

Free Speech for GIs

Analysis of a victory

Michael Smith

1969

Editors' Note: The author is an attorney with the Detroit Law firm of Lafferty, Reosti, and Jabara, who spent two months in Columbia, S.C. working on the legal defense of members of GIs United Against the War in Vietnam.

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The story of the Ft. Jackson Eight is the story of how an attempt by the brass to break a rank and file GI movement failed.

When lawyers for the Fort Jackson Eight threatened to have Brigade Commander Col. Thomas Maertens court martialed for illegally confining the men in the stockade after an antiwar meeting attended by 200 men, the grapevine on the base had it that the colonel's wife broke down in tears.

And the hysteria spread. A *New York Times* reporter at a confidential Pentagon briefing finally got the brass to admit to their grave concern over the new anti-warriors.

The base commander, General James F. Hollingsworth, is the famous "Zap-Zap" General who came to public attention by hanging out helicopter doors in Vietnam, carbine in hand, "zapping the Cong." Describing his exploits to a British reporter, he declared that "There is nothing I like better than killing Cong, no sir."

In a speech Hollingsworth gave at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, the one-star general, who was pushing for a second star, made it plain that there is nothing he would like better to do now than to "zap" the Ft. Jackson Eight and destroy their organization, GIs United Against the War in Vietnam.

GIs United started last January when a group of black and Puerto Rican soldiers began gathering in the barracks to listen to Malcolm X tapes. The brass moved to break them up by inciting white soldiers against them. "They are black power Mau Mau advocates," the white soldiers were told.

The brass urged whites to grab broomsticks in the supply closet to "beat in some heads." But the supply clerk at the time, a white soldier from Decatur, Ga., Pvt. Joe Cole, who is one of the defendants in the stockade, had the only key to the closet and he refused to open the door.

Not to be foiled, the brass then announced it was Upper Respiratory Infection Season, and that all meetings in the barracks of more than eight men would be "dangerous to the health of the company."

The next meeting was held outside in the dead of winter. Over 80 GIs attended.

Membership in the newly-named GIs United was extended to those who opposed the war and who supported GIs' First Amendment rights to express themselves on the question. In order to broaden support, white GIs too became members, but only on the condition that they supported the principle of self-determination for blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Realizing that strength is in numbers, the GIs started a petition campaign as an organizing tool. Maintaining their First Amendment right to petition the government to redress grievances, and using that as a shield, the soldiers circulated through the base on their off-duty hours, talking to other GIs about the war and asking them to sign a petition directed to the General which asked that he provide the facilities for a base-wide meeting—open

to anyone—to discuss the war, racism in the Army, and other grievances the men had. Within a week, nearly 300 signatures had been collected.

Fearing that the night of the presentation of the petition was imminent, the brass tried to prevent the men from reaching headquarters. In one week they called three inspections—one to determine if the men's pants came down to the third shoelace hole—and two mandatory basketball games.

Finally, two privates who had eluded the restriction attempted to hand the signed petition to Fort Jackson Public Information Officer Lt. Col. Sticles. The press, notified in advance by GIs United, surrounded the group which gathered in front of Post Headquarters. They were boggled, as were the interloping brass by the simple request.

"Private Cole reporting to present petition signed by enlisted men at Fort Jackson, Sir."

The petition was, of course, not accepted. Pvt. Andrew Pulley, one of the eight told a reporter that night, "By their refusing to accept the petition, they have actually made a mistake. The public will really know what the Army is all about, and not only will the public know, but the rest of the GIs..."

The harassment caused GIs United to grow even bigger. At outdoor meetings, still citing the First Amendment umbrella of free speech, they talked about the root cause of the men's discontent—capitalism.

Explanations of the racist and imperialist nature of the war came down. Army harassment of enlisted men was seen as an attempt to turn men into mental vegetables, all the more pliable. The question of free speech was seen ultimately to mean that the Army couldn't fight an undemocratic war with a democratic army.

Much that is rotten in American society comes to a head on a military installation—rigid class distinctions, racism, meaningless work, boredom, and of course, authoritarianism.

On one occasion, one of the defendants pressed the free speech argument on the Inspector General. He answered that the men had no right to think, and that their only right was "to obey orders and die proudly." As for himself, well he was accountable to only two people—"My commander and God."

Because of the draft, the Army represents a fairly good cross-section of the American population. Fort Jackson contains 30,000 men, 10,000 of whom are being trained in some combat capacity. These are men who have at least been exposed to the struggles taking place in the schools, streets, and the communities.

As a result, most enlisted men oppose the war, albeit often in a confused way. Black soldiers, of whom there are disproportionate numbers in combat training, oppose the war nearly to a man.

It is thus not surprising that blacks played a vanguard role in launching GIs United. The unity they achieved enabled them to withstand the Army's greatest weapon of intimidation—fear. Alignment with militant whites, on a principled basis of supporting self-determination, gave the organization its crucially needed widespread appeal.

The fear of participating, of coming to meetings, of expressing anti-war and pro-black views, was broken down. Photos of pin-up girls and hotrods disappeared from the barracks—up went large photos of Malcolm X on footlocker doors. GIs United adopted the clenched fist salute and chances are now that if you make the gesture to an enlisted man on the base, it will be returned—with a smile.

When the GIs insisted that their activity is perfectly legal and constitutionally guaranteed by the First Amendment, the Army fell flat on its face. Its attempt at repression by arresting the Ft. Jackson Eight rebounded and thrust the movement up to a new level.

With charges pending the case began to get national publicity. Even the British press and German television came down to Columbia to do stories on the eight men and the GI anti-war movement. The brass maneuvered into partial retreat. Charges against four of the men were dropped.

Cut free, Pvt. Tommy Woodfin of Harlem started up again, with another petition, this one addressed to the Commanding General asking that the flag over the post headquarters be lowered to half mast on May 19 in honor of Malcolm X's birthday, "a man the American people knew and loved." The first night out Tommy got 67 signatures in 45 minutes and was caught by the Colonel the next day in the mess hall where people were lining up at their tables ready to sign.

And again, since there is nothing illegal about signing a petition, and considering the atmosphere on the base, the brass could do nothing. Two days later the remaining three men were released from the stockade—all charges dropped—and told they would be getting administrative discharges!

GIs United did not die as the Army expected. Meetings are held and a petition campaign in support of the men is being conducted.

Another GIs United group has sprung up at Fort Bragg, N.C., containing a number of Vietnam Vets and a half dozen or so Green Berets. Airmen from nearby Shaw Airforce Base are starting now to build their own organization as are similarly inspired Marines from the Beauford Air Station.

And a former Ft. Jackson soldier, now in Vietnam, has written to Jose Rudder, one of the defendants while he was in the stockade, that there soon will be a GIs United in 'Nam.

The brass has not ceased its harassment of anti-war soldiers.

Pvt. Joe Miles, one of the founders of GI's United, has been shipped off to the Arctic circle, because he continued his organizing activities at Ft. Bragg after being transferred there from Ft. Jackson. His transfer will only mean the formation of the first GI United in Alaska.

Also, a new petition is circulating at Fort Jackson, carrying the identifying tag, "GIs United Against the War in Vietnam."

GIs United is protesting the Army's vindictive new attempt to discredit the Fort Jackson eight by court martialing Pvt. Tommy Woodfin, 19, of Brooklyn, New York, one of the original black founders of the anti-war group.

Woodfin is charged with assault (because he defended himself against a trainee whom the Army has dressed up as an NCO for the occasion) and with being AWOL on June 2.

For these alleged offenses he is now held under barracks arrest and will face a special court martial which can impose a sentence of six months in the stockade at hard labor. Tommy's attorney is Howard Moore of Atlanta, who has already won one court martial acquittal for him.

In a speech played on the local radio General Hollingsworth noted that 3 to 4 thousand young Americans return home from Vietnam each month. He said these were exceptionally highly motivated young men. They had seen the face of terror, of totalitarianism. They now knew first hand about communism and that they would come back with that knowledge and add a new element to American life.

The rulers and functionaries of a decaying social system increasingly lose touch with reality as their bulwarks decompose. And the irony of Hollingsworth's prediction is that in essence it is true.

But it is not communism these men are identifying as totalitarian. It is the Army and the system it both reflects and protects that these men are identifying as the enemy.

And what the general will never understand is that the heroic struggle the Vietnamese are waging to be free to construct their own society is a magnificent example for our American soldiers who will some day enter into that very same struggle here at home.

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Fifth Estate #82, June 26-July 9, 1969

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