

Fifty Years Ago Today, US Soldiers Joined the Vietnam Moratorium Protests in Mass Numbers

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Global Research, October 21, 2019

[Jacobin](#) 15 October 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of the October 15, 1969 Moratorium, perhaps the most important US protest during [the war against Vietnam](#).

Millions turned out across the United States in a historic day of action. Nothing else so conveyed the breadth of the antiwar movement. *Life* magazine described the Moratorium as “a display without historic parallel, the largest expression of public dissent ever seen in this country.” With the Moratorium, wrote Fred Halstead, “the antiwar movement for the first time reached the level of a full-fledged mass movement.”

The Moratorium’s organizers urged people across the country to dedicate October 15 to protesting the war. With the hawkish Nixon in the Oval Office, and with the war showing no end in sight, antiwar forces needed to make a powerful statement that would jolt the political climate in the United States.

When October 15 came, some two million people across two hundred cities took part. There were the expected huge demonstrations — a quarter-million people each in New York City and Washington, DC, and another hundred thousand in Boston, for example. But the scope of antiwar sentiment was also reflected in the many local expressions the Moratorium took across the nation. As one historian described it:

Everywhere, black armbands; everywhere, flags at half staff; church services, film showings, teach-ins, neighbor-to-neighbor canvasses. In North Newton, Kansas, a bell tolled every four seconds, each clang memorializing a fallen soldier; in Columbia, Maryland, an electronic sign counted the day’s war deaths. Milwaukee staged a downtown noontime funeral procession. Hastings College, an 850-student Presbyterian school in Nebraska, suspended operations. Madison, Ann Arbor, and New Haven were only a few of the college towns to draw out a quarter of their populations or more.

Throughout 1969, Nixon had tried to paint the growing antiwar movement as the fringe of the Left. But the Moratorium proved that that the movement was undeniably mainstream, a core pole of American life, able to influence the terms of political debate over the war.

But to understand the true extent of the Moratorium, we must look closely at an oft-overlooked [group of participants](#): the US soldiers serving in the military’s ranks who were made to fight the war.



Police halt an effort to throw a casket over the White House fence protesting the Vietnam War October 15, 1969 as part of the Moratorium Against the War. Washington Area Spark / Flickr

Hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of GIs actively took part in Moratorium actions, both in October 1969 as well as in further Moratorium protests later in the year. Some attended off-base demonstrations. Many signed their names to public statements against the war. Others wore black armbands. Some educated and organized fellow troops in solidarity with the Moratorium. Dozens wrote letters to antiwar papers and groups to express their sympathy with the protests. And many worked alongside civilian allies to take their antiwar stance. This is history that flies in the face of popular memory, shaped and politicized by right-wing myths, that pit Vietnam War-era soldiers against the antiwar movement, posit that peace protests at home demoralized troops in Vietnam, or claim that protesters spit upon GIs.

The history of GI protest during the [Vietnam War](#) — and the affinity that many soldiers felt with the Moratorium actions — tells another story. Many troops *were part of* the antiwar movement. The horrible war they were fighting, and the harassment and racism they endured from the military brass, was hurting their morale. And civilian [antiwar organizers](#) viewed them with sympathy and solidarity, offered various forms of support, and, most of all, worked tirelessly with them to try to end the war.

This all may seem to be remote history at this point, but it's still deeply relevant. The construction of the mainstream memory of the Vietnam War in the United States has been a deeply political and ideological process. Conservative efforts to define the Vietnam War-era US soldier as "[spit upon](#)" and "stabbed in the back" by antiwar protesters have gone hand in hand with manufacturing popular consent for war-making over the past half-century.

But the history of GI resistance during the Vietnam War — and during the Moratorium — tells another story that challenges these militarist narratives: that soldiers weren't pitted against the antiwar movement. Many were part of it.

The GI Movement

Active-duty GIs had been protesting the war as early as 1965, and by 1969, that protest had evolved into a full-on movement. The [GI movement](#) — as it was called — was an effort by

active-duty soldiers and veterans, working closely with civilian allies, to organize troops to oppose the war, resist the military brass, fight racism, and protect GI civil liberties. While often local, sporadic, and decentralized, the resistance that made up the GI movement was loosely tied together by common symbols, narratives, organizing vehicles, and outside support.

Thousands of soldiers plugged into and participated in the GI movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They signed petitions, joined antiwar marches, and donned peace symbol necklaces. They formed their own soldier antiwar groups with names like GIs for Peace, the American Servicemen's Union, and Movement for a Democratic Military. They flocked to off-base antiwar [coffeehouses](#) and circulated hundreds of subversive [newspapers](#) deep into the military's ranks.

And all this was just the more organized expression of a much larger reservoir of disobedience and rebellion throughout the ranks of the armed forces — leading, for example, journalist John Pilger to film a 1970 documentary on US soldiers in Vietnam titled [The Quiet Mutiny](#), and a famed Marine colonel to declare the “[collapse of the armed forces](#)” in the pages of the *Armed Forces Journal* in June 1971. (For more background on the GI movement, see the new book, [Waging Peace in Vietnam: US Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War](#), as well as David Cortright's [Soldiers in Revolt](#), David Parsons' recent book on [GI coffeehouses](#), and the documentary [Sir! No Sir!](#)).

A crucial factor in building the GI movement was the solidarity between dissident soldiers and the antiwar civilians who helped them organize. This is important, because the history of the GI movement dispels the notion that the antiwar movement hated soldiers. Rather, many peace activists sympathized with the plight of US troops and helped organize them to end the war.

They fundraised for the GI movement, offered legal help, and aided in the staffing of coffeehouses and the production of GI papers. Some tensions may have existed between antiwar civilians and GIs, but their relationship was far from what scholar Jerry Lembcke has called the “[spitting image](#),” the myth that peace activists spit on US soldiers, would have us believe. Rather, the spitting image was a trope that was mobilized *after* the war for conservative political gain and to serve a revived American militarism.

By the time the October 15, 1969 Moratorium rolled around, then, GIs were not only increasingly seen as a crucial constituency within the wider antiwar movement, but they had already succeeded in organizing themselves into their own loose antiwar movement that stretched across the globe.

The October Moratorium



Telegram

cancel
LLH111 KTQLNS A387 *Bob Lucas*

54
1969 OCT 15 AM 11 30

NS SNA507 MP NL PDF SAN ANTONIO TEX 14 OCT

THE NEW MOBILIZATION COMMITTEE DLY 75

1029 VERMONT AVE NW WASHDC

WE THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF COMPANY E 4TH BN USA MTC FORT
SAM HOUSTON TEXAS SUPPORT YOUR EFFORTS IN BRINGING ABOUT A
SPEEDY END TO THE WAR IN VIET NAM PS AND LOTS MORE WHO WE COULD
NOT AFFORD TO LIST

PVT WILLIAM GRIGSBY

PVT GRANT WILLIAMS

PVT JOHN POHICH

PVT GEORGE KAUFMAN

PVT HOWARD RUMBOLD

PVT MICHAEL COHLER

PVT GEORGE BAHR

PVT EUGENE KURLONKO

SF-1201 (RS-69)



Telegram

NS SNA507 SHEET 2

1969 OCT 15 AM 11 30

PVT ROBERT P WARD

PVT STEPHAN GUBAR

PVT MARK CAMPBELL

PVT DARRELL CARPENTER

PVT BURL H MILLSTID

PVT LEE STOUT

PVT FLOYD BRYANT

PVT RICHARD DIETZ

PVT ROBERT GOURLEY

PVT VINCENT CLARK

PVT STANLEY BURKS

PVT RANDY ZAPARRA

PVT CALVIN HALLOCK

PVT SAMUEL LAMONT

SF-1201 (RS-69)



Telegram

NS SNA507 SHEET 3

PVT JOHN POLGREEN.

1969 OCT 15 AM 11 30

via History Workshop UK.

In the leadup to the October Moratorium, civilian antiwar groups like the Student Mobilization Committee (SMC) and the Vietnam Moratorium Committee (VMC) sought to

recruit GIs into the action. For example, Jerry Lembcke [cites](#) a memorandum that the VMC sent widely to GI antiwar newspapers that read:

We are eager to have servicemen join our national campaign to maximize public pressure for peace. We are writing for your help in getting GIs to participate in a 'recurring moratorium' on "business as usual."

The memo gave suggestions for actions GIs could take, such as holding on-base meetings to discuss GI rights, sending letters to elected officials, and holding fasts during the day of the Moratorium. The VMC also offered legal help to soldiers that made the decision to protest, since this could invite punishment from the military brass.

GIs across the world answered the call to participate in the October Moratorium. Some joined or held stateside protests. For example, seventy-five soldiers stationed at Fort Carson [participated](#) in a protest in Colorado Springs, while around 150 soldiers at Fort Sam Houston signed a petition to protest on base. When their request was denied, they held their protest in downtown San Antonio. Hundreds of other GIs elsewhere also took part in Moratorium events.

These dissident troops made their antiwar stance known to the wider movement. For example, twenty-three GIs at Fort Sam Houston signed a Western Union Telegram sent to the New Mobilization Committee that read:

WE THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF COMPANY E 4TH BN US A MTC FORT SAM HOUSTON TEXAS SUPPORT YOUR EFFORTS IN BRINGING ABOUT A SPEEDY END TO THE WAR IN VIET NAM PS AND LOTS MORE WHO COULD NOT AFFORD TO LIST.

But GIs didn't just protest stateside. They also joined the Moratorium from Vietnam.

"In the foothills south of Danang," wrote the the *New York Times*, "about 15 members of a platoon of the Americal Division wore black armbands as they marched on patrol. 'It's my way of protesting,' one soldier told a reporter. 'We wanted to do something, and this was the only thing we could think of.'"

The high stakes of the war for these GIs was not lost in the *Times's* reporting. "Before the day was out," the article said, "four of the protesting soldiers had been wounded by Vietcong booby traps."

Historian Tom Wells [writes](#) that another half-dozen troops "donned armbands at the gigantic Tan Son Nhut air base." Wells also quotes draft resister Michael Ferber, who visited with some US psy-war troops in Vietnam before the protest:

Between drags of "unbelievable" Cambodian grass, the GIs "wanted to know all about the Moratorium," Ferber recalled. "They were all against the war ... I was amazed that morale had degenerated to that extent."

Lembcke also [writes](#) that *Life* reporter Hal Wingo interviewed around a hundred GIs around the time of the October Moratorium. One of them was Private Jim Beck of the Army's 101st Division. His brother had been killed in Khe San, and Beck had gone to Vietnam to seek

revenge, but he told Wingo “[t]he demonstrators are right to speak up because this war is wrong and it must be stopped.”

Another soldier Wingo who spoke to was PFC Chris Yapp. “I think the protesters may be the only ones who really give a damn about what’s happening,” Yapp told Wingo.

Wingo observed that many GIs in Vietnam did not view the antiwar movement as “anti-soldier”; just the opposite. “Many soldiers regard the organized antiwar campaign in the US with open and outspoken sympathy,” Wingo wrote; and he noted that “the protests in the US are not demoralizing troops in the field.”

Lembcke quotes a letter from one servicemember, Sergeant James C. Ruh, who expressed his support for the October 15 Moratorium and blasted the notion that the antiwar movement was hurting troop morale.

“It has been argued by people, such as Vice President Agnew, that the peace demonstrations are demoralizing and dispiriting to those fighting in Vietnam and therefore should not take place,” wrote Ruh. But he found “nothing to be further from the truth”:

In my own infantry company, which I believe to be fairly representative, the Moratorium has wide support. It was, in fact, very much a morale builder. The men are intelligent enough to realize that the peace demonstrations are on their behalf. They realize that the greater the pressure kept on President Nixon, the sooner they’ll get home. Even more importantly, the fewer will be their friend who do not return.

Ruh also criticized the argument that that “unless you’ve been to Vietnam, you don’t know what is really going on there, and have no right to criticize it,” and turned it on its head while invoking the October Moratorium:

While this is an obviously fallacious argument, being there does add a personal perspective to the situation, which makes many of your men fighting in Vietnam the biggest critics of the war. They can see what is going on, not what is screened through the media. While many wore armbands for the October 15 Moratorium, they are for the large part prevented from demonstrating their feelings on the war. They can give only moral support to the Peace Moratorium, and hope that it is successful.

It’s significant that both Wingo and Sgt. Ruh bring up the relationship between GI morale and the antiwar movement. While pro-war forces claimed the movement was demoralizing soldiers in Vietnam, GIs often saw the existence of the peace movement as a morale *booster*. It was the horrible war itself, the careerist military brass above GIs, and the racism that many soldiers endured, that was hurting morale.

Beyond October

While October 15 saw the height of the Moratorium protests, similar actions, as well as GI participation in them, continued throughout 1969.

Civilians antiwar organizers intensified their outreach efforts to GIs for the follow-up

Moratorium on November 15, while GIs themselves stepped up their protest efforts in the days after the October action. For example, an October 20 on-base meeting of GIs at Fort Lewis, organized by the American Servicemen's Union, was [raided](#) by military police, leading to thirty-five arrests.

On October 28, a captain stationed in Long Binh wrote the Moratorium Day Committee, and after praising the October Moratorium and criticizing his own "cowardice" in failing to protest the war, he declared:

It is time, however belated ... that the members of the Armed Forces stood up, raised their voices, and informed the world that they are at one with both the method and the goal of the Vietnam Moratorium. The Moratorium transcends politics. The very humanity of my race is threatened, and no longer can I sit back and laud people who raise their voices without adding mine. This I do now!

Nor was the captain just making a verbal declaration. He was starting to organize. He included a petition with over eighty troop signatures under the heading: "We, the undersigned, agree in spirit with the Vietnam moratorium and urge the immediate and total withdrawal of all U.S. combat troops from SE Asia." He even included a follow up letter: "You may use both the petitions and my personal letter in whatever way you see fit ... Inform all those who will listen that American troops can and should be supported only through support for the Moratorium."

But perhaps the most significant GI antiwar expression was a November 9, 1969 full-page antiwar ad, published in the *New York Times*, and signed by an astounding 1,366 active duty GIs from across eighty bases and ships, including nearly two hundred stationed in Vietnam.

The ad was sponsored by the GI Press Service, a "news bulletin and information center" for GI antiwar newspapers that was overseen by the Student Mobilization Committee. The SMC had a "GI task force," coordinated by ex-GI and Young Socialist Alliance member Allen Myers, that edited the ad.

The ad's message was clear: it was a bold and direct statement against the war and a call to support the November 15 Moratorium. "We are opposed American involvement in the war in Vietnam," it read. "We resent the needless wasting of lives to save face for the politicians in Washington. We speak, believing our views are shared by many of our fellow servicemen. Join Us!" The ad also carried a message for supporters of antiwar GIs:

GI's, as American citizens, have the constitutional right to join these demonstrations. In the past, however, military authorities have often restricted servicemen to their bases, thus effectively preventing them from participating in demonstrations against the war. We ask you to write to the President and your representatives in Congress to demand that GI's not be prevented from participating in the November 15 demonstrations.

Some GIs organized within their military units to turn out support for both the *Times* ad and the November Moratorium. David Cortright was stationed at Fort Hamilton, New York, at the time. Despite the threat of reprisals, thirty-five out of sixty soldiers in his unit signed added their names, and a dozen Fort Hamilton troops attended the Moratorium protest in DC, along with hundreds of other GIs.

Cortright [recalled](#) that the ad had a “dramatic impact” and helped to “build momentum” for the November Moratorium. Indeed, GI participation on November 15 may have surpassed that of the October protests. Over 200 GIs led the DC protest, which numbered around a quarter-million.

There were also more local expressions of Moratorium organizing. For example, troops at Fort Bliss, who had organized a vibrant chapter of GIs for Peace, held a prayer meeting at a chapel. Francis Lenski, who was stationed at Fort Bliss, recalls another GI action.

“During the lead up to the Moratorium demonstrations,” Lenski said, “members of GIs for Peace decided to make a statement against the war that all of El Paso would see.” He [went on](#):

Located on the side of the Franklin Mountains facing El Paso and Fort Bliss were some hollow drums, painted white by students from a local school. We decided to adapt those drums for another purpose. Working mostly under the cover of darkness, we relocated them to form the shape of the peace sign, filled them with fuel, and set them ablaze. The fiery scene above the city and environs spoke for itself (and us) and was the talk of the town and base for days to come.

Meanwhile, evidence of GI sympathy with and direct participation in the November Moratorium, expressed through letters, poured into the offices of protest organizers. One soldier stationed in Georgia, probably at Fort Benning, wrote to a Moratorium organizer declaring: “I desire to help in any manner I can in the cause of peace and especially on November 13, 14, 15.” He went on, expressing his deep desire to organize against the war:

Saving face is not worth the price, 40,000 + live. I desire to do anything I can to help end this American tragedy and useless killing. The Columbus, Ga. area is in need of some organization and information. There are many others, who like myself would like to work for peace but are ignorant as to just what we can do. Many of us have wives who are eager to do their part and who are better able to fully participate because of their civilian status. Any information and advice and/or material you could send will be greatly appreciated.

Another servicemember wrote to the VMC from his ship, the USS Sanctuary. “Those of us stationed aboard this ship who support your efforts and goals would like to participate in events on November 15, 1969,” he announced. He said that he and his shipmates planned “to wear black armbands,” though they had no plans to disrupt “the normal routine on board the ship,” seemingly in fear of reprisal.

Yet another soldier wrote the Cleveland Area Peace Action Council to express regret that he had “little way of supporting the Movement” from Vietnam, where he was stationed, but he sent \$16 for the group to “send someone to DC who can’t afford it” on November 15. This GI explained his donation by saying he “would like to do my share for my country via the Movement.”

Historian Richard Moser [cites](#) Dave Blalock, a communications specialist stationed at Camp Long Thanh North, to show how the *Times* ad inspired GI protest in Vietnam around the November Moratorium. “One night we were sitting around the barracks in Vietnam” said Blalock, “and passing around this full-page ad in the *New York Times* that a guy had just

come back from R & R in Hawaii had clipped out.”

Blalock recalled that everyone started saying “Why don’t we do something on this date, November 15,” and the GIs “came to a decision that we’re going to wear black armbands and we’re going to refuse to go out on patrol.” He continued:

The next day we went around ... and put out the word ... It seemed like everybody was doing it ... The morning of the 15th we wake up at about five in the morning, and instead of playing the military shit, they put Jimi Hendrix’s “Star-spangled Banner” on ...

So we went to formation with our new commanding officer. The former CO was blown away ... he was killed, fragged ... So we went out in morning formation and we’re all wearing black armbands. It was like 100 percent of the enlisted men. .. Including some of the war doctors and the helicopter pilots. The CO comes out as says ... “I think we’re going to give you guys a day off.” He was real slick with it.

(Blalock’s full account can also be read in [*Waging Peace in Vietnam: US Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War.*](#))

These are just a few examples among many others, revealed in interviews, firsthand accounts, the GI underground press, and in letters that soldiers sent to antiwar groups and GI papers of the extent of soldier sympathy with and participation in the Moratorium protests.

The momentum from the November 15 continued to propel GI protest in the weeks that followed. For example, fifty marines from Camp Pendleton [led](#) an antiwar protest in Los Angeles days after the November Moratorium, while a few hundred GIs from Fort Bliss led an antiwar march the following Saturday in El Paso, Texas.

And while the Moratorium tapered off by the end of 1969, there were some last gasp attempts to carry out December activities. GIs participated in them. Penny Lewis [notes](#) that a thousand marines staged a Moratorium march in Oceanside, California, near Camp Pendleton, on December 14, 1969, while Cortright writes that two hundred soldiers at Fort Bragg also protested in a December action.

One soldier from the Army’s 33rd Signal Battalion wrote to an antiwar GI paper on New Year’s Eve, 1969, to request copies. He declared: “I have close to 500 names of G.I.’s that want to read it and become a part of the Peace things that are happening with the moratorium committee.” He noted that a single copy of an antiwar paper “can travel through 20 and 30 people in one day.” Another soldier from the Army’s 199th Infantry Brigade wrote to the VMC on December 13, 1969. His moving letter read:

For the past seven months I have served in Vietnam in an infantry company. During that time I have come to know the war in terms so personal and so filled with incredulity and sorrow that it is difficult for me to express my feelings about it without becoming either emotional or angry.

My country has let me down. It has sent me here to fight an impossible war; it has witnessed the death of my friends with nothing but vague talk of “commitments” and “silent majorities”; and refused to admit it. It is statistically freightening that the United States could commit 40,000 American

lives to so unnecessary a war, but to those of us who must fight this war it is an almost unbearable reality.

I'm hoping that in the coming year our leaders will have the courage and humanity to extricate us from this senseless bloodbath. Too many men, good men, men who deserved to live, have been sacrificed already.

He ended his letter with an authorization from the VMC to "print this letter in full or in part in the N.Y. Times."

Even into 1970, some GIs still wrote to the Moratorium committee with antiwar missives. A marine wrote a letter to an antiwar paper on behalf of his fellow troops. "We are active as possible here," he declared. "59 Marines and 1 corpsman signed our petition for Xmas moratorium and we have more planned for this month.

Legacy

Remembering the antiwar efforts of GIs during the Moratorium days, and the GI movement more broadly, isn't just an exercise in historical memory. The Vietnam War-era GI movement left an important model of resistance for later generations of antiwar soldiers and veterans, including up to the present.

Some scholars have also argued that the huge extent of soldier protest, defiance, and disobedience played a role in bringing the war to an end. The history of the GI movement also discredits the trope of a civilian antiwar movement that hated and [spit upon](#) soldiers.

Finally, remembering the history of GI protest during the US war on Vietnam is politically important, because it pushes back against popular narratives surrounding the war and soldiers that have been used to serve elite, militarist aims.

As I wrote for [Monthly Review](#) in 2016, the construction of historical memory is a deeply ideological process through which different political interests contend to shape our "common sense" about the past. Conservative and militarist forces have sought to define cultural icons like "the soldier" in ways that will benefit their own political agendas. This has been [particularly true](#) regarding the memory of the Vietnam War.

However, the history of GI protest during the Vietnam War, the *actual* widespread examples of soldier resistance that have been largely erased from popular memory, pushes back against efforts to link the memory of US troops from the war with disdain for antiwar politics and support for war and militarism today.

Rather, soldiers themselves — in huge numbers, from the United States to Vietnam, often in solidarity with civilians peace activists — were actively involved in the antiwar movement or strongly supported it. For many, the antiwar movement and antiwar politics didn't demoralize them; rather, this was *their* movement and *their* politics. A half-century since the October Moratorium, which GIs participated in and supported, this is history worth remembering.

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Featured image: Vietnam War protestors march at the Pentagon in Washington, DC on October 21, 1967.

Photo credit: Frank Wolfe / LBJ Library / Wikimedia

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