

**Striking the War Machine: The Anti-War Folklore
of American Civilians and GI's during the Vietnam War**

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Like many widely held conceptions of history, popular recollections of the Vietnam War tend to be oversimplified. The typical narrative proceeds something like the following: The war, occurring within a turbulent decade unprecedented in modern history, polarized parents from their children as the young supported peace and revolution. “Doves” consisted of college students, activists, hippies; “hawks” were the U.S. government, anyone involved in the U.S. military, and anyone over thirty. From the early to mid-sixties until the early seventies, any American citizen was either for the war or against it, either part of the solution or part of the problem.

This dichotomy, of course, is somewhat problematic, as a look at the folklore of the war dramatically demonstrates. Coming to my research with the assumption that civilian protesters and members of the American military were fundamentally opposed during the war, I set out to examine the folk culture of both civilian anti-war protesters and American GI's in Vietnam. I expected my results to confirm what I knew about the war, and to a point, they did. However, I found my conception of cohesive thought among the armed forces, of a homogeneous military outlook of support toward the war, irrevocably shaken. Although military culture and the anti-war movement seem, at first glance, to be fundamentally opposed, the folklore of American GI's

in Vietnam reveals that soldiers were largely opposed to the war; and although their methods of expressing their discontent usually differed significantly from those of civilian protesters, at times the language and themes of the two groups' protests overlapped. While civilian protesters were certainly more visible in their opposition of the war, American GI's fought against the war subtly, through their everyday speech rather than through marches and sit-ins.

For the purposes of this project, folklore is defined as the unofficial culture of a group of people. Folklore includes slogans, chants, legends, personal experience narratives, jokes, folk songs, and folk images, as long as they are transmitted from person to person and become a part of the group's collective culture. In this way, civilian anti-war products like slogans on signs and on buttons are folklore because the same messages were used in many different protests. Because the slogans were shared among protesters, they would be considered as a part of protester culture, while, for instance, a popular recorded song by Bob Dylan is not folklore.

Studying historical folklore is inherently problematic. Collecting folklore from participants thirty or more years after the time period being studied ensures that the only material the researcher will have at her disposal is that which is remembered, at times imperfectly. However, relying on historical records for folklore collection has its own problems. Finding folklore this way is a difficult and unpredictable task, since few documents explicitly label the data collected as folklore. Also, in many cases, few scholars or laypeople valued recording folklore during the period, resulting in the loss of much material. However, studying the war from the perspective of folk culture is imperative. The way that civilian protesters and American GI's discussed the war and framed it in their minds provides valuable information as to what the war meant for individuals involved in opposing it from home and those directly involved in the fighting of it in Vietnam. A group's folklore concerning a specific topic like the war reflects as

well as determines how the group feels about it; folklore both expresses a group's attitude toward the subject and influences how members of that group approach the subject, because the group is in turn affected by folk culture. As such, historical folklore, difficult as it is to collect, is imperative to a thorough examination of history.

I did not collect my own material for this project, relying instead on the historical record for material that either had or had not been perceived as folklore when it was collected. In addition, I drew on more recent folklore scholarship that examined folklore of American soldiers in Vietnam. Both sets of sources are somewhat problematic; by restricting myself to searching through the work of others, through only the material that those before me thought useful to preserve, I did not gain a full perspective on the range of opinions that certainly existed. I was restricted by not being able to ask my own questions of informants. I was, for instance, often at a loss when trying to discern when, where, and by whom certain pieces of folklore were shared. I was often presented with only the text of a legend, joke, or song, with no indication of who embraced it, when, and why. I have tried to acknowledge these shortcomings throughout my work, and I concede that future scholars might begin with their own collection in order to determine context, which I was often unable to examine properly.

Furthermore, I found remarkably little material on the folklore of the civilian protest movement, a fact which startled me since the popular culture of the movement is so readily available. However, although I acknowledge that my collection of civilian protest folklore is incomplete, I feel that it is substantial enough for me to acknowledge connections between it and the more abundant material available regarding military folklore of the period.

It is also important to note that neither civilian protesters nor American GI's were entirely homogenous as a group. Here, I share and examine the folklore common to each group, but

doing so is in no way an acknowledgment that all members of each group participated in each example of their group's folklore. Rather, an examination of folklore such as this one aims to collect as much of a group's folk culture as possible. Whether or not all members of each group used every single example of folklore in their own daily lives, most members were probably at least aware of the majority of the group's folklore as presented here.

In the discussion that follows, I examine the anti-war folklore of both civilian protesters and American GI's in Vietnam, concentrating on that discourse which centers on the concept of questioning authority. One of the most common ways in which both civilian protesters and members of the military discussed the war and their objection to it was in criticizing the so-called "war machine" itself. In this dialogue, the government or the military, who were both assumed to be overarching, powerful institutions that directly determined and controlled the war, were the culprits who imposed the war from above, against all moralistic and rational reasoning. Whether protesters depicted the government and the military as guilty of deliberate deception and cruelty or as guilty only of a bureaucratic method that hampered the success of the war, in this scenario dissenters always spoke of both organizations as unwieldy groups that had extensive, if not unlimited, power—groups that were capable of doing as they pleased with few checks on their overzealous warmongering.

Additional themes arose in the course of my work, and I explore them in the longer version of this essay. Here I analyze only that lore that focuses on criticism of and rebellion against power. Through this theme, I examine the ways in which the folklore of civilian protesters and American GI's meet and diverge. Doing so makes evident the fact that the two groups were not as different as many assumed.

Folklore of Civilian Protesters

Civilian protesters tended to paint the U.S. government as a cruel imperialistic state that was bent on colonizing the world, exploiting it financially, and behaving violently in the process. Slogans on buttons, chants in marches, and words on picket signs communicated angry protesters' feelings about a government that had, in their opinion, departed on a power-hungry rampage of the entire world, all the while framing its actions in the language of the Cold War. Much civilian protester folklore depicted the U.S. government as overtly evil. One button displayed Uncle Sam whose pointing finger was replaced with the barrel of a gun. A sticker entreated protesters to "Strike the War Machine."¹ Both of these examples reference a theme in the language of Vietnam War protest: protesting this war did not mean simply questioning *this* war, or the loss of life of Vietnamese and American soldiers in it; protesting this war also meant, to a large extent, that one was questioning the entire system that had created it—the "war machine." Questioning the entire system meant that even Uncle Sam could be viewed as sinister. The United States could no longer be trusted as an arbiter of peace and justice as the nation itself took up a weapon and fired on innocents.

In other instances, criticizing the war machine meant criticizing not government as a whole, but specifically *this* government, the current military establishment and the Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations. Many civilian protesters recognized the current personalities in power to be extraordinarily bad leaders and blamed specific officials, rather than the system of government itself, for U.S. involvement in Vietnam. A favorite subject of attack was President Johnson, whose Great Society, to many protesters, seemed entirely contradictory

¹ The Sixties Project, "Buttons of the Sixties," 28 January 1999, available at http://lists.village.virginia.edusixties/HTML_docs/Exhibits/Buttons.html.

to his actions in Vietnam. Protest buttons played on Johnson's campaign slogan, "A better way with LBJ," by insisting that "There's a better way than LBJ."² Protesters carried signs at marches that called LBJ "Fuehrer," while others encouraged the nation to "beat LBJ into a plough share," ostensibly to help him understand the plight of the Vietnamese whom he was ordering troops to fight against.³ Similarly, chants asked the president, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"⁴ According to this dialogue, President Johnson bordered on evil, a "Fuehrer" who was leading the nation to impose heinous acts of death and destruction. By referring to this violence in chants and on signs, thus placing it on the nightly news, protesters, one might suppose, hoped to make the president—and the American people—unable to ignore the violence being done in Southeast Asia in the name of the United States.

Other civilian protest folklore focused on the military, identifying the institution of the armed services—though perhaps not soldiers themselves—as just as responsible for the war as was the U.S. government. Protest signs asked, "General Taylor, where is your conscience?" and further criticized the general with slogans such as "General Taylor—blood on your hands."⁵

Identifying General Taylor indicted the military and the government without indicting the soldiers fighting in Vietnam. There was blood on General Taylor's hands because he influenced the orders given to soldiers on the ground, resulting in loss of life for both Americans and Vietnamese. Although he might not have been involved in daily combat, the way that American GI's were, *he* was the one responsible for the lives lost.

² Vintage button found for sale at <http://www.ebay.com>.

³ *Making Sense of the Sixties: Breaking Boundaries, Testing Limits* (episode 3) and *In a Dark Time* (episode 4), videocassette, directed by David Hoffman (Washington, D.C.: WETA in association with Varied Directions Intl and PBS, 1991).

⁴ Carol Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight: Gender, Folklore, and Changing Military Culture* (Boston, 2004), 36.

⁵ *Making Sense of the Sixties*.

One button, however, does reference ground soldiers somewhat more directly: “The Marine Corps builds Oswalds.”⁶ This statement, which refers to Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy’s assassin, suggests that military training directly creates mad, violent men who might go so far as to murder the president, thus committing treason. Although this button is criticizing soldiers by alluding to their bouts of violence, it ultimately condemns the military, not soldiers themselves. According to the button, the *Marine Corps* builds treasonous murderers; ostensibly, before involvement in the Corps, soldiers were ordinary young citizens, but indoctrination by the military ultimately resulted in men willing even to commit treason against the nation in whose military they served.

While they were critically using images of American public figures like President Johnson, General Taylor, and Lee Harvey Oswald, some civilian protesters were also idealizing the leader of the “enemy.” Some protesters—though undoubtedly a relatively small number of them—expressed themselves through chants such as “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh,” which displayed a fascination with the communist leader of the South Vietnamese.⁷ These protesters openly declared their disapproval of the war by vilifying their own leaders while romanticizing the man the U.S. government and military were ultimately fighting against. Not only did they refuse to support American military operations in Vietnam; some protesters went so far as to support the enemy’s struggle against American intervention.

Although they were critical of their government and its current administration, civilian protesters viewed the history of their nation as a source of pride which contrasted sharply with their present sense of shame in their country’s actions. By recalling American history’s high and low points, protesters attempted to place the Vietnam War in a historical context in order to point

⁶ Ebay.com.

⁷ *People’s Century: Young Blood*, videocassette, directed by Mark J. Davis (Boston: WHGB Boston and the BBC, 1991).

out that the present might not look too favorable in the history books. Buttons that read “Honor America—leave Vietnam” painted the war as a shameful speck on an otherwise valiant history. The only way to preserve American honor was to pull out of the war immediately.⁸ Similarly, one protest sign demanded, “Wilson, tell Johnson we want the war stopped.”⁹ This message entreated President Wilson, proponent of the League of Nations and a figure untarnished in the minds of many protesters, to show President Johnson the error of his ways; in doing so, it recalled a glorious (if idealized) history of America as a peacekeeping nation, dedicated to ending world wars and promoting self-determination. Another sign was less positive about history. Pleading for “No more Hiroshimas, no more Vietnams,” it connected the war in Vietnam to the atom bombs that the U.S. dropped on Japan to end World War II.¹⁰ In the eyes of many protesters, current military action in Vietnam was just as heinous as the nuclear attacks that destroyed two Japanese cities. Reminding the nation of this historical moment called for peace in the memory of past deaths; doing so requested that Americans learn from history and cease performing violence on a world stage.

Other dialogues of the protest movement used the language of the United States’ own traditional ideals of democracy and popular representation to argue that the war conflicted with American values. “Did you vote for war?” one protest sign inquired.¹¹ Similarly, a sign reading “Beat Bullets with Ballots: Vote for Peace in November” urged Americans to use their political power—their ballots—to end the war.¹² Slogans such as these were hardly revolutionary: in encouraging an end to war within the system of voting and elections, these protests encouraged

⁸ Ebay.com.

⁹ *People’s Century*.

¹⁰ CBS News Special 1978-08-25: 1968, videocassette, written by Perry Wolff (New York: CBS News, 1978).

¹¹ *Making Sense of the Sixties*.

¹² Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), unnumbered photograph selection after p. 138.

moderate liberalism, working through the system, rather than overarching systematic change. Buttons reading “Cash in your war bonds” encouraged Americans to protest the war the old-fashioned American way: by withdrawing their monetary support.¹³ Protester dialogue such as this, contrary to chants referencing Ho Chi Minh, represented civilian protesters not as wild, young revolutionaries, but as responsible citizens, well-versed in the American way of doing things, who hoped to end the war through the time-tested methods of American-style democratic capitalism.

Other folklore falling in this category of protesting the war by depicting it as incongruent with American ideals was harsher in delivering a similar message. “1-2-3-4, We don’t want your fucking war,” a favorite slogan for chants and buttons, constructed the war, as other scholars have noted, as “*your* war”—in other words, the war was not one of the people, but of the government and the military.¹⁴ In light of this recognition, American citizens should have no obligation to fight. Since the war was not the will of the people, they should be free from obligatory participation. Thus, the draft seemed particularly evil, and many chants and slogans highlighted civilian protesters’ hatred of conscription. Buttons expressed protesters’ hope to “Fuck the draft,” and one protester wore this slogan on his chest when he went in for a draft physical.¹⁵ Similarly, signs entreating young men to “Resist Oppression—Refuse the Draft” used this language, suggesting that involuntary conscription was oppressive and incompatible with American ideals of democracy.¹⁶ One of the most popular chants of the protest movement—“Hell, no, we won’t go!”—took on a double meaning: protesters would

¹³ Ebay.com.

¹⁴ Ebay.com; *People’s Century*.

¹⁵ Ebay.com; Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), 271.

¹⁶ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, after 138.

not stop organizing against the war, but they also would not go to Vietnam.¹⁷

GI Folklore

Civilian protesters were not alone in depicting the U.S. as a cruel imperialist state that was betraying its own virtuous past in fighting the war in Vietnam. Some GI's, especially those more directly allied with the civilian protest movement—including those involved in Vietnam Veterans Against the War and those working with underground GI protest newspapers—used this language as well. Depicting the U.S. and the military as imperialist, deceptive, and obsessed with money, these GI's and ex-GI's levied some of the same charges as did those involved in the civilian protest movement.

Overtly anti-war GI's framed the war as an imperialist exercise that America had no business pursuing. One button represented “Vietnam Veterans United to Prevent WWII,” presenting the war in Vietnam as indicative of an imperialist spirit that would soon lead to a worldwide conflict.¹⁸ Similarly, another button read, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War—Anti-Imperialist.”¹⁹ In this dialogue, the war was not an altruistic enterprise to rescue a poor nation from communism; rather, it was a selfish, sinister one to further American dreams of world-domination. GI's were presenting this concept as reality, disavowing what they had been told about the war they were sent to fight.

Underground newspaper cartoons were another arena in which anti-war GI's could express themselves. These newspapers were published by and for enlisted men and often expressed sentiments that would not have been popular among the upper echelon of the military

¹⁷ Ebay.com.

¹⁸ The Sixties Project, “Buttons of the Sixties.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Cartoons published in these papers appeared mostly anonymously and, while it is not clear whether they were definitely folklore—that is, whether they were spread informally and drawn in other versions by other enlisted men—one might speculate that parts of drawings appearing in these cartoons were recreated on paper, or that slogans from cartoons were appropriated to be stitched on jackets or written on hats. Whether or not these cartoons constitute a folklore form, they represent an attitude of many enlisted men, an attitude that *is* represented in full-fledged folklore forms such as the buttons referenced above.

One such cartoon, appearing in the *Ft. Lewis Free Press* in September of 1970, depicted Nixon in regal dress with the caption “Remember what happened to George III!”²⁰ By comparing the president to the king who ruled England during the American war for independence, GI’s argued that America had abandoned its courageous, revolutionary past and now resembled its old enemies. These GI’s felt betrayed and deceived by the government, prompting cartoons that read, “Ask not what your country will do to you” in a *Duck Power* December 1969 issue, and others that depicted the Statue of Liberty torching villages (in a 1970 issue of *P.E.A.C.E.*) and President Johnson personally dropping a bomb (in a 1968 issue of *The Ally* 9).²¹ Surely, the America for which they had fought was hardly the well-intentioned, altruistic and always just nation they had assumed it to be.

Another recurrent theme in this sort of GI folklore was that of money—the idea that the war was fought for business interests and that American business, rather than the will of the people or the good of the nation, dictated policy in Vietnam. One underground cartoon, appearing in *The Bond* in the summer of 1969, depicted a grinning businessman consoling a

²⁰ James Lewes, *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers during the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116-7.

weeping mother while a military official stood behind the two of them; the caption read, “Just look at it our way, lady. Your son was a profitable investment.” Another cartoon, also from *The Bond* in August of 1968 and entitled “The Military Machine,” portrayed a tall businessman, seated on bags of American currency, holding a steering wheel that pressed into the rear end of a Pentagon official, whose steering wheel directed a military official, whose steering wheel directed a soldier.²² Unlike civilian protesters’ folklore, which assumed that the government and the military had enormous unchecked power that allowed the war to continue, these GI’s saw the military as simply an arm of American business. The military and the government were not without fault in this scenario, but at greater fault was American industry, which would allow Americans and Vietnamese to die in large numbers in order to pull a profit. Anti-war GI’s felt that they were betrayed not only by their government and the military, but by the entire American capitalist machine, whose profit margins took precedence over lives.

The arguments against the government and the military from other GI’s—especially those still in Vietnam—did not so closely resemble the arguments of civilian protesters, of GI’s in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and of those involved in the anti-war underground newspapers. These GI’s were less overtly anti-war, allowing cynicism and veiled comments to replace the organized protests and harsh cartoons of those officially in the anti-war camp. But although they did not identify as protesters, much of the folklore of ordinary GI’s was unmistakably anti-war. The majority of military folklore protested against the war by criticizing not the aim or the intentions of the government and military but their ineptitude and the bureaucratic roadblocks to success in Southeast Asia.

²² *Ibid.*, 84.

The vast majority of this folklore which is critical of the government and the military as a whole emphasizes the complete inadequacy of these powerful institutions to understand the situation of soldiers on the ground in Vietnam. Much of this dialogue paints the government and the military as childish, arrogant, and bumbling, but seldom as evil or intentionally damaging. Most commonly, the subject of criticism is officials in power who knew nothing of the war they were directing; rather than asking soldiers in the field, who were engaged on the ground every day, they relied on their own knowledge, which was entirely unsuited to this sort of war. Several GI folksongs emphasize this issue. According to Lydia Fish, GI's played and sang folksongs in officers' clubs, in bars, at parties in bunkers, at base camp, and even on troopships. The sharing of folksongs during moments of leisure provided both entertainment for enlisted men and a way for them to express their feelings about their situation as soldiers and about the war in general.²³ In "We Stayed Too Long" (set to the tune of "I Wonder Why"), an American in Vietnam sings these words:

We don't need MAAG Advisors,
We just take tranquilizers,
We've been here long enough to know...²⁴

A song called "Saigon Warrior" describes a similar situation:

Saigon, oh Saigon is a wonderful place
But the organization's a goddamn disgrace There are
captains and majors and light colonels too With their
hands in their pockets and nothing to do...
And they sit at their desks and they scream and they shout
And they talk of a war they know nothing about Against
the VC they're not doing too well
But if paper were cordite we'd be blown to hell.²⁵

²³ Lydia M. Fish, "General Edward G. Lansdale and the Folksongs of Americans in the Vietnam War," *Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 406 (Oct.-Dec. 1989), 391-2.

²⁴ Thomas Bowen and Lydia Fish, *The Longest Year: A Collection of Songs by Advisors and Civilians in the Vietnam War* (Buffalo, NY: Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project, October 1990), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁵ Various Artists, collected by Lydia Fish, *In Country: Folk Songs of Americans in the Vietnam War*, Flying Fish Records, 1991.

Both of these songs emphasize that soldiers, not upper echelons of the military or government, are the ones who should be directing the war. Rather than listening to those who “talk of a war they nothing about,” the military should ask those who have “been here long enough to know.”

Similarly, this GI folksong expresses the opinion that military officials were more intent on peace of mind than on really knowing what was happening on the ground:

God rest ye, General Westmoreland,
Let nothing you dismay
The First Air Cavalry
Was wiped out yesterday

The Big Red One will get it next
Out at Michelin
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy...²⁶

In this song, the truth of the war—destruction of American troops—is news to General Westmoreland; but rather than being shocked into action, he should simply relax comfortably and allow the troops to continue fight the war—unsuccessfully.

One legend told by GI’s (although when the legend was shared is not clear from the source in which the legend is recounted) further illustrates that the military’s priorities were not in order in Vietnam:

A friend of mine was commanding a certain unit, and was fed up with the large number of detailed, time-consuming, but apparently useless weekly reports which were required by higher headquarters. One week he began to send in a self-contrived “Flypaper Report,” consisting of the amount of flypaper consumed that week, the number of flies caught, the number of flies per unit length of flypaper, and other such information. He did this for about six months, and then one week he did not send it in. It did not take long for a message to come through from headquarters informing him that the required weekly “Flypaper Report” had not yet been received!²⁷

This legend, though it does not directly reference the war, illustrates many a GI’s dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy of the military, which, in their eyes, inhibited real progress. In this story,

²⁶ Thomas Bowen, *The Longest Year*.

²⁷ Saul F. Broudy, “GI Folklore in Viet-Nam,” M.A. Thesis in Folklore and Folklife (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1969), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 10.

the subversive joke of a Flypaper Report is not recognized as such by rather thick military officials, but is instead co-opted by them to become a report they expect to continue to receive. According to this legend, the military is too concerned with petty paperwork and with awareness of issues—such as flypaper use—that are entirely unimportant when compared with the realities of war. Here, the day-to-day business of fighting a war is neglected in favor of superfluous bureaucracy, and the routine task of paper-pushing takes precedence over the more difficult matter of discovering the real needs of troops on the ground.

In another GI folksong, “Phan Rang Tower” (adapted from the Korean War song “Itazuke Tower), military bureaucracy and ineptitude result in death. The song has many permutations, and it was often adapted to fit the circumstances of the singers—so, for instance, the name of the tower and of the plane would be changed to those more closely resembling the soldiers’ location and assignment.

Hello, Phan Rang Tower, this is Blue Star 851
I’m five miles from your airfield and my fuel is almost gone
My engine she’s a-coughing and my tack needles have split
You better call your crash crew out, this damn thing’s gonna quit.

Hello, Blue Star 851, this is Phan Rang Tower
We can’t call out our crash crew, this is their coffee hour
And we had just as soon you didn’t here [*sic?*] for a while
Because our visibility is not half a mile

Hello, Phan Rang Tower, this is Blue Star 851
I’d love to put this landing off but that just can’t be done
My engine’s belching fire and I’m running out of gas
I’ve got to set this chopper down before I have a crash

This is Phan Rang Tower calling Blue Star 851
We’d just like to know what kind of flight you’re on
Our Operations Officer says you have not been cleared
You’ll be grounded thirty days if you land that chopper here

Hello, Phan Rang Tower, this is Blue Star 851
 I'm up in pilot's heaven and my flying days are done
 Tell my old commander that I'm sorry that I crashed
 Tell your Operations Officer that he can kiss my ---!²⁸

The song depicts a situations where the immediate need of soldiers—a place to land before fuel runs out—is ignored because of a crash crew's luxury coffee hour and rules unsuited to an emergency situation. Good American soldiers in this story are lost not by Vietcong fire but by American military incompetence, where the leadership of the military would rather abide by bureaucratic regulations than provide for its GI's. Similarly, "Damned Air America" expresses a similar message (although death is not necessarily the outcome):

Damned Air America
 You're always late
 You do hound us and confound us
 Our desire for to travel is great

From old Saigon
 To dear Danang
 To the airport citadel Danmed Air
 America can go to hell, Damned Air
 America can go to hell.²⁹

Other GI folklore levies accusations that the military and government were not simply ignorant and incompetent, but deceptive as well. This GI folk parody expresses soldiers' exasperation with the gap between what they knew of the war and what the government and the military were telling American civilians:

Oh, me name is McNamara, I've got a special band,
 And every couple of weeks or so I fly to old Vietnam
 I assemble the troops, count communist groups, and while the choppers fall,
 I hurry home to tell you, sure, it's not so bad after all.

La, la, la, la, we are winning!
 La, la, la, la, yes, we are winning!³⁰

²⁸ Broudy, "GI Folklore in Viet-Nam," 38; *In Country*; Fish, "General Edward G. Lansdale and the Folksongs of Americans in the Vietnam War," 390.

²⁹ Thomas Bowen, *The Longest Year*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

This song, set to the tune of “Rock of Ages,” communicates the same theme:

We are winning, this we know
General Harkins tells us so
Though in the Delta things are tough,
And in the highlands very rough
But the VC soon will go
Mr. Cabot tells us so
If you doubt them, *who are you?*
McNamara says so too.³¹

These songs, explicit in their exasperation with the skewed image of war that civilians received from government and military officials, protest the war not for its aims or for its failure but for its lack of transparency.

Rumors demonstrated the lack of GI trust in the military and the government to take care of soldiers. This rumor, though I never found it recounted in my sources, was reported online as a piece of lore that soldiers shared to explain to themselves and to each other why the war was progressing so badly.

The handgrip of the M16 rifle was made by Mattel. When the gun was first introduced in Vietnam, soldiers noticed the toy company’s logo embossed on the handgrip and complained. Later shipments arrived without the imprint, but the grips were still manufactured by Mattel.³²

Rumors such as this one accused the military of employing a toy company to manufacture its weapons—suggesting that even the military and the U.S. government did not take this war seriously and were willing to put American lives in jeopardy, perhaps to save money.

Beyond criticizing the government and the military for their ineptitude and deception, GI folklore called into question the system of military hierarchy and the military system of values. GI slang, jokes, and folk artwork reflected exasperation with the way that GI’s were treated within the military. GI’s were called “grunts,” a title bestowed upon them, according to one GI,

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Legend reported at <http://www.snopes.com/military/m16.htm>.

“‘cause that’s what you do when you shit.”³³ By contrast, those who chose the military as a profession were called “lifers”—a term of derision among GI’s.³⁴ Thus, to be a grunt was to be the lowest of the low—but at least a grunt was discharged in a year; lifers would be in the military until retirement. To reflect the power structure of the military which was, in their minds, exploitive, one GI cartoon from the underground GI newspaper *Out Now* (1970), depicted an outhouse that, quite literally, put officers above GI’s.³⁵

Other folklore disparaged military life by counting the time until discharge. A soldier was called “short” if he had little time left in Vietnam. This joke, shared by one soldier—be he “short” or not—with another soldier who was nearing the end of his time in Vietnam, displayed one’s “short” status and allowed for it to be celebrated:

How short are you?
I’m so short...
—I need a step ladder to get up on a dime.
—I can’t drink anything but short beers.
—I can’t start any long conversations.
—I don’t have time for a short-time.³⁶

This joke cemented one’s identity as a “short-timer,” thus allowing GI’s the chance to display their good fortune in having their days in Vietnam numbered. In other folklore, sexual conquest was equated with the imminent freedom awaiting short-timers. One folk calendar that GI’s drew for short-timers was shaped as a voluptuous woman, her body separated into 365 tiny pieces. Beginning when he had exactly one year remaining in Vietnam, the GI would color in a piece each day, beginning with 365. As the numbers grew closer to one, the pieces they represented would become more and more erogenous, until two and one represented her breasts, and “Civilian” was spelled out onto her crotch, which was covered by a pair of

³³ Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-And-Tight*, 110.

³⁴ George Cornell, “G.I. Slang in Vietnam,” *Journal of American Culture* (1981): 198.

³⁵ Lewes, *Protest and Survive*, 108.

³⁶ Broudy, “G.I. Folklore in Viet-Nam,” 7.

underwear.³⁷ Here, sexual conquest was equated with freedom: no GI would reach his ultimate goal—her vagina—until he could also achieve his goal of being discharged from Vietnam. This calendar reinforced both a misogynist social order based on the conquest of women and an association of escape from Vietnam as the ultimate pleasure. By glorifying exit from the country and from the military, these pieces of lore expressed GI's discontent with the military system.

GI material culture emphasized enlisted men's discontent with everyday life in the army. A favorite slogan for cartoons and decorations for jackets and helmets was "Eat the apple, fuck the corps."³⁸ Cryptic messages like "FTA" (standing for "Fuck the Army") in graffiti allowed GI's to express themselves without being obvious to those who were not aware of the meaning of the acronym.³⁹ And an adaptation of the standard Military Assistance Command patch turned a raised sword into a raised middle finger.⁴⁰ Thus, even military-issued garments became a canvas for anti-military protest. By protesting daily military life, GI's were, by extension, protesting the war itself and the system that determined how they must fight within it.

Throughout the 1960's and the early 1970's, the folklore of civilian protesters and of American GI's alike protested the war in Vietnam. Civilian protesters were more open in their criticisms of the war, while GI protest tended to be more subtle and veiled, but both sides communicated through their everyday speech and interactions with other members of their group that they were displeased with the war and called for an end to it. While each side implemented very different methods to demonstrate their contempt of the war, surprisingly a number of themes developed between the two sides. Despite perceptions in the popular imagination, civilian

³⁷ William R. Ferris, Jr., "The Enlisted Man: Army Folklore," *New York Folklore* 2 (Winter 1976), 233.

³⁸ Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-And-Tight*, 89.

³⁹ Cornell, "G.I. Slang in Vietnam," 200.

⁴⁰ Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-And-Tight*, 90.

protesters and American GI's were not such polar opposites after all. A further consideration of the similarities and the differences between the folk expression of civilian protesters and American GI's—and a more thorough analysis of the role of folklore in popular protest—is thus required in future study of the time period.