



AN ESSAY

# VVAW, The Turning, and the Rewards of Digitized History

*Andrew Hunt, professor of U.S. History at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, gives an overview of the extraordinary history of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and how digital access to related primary sources can inspire new insights into tumultuous times – then and now.*



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## Vietnam Veterans Against the War: A Brief Introduction

Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) is an antiwar organization that, as the name suggests, consists primarily of veterans of the Vietnam War. Before VVAW was created, there had not been anything like it on the same scale: a gathering of veterans who came together with the shared purpose of resisting a war in which they themselves had served and, in many cases, fought.

Founded in New York City in 1967 by Vietnam veteran, poet and activist Jan Barry Crumb (variously known as Jan Barry), VVAW was slow to grow at first. By 1970, however, it had emerged as one of the most prominent, effective and respected anti-Vietnam War organizations the United States.

In time, VVAW came to be known for its dramatic protests. Within their arsenal of nonviolent resistance were such potent weapons as guerrilla theater (a kind of performance art protest, carried out in the streets of America, that reenacted Vietnam War scenes), a series of war crimes hearings in Detroit and other parts of the country, and colorful marches that, in some cases, involved such memorable actions as throwing away medals, citations and other symbols of war.

## During a time of waning protest, VVAW revitalized antiwar militancy in America

To a public weary of years of destructive war in Southeast Asia, VVAW brought gravitas and legitimacy to the antiwar movement.

To the Nixon administration, VVAW represented a threat to American security and had to be curtailed through covert surveillance campaigns. Behind closed doors, President Richard Nixon gave his blessing to a government offensive against VVAW, encouraging cooperation between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local law enforcement organizations to infiltrate, harass and destabilize the group.

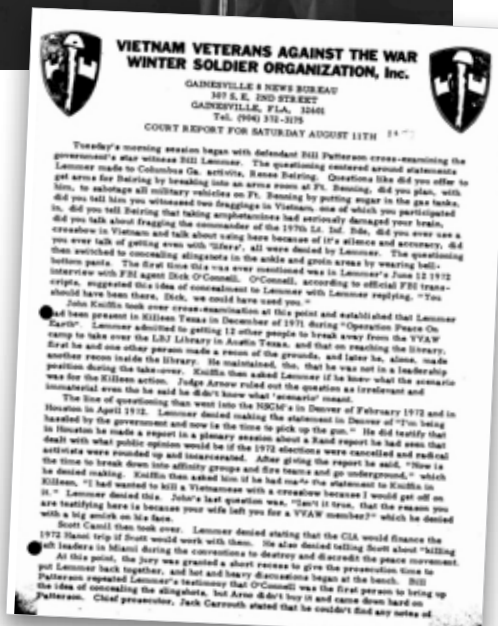
Some highly visible VVAW figures, including future Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, and author and activist Ron Kovic, went on to assume prominent places in the American political and cultural landscape.

Within VVAW's ranks could be found some of the most creative and passionate dissenters in American history – poets, filmmakers, political organizers, veterans' advocates – who, during VVAW's heyday, championed a type of activism that was orderly in execution, yet decidedly anarchical in philosophy.

In the antiwar movement, VVAW members were instantly recognizable in their green military fatigues, with armed services decorations pinned to their chests, and black combat boots. Under the banner of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, they marched and chanted to bring their “brothers” home, and end a war they regarded as fundamentally unjust.

After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, ending direct American combat intervention in Vietnam, VVAW's potency began to diminish. Given that VVAW's raison d'être had been to end to the Vietnam War, it's not surprising that its membership rolls immediately began to shrink.

Still, a surprising number of members stayed dedicated to the organization, and VVAW exists to this day, albeit in much smaller form. From the mid-1970s onward, clusters of dedicated VVAWers continued to organize, educate and agitate on a nationwide scale. Some fought for veterans' benefits and government funding for rehabilitation programs, and played a vital role in the founding of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA).



Other VVAW members demonstrated against militarism at home and abroad. American intervention overseas – in Central America in the 1980s, for example, or Iraq in the early 2000s – brought members out into the streets to protest, and lecture in classrooms about the dangers of sending young American soldiers to foreign lands to serve in questionable conflicts. And, as of this writing (2018), there are still pockets of dedicated VVAW activists who seek to keep the memory of their organization alive by sharing memories and participating in reunions.

## Writing the History of VVAW

When I set out to write the history of VVAW in 1994, I was a doctoral student in the University of Utah's Department of History in Salt Lake City.

My reasons for wanting to write about VVAW were largely personal: I grew up in Southern California, the son of parents who supported the anti-Vietnam War movement, and knew Ron Kovic and several other VVAW members. As I got older, I heard family tales of VVAW holding its large state convention outdoors in our spacious backyard in Riverside.

Flash forward: As a twenty-something graduate student in 1994, seeking to narrow down dissertation topics, I went to the library in search of a secondary history of VVAW. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that no such thing existed.

In those days, the internet was still in its infancy, and historical documents weren't yet being digitized online. I had to write letters, search through books, and do some telephoning around to discover that VVAW's papers were kept at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison. In addition, I also found out that other researchers were racing to write the same history I was, but I didn't let that stop me.

I journeyed to Madison and, with the help of the wonderful archivists at the State Historical Society, began going through VVAW's papers, photocopying everything I could get my hands on. I eventually left Madison with boxes of material, which I sorted out into file folders at home. I discovered at my fingertips a vibrant history, full of drama, begging to be told. Reading through stacks of correspondence, organizational documents, national office memos, newsletters, press clippings, unpublished first-hand accounts, and a variety of other primary sources, I came to appreciate VVAW's remarkable history, and I was determined to do it justice.

After conducting oral histories with dozens of VVAW members, I set out to write my dissertation. Later, as a new faculty member in the University of Waterloo's Department of History, I would return to Madison again to do additional research. More help arrived when I received boxes of recently declassified files from the FBI. I revised my dissertation, and New York University Press published *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* in the summer of 1999.

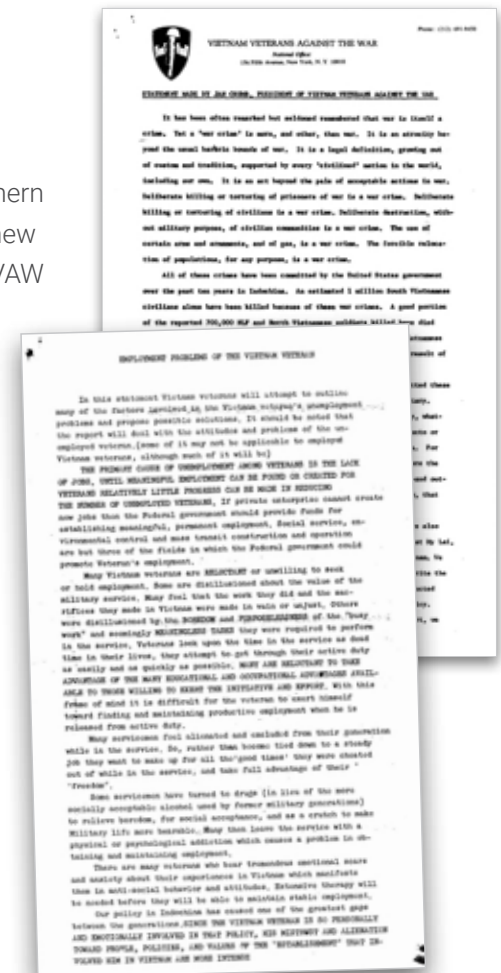
Writing the first scholarly secondary history of VVAW is still one of the proudest accomplishments of my career.

## ProQuest History Vault, VVAW, and the wonders of digitized history

One of my most rewarding personal experiences in recent years was having the opportunity to revisit VVAW's papers in ProQuest's History Vault. It was a compelling journey for me, giving me yet another opportunity to rediscover an organization that had achieved so much during its prime peak.

I also found myself once more captivated anew by VVAW's youthful members who, despite being only in their twenties or early thirties, managed to infuse a spirit of humanity into every undertaking.

ProQuest History Vault impressed me deeply. I use a lot of historical databases, but this one stands out as one of the best and most user-friendly I've encountered.





Revisiting digitized VVAW documents, I saw much that was familiar, but I also encountered a lot of new sources that hadn't yet been made accessible to archivists when I was doing my research back in the 1990s.

In fact, touring ProQuest History Vault, I was struck by how much of VVAW's history was new to me. Back when I wrote *The Turning*, I was mindful of the fact that I was writing a national-level history of an organization that had not yet been explored by historians. I was mindful, therefore, of the need to write a top-down account of VVAW that would inform readers of key developments in the group's history, and would place its story against the larger backdrop of the eventful American tapestry of the time. In some ways, my main challenge under those daunting circumstances was to figure out what not to include in *The Turning*. There was a lot of history, especially on a grassroots level in numerous communities, that didn't make it into my book.

There are still so many VVAW stories waiting to be told. The historical record demands biographies of key members, detailed histories of defining events (such Operation Dewey Canyon III – culminating with the dramatic medal-throwing ceremony – in April 1971), and greater focus on localized, community-based, self-help veterans' activism in cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, New York and other locales where VVAW maintained a significant presence. VVAWers have also left behind a rich repository of personal accounts about the Vietnam War itself, and postwar life in America. Their experiences form a vital narrative of a nation in a time of torment.

It is also important to remember that VVAW did not simply resist the Vietnam War. Its members fashioned a vibrant subculture that helped countless Vietnam vets find their voices, and form networks of kindred spirits. Members made documentary films. They published books of poetry. They launched self-help collectives. With the assistance of antiwar psychiatrists such as Dr. Robert Jay Lifton and Dr. Chaim F. Shatan, they formed therapeutic "rap groups" to discuss their experiences.

Before the 1970s, veterans of overseas' conflicts had largely refrained from sharing stories about their wartime ordeals. VVAW, more than any other group, shattered that old paradigm by bringing veterans' narratives out into the open.

Like the VVAW members of the early 1970s, we live in times of uncertainty and polarization. But our present moment is also full of opportunities and hope. VVAW's story reminds us of another time, when voices of dissent came from the ranks of the nation's defenders in uniform. They, too, made their way through difficult periods, fraught with challenges. Remarkably, however, most dedicated VVAWers remained mindful of the goal of pressing their country to live up to its highest ideals. Their life stories, and the organization they created to fight for their collective vision, still have much to teach us.

*"Today, in 2018, we need these digitized VVAW records found in ProQuest's History Vault more than ever. There are still so many hidden histories that await the light of day, and the curious eyes of young historians. The U.S. is unique in being home to the first antiwar organization whose members served in the very war they were protesting – and while it was still underway, no less."*





### About Andrew Hunt

Andrew Hunt is a professor of U.S. History at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario, where he specializes in such topics as modern American popular culture, music history, social protest movements, the Vietnam War, and contemporary political history. He is the author of *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York University Press, 1999), *David Dellinger: The Life and Times of A Nonviolent Revolutionary* (New York University Press, 2006), and *The 1980s: A Social History* (ABC-CLIO Press, 2009). He is also the author of the historical mystery novel *City of Saints* (Minotaur Books, 2012), winner of the Tony Hillerman Prize, and its sequels, *A Killing in Zion* (Minotaur Books, 2015), and *Desolation Flats* (Minotaur Books, 2016). He is currently writing a social-cultural history of Beatlemania and its impact on the United States, particularly on the emergence of protest politics and the counterculture.

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# VVAW OBJECTIVES

1. To demand an immediate cessation of fighting and the withdrawal of all American troops from Indochina. We cannot allow one more human being to be killed in Indochina.
2. To demand Congress enact legislation for the immediate termination of all funds being utilized by the United States government, its allies and the Central Intelligence Agency to support their illegal operations in Latin America, Africa, China, Europe, and the countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.
3. To demonstrate that our military tactics dehumanize soldiers and civilians, and to make clear the United States government is prosecuting an illegal, unjust and immoral war in Indochina.
4. To show Americans that their society is structured by a racism which lets us view all non-whites as less than human. This racism pushes our minorities through inferior schools and into the combat arms. Thus, we send our minorities off to die in disproportionately high numbers while we kill Asians indiscriminately. We demand that the military recognize its complicity in America's domestic and international racism.
5. To make clear that the United States has never undertaken an extensive, open investigation of American war crimes in Indochina. We demand that the United States government, in its war in Indochina, affirm the principles of justice, we recognize the responsibility of the individual in committing war crimes. We also recognize that the United States is responsible for war crimes committed in the name of America at all levels.

Active-duty servicemen and women be afforded the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and presently denied them by the Uniform Code of Military Justice that servicemen and women are treated as less-than-citizens. We endorse the efforts of our active-duty sisters and brothers to democratize the military. We demand that every personnel refusing to serve in wars of aggression be granted amnesty by Congress for the immediate and full amnesty to those brothers and sisters who are in the military for the reason of their refusal to serve in the military. We demand legislation to be passed to make it illegal for the military to deny the rights of its members; to make it illegal for the military to deny its members the right to refuse to serve; and to provide for the immediate and full amnesty to those brothers and sisters who are in the military for the reason of their refusal to serve in the military. We demand legislation to be passed to make it illegal for the military to deny the rights of its members; to make it illegal for the military to deny its members the right to refuse to serve; and to provide for the immediate and full amnesty to those brothers and sisters who are in the military for the reason of their refusal to serve in the military.



"OUR GREATNESS AS A NATION HAS BEEN OUR  
WHAT HAS TO BE DONE WHEN WE KNEW OUR

Richard M. Nixon,



## THE WINTER SOLDIER

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 THESE ARE THE TIMES THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS; THE SWORN SOLDIER AND THE SUNSHINE PATRIOT WILL, IN THIS CRISIS, SHINE FROM THE SERVICE OF HIS COUNTRY; BUT HE THAT STANDS IT NOW DESERVES THE LOVE AND THANKS OF MAN AND WOMAN!
 

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