

After Vietnam: Resistance Continues

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Review: *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veteran Movement* by Gerry Nicosia (N.Y., Crown, 2001) 688 pages, \$30 hardcover.

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SERVICE IN THE United States military was an honorable calling before the Vietnam war deflated that robust patriotic tradition. Young men routinely volunteered or accepted being drafted, seeing an opportunity to defend what was called the “American way of life.” Veterans from the First and Second World War, as well as Korea, returned home to suffer in silence. Unless their wartime mental wounds flared into acts of violence, their injuries were seldom acknowledged.

As a boy, I lived near a World War II vet who’d flown many combat missions. It was common knowledge in our neighborhood that he often awoke screaming from violent nightmares. Although still young, he could be seen pattering around in his pajamas during the day, a stiff drink never far from his side. When he died a few years later, I don’t recall anyone describing him as a casualty of war.

Veterans of these wars who chose to acknowledge their military experience generally did so by participating in one of the conservative veterans groups such as the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars. As it did to many other things, Vietnam changed all that.

Gerry Nicosia’s ambitious book attempts to explain why veterans of America’s longest war chose to publicize their grievances and what that meant to them and to the rest of American society. He begins his narrative by describing their antiwar protests and war crimes inquiries while the war still raged.

He then proceeds to their postwar struggles to hold the government accountable for injuries caused by post-traumatic stress and from the toxic effects of the herbicide Agent Orange.

Careless With Facts

Regrettably, Nicosia is a careless historian. I was directly involved in organizing Vietnam vets to testify about war crimes policies employed in Vietnam, and he gets important parts of that story

wrong.

For instance, he barely mentions the important ad hoc Congressional hearings which heard veterans' testimony and he mistakenly assigns the huckster Mark Lane a key role in those hearings. It's a similar story with the Agent Orange issue, in which I also played an active role.

Many of these errors could have been corrected by simple fact checking. One would think that Nicosia had time to do this in the twelve-year interval from the time he conducted his interviews and when the book was published.

The book is based on over 1,000 hours of taped interviews. Perhaps this explains why the book is dense with anecdotal detail but short on political analysis. Nicosia relegates most of his analysis to the Prologue and Afterward. The reader looks in vain for a summing up, the overall perspective that makes sense of a mass of historical detail. Why, for example, did Vietnam vets respond differently than those who fought in Korea?

Nicosia may also have revealed more than he intended about his politics when he criticized Bertrand Russell, the sponsor of a war crimes inquiry in Europe, for sending the following to President Johnson; "Within living memory only the Nazis have exceeded in brutality the war waged by your administration against the people of Vietnam . . ."

Rise and Decline of VVAW

Despite these flaws, the book has definite strengths and is well worth reading. Nicosia's description of the rise of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) from a small band of angry vets to a national organization with perhaps 25,000 members and dozens of chapters is well done.

Early on, VVAW borrowed a tactic of the Depression-era Bonus Marchers by mobilizing encampments in Washington, D.C. where vets clad in their combat gear won broad public support and strong media interest. One of the most powerful such events was "Dewey Canyon" near the Capitol building in April 1971, where hundreds of combat vets threw back their medals to protest Nixon's continuation of the war, despite his promises to end it.

The organization's presence on the national stage however, was short lived. Its last hurrah was slightly more than a year later when VVAW mobilized a confrontation with Nixon backers during the GOP national convention in Miami. Part of this story was later told in the film "Born on the 4th of July," which was based on the autobiography of veteran paraplegic Ron Kovic.

Nicosia captures some of the surreal quality of that event as vets in combat garb joined Yippies, Zippies, and plain old "acid freaks" in a challenge to Tricky Dick and his stonefaced, dark-suited cabal in the tropical streets of Miami Beach. He reports that the protests ended with a full-scale police riot during which over a thousand demonstrators were beaten and then dragged off to jail.

Nicosia's account of VVAW's demise as a dynamic coalition of grassroots vets, when it split into various political factions, makes for depressing if familiar reading. A toxic stew of inexperience, combat stress and ultraleft sectarianism combined to divide the organization into various factions of "revolutionaries," "reformers" and the like.

The author reports that this craziness reached a point where a vet's proposal to assassinate reactionary Congressmen was seriously discussed by VVAW's leadership. The vet reasoned that since the CIA's Phoenix program was murdering thousands of Vietnamese civilians suspected of

being Viet Cong sympathizers, our pro-war leaders deserved a taste of their own medicine.

Nothing came of this proposal, although eight VVAW leaders were later tried and acquitted in a Florida federal court on charges of conspiracy to riot during the GOP convention in Miami.

Eventually, the splits would leave VVAW without a mass base. When the faction which took charge of the national office ultimately declared their loyalty to Bob Avakian and the Revolutionary Communist Party(!) it was the death knell for what had been a vibrant, promising organization.

The book also provides an exhaustive (if not to say exhausting) account of the veterans' fifteen-year struggle with the Veterans Administration to win treatment and disability for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. One respected study found that at least 15% of all combat vets suffered from "serious" PTSD.

A Movement Shortchanged

Nicosia makes some puzzling editorial choices. Nearly all references to the concurrent GI movement are omitted, yet he devotes about forty pages to the manic escapades of disabled vet Ron Kovic, only to conclude that he was too egocentric and tormented to be an effective leader. (I can fully agree with his conclusion, having once spent an exhausting afternoon in Ron's company.)

As noted, the book's biggest shortcoming is its failure to report on the GI movement. The GIs who led the GI coffeehouses/bookstores outside U.S. military bases were often battle-hardened Vietnam vets whose antiwar views were formed while "walking point" in the jungles of Vietnam.

In his preface, Nicosia explains that his publishers insisted on cutting virtually everything about this movement. Yet given the gobs of extraneous detail that made it into print, I wondered why he couldn't bargain to save at least some of this essential material.

For me, the self-organizing of tens of thousands of active duty GIs while the war raged around them is one of the most inspiring and important aspects of the antiwar movement. Dave Cortright's early *Soldiers in Revolt* (1975) tells some of this story, but the book is long out of print.

In 1972, while defending a Marine Vietnam vet who had deserted, I spent time at the GI coffeehouse and bookstore near Camp LeJeune, N.C., the principal Marine Corps base for the eastern United States. I was impressed by the militance of the active duty Marines who staffed the project and by the support they enjoyed from other Marines on the base.

This scene was repeated at many other large military bases in the United States, Europe and Okinawa. We later learned that this political movement struck fear into the hearts of the Pentagon command. One Army general, S.L.A. Marshall wrote an influential article in which he described this phenomenon as the "death of the army." I would argue that a central concern of the U.S. military since Vietnam has been how to stifle or kill off this legacy of resistance.

Indicting Agent Orange Makers

Nicosia presents one of the first published accounts of the long and ultimately unsuccessful struggle to hold the herbicide manufacturers responsible for the injuries and deaths caused by their dioxin-laden herbicide. Unfortunately, it too suffers from numerous factual errors.

I worked closely with one of the seven lawyers who served on the Plaintiffs Management Committee after it took control of the case from Victor Yannacone, the original “lead” attorney for the class-action suit. Again, far too much time is spent reporting the antics of certain veteran “advocates,” no matter how colorful some of them may have seemed.

This section would have been much stronger if the author had taken the trouble to interview some of attorneys involved in the litigation besides the highly biased Yannacone.

Nicosia is clearly out of his depth in trying to analyze the larger issues of corporate responsibility, legal proof of causality, and the like. He even misinterprets the negative role played by the influential New York Times whose nasty editorials attacked, unjustly, the scientific basis of the veterans’ case.

Near the end of the book, some sobering statistics are presented. According to a 1988 study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Vietnam vets suffer from a 45% higher mortality rate — and their rate of suicide is 72% higher — than that of comparable military vets who didn’t serve in Vietnam.

Nicosia also tells the damning story of how a promising CDC study of Agent Orange health effects was killed by the Reagan White House despite the protests of independent scientists who had developed a means to measure Agent Orange exposure in combat vets.

Not only did \$60 million in research funds go up in smoke, but an opportunity to finally determine the degree of harm caused by this toxic herbicide was lost — perhaps for all time. A subsequent Congressional probe of the CDC’s decision concluded that it was a nakedly political one which ran counter to the advice of independent scientists.

In sum, this book takes more time than it needs to makes its points, and misses some big ones, but because it salvages an important piece of history it is worthwhile reading just the same.

Tod Ensign

P.S.

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