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Some Considerations Of Power, Responsibility And
Self-Activity

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Original text

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Today many Americans are opposed to the war in the Persian Gulf for a wide variety of reasons. Some at first believed that sanctions should be given a real chance to work, and now advocate negotiation as most realistic; some criticize US government policy in that region and elsewhere in the world; and some reject the socio-economic order which is at the root of such policies. The outpouring of strong feelings and the tense atmosphere generated by the crisis make it easy to lose sight of some important aspects of this war—and all wars—which need to be dealt with on a personal and on a social level.

In an attempt to avoid the supposed mistakes of the anti-Vietnam War movement, almost everyone is anxious to proclaim support for the American troops in the Middle East. But this well-meaning sentiment glosses over an important aspect of social reality. It ignores the distinction between those people as living beings, as fel-

low human beings, as friends and relatives, and as troops under the orders and domination of a militarized, hierarchized organization. Governmental and other leaders would like us to believe that there is no such distinction and that if we criticize government policy and the role of the troops then we are betraying the men and women sent to the Gulf. In this way, those in power hope to take advantage of our sense of responsibility, concern and sympathy for people in danger, and thereby mute our criticisms of official policy. But this appeal to guilt is based on false premises. Criticizing what the troops are instructed to do in the Middle East, what they actually do, or the institution of the military itself doesn't mean that we wish to withhold support and solidarity from the people sent there.

We have a lot of compassion for those who are now in the Middle East to execute the government's war policy. But we feel it is necessary to oppose the system which works to turn them into killing machines. And we urge them to oppose it. Moreover, we think it is necessary to identify and define the power relationships that enmesh us all, so as to begin to go beyond them. With this in mind, it is very important to face and deal honestly with the fact that operating machinery which injures and kills is not a neutral job. We cannot condone the attitude of just following orders, just doing the job. And we are profoundly disturbed by the denial of the value of human life and suffering implied in likening the tasks of war to the activities involved in playing a video or football game—as some of those engaged in the battle in the Gulf have done.

Running the machinery, or helping to run the machines that kill people, even at a distance and indirectly, is still killing. Even, and especially if one thinks that these murders are justified (which we do not) it is necessary for people to take responsibility for their acts in order to be decently social. The attitude that murder is justified if it is defined as one's job is dangerous for relationships in our society and between the world's peoples. It is dangerous, in fact, for all life on Earth.

The simple assertion of support for the troops avoids discussion of the social function of the military and the militarization of society, and consideration of whether such hierarchy and domination serve to protect us from anything or merely subjugate us and others. We must challenge the practice of turning people into killing machines at the disposal of leaders. We need to recognize that the kind of thinking which yields to official decisions that bring massive death and suffering is a kind of thinking which follows from and leads to a "normal" renunciation of individual initiative and responsibility to others in everyday life. It enforces a passivity and unthinking numbness in the face of our multitudinous social problems—from poverty and the destruction of our cities to the many forms of bigotry and discrimination, from exploitation on the job and off to exposure to dangerous and poisonous conditions everywhere, to the brutalization, violence and degradation we all face from strangers and those we know.

Passivity and renunciation of social responsibility are precisely what political and military leaders advocate as most desirable and admirable, and as absolutely necessary for carrying out their policies and achieving their goals. They are profoundly disturbed whenever a significant Proportion of the population challenges their domination and threatens to become independently active. This is exactly what happened And what worried them so much during the 1960s and '70s. That is why they have carried on a campaign of lies against the social movements of that time ever since. And today, in an effort to defuse the threat they once again Sense, they Are presenting a gross distortion of the Vietnam-era anti-war protests as a betrayal of the Americans who were sent to fight in Vietnam, and therefore a movement unworthy of emulation. They want to deprive current opponents of US government policies of any valid models of self-activity to build upon. But we must not allow them to succeed as the interpreters of our history. We must not allow them to limit the possibilities of the present with their lies about the past. We want everyone involved in today's anti-war

movement to become aware of some important, neglected truths about the earlier movement so that we all can learn from its positive insights, as well as from its real mistakes.

To begin with, we must challenge the myth that the anti-Vietnam War movement was hostile to the American troops. The various protests, in fact, were Against the government's policies, not against the people sent to fight the war. A significant proportion of those of us who were actively involved in the movement of the 1960s and '70s had a great deal of concern for, and expressed our solidarity with, those who had to face the demands of the military. Many in the movement were also part of the civil rights struggle, and brought to anti-war activity a concern about racism at home and the US military's brutalization of people of color in other parts of the world.

By the height of the movement in the mid 1960s, a good number of us had come to see the US military itself as a racist and exploitative institution. Some opponents of the Vietnam War began, through draft counseling, to assist men before they fell into its grip. We, ourselves, were active in a group which counseled poor and minority high school students about their possibilities for resisting military service if they wanted to. We (and others in similar groups throughout the country) felt that they should have as much information as better-off people did, so that they could have as good a chance as possible of resisting. There were also groups on college campuses nationwide which fought against the presence of military recruitment and training programs. Many succeeded in having these programs removed from the campuses and thereby, at least temporarily, severing the connection between college education and military mobilization.

Large numbers of young men were opposed to the war for moral, spiritual or religious reasons; many refused to go to Vietnam and applied for conscientious objector status. Well over a hundred thousand were granted exemptions from the draft on this basis. Large

understanding that it is necessary for all of us to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. In some important respects the Vietnam War was very different from the present war, and therefore the reasons for opposing it were different. Now, opposition to the massive deployment of state violence in the Persian Gulf region is another opportunity to define individual responses to authority, and ways we can join with others in social movements to defy it. We who lived through the anti-Vietnam War movement refuse to allow today's power holders to distort our experiences and deny our positive insights for purposes of social pacification and for their own self-justification. We must not be intimidated into giving up such insights, into holding back from challenging everyone to question their own role in facilitating government policy. Let us all—whether or not we experienced the movement of the '60s and '70s—build on and go beyond the positive aspects and insights of the Vietnam-era protests.

Only by challenging the processes through which orders are turned into actions can we make a real difference, can we hope to stop those actions or those orders themselves. Wars are not simply acts of nature or inevitabilities which must be borne, but human activities that are decided upon by people—usually the few who hold power—and waged by people—usually the many who follow orders. Only when ordinary people decide which battles to fight, for what goals and how to fight them, can we gain anything for ourselves.

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We firmly believe that none of the state authorities or aspirants to state power offer any real hope to, or deserve the support of, ordinary people anywhere. Our article "No State Solution Is A Good Solution" elaborates this point. For copies of it and this article, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Feel free to reproduce this article.

numbers refused to register for the draft, and some left the country to escape it.

Many of those who did go into the military and were sent to Vietnam came to feel that the fight there was immoral and unjust, and not for democracy as the US government claimed. They came to understand that they had to think for themselves and act more in accordance with what they felt to be socially just. Thousands of G.I.s in Southeast Asia and in the US refused to carry out orders and fight the so-called enemy. Whole companies and naval units mutinied and refused to fight, and many deserted. Some soldiers put out anti-war newspapers directly addressed to other G.I.s. Some were imprisoned for their opposition.

And, there were civilians who offered their support to soldiers through involvement with anti-war G.I. coffee houses, which provided off-base meeting places for those in training or stationed in this country. In the coffee houses those G.I.s who opposed the war could find sympathetic people with whom they could discuss their thoughts and feelings.

Not all civilian protesters were directly involved with draftees, G.I.s or veterans, and not all felt comfortable with them because of differences in background, life experiences and lifestyles. Nor did all anti-war G.I.s and veterans feel comfortable with the civilian protesters, for similar reasons. But, support of draftees, G.I.s and vets was an integral part of the anti-war movement, especially when it was most vigorous.

However, during the social defeats and fragmentation of the 1980s, all too many former anti-war activists seem to have forgotten this past or have been intimidated by the conservative portrayal of a deep separation and antagonism between the movement and the soldiers. Some now seem to accept this version of the past because they can think of no other explanation for the failure of the anti-Vietnam War activity to develop into a strong united force for social change that could resist the onslaught of the Reagan-Bush era. And some hesitate to challenge it out of fear

of alienating the large numbers of today's protesters who have no radical background and who, for the most part, are more familiar with the lies about, than the actual history of, the older movement. For example, in an article in *IN THESE TIMES* for January 23-29, 1991, one long-time activist is quoted as conceding that the anti-Vietnam War protesters "appeared" to be unsupportive or even blaming of the troops. While not going so far as to repeat the current lie that the movement was against the troops, he seemed to be implying that the attempt of many in the movement to criticize their role as troops was a mistake because it gave the wrong impression. But this grants too much to the logic of authoritarian conservatism. People in the movement generally made a clear distinction between the soldiers as human beings and what they did in their role as troops.

Vietnam vets who were angered and hurt by the existence of civilian opposition to the war very often based their feelings on a sense of being betrayed. They felt that they had risked their lives because "the country" asked them to, which meant the civilians back home. But it was a basic misconception to think that just because the US government ordered American soldiers to fight in Vietnam, this meant that "the country" asked them to, or that they were in fact serving the civilians back home. Most civilians knew nothing about the war in its early stages, and certainly expressed no will that it either be started or escalated. It was not the fault of the anti-war civilians that some G.I.s assumed that the government's policy represented the will of the people. As more and more civilians came to believe that the war was unjust and immoral—conducted by deceitful and manipulative holders of power in their own interest—the government represented the will of the people less and less. So, those G.I.s who believed that they were serving the entire population, rather than the war-makers and a shrinking number of their supporters among the population, were unfortunately mistaken. They couldn't expect those who had come to oppose the war to be silent about their moral beliefs and political understand-

self-serving power elite and to examine our own lives and the lives of everyone caught in the hierarchy of power. We wanted to go beyond the passivity encouraged by the status quo and to develop ways for everyone to gain a greater voice in social and personal decisionmaking.

There were many debates in the movement about how to evaluate the relative responsibility of leaders and followers: Should all the people in a nation be held collectively and Equally responsible for the policies and practices of its rulers? Or must we take into account the fact that we live in a diverse, divided and conflicted society, one in which we don't all have equal, similar or even equivalent capacities to determine what happens and what others do? And how do we evaluate personal responsibility in a society where we all must often do things we don't feel good about, or even abhor, in order to survive or protect our loved ones, or because we don't know of any alternatives? No general agreement or decisive conclusions were reached by the majority of participants in the movement on these important issues; but it was generally agreed that none of the factors which might limit personal responsibility eliminate the need for each of us to recognize the true nature and significance of the activities we are told to engage in by our leaders and bosses, especially when they injure others or involve matters of life and death. As we debated goals and strategies, many of us came to realize that wars are not waged by leaders alone. Policies are carried out by people who do their jobs and follow orders; their obedience is required for the execution of these policies. Further, this questioning implicitly recognized that our only hope for a way out of a life of bad choices lays in frankly facing what we may be forced to do and/or what is being done "in our name." To obscure or deny these realities cannot, in the long run, help any of us survive. It can only prepare us to submit to the orders to kill and be killed.

We are not interested in idealizing the anti-Vietnam War movement; there are many criticisms that can and should be offered of it. But it should not be faulted because participants in it developed an

began. It should be noted that when the Kennedy administration first became seriously involved militarily in South Vietnam in the early 1960s, there was hardly any protest, or even awareness of the war. When the Johnson administration escalated into a fullscale invasion there was still very little protest. Opposition only reached a significant level when several hundred thousand American troops were directly involved. By then, it was impossible to hide the war, because of the large numbers of families that had soldiers being sent to Vietnam and returning home with firsthand experience of the brutal conflict.

Much has been made of the extensive media coverage of the war as contributing to popular disaffection; but, although it did increase awareness, a large part of the media presentation generally favored government policy, and a great deal of it was subject to the influence of official disinformation. There is no basis for taking seriously the claim that the media were to blame for the popular disaffection.

Moreover, government officials persisted in trying to hide the facts about the Vietnam stalemate from the population right to and beyond the end of the war. This meant, among other things, that they didn't want to highlight the homecomings of the G.I.s. For that matter, the war had no victory to celebrate.

What's more, it should be noted that we who opposed the war never condoned the short shrift the government gave Vietnam vets in terms of medical care, educational and other benefits. Opponents of the war were not in favor of that and didn't have any hand in it. The attempt to hide the war and the treatment of the veterans afterwards were both part of high-level policy decisions concerning its general conduct, made by officials at the top.

Some in the movement hoped to bring about changes in those policies by changing the minds of people in power, others by changing those in power, and still others by rejecting power and acting for ourselves. The vast majority of those of us who were seeking social change believed it was necessary to simultaneously challenge the institutions and policymaking apparatus in the hands of the

ings just to spare the feelings of some soldiers. The issues involved here went beyond personal feelings to questions of morality, social justice and the murder of innocent people.

Moreover, while some individual G.I.s and veterans may have had unpleasant experiences with some individual civilians, it is totally unwarranted to assert—as conservative ideologues have—that such incidents were caused by, and therefore the responsibility of, the movement. Unpleasant Personal encounters between individual soldiers and civilians, "hippies" or others, cannot be laid at the feet of the antiwar struggle, which certainly did not suggest, encourage, or condone insulting G.I.s or vets. These kinds of incidents can usually be interpreted in a wide variety of ways, depending on the outlook of the one doing the interpreting. Moreover, to generalize such encounters into a picture of the movement as basically hostile to the troops involves an ideological and demagogic use of such experiences.

The claim that many G.I.s and vets were insulted, or even spit upon, when they came home was propagated and emphasized largely by those who wanted to discourage cooperation between dissenting G.I.s and vets and the civilian anti-war protesters. Such solidarity was understood by the political and military leaders of the Vietnam era as a threat to their unhindered pursuit of the war. And, today's elites still have a stake in discouraging this kind of cooperation.

While some individual civilians may have insulted some returning Vietnam veterans as a way of expressing opposition to the war, it was never the intention or desire of the vast majority of people in the anti-war movement to do so. On the contrary, such an approach would have gone against our overwhelming desire to have them join us. We were encouraged when G.I.s and vets voiced their abhorrence of the brutalities inflicted in Southeast Asia and their opposition to the US government's policies there; and we were aware that all of those in the military risked more, and the veterans found it more difficult, to express opposition than did those

of us with no military involvement. So, we respected them when they took a stand.

And, although there were some Vietnam-era G.I.s and veterans who felt that the Protesters were opposing them, we certainly knew of many who felt that the protesters were on their side, particularly when they were resisting the situations the military had put them in. There was no betrayal here. We were acting in solidarity with those who were refusing to be absorbed into the killing machine; we and they were all, in various ways, resisting what we saw as repressive and unjust policies. People from many different backgrounds and life situations were drawn together to demand the voice in decision-making which democratic states claim to give to the people.

But the widespread demands for a change in policy did not cause the US military to lose an otherwise winnable war. This idea, perpetrated by political and military leaders at the time and since, is another gross distortion of the facts which should not go unchallenged. The anti-war movement did not create the sentiment of abhorrence of the war which such a large proportion of the American population came to feel. The movement was itself the product of the dissent of millions of Americans; in fact, it could not have developed or flourished without their individual opposition to the war. What's more, the anti-war movement did not, and could not by itself force an end to the war. There were other very important factors also involved which brought that about.

The truth is that the US government met with a stalemate in Vietnam, caused by the disgust of so many Vietnamese people with the brutal and corrupt regimes it sponsored for so many years in South Vietnam. This led to the blatant lack of enthusiasm which the South Vietnamese troops constantly demonstrated for dying in defense of those American-backed regimes. Alienation from and brutal repression by those regimes also led to real local civilian Vietnamese support for the guerrilla insurgency against the US military. This support was more significant and unstoppable than the reinforce-

ments coming from the North. And, for those G.I.s who believed in democratic self-governance, it was a major disincentive to fighting.

These human factors could not be overridden by the massive input of money or military might or the tremendous sacrifice of human lives. And despite the dominant conservative propaganda to the contrary, there was never any holding back on these; billions of dollars were spent; 4,600,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Vietnam, 2,000,000 tons on Cambodia and Laos; 400,000 tons of napalm were loosed on the Vietnamese people; 19,200,000 gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides were used to kill forests and crops and poison the population and the environment; 9,000 out of South Vietnam's 15,000 hamlets were destroyed; 1,921,000 Vietnamese were killed, 200,000 Cambodians (between 1969 and 1975), and 100,000 Laotians (between 1964 and 1973); altogether, 3,200,000 Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians were wounded, and by 1975 some 14,305,000 were made refugees; out of the 2,150,000 American troops who served in Vietnam, 57,900 lost their lives.

As noted by Noam Chomsky in TOWARDS A NEW COLD WAR, by 1968 strain on the economy due to the war was harming the position of the United States with respect to the other major industrial nations of the world. And the costs of the war were contributing to an economic crisis at home which brought leading business and conservative groups to begin to turn against the endeavor. Anthony Lewis's assessment was that "by 1969 it was clear to most of the world—and most Americans—that the intervention had been a disastrous mistake." The growing awareness among government officials and military leaders that the war was unwinnable finally constrained them to withdraw. The anti-war movement was only one element in their considerations.

And, the anti-Vietnam War protesters cannot be blamed for the lack of victory parades for returning soldiers. That was the result of the war's being one in a series of undeclared wars—one, moreover, which the US government worked hard to hide as much as possible from the general public, even before the opposition really