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## Preface

After spending years asserting that there was no similarity between Iraq and Vietnam, in August 2007 President George W. Bush switched and began using analogy to Vietnam to explain why the Iraq war needed to be continued. Bush did this without any deep reflection and without taking into account the fact that the Vietnam war is still disputed historical terrain. Never mind the conflation and mischaracterizations of this president's presentation of the past. The fact that he called up Vietnam as justification raises its own questions about the role of that conflict as analogy and the realities behind the mythology that has grown around it. We understand that history unrolls as tragedy and repeats as farce. Vietnam was certainly a tragedy. The question that continues to permeate that conflict, accounting for much of the mythology, is whether it was all inevitable. Was Vietnam an unwinnable war? What does that make Iraq?

Although there have been survey histories of the Vietnam war in the past, current efforts to rely on that conflict as historical analogy for Iraq indicate the need for a fresh review. In addition, most existing accounts were written prior to the declassification of large swaths of records of presidents Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford, who led the United States during the later phases of the war; these records are especially important because allusions to success in Vietnam are based on that period. This is not to say that earlier events, some as early as the 1950s, were not crucial to the outcome, indicating the necessity for a new broad overview. Histories also pass lightly over certain actions that need to be placed in proper relation to the whole to fully appreciate the unfolding American experience in Vietnam. In particular, this account presents evidence that developments during the Eisenhower administration in 1954–1955 not only conditioned later events but also played a key role in the minds of central actors.

As will become evident, the core argument advanced here is that, whatever the intentions and aims of American leaders, the United States acted within a context defined along political, military, foreign policy, social, and economic dimensions—in effect, an “envelope”—and that envelope narrowed over time due to developments in all those fields. The narrative shows how and why the range of potential choices constricted, as well as which choices

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were influenced by individual agency, ambition, and misunderstanding of the war's reality or, as the Soviets used to say, the true "correlation of forces."

I believe the Vietnam war remains contested historical terrain in large part because observers have presented "atomized" views. Some write of the agonies of presidents facing crucial decisions at particular moments in time. These accounts emphasize short-range thinking. They frequently allude to long-range impact but still present only a limited slice of the relevant history. Others approach the war as simple military conflict and write of campaigns and battles. With a few exceptions, Americans won all the battles. So how did the United States lose the war? A few accounts combine a battle with a view of the home front, but again, the scope is restricted. Others approach the issue as a technical problem of military doctrine and argue that better strategy and tactics could have led to a different outcome. Some try to explain defeat by focusing on North Vietnam, usually depicted as a warrior state thrusting across international borders and invading the territory of those the United States sought to support. Still others account for the outcome by writing of the American political movement that opposed the war, blaming that for the failure. Variants of that theme include implicating the media in the defeat for not reporting positive news about the war, or charging Congress with running away from its responsibilities and not allocating the necessary funds. What all these visions of Vietnam have in common is that they consider only pieces of the puzzle, extrapolating general conclusions from very narrow bases of evidence. They are atomized views.

There is also an elephant in the room of historical analysis on Vietnam, much as there is with Iraq. That is the *American ally*. Discussions of the troop "surge" in Iraq mention but do not explain why U.S. military action has not been matched by indigenous political progress and then dismiss the subject. In much the same way, accounts of the Vietnam war speak of the Saigon government and its army and mention South Vietnamese aspects when unavoidable, usually the participation of its troops, but they make little serious attempt to understand the limitations of our ally. Nor do they say much about the southern resistance. In Iraq as in Vietnam, Americans substituted hope for the political development of the ally for real analysis of that ally's incentives and social realities. This deliberate donning of blinders inevitably distorts. In Iraq today, this feature contributes to an evolving tragedy. In looking back on Vietnam, it is a fault that led to inaccurate appreciation of the status of the conflict.

There is a third artificiality, at least in the historical debate over Vietnam. This, which may or may not turn out to be true of Iraq, resides in the castigation of the war's political opponents, in the notion that the forces in contention consist of right-thinking supporters of administration policy versus deluded or manipulated opposition elements. This stance prevents debate by preemptively defining the ideological terrain—those agreeing with govern-

ment policy in the right, the others in some darker place. It also fails to deal with public opinion as a dynamic factor. As a general proposition, opinion tends to follow the flag. Presidents make great headway by simply taking actions that the public rallies around until it learns or feels or knows that the president's course is misguided. In short, apart from the pro and con advocates, the bulk of the public undergoes some transformation that *turns* them against the war. Not recognizing or responding to such changes in itself creates inertia that becomes an obstacle to "progress."

For all these reasons, a fresh analysis of the Vietnam war is necessary. The atomization of the literature has impeded a full understanding. We have narratives of presidents making decisions in which either military or political considerations, or both, have only a backstage presence; they are treated as givens rather than as sets of dynamic forces or, worse, as merely something to mention. Then there are battle histories in which presidents and politics are barely noticed. Virtually all this literature ignores the South Vietnamese, whose struggle lay at the heart of the entire enterprise. And most of it treats the Vietnamese adversary, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as mere black box. Hanoi's allies pass with the lightest of touches. Finally, sources on the antiwar movement and various sectors of American society, apart from an initial spate of postwar writing that centered on who did what, when, and where, have been preoccupied with finding scapegoats for defeat. The diplomatic histories tend to focus on either the Johnson or the Nixon period. In contrast, this work aims to bring together the strands of the Vietnam story in a new overview, presenting developments on many fronts as they relate to each other as well as to the whole.

In describing this book to a number of people I have used the term *unified field theory*. By that I mean it attempts to weave an account of both action and context that includes all necessary elements. The theme of individual transformation is also embodied here. Ultimately it is difficult to understand how the mass of a society can adopt some view without seeing that process in action. The domestic politics of Vietnam is a vast canvas, but it is intrinsically necessary to understanding the war, both because of its inherent importance and because U.S. government attempts to counteract the antiwar movement complete the circle of policy and action. I show the roots of that Movement, describe how it evolved, and note significant protests and other events. High points are the focus because, much like the details of military campaigns, any attempt to present a comprehensive account of the welter of efforts would make this book unwieldy. A few stories will have to stand in—both for protest and for combat—for the experiences of many. I apologize in advance to all those who feel that the events in which they participated are slighted here. Many argue that America's war in Vietnam proved to be the most socially divisive U.S. military engagement since the Civil War. In consonance with that, I have drawn many of the chapter titles from a famous Civil

War song whose lyrics eerily evoke various stages of the Vietnam experience: “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Individuals aggregate in groups. That transformation needs to be understood too. I chose to focus on one particular group: Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). This group played a central role at several crucial moments, yet except for accounts that center on the organization itself, it has only a bit part in standard Movement histories. My narrative introduces new evidence of the extent to which the U.S. government initiated an explicit campaign to “get” VVAW, illustrating how the government played simultaneously on the war and antiwar boards. As a veterans’ organization, VVAW also furnishes a natural link to another aspect of the narrative—how controversies over the war affected U.S. military forces themselves, ultimately leading back to the nation’s ability to carry on a war in Southeast Asia.

The narrative explicitly puts South Vietnam back into the equation, following a number of aspects of Saigon’s political, military, and economic development. This war was about the future of South Vietnam, and it is a matter of perplexity that matters Vietnamese receive such short shrift. There are exceptions regarding a few events, such as the coup that toppled Saigon leader Ngo Dinh Diem, and some accounts pay greater attention overall—Stanley Karnow’s *Vietnam* is one—but those histories tend to be essentially descriptive. They do not tease out the set of themes that show the dynamics at work. This book does exactly that. It is part narrative history, part interpretive, and it aims to demonstrate why what began as a mote in the eye ended up nearly consuming a great nation.

In addition to South Vietnam, I present material on North Vietnam, China, Russia, and Western Europe in their relation to the Vietnam war. A conscious effort has been made to bring new evidence to bear on the North Vietnamese side. Space precludes this book from being as much of an international history as I would have liked, particularly with regard to the activities of some actors in the Johnson administration’s peace feelers and the influence of protest movements in many European lands, but these do receive some attention.

It is also true that existing overviews fail to take into account important bodies of data. In addition to the declassification issue, virtually all the existing survey histories appeared before the availability of White House tapes of five presidents who led the nation during Vietnam, most importantly John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. Material such as intelligence records and official histories—including important ones from the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency (which only began to appear in 2006–2008), but military service ones as well—has largely been ignored in previous accounts. And Vietnamese sources from both the South and the North have been notably underutilized, along with a plethora

of other material. Incorporating this knowledge is another reason why a fresh overview history is necessary.

As for chronology, my view is that the parameters that set the framework for the war—not so much determining events as establishing the boundaries of the permissible (i.e., the envelope)—were progressively laid down from 1945 to 1955. For that reason, the narrative begins with the end of World War II, treats certain 1954–1955 events in some detail, and follows the American war through to its end. Events during the Johnson and Nixon presidencies are covered in the greatest depth, but other periods are not ignored. I do take advantage of the existing literature; thus, certain events and characters that have been covered in extensive detail elsewhere are treated more briefly. Even for well-known events, however, an effort has been made here to show neglected aspects. Fresh material appears on virtually every facet of the Vietnam war. Most important, this is among the first works to cover the Nixon period based on the emerging documentary record rather than people's impressionistic recollections, and considerable detail is devoted to that era.

This study is based on extensive research, including documentary research in every period covered plus interviews with a wide assortment of the characters involved on every side and at every level. I know, interviewed, participated in conferences with, or have met national security advisers, National Security Council staff, diplomats, secretaries of defense, generals, battalion commanders, grunts, airmen, intelligence officers, and antiwar movement figures; South Vietnamese leaders, generals, soldiers, airmen, and resistance fighters; North Vietnamese diplomats, generals, soldiers, and historians; Australian officers and historians, Canadian and British diplomats, and more.

I am aware of and have used the huge literature on the Vietnam war. There are a variety of historical debates on certain aspects of the war, such as whether Kennedy would have gotten the United States out of Vietnam and what was achieved by the Christmas Bombing of Hanoi, to cite just two examples. Again, these issues are not well developed in the older survey histories. I comment on these debates and on some of the studies that champion them, working the evolving debate into an overview account for the first time. Such discussions are intended to advance the historiography of the war, contributing to the comprehensiveness of this narrative. Ultimately I side with those who consider Vietnam an unwinnable war. I came to that view early, but extensive research and deep analysis confirm that impression.

*John Prados*  
Washington, DC  
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## Acknowledgments

Let me begin by acknowledging the example of George McTurnin Kahin, who died eight years ago. Kahin inspired many as the very model of the engaged scholar. Though his field was Indonesia, Kahin remained alert to the wider problems of Southeast Asia and quickly perceived that America's Vietnam war was both a tragedy and a blunder. America's involvement disturbed Kahin so profoundly that he immediately began to delve into these matters and by 1965 was already prepared to stand against the tide of intervention. That year Kahin appeared at a large national teach-in on Vietnam, the one McGeorge Bundy skipped because Lyndon Johnson threatened to fire him. Kahin also spoke against the war in congressional testimony beginning that year. With scholar John Lewis, Kahin published *The United States in Vietnam* in 1967, a work that influenced me and no doubt others. I first met him at Cornell in 1970, where his lack of pretension impressed, and his gracious help to an undergraduate from another school enabled me to raise my own Indochina research to a new level.

Kahin also became an exemplar in the use of declassification to open up the secret record of U.S. history. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the release of classified records on Vietnam still at a very early stage, Kahin used the Freedom of Information Act to demand that the State Department simply release all its documents on that matter. The several thousand documents he received formed the basis for his 1986 book *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*, which illuminated Lyndon Johnson's 1965 troop decision in a depth never before achieved. All scholars should strive for the integrity and dedication that marked George Kahin and his works on Indonesia as well as Vietnam.

For the present book I am indebted to many, starting with the gracious staffs of the following libraries: Columbia University, the Forty-second Street Library of the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of California–Berkeley, Texas Tech University, New York University, George Washington University, the Echols Collection of Cornell University, and the Wheaton Regional Library of the Montgomery County Public Library. I received invaluable assistance from archivists at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); the presidential libraries of Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Gerald R.

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I also want to make special mention of Lewis B. Sorley. Although he did not help me specifically, Colonel Sorley contributed directly to this book and to all future Vietnam scholarship with his painstaking transcriptions of the MACV staff meeting tapes, which are cited liberally in the part of this narrative covering the Nixon years. I ran into Sorley at the Army's Military History Institute while he was engaged in this undertaking, and through my own work with presidential tapes, I am aware of the difficulties of transcription, which are enormous. Thank you. Though our interpretations of the war differ, Sorley is a good friend and has been a fun debating partner on numerous occasions.

For affording me access to their papers, I thank Larry Berman, Daniel Ellsberg, Milton K. Leitenberg, and Douglas Valentine. Ray W. Stubbe graciously provided me with translations of Vietnamese materials on the battle of Khe Sanh. Special thanks are also owed to Merle Pribbenow, who furnished me with some of his extensive translations from the Vietnamese. For specific documents important to this inquiry, I thank William Burr. I am grateful to James Dingeman for providing me with dissertations not encountered elsewhere. I also want to thank Kai Pantin, who helped with printing some of the materials I could not access otherwise, and especially Mary Curry, who actually produced the manuscript text at a critical stage when my computer malfunctioned. For answering questions great and small I thank Gar Alperowitz, James Blight, Robert K. Brigham, McGeorge Bundy, Robert Buzzanco, John M. Carland, Timothy M. Castle, Graham Cosmas, Gloria Emerson, Gerald K. Haines, David Halberstam, William Hammond, George Herring, Melvin Laird, Janet Lang, Theodore Mataxis, Robert S. McNamara, Douglas Pike, James R. Reckner, Marilyn Young, and Howard Zinn. Several of these individuals have since passed away, and I regret their loss.

Colleagues Jeffrey Kimball and Melvin Small read and commented on the manuscript. They helped me sharpen many of the points made here. My companion Ellen Pinzur not only read and commented on the manuscript but also edited it and helped with innumerable questions of fact and language. I stand in great debt to them all. Editor Michael Briggs not only supported this project throughout but also afforded me the time necessary to attend to the myriad tasks required to finish the work—a special thanks. Separately and together, all these persons contributed a great deal to this book. The omissions or errors herein are solely my own.



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## A Note to the Reader

Given the bitterness that surrounds American memories of the Vietnam war and the broadness of my inquiry in this book, I believe some personal perspective might be helpful. Think of it as full disclosure. To the degree that I have any reputation, it is probably that of an engaged leftist intellectual. But it was in fact Vietnam that brought me here. Surprising as it may sound, as a boy I wanted nothing more than to be a soldier—and not just any soldier, either. I wanted to be the one who understood, the leader who was also a sage, perhaps to shepherd the Army into an age of conflict at any level of violence. John F. Kennedy's ascension to the presidency thrilled me, his inaugural speech suggested we shared a vision, and his call to service against any foe seemed just right. About the time of the movie *The Longest Day* (1962), I decided that General Maxwell D. Taylor, the World War II paratrooper, military adviser to Kennedy in the White House, and then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was my model for the kind of officer I wanted to be.

It would not be accurate to say I was an Army brat or that mine was a military family, but it would not be far from true. My father was an Army officer in World War II and Korea. He remained active in the Reserves until retirement. My maternal grandfather was Army too. He fought Aguinaldo in the Philippines and served on the Western Front in the Great War, earning a battlefield commission. My parents met in Leavenworth, Kansas. Grandfather never talked about his wartime experiences and never claimed to have been an officer, but the endless hours I spent playing around the pool at the Fort Leavenworth Officers' Club as a visiting youth carried evident meaning. I played at soldiers, collected armies of toy figurines, built models of military equipment and warships, consumed military histories, and dreamed of going to West Point. I tried to understand the process of combat and taught myself to design and create war games, the kind of board strategy games that still excite the interest of hobbyists across America. Vietnam changed that.

By the early 1960s my father, stymied on Army promotions, had gone into sports journalism. The family moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico, where my father had been hired as the first manager for the city's Hiram Bithorn Stadium, a site for Winter League baseball and a lot more besides. It was from San Juan that I watched my country march into the Vietnam war, something

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that greatly interested me as an Army wannabe. Coming of political consciousness, I agreed with President Kennedy's policies, thrilled at the exploits of Army heroes such as Captain Roger Donlon at the Nam Dong Special Forces camp in 1965, and thought the enemy would get their due when President Johnson decided to commit American ground forces to South Vietnam. Expecting to serve, I set out to learn everything I could about Vietnam, which was difficult in San Juan because of the limited English-language media and the poor libraries. Nevertheless I plunged into the effort and began by studying the French in Indochina, the immediate antecedents to Americans in Vietnam. I discovered that events in Southeast Asia were a great deal more complex than I had imagined. But my basic stance was the same.

It was actually the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic that first knocked a chink in my ideological armor. San Juan, only a couple of hundred miles away, was a very good platform to witness that event, and it became evident that U.S. moves there belied the aims enunciated by the White House. That raised questions for me, which gradually deepened as I read weekly newsmagazines about the progress in Vietnam, only to see war maps that showed essentially the same situation over a period of three years. Meanwhile, I saw the civil rights protesters as righteous but rejected Vietnam dissenters as wrong—until the Tet offensive. The Johnson administration's claims of approaching victory, capped by the spectacle of a countrywide North Vietnamese offensive, were so disconcerting that I began to question all I thought I knew. Tet was followed in rapid sequence by Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, the assassinations of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and a violent eruption at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In truth, 1968 was a stunning year.

It was also the year that I began to line up the requisite support for an application to West Point. My father had plentiful and sufficient contacts to sustain such a candidacy. But I had begun to doubt American motives, though I had not joined the ranks of dissenters. Nevertheless, something was not right in the progression from France to America in Vietnam. Those doubts led to some discomfort within my family and to arguments with and estrangement from my father, who supported the war. I gave up the goal of an Army career and the idea of going to the U.S. Military Academy. As I started my senior year in high school I applied to and was accepted at Columbia College, where I originally intended to pursue my studies of French Indochina. There. My cards are on the table. I know that transformation was at the heart of the growth of American opposition to the war in Vietnam because it happened to me.

At an early stage in this project, my editors asked me to write of my own experiences as part of a more limited study focusing on the antiwar movement. I assembled such a narrative. Because that experience is directly rele-

vant to the theme I develop here—the narrowing envelope for American leaders in Vietnam—I have retained portions of that material and present it later in the book. These passages, which are distinguished in the text by being set in italic, illustrate how the Vietnam war affected individual Americans.



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## Acronyms

AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AFV	American Friends of Vietnam
ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand–United States (Treaty)
APC	armored personnel carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASA	Army Security Service
AWOL	absent without leave
CALCAV	Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam
CCI	Citizens Commission of Inquiry
CDEC	Combined Documents Exploitation Center
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICV	Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief Pacific
CO	conscientious objector
COINTELPRO	Counterintelligence Program
CORDS	Civil Operations and Rural Development Support
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CREEP	Committee to Re-elect the President
DAO	Defense Attaché Office
DAR	Daughters of the American Revolution
D4M	December 4th Movement
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
FLM	Front for the Liberation of the Montagnards
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FULRO	Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées
FWF	Free World Forces
GI	government issue (term for a soldier, in use since World War II)
H&I	harassment and interdiction (an artillery tactic)

**xxvi**     **Acronyms**

HES	Hamlet Evaluation Survey
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
ICCS	International Commission for Control and Supervision
ID	identification
IDA	Institute for Defense Analyses
INR	Bureau of Intelligence and Research (State Department)
IRS	Internal Revenue Service
ISA	International Security Affairs (unit of the defense secretary's office)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JGS	Joint General Staff
JFK	John Fitzgerald Kennedy
LBJ	Lyndon Baines Johnson
LZ	landing zone
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACSOG	MACV Studies and Observation Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MIA	missing in action
MP	military police
MSUG	Michigan State University Group
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NLF	National Liberation Front
NPAC	National Peace Action Coalition
NSA	National Security Agency
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
NSDM	National Security Decision Memorandum
NSG	Naval Security Group
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
NYPD	New York Police Department
OPLAN	Operations Plan
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PF	Popular Forces
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
POL	petroleum, oil, and lubricant
POW	prisoner of war
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRU	Provincial Reconnaissance Unit
PSDF	People's Self-Defense Force

PX	post exchange
RF	Regional Forces
RLG	Royal Laotian Government
ROAD	Reorganization Objective Army Division
ROK	Republic of Korea
ROTC	Reserve Officers' Training Corps
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SANE	National Committee for a Safe Nuclear Policy
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SEAC	Southeast Asia Command (World War II)
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit (CIA Hmong force)
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SOG	Studies and Observation Group (MACV)
SPI	Simulations Publications Inc.
STAG	Student Agitation
SUNY	State University of New York
SVN	South Vietnam
SWP	Socialist Workers' Party
TPF	Tactical Patrol Force (NYPD)
UN	United Nations
UPI	United Press International
VA	Veterans Administration
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars
VIG	Vietnam Information Group
VNA	Vietnam National Army
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force (South Vietnam)
VPA	Vietnam People's Army
VVAW	Vietnam Veterans Against the War
WIEU	Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update
WSAG	Washington Special Actions Group





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# Vietnam



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## ■ April 1971: Veterans at War

They came in cars, in buses, by train and plane, in their scruffy hundreds, disillusioned veterans of America's war in Vietnam. It was April 1971. Richard Nixon sat in the White House. At his command, U.S. forces in Southeast Asia were supporting an invasion of Laos by the Vietnamese allied to the United States. To avoid the word invasion, the Nixon administration had characterized the Laotian operation as something else, anything else, calling it an incursion, as it had done the previous year in Cambodia. So the veterans styled their march on Washington as an "Incursion into the County of Congress." The events of that week changed the course of the Vietnam war, a change wrought on the banks of the Potomac, not in the paddy fields of South Vietnam.

■ ■ ■ The incursion came as no surprise to the powers that be in the nation's capital. The White House knew by early March there would be a huge antiwar demonstration in Washington on April 24. Intense feeling was palpable. On March 1 a bomb went off on the Senate side of the Capitol. A faction of the Students for a Democratic Society known as the Weathermen took credit. Nixon hung suspended between his preferred war strategy and the American people's evident distaste for that course. Just before the Laotian invasion, polls by the very credible American Institute for Public Opinion showed that 59 percent of Democrats opposed the war and—worse—61 percent of Republicans held identical views. The better-known Gallup poll had the president's approval rating hovering around 50 percent, while the Harris poll showed just a 43 percent favorable rating. H. R. ("Bob") Haldeman, the president's chief of staff, recorded in his diary that Nixon "clearly has sort of a mystic feeling about the Laotian thing."<sup>1</sup> But that operation proved to be an agonizingly slow failure. The president's rating in the Harris poll fell even more.

The Nixon White House, acutely sensitive to any whiff of antiwar activity, doubled and redoubled the stakes in its efforts to neutralize opposition. It employed every tool in its bag of tricks, and they were many. At the Department of Justice, Attorney General John Mitchell enlisted the aid of state and local police forces. Nixon had created a law enforcement assistance program

## 2 April 1971

in 1969 to help local jurisdictions. Under the guise of cooperation, Mitchell's officials asked them for information on antiwar activities. The U.S. military monitored dissent in its ranks, which revealed the activities of antiwar veterans who were attempting to reach out to their comrades still on active duty. Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had a major operation of its own specifically targeting the antiwar vets.

A group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) was following up public hearings it had held in Detroit in January, where members had exposed a multiplicity of arrogant acts, bad behavior, and even American atrocities they had witnessed as soldiers in Vietnam. One of the group's leaders, a former U.S. Navy officer named John Kerry, had proposed the march on Washington. Kerry's idea was well thought-out; he had come to a national office meeting with a prepared presentation and a poster-board display. California coordinator Barry Romo suggested calling the action "Dewey Canyon III," in a reference to the Laotian invasion.<sup>2</sup> A period of planning and fund-raising ensued. Now the veterans' incursion loomed, scheduled for the four days immediately prior to the big national protest. The veterans made no secret of their intentions. Their March 1971 newsletter encouraged attendance and jocularly warned, "No air cover will be provided (despite the forty members of a crash and rescue helicopter unit in 'Nam who have joined VVAW) so bring [your] own ponchos, sleeping bags, old uniforms and medals."<sup>3</sup> From the beginning they emphasized that the march would be a peaceful protest.

The FBI kept Washington officials apprised. The Bureau had many sources of information. For one thing, FBI special agents were avid scavengers, pocketing every paper found at a VVAW office and every leaflet from a demonstration. Garbage cans and mailboxes outside offices were fountains of data. Undercover operatives had infiltrated the veterans. The agents sought data from local police departments that had their own channels into VVAW. Not that the vets were doing anything in secret—indeed, plans for an encampment in Washington, combined with lobbying efforts and demonstrations, constituted an organizing tool for VVAW. Nevertheless, declassified FBI records show that the Nixon administration knew the basics more than two weeks before Kerry announced Dewey Canyon at a news conference in the office of Massachusetts congressman Michael J. Harrington on March 16. The FBI had detailed knowledge of the plans by the end of March, and it followed subsequent changes.

That was not all. The vets hoped to put 5,000 comrades on the ground in Washington. The Bureau did its best to prevent that. According to FBI records, special agents in Indianapolis and elsewhere used contacts with car rental companies to learn of VVAW efforts to hire automobiles for caravans. In New York other FBI agents found out that Ed Damato and Joe Urgo of the VVAW national office had asked the Penn Central Railroad about hiring a

special train to transport veterans from Boston and points south to Washington. The vets were told the railroad had no spare equipment. Coaches could be added on scheduled runs, but arrangements had to be made through the national coordinator for the march, Jack Smith, a former Marine sergeant with two tours in Vietnam who lived in New Haven. Before Smith could do anything, it was too late. It is still unknown what kind of pressure Nixon administration operatives put on the Penn Central, but the mere fact of an FBI inquiry often has a chilling effect. Subsequent Bureau reports noted that VVAW had reserved seats on other trains to Washington.

On March 30 the FBI ordered undercover informants among the VVAW's ranks to accompany the veterans on their Washington mission. Bureau headquarters confirmed the orders on April 1. In California, for example, a VVAW organizer recalls one member who dressed in a fatigue shirt with captain's bars but could not produce the document issued to soldiers leaving the military. The man threw himself into march preparations with gusto and flew to Washington with the rest of the California contingent. Once on the ground he disappeared. Special agents in the field reported on the pre-march activities of Kerry, VVAW southeast regional coordinator Scott Camil, and others. Preparatory activities in Albuquerque, Atlanta, Jacksonville, San Francisco, Milwaukee, Kansas City, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Detroit, New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Washington itself were detailed by those cities' FBI offices. The vets' fund-raising for the march was also featured in FBI reports, as were appeals from clergy for food donations to the encampment.

Because the VVAW action required a place for the protesters to stay, this presented a ripe opportunity for obstruction. At first the vets planned to camp on land owned by Georgetown University. Suddenly the administrator who had given permission was fired, and VVAW was told the agreement had been canceled. The vets tried to make an arrangement with American University, but that proposal went nowhere. Then local organizer Mike Phelan tried to obtain a permit for a camp near the Lincoln Memorial. The National Park Service said that obtaining such permission required three months. The incursion was just weeks away. Organizers finally requested The Mall only as a gathering place and a location for nighttime meetings. This search for a campsite became a touchstone of the entire Dewey Canyon III march.

Meanwhile, the vets were beset with all the headaches associated with trying to bring off such an ambitious protest. They sent solicitation letters to at least nine major food companies, including General Foods, Howard Johnson's, Oscar Mayer, and Bird's Eye. A vegetarian collective in Indiana donated some food. Portable toilets were donated. Friendly Washingtonians were asked to house notables but not the vets themselves. A special effort to cultivate Washington and Capitol Hill police included an open letter explaining the vets' purpose, aimed at minimizing friction. Public relations was a huge lacuna that veteran Tim Butz tried to fill. From New York the

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VVAW national office sent one of its members, Mike Oliver, to help local organizers.

Phelan tried to get permits for every planned activity as a means of minimizing potential confrontations. Lots of difficulties arose. VVAW wanted to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery, but the Park Service rejected this innocuous event. The Justice Department went to court to block a march near the White House, claiming security problems, even though it had already given permission for the larger march through downtown Washington by the National Peace Action Committee.

The high point of the planned veteran protests was to come on the last day, April 23, where The Mall rose up to the Capitol. The veterans wanted to stage a symbolic ceremony in which they returned their combat medals to the U.S. government. The idea was for them to line up, make whatever statement they wanted, then deposit their medals in a body bag, which VVAW would present to Congress. The group had requested permits for this event plus an opening-day protest on Capitol grounds. Given their other troubles, VVAW expected problems here, especially since Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, as president pro tem of the Senate, controlled the Capitol grounds. Agnew was famously leery of the Movement and had been Nixon's point man for a political offensive against dissent, labeling protesters an "effete corps of impudent snobs."<sup>4</sup>

Issues came to a head on the afternoon of April 15, when the VVAW's Jack Mallory met with officials from the Office of the Vice President. Agnew staffer Alice Lane huffed that Mallory "did not look like a former captain."<sup>5</sup> Mallory, who had been in Vietnam with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in 1969–1970, swallowed the insult and got down to business. Remarkably, Agnew's people permitted the event, although they refused to approve the climactic medal return, citing security concerns related to the huge antiwar rally scheduled soon after. The vets countered that a number of senators and congressmen were going to participate. Agnew's representative shot back, "The vice-president doesn't care about the senators and congressmen."<sup>6</sup> Surprised at getting anything at all, the vets left with half a loaf. What VVAW did not know that spring afternoon was that Nixon's people thought they had the veterans in a trap.

■ ■ ■ A little after eleven o'clock the next morning, Richard Nixon, a president who actively followed those things that mattered to him, telephoned aide Charles W. ("Chuck") Colson. Sitting back in their White House offices, the two agreed that the latest developments held potential for pro-war "hawks." Referring to the chances of inflaming their supporters, Colson remarked, "Demonstrations are gonna help us there."

“Particularly,” Nixon agreed, “since Agnew’s allowin’ ’em to do it up at the Capitol. That’s good. Just let those people up there see those people, right?”

Colson remarked, “If the Vietnam veterans, uh, put on their show this week, it’s just gonna make, uh, it’s gonna make the hardhats ’n’ the . . . rest of our coalition, uh, it’s just gonna stiffen their back.”

“Right,” said Nixon. The president seemed very pleased.

Colson finished, “I hope they put on a little show ’cause, uh . . . it’s important that our, our people get that reinforcement.”<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the president and his political aide were working a conscious strategy against the protests. Nixon took the lead, defining the terms and aiming to create a situation that would allow him a free hand in the Vietnam war. Colson would be his point man, although every official in the Nixon White House contributed. As early as January, legal counsel John Dean had begun collecting information on demonstrations in the spring, and in February, about the time VVAW decided to carry out Dewey Canyon, the White House considered creating a task force to plan countermeasures. This led to the so-called Intelligence Evaluation Committee, an interagency group chaired by Robert C. Mardian, the assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department’s Internal Security Division.

Haldeman rode herd on all this. He monitored the paper flow and floated ideas, lining up the main options. Chief domestic adviser John Ehrlichman worked on specifics, such things as protest permits and security arrangements. Speechwriters Patrick J. Buchanan and Ray Price suggested ways to polish Nixon’s image, for example, contacting a student who in early March had sent a letter decrying the protesters’ tactics.

Colson made suggestions too. On March 2 he advised Nixon to telephone singer Frank Sinatra, whom he saw as being disenchanted with the liberals. “Sinatra has the makings of another Al Capp,” Colson wrote, referring to a prominent cartoonist who had spiraled from the Left to the Right. “Most of our Hollywood friends believe that Sinatra is the most influential celebrity in the country because if he goes, so go many other prominent figures, particularly new young stars.”<sup>8</sup> Nixon made the call and later instructed aides to make Sinatra a present of a golf ball. The administration also approached the dairy industry with promises of milk price supports to solidify the backing of American farmers. Nixon mollified big business, too, ordering the Justice Department to drop antitrust suits against the corporate giant International Telephone and Telegraph. On March 25 Nixon met a group of college student government representatives to receive a resolution voted by the National Student Congress, which Colson had bragged some months earlier was “back” under administration “control.”<sup>9</sup> Reminded by Colson that “poll data indicates that we do not stand well politically with the 18–20 year old vote” (hardly a surprise) and that “a better organized effort is neces-

sary,” Nixon met with Haldeman, Colson, and administration youth envoy Robert Finch for a strategizing session in his hideaway office at the Old Executive Office Building on April 7.<sup>10</sup> The sudden reappearance of Finch, a close adviser during and after the 1968 campaign but who had long been frozen out of the president’s councils, is indicative of White House fears.

But the major elements of the Nixon effort were two: an attempt to minimize the impact of the veterans’ march, on the one hand, and the creation of a counterweight in the form of labor supporters from the construction industry—“Hard Hats,” in Nixon speak—on the other. The alliance with the Hard Hats had been a special project of Colson’s, partly to offset growing disaffection with the war by American labor, and partly to project an image of mass public support. Labor backing had begun to disintegrate. At Colson’s behest, Nixon massaged Hard Hat leaders with a phone call to Peter Brennan, president of the New York Building Trades Union, in early March. But the Hard Hats were souring too. Colson believed that this was due to cuts in federal payments for construction. The president admonished him to show statistics demonstrating the opposite. The White House hoped the Hard Hats would neutralize the protesters.

As veterans began their trek to Washington, the White House paid close attention. Colson and Nixon discussed the upcoming protests over the phone the evening before the crucial VVAW-Agnew meeting on the Capitol permits. Their conversation not only reviewed tactics they expected the vets to use, including “guerrilla theater,” but also covered Colson initiatives from the creation of a group of *pro-war* veterans to talk of the Hard Hats. Colson reported back to Nixon the next day and again on April 16. They scheduled a White House meeting to discuss the Hard Hat strategy, for which Colson prepared by speaking to labor leaders. As for the vets, the White House coaxed a statement out of Alfred Chamie, national commander of the American Legion. Though not as strident as what Colson had hoped for, it deplored “another Washington demonstration, however altruistic may be the motives of the sponsoring organization.”<sup>11</sup> On the seventeenth Nixon discussed Agnew’s permit with J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI. Once the VVAW action began, focus shifted to new countermeasures. On April 20 Nixon and Colson resolved to charge that VVAW vets were phonies, not veterans at all, encouraging press coverage of that charge, and to get groups such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) to denounce the protest. Then, as VVAW did its thing, Colson actually met labor leader Brennan at the White House.

President Nixon had no intention of sticking around through the protests. On the afternoon of April 23, as the vets threw away their medals, he left to visit daughter Julie in Virginia Beach. After dinner Nixon went on to Camp David. But before leaving Washington the president held a lengthy discussion of the VVAW demonstration with aides. Then he placed no fewer than

three telephone calls to Herbert R. Rainwater of the VFW, encouraging him to demand airtime on the television networks equal to that given to coverage of the VVAW protesters, so that Rainwater could defend Nixon's war policy. Then the president phoned Dean and ordered that he be kept up-to-date on the vets' activities. Dean ended up sending hourly situation reports.

Rainwater's statement would say, "I realize the remnants of uniform, the toy guns, and spilled red ink are colorful and considered newsworthy—but I question the value of this type of publicity to the American people."<sup>12</sup> Unknown to Rainwater, White House officials privately considered him a clown.

Meanwhile, the other big issue for the White House had already come to a head: the Vietnam veterans were in fact camping on The Mall, in defiance of court orders that were Nixon's responsibility to enforce. The administration had brought Army regulars to the capital and had plenty more security forces. What would it do?

■ ■ ■ All through the day on Sunday, April 18, veterans trickled into Washington. As darkness fell, around 900 vets had registered with organizers. The small turnout initially sparked much soul-searching. VVAW was not that well known, despite the full-page ad it had taken out in the *New York Times* and the one donated by *Playboy*. The group had demanded that participants bring proof of their military service, undoubtedly dissuading some who might have participated. Also, the spring had been a cold one. There were many possible explanations. Numbers gradually built: there were 1,100 by the next day, and ultimately 2,300 were counted. Historians of VVAW calculate that including those who came for only one or two days, several thousand veterans may have attended. Though this fell short of hopes, such concerns were swept away.

The drama began at Arlington Cemetery on April 19. The vets marched across Memorial Bridge to the cemetery shortly after sunrise. There were a few problems with rush-hour traffic. Then they were denied access. The veterans were accompanied by four Gold Star Mothers—women whose sons or husbands had died in Vietnam—including one whose boy was actually buried in Arlington. The National Park Service closed and chained the gates, unprecedented in Park Service history. VVAW national officer Al Hubbard used a megaphone to denounce "the insensitivity of the government and the military."<sup>13</sup> One frustrated veteran hurled a toy rifle at the gate. It shattered. Another threw a mess kit. Seeking out the ground at the base of the hill where the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is located, the vets held their memorial service, presided over by the Reverend Jackson Day, an Army chaplain who had served in Vietnam. Then vets and the Gold Star Mothers laid two wreaths at the gate. Some wanted to storm the fence, but others backed

them down, arguing that a fight at the cemetery would make them the bad guys. Among the voices of moderation were John Kerry and Scott Camil.

The marchers retraced their steps and, recrossing the Potomac River, stepped down The Mall in cadence, chanting, "Bring our brothers home!" Along the way they passed women of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which was holding its convention in Washington. "Son," one woman called out, "I don't think what you're doing is good for the troops."

"Lady, we *are* the troops," the veteran replied.<sup>14</sup>

Pointedly, President Nixon addressed the DAR convention but had nothing whatever to do with the antiwar veterans. The United States would stop the war, he said, when there was "a South Vietnam able to defend itself against communist aggression."<sup>15</sup>

Reaching the Capitol steps, the veterans rallied there. Four members of Congress addressed the crowd: liberal Republican Paul McCloskey and Democrat Don Edwards from California, and Democrat Bella Abzug and Republican Ogden R. Reid from New York. On behalf of the VVAW executive committee, veteran and organization founder Jan Barry presented sixteen demands for ending the Vietnam conflict. Afterward most vets returned to The Mall and established a campsite at the heart of this esplanade, close to Congress. Some began lobbying efforts that very afternoon. VVAW garnered tremendous media attention; notably, Walter Cronkite featured the veterans as his lead story on the widely watched *CBS Evening News*.

The VVAW campsite challenged the Nixon administration. The vets had sued the Department of the Interior to permit their marches and their camp. The previous Friday the Justice Department had sought a restraining order prohibiting a camp on The Mall, which was granted by Judge George L. Hart of the U.S. District Court. On Monday lawyers for VVAW appealed that order to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. The veterans were being prevented from holding their encampment despite contrary precedent—the Poor People's March and the Boy Scouts of America had previously used the exact same area. The appeals court reversed Hart's order, effectively granting VVAW its camp permit. The administration immediately went to the Supreme Court to reinstate the restraining order, with Assistant Attorney General L. Patrick Gray certifying that the government stood ready to enforce it.

Solicitor General Erwin N. Griswold argued before the Supreme Court on April 21 that the VVAW encampment "would cause a serious problem to maintaining public order and could lead to substantial public health hazards with inevitable environmental pollution."<sup>16</sup> Thus the veterans were faced with the possibility of arrest simply for their presence on The Mall. A long and earnest debate ensued, and in a late-night vote, the vets decided to stay. The vote was pretty close, and a motion to make it unanimous carried easily. With them were sympathetic legislators, including Massachusetts senator

Edward Kennedy, New York congressman Ed Koch, and others, acting as a sort of human shield.<sup>17</sup> Visitors also included soldiers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, the Old Guard, which mounts the honor guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Relying on their military experience, the vets set up a security perimeter. As Air Force veteran Joe Urgo, a member of the national staff, stood his watch in the early-morning hours, some men with short-cropped hair approached and told him they were active-duty GIs from Fort Bragg.

"I'm one of the organizers of this," Urgo replied. "How do you boys like it?"

One of them answered, "You know, we're on alert to put you down."

"So what're you going to do?" the VVAW man asked.

"Don't worry," they assured Urgo, "the trucks will never roll. We put sugar in the gas tanks."<sup>18</sup>

The vets made their camp. The Park Police, which had put up an observation post to peer across The Mall, told VVAW that they would certainly not arrest anyone who was not sleeping, so the veterans tried to pull an all-nighter. Lots of coffee went down that night. Some vets did not make it, but no one was touched. The next morning the *Washington Daily News* headlined: "VETS OVERRULE SUPREME COURT."<sup>19</sup>

Much of that morning the Nixon White House frantically considered what to do about the defiant vets. Nixon finally ordered Mitchell not to use the police. As Haldeman recorded, "Our decision ended up to be that we just continue negotiating and try to negotiate the issue to death."<sup>20</sup> Vets demonstrated outside the Supreme Court, culminating in the only arrests of Dewey Canyon III—125 persons, including Barry Romo. But Mitchell had to ask that the injunction be lifted. Furious at the administration's failure to deliver on its promise of enforcement, Chief Justice Warren Burger sent the matter back to Judge Hart. He was angry, too, telling Justice Department lawyers, "This Court feels that one equal, coordinate branch of government, the Judiciary, has been dangerously and improperly used by another." The courts had been "degraded by this whole affair." Hart thundered, "If you did not wish to enforce that deadline, you should have come to this Court and had that injunction dissolved and removed."<sup>21</sup> The judge did precisely that. Nixon suffered an embarrassing defeat.

Amid the legal and political maneuvering, VVAW proceeded with its lobbying and demonstrations. Guerrilla theater, in which protesters played character roles to illustrate their concerns, figured prominently. A typical VVAW skit was a mock patrol randomly grabbing people off the street on suspicion of being enemy guerrillas. Teams of vets pulled off such skits all around Washington. Veteran Bill Crandell led one guerrilla theater team that played on the steps of the Capitol to great effect. Inside the building, veterans had varying success. Jan Barry was insulted by the congressman from his district. Texas vet Terry DuBose discovered that Senator John Tower would not

even open the door to him. John Lindquist saw Wisconsin Democratic representative David R. Obey, who was against the war, and conservative Democrat Clement J. Zablocki, a hawk—an encounter that went down only half as badly as expected. In the hallway Lindquist, a former Marine who had driven trucks to Khe Sanh in supply convoys, witnessed an incident as strange as he had ever seen. Around the corner came General Leonard F. Chapman, the Marine Corps commandant, in full uniform on a Capitol Hill mission to perform the trick of testifying that the Corps had come in under budget and would be returning money to the U.S. Treasury. A vet challenged Chapman in the hearing room and promptly unclipped the Purple Heart from his fatigues, slapping it down on the table in front of the general. Chapman grimaced and fled down a side corridor.

On April 21, while the vets' lobbying was in full swing, Nixon called Colson from the Lincoln Sitting Room of the White House. The president wanted to know how Colson's meeting with the Hard Hats had gone. "What do they think of these, uh, these, uh, that crowd on The Mall down there?" he asked.

Colson laughed. He reported that the construction workers thought the vets were real bums and had asked, "How do you keep people like this off the streets?" However, the Hard Hats were not going to do anything overt.

Nixon agreed. "That's right. They ought, they shouldn't fight veterans."

Colson thought the Hard Hats were also partly dissuaded by the thought that the VVAWers actually *were* veterans, but then added, "Of course, we know they're not."

Nixon shot back, "A lot of 'em aren't, yeah."<sup>22</sup>

The lobbying efforts, guerrilla theater, a smaller return march to Arlington (which actually got into the cemetery), a spontaneous nighttime candlelight procession around the White House, and other VVAW actions impressed many. The White House countered, with press secretary Ron Ziegler quoting Nixon's claim that only a few of the protesters were real Vietnam veterans. The vets were ready for that one. When a wire service reporter went to the campsite to check, she would be shown a host of service records that proved the opposite. The one big mistake came from the VVAW's own organizer Al Hubbard, who had said on television that he was a former captain in the Air Force. Nixon's people looked up Hubbard's file and discovered he had only been a sergeant, then leaked this to broadcaster Lawrence Spivak. Hubbard had to acknowledge the fact. But this was the only case the White House could find to bolster Nixon's claim, and Hubbard was, in fact, a veteran.

Any embarrassment caused by the "phony veteran" problem was more than wiped out by the powerful statement John Kerry made before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22. There he posed the basic issue squarely:

In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse,<sup>23</sup> is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart.

Kerry argued that the veterans had found Vietnam's conflict to be a civil war. Many Vietnamese saw no difference between communism and democracy, he said. "They only want to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bombs with napalm burning their villages." The VVAW spokesman decried the profligate U.S. use of firepower, calling it a war crime; the falsification of "body counts"; and the poor service provided by the Veterans Administration and its hospitals to returned veterans. "Where are the leaders of our country?" Kerry asked. The commanders had, in effect, deserted the troops. "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"<sup>24</sup>

The next day the veterans staged their medal giveback ceremony. Through Agnew, Nixon's people had contrived to have a wood and wire wall erected on the Capitol steps to prevent access. That backfired. Maine senator Edmund Muskie and others appeared and acknowledged the veterans' contributions. Muskie, expecting to be a presidential candidate in 1972, had taken up the antiwar banner. Denied entrance to the Capitol, the vets changed their plans. Instead of filling a body bag with medals, they stepped up to the wall, made individual statements, and threw their medals over it. One iconic photograph of the Vietnam war era came from this demonstration: angry veteran Rusty Staub hurling his medals full tilt. John Kerry tossed decoration ribbons and some medals given to him by vets who could not attend. Inquiries with the Capitol Police, historians of Congress, and the Capitol architect in the 1990s revealed that no one knows what happened to the medals. In any case, the ceremony proved as powerful as the Kerry testimony. The veterans left Washington, Bill Crandell recalls, feeling they had "moved the town."<sup>25</sup>

■ ■ ■ The vets may have been exhilarated, but they were not safe. Colson continued his dirty tricks. Back in New York, Hubbard would be arrested at another protest within a couple of weeks. Colson and Nixon chortled on May 5 when the aide reported Hubbard's arrest. Colson also leaked claims that Kerry had left The Mall and stayed in comfort at the Georgetown home of a Washington socialite, dining at fine restaurants. A Detroit reporter was given the information, and his article was then sent

anonymously to hundreds of Movement figures, using plain envelopes. Not just top VVAW members were vulnerable. Upon his return to California, veteran Steve Miller was arrested almost immediately, not for protesting but because an FBI informant had planted drugs in his refrigerator.

When the vets came to Washington, the Vietnam war was a conflict that had been waged by American presidents on several fronts. One, in Southeast Asia, remained an affair of military proportions—soldiers on patrol, planes loosing bombs or ferrying troops, delicate alliances with the Saigon government. Another front, waged across conference tables and in back corridors, involved international diplomacy, from peace talks to appeals for help. The third front was at home, in America, where presidents struggled to retain the political upper hand for the war they wanted to conduct. Dewey Canyon III changed that. Henceforth there would be two *wars*, and the second of these the Nixon White House waged directly against Americans—veterans most prominently, but many others too. That represented a marked escalation of the political struggle over Vietnam.

The Laotian invasion and the vets' incursion on Washington did not start the new war. Harbingers of the shift had been in the air, and Lyndon Johnson had set the gears in motion. But Richard Nixon's frustration drove him to take more extreme measures, and the protest demonstrations sparked by Laos became the new war's biggest battle. Now the president went beyond political tactics, using the instruments of governmental power to strike directly at those Americans perceived as opposed to his policies.

Never had the veterans of America's legions fought their government over an issue of war and peace. Only once, amid the desperation of the Great Depression, had veterans marched on Washington—in June 1932—but then the issues had been benefits and bread and butter, not U.S. foreign policy. This was different. Never in the history of the United States had a government conducted political warfare against its own citizens. How had American politics come to this turn? Now there were opposing camps, each convinced that the future of the Republic depended on adopting the course it advocated, each determined to fight to the finish. How, indeed, had it come to this? The answers lie in the bitter roots of the Vietnam war.