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Vietnam: A War with Two Fronts

Abstract

The Vietnam War is viewed by many historians as a turning point in American war memory. Never before had there been such an outstanding opposition to a military endeavor by the United States' own citizens, government officials, soldiers, and veterans. Drawing from the first hand accounts of PFC Steven Warner and the work of numerous historians, this paper offers an examination into the ways in which some high profile events of the Vietnam War (such as the Cambodia Campaign and the Kent State Shootings) created an environment that negatively impacted United States soldiers and veterans of the Vietnam War.

Keywords

Vietnam War, Cambodia Campaign, Vietnam Protests, Kent State, Vietnam Veterans

Disciplines

Asian History | Military History | United States History

Comments

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Vietnam: A War with Two Fronts

To many, the Vietnam War is America's greatest mistake. Plagued by controversy over the actions of the U.S. government and military, it was a time of trials and tribulations for the nation that redefined its status on both a domestic and global scale. Such a shift is captured by terms such as the "Vietnam Syndrome," which refers to the emerging post-war public opinion that stressed avoidance of overseas military conflicts. This new foreign policy outlook contrasted heavily with the pre-war mentality of the United States' duty to suppress Communism.¹ As Samuel Hynes puts it, the Vietnam War was a "lesson in political unwisdom" that "lingers in American minds like the memory of an illness."² This "illness" infected the hearts and minds of American citizens and divided them in ways that had not been seen since the American Civil War.³ On one side were those who believed that the war was necessary given America's duty to protect democracy from the oppressive nature of Communism.⁴ On the other were the anti-war protesters who generally believed that the nature of U.S. behavior in Vietnam undermined the nation's values, notably peace and national unity.⁵ The anti-war movement was characterized by

¹ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* (Amherst, MA; University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 23.

² Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* (New York, NY; Penguin Books, 1997), 177.

³ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 256.

⁴ Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 200.

⁵ Thomas J. Knock, "'Come Home, America': The Story of George McGovern," in *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: The Politics of Descent*, ed. Randal B. Woods (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108.

a wide range of demonstrations, yet they most notably consisted of protests by younger generations on college campuses. Richard Helms, former director of the CIA during the second world-war, states that the nature of these protests was “particularly” effective in strengthening public sentiment against the war effort, therefore heavily swaying government policy.⁶

Therefore, it is appropriate to determine that had the United States sought to be more forthcoming with its citizens and behave in ways that maintained public support, it would not have experienced a division on the scale that had occurred. This view is shared by Robert S. McNamara, former U.S. Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, who artfully states that “a nation’s deepest strength lies not in its military prowess but, rather, in the unity of its people. We [the United States] failed to maintain it.”⁷ It is important to note that this division created an environment that not only impacted United States citizens but also shaped the experiences of United States soldiers. In conjunction with a wide range of scholarly research, the experiences of one individual, PFC Stephen H. Warner, show just how soldiers were impacted by both the United States conduct and the anti-war movement. As such, I will argue that the tumultuous aspects of the United States’ behavior during the Vietnam War, and the subsequent emergence of a strong domestic anti-war movement, undermined the sacrifices and efforts of U.S. soldiers and Veterans of the Vietnam War.

Warner, born in 1946, attended Gettysburg College as a member of the class of 1968 and was a student at Yale Law school for the 1969 academic year before being drafted for the war in Vietnam. Warner served in Vietnam from March of 1970 until his death during a Viet Cong

⁶ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America’s Battle over Vietnam* (Oakland, CA; The Regents of the University of California, 1994), 254.

⁷ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York City, NY; Times Books, 1995), 322-323.

ambush during a field operation along the Laotian border on February 14th, 1971.⁸ Although widely different from that of the average U.S. soldier in Vietnam, Warner's experience offers a unique perspective of the war and shows how its nature directly affected the soldiers he came in contact with.

There are many aspects of Warner's experience in the Vietnam War that differentiated him from other soldiers, the main one being his military occupation. Warner was assigned to work in the Public Information section of the Information Offices of the USARV (United States Army Vietnam) headquarters in Long Binh, Vietnam. The primary role of his position, in his own words, was "to get out a daily press sheet on what has happened in the war during the last 24 hours."⁹ In addition to this, Warner was also tasked with authoring press releases detailing military activity and progress in Vietnam as well as issuing what he called "home towners": short features on specific soldiers that were sent to be published in their hometown newspapers.¹⁰ As such, Warner's job demanded that he travel around Vietnam to observe and interview soldiers and commanders to accumulate material for the stories his office was responsible for generating. This freedom of movement allowed Warner to observe the war from multiple perspectives, both alongside soldiers in the field and back behind the front lines in bases with higher-ranked officers.¹¹ Due to the fact that he was a strict pacifist, Warner was opposed to and swore against the use of firearms: "I'm going to do my best never to fire one over here except on a range when some dumb CO has ordered us to test our weapon."¹²

⁸ Joseph Tucker, "Guide to the Stephen H. Warner Collection," <https://www.gettysburg.edu/dotAsset/cb040ebd-2cad-4b32-85f3-f6b148de83e4.pdf>, (2004).

⁹ Letter from Warner to family, 3 April 1970, Box 1, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

¹⁰ Letter from Warner to family, 31 July 1970, Box 1

¹¹ Warner's field notes, 4 July 1970, Box 1

¹² Warner's field notes, 4 July 1970, Box 1

The most important aspect of Warner's point of view was his opposition to the war and lack of appreciation for authority and the U.S. Government. In his letters to his family, Warner openly expressed his frustrations with the war, conduct of the U.S. Government, and events on the homefront. His passion is seen in his response to one such event: the May 4, 1970 Kent State Shootings during which Ohio State National Guardsmen opened fire on a peaceful students' protest of the Vietnam War, killing four and wounding nine.¹³ During his career as a student, Warner focused heavily on civil rights and social justice, two interests that heavily influenced his outlook in the war.¹⁴ This explains why Warner identified heavily with the student protests, as he believed that the violence exhibited by the guardsmen and the support for such means of deterrence by the U.S. Government were inexcusable. He criticized America for allowing such violence on the homefront and in Vietnam itself: "When will America wake up that this war is tearing out our very soul? Raising bitterness and hate which can't help but linger long after the killing has stopped and only the maimed in body and mind remain."¹⁵ During this time, the U.S. was also involved in the Cambodian Campaign, in which forces mobilized with the goal of eliminating the communist forces of the North Vietnamese Army that had chosen to heavily establish themselves in this neutral area of eastern Cambodia bordering South Vietnam.¹⁶ Warner opposed the entirety of the campaign imposed by "stupid asses" in Washington on the grounds that it was a "cynical violation of very known norm of International Relations" that

¹³ History.com Editors, "Kent State Shooting," <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/kent-state-shooting>, (November 2, 2018).

¹⁴ Joseph Tucker, "Guide to the Stephen H. Warner Collection," <https://www.gettysburg.edu/dotAsset/cb040ebd-2cad-4b32-85f3-f6b148de83e4.pdf>, (2004).

¹⁵ Letter from Warner to family, 6 May 1970, Box 1

¹⁶ History.com Editors, "Nixon approves Cambodian incursion," <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nixon-approves-cambodian-incursion>, (August 21, 2018).

violated the Geneva Accords and served only to prolong the war through the inspiration of further aggression by communist forces.¹⁷

So what might Warner's incredibly unique experience have to say about U.S. soldiers' experiences in Vietnam? Interestingly enough, the polarizing characteristics of Warner's attitude and experience in Vietnam did not prevent him from forming close relationships with the soldiers he observed in the field. Instead, it was through these close relationships that Warner was able to witness the ways in which the war's controversies affected the soldiers around him, both through their attitudes and their treatment. In his response to the Kent State Massacre, as mentioned previously, Warner states that he, his fellows in the information office, and the soldiers he was in contact with were "totally and literally sick at the mess in Cambodia, not to mention the problems of back home of which the Kent College massacre is the most blatant example."¹⁸ This shows that the soldiers surrounding Warner were deeply aware of the developments on the homefront and were therefore heavily affected by them.

Furthermore, Warner was a vehement defender of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam who were exposed to heavy scrutiny by the American public. Warner's longest field observation occurred during the June of 1970, when he spent twenty days in Cambodia with men of the 5th Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment of Alpha Company. He made many friendships within this group, recollecting that "you make good friends fast out in the woods."¹⁹ When he was back at camp with these men after being in the field with them, he observed them and expressed his anger at the ways in which the soldiers were viewed by the public:

¹⁷ Letter from Warner to family, 6 May 1970, Box 1

¹⁸ Letter from Warner to family, 6 May 1970, Box 1

¹⁹ Warner's field notes, 4 July 1970, Box 1

That's one of the problems: most people only see and only think of grunts in mass - and that's not the way to see or appreciate any human being. Take a grunt (...) and look at him, talk with him as a unique individual and you'll find (...) a person with all the groovy things which make up a person in NYC or St. Augustine, or Clarksville Tenn. It's just that dirt and uniform and the image of "trained to be a killer" that makes you forget about the rest.²⁰

It is clear that, while Warner was very much against the war, he cared incredibly deeply for the soldiers that fight in them. During his time in Cambodia, Warner discovered the work of a well-known WWII correspondent named Ernie Pyle. Instantly inspired, he chose Pyle as a "model" of the kind of work he wished to create. Identifying heavily with a quote straight from inside the cover of a book detailing Pyle's work: "He hates war, but loves the men who have to fight them," Warner exclaimed: "That about sums me up too!"²¹ Despite the heavy censorship put on his work by commanding officers, Warner was still able to draw comfort from his procurement of home town features. He recognized these as a compromise between his need to represent the true nature of the war and the U.S. Army's need to maintain a positive image because the soldiers "appreciate it, it makes me feel good and it makes big statistics for the Army, so everyone is happy."²² Also, even though they received many alterations by the Army before their publication, Warner believed that the press releases he authored provided many details of the soldiers' activities in ways that represented the positive implications of their actions and the camaraderie present in the field, two aspects of the war that Warner valued highly.

²⁰ Warner's field notes, 4 July 1970, Box 1

²¹ Letter from Warner to family, 2 July 1970, Box 1

²² Letter from Warner to family, 31 July 1970, Box 1

Evidently, Warner was an individual who cared deeply about the soldiers by which he was surrounded. Although he was anti-war and disagreed with the United States' war aims and conduct in Vietnam, he consistently put the interests of the American soldiers first and sought to use his position to represent them in ways that expose their humanity in the face of heavy scrutiny. His collection not only addresses some of the controversy surrounding the United States' conduct during the Vietnam War, but it also shows the ways in which these issues, along with public opinion about the war, directly affected the morale of the United States soldiers in Vietnam.

This collection provides a first hand account to the ways in which American soldiers were heavily affected by both domestic and foreign conflicts during the Vietnam War, and it alludes to the presence of this dynamic on a much larger scale. Many historians have explored these controversies in depth, and there are a wide range of opinions. First, I will introduce the debate upon the legality of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Second, I will present the ways in which the behaviors of the U.S. government created an environment that negatively impacted U.S. soldiers and veterans of the Vietnam War alike.

Even since the beginning of the Vietnam War there has been massive debate on the legality of the United States' conduct in the Southeast Asian theater. A popular example of a U.S. operation that immediately fell under scrutiny was the Cambodian Campaign. There are those whose work seeks to contradict such negative interpretations by offering a more favorable account of the United States' conduct. John M. Shaw supports the decision of the Nixon administration, arguing that the Cambodian Campaign was "militarily necessary," "well conducted," and entirely justified given the minimization of American casualties, a path of

reasoning akin to that which led to the dropping of the atomic bombs by the United States in World War II.²³ Further supporting this standpoint are partner historians James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi. They argue that the United States, under Nixon, acted accordingly and with vindication considering the fact that Cambodian neutrality had already been violated by the North Vietnamese once they began to utilize the Cambodian border areas for bases while operating in South Vietnam.²⁴

However, many historians support Warner's view that the Cambodian Campaign was fundamentally wrong in that it violated international law. Many historians agree with this perspective, notably Richard A. Falk, who, from very early on in the history of the war, began studying the international law surrounding the Vietnam War conflicts. In his third and fourth volumes of his collection titled *The Vietnam War and International Law*, Falk maintains that the Cambodian Campaign was an open violation of the promises to refrain from the "renewal of aggression" in Indochina made by the United States in their ratification of the Geneva Accords of 1954.²⁵ Likewise, historian Tom Wells highlights the negative implications of the Cambodian Campaign, citing the initial reaction of Washington officials, including the resignation of three of the Nixon administration's top military advisors as well as the proceeding public outcry characterized by student demonstrations at colleges across the United States.²⁶

In addition to unlawful operations such as the Cambodian Campaign, there are many instances of U.S. war crimes that further discredit the U.S. involvement in the war. Anthony

²³ John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign* (Lawrence, KS; University Press of Kansas, 2005), 153-56.

²⁴ James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi, *Dirty Little Secrets of the Vietnam War* (New York City, NY; St. Martin's Press, 1999), 186-87.

²⁵ Richard A. Falk, *The Vietnam War and International Law*, Volume 3: The Widening Context; Volume 4: The Concluding Phase (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972; 1976), 63; 44.

²⁶ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Oakland, CA; The Regents of the University of California, 1994), 419-21.

D'Amato, Harvey Gould, and Larry Woods provide an extensive review of the war crimes committed by the United States' armed forces using available evidence. The study cites heavy U.S. bombing of non-military targets, mistreatment of POWs, and use of tear and riot control gases. Specifically, the use of tear and riot control gases, which, according to a Canadian doctor working in Vietnam, resulted in ten and ninety percent mortality rates for Vietnamese adults and children, respectively, were open violations to the Geneva Accords of 1925 of which the United States formally recognized in 1943 under President Roosevelt.²⁷

Aside from the Cambodian Campaign and U.S. war crimes, both of which are prime examples for events in which the United States' conduct was illegal, there are those who argue that the entirety of American involvement in the Vietnam War was unnecessary and an example of the government's gross abuse of power. Robert S. McNamara, former U.S. Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B Johnson, expresses regret in his role in the escalation of United States conflict in the Southeast Asian theater while emphasizing lessons that can be learned from American blunders. One of his strongest opinions is that the Vietnam War was unsuccessful in hindering the progression of the Soviets and Chinese in the 60's and 70's. This leads McNamara to make the conclusion that the war itself, and therefore the sacrifices of its American veterans, were unnecessary.²⁸

Ultimately, there are historians that consider the effects of not only governmental misconduct but also public behavior and opinion upon soldiers and veterans of the Vietnam War. West Point graduate and Vietnam War veteran, Gil Dorland interviewed Tom Hayden, an ardent

²⁷ Anthony A. D'Amato, Harvey L. Gould, and Larry D. Woods, *War Crimes and Vietnam: The 'Nuremberg Defense' and the Military Service Register* (Berkeley, CA; California Law Review, 1969), 1092-1094.

²⁸ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York City, NY; Times Books, 1995), 319-23.

opponent of the civil war who had travelled twice to Hanoi. The interview shows the ways in which the anti-war movement affected the soldiers in Vietnam. Although opposed to the war, Hayden sympathized with the soldiers he met and admitted that he was fully aware that the anti-war movement was negatively affecting the willingness of the soldiers to fulfill their duty in Vietnam.²⁹ Patrick Hagopian characterizes the experiences of veterans as they attempt to come to terms with their experiences, pointing out that many believed they had to fight for recognition and were faced with what he calls a wrongful degree of scrutiny upon their return home. Even upon the completion of the Vietnam War Memorial, many veterans were angered by the fact that “the country took so long to honor those who served in Vietnam.”³⁰ James E. Westheider details the accounts of returning soldiers that were met with harassment by both supporters and detractors of the war, leading to widespread feelings of unappreciation among returnees.³¹ Michael H. Hunt describes the ways in which soldiers expressed great pride and enthusiasm at the onset of the Vietnam War yet became increasingly frustrated as time went on. Their frustration, Hunt says, was largely due to the contrast of the “growing protest at home” with the popular support experienced by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong by the local populace.³²

It is apparent that the unacceptable, illegal, and divisive behaviors of the United States government during the Vietnam War created an environment, characterized by a strong, ruthless, and very influential anti-war movement, that negatively impacted U.S. soldiers and veterans. As the Vietnam War raged on, U.S. soldiers became increasingly disillusioned as a result of the

²⁹ Gil Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era* (London, UK; Brassey's, 2001), 78-79.

³⁰ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* (Amherst, MA; University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 141.

³¹ James E. Westheider, *The Vietnam War* (Westport, CT; Greenwood Press, 2007), 160-61.

³² Michael H. Hunt, *The Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (Chapel Hill, NC; University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 126.

anti-war movement that was fueled by government misconduct. As Samuel Hynes put it, the American soldier in Vietnam had not one, but “*two* enemies,” and oftentimes the one they hated the most was “the one back home, in his own country.”³³ Not only were the soldiers negatively impacted during the war, but they were met with a hostile and unsupportive environment upon their return home that left them with the daunting task of finding meaning in their sacrifices. In these ways, U.S. soldiers of the Vietnam War effectively traded one front for another.

³³ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* (New York, NY; Penguin Books, 1997), 181.

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