

Recharged

Amnesty and the GI Movement Abide

While I was strutting around on Amnesty's glamour beat in those early months of 1975, and Eddie busied himself liaising with stragglers attempting to revive the GI Movement, Tod, between his obligatory getaways, did some heavy lifting on the public service campaign. Our PSA had quickly spawned two rivals, one from the armchair wing of NCUUA, the ACLU and the National Council of Churches, and the other from the Clemency Board itself. The government, a primary consumer of the public airwaves – not least for military recruitment - might have eventually hit on the PSA tactic themselves independently of the stimulus we provided. And yet when I trace the sequence of these campaigns it still amazes me that such powerful institutional players as these were again tagging well behind Safe Return's launch of the Burt Lancaster spot.

The Clemency Board distributed thirty second spots featuring two of its members. Notre Dame President Theodore Hesburgh addressed draft resisters, touting his self-proclaimed antiwar stance while urging them to come forward and seek mercy before the Board. The message aimed at deserters, delivered by a retired general, was purely informational about how to turn yourself in. At a moment when headlines like, "U.S. Amnesty Job Program Faltering," in the January 25th edition of the *Washington Post*, were appearing across the land, the government PSAs had an immediate impact and would increase the number of Clemency Board applications sevenfold in three weeks. But it only took a week after the blitz began for Gerald Ford's eleventh hour face saving decision to extend his earned reentry program another month until the first of March.ⁱ

Not surprisingly, the PSAs sponsored by the ACLU and NCC tracked a path similar to the government effort by channeling resisters to the Board or the brass, but with the critical distinction of providing the names of antiwar service groups or pro bono legal projects who could offer potentially valuable pre-surrender counseling, then track the resisters' cases when they went before the authorities.

We were proud at Safe Return to have placed at the center of our public service spot resistance to the Vietnam War, a stance irrelevant to the government and soft-peddled by the liberals. For many broadcast outlets, however, even Safe Returns' toned down appeal in which "amnesty" was only implied, not spoken, was too "controversial," as more than one station administrator wrote to inform us. The government campaign received most of the public service airspace, while the ACLU spot competed with ours in markets where amnesty was a topic less verboten. It was this contest of unequals that Tod disputed for months, arguing that our denial of airtime was in violation of the FCC fairness doctrine.ⁱⁱ

High level TV network executives or their lawyers took Tod's protests very seriously. Judging from the length and content of his letter, the Assistant General Attorney for NBC devoted real time to crafting his legalistic justification for refusing our spots. The thread common to a string of these rebukes was that Safe Return's advocacy for amnesty would require broadcasters to – not deny the government's allegedly neutral announcements – but require equal time for amnesty's opponents. The General Counsel of the Clemency Board also joined this chorus, and pushed directly against our efforts by distributing a nationwide "Memo to Station Managers." In it he contended that the only objective of

the government spots was “to inform, not argue,” and therefore they “did not create legitimate grounds for a demand of equal time.”

This was pure red herring. Given that amnesty was only by the thinnest margin clinging to the public’s postwar preoccupations, no organized opposition to the campaign had emerged, unless you want to count virtually the entire U.S. Congress; and, of course, latent rabid opposition was always to be assumed among the career military and the flag waving veterans’ service organizations like the American Legion and VFW. In the PSA campaign, the fairness doctrine most certainly applied because the concept of earned clemency pushed by the government was in direct opposition to the movement’s call for unconditional amnesty. But, however a given station manager or executive network big wig might have reflected privately on amnesty’s merits, he wasn’t about to crowd his corporate bosses or advertisers who typically massed on the traditional and privileged end of the political curve. And still we kept pushing. And so did the others in the wider movement, as the investment so many activists had committed to NCUUA was finally paying dividends.

The big splash for NCUUA came in in late January, when Gerry Condon announced his intention to come home from Canada as a direct challenge to Ford’s vengeful plan.

Learning of Gerry’s intention to return, Tod wrote to offer Safe Return’s full support with the “hope that we can still talk together about matters of mutual concern.” Tod always saw Gerry as one of the most articulate and politically developed voices among the exiles, and he regretted the occasions he had cast doubt on Gerry’s judgment or trustworthiness. But by this stage of events, Gerry had cast his lot with AMEX’s Leninist wing. He nonetheless conducted a relatively non-ideological campaign, while not failing

to condemn U.S. imperialism, as he moved around the country from one gig to another speaking before sympathetic, often college audiences. I see no evidence that Gerry ever responded to what was a genuine offer on Tod's part, although it was hard to say what form that might have taken; we did, however, give Gerry, and his NCUUA sponsorship, some decent coverage in the next issue of *Amnesty Report*.

A communique from NCUUA central at that time was addressed as much to the activist Left as to amnesty's broader grassroots community in sounding an alarm about the potential re-intervention of U.S. forces in Vietnam against a drumbeat of national headlines that plotted the troops grounding steadily from the North toward Saigon. NCCUA's mailing echoed a wider call among antiwar forces gathering in Washington at the end of January, prepared for the worst. I suppose the view from Safe Return was that this was purely prophylactic, since the odds of the U.S. reengaging militarily had already been shortened irreversibly by a mood of resignation shared alike on Capitol Hill and in the Pentagon that the war was already lost.

There was an element of nostalgia for the halcyon days of the antiwar movement among some in the old guard, including the NCUUA coordinator Irma Zigas, but also a legitimate apprehension that this long and bloody quest for Vietnamese independence might be stalled once again, or even denied; and this undoubtedly stirred an exaggerated sense of urgency and danger among elements of the activist Left. "End all aid to Thieu and Lon Nol," the dictators of South Vietnam and Cambodia respectively, screamed the banner slogan above a turgid eight page screed that, three days before the January 31st second anniversary of the peace accords, materialized from a clandestine corner of the Weather Underground. The demand was couched in a potentially deadly declaration:

“Tonight we attack the AID in Washington and the DOD in Oakland.” The bomb in a State Department office went off, injuring no one, but causing considerable damage; the bomb at the Oakland Induction Center was found and disposed of. The rage among this slice of America’s most privileged radical youth had in no way abated by 1975, when their tactic to ‘take up the gun’ struck most activists, including us, as even more bizarrely adventurous than it had been when the Weather faction first emerged from the ruins of SDS half a decade earlier.

Otherwise, these expressions of nervousness around Vietnam’s immediate prospects did not distract NCUUA from riding the momentum of its increasing visibility and outreach. On the heels of the antiwar assembly, and scheduled over the first three days of February, NCUUA hosted a “Convocation of Families” coordinated by two of its affiliates, Americans for Amnesty and Gold Star Parents for Amnesty, before whom Gerry Condon first surfaced from exile in an unannounced appearance. As reported by the well-known Washington columnist, Mary McGrory, Gerry told an emotion-stirred audience that, “if arrested... he will fight in court. If not he will travel the country speaking out against... President Ford’s newly extended clemency program.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are two points that can be made here of significance to the internal history of the amnesty movement. First, although Gerry Condon did not emerge under the sponsorship of Safe Return, his public surrender and subsequent media campaign stood on the shoulders and followed the playbook of all the similar actions we had organized before him. As for the coalition, NCUUA had finally begun to project a lobbying component for resister family members that was likewise a carbon copy of the work we had been long accomplishing with FORA. Neither of these significant moments, however,

represented a case of idle duplication of effort, but helped maintain a level of public awareness around amnesty, which was in turn channeled more and more into the halls of Congress.

To many amnesty supporters who were not read into to the internecine quarrels of the New Left, what FORA and Americans for Amnesty were doing separately did appear to be an unnecessary splitting of forces, and resources – which caused genuine conflict among some donors when they received competing appeals for money. This occurred increasingly, especially after NCUUA got in the mails - although never near the same scale as us - since our funding universes inevitably overlapped. From 1975 on, until Tod and I dissolved Safe Return two years later, a steady stream of letters appears in our files asking why we were not members of NCUUA. In one typical response Tod wrote, “Only in recent months have we noticed the kind of activity that seemed to make NCUUA a serious coalition. At first it seemed to consist of meetings and talk. We plan on reconsidering our position at our next board meeting.” In other words, we begged the question as the reference to a bogus board meeting underscores. If there had ever been a time when we could work constructively with NCUUA, the bad blood on all sides had buried that option well in the past.

To fend off the alienation of erstwhile supporters over our conflict with NCUUA now that the coalition’s profile was rising, we developed and distributed an impressive sheet of quoted encomiums under the heading, What Are They Saying about Safe Return? First in line was a straight forward description of our program, both retrospective and ongoing, that had run without editorial skewing in the *New York Times*. “The surrenders of deserters was coordinated by Safe Return to dramatize the cases of all men with legal

hangovers from the Vietnam War. The committee will also hold meetings around the country aimed at renewing interest in the future of returning exiles and deserters...” This was followed by flattering comments from other news outlets, the *Boston Globe* and the UPI, and quotations, many written by ourselves in letters they’d signed, from Burt Lancaster, Daniel Ellsberg, Bella Abzug and Paul O’Dwyer; and not to forget, the outdated judgment by Judith Miller covering the Simon/McNally surrender in the *Progressive* that Safe Return was “the most active and important amnesty organization” in the country.

Ford’s decision to extend the earned reentry program was covered widely, and certainly reenergized the fight for amnesty. But the extension was not popular within his own administration. Both Justice and Defense opposed it, and, according to the National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors (NISBCO), the additional month was a stingy compromise of the Clemency Board’s request to prolong the program for six months. NISBCO was keeping a close scorecard on the categories of resisters being processed by the government – still pitifully few - those in uniform, draft resisters, indicted or unindicted, or those who had already been convicted and served time in federal prisons. It was this latter group that stood the best chance of benefiting from an application for clemency, at least for those who gained full pardons and thus the erasure of their felony convictions. Others benefited according to the circumstances of their lives, and many of those who came forward, whether deserter or draft evader, expressed similar reasons for doing so, that they had gotten tired of looking over their shoulders. We again saw this sentiment expressed in print, but already knew it well from a comment

Ed Sowders had made around the time of his own surrender, about how he couldn't even afford to be stopped for jaywalking in the years he was on the lam.^{iv}

Every day clemency-related human interest stories circulated in the news. The Attorney General announced that the government was vacating warrants on two thousand evaders, bypassing the clemency procedure entirely. A similar trend among local prosecutors was reported by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* when the draft-related charges against 25 men in that city were likewise simply dropped. Articles related to the reception of deserters were typically more conflicted. In Kansas, The *Winfield Daily Courier* reported that an Army deserter who'd fled to Canada in 1969, would be permitted to keep his \$2.67 an hour menial job in Lawrence under the clemency program, despite the angry protests of local citizens led by an officer in the Marine Reserves.

We continued to hear as well from parents of military resister seeking our direct sponsorship for surfacing or repatriating their sons. To one deserter's mom Tod wrote, "We are distressed to think that a young man who tries to cooperate with the President's program cannot escape humiliation and harassment; we can't take the case, however."

Taking on clients always meant an extra burden for Tod, but Ed was able to respond to another mom with a deserter's empathy, suggesting she call a clemency information hot line set up by the National Council of Churches to get a referral for a local counselor in Indiana before her son arrived at the Ft. Benjamin Harrison processing center.

In a series of mailings, informational and fund appeals, we had urged our supporters and donors to write protest letters to the two liberal members of the Clemency Board, Theodore Hesburgh and Vernon Jordan. A woman named Dorothy Wright from Seattle was particularly successful in getting these men to respond. Hesburgh wrote somewhat

defensively that he “wouldn’t be in the program if it wasn’t an honest attempt to get hundreds of these youngsters out of jail (we have done it) and to relieve them of dishonorable discharges and convictions of felony (we have done that for hundreds, too).” As I have already commented we had no argument with a handful of draft evaders getting their felony raps erased. But Hesburgh’s reference to “dishonorable discharges” sharply revealed his ignorance on the nature of the military discharge system, and of the offenses that led to GIs receiving bad paper that was overwhelmingly several degrees less severe than “dishonorable,” and that the substitution of the Board’s clemency discharge would, in any case, be no less stigmatizing than the other forms of separations not under honorable conditions.

Vernon Jordan’s letter to Dorothy Wright was intriguing in its attempt to flush out the affiliation behind his correspondent’s use of “we.” After acknowledging his own concern about “less than honorable discharges, which minority groups suffer disproportionately,” he pressed her with “you don’t indicate what group you are representing, and I should like to know.” Whether or not that information would have influenced a man like Jordan for good or ill, here was a pragmatic operator who, unlike Hesburgh, occupied the real world, and – as head of the National Urban League - the minority card was in his deck when he needed it. Eventually, although not until early fall, Vernon Jordan redressed his error in joining the Board, submitted his resignation, and publically declared for universal, unconditional amnesty.

While the Executive Branch stumbled along passing this political hot potato from agency to agency, proposals for amnesty legislation began to multiply in the House and clog the agenda of the Judiciary Committee. On the progressive side alone there were separate

bills by Representatives McCloskey, Koch and Dellums. Bella Abzug retooled her own bill from the previous session, aligning it even more closely with the movement's universal and unconditional demands. Phil Hart had graciously signed a follow up cover letter for a second mailing in our PSA campaign, and in a letter to me dated February 12th, announced he would be introducing an unconditional amnesty bill "shortly" on the Senate side.

At Safe Return, Tod worked to build on these congressional developments by designing and launching our *Campaign 100*, which he later described in the pages of *Amnesty Report* as based on "an analysis of House Members' votes on three Indochina resolutions [for substantial cuts in aid to both Saigon and Phnom Penh] over the past eight months. From these data, and from liberal Congress-rating groups, Safe Return has compiled a list of one hundred Congresspersons who we believe can potentially be won to support for unconditional amnesty. We urge the amnesty community to concentrate its lobbying on these members," whose names, states and districts were laid out on a separate page in orderly columns.^v

This was an interactive campaign, and readers were asked to fill in and return a coupon with the name of their own representative who they were urged to write and, above all, to visit personally in their home districts or in Washington. Inevitably Tod's inventive side came into play when he announced that regular news releases would be mailed "to all who express interest via our new service, *Legislative Update*." What we couldn't accomplish in reality, we projected with smoke and mirrors. The so-called *Legislative Update* may have been created while brainstorming for the article; in this case I think

Tod actually did get off one such update, after which, to my recollection, it was never mentioned again.

There is a memo in the record that divides up the writing for this issue of *Amnesty Report* with an editorial, “After Clemency – Amnesty,” assigned to Eddie. He may have indeed provided the initial draft, since his own ambition to write and publish was now supported by academic work that was sharpening the skills necessary to do so. But there is content in the editorial that reflects a radical re-positioning of how we saw amnesty in the political present, and that thinking was undoubtedly the product of much conversation among us.

Amnesty, we informed readers of our newsletter, “to the degree it no longer represents an effective tool with which to combat pro-militarist elements in the US, the chances of it being achieved increase proportionately. Thus the human dimension of the amnesty issue must now take precedence over its antiquated political function. The equity question is still valid. Thousands of resisters need amnesty to regain equal status with the rest of working America.” Campaign 100, and related efforts to follow in the months ahead, reaffirmed our commitment to deserters not only as resisters, but now as workers, couched in the language of class struggle, but geared to play in the establishment as a warning of a long term potential loss of valuable assets in the labor market.

To say the least, our analysis of amnesty’s diminishing usefulness to focus the public mind on the lessons of Vietnam contrasted sharply with the opposite tendency promoted by those around AMEX magazine. AMEX argued that “principled groups and individuals in the amnesty movement... have an historic duty to perform, not only winning total amnesty, but also explaining the unjust nature of the Vietnam War.”

Indeed whatever public support existed for amnesty was to one degree or another premised on that characterization of the war. But it wasn't enough. The movement for amnesty was peaking, if it hadn't already peaked. The only real game, which would be prolonged only as long as Gerald Ford remained in the White House, was in Congress, and largely by default owing to the dismal failure of the president's earned reentry. Nowhere was the course of this congressional activity more closely observed and reported on than in AMEX magazine. An article in their summer 1975 issue describes a mid-April hearing chaired by Congressman Robert Kastenmeier before the Subcommittee on Courts and Civil Liberties of the House Judiciary Committee. With Democrats holding the House, and generally more sympathetic to some kind of compromise on amnesty that could be sold to the public, if not the movement, they made rough water for the Republicans who appeared to testify, not least, Clemency Board chairman Charles Goodell.

"The first day of the hearings," wrote AMEX's Kerry Gershowitz, "was devoted to questioning officials who implemented the earned reentry program." She says that Goodell gave "a falsified account," that it was war resisters' ignorance of the program that led to its failure. Kastenmeier, says Gershowitz, "was not impressed with Goodell's explanation." Goodell and other government official were further challenged by the movement's own talking points now fed into the mouths of the committee's liberal members. How did they justify a selective service system "which allowed 89% of draft age men to legally evade the draft?" Why were clemency applicants blowing off their assignments for alternative service, or why couldn't those who wished to fill them, even find such jobs? How could these clemency defenders naively spout that it was a simple

procedure for a vet with a bad discharge to just present himself before the Veterans Administration for an upgrade? Goodell had no answers, and was left holding the bag as the Democrats rubbed his nose in the president's debacle.

On the second day, it was a pair of Senators, Republican and Democrat, who came in for the drubbing according to AMEX. Jacob Javits and Gaylord Nelson outlined the bill they planned to introduce in the other chamber, which was essentially nothing more than an extension of the very clemency program that the committee had spent the first day debunking. Congressman Robert Drinin, the Jesuit priest representing a Boston constituency, accused the two Senators of spreading their punishment over all categories of war resisters equally. So "enraged" was Nelson by the committee's "fault finding" with their proposal, Gershowitz reported, that he "swept out of the room, practically knocking down a war resister's mother who had been introduced to him."

The final day the committee heard testimony from the pro-amnesty forces, headed by the ACLU's Henry Schwarzschild for NCUUA's institutional wing and Gerry Condon for the radicals, which ensured at least that the Movement's irreducible demands would be communicated unambiguously before the seated panel. Over the next several months, Kastenmeier and his colleagues would sift through the many bills that had been put before the Judiciary. A number were then successively floated bearing the committee's imprimatur as successive versions of the National Reconciliation Act. Bella Abzug called her bill the War Resister's Exoneration Act. None of them would ever reach the House floor, and if one had, even Abzug's, it would have done so without Safe Return's and much of the rest of the amnesty movement's seal of approval. Not only were all these legislative proposals still mired in one version or another of an administrative

numbers' game to sort out who was and who was not a bonafide war resister, but worst of all, they all managed to conspire that the word amnesty would never appear within them.

Moving parallel with amnesty, and to make explicit our ongoing opposition to a militarized American economy and foreign policy, we had created Alternatives to Militarism in February. ATOM was a non-profit cover to frame and promote a number of non-amnesty related issues. The foreign conflict habitually in the news in the early Seventies was taking place, not in South East Asia, but in the Middle East. Our sympathies were with the Palestinians whose very claim to existence as a national group was being denied and repressed by the State of Israel. I had been reading widely on the background of this conflict, and had been heavily influenced by Noam Chomsky's, *Peace in the Middle East*, in which he called for a one-state solution putting both nations under the same flag, and also an article by I.F. Stone, "Justice for the Palestinians," in the *New York Review of Books*. Tod had a close friend from law school, Abdeen Jabara, who was a Palestinian-American, and with his collaboration, we cooked up as a side line a speaker's bureau we called POME – Project on the Middle East.

To add a bit of gravitas to the initiative we had taken a sit down meeting with Professor Chomsky in his office at MIT seeking advice on how to proceed. Chomsky recommended we include journalist and civil rights activist Fouzi el Azmar, an Israeli Arab also sympathetic to the cause of Palestinian liberation, who was then based in Connecticut. In a letter to Dr. el Azmar in March, I wrote that, broadly speaking, our objective was "dezionizing elements of the American population concerned with

American military abuses, and to challenge interventionist assumptions and massive arms transfers to the Persian Gulf, etc.”

Apparently my own focus that spring was by no means exclusively on the frothy alliance with celebrities to organize and promote our D.C. extravaganza for amnesty. Working on POME appealed to both the intellectual and internationalist aspects of my politics. I had not only immersed myself in a body of literature on the Palestinian Question, but went so far as to apply for a scholarship – unsuccessfully – from the American Jewish Committee to pay for a trip to Israel organized by Catholic Campus Ministries that my uncle, Father Charles Cushing, a chaplain at Queens College, had told me about. But beyond circulating a brochure with the provocative title, *Diatribes or Dialog*, to canvas potential speaking engagements for Dr. el Azmar and Abdeen, primarily at universities, and actually booking a couple of gigs where we took an agent’s cut, we soon traded this internationalist arena for one equally topical, but more immediately revolutionary, that had been unfolding in Portugal over the past year, (taken up in the next chapter).

We had also created a second entity for ATOM under the acronym, MAP, which stood for Military Affairs Project, conceived as a research entity to track policy developments and soldier’s grievances within the new volunteer Army. In the manner that we presently positioned resisters as surplus labor in the class struggle, we were also - thanks largely to our contact with organizers in the Dutch Soldiers Union - beginning to see American GIs as workers in uniform, all the more now that they served in a strictly professional military.

The many paged Dutch report on the anti-NATO conference reached us sometime after the first of the year. As a document it was written in a classically Leninist analytical

idiom, and asserted that, in most of countries within the European Alliance, the soldiers' movements were growing. In response to the "crisis of capitalism" and its inherent contradictions, what had formerly been spontaneous expressions of soldiers' grievances were being organized into concrete demands against racism, gender discrimination, and national differences that directly attacked the foundations of military discipline.

As for "the task of socialist soldier organizations," which in the U.S. we simply called G.I. projects, it was "neither to wait for the mass of soldiers till they react against the command, nor to propagandize abstract programmatic demands," an indirect rebuke to the practice of groups like GIPA and VVAW who did just that. Instead, organizers were to support the struggles advanced by the soldiers themselves, to "raise political consciousness, and make clear the anti-proletarian function of the army." In the short term, the strategic goal was to expel U.S. forces from Europe, and, ultimately, "destroy the capitalist system and to fight against the army executing the interests of the bourgeoisie."

In our hearts we would have certainly shared such standard issue Marxist objectives that pointed toward a millennial dream. And indeed it is very clear as I revisit the written record of the period in which these activities occurred, that revolutionary rhetoric within the ranks of the American New Left was not limited to the New Communists in our midst - aka Maoists - who remained attached to the Leninist model of building the vanguard party of the workers. We ourselves did not shy in the mid-seventies from self-identifying as adherents of revolutionary socialism. Otherwise, we understood quite well that the Marxist formulations vernacular to the European Left, even among leftwing elements of

parliamentary parties who shared in governing, the Social Democrats, the British Labor Party, had all but zero currency among Americans outside the tiny margins of the Left. As already noted, after he had attended the Anti-NATO conference in Amsterdam in which Dave Cortright and GI activists from a half dozen other European countries had also participated, Ed Sowders toured the remaining projects of the GI Movement in the American South. Cortright himself was visiting military projects in Europe with our old friend Max Watts of RITA-Act, researching for a sequel to his book *Soldiers in Revolt*, and initially pegged to the dawn of the VOLAR era; it finally appeared in 1991 as an academic study which concluded that resistance in modern armies tended to be greatest in countries “with a high degree of capital accumulation,” a conclusion that was patently self-evident.^{vi}

There was a good deal of barely submerged tension between Dave Cortright and Safe Return, which, in retrospect, seems to have been rooted in the kind of clash we experienced with Dee Knight of AMEX, as much competition for the spotlight as a difference in politics or style. One example of where we rubbed against Cortright appears in a hand written note Ed Sowders had dashed off soon after his arrival in Amsterdam, alerting us to what transpired when he and Cortright were being interviewed by a local journalist. In a tone of exasperation Sowders winces, “Surprises never stop! Cortright passed himself off as a member of VVAW... it was sickening... Claimed VVAW leadership in the GI Movement with 25-30 active chapters...20-30M full membership.” Ed then concluded that Tod had been right in his opinion that Cortright’s objective in meeting with us before the anti-NATO conference was to “gather data for VVAW,” keeping tabs on a rival’s plans, I suppose.

Certainly Cortright's embrace of VVAW was – as we used to say, “opportunist” - if not exactly “sickening.” Cortright, not a war vet, was a radical conscientious objector constitutionally at home in the company of the movement's pacifist wing, and most recently, with *Soldiers in Revolt*, the Boswell of the GI Movement in which as a cornet player in an Army band on the home front he had played a role as both resister and organizer. From our earliest dealings with him, a sentiment only reinforced over time, I sensed that, not only did Cortright wish to keep Safe Return at arms' length, but that his animus toward us was particularly acute, even in a political milieu where we were often the object of criticism for what the resister Gerry Condon would years later express to me as our “Madison Avenue, go-it-alone style.” But Cortright, although a loner himself, proved career minded, and would eventually move toward institutional spaces where a radical pacifist could find support and advance his agenda. But, unlike the more trusting Ed Sowders, given that both Tod and I had already come to be wary of Cortright, it would hardly have surprised us that he felt it necessary to buff his leftwing credentials for the benefit of the Marxist comrades in Europe by embracing the loudly anti-imperialist VVAW, and then aggrandize the group's size and involvement in what remained of the GI Movement.

Ed Sowders was a more modest man, although himself equipped with excellent credentials to move within the post-Vietnam GI Movement. Under the wing of our MAP program, Ed now had an opportunity to strengthen that role at Safe Return. And it also fell to Ed to ensure that communications between Cortright and Safe Return remained open, as clearly was not the case with AMEX with whom we had completely broken. In a correct and non-sectarian tone, Ed had written a letter summarizing for Cortright his

February tour of four remaining GI projects at bases in the Southeast. He reported a general lack of enthusiasm among the project cadres interviewed about the revival of USSF, which were stated over a range of objections. One organizer opposed the idea outright arguing that RESIST already played that funding role for the projects. Another voiced the resentment of someone at a branch office put upon by the higher-ups at headquarters. The GI movement needed more organizers at the grassroots, not more fundraiser who would impose their views from above.

As the bearer of what his correspondent may have taken as bad news, if not bad faith, Ed stroked Cortright with the wane assurance that he was still hoping to review *Soldiers in Revolt*, and, after being turned down by the *Progressive*, mentioned having received some encouragement from both the *Nation* and the War Resister League's *WIN* magazine. But Ed kept his last paragraph for a question that he, and undoubtedly Tod and I, most wished Cortright to answer; was he "seriously considering re-forming USSF, or setting up a similar grouping?" "Please keep me informed," the letter ended somewhat awkwardly.

We certainly wanted to know what Cortright was up to. Would there be a USSF redux, or not? This conversation had been going on for several months prior to Amsterdam, and apparently, as one source in the record documents, I was – at least initially - in the thick of it. Having established contact with the Dutch military organizers, learned of the existence of a union of rank and file soldiers in their Army, and of their plans to host an anti-NATO conference, I wrote a memo to several individuals formally involved in some capacity with the United States Servicemen's Fund, at that point essentially defunct. I was inviting them to a meeting in late September 1974 at Safe Return offices in New

York well in advance of the Amsterdam event. My purpose was to give notice of that conference, and pass along the BVD organizers' answer to the question I had asked them: "What is the nature of participation by the U.S. delegation they feel would make the most positive contribution to anti-NATO work?"

I have already addressed the BVD's concern that the U.S. delegation leave its sectarian in-fighting at home. In this memo, I had further outlined the categories of inquiry the conference would focus on like the historical context in which the new American Volunteer Army had emerged, the challenge of how an anti-NATO politics might be stated in the U.S., the relationship of a program aimed at "de-occupying" Europe of American forces to a broader opposition to U.S. military presence elsewhere, and the a priori objective of creating a basis for "international united action."

Aside from this conference-related agenda, I suggested we might also "try to arrive at some common understanding of the current state of the GI movement." One recipient of this memo was David Cortright. As for the meeting itself, other than Cortright's appearance in our office as mentioned above, I have no recollection that it ever took place. There was some back and forth through the mails, and, no doubt, a string of phone conversations as well. Soon after I'd dispatched that memo, the responsibility for follow-up, as I have already shown, was put in Ed Sowder's hands after I was diverted back toward amnesty work on the art benefit, and later the celebrity lobby.

By March 1975, a general outline was emerging of how the residual energy of the GI movement would organically flow into VOLAR thanks to the information exchanges in a network that included the GIPA bulletin from San Diego, Ed Sowder's reports on his tour of Southern bases, *Up Against the Bulkhead*, the newspaper for sailors and GIs

distributed by our friends in the Bay Area, and – till then - by *Wildcat* (which had just ceased to publish) from the organizers at the Chicago Great Lakes Naval Station, and with Cortright himself through his and Max Watt's scouting of GI projects in Europe that had outlived the war, and from his base at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, where Cortright seems to have made a strong bid to resuscitate USSF which ultimately came to naught. Whoever he was dialoging with on the viability of that possibility, it was not with us.

What would soon become clear enough however - although by no means as early as the spring of 1975 – was that organizing GI's on the antiwar/anti-military model that had once defined the astoundingly effective work of USSF during the Vietnam War, would be replaced by a peacetime effort to channel servicemembers' grievances into a politics closer in spirit to organized Labor than to the rebellious, fragmented and semi-autonomous mass GI resistance of the war years. Certainly, whatever else kept the US factions still engaged in this arena, the one ideal all of us would have shared was the general anti-capitalist and internationalist politics in which the Amsterdam conference report was framed. But in the circles we worked with domestically, I am aware only of GIPA and a few of its satellites on U.S bases in Asia, and an RU core at VVAW national who would have been inclined to label their cadres in language akin to a "socialist soldiers' movement."

Conditions in Europe and the US were very different. In Europe, where many of the NATO countries still had conscript armies, when a given draftee put on the uniform he might have already been schooled politically within a socialist milieu. But here, at least as I argued in a long proposal put before the Seed Fund in San Francisco, the GIs of the

new volunteer era thrilled much less to the radical vision of his wartime counterparts than to demands related to long term employment around 'health and safety,' 'length of work day,' 'civil rights' (legal political activity), 'race and gender discrimination,' 'abolition of outdated appearance codes,' 'housing and forced separation from family,' and a 'reform of the UCMJ (the military's command-dominated Uniform Code of Military Justice)'.

"For most career soldiers their job is just a job," I wrote. "Appeals to patriotism ... do not automatically fill the ranks of the Armed Forces. Without the draft, without a patriotic cause, what appears to be evolving in the military institutions is a traditional boss/worker contradiction possibly conducive to unionism." We had now begun to push harder against the mysterious *Army Times* editorial the previous November which had vigorously opposed a military union that, as far as we knew, no one was talking about. But someone was, and we wanted to know who. Clearly, the official entity with the mission to advance a limited set of interests on behalf of the career military, the National Association of Uniformed Services (NAUS) - sanctioned by the Defense Department, - was spooked, and had been enlisted by the semi-official *Army Times* to sound the warning that any kind of union - except them - was "not consistent with military readiness, efficiency and the nation's best interests."

But maybe all was not as cozy between NAUS and the government as we initially imagined. Having gotten a copy of the Association's house publication, we learned that it was pushing intensely on the inside to make the Defense Department aware of what they called, a "deteriorating relationship" between the government and "our career military." "If something is not done to provide equity... in personnel procedure, pay entitlements, etc.... the deterioration may result in Unionism in the Armed Forces."

I read the phrase “personnel procedure,” as a coded reference to racist practices applying to promotion and advancement. Given the numbers of African Americans flocking to VOLAR, and the considerable pressure by officials from both inside and outside the DOD, the military would make some remarkable strides in the years ahead allowing more and more Blacks to move into the command structure, and stripping away at least the more overt forms of ingrained racism that had so long prevailed in the Armed Forces. Apparently, the threat of a union was not the only writing NAUS could see on the wall. As for “pay entitlements,” there was something off about that which I addressed in my proposal by summarizing an analysis from the *New York Times* of March 1st. According to the *Times*, “the Pentagon itself calculates that the average service person earns approximately 20% more in wages and benefits than his counterpart in the industrial sector.” But in reviewing the DOD budget for fiscal 1976, where 55% of the Defense expenditures went to payroll, the result of “real dollar incentives” that had become necessary to maintain troop levels when jump starting VOLAR, it was clear this left a smaller share for capital intensive weapons development on projects like the Trident Submarine and the B-1 bomber, “both under severe attack,” I wrote, “from DOD watchdogs in Congress.”

Still it wasn't just the decent pay that drew recruits to the new Army, but the combination of a general recession that had plagued the economy since the 1973 oil crisis and the fact that, according to what the DOD Manpower Director told a reporter for a March 11th article in the *New York Times*, the 17-21 year old labor market, considered unstable, was not of great interest to most American employers. Maybe NAUS was anticipating a slowing of the pace of legislated wage hikes or some manner of reduction in benefits.

Given that service members' pay was relatively high at the moment, I argued, it was more likely that the conditions in the military that might give rise to a union drive lay elsewhere, and specifically around the 'life style' issues I enumerated above. Primary among these was disgruntlement over "outdated appearance codes," which competed strongly with demands for rights of assembly and freedom of political expression when not on duty. The Seed Fund proposal was to support my salary for half a year while researching this question, a \$150 per week, which represented a decent raise from the \$125 I'm pretty sure we were paying ourselves at the time; it did not get funded.

Our closest allies in this ongoing work with GIs were our friends in the Bay Area, Steve Rees and Linda Alband. This was by no means an exclusive relationship where these west coasters subscribed to or endorsed uncritically whatever Safe Return was saying or doing. Nor were we always in agreement with them. What distinguished this connection from even those groups with whom we were on cooperative or friendly terms, was the level of communication and the degree of collaboration. At this stage, most of the contact from their side was maintained by Linda, and from our side by Eddie and Tod, all of whom enjoyed and practiced the art of letter writing. Later in life I would get to know Steve much better, but at the time I had spent little time with either of them, and would never really develop an independent relationship with Linda.

Linda, of course, had already been a strong contributor to the amnesty campaign, mostly around FORA, dating from the period when her close friend Sailor John McGarrity was on our staff. Now, in mid-March, Linda had written a long letter to Tod that covered a number of topics. Their big news was punctuated by her enclosure of the "first issue" of *Bulkhead* – a revamped version of their group's original GI newspaper – that she, Steve

and their local crew, including our old comrade Paul Cox, had just brought out. The new name was subtracted from the old, *Up Against the Bulkhead*. “We have to work out... a name change... with the new format based on living and working conditions and... breaking down the separations between military and civilians. We need a name that speaks to how people are feeling both inside and outside the military.” But they could find no consensus, so, until they “got it resolved,” she sighed, “we’re stuck with the old name.”

Linda also referred to a strategy proposal Steve had contributed to the latest issue of the GIPA bulletin that included a “critique of the practice and politics of RU, Weather Underground, etc.... as a general analysis of the GI movement, and the way that projects misinterpret or fail to interpret what’s going on now.” Her example was how an article in VVAW’s newspaper, *GI News*, portrayed “the haircut fight” – i.e. GI opposition to the traditional military style of close cut hair – “as an attempt to smash racism (because of 2 black women and a few scattered black men who got into hair regs hassles), when in fact most of the opposition... has come from white males.”

Ed Sowders had been tracking this emerging topic of dissent, and described in a letter to Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, a Colorado Democrat, how grievances around “outdated appearance standards” among the lower ranks were moving off the charts. Schroeder had become the GIs’ champion on the issue in Congress, and Ed was giving her an account of his contact with soldiers on southern military installations who felt that “the hair length standards imposed by higher ranking officers... served to isolate them from people their own age socially.” Many of the junior and senior NCOs he talked with “sympathized with the younger GIs,” Ed wrote. They told him that relaxing appearance standards was

irrelevant to maintaining discipline and combat readiness. Quite the contrary, it would boost morale.

Like all of us at Safe Return, Linda Alband was addicted to sectarian gossip. In a brief note, this time to Ed a week later, she reported that the Northern California chapter of VVAW/WSO – for some time now the group’s official acronym – had been kicked out of the organization by the national’s ranking commissars. And then, retailing a juicy tidbit she’d heard from Paul Cox, she added that “Ms. [Jeanne] Friedman was the only person affiliated with VVAW/WSO who will not be allowed back in no matter what (the others can get back in if they repent sufficiently.” Friedman had once played the heavy two years earlier in the vote to have me expelled from a meeting with members of NCUUA, a personal affront for which I bore her a heavy grudge, and so the news of her political demotion no doubt filled me with righteous delight. It is the nature of a memoir to mine the text with every unforgotten slight.

In this same round of communiques, Linda mentioned that she had finally made plans to see Peter Davis’ Vietnam War documentary, *Hearts and Minds*, which she’d heard “lacked depth” and was little more than “an analysis of the change the American people went through during the Vietnam Era.” This was pretty likely our take on the film too, even though Safe Return was featured in a cameo taken from Davis’s footage of Ed’s surrender on Capitol Hill, in which Tod also appeared. I find it strange, looking back that we had been so blasé about our link to this Academy Award winning documentary, to which I remember having reacted somewhat more positively than my mates, although I suspect Ed dined out more than once on his few minutes of cinematic celebrity. But why Tod may have been less enthusiastic about it I can no longer channel since he was usually

unambiguously pleased to be in the spotlight. I suspect that Linda's analytical, rather than more characteristic descriptive response, may have been influenced by Steve Rees, whose rigorous comments to the GIPA Bulletin she had copied and sent to us.

I vaguely perceived at the time, a presentiment only strengthened over the years, that, in Steve Rees, we were dealing with one of the finer minds among the many fine minds we were exposed to within the intellectual ranks of our movement. Early evidence of this is present in Steve's notes to GIPA on "What We Would Like The Bulletin To Become." If this was polemic, it was written in a reasonable and non-sectarian tone. He begins smoothly with a dose of praise crediting the San Diego group for doing the "work which makes possible the exchange of experiences and ideas." He is then self-critical for not having formally recognized this contribution earlier, but for also failing to comment where the group around *Bulkhead* was not in agreement with reporting or commentary in the Bulletin. And now, having re-read the last twelve issues, "This letter and our report and evaluation of the Coral Sea opposition movement marks the end of our detachment." Steve felt the Bulletin was too "descriptive." "We would rather not know which project shows which film. We are not that interested in whether ten or fifteen people show up for that event. What we do need to know is what people are thinking." Regarding contact with crew members of the Coral Sea aircraft carrier in response to the dangerous working conditions that had stirred up loud discontent among their wives, GIPA focused on agitation, and *Bulkhead* on "investigative work." But since the Navy always had the option to address and correct the expressed grievances, however differently these radicals approached them, then, Steve asked, "What is the purpose of our intervening in a militant reform struggle of this type...?"

What Steve wanted was for his interlocutors in the GI Movement, not least GIPA, to address the possibility that the increased unionization of the public sector in the US might lead to “the creation of a mass organization in the form of a GI union,” analogous to the Dutch experience. And if so “What differences in political perspective underlie the choice between ‘mass work’ and ‘cadre work,’” which is how, I suppose, he distinguished *Bulkhead’s* activities from GIPA’s. Diving into deeper conceptual waters Steve posed the larger questions that few of us in this Movement ever took time to ponder: “What is the relation between revolution and reform? Is a project reformist simply because it engages in reformist struggles? Is a project revolutionary simply because it speaks against functions of a capitalist military?”^{vii}

These were all questions that I believe guided Tod and I instinctively, and were at the core of our practice. Given our fast-paced, media-driven hit and run guerilla-style tactics, we had seldom brought such strategic thinking to consciousness, and this was an area in which Steve was particularly strong. As to the matter of who ought to receive the Bulletin, both *Bulkhead* and the *Wildcat* activists outside Chicago were arguing in its pages that the GIPA cadres should err in the direction of inclusion, not exclusion. And while I have already commented in some detail, and out of chronological sequence, on GIPA’s refusal to include Safe Return in the Bulletin’s distribution list, that bit of sectarian controversy would in real time drag on until the coming fall. Until then we depended on our Bay Area comrades to Xerox their copy of the Bulletin for us, which was both inconvenient and expensive at a time when copies cost 15 cents a page – quite high when calculated against the dollar of 1975.

Mini Scene: Concord, Mass.

As I've shown, my own attention until early April has been diverted from this discussion on the state and future of the GI Movement, which I will return to again in a later chapter. Moreover, I was in the initial blush of a new romance. I'd only been going out with Kathryn Grody for a little over a week when the two of us traveled to the colonial village of Concord to attend the rally and concert Jeremy Rifkin and his Peoples' Bicentennial Commission were staging there from midnight to eight in the morning on April 19th. I almost always visited with Jeremy when I traveled to Washington, often crashing at his very modest apartment off DuPont Circle, and I continued to follow what he and his team, including his new partner, Ted Howard, were organizing and writing on behalf of this alternative celebration of the nation's 200th birthday.

Everything Jeremy has advocated for in his life of activism, not just on the margins but ever increasingly in the mainstream, has been surrounded by controversy; and this project was no exception. The actions he'd conceived and executed to challenge the nation's official historical narrative had been widely covered by the media, and he was getting under the skin of the organizers of the official commemoration. He was accused of attempting to hijack the Bicentennial, and, of being an anti-American Marxist. No surprise there, except for the fact that neither of those portrayals was accurate. Far from hating America, Jeremy was hell bent on reforming her, and the counter Bicentennial was primarily a platform to push the notion of what he called, "economic democracy," which was closer to an anti-poverty program than to socialism. Jeremy eschewed socialism as a foreign import, and frankly believed Americans could come up with something better if we put our minds to it. Since Jeremy was suspicious at the time about technological

advancement which he saw as an assault to humanist values, he was often slandered as a Luddite.^{viii}

How Kathryn and I traveled to Concord is lost in the fog of memory. It's possible we hitched a ride with someone, or boarded the "dog" at Port Authority. It was a miserable night in a drizzling rain, but the nearly 50,000 people who showed up were in a party mood, and this event in more than one press account was compared to Woodstock, which was by no means Jeremy's intention. He kept telling reporters that this was a "serious" political protest, while the essentially apolitical crowd of young men and women ceaselessly chanted, "Stop the rain." But as one wit of the 4th estate reported, the same cry had gone out at Woodstock to the same effect.

The roster of performers gathered the usual musical troubadours long associated with the Left and, in particular, with the Communist Party: Pete Seeger, Ronnie Gilbert, Utah Phillips, and of the younger, New Left generation, Phil Ochs, Arlo Guthrie, and Holly Near. Standing in for the Kerouac crowd of the alienated Fifties, was the wandering balladeer, Ramblin' Jack Elliot. Jeremy political sermon with a stem-winder. Whatever else was happening on the stage, among the masses clouds of marihuana puffed through the mist like smoke signals; and every news account notes that the audience kept warm by consuming large quantities of tequila, wine and beer.

A spacious tent had been set up as a Green Room for the performers, and Kathryn and I spent much of the night sitting under cover with Holly Near at one of several picnic tables arranged within that space. Kathryn was a close friend of at least two of the Near sisters, Holly and especially her older sister, Timothy, who was at the time a hearing-able performer with the Theater of the Deaf, and, before that, Kathryn's classmate at the

drama school of the University of San Francisco. Holly had a boyfriend then, and had yet to come out as the voice of Lesbian feminism. The clearest memory I have of an otherwise bone chilling night that seemed to go on forever is of a palpably morose Phil Ochs sitting alone at another table pouring cognac into his coffee. Ochs had sung one of his most celebrated songs that night, *I Ain't Marching Anymore*, but had also relieved himself of a boozy bitter political rant on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Almost exactly one year later, Phil Ochs would hang himself at his sister's home in Far Rockaway, a seaside New York City suburb.

Reflection on the Fall (sic) of Saigon

While I have total knowledge of the story line, I can summon no genuine memory – emotional or cerebral - of the epochal event that occurred on April 30, nearly two weeks after the festivities in Concord, when a North Vietnamese Army tank rumbled through the gate of South Vietnam's Presidential Palace in Saigon, and signaled simultaneously for the whole world to witness the liberation and unification of a people who had been colonized and divided for centuries (even as they had divided and colonized various predecessors before, and minorities among, them) . In our otherwise abundant record of all the activities that occupied us at this time, I find only one retrospective reference two weeks later, a mere aside, about what was euphemistically crowned by the American media as the Fall of Saigon.

Several layers of explanation account for our lack of attention to what, for most veterans of the antiwar Movement, was a euphoric and celebratory moment. And I have no doubt that we too were unambiguously thrilled that all Vietnam was finally free of

American military and political control. To some degree we remained invested in the narrative of the heroic struggle and sacrifice on the part of the victorious Vietnamese people. As for choosing between the Stalinists in Hanoi and the puppets of the West in Saigon, there was no contest. And although I think we would have mildly disapproved of the harsh reeducation camps to which southern Vietnamese who had politically opposed or sidestepped the revolution had been sent, this sympathy by no means extended to the South's corrupt and vicious comprador governing and military castes who we judged as despicable as the U.S. government war criminals who pulled their strings. Yet we would have been caught off guard by the numbers who fled Vietnam, and came to be known as "the boat people," but to whose fate we were largely indifferent. When Joan Baez took up their cause she was criticized in some Movement circles as tantamount to a turncoat.

We reasoned that the country was in ruins, and despite the talk of reparations in the Movement, what Vietnam would get from the U.S. was a sore loser's revenge in the form of an economic embargo which further strangled its economy and retarded recovery for decades. We would look no further than that to explain how the victors could justify their internal work camps, and why thousands of people would risk their lives at sea to escape that punishment. Those who fought against the North, those who collaborated with the Americans, we felt, got pretty much what they deserved. If there was a finer comb with which to analyze Vietnam's postwar conditions, we did not seek it out.

Over the years we would duly receive an invitation from Vietnam's UN delegation to attend a dinner commemorating Liberation Day on April 30th, taking great delight in the sumptuous food, and the contact with the sophisticated Vietnamese diplomats who

treated us like royalty. Our consciousness – I can speak unequivocally here for Tod – may have been pre-mature, but it was already clear the he and I already looked upon Vietnam more and more as a lesson for domestic use against future acts of American aggression, content that the Vietnamese would attend to their domestic cares as best they could.^{ix}

Another revolution beckoned, one that had been brewing for the past year, not in remote Asia, but on Europe's own doorstep. We had been immersing ourselves in these developments for months, the topic being the latest darling of the Marxist Left of which we considered ourselves at least fellow travelers. To get a closer look we boarded a flight from New York on May 28th and embarked for Portugal, where, for the next two week, with Lisbon as our base, we soaked up what we could of that country's ardent and very public revolutionary realities.

-
- ⁱ. “Ford Extends Clemency Plan Until March 1,” Lou Cannon, *Washington Post*, January 31, 1975.
- ⁱⁱ. “Controversy Lingers Over Clemency Board,” George E. Curry, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, February 1, 1975.
- ⁱⁱⁱ. “A Former Green Beret Who Didn’t Go Surfaces – Defiantly,” by Mary McGrory, *Washington Star News*, February 3, 1975.
- ^{iv}. “President Extends the Amnesty Deadline to March 1,; by Anthony Ripley, *The New York Times*, January 31, 1975.
- ^v. *Amnesty Report #6*, Spring 1975.
- ^{vi} *Left Face: Soldiers Unions and Movements of Resistance in Modern Armies* by David Cortright and Max Watts. Praeger, 1991.
- ^{vii}. Decades later in personal communication with me Steve Reed was blunter about his critique of GIPA. “I didn’t like the contact with others in California (especially those unapologetic Maoists in San Diego) who said they were doing “similar” work [to that of *Bulkhead*.]”
- ^{viii}. Jeremy Rifkin has even been accused of being the unwitting progenitor of the reactionary Tea Party movement of the early millennial years. Lapone New Yorker.
- ^{ix}. Twenty years later, when it first became possible to travel to Vietnam, both Tod and I, no longer working together, but still a team informally and always intimate friends, would both visit Vietnam on the strength of our antiwar credentials, and with political agendas that were still related to the aftereffects of American devastation of the countryside in southern Vietnam by the wide scale use of toxic herbicides like Agent Orange. This had been a focus of a book we co-authored in 1981, *GI Guinea Pigs: How the Pentagon Exposed Our Troops to Dangers More Deadly Than War* (Playboy), which focused exclusively on the effects these herbicides had on the health of aging American veterans of the war. Only later did we turn our attention to how these defoliants had damaged both the people and the environment in Vietnam.