

SAFE RETURN

Defending Deserters during the Vietnam War

A New Left Memoir in New York in the Seventies

Michael Uhl © 2007

Anti-war radicals had... a unique position in society – we were the action and, most importantly, we had the new morality and got our sense of importance largely from that distinction between ourselves and others.¹

Michael Albert

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Prologue

By late December 1971 I was already calling myself a revolutionary. This was not quite three years since my return from Vietnam, less than two and a half after being discharged from the TB ward at Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania. I'd divided most of that time between a desultory stint in Graduate School at New York University, and a passionate commitment to the antiwar movement. My protest activities had put me at the strategic center of a campaign led by two New Left radicals, Jeremy Rifkin and Tod Ensign, neither of whom had served in the military, to bring former combatants like myself into the Movement by giving public testimony about atrocities committed by American units in Vietnam.

That organizing, the subject of an earlier memoir, *Vietnam Awakening*,² was the best schooling I'd ever had. Never had I been a more eager student, nor - in my till then twenty-five years - a more disciplined and willing worker. With a low B-average after years of private education I'd been pegged an underachiever. As for employment, most of it part time over summers or in college, I am chagrined to admit that I'd gotten fired more than a few times, twice for sleeping on the job. Until Vietnam my vague ambition was to become a diplomat, not from any engagement with history or states craft, but more tenuously drawn from an ease with modern languages and the sensual pleasures of an undergraduate year in Rio de Janeiro.

The Vietnam War literally changed my life. What I'd seen in Vietnam angered me deeply. The antiwar movement provided an outlet for that anger, even if some portion of its intensity derived, not from the war alone, but from the classic Freudian origins of one's mere existence. What is relevant to this account, however, is that by submerging the disturbing experiences of Vietnam into a well-grounded routine aimed at confronting the architects and apologists of that war, I had begun to construct a solid identity for the first time in my life. My pre-war personality had an ambivalent, drifting quality. By the end of 1971 I was no longer a detached and apathetic bleeding heart. I had become a partisan of the American Left, a right-on revolutionary small 'c' communist.

A whole generation of New Leftists consumed by their opposition to the Vietnam War had come to define themselves in similarly provocative terms. As a state of mind this pretense was not entirely delusional. Only those activists most unhinged from material reality believed the United States was living a genuinely revolutionary moment. But revolutionary zeal had become rampant throughout the politicized youth culture. The axiomatic beliefs shared by many - perhaps most - radicals within this loosely knit, endlessly factious collectivity called the Movement - always capitalized - held that the American political system was a sham, and that capitalism as a viable engine to achieve social and economic justice had been totally discredited. Equally in disrepute was liberalism, the idea that the system could be reformed at a steady and gradual pace, an ideological wolf in sheep's clothing presenting a more comforting appearance for maintaining the status quo. Aim the first blow at the liberals Chairman Mao had advised his own revolutionary cadres; our group wasn't Maoist, but we certainly had our issues about liberals.

In the Movement we were known as CCI, short for Citizens Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam. Founded in the wake of public dismay over the revelation of the My Lai massacre in November 1969, CCI's goal was to elevate popular awareness to the much greater scope of American atrocities in the war zone. Over the ensuing two years we'd had an amazingly good run, terrific coverage in the press and electronic media, with our two major accomplishments, a National Veterans Inquiry, and the rump Dellums War Crimes hearings on Capitol Hill, both subjects of books from mainstream publishers.³

We never did convince most Americans beyond radical veteran and Movement circles that war crimes committed by our troops were both widespread and a *de facto* consequence of the manner in which the war was being conducted, primarily against South Vietnamese civilians. CCI had claimed that American war crimes were a matter of policy inherent in U.S. tactics: saturation bombing, free fire zones, forced removal of non-combatant civilians and destruction of their villages, and the systematic use of torture in the interrogation of detainees and prisoners. Looking back I suppose that the most important contribution CCI made to the collective antiwar effort was to provide a forum for disaffected GIs like me who'd had their heads turned around in Vietnam and were inclined to tell that story to anyone on the home front willing to listen.

By late 1971 the war crimes issue was a dead letter. Nixon had temporarily succeeded in demobilizing the antiwar movement with his policy of Vietnamization, the gradual withdrawal of American ground forces which, because victory now depended on the U.S. backed Saigon regime to battle on without American infantry, the press gruesomely described as "changing the color of the corpses." It was a savvy political move. Clearly what had come to bother most Americans about the Vietnam War was its utter endlessness, not least the endless images on the nightly news of GIs being stuffed into body bags and brought home in flag draped coffins.

And still the war raged on with a full complement of American air and naval firepower at an intensity that was virtually undiminished despite the overall reduction in U.S. troops. Moreover, the field of hostilities would actually expand when both Laos and Cambodia, where covert war had been carried out for years, were openly invaded by American forces or their Army of South Vietnam allies. Far from “winding down,” from the Movement perspective the war had merely shifted into a phase that was likely to confuse, if not palliate, the mounting opposition among many so-called Middle Americans whose exhaustion with Vietnam had become a political obstacle to the Nixon administration’s hallucinatory dreams of “keeping” Indochina, and sustaining the puppet regime in Saigon.

A choppy letter, dated December 23, 1971 to a friend in Australia where I’d spent several weeks on an antiwar speaking tour earlier that year, captures something of the ennui momentarily deflating my own spirit.

CCI still in existence... watershed on the war crimes issue. Air war not real enough to excite American public, what with economic crisis. Many groups trying to reorient... Am now into a regularly scheduled Marxist study group... beginning to develop a methodology for practice that is germane to unique American conditions. Several of us are trying to put together a Men’s Consciousness Raising group... Many feel a great need for more sensitive support especially from our male comrades. Sorry this is so cut and dry. Xmas season always depresses the hell out of me. Love/struggle. Michael.

After the major antiwar mobilization of April 1971, which had included the now legendary veteran encampment called Dewey Canyon III, CCI’s principal organizers, Rifkin, Ensign and I, had spent several months meandering around the New Left political landscape

looking for new direction. That fall we'd attended the founding sessions in Chicago of the New American Movement, which would in time help form the Democratic Socialists of America, a left wing caucus operating within the Democratic Party. But neither Tod, Jeremy nor I were 'join the party' types.⁴

Independently, we had floated a set of project ideas that sought to extend our outreach among GIs and veterans and maintain a continuity of sorts with our efforts of the past months. In July 1971 we'd proposed that Representative Ronald Dellums of Oakland, California, who'd chaired our war crimes hearings in April, sponsor another round of inquiries around "racism, repression and militarism within the U.S. armed forces." Our proposal began:

Most Americans, because of media coverage, are beginning to perceive the serious problems that exist within the military today. These problems derive, not from "societal permissiveness," or unruly youth unable to adapt to the rigors of military life, but from structural deficiencies endemic to the outmoded and anachronistic military system. The U.S. military cannot maintain its effectiveness given the goals of American foreign policy and at the same time address itself to internal demands for an end to racism, "machismo," and the creation of a democratic military.⁵

I love the part about a "democratic military." As if! To animate this new assault on the Pentagon we promised to examine, not just the "patterns" of racism in the military, but issues like GI constitutional rights and privileges - essentially a critique of the military legal system embodied in its Uniform Code of Military Justice; rampant drug use among GIs and the military's inadequate drug therapy programs; issues involving women in the military; indoctrination and brutality in basic training; and GI antiwar and racism-inspired rebellions on

domestic and foreign U.S. bases. Dellums wrote in July approving the proposal, setting the date of the hearings for October 1971.⁶ It was a terrific proposal. We'd all signed it, but I'm guessing Tod and I probably drafted most of it. Problem was, it never took place, at least not the way we had planned it.

For war crimes hearings that previous April, CCI had furnished all the witnesses, and bankrolled the whole affair.⁷ All Dellums and the other members of Congress had to do was show up. This time, however, Dellums altered the format by inviting the House Black Caucus to co-sponsor what Tod and I had envisioned as an activist-driven event. Using a model we had already employed that summer when I accompanied Dellums' unannounced visit to inspect stockade conditions at Ft. Dix, the idea was to designate a progressive congressman or woman who sympathized with the antiwar movement to appear without warning at one of a dozen military installations around the country, and interview pre-determined groups of disaffected African American soldiers and sailors about their racially-tinted grievances.

When the Black Caucus signed on, the base visitations still took place, but with the prior notice and cooperation of the command, and without the presence of the non-black congressional progressives who had predominated at the Dellums war crimes hearings. CCI's role was reduced to that of resource for activist contacts at the bases, and to providing a couple of witnesses for the formal hearing that would follow in Washington. What we had conceived as a radical action to help mobilize and support the African American wing of the GI Resistance, to expose racist military practices, and to embarrass the Pentagon, became a conventional media tool for the Black Caucus to pursue a more mainstream agenda. The armed services, after all, had become the nation's largest equal opportunity employer. The Black Caucus, quite legitimately, wanted to combat racism in the military to support the aspirations of blacks seeking service careers on a

equal footing with whites. Most members of the Caucus were machine Democrats, long in office, and not, except on occasion for appearances sake, in solidarity with the rebellion of blacks in uniform, nor with the Black Power movement generally. They also did not overtly oppose American militarism which was CCI's agenda.

The actual hearings were eventually moved to November. Whatever its extent, the media coverage was totally lacking in drama, and we knew quite well that it had been the work of Dellums' staff to marginalize CCI's role from the beginning. There was a residue of resentment about our predominance in running the show for the April hearings; and now we were moving into what they perceived as an exclusively black issue. His freshman year in Congress, Dellums had been a thorn to the Pentagon on the war crimes issue. Removing the hearings on racism from the radical culture was perhaps a step for Dellums, as he prepared to settle into a long congressional tenure, to make his peace with the military establishment en route to becoming chair of the House Armed Services Committee when the Democrats came into the majority.⁸

CCI was most intensely involved in the planning of these hearings on racism during the early fall of 1971. Jeremy and I were still living in the apartment in D.C. that CCI had rented during the build-up for the mobilization of the previous spring, while commuting frequently to meet with Tod in New York where I had kept my apartment in the East Village. With the inevitable letdown following the peak of CCI's war crimes activities, each member of our threesome was anticipating a passage, and the strong possibility that we would all soon be going our separate ways. I myself, with both Tod's and Jeremy's encouragement, was thinking seriously of attending a Saul Alinsky organizers' school in Chicago. After the roller coaster ride

of the past three years, not least Vietnam, I craved a structure, and the institutional career model still dominated my consciousness. .

It must have also been in this transitional period that Tod drafted an earlier, equally ambitious and less obviously anti-military proposal to examine the “Sufficiency of Mental Therapy for Returning Vietnam Veterans,” and addressed it to the chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. Tod’s document itemizes the symptoms that, even by 1971, underlay the negative stereotypes around which the national media and society in general had come to perceive the troubled community of Vietnam War veterans. But far from describing how these symptoms were manifest in the alienated or antisocial behaviors that so unsettled their fellow Americans, Tod’s proposal expressed how the veterans had experienced their wartime experiences from the inside: strong guilt feelings, feelings of having been scapegoated, ostracized and isolated by the nation at large, distrust of authority, especially toward members of the Establishment, and fear of never being able to feel love again.

The odd thing about this proposal is that I don’t recall having seen it at the time Tod must have written it, and only discovered a copy during my careful examination of the records on which this memoir’s narrative is based.⁹ Given the prominence that PTSD - only recognized officially in 1980 - has since acquired as an inevitable cost of war, this document speaks with amazingly prophetic insight. The fact that I never knew of Tod’s proposal is evidence that he too was looking to the future on his own.¹⁰

As for Jeremy, only months earlier he had expressed a sincere interest in becoming a full time GI organizer. This option seemed unlikely, but the appeal was understandable. The resistance to military authority by rank and file GIs on bases throughout the United States and overseas remained the most dynamic sector of the late antiwar movement. Activists and

Pentagon analysts alike understood that the disintegration of American ground force capabilities, whether through acts of outright politicized or racially inspired rebellion, or from addiction to heavy drugs reported to be widespread among the America's remaining combat troops, played a strong part in undermining U.S. military objectives, especially in those late stages of the war. Urban cats that my comrades and I were and would remain, all three of us nonetheless felt the opposing pull of being billeted in the provinces at the flashpoint of struggle with a grassroots G.I. project.¹¹

Then suddenly Jeremy was on a different tack, one which initially did not signal an apparent shift in his ideological ballast, but left no space for on-going advocacy on behalf of veterans and GIs. He had discovered that corporate groups were already lining up to organize and commercialize what would be the nation's two hundredth anniversary in 1976. In response Jeremy and I held a press conference in Washington, D.C. in October 1971 calling for a counter bi-centennial celebration that would remind Americans of the nation's revolutionary origins. The vehicle to guide this intervention, and to which Jeremy would devote the next four years, we named the People's Bicentennial Commission.¹²

Several years later Jeremy would confide in an interview with *New Times* magazine what by late 1971 had indeed become his growing alienation from the antiwar movement. "I think a lot of people dropped out... because they never developed an American identity. There was so much guilt by association with being white and middle-class. You had kids... calling themselves Americong, quoting simple passages from Mao that were intended for a peasant society... in China. It was an Alice in Wonderland fantasy land... the only way one can sustain oneself as a revolutionary is to develop an identity that's based... on your own culture." This was to be, as the interviewer noted, Jeremy's "farewell to the militant Left."¹³ Jeremy's new orientation

toward honoring our homegrown radical heroes/heroines and traditions, which led him to abandon the Left, caused Tod and I to embrace that tradition more tightly, and wish to synthesize those native elements within it.

But, the truth is that, like Jeremy, Tod and I had become equally allergic to a New Left tendency we contemptuously labeled “Third World worship. And we didn’t just look away from China. Not one of us believed that the Soviet Union, or any other realm of the industrialized socialist block, offered a prescriptive cure for what ailed the U.S. Yes, we freely spoke the rhetoric of revolution and socialism, but deep down each one of us was hooked on democracy. We were native sons. We wanted America to fulfill her promise, and had come to believe that no truly democratic society could be organized economically under capitalism. Internationally we wanted our government to stop interfering in the lives and interests of the rest of the world through its endless episodes of aggressive bullying or worse, to which we gave the name “imperialism.” We were young; we wanted justice. I still do.

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1. Michael Albert. *What is to be undone: A modern revolutionary discussion of classical left ideologies*. P. Sargent, 1974.
 2. Michael Uhl. *Vietnam Awakening: My Journey from Combat to the Citizen's Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam*. McFarland, 2007. By necessity, the Prologue of this current work summarizes a few salient details from *Vietnam Awakening* to orient readers not familiar with the earlier memoir.
 3. James Simon Kunen. *Standard Operating Procedure: Notes of a Draft-age American; with the cooperation of the Citizens' Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Indochina*. Avon, 1971. *The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam*. Edited by the Citizens Commission of Inquiry. Vintage, 1972. See also Uhl, op. cit.
 4. See my *Vietnam Awakening* for an account of our participation in the founding meetings of the New American Movement.
 5. A copy of this proposal is among papers in my possession; the original is stored in the Citizen Soldier collection (#7033) of the Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York. The record on which this work is based is found primarily in Boxes 1 through TK, and 8 through TK of that collection, henceforth cited as Cornell.
 6. Cornell.
 7. Bankrolled sounds impressive. In fact, CCI was a shoestring operation, but with little overhead. Our biggest expenses were telephone, travel and printing. Travel meant strictly transportation; no hotel, no per diem for meals, which came out of our own pockets. Rent in our New York office was \$130 a month. And Tod and Jeremy each received a salary of \$40 a week; I lived on my monthly disability check from the VA. Even our witnesses often paid their own travel expenses, and local hospitality was arranged to house them. We were constantly hitting up the same dozen or so well-off supporters, who could readily see from our media impact, where there donations were going.
 8. The proposal was entitled, "Ad-Hoc Congressional Hearings on Racism, Repression, and Militarism within the U.S. Armed Forces," July 22, 1971, by Mike Uhl, Tod Ensign, and Jeremy Rifkin. Dellums letter to me at CCI's office was dated July 28, 1971. Dellums concluded his letter, suggesting "the hearings be conducted in October 1971, and I agree that you should begin initial preparations now." Dellums letter to Representative William Anderson, head of the Black Caucus, was dated October 8, 1971. Cornell.
 9. Cornell.
 10. The House Veterans Affairs Committee never responded to this proposal. Personal communication with Tod Ensign.

11. In 2006 Tod Ensign would satisfy this longstanding urge by founding The Different Drummer, an Internet GI Café in Waterville, NY outside the gates of Ft. Drum, home of the Army's 10th Mountain Light Division, whose troops - as this was written - were extensively deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

12. "Group Plans to Show Radical Spirit of '76," by William Greider. *Washington Post*, Oct. 15, 1971. An account of the People's Bicentennial Commission's crowning public moment is found in Chapter [TK] of this work.

13. "Reclaiming the revolution," by Al Robbins. *New Times*, April 1976.