

*Possible MODERATOR INTRO:*

*Alex Primm testified at the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit in 1970, participated in the Manhattan planning meeting for the spring, 1971, week-long protest in the Capitol known as Dewey Canyon III and served as a Midwest co-coordinator VVAW for a year. He lives near Rolla, Missouri, where he operates the Oral History of the Ozarks Project and teaches international relations at East Central College. The title of his paper has change from what is in the program to*

**Deconstructing the Anti-Kerry Campaign:**

An overview of operations against  
Vietnam Veterans Against the War nationally and locally.

*He will focus two books of the 2004 campaign, Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War by Douglas Brinkley, and Unfit for Command, Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry by John O'Neill and Jerome Corse.*

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The change in focus for this paper came about rather quickly when I realized there was no way to read, much less analyze, the perhaps several score of books that dealt with the Vietnam War in the last election. The only thing which may compare with this vitriolic flood may be two 19<sup>th</sup> Century American campaigns: John Quincy Adams' attacks on Andrew Jackson in 1828 for alleged adultery; second, Grover Cleveland's problems with courtship during the election of 1884.

Their malevolence make these scurrilous tactics of the 19th Century similar to our 2004 election. But in these previous mud-slinging campaigns, the candidates had been hurling invective at each other many months before Election Day. The Swift Boat veterans' attacks on John Kerry came out of the blue only few months before Election Day '04. A 30-year-plus history of mistruths surrounding the Vietnam War helped create a charged election season, as we shall see.

This morning we'll look at a few attacks in the book Unfit for Command on the Vietnam Veterans Against the War when John Kerry was involved. Also I'll examine one Midwestern chapter of that organization. Are the Swift Boaters right in calling VVAW of no value?

As many veterans must have been, I was apprehensive when the Democratic nominee decided to make his service in Vietnam a key part of his campaign. This war has always been divisive. Wouldn't focus on other issues, such as the on-going war in Iraq, be

more relevant? However when Douglas Brinkley's biography, Tour of Duty, was released last spring, I felt the Kerry campaign may have wisely selected his military service as the key narrative in defining the candidate. Though I thought the book somewhat rambly, it attempted to be reasonably objective. Maybe Kerry could resolve differences over this old conflict as he and Sen. John McCain had confronted MIAs in Vietnam.

Brinkley's book was overshadowed during the campaign as more strident political books on both left and right dominated. Literary warfare went bonkers. The most effective of these campaign tracts was Unfit for Command, Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry. The Swifts most serious charge against John Kerry may be on page 108: "Senator Kerry refuses to consider that his testimony caused more deaths and prolonged the war in Vietnam by undermining support at home and contributing directly to a Vietnamese Communist victory."

Referring to Kerry's famous speech of April 1971 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Swifts imply widespread support for the war. In fact backing for the war had been steadily declining for at least three years at this time. One of the strongest anti-war statements of this period came a year and three-quarters before Kerry's address by Life magazine, hardly a radical publication. The June 27, 1969, issue devoted 12 pages to photographs of the 242 Americans killed in Vietnam during the last week of May, the week of Memorial Day, 1969. These 242 deaths were an average weekly loss for the United States during this period. More than 20,000 additional Americans were to die in Vietnam after that special

issue in Life magazine appeared. What purpose did these deaths serve?

Blaming veterans who for the first time in history opposed their own war for its very continuation makes as much sense as attacking trees for causing lung cancer or walkers for highway fatalities. But political arguments are rarely about reason. This is what makes Unfit for Command so toxic. Its arguments rely on half-truths and attacks on anyone who questioned the wisdom of American policies at any level. By contrast, Brinkley's biography shows how John Kerry gradually turned against the Vietnam War. Such ambivalence about this conflict typifies what many, in the military and out of uniform, felt during America's three decades of involvement and especially at the height of combat in the late 1960s.

For most who joined VVAW, it was not an easy decision. Over its most active years, the group was diverse across the nation. There was little to gain from becoming a member. Unfit for Command makes the decision to join into something casual:

In 1970, joining the VVAW took little more effort than just showing up. Anyone with a beard, scraggly uniform, and enough make-do information about the military and Vietnam—information readily available in a bar or a library—could become a full-fledged member.” (p. 114)

This hardly describes the membership process. Veterans were reluctant to join the organization as most who had been released from service and were questioning their service in the conflict had enough of organizations at any level. They wanted to be left alone to adjust to the new world of being a civilian. Many anti-war veterans

may have looked scraggly, but their consciences were far from inactive. Joining the organization, when our St.Louis chapter was most active, demanded total openness because most of us were starting out in careers and thus had time free from studies or marginal jobs. So we came to know one another in the process of planning protests, which took many creative forms, ranging from developing a housing program for vets to throwing bags of our own blood onto a military facility to protest the Christmas bombing of Hanoi.

The Swift Boaters also attack VVAW for 'demonizing' American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. (p. 116) Nothing could be further from the truth. Our argument focused on government policies, not finding fault with fellow veterans. We were saying the emperor was not only naked, he was criminal.

Just as VVAW nationally sponsored the Winter Soldier Investigation in 1971, our St. Louis chapter sponsored a similar local inquiry into the war that April. Some 20 vets testified. One of the most memorable was an Army lieutenant who compared his service in Operation Phoenix to 'neutralize' Viet Cong infrastructure to Nazi policies. This young officer went on to serve in George H.W. Bush's justice department. Three other law students in our VVAW chapter have continued in legal public service.

Was our VVAW chapter unique in being composed of several hundred young veterans, officers and enlisted men from all walks of life, who could unify around one basic principle: that American troops should be withdrawn as quickly as possible from Southeast Asia? Some of us were more conservative, believing the war should have been carried out more aggressively; most felt that the war was

immoral and would never be won no matter what. Usually checking with police before any actions, we developed an understanding with the St. Louis Red Squad out of their respect for our openness as veterans. Mostly it was a profoundly local organization led by a core that rarely contacted chapters in Arkansas, Chicago, Kansas City or the East Coast. Long distance was expensive back then. In general VVAW in the American Heartland was a healthy and rapidly growing organization in the early 1970s: no wonder the Nixon Administration sought to destabilize us with infiltrators. Not only was VVAW a rapidly growing organization, our military in Vietnam was losing its ability to fight. Thus VVAW was targeted as an enemy. The Swift Boaters used similar half-truths successfully last fall.

What made our chapter most effective was neither the dozen or so vets we sent to Washington D.C. to protest as part of Dewey Canyon III in spring 1971, nor the several dozen who returned their medals and commissions as officers to the government at a similar protest later that year in St. Louis. What made this VVAW chapter most significant were the human bonds between young men filled with anger at their best years wasted in failed foreign adventures. We inspired a certain idealism and hope in each other because we knew we were survivors of terrible tragedy. We bonded as we had with fellow soldiers in Vietnam, and didn't worry that much about personal political ideologies. We gave new life to ourselves, to the peace movement nationally and to Congress to oppose executive corruption by our determination to speak truth to power. This is the ultimate value of VVAW, its moral witness to American foreign policy.

One time a young vet visited our on-going irregular weekly meeting in St. Louis. He was discouraged, out of work and maybe strung out on drugs. We learned later he killed himself shortly after that. It was a terrible feeling for all of us. But it only strengthened our resolve and drew us tighter together. We knew the effects of hate and extremism all too well. We ourselves were the only people we could fully trust. No one outside of our group understood our rage at the betrayal of American ideals and useless deaths we had witnessed. Trust in America was the ultimate victim of the war in Vietnam.

Larry Sabato and Glenn Simpson also wrote about the death of trust in America in their classic examination of recent elections, [Dirty Little Secrets: The Persistence of Corruption in American Politics](#). It reports a 1964 survey found 76 percent of respondents trusting the federal government to do what is right most of the time. Thirty years later that figure had fallen to 19 percent.

The lies that supported the Vietnam War killed trust in America. These same lies were carried forward into the 2004 campaign. The lies of the past killed off discussion of current issues. Thus the war in Vietnam continues to cast its pall over the war in Iraq and all of us.

John Kerry asked Congress in 1971 who will be the last person to die in Vietnam. The recent election makes clear that not only is truth the first casualty in war, truth is a continuing casualty of combat. It is almost as if the word 'reconciliation' has been stricken from the language.