

The Collapse of the Armed Forces

Reprint

Robert D. Heinl Jr.

1990

FE Note: The article reprinted here first appeared in the *Armed Forces Journal*, June 7, 1971, and is excerpted here from *The Movement Against the War*, Ramparts Press, 1972. Col. Heinl's hawkish military columns were a regular feature in the *Detroit News* during the 1950s and '60s.

From original Introduction to article: When Colonel Robert Heinl published this article in the *Armed Forces Journal* in June 1971, it drew national attention. Hints of near-mutinous conditions among U.S. combat forces in Vietnam and in the fleet off its coast had occasionally surfaced in the press. There had also been some coverage of the week-long April encampment in Washington of a thousand Vietnam veterans, who had chanted pro-Viet Cong slogans outside the White House and hurled their hundreds of Purple Hearts and combat medals at the Capitol. But relatively few Americans were aware that by this time the anti-war movements at home and within the armed forces were often working in coordination, nor did many think of the U.S. military as close to "collapse."

It was hard to dismiss the views of Colonel Heinl, a combat veteran with twenty-seven years' experience in the Marines, former director of the Marine Corps historical program military analyst, and author of five books, including *The Marine Officer's Guide* and *Soldiers of the Sea*, the definitive history of the Marine Corps. His article was certainly controversial, but it was criticized as much for understating as for overstating the potentially insurrectionary situation within the armed forces.

The Collapse of the Armed Forces

by Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr.,

***Armed Forces Journal*, June 1971**

The morale, discipline and battle worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States.

By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited, where not near-mutinous.

Elsewhere than Vietnam, the situation is nearly as serious. By several orders of magnitude, the Army seems to be in worse trouble. But the Navy has serious and unprecedented problems, while the Air Force, on the surface at least still clear of the quicksands in which the Army is sinking, is itself facing disquieting difficulties.

Only the Marines—who have made the news this year by their hard line against indiscipline and general permissiveness—seem, with their expected staunchness and tough tradition, to be weathering the storm.

Back to Campus

To understand the military consequences of what is happening to the U.S. Armed Forces, Vietnam is a good place to start. It is in Vietnam that the rearguard of a 500,000-man army, in its day (and in the observation of the

writer) the best army the U.S. ever put into the field, is numbly extricating itself from a nightmare war the Armed Forces feel they had foisted on them by bright civilians who are now back on campus writing books about the folly of it all.

“They have set up separate companies,” writes an American soldier from Cu Chi, quoted in the *New York Times*, “for men who refuse to go out into the field. It is no big thing to refuse to go. If a man is ordered to go to such and such a place he no longer goes through the hassle of refusing; he just packs his shirt and goes to visit some buddies at another base camp. Operations have become incredibly ragtag. Many guys don’t even put on their uniforms any more...The American garrisons on the larger bases are virtually disarmed. The lifers have taken our weapons from us and put them under lock and key...There have also been quite a few frag incidents in the battalion.”

Can all this really be typical or even truthful? Unfortunately the answer is yes.

“Frag incidents” or just “fragging” is current soldier slang in Vietnam for the murder or attempted murder of strict, unpopular, or just aggressive officers and NCOs. With extreme reluctance (after a young West Pointer from Senator Mike Mansfield’s Montana was fragged in his sleep) the Pentagon has now disclosed that fraggings in 1970 (209) have more than doubled those of the previous year (96). Word of the deaths of officers will bring cheers at troop movies or in bivouacs of certain units.

In one such division—the morale-plagued Americal—fraggings during 1971 have been authoritatively estimated to be running about one a week.

Bounties and Evasions

Bounties, raised by common subscription in amounts running anywhere from \$50 to \$1,000, have been widely reported put on the heads of leaders whom the privates and SP4s want to rub out.

Shortly after the costly assault on Hamburger Hill in mid-1969, the GI underground newspaper in Vietnam, *GI Says*, publicly offered a \$10,000 bounty on LCol Weldon Honeycutt, the officer who ordered (and led) the attack. Despite several attempts, however, Honeycutt managed to live out his tour and return Stateside.

The issue of “combat refusal,” an official euphemism for disobedience of orders to fight—the soldier’s gravest crime—has only recently been again precipitated on the frontier of Laos by Troop B, 1st Cavalry’s mass refusal to recapture their captain’s command vehicle containing communication gear, codes and other secret operation orders.

As early as mid-1969, however, an entire company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade publicly sat down on the battlefield. Later that year, another rifle company from the famed 1st Air Cavalry Division, flatly refused—on CBS-TV—to advance down a dangerous trail...

“Search and evade” (meaning tacit avoidance of combat by units in the field) is now virtually a principle of war, vividly expressed by the GI phrase, “CYA (cover your ass) and get home!”

That “search-and-evade” has not gone unnoticed by the enemy is underscored by the Viet Cong delegation’s recent statement at the Paris Peace Talks that communist units in Indochina have been ordered not to engage American units which do not molest them. The same statement boasted—not without foundation in fact—that American defectors are in the VC ranks.

Symbolic anti-war fasts (such as the one at Pleiku where an entire medical unit, led by its officers, refused Thanksgiving turkey), peace symbols, “V”-signs not for victory but for peace, booing and cursing of officers and even of hapless entertainers such as Bob Hope, are unhappily commonplace.

As for drugs and race, Vietnam’s problems today not only reflect but reinforce those of the Armed Forces as a whole. In April, for example, members of a Congressional investigating subcommittee reported that 10 to 15% of our troops in Vietnam are now using high-grade heroin, and that drug addiction there is “of epidemic proportions.”

All the foregoing facts—and many more dire indicators of the worst kind of military trouble—point to widespread conditions among American forces in Vietnam that have only been exceeded in this century by the French Army’s Nivelle mutinies of 1917 and the collapse of the Tsarist armies in 1916 and 1917.

Society Notes

It is a truism that national armies closely reflect societies from which they have been raised. It would be strange indeed if the Armed Forces did not today mirror the agonizing divisions and social traumas of American society, and of course they do.

For this very reason, our Armed Forces outside Vietnam not only reflect these conditions but disclose the depths of their troubles in an awful litany of sedition, disaffection, desertion, race, drugs, breakdowns of authority, abandonment of discipline, and, as a cumulative result, the lowest state of military morale in the history of the country.

Sedition—coupled with disaffection within the ranks, and externally fomented with an audacity and intensity previously inconceivable—infests the Armed Services:

* At best count, there appear to be some 144 underground newspapers published on or aimed at U.S. military bases in this country and overseas. Since 1970 the number of such sheets has increased 40% (up from 103 last fall). These journals are not mere gripe-sheets that poke soldier fun in the “Beetle Bailey” tradition, at the brass and the sergeants. “In Vietnam,” writes the Ft. Lewis-McChord *Free Press*, “the Lifers, the Brass, are the true Enemy, not the enemy.” Another West Coast sheet advises readers: “Don’t desert. Go to Vietnam and kill your commanding officer.”

* At least 14 GI dissent organizations (including two made up exclusively of officers) now operate more or less openly. Ancillary to these are at least six anti-war veterans’ groups which strive to influence GIs.

* Three well-established lawyer groups specialize in support of GI dissent. Two (GI Civil Liberties Defense Committee and New York Draft and Military Law Panel) operate in the open. A third is a semi-underground network of lawyers who can only be contacted through the GI Alliance, a Washington, D.C., group which tries to coordinate seditious anti-military activities throughout the country.

One anti-military legal effort operates right in the theater of war. A three-man law office, backed by the Lawyers’ Military Defense Committee, of Cambridge, Mass., was set up last fall in Saigon to provide free civilian legal services for dissident soldiers being court-martialed in Vietnam.

* On the religious front, a community of turbulent priests and clergymen, some unfrocked, calls itself the Order of Maximilian. Maximilian is a saint said to have been martyred by the Romans for refusing military service as un-Christian. Maximilian’s present-day followers visit military posts, infiltrate brigades and stockades in the guise of spiritual counseling, work to recruit military chaplains, and hold services of “consecrations” of post chapels in the name of their saintly draft-dodger.

* By present count at least 11 (some go as high as 26) off-base anti-war “coffee houses” ply GIs with rock music, lukewarm coffee, anti-war literature, how-to-do-it tips on desertion, and similar disruptive counsels. Among the best-known coffee houses are: The Shelter Half (Ft. Lewis, Wash.); The Home Front (Ft. Carson, Colo.); and The Oleo Strut (Ft. Hood, Tex.).

* The nation-wide campus-radical offensive against ROTC and college officer-training is well known. Events last year at Stanford University, however, demonstrate the extremes to which this campaign (which peaked after Cambodia) has gone. After the Stanford faculty voted to accept a modified, specially restructured ROTC program, the university was subjected to a cyclone of continuing violence which included at least \$200,000 in ultimate damage to buildings (highlighted by systematic destruction of 40 20-foot stained glass windows in the library). In the end, led by university president Richard W. Lyman, the faculty reversed itself. Lyman was quoted at the time that “ROTC is costing Stanford too much.”

One militant West Coast Group, Movement for a Democratic Military (MDM), has specialized in weapons theft from military bases in California. During 1970, large armory thefts were successfully perpetrated against Oakland Army Base, Fts. Cronkhite and Ord and even the Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton, where a team wearing marine uniforms got away with nine M-16 rifles and an M-79 grenade launcher.

Operating in the Middle West, three soldiers from Ft. Carson, Colo., home of the Army’s permissive experimental unit, the 4th Mechanized Division, were recently indicted by a federal grand jury for dynamiting the telephone exchange, power plant and water works of another Army installation, Camp McCoy, Ws., on July 26, 1970.

The Navy, particularly on the West Coast, has also experienced disturbing cases of sabotage in the past two years, mainly directed at ships’ engineering and electrical machinery.

Drugs and the Military

The drug problem—like the civilian situation from which it directly derives—is running away with the services. In March, Navy Secretary John H. Chafee, speaking for the two sea services, said bluntly that drug abuse in both Navy and Marines is out of control.

In 1966, the Navy discharged 170 drug offenders. Three years later (1969), 3,800 were discharged. Last year in 1970, the total jumped to over 5,000.

Drug abuse in the Pacific Fleet—with Asia on one side, and kinky California on the other—gives the Navy its worst headaches. To cite one example, a destroyer due to sail from the West Coast last year for the Far East nearly had to postpone deployment when, five days before departure, a ring of some 30 drug users (over 10 percent of the crew) was uncovered.

Only last week, eight midshipmen were dismissed from the Naval Academy following disclosure of an alleged drug ring. While the Navy emphatically denies allegations in a copyrighted article by the “Annapolis Capitol” that up to 1,000 midshipmen now use marijuana, midshipman sources confirm that pot is anything but unknown at Annapolis.

Yet the Navy is somewhat ahead in the drug game because of the difficulty in concealing addiction at close quarters aboard ship, and because fixes are unobtainable during long deployments at sea.

The Air Force, despite 2,715 drug investigations in 1970, is in even better shape: its rate of 3 cases per thousand airmen is the lowest in the services.

By contrast, the Army had 17,742 drug investigations the same year. According to Col. Thomas B. Hauschild of the Medical Command of our Army forces in Europe, some 46 percent of the roughly 200,000 soldiers there had used illegal drugs at least once. In one battalion surveyed in West Germany, over 50 percent of the men smoked marijuana regularly (some on duty), while roughly half of those were using hard drugs of some type.

At Ft. Bragg, the Army's third largest post, adjacent to Fayetteville, N.C. (a garrison town whose conditions one official likened to New York's “East Village” and San Francisco's “Haight Ashbury”) a recent survey disclosed that 4% (or over 1,400) of the 36,000 soldiers there are hard-drug (mainly heroin and LSD) addicts. In the 82nd Airborne Division, the strategic-reserve unit that boasts its title of “America's Honor Guard,” approximately 450 soldier drug abusers were being treated when this reporter visited the post in April. About a hundred were under intensive treatment in special drug wards...

Desertions and Disasters

With conditions what they are in the Armed Forces, and with intense efforts on the part of elements in our society to disrupt discipline and destroy morale, the consequences can be clearly measured in two ultimate indicators: manpower retention (re-enlistments) and their antithesis, desertions; and the state of discipline. In both respects the picture is anything but encouraging.

Desertion rates are going straight up in Army, Marines, and Air Force. Curiously, however, during the period since 1968 when desertion has nearly doubled for all three other services, the Navy's rate has risen by less than 20 percent.

In 1970, the Army had 65,643 deserters, or roughly the equivalent of four infantry divisions. This desertion rate (52.3 soldiers per thousand) is well over twice the peak rate for Korea (22.5 per thousand). It is more than quadruple the 1966 desertion rate (14.7 per thousand) of the then well-trained, high-spirited professional Army.

If desertions continue to rise (as they are still doing this year), they will attain or surpass the WWII peak of 63 per thousand, which, incidentally, occurred in the same year (1945) when more soldiers were actually being discharged from the Army for psychoneurosis than were drafted. The Marines in 1970 had the highest desertion index in the modern history of the Corps and, for that year at least, slightly higher than the Army's.

The trouble of the services—produced by and also in turn producing the dismaying conditions described in this article—is above all a crisis of soul and backbone. It entails—the word is not too strong—something very near

a collapse of the command authority and leadership George Washington saw as the soul of military forces. This collapse results, at least in part, from a concurrent collapse of public confidence in the military establishment.

General Matthew B. Ridgway, one of the Army's finest leaders in this century (who revitalized the shaken Eighth Army in Korea after its headlong rout by the Chinese in 1950) recently said, "Not before in my lifetime...has the Army's public image fallen to such low esteem..."

But the fall in public esteem of all three major services—not just the Army—is exceeded by the fall or at least the enfeeblement of the hierarchic and disciplinary system by which they exist and, when ordered to do so, fight and sometimes die.

Related

See the Fifth Estate's Vietnam Resources page.

"Mutiny at the Outposts of Empire: GI Resistance in the Vietnam Era," FE #346, Summer, 1995

fifth Estate

Robert D. Heintz Jr.
The Collapse of the Armed Forces
Reprint
1990

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/335-winter-1990-91/the-collapse-of-the-armed-forces>
Fifth Estate #335, Winter, 1990-91

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net