

The Lessons of Vietnam

Rob Rifles (Rob Blurton)

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It's happening again. The tableau that has appeared so many times before resurfaces with bands playing and citizens cheering as the imperial army marches off to war. Now, an additional note is added to the traditional spectacle of men in uniform: departing women, with packs and rifles kiss weeping husbands and children goodbye.

Given the latest surge of war fever projected by the media, it is scarcely believable that less than two decades ago the U.S. armed forces were in open rebellion on the battlefields of Vietnam. As an enlisted marine in the early '80s, I found among the troops no knowledge of the extent of Vietnam-era mutinies, although talk of "fragging" officers if we ever went to war was common. However, there was never a threat of serious disobedience and many of my friends followed orders which led them to a desolate airport in Beirut in 1983 and the trip home in body bags.

This time around there is already a whiff of individual resistance that we at the *Fifth Estate* hope to see generalized into a mass movement. Three Army reservists recently joined two members of the Marine Corps in publicly refusing to obey orders sending them to the Saudi war zone. The Pentagon notes a total of ten refusers. One of them, Matthew Brown, stated, "I don't consider the Kuwaiti royal family or cheap gasoline as sufficient reasons for thousands of Americans to die." Nothing fills our hearts with glee more than to hear young soldiers wising up to the deal and refusing to be used as cannon fodder to defend the "American Way of Life."

Many times before, other crusades that began triumphantly have ended in ignominy or even revolution. Armed force is the ultimate instrument of state power, so when soldiers refuse orders or take the further step of training their guns on those issuing them, anything is possible.

During the last sustained imperial war effort, it took three years of grisly jungle warfare in Vietnam for a substantial movement of GI resistance to take root. By 1969-71, however, the refusal to kill or be killed in service to the empire was widespread. Must these same hard lessons be learned on blood-soaked battlegrounds once again?

Rob Rifles is a member of the FE Staff.

Related

* "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," FE #335, Winter, 1990-91.

* "The Lessons of Vietnam: The government spat on Vietnam vets, not the anti-war movement," FE #336, Spring, 1991

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

* *Fifth Estate's* Vietnam Resource Page.

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