

4.  
THE POLITICS  
OF RAPE  
IN VIETNAM



*This is my rifle [GI holds up M-16]  
This is my gun [puts hand at crotch]  
One is for killing  
The other for fun.*

—training exercise in U.S. Army

*On August 2, 1965, during a raid on Hoa Vang District and north of Dien Ban District, in Quang Nam Province, GI's gathered hundreds of women in the courtyard . . . and took turns raping them. Among the victims were many old women of seventy and teenagers of ten or twelve. [1]*

People around the world have heard about the massacre at Son My Village—sometimes called My Lai—on March 16, 1968. In that district, U.S. troops killed as many as five hundred civilians within a few hours. But it is not well known that before the massacre, troops of the Third Airborne Brigade, 82nd Division, raped hundreds of women. [2] It may be hard to believe reports like these, but they become irrefutable when the GI's themselves begin confessing:

*When we went through the villages and searched people, the women would have all their clothes taken off and the men would use their penises to probe them to make sure they didn't have anything hidden anywhere; and this was raping, but it was done as searching. [3]*

Sp/4 Joe Galbally of the Americal Division reported:

*We went through the village; it was about an eight-man patrol. We entered a hootch [peasant home]. These people are aware of what American soldiers do to them, so naturally they tried to hide the young girls. We found one hiding in a bomb shelter in a sort of a basement of her house. She was taken out, raped by six or seven people in front of her family, in front of us and the villagers. This isn't just one incident; this was just the first one I can remember. I know of ten or fifteen such incidents at least. [4]*

No one should dismiss these crimes as “natural but unintended and inevitable consequences of war,” because not all warriors are rapists. There are virtually no verified reports of rape committed by NLF or North Vietnamese troops. To understand rape in Viet Nam, we must return to the U.S.

### Getting away with it

Ralph Garofalo is a psychologist who treats rapists at the Center for Diagnosis and Treatment of Sexually Dangerous Persons, Bridgewater, Massachusetts. He implied, in his own crudely sexist manner,

that men will commit rape if they think they can get away with it:

*Yet on the balance, the rapist is not an exotic freak; in some cases his behavior is merely an extreme manifestation of the normal male sex drive. I don't think there's a man worth his salt who hasn't seen some chick walking by and wanted to screw her. The crucial distinction is that normal men find a socially acceptable outlet for their desires, while the rapist loses all sight of moral and legal considerations. [5]*

In Viet Nam, the U.S. Military Command made rape “socially acceptable”; in fact, it was unwritten, but clear, policy. Systematic mass rape was a policy implemented by consistently covering up reported rapes and by making it clear to GI's that they had no real need to fear punishment. Of course, this policy was never socially acceptable to the Vietnamese people, but they had no voice in the U.S. media.

Garofalo's equation—“the normal male sex drive” equals sexual aggression—is, in reality, a myth. It's a myth created by this violent society where individuals can only profit at others' expense. It's a myth that men are trained to live up to. In this way, sexual aggression becomes the rule, even though it's not a biological imperative. Sexual aggression reinforces itself by keeping women in a subordinate position—dependent on men for protection. When people accept another myth—that women are naturally weak and passive—women become easier prey for men and are less likely to rebel against the entire system of oppression.

Assertions that women are naturally passive form part of an elaborate mosaic of myths which proclaim women's inferiority. These myths persist in one form or another because they're convenient rationalizations to justify and maintain economic exploitation of women. For example, the assertion that “serving as wife and mother is the highest fulfillment of all women's natural needs” implies that all women should be satisfied and happy leading “private lives” as housewives. But housework is monotonous menial labor which serves a public function—women's labor in the home supplies the economy with billions of hours of free labor—labor necessary to produce and maintain the nation's work force. Employers' profits would be a lot lower if they had to pay even minimum wage for all the hours of work done by the wives of their employees—work which makes it possible for these employees to be available and efficient at the job.

Employers in an economy based on profit also need a pool of unemployed people, or reserve labor force, whom they can easily hire and fire to do temporary jobs, low-paying jobs, undesirable jobs, and strikebreaking. Housewives form the ideal constituency of the reserve labor force because they're available for work outside the home and they often have useful skills. Belief in myths that “women's place is in

the home" makes it less likely that women will challenge their boss when he lays them off or pays them poorly. Ideas about "women's place" or that "a woman can't be happy unless she's serving a man" combine in a strong social pressure that forces many women not to "take men's jobs" or to earn as much as a man. This subordination of women is also given as a flimsy compensation to poor and working-class men. These men are systematically denied access to the basic source of power in the United States: control over the profitmaking resources of the nation.

Other myths turn reality upside down to hide or justify white men's privilege. It's a lie that most rapists are Black men lusting after white women. Historically, white men regularly raped Black women to terrorize them into submission and to produce more slaves. Today, the majority of rapes do not cross race lines. An accurate reading of publicity about the rapes of white women by dark-skinned men really exposes the racism of the courts and the media, which try to use Third World men as scapegoats for women's oppression.

In short, the rape which was rampant in Viet Nam was bred in the United States where it is not a problem of natural biology or psychopathology or a breakdown of law and order. It is part of a carefully woven net of capitalism, racism and sexism that traps all oppressed people—but devours women.

### Producing men

As soon as a young boy learns to speak in the United States, or perhaps earlier, he begins to learn that "girls are not as good as boys." He sees men with power and women with none. He learns that "being a man" is something to be proud of. Male pride is nurtured by its opposite—female adoration and helplessness. Ideals of manhood in our society require that the young boy learn to stunt his emotional growth. "Crying is for girls." They require that a young man be aggressive, competitive, brave, even cruel. They teach that "you can tell the men from the boys by how many women they've conquered." They teach that "all women secretly want to be raped."

They also teach that a woman's helplessness and gratitude to her "savior" makes a man into a hero. Susan Griffin, in an article called "The Politics of Rape," points out that chivalry is a "male protection racket." The rapist may force a woman to depend on the "knight" for protection. But the "knight" also takes advantage of her by disguising his own sexual aggression in more socially acceptable forms. Excessive courtesy and contempt are two sides of the same coin. [6] The same Marine who "salutes a lady" may refer to a common woman as "Susie Rottencrotch."

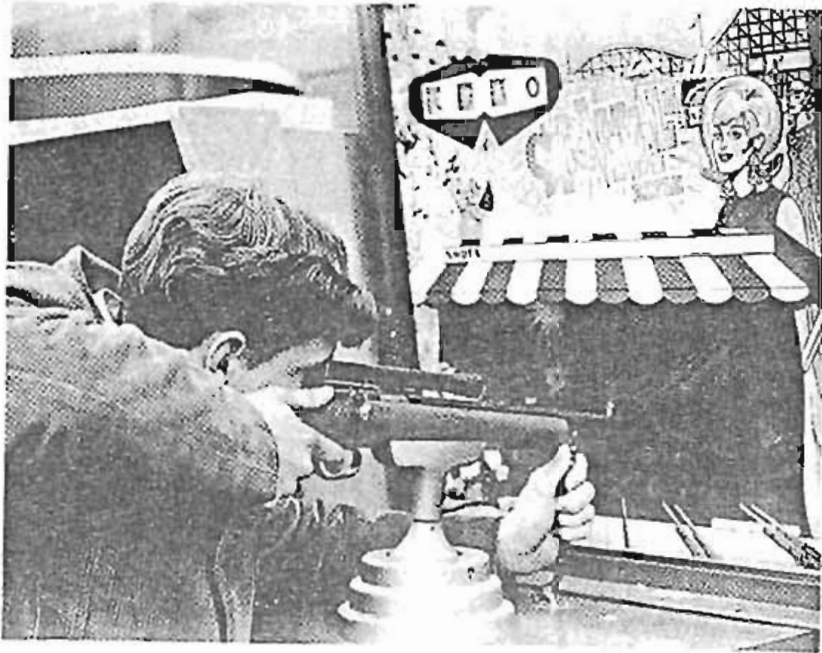
As a boy approaches manhood, the demands to prove himself a *man* escalate. Variations on the games of "I-dare-you" or "chicken" are endless. It's impossible for any boy to escape the influence of friends, home, school, TV, and movies. The model is either John Wayne or James Bond. John Wayne is the "strong silent type." Psychologists write:

*On the screen, he doesn't feel comfortable with women. He does like them sometimes—God knows he's not "queer." But at the right time and in the right place—which he chooses. And always with his car/horse parked directly outside, in/on which he will ride away to his more important business back in Marlboro country. [7]*

John Wayne in real life is a staunch supporter of Richard Nixon and is proud to glorify the adventures of the Green Berets in Viet Nam. James Bond's image is a variation on the same theme. He treats women like sales items. He's cool, detached, independent and non-feeling. He kills with ease. Perhaps he is dead inside but externally he's lively and charming. Not all men identify with the John Wayne/James Bond image of manhood. Some are driven crazy by it. Some fight it. Third World men have their own models of masculine superiority like Superfly. But in varying degrees, there exists a bit of the male superstar in every man raised in the United States.

Many white middle- and upper-class men have a chance to disguise their Wayne/Bond desires in a cloak of polite manners. They got draft deferments and proved their manhood in college sports and sororities and later in aggressive business deals. But the national habit of "proving yourself a man" was a convenient tool in the hands of draft boards and military recruiters. They tried to convince draftees, most of whom were Third World and white working-class men, that to resist the draft was cowardly and unmanly. Doing your duty by serving your country in Viet Nam became another proof of manhood.

Of course, many who were drafted and served understood that their dignity had nothing to do with fighting in Viet Nam. They went because they faced the choice: join the Army which "is after all a job and promises to teach you a skill" or go to jail. A Black reporter in Viet Nam did a survey in 1970 of Black enlisted men and found that seventy per cent of them named Malcolm X as their hero. Sixty-four per cent believed their fight was in the United States, not in Viet Nam. Thousands of men were thrown in stockades and briggs because they challenged the military machine. Since 1963, a half-million GI's received discharges "under less than honorable conditions." In 1972, Black soldiers received twenty-one per cent of all Bad Conduct discharges and thirty-three per cent of all Dishonorable discharges. [8] Black men took the lead in rejecting the pressure to perform as dictated in Viet Nam,



Times Square, New York City

and a number of white men, especially those coming from poor urban families, joined them.

In spite of the harsh penalties, two hundred thousand men became fugitives rather than go to Viet Nam. As early as 1964, Malcolm X urged Black men not to fight Uncle Sam's wars, but to fight for Black liberation. In 1965-1966, SNCC, the most militant civil-rights organization, popularized the slogan "Hell No We Won't Go," and by 1967, the anti-draft movement incorporated thousands of people, both Third World and white.

But many of those who most identified with the John Wayne/James Bond image of manhood voluntarily enlisted in the U.S. Armed Services. Those who joined the Marines present the most extreme cases:

*When I look back on it I can see that I wanted to go to war because like most little guys, we were the product of seeing battle, John Wayne and all that kind of thing and you think it's cool. And then you want to go and see what it's all about and be a hero. That was in my mind when I got over. I wanted to be a hero.*

He continued

*And I always wondered, like if I didn't go if it was just because I was afraid to go. . . . It may seem foolish . . . after I got to Viet Nam and was in contact, I realized how foolish I was—to think, you know, that my reason was to find out, "Am I gonna chicken out?" [9]*

Another Marine explained that his friends said "Join the Marines if you want to be a man"—"so I did." [10] Going to Viet Nam, for many young men, became a kind of initiation rite—a way to earn a place in this society as a man. Many said that they had to prove that they could face death "without shitting in our pants."

### Training

Before going to Viet Nam, GI's may sit through some hours of indoctrination classes which teach that they will be fighting, perhaps dying, for democracy in Viet Nam. But even the trainers must know that only those soldiers who are totally blind to reality can take the line seriously after a brief time in Viet Nam itself. In fact, by 1970, only fourteen per cent of the Black soldiers and twenty-one per cent of the white soldiers believed that they were fighting to build democracy in Viet Nam. [11] The kind of training new recruits undergo shows that the Pentagon has discovered that if you can't motivate men to fight for an unjust cause, you can motivate them to fight to assert their racial and sexual superiority.

Once in training, all GI's, whether volunteers or draftees, face a total onslaught from the he-man-making machine. The Army totally isolates new recruits from the outside world for the first eight weeks of basic training. They shave their heads. They uniform and drill their bodies. They assault their identity. Drill instructors call them "sweetie, shithead, fatboy, creep or faggot" until they prove themselves as men by becoming killers who seem to enjoy killing. A drill instructor in San Diego yelled to a platoon that wasn't clicking its heels loud enough:

*You want to march on your toes like you have a bunch of high heels on? OK ladies that's just fine, put your arm up like you're holding a purse. Now get on your toes and repeat after me [switching to a high falsetto] "We're a bunch of girls and we can't march." [12]*

Vets remember that if they referred to other GI's as "guys," they were ridiculed: "We don't have any guys in this army. Sweetie, only men." If the new recruit mistakenly called his M-16 a "gun," he had to recite the ditty that opens this chapter about the difference between a rifle and a gun. If he didn't thrust his bayonet into the dummy with enough spirit, they called him a "pussy." If he was repulsed by graphic recommendations on curbing out someone's guts, they told him

to "go home to mama." The brutalization process skillfully manipulated ideas which are full of contempt for women. To be a man, a GI had to hide his humanity and become more or less schizophrenic, depending on how much he really believed his indoctrination. Trainers had the advantage because they could convince the recruits that brutality was a matter of survival. A vet recalled:

*When you made mistakes, they screamed, "You're not going to live three minutes over there, you idiot." And I believed them. [13]*

After four weeks of basic training and harassment, the recruit gets a chance to prove he is *somebody*, the chance to prove himself on the rifle range. Now, instead of being only a victim of brutality—the brutality of his drill instructor—he can become an agent of brutality. The enemy target was the "gook." Drills focused on a "hostile and inferior race" as the enemy and not on hostile ideologies.

White drill sergeants could easily draw from an infinite variety of white supremacist myths which reflect and reinforce the oppression of Third World people inside as well as outside the United States. Since the earliest days of slave trade, white men's prosperity has depended on the denial of Third World people's right to self-determination. Racism is built into the imperialist system so that Asian, Black, Latin and Native American people face systematic discrimination in jobs, politics, the schools, the courts and in housing.

Third World women carry the triple burden of racial, economic, and sexual oppression. For example, a Black woman usually gets the lowest-paying jobs and often can only survive with the aid of Welfare. But the Welfare Department tries to dictate every intimate detail of her life—even forcing her to sign papers authorizing her own sterilization. The white real-estate industry forces Black people to live in ghettos. But when Black people *choose* to live with each other and are proud of their culture, racist politicians call them "fanatic separatists" or "culturally deprived." White police occupy and terrorize Third World communities in the ghettos of the U.S. in much the same way that U.S. troops occupied Viet Nam.

#### "Mere Gook Rule"

Killing in Viet Nam came easier to the killers who thought their victims were not quite human: "gooks, dinks, slopes"—with slanted eyes and maybe "slanted pussies." Many ignorant men looked forward to finding out how it would be to "screw" a woman who was the subject of so many racist jokes about her vagina opening cross-ways. Few spoke of the Vietnamese as people. They were just numbers in

body counts. Corporal John Getmann, 3rd Marine Division, explained the racism of the system:

*When somebody asks: "Why do you do this to people?" your answer is, "So what, they're just gooks, they're not people. It doesn't make any difference what you do to them; they're not human." And this thing is built into you, it's thrust into your head from the moment you wake up in boot camp to the moment you wake up when you're a civilian. And it's a very hard thing to try to forget about it. It's about the only way I can put it, it's—they make you want to kill. Their whole thing is killing. You're not to question, you're not supposed to ask why. If you're told to kill, you're to kill. [14]*

When a GI tried to stop several buddies in the process of raping a Vietnamese woman, they brushed him aside with, "What are you worried about? She's only a gook!" The jargon of Army lawyers expresses the same racism. The MGR—or "Mere Gook Rule"—is the unwritten law that nearly guarantees an American soldier his freedom if charged with raping a Vietnamese woman. [15]

The attitudes and training of recruits to the People's Liberation Armed Forces, the military organization of the NLF, stand in stark contrast. Recruits receive a political education designed to make them understand these basic principles: (1) Why do we fight? Because we are oppressed and want to lead a decent life free of foreign oppressors and feudal exploiters. (2) For whom do we fight? All peasants, workers and oppressed people throughout the world will benefit from our victory. (3) We, the poor and exploited, should have the power in society and be proud of our work. (4) Victory is certain.

It is PLAF policy to give peasants, who have been traditionally held in contempt, a sense of dignity and strength. One regimental political officer explained:

*We reject the concept that the masses are simply "cannon fodder" who will blindly follow their leader. . . . We want people who know exactly why they do what they do, who act together when the occasion demands, but each of whom is a separate being bringing his/her own experience, intelligence to bear on the concrete problems to be solved. This makes unity a creative, living concept and not just a slogan. [16]*

After fifteen days of political education, the recruit receives a gun. But the education continues in the form of daily sessions in which all activity—including what officers do—is discussed and criticized. The soldiers are evaluated according to standards that have nothing to do with the assertion of manly or racial superiority:

*Complete identification with the people in any area where our troops are stationed or operating is an absolute imperative and anyone in-*

olved in the slightest violation of the "why and for whom" concept in relations with the people would be severely criticized. We are a people's army, devoted to helping the people themselves successfully carry out their revolution.

### The test of Viet Nam

Once in Viet Nam, most GI's became numb to the killing and developed an elaborate cynicism to shield themselves from doubt and guilt. A vet named Kirk reported:

*I didn't feel it [killing] was traumatic. I mean, I was, you know, you're ready for it, you know, you see TV, movies all your life. You know what to expect.*

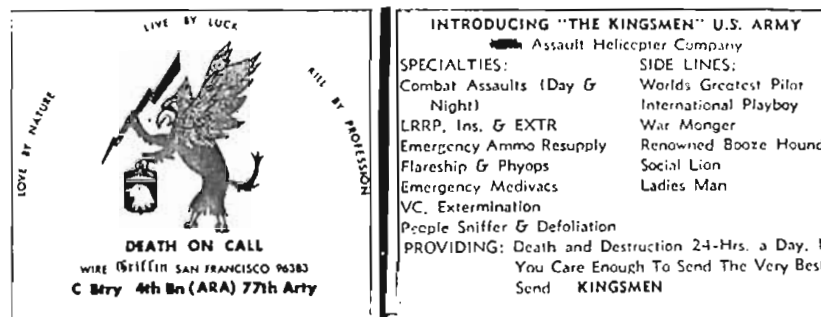
Kempton, another vet, even found pleasure in killing:

*Yeah, I wanted to kill, I really did. . . . I ran out there with my rifle and I was just all smiles from here to there . . . mentally it was like a good time, a good party, you know, like this is party time, let's get going. That's the way I felt. [17]*

Technology made it easier for some to kill. GI's reported how pulling the trigger became automatic and required no thought. But many soldiers maintained a sense of humanity and killing brought them to a state of moral crisis. Some cried. Some went mad. Many killed only when it was absolutely necessary for their own survival. As the war dragged on, resistance to participating in the slaughter gained momentum. Soldiers wore buttons with peace signs, with guns pointing to the earth, and with slogans: "No Vietnamese ever called me nigger." Mutinies made headlines, but there were thousands of men who quietly withdrew from the military effort. Many turned to heroin, especially those stationed in the rear. Others felt sorry, but were ashamed of these feelings:

*I felt sorry. I don't know why I felt sorry. John Wayne never felt sorry. [18]*

The GI jargon thickened their shield of cynicism. White phosphorus, which continues burning flesh until it hits bone, was called "Willie Peter." They called 2000-pound bombs "daisy cutters." They called torture by electric shocks from a field telephone "Bell Telephone Hour." They named their tanks: "Cong Au-Go-Go," "WETSU" (We Eat This Stuff Up), and "Saigon Tea." The 12th Air Commando Squadron at Bihn Hoa was responsible for defoliating miles of Vietnamese land. Their proud motto was, "Only you can prevent forests!" [19]



Calling cards of units in Viet Nam

A Japanese reporter described a moving scene where cynicism was combined with the emotional invalidism of James Bond. During a search-and-destroy mission, GI's would generally invade villages and homes, destroying lives and anything that could support life. It took one GI only a few minutes to wreck everything a poor peasant owned. As he threw away the family rice supply and was about to hurl the only remaining jar to the ground, a young woman pleaded with him through her tears, "Please stop, it's a special relic from our ancestors." He stopped, but only long enough to remark, "What a pretty girl!" and then resumed his destruction. [20]

### Rape as terrorism

*Rape is not a crime of passion; it is an act of aggression. [21]*

From the distressingly long list of cases, it's impossible to know the exact personal motive of each rapist. But the general motive for rape as the military policy of an aggressive army is clear. Terrorism is a classic counterinsurgency tactic against people's war. Rape is a classic act of terrorism which not only serves the political function of intimidating a rebellious population, but also allows the rapist to reassert his manhood. A conscious policy of counterinsurgency made rape in Viet Nam standard operating procedure aimed at terrorizing the population into submission:

*I saw one case where a woman was shot by a sniper, one of our snipers. When we got up to her she was asking for water. And the lieutenant said to kill her. So he ripped off her clothes, they stabbed her in both breasts, they spread her eagle and shoved an E tool [entrenching] up her vagina, and she was still asking for water. And then they took that out and used a tree limb and then she was shot. [22]*

Sp/5 Don Dzagulones, Americal Division, testified to the torture of villagers thought to be sympathetic to the NLF. Most of the prisoners were women, children and old men:

*They brought in a woman prisoner who was alleged to be a spy. They continued the interrogation in a bunker and she wouldn't talk. I don't think she even gave them her name. So they stripped off her clothing, and they threatened to rape her, which had no effect on her at all. She was very stoic. She just stood there and looked at them defiantly. So they threatened to burn her pubic hairs . . . she caught on fire and went into shock . . . they gave the medics instructions to take her to the hospital under the pretext of being in a coma from malaria. [23]*

On September 16, 1966, soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division stationed in Ben Luc and Go Den (Long An Province) rounded up two hundred women and took turns raping them. That same month, fishermen from Cai San and Cai Con found the naked bodies of ninety-seven women floating in the river. [24]

#### Rape as revenge

The Marines, "Leathernecks," have a battle psalm:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil;*

*'Cuz I'm the toughest mutha in the valley. [25]*

But soldiers in Viet Nam were afraid. They were also frustrated. They took this fear and frustration out on the people, especially the women. GI's were unnerved by the fact that they couldn't distinguish between the "enemy" and civilians. Booby traps caused the majority of casualties and a good deal of the deaths in Viet Nam. Any Vietnamese, even a child, could set a booby trap. Most booby traps are arranged so that the victim acts as his own executioner. They're traps for "boobies," for fools. [26] GI's responded with hatred:

*I hate gooks . . . and of course the only way you could determine who hated them the most was how many times you beat them or killed them or raped them or something like that. [27]*

The NLF also challenged the GI's by setting ambushes. In conventional war, the aggressor sets the time and place of battle and the victor is the one with the most firepower. But NLF guerrillas refused to allow American invaders the option of initiating battles. The U.S. soldier never could be sure when the enemy would strike. He was



highly visible. His opponent was invisible. Sensing that most civilians were sympathetic to the NLF, the American GI was constantly aware of his vulnerability.

Sometimes, liberation soldiers would demoralize GI's by deliberately making them feel like helpless objects. They would speak to the foot soldiers, "grunts," in English over loudspeakers about U.S. battle plans that the grunts hadn't been briefed on. Nervous GI's understood that the PLAF could have just as easily shot them as spoken to them. One Marine reported:

*This NVA soldier goes "Good Morning, Marines." A lot of shit they did just to fuck up your head. I mean, they must have had a chance before that to really zap someone. They did this shit just to scare the fuck out of you. . . . Everyone fucking flies out of the trenches with their rifles. They're expecting attack. Fucking gook is probably laughing his ass off in the bushes. [28]*

Humiliated GI's took revenge by humiliating women:

*One thing that was more or less a joke . . . and it would get a laugh every time from somebody, was if we were moving through a village and there was a woman present. Her clothes, at least the top half were just ripped [off]. I've seen that happen and done it several times. . . . It only takes one hand to rip those kind of clothing. [29]*

L/Cpl Thomas Heidtman continued to explain that after a woman's breasts were exposed, she would be shoved aside into a ditch and in John Wayne style, "We'd just keep going."

45,806 GI's died in combat in Viet Nam. Another 47,000 died from "non-hostile" causes. Three hundred thousand were wounded in action. Some GI's did not recognize that they had been ordered to invade Viet Nam by the President of the U.S. They blamed the Vietnamese people. One GI paraphrased the thoughts of a rapist before he mounted a terrified Vietnamese woman:

*... you dirty bitch, you killed Wilson and you killed Weber and Cox and Rotger and Bell and you got me out here and look what my buddies are doing. I hate this war and it's your fault I'm here.* [30]

Women suspected of fighting for the liberation forces were called "Vietcong Whores" and would be subjected to "gang bangs" whenever captured. Vets testified to raping women after they were dead. Troops of the 11th Armored Cavalry used an automotive grease gun to rape a dead woman and joked that they had "packed her full of grease." [31]

When he felt his manhood threatened, the GI would also treat his ally, the ARVN soldier, with incredible brutality. For example, after receiving consent to ride in a U.S. truck, a legless ARVN soldier touched the leg of a Marine in gratitude. The Marine recalled:

*The little slope grabbed me by the leg. And I had been in the country long enough to know that most of them are queer. They hold hands and stuff. And this sort of irks most Marines and soldiers. And we're told that it's a Vietnamese custom, when you're friendly you should hold hands. So they try to hold a lot of guys' hands. So they end up getting beat bloody. The guy grabbed my leg. So I got mad. I wasn't in a good mood that morning and I whacked him. And my buddies grabbed his crutches. And I said, "Go!" So we took off. We threw his crutch in a rice paddy and went another 150 yards and threw the other crutch and then out he went. He was screaming and crying and begging us. "Out you go." We all had a good laugh about that.* [32]

Some rapists were not intentionally applying a policy of terrorism or revenge. Some had just been trained to think that this horror was fun. A soldier named Eriksson witnessed the kidnapping of Pham Thi Mao, 18 years old, by four GI's. They took her from her village so that she could service them on a five-day reconnaissance patrol in Bong Son Valley. They forced her to carry their baggage and after they ate and rested, the sergeant announced that it was "time for recreation." All four repeatedly raped her and then resumed their patrol. When night fell, they raped her again and then shot her. [33]

Perhaps the most barbaric rapes were those specifically intended to destroy future generations. In the course of a sweep of Mo Cay District, Ben Tre Province, early in 1971, GI's raped to death five school girls. [34] Torturers also deliberately thrust sticks with sharpened ends, broken Coke bottles, and electric bulbs into the vaginas of captive women to make it impossible for the victims to bear children. [35]

"It was the rape that made me see the true face of the war"

A Vietnamese woman from a middle-class Saigon family is now in Canada working with the Association of Vietnamese Patriots in Canada, a group that supports the liberation struggle. Until about 1970, she had supported Thieu and the Americans. It was the rapes that made her change her mind.

In some societies, women who have been raped are outcasts. The policy in the liberated zones of Viet Nam is to treat women who have been raped as victims of American aggression. Revolutionary cadre actively fight against the traditional shame and prejudice against women who have been raped. Vietnamese women often transform their shame into fighting energy. Le Thi Hong Gam, a heroine of the PLAF, became a guerrilla when she was 16. She insisted on being allowed to take up arms after witnessing the rape/murder of her best friend. By the time Gam died in combat, at age 19, she had killed 26 enemy troops. Other women respond to rape with their own individual acts of resistance. The *New Yorker* magazine, April 15, 1972, reported the practice of "deranged war widows deliberately squatting to relieve themselves in front of hotels where Americans stay." Some women may silently guard their hatred and join the struggle at a later time.

Huyn Thi Kien explained why she joined the struggle to expel the American invaders:

*I'll tell you another incident I saw. A woman was going to give birth in about two weeks. During a raid, GI's forced her back into a room and tried to rape her but she resisted. So the five GI's tied her to the bed and raped her to death. After that, they used their bayonets to pluck out the fetus. And they laughed. . . . In my case, as a woman and a peasant in the South, I only worked very hard to live. When I witnessed these savage crimes of the GI's with my own eyes I felt very strongly. In order to defend my own life and the lives of my family, I had no other way but to join other women and to fight back.* [36]

The Women's Committee to Defend the Right to Live is a strong mass organization in Saigon. A well-publicized dual rape of a mother





The banner reads: "U.S. Imperialists Out of Viet Nam."

and daughter became the incident that initially sparked women to organize the group in 1970. Forming the organization, in itself, was a particularly heroic act. All organizations that call for peace are illegal in Saigon. Just two weeks before its public founding, President Thieu announced that he would "beat to death" anyone who spoke of peace.

The Women's Committee to Defend the Right to Live began with four demands: immediate withdrawal of all American troops; ouster of Thieu from government; the formation of a new coalition government; and respect for the dignity and civil rights of women. They have staged demonstrations, boycotts, strikes in the marketplace, and other mass activities to campaign for their goals. Many of their members, includ-

ing their founder, Madame Ngo Ba Thanh, have been in prison for years. Madame Thanh, a lawyer educated at Columbia University, was finally released from prison after several years of international pressure and months of hunger strikes. Since her release, she has rejoined her sisters in the Women's Committee to Defend the Right to Live in fighting for the release of other political prisoners and for the enforcement of the Cease Fire Agreement.

#### When Johnny comes marching home

Since 1961, nearly six million men have returned as veterans of war in South East Asia. Many more know vets as brothers, sons, lovers, co-workers, and students. Tens of thousands of veterans have joined an organization called Viet Nam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). They have taken the leadership in many anti-war activities. They also have helped many vets begin the difficult process of challenging their own racist and sexist attitudes in rap groups and other forms of counseling. An editorial headlined "Free Our Sisters" in the newspaper published by the San Francisco chapter of VVAW recognized GI responsibility for rape in the following way:

*Rarely do we comment on the courage it takes for our sisters to walk in the streets, where they are open targets for any men who so desire. How many of our sisters get raped in our streets and what are we doing about it? Our attitude is one of silent support for the rapist.*

*So, even though the system we live under is the main culprit for the oppression of women, we also have a responsibility to our sisters. We must try to understand what our sisters are going through. How women also would like to feel independent the way men do, but all the cards are stacked against them. We have to rally to their cause, which is the full emancipation of women. [The Veteran, Spring 1973]*

But the commitment of VVAW is only a small beginning. We can only speculate on how deep and ugly are the scars inflicted by a "tour of duty" in Viet Nam. In a war where the invaders could gain no territory, they could only show "progress" by making the body count as high as possible. When these soldiers come home, what happens? There are no reliable statistics showing how many cases of wife beating, child abuse, rape, murder and suicide are committed by Viet Nam veterans. But there has been a lot of experience with "Post Viet Nam Syndrome" (PVS). Symptoms of PVS include guilt, emotional numbing, insensitivity, mistrust of society and organization, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, rage, sexual aggression and sexual impotence.

All men learn to suppress their emotions, especially emotions of

sympathy. Men and women alike learned to live with statistics of body counts, and reports of war atrocities. We have all been brutalized and numbed by U.S. government policy in Viet Nam. In Viet Nam itself, the emotional mutilation process is accelerated and exaggerated. Vets explain, "You learn not to have friends . . . you don't want to get too close to anybody, 'cause it might kill you." Other vets reported initial traumas when they first killed somebody, but later pulling the trigger became a habit, a reflex. [37]

When these men return to a non-combat situation, they deliberately insulate themselves from emotion-laden situations, fearing they might lose control and have their combat "instincts" return. They fear that if they unlock their emotional vaults for any one reason, all their accumulated fears and anguish will pour out. This fear creates enormous problems within families and other social relations. One vet confessed:

*If I am fucking and a girl says "I love you," then I want to kill her . . . [because] if you get too close . . . you get hurt.* [38]

These vets are cracked-mirror images of an entire society suffering from Post Viet Nam Syndrome—a national crisis embodied in the brutality of our prisons and mental hospitals, in the cynicism of Watergate and the bankruptcy of the economy. In contrast, the Vietnamese women who survived and fought against all the barbarism U.S. society produced, give us a vision of the potential for human renewal.

## Notes

1. Committee to Denounce War Crimes of U.S. Imperialists, "Crimes Perpetrated by U.S. Imperialists and Henchmen Against South Viet Nam Women and Children" (Viet Nam: Gai Phong Publishing House, 1968), p. 13. (In the following notes this pamphlet will be cited as "Crimes.")
2. "Crimes," p. 14.
3. Quote from Sgt. Scot Camil, First Marine Division, cited in VVAW, *Winter Soldier Investigation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 13.
4. *Winter Soldier Investigation*, p. 46.
5. *Newsweek*, August 20, 1973, pp. 67-68.
6. Susan Griffin's article, "The Politics of Rape," was originally published in *Ramparts* (1971), but has been reproduced by many women's organizations.
7. Jack Balswick and Charles Peek, "The Inexpressive Male," in *Family Coordinator*, October 1971, pp. 363-368.
8. Results of this survey by Wallace Terry II, "Bring the War Home," in anthology edited by Clyde Taylor, *Viet Nam and Black America* (New York: Anchor, 1973), pp. 200-222. Discharge and other statistics of resistance by GI's from pamphlet published by VVAW/WSO, "Amnesty" (1973), p. 4.
9. The quote is from an ex-Viet Nam Marine whom the author calls "Tidwell" in Norma Juliet Wikler, "Vietnam and the Veterans' Consciousness" (UC Berkeley, Sociology Department, Ph.D. thesis, June 1973), pp. 52-54.
10. Wikler's thesis, p. 71.

- Wallace Terry II, p. 205.
- Quoted by Wikler, p. 81. Other insights into what happens in training come from my own informal discussions with vets, especially Sp/4 Vincent J. Dijamich, Co. "E," 502 Infantry, 101 Airborne Division.
- Quoted in Wikler, p. 82.
- Winter Soldier Investigation*, p. 5.
- See "This World," *San Francisco Chronicle/Examiner*, (Sunday) March 21, 1971, p. 7.
- This quote and other details on PLAF training come from Wilfred Burchett, *Viet Nam Will Win* (New York: Guardian Books, 1970), ch. 2, "Making of a Soldier," p. 19.
- Both quotes are from Wikler, pp. 196-200.
- Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), p. 121.
- Don Pratt and Lee Blair, *Salmagundi Vietnam* (Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1971), p. 33.
- Katsuchi Honda, *Vietnam: A Voice from the Villages* (Japan: Committee for English Publication of Vietnam: A Voice from the Villages, 1967), p. 20.
- Boston Lesbian Feminists, "Vietnam: A Feminist Analysis," in *Rough Times*, vol. 2, #8 (July 1972), p. 6.
- Winter Soldier Investigation*, p. 14.
- Winter Soldier Investigation*, p. 118.
- "Crimes," pp. 13-15.
- Pratt and Blair, p. 144.
- Charles J. Levy, "ARVN as Faggots," in *Transaction*, vol. 8, #12 (October 1971), p. 23.
- Mx Lai vet quoted by Lifton, p. 189.
- Levy, p. 26.
- Winter Soldier Investigation*, p. 28.
- Lifton, p. 54.
- Winter Soldier Investigation*, p. 94.
- Levy, p. 21.
- "The Crime on Hill 192," in *South Viet Nam in Struggle* #50 (December 20, 1969), p. 7.
- Nguyen Thanh Son, "Wicked Schemes," in *Women of Viet Nam* #2 (1972), p. 17.
- "Crimes," p. 7.
- Huyen Thi Kien interview with Anne Dockery and Karen Kearns, "I Wanted to Spit in Their Faces," *Liberation News Service* #328 (March 24, 1971), p. 7.
- Both of these reports are from Wikler, pp. 190-194.
- Lifton, p. 271.



Liberation forces did not fire on GI's wearing this button.