar protests, the problem no longer could be called elite consensus for the

war—consensus had broken down, and the breakdown was not led by elites. Instead, the VVAW ran smack into backlash and issue avoidance stemming from the cognitive dissonance and angst the war was generating.

By the time Dewey Canyon III hit Washington, 62 percent of poll respondents thought the U.S. would have to reach a compromise war settlement with the Communists (Louis Harris 1971a). Some 58 percent thought the war morally wrong (Louis Harris 1971b). Sixty-six percent wanted their congressman to vote for a proposal to bring all U.S. troops home by the end of the year (Gallup 1971a). The public, however, clearly resented the drumbeat of events—especially the coverage of events forcing those conclusions.

Antiwar protesters never were popular during the Vietnam War. In 1968, two-thirds of respondents disagreed with the proposition that the demonstrators in Chicago had their protest rights taken away unlawfully (Louis Harris 1968), and 56 percent approved of the way Chicago Police dealt with the young people protesting the war (Gallup 1968d). Some 71 percent agreed that the “country would be better off if there was less protest and dissatisfaction coming from college campuses” (National Opinion Research Center 1968).

In 1969, some 77 percent of poll respondents disapproved of public protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Further, 62 percent thought public protests hurt our chances of reaching a peace settlement with North Vietnam; only 13 percent thought the protests helped. When presented with Nixon’s characterization of a silent majority with war opponents as a vocal minority, respondents opted to think of themselves as Silent Majority as opposed to Vocal Minority, 74 to 21 percent (CBS News 1969; Chandler 1972., 165-183). Eighty-four percent of white “Middle American” adult respondents thought demonstrators on college campuses had been dealt with too leniently; the same percentage thought the same of black militants (Gallup 1969b).

One 1969 study of adult men posed the question, “Tell me if you think about these [nine-item list] as violence. I don’t mean if they lead to violence, but if you think of them as violence in themselves.” Thirty-eight percent thought of student protest as intrinsically violent (Survey Research Center 1969). A 1970 survey of women found 65 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly opposed to the actions and goals of student protest (Louis Harris 1970a).

In 1970, 37 percent of the respondents thought protests against the Vietnam War should be declared illegal (Louis Harris 1970b). Roughly a quarter thought protests hurt our ability to deal with the Communists (Gallup 1970). Harris (1969) phrased the question in terms of “people who picket against the war in Vietnam” and found 59 percent calling these actions more harmful to American life; only 18 percent said more helpful. When Nixon polled in advance of Dewey Canyon III and other April 1971 protests, 65 percent of respondents disapproved of the demonstrations (Opinion Research Corporation 1971b).

Blaming the messenger also took place. Six in ten said the “press and TV (television) should never have reported statements by the soldiers because all the publicity about My Lai [massacre] can only hurt our cause in Vietnam” (Louis Harris 1971c). Among 310 respondents who had heard about the Pentagon Papers, nearly four in ten disapproved of the *New York Times*’ decision to publish the secret, retrospective report on the deceptions and errors leading to the Vietnam War. Twenty-six percent thought the *New York Times* broke the law. Respondents split evenly on whether the *Times* had acted responsibly (Opinion Research Corporation 1971c). Of course, the press always makes a good scapegoat, especially when it tells people things they’d prefer not to hear, read, or see (Halberstam 2003, 126).

During the time VVAW and other protest groups were riddled with informants, the public still held a favorable inclination toward law enforcement. In 1971, 41 percent of the public thought the FBI

had not done enough in its investigations of political and protest groups. Further, 31 percent thought it had not done enough in “having agents or informers pose as members of militant protest groups.” For both questions, only 14 percent said the FBI had gone too far (Gallup 1971b).

Protest remained unpopular in 1972. Half the respondents to one survey (Louis Harris 1972) thought presidential candidate George McGovern had too many ties to radical and protest groups; 31 percent disagreed. Nearly half the respondents to a 1973 Harris survey thought student demonstrators who engaged in protests did more harm than good. In the same survey, 43 percent agreed with the rights-chilling statement “All protest meetings should be reviewed in advance by government authorities to be sure that what people are protesting is legitimate and they will not urge others to overthrow the system.”

TV news crews themselves were not particularly fond of protesters. Roger Mudd (2008) reported that the cameramen hated all the tear gas and rock throwing and largely “were very hawkish at one point and resented the war protestors, as we all did.”

TV News—and one could argue nearly all of journalism—arrived late to the story of antiwar veterans, well after consensus opinion barriers about the war had fallen, even as the public retained lingering doubts about protesters. VVAW, of course, was not a typical protest group, and its credibility was undeniable, even if belatedly discovered. Then, true to one of the more maddening conventions of journalism, news media dropped the story of VVAW almost as quickly as they had found the story. Like children with attention deficit disorder, newsrooms went off in search of something fresh, shiny, and new. Though many of the VVAW events after Dewey Canyon were just as large or dramatic, the VVAW was yesterday’s news—in today’s slang, “been there, done that.” David Halberstam won a

Pulitzer Prize for his Vietnam reporting and later summed up this tendency, putting much of the blame on the medium of television itself:

As television made things grow larger much more quickly, it also had a tendency to let them die more quickly too, the roots were not as deep, more of the country was living on electronic sand rather than on real soil. The saturation point and the point of boredom came sooner. People were bored with an issue before it was solved, finished, or decided. Television heightened the interest in the war in Vietnam, heightened for the first time the enthusiasm for it, probably quickened its demise, and left people saturated, long before the war was in fact over; it was over in people's minds while it was still unfinished upon the battlefield. (1979, 407)

Longtime network TV news correspondent Marvin Kalb (2009) was kind enough to respond to the author's inquiry about the decline in VVAW coverage. He wrote:

One difference was leadership. In 1971 John Kerry was a prominent leader. He was mainstream opposition, smart, media savvy, brilliant talk before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His glow, which upset the White House profoundly, covered the protesters too. But Kerry left the group in the summer of '71, after he and other leaders argued about tactics and philosophy. He thought they were turning too extreme, too ideological, in some cases too anti-American. When he broke with the group, other moderates followed his example. When the

group arrived at the GOP convention, I don't remember them being as large as you say, but in any case they had lost much of their earlier luster—and relevance. Nixon was pulling troops out of South Vietnam, and he was in the midst of foreign summitry with Russia and China that won him credit and admiration. The VVAW was a kind of sideshow by then. Antiwar demonstrators didn't cut it much anymore.

Peter Zastrow (1984), a Last Patrol participant who later served on the VVAW national board, said, "The press perceived us as becoming too radical and therefore somehow losing credibility." Both Zastrow and John Lindquist (1984), another Last Patrol participant who later served on the VVAW national board, believe that, in retrospect, the FBI infiltration was partially successful in breaking up the southern wing of VVAW. One also should add James Dickerson's (1998, 134) tally of U.S. Army counterintelligence units with code names such as Punch Block, Lantern Spike, Rose Bush, and Steep Hill. He claims those operations had more than fifteen hundred plainclothes agents who would dress in street clothes, sometimes pose as news reporters, and compile files on more than a hundred thousand citizens, mostly for antiwar and civil rights activity. George Moss (2010, 212) notes that during the Vietnam era, the FBI, Secret Service, IRS, Justice Department, and even the CIA—the latter in violation of its charter—all were investigating antiwar organizations and individuals. Scott Camil (2009) believes that after the Gainesville Eight trial, many members quit VVAW because of the large amount of government infiltration and intimidation. Further, with the perception that the war was winding down, fewer people were doing the work of garnering media attention.

In the literature reviews and interviews concerning VVAW activities, it became apparent that the activities were viewed as a threat to the elite initiatives. Initially, the VVAW were the victims of a coordinated and continuous government effort to harass and discredit the organization. The four veterans interviewed for this report all mentioned harassment of VVAW by the FBI, the Committee to Re-Elect the President, and the Justice Department. The trial of The Tallahassee Six, later the Gainesville Eight, was essentially a prolonged device to drain resources and create a negative public image.



1972 VVAW protest outside the Committee to Re-Elect the President offices in New York City.

Photo courtesy of VVAW.

The FBI targeted VVAW in a program of surveillance and disruption of individuals and groups judged to be radical. The targeting often included an agent provocateur pushing the group to illegal acts (Doyle 1977; Gitlin 1980, 186-189). The national VVAW office identified twenty to thirty FBI agents in local chapters; many were women encouraged to befriend members. The most famous was Sarah Jane Moore, the troubled woman who later fired a gun at President Gerald Ford (Zastrow et al. 1997).

The other targets of COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) activity included the Ku Klux Klan, the Black Panther Party, and Jane Fonda. One FBI agent wrote a book of regrets for his role in infiltrating VVAW, stating that VVAW was the protest group most committed to non-violence (Payne 1979, 84).

Another informant, Mary Jo Cook, told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that the FBI advised her to gain the confidence of emotionally unstable members of VVAW by acting as a “big sister” for them. She came to regret what she had done and later testified:

The more I understood and defined VVAW/WSO [Winter Soldier Organization] as a process, the more I became aware that the FBI’s response to this process was inimical. The picture painted for me by the FBI as a group of “crazies” was replaced by my experience of VVAW/WSO as an extended family, a community of people engaged democratically in a self-help program. I became confused and then alarmed that a real involvement in the democratic process was not regarded as a positive thing. I resigned from the FBI in November 1974 certain that VVAW/WSO was a legitimate and valid organization. This resignation was a matter of moral principles and patriotic duty. (Senate Select Committee 1975, 114)

Gary Dotterman (2007) tells how the VVAW eventually figured out “that the FBI had been paying a VVAW coordinator from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Kansas. He would try to provoke violence in the rank and file of the vets,” Dotterman wrote. “He would corner some vet, then talk about a need to collect weapons and train for a rebellion. He spoke to vets about how it might be a good idea to kill a senator and congressman.”

The government's effort to discredit the VVAW was coordinated with the Committee to Re-Elect the President. Both Attorney General John Mitchell and Assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian had moved over to the committee by the time of the Last Patrol. Mardian regularly provided Justice Department Internal Security Division reports on VVAW to James McCord, even after Mardian supposedly had left the Justice Department (Kendrick 1974, 370-71). The threats of violence were somewhat self-fulfilling. FBI informers infiltrated VVAW meetings with the thought of provoking the group into illegal action (Kendrick 1974, 71; Zastrow 1984; Lindquist 1984; Pilisuk 1975). The FBI also planted agents in Flamingo Park and may have been responsible for the six mystery explosions that sent war-weary veterans into a frantic but fruitless search for the bomber (Lindquist 1984; Baxter 1972; Bellows 1972). In fact, VVAW patrols, some of which included recovered drug addicts, caught a few people attempting to sell Quaaludes and heroin to the vets. Miami Beach police released the drug pushers because the pushers were FBI agents (Lindquist 1984).

The VVAW also had reason to suspect people who presented themselves as reporters. Herbert Gans (1979, 272), in compiling his own fieldwork and congressional investigations, concluded that during the era of Vietnam War protests, some news executives allowed CIA agents to view network TV film outtakes and magazine reporter notes. Local television stations also voluntarily supplied film outtakes of antiwar protests to the CIA, FBI, or local police "red squads" to help them identify individual demonstrators. Sheldon Ramsdell (1997b) recalled people who were taking photographs and holding microphones, but recording only when vets were giving their names, addresses, and serial numbers. "We take a picture and escort him off. He would be very upset. It only happened two or three times, but once was enough."

That summer, the federal government had William Lemmer, a shadowy figure apparently sent to prompt VVAW to acts that would discredit the group, as its star witness. The *New York Times* found circumstantial evidence that he had been paid to inform on the VVAW (Kifner 1972d). The local police also had infiltrators Pablo Fernandez and Vincent Hannard trying to prompt the VVAW into some discrediting act. The head of the Miami Police Department's special investigations section, Adam Limkowski, told the press "we were hoping for an overt act necessary to produce a charge of conspiracy." VVAW did not take the bait (Lembcke 1998, 64-65). Watergate operative G. Gordon Liddy even had a plan to use informants to identify the most effective protest spokesmen and kidnap them during the convention to keep them away from television cameras (Dean 1976, 81-87).

With the government's efforts to portray VVAW as a menace to the establishment, it is of no surprise, given the research on media coverage of social movements, that major news organizations adopted a weary and wary attitude toward the group and its efforts. By not highlighting the activities of this group, news coverage was essentially "protecting" the establishment. If any mention was made of VVAW activities, the report generally represented the group as largely passive and inconsequential—a technique often used by the press to minimize the sense of threat posed by a group (Gamson and Wolfsfield 1993; Tichenor, Donahue, and Olien 1980). As seen in the news reports of the VVAW protest in Miami, the veterans were described as "well disciplined" and as "sitting quietly in protest in the sun" (White 1973, 242). The non-threatening characterization clearly comes across.

Past observations regarding media and social movements claim that the only time voices of opposition are heard in the news is when conflict exists among the elite. If members of the elite cannot agree

on a particular policy stance, then the likelihood of seeing divergent views openly expressed in the news increases. By 1972, however, the Vietnam War themes adopted by the nation's elite were that the war was coming to a close and that social protests against the war were in decline. These were themes also adopted by newsrooms across the country.

In 1972, accredited correspondents in Vietnam numbered 295, down from a high of 637 during the Tet Offensive (Knightley 1975, 398, citing Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). The remaining correspondents were told by their editors to approach stories from the angle of the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces. The VVAW's pointing out the reality that a record number of persons in Indochina were being killed, maimed, or made homeless conflicted with the conventional wisdom that the Vietnam War was "winding down" (Knightley 1975, 398; Epstein 1973, 17, 250). The "winding down" theme had been in place at the networks for even longer. In March 1969, the executive producer of the *ABC Evening News*, Av Westin, asked the correspondents to shift focus "from combat pieces to interpretive ones, pegged to the eventual pull-out of American forces." Much the same was happening at NBC. In November 1968, the executive producer told the staff that the story was now the negotiations, not the fighting. Combat footage still was sent for the evening news, but use dropped from three or four times a week to three times in a two-month period (Epstein 1973, 17-18).

A number of factors contributed to this theme of the war "winding down." For instance, during the protest march in Miami Beach, reporters found it easy perhaps to stereotype the VVAW as an insignificant part of a dying cause. In fact, the war protest movement definitely was declining in the summer of 1972. The draft had ended, as had the ground combat role in Vietnam (Kraft 1972). Troop strength in Vietnam was down to 39,000 ("News in Brief" *Los Angeles Times*,

August 21, 1972). Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin had retired from street politics (Associated Press, 1972c). Other activists were busy working on the McGovern campaign.

Furthermore, Miami Beach was far from the center of protest activity and had few local radical groups (Kraft 1972, 23; Dillin 1972b). The original plan had been for a convention in San Diego, but the Nixon Administration eventually turned against that idea because of thousands of antiwar activists in Southern California (Magruder 1974; Dean 1976, 52fn). When only five to ten thousand protesters showed up in Miami Beach, the news story became the decline in protest activity (“Beach Weighs Request” *Miami Herald*, August 2, 1972). The ultraconservative *National Review* seized upon the small protest turnout and declared the protest a flop run by “disreputable drifters and spaced-out types.” *National Review* also chastised Rep. Pete McCloskey for distributing convention passes to a “war protester who seized this opportunity to heckle the President during his acceptance speech” (“Convention Notes” September 15, 1972). Through careful wording, the VVAW presence was not revealed; and Ron Kovic was not described as disabled or as a Vietnam veteran.

Repeatedly, VVAW made attempts to geographically and ideologically separate themselves from other protesters, but journalists chose the course of least resistance and lumped VVAW into the “last gasp of war protest” stories. Ed Fouhy (2009), longtime CBS producer and bureau chief, covered the convention and participated in editorial meetings before the live coverage; he does not recall the vets. He writes, “[T]here are so many demonstrations at political conventions it would have been difficult for the vets to stand out from the background noise at the ’72 GOP gathering in Miami. It may also have been that the police had so isolated demonstrators from the convention goers that I was not aware of their presence.”

Two U.S. magazines complained about press tendencies to arbitrarily categorize VVAW. John Osborne wrote in *New Republic*:

The tragedy for the country, though not for the Nixon people, was that the miscellaneous yippies, fags, dikes and extreme militants who monopolized the news during the first days of the convention obscured the steady discipline of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the main forces of dissent assembled by David Dellinger and Rennie Davis in the Miami Conventions Coalition. Watching the unkempt legions of the outraged and in some instances outrageous young at their work in the streets, I concluded that they were driven to excess by a sense of their own futility. I was torn between admiration for the best of them and regret that they were so effectively assisting the Nixon design. (1972)

Phil Tracy echoed the complaints for *Commonweal*, beginning with praise for the march on Miami Beach High School:

The veteran's protest parade on Monday was an exercise in dignified and justified outrage. The distance between that march and the marauding band of thugs who ran down Collins Avenue Wednesday night, slashing tires, disabling buses, breaking windows and beating up those whose only crime was trying to get home from work on the wrong day is the distance between moral outrage and nascent fascism. The bullies who pushed and shoved a middle-aged couple on their way to vote for Nixon-Agnew were little more than brown shirts in blue denim.

Whatever the causes, whatever atrocities have made them that way, these punks were libidinally linked to the current status quo and mock what the veterans marched for. (1972)

Unfortunately, neither *New Republic* nor *Commonweal* saw fit to redress that imbalance with detailed accounts of the Last Patrol. The two only made passing references to VVAW events. Furthermore, to lessen the threat of the VVAW, instead of disparaging the veterans, as they had done with the other protesters, they portrayed the veterans as passive. They described the veterans as being “dignified” and showing “steady discipline.” In other words, the veterans were safely contained. The novelty of their heretical social movement was gone. They weren’t a story anymore.

One key news expectation also worked against VVAW. With the nominations sewn up and the protest movement in decline, national news organizations went to Miami Beach working under the self-fulfilling prophecy that they would get little news and much hoopla. The *Los Angeles Times* was so moved by the dearth of news from traditional sources that it ran an account headlined “Top Stories Run Gamut as Media Face Slow Day.” The story described what the morning TV news shows and other newspapers were highlighting “in the absence of a major event” (Witcover August 22, 1972). As that report hit the newsstands on the west coast, the vets, fresh from the National Guard confrontation, began the Silent March.

Even the book publishing industry missed the importance of events such as the Last Patrol. For instance, in *The Making of the President 1972*, famed chronicler of presidential elections Theodore H. White failed to include accounts of the Last Patrol. He gives only passing mention to “lean, hard-muscled Vietnam veterans sitting quietly in protest in the sun on the street paving before the

Fontainebleau to protest the war.” This statement is the only reference to Last Patrol, VVAW, or Tallahassee Six that appears in the book.

Melvin Small (1987) cites boredom as the cause of waning media attention. He notes: “After several years of spectacular and unprecedented mass marches and demonstrations, the media became bored. Media inattention was one of the reasons why the antiwar movement came to an apparent halt in 1971.” The near daily and usually predictable activities were unable to sustain journalistic attention (Small 2002, 151; Spencer 2005, 65).

Some thirty thousand Americans had been killed in Vietnam when Nixon entered office. Almost ten thousand more perished during the first year of his presidency and another five thousand in the next three years. The war was drawing to its ignominious close and the eventual grim tally of 57,939 Americans dead or missing in action (Karnow 1984, 2, 601; Kraft 1972). The VVAW clearly wanted to hasten that end. For the first time in American history, thousands of returned veterans were protesting a war still in progress (Lindquist 1984; Davis 2007; MacPherson 2001, 55). Yet, through federal government commission and press omission, the VVAW simply flashed and faded as a news story on network TV and in the nation’s newspapers and magazines.

News coverage of VVAW yields mixed results from what social movement theory would suggest. One could argue that these high-credibility antiwar veterans threatened power elites. Certainly the organization threatened and worried the Nixon Administration, which responded with intense resistance, with actions ranging from legal harassment to manufactured countervailing groups. This lends support to Todd Gitlin’s observation (1980, 24) that an increase in coverage can lead to an increase in resistance in a battle to control and define the images key to the success of protest movements.

Daniel Hallin's point about avoiding cognitive dissonance (for reporters, editors, and for that matter the public) and Warren Breed's (1955) point about social conformity both are borne out repeatedly in historical accounts and in polling data from the era.

The one area where social movement theory clearly was at odds with VVAW news coverage was in the McLeod and Hertog expectation of a violence frame. This difference likely resulted from the VVAW's stress on discipline and restraint, even when engaged in civil disobedience. VVAW avoided even the FBI and police efforts to entice it to violence, a point validated by the verdict in the Gainesville Eight trial. VVAW tried its level best to separate itself from violent or chaotic groups. It largely succeeded in this regard, with the possible exception of the Last Patrol, where it was grouped together in a "last gasp of war protest" frame.

Patricia Hipsher (2007) claimed that heretical social movements must be cast as aberrant. That point generally held true, but only after Nixon loyalists created an alternate group for easy media access. It mattered little that VVAW was much larger than Veterans for a Just Peace. VVAW brought thousands of people to Miami for the Last Patrol, while Veterans for a Just Peace numbered fifty (B. Davis 2007). TV journalists tended to put one "pro" sound bite against one "anti" sound bite and to stop analysis at that point in a superficial act of bogus balance. This journalistic convention made it easier to dismiss VVAW.

After Dewey Canyon III, covering the VVAW made no sense to journalists. The prominent frame was the ending of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The public and the journalists responding to that public were eager to get past the angst the war had generated. Antiwar veterans became a reminder of what the public wished would go away. The press and broadcast reporters saw no need to continue coverage or to find a fresh angle.

This variation in news coverage fits nicely with one of the earliest observations about the limits and flaws of journalism. Walter Lippman (1922) wrote about how journalism was like a spotlight endlessly moving about, moving one development and then another out of darkness and into light. This spotlighting had some beneficial effects but was insufficient to read by or to make informed decisions by, or to build a body of knowledge upon. From the point of view of social movements, major media can be counted on only as a “fleeting friend” at most.

Yet journalistic habit and Nixon Administration subversion alone cannot explain how the VVAW changed both in its internal dynamics and its public face as the 1970s progressed. Bobby Muller, one of the wheelchair-bound vets who heckled Nixon, had some good insights on how things changed and what those changes meant. His activism began early. He was injured in Vietnam in 1969, losing the function of his legs. His hospital ward was the centerpiece of a *Life* magazine cover story, May 22, 1970, about “Our Forgotten Veterans.” Muller became the ward spokesman as other media did follow-up stories. “I stopped shaving,” he said. “I had a beard and long hair. If you’re going to treat me like an animal, all right, I’ll look like one.” Congressional hearings also drew attention to the national scandal (Muller 2007, 209).

VVAW members sought him out; they shared common experiences and promoted a common cause. Though Muller never formally joined VVAW, he did a lot of media appearances for the group, for instance, on Dick Cavett’s and David Susskind’s shows. The operation didn’t require joiners or impose uniformity. Muller stated:

The thing that was beautiful about VVAW is that when we had a protest or we had a rally, you didn’t have to tell guys, “This is what you say.” You didn’t

have to tell them what the party line was. You just say, "Hey, what's your experience brother?" Each guy would tell his story and it was just understood that the war was ridiculous. We never had guys on the other side of that issue. There were a handful, but they were political hacks that had gotten recruited by the right-wing elements (Muller 1997, 210).

For Muller, and likely many others, VVAW was not just an anti-war statement; it was camaraderie, brotherhood, and therapy. Later, the group learned that many of their fellow vets shared their antiwar sentiments but did not feel comfortable expressing their views in the small, rural communities to which they returned. Their mood was more like "I don't want to talk about it. Let's get on with it" (Muller 1997, 210-211).

These operational characteristics that made VVAW credible, sincere, and effective, however, also made long-term sustained news coverage difficult. VVAW members often disagreed on tactics or on who spoke for them (Nicosia 2001, 117, 127; Brinkley 2004, 365; Halstead 1978, 610). Nicosia overstated the case when he blamed post-traumatic stress and quoted Jack Smith about "crazies" who "had taken too much incoming" as the cause of VVAW strife (Nicosia 2001, 117). The group had strong members who had strong opinions about goals and tactics. In the mid-1970s, the differences grew when members of a Marxist-Leninist group, the Revolutionary Union (later renamed the Revolutionary Communist Party) became active in VVAW. By 1978, that tension led to a split where those splinter members created VVAW-AI [Anti-Imperialist] while the larger group carried on with the goals of peace, amnesty, and veterans' care (Nicosia 2001, 312-313; Moser 1996, 127).

Philip Caputo (1977), who later would write a best-selling book on Vietnam, noted that many vets both opposed the war and felt emotionally tied to it. He drifted into the antiwar movement, joined VVAW, and naively believed that his 1970 mailing of his campaign ribbons to Nixon would have an impact. The medals were returned with a curt letter from a staffer. “My grand gesture of personal protest had been futile, as futile as the war itself,” he wrote.

Caputo, like Kovic, went to war with President Kennedy’s call to national service ringing in his ears. Both came from communities that unquestioningly supported their country’s call to war, and both believed they would be playing “cop” to communist “robbers” in an honorable fight. Both would write of their world of growing disillusion, a world of naïve but good young men sanctioned to kill, to build body counts. These men sank to a brutish state in a hostile country, facing a relentless enemy in an increasingly nonsensical mission (Martin 1993). It is no wonder that so many veterans became silent, haunted. This silence made interviewing difficult even for reporters who bucked the mediated “war winding down” theme and the later “let’s not talk Vietnam; it’s too painful” attitude.

VVAW merits only one paragraph in Robert Mann’s tome about Vietnam, *A Grand Delusion* (2001, 680), and most of that mention concentrates on the “gaunt, fatigues-clad” Kerry testifying to a congressional committee. A vet like Kerry was an easier “sell” to newsrooms and to a public dubious about the war but despising long-haired protesters. Kalb’s (2009) lauding of Kerry’s leadership shows how well Kerry played in newsrooms. The *Newsweek* coverage of Dewey Canyon contained a picture of Kerry with praise for both his heroic background and nonviolent protest technique.



*CLICK TO LISTEN*

Democracy Now: John Kerry in 2004 and during his 1971 senate testimony against the Vietnam War. Courtesy of Pacifica Radio Archives. Available from the Internet Archive at [archive.org](http://archive.org).

Journalists were attracted to Kerry as VVAW spokesman because of more than just his role as one member of the six-man executive committee at the time of Dewey Canyon III, his leadership skills, or even his speaking ability. Kerry, the patrician scion of a wealthy Boston family, volunteered for the Navy and for hazardous duty despite his reservations about the war. He was not some grungy, working-class draftee who turned against the war, grew his hair long, and might have seemed menacing to middle America, or at least middle- and upper-class America. Further, as Herbert Gans (1979, 58, 127) found when he studied network news and two news magazines, journalists from these elite media outlets tend to have trouble crossing social barriers to find new sources. They rely on a small set of peers, friends, relatives, other media, and elite sources. Thus, disorders in affluent areas or elite institutions are more likely to receive coverage than disorders happening elsewhere.

Television reporters of the time seem to have decided that American viewers were not ready to listen to the angry voices of their own frustrated working-class warriors but that they would accept carefully crafted words from a young man who could be an unthreatening guest at any dinner table. The irony is that, during this time, the working class who supplied the U.S. soldiers for the Vietnam War relied on TV news more than on other sources and used the medium more than the upper and middle classes did (Szymanski 1983, 334).

In the days following John Forbes Kerry's testimony before Congress, he became a "media darling, and thus a bane of the Nixon Administration" (Brinkley 2004, 379). Articles about him appeared in *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. An Associated Press profile of Kerry appeared in more than a hundred newspapers. A *Boston Globe* reporter, Barbara Rabinovitz, visited his Waltham home and found their conversation interrupted by phone calls, television tapings, and quick gulps of ginger ale and chocolate chip cookies. She noted that Kerry had put away the fatigues worn during Dewey Canyon III and was wearing "sports glen-plaid pants, wide orange and blue ties, and a blue shirt with the monogram 'JFK.'" A few weeks later, Morley Safer filmed a profile piece for *60 Minutes*. Safer was impressed by Kerry's thoughtful reflections and range of interests. "I was knocked out," Safer recalled, "I never heard somebody so articulate during all my days covering Vietnam" (Brinkley 2004, 379). The *60 Minutes* broadcast set off a second wave of mediated interest (Brinkley 2004, 381).

Of course, there are several inherent problems in having a one-man Rolodex for antiwar veterans. Kerry quickly became the focus of personal attacks from the other side. White House tapes verify that on April 28, 1971, President Nixon and aide Charles Colson had a phone conversation about the twenty-seven-year-old veteran who had turned against the war. They derided him as a phony and even exchanged some false information about where he slept during Dewey Canyon. Colson then wrote a secret memo about the need to "[d]estroy the young demagogue before he becomes another Ralph Nader" (Brinkley 2004, 378). The media attention to Kerry also magnified real differences and petty jealousies with other VVAW members. Kerry stuck with the group through the summer of 1971, but when he parted ways with VVAW, yet another factor was in place for the dramatic decline in coverage by the time of the Last Patrol.

### *Highlights*

News treatment of VVAW generally followed the patterns suggested by various authors describing social movements and news media.

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One notable exception was the notion that VVAW attention rose in response to fragmented elite consensus. Public opinion data show a breakdown of consensus about the war long before the media discovered VVAW. Furthermore, the greatest war opposition came from lower, not upper, classes.

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The war itself grew increasingly unpopular over time, but public disapproval of antiwar protesters remained fairly high and steady throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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Declining coverage can be explained by many factors: excessive news reliance on Kerry (who by 1972 had left VVAW), disagreements within the organization, an extensive government effort to discredit VVAW, and a news tendency to think “we’ve done our antiwar veterans story.”