

SAFE RETURN

“In a large vintage office building off New York City’s Union Square, an area which has traditionally been the headquarters for groups involved in radical causes, there is a Dos Passosan office which is a chaos of newspapers, books, files and posters. On the door, a letterhead announcing the Citizens’ Commission on U.S. War Crimes is scotch taped to the glass.”

That’s how the writer James Reston, Jr. described the two room suite Tod Ensign and I occupied on the tenth floor at 156 Fifth Avenue on the uptown corner of West 20th Street. Reston’s geography, stretched for effect, was a few blocks off but the atmospherics were on target.¹ This was New York City’s Movement building where many left-wing groups had their headquarters in the late Sixties and early Seventies, including Vietnam Veterans Against the War. And it was here that, during the fall of 1971, Tod and I brain stormed daily about what we might still accomplish politically to help keep the smoldering Vietnam War visible in the minds of an American public for whom the decade long conflict appeared to be over. In the interim the old CCI letterhead remained stuck to the door.

Every morning I would walk to the office from my apartment on East 5th Street near First Avenue. Most days I’d follow the same route: across St. Marks Place and up Fourth Avenue toward Union Square, then along Broadway, crossing on 20th Street one short block west to Fifth Avenue. Living solo then I’d almost always breakfast out, often at the B&H Dairy on Second Avenue two doors down from the Gem Spa, the all-night newsstand, an East Village landmark at the corner of St. Marks. The challah French toast

at the B&H was worth the abuse from the owner/cashier, a congenital crank named Dave who didn't have a good side anyone could ever get on, and who doubled as the restaurant's principal short order cook, one of the great ones. I'm a four season soup fiend, day or night, so on occasion I'd breakfast on a bowl of vegetarian matzo ball soup - no chicken stock in a dairy restaurant - and a couple of slices of fresh puffy challah bread smothered in butter. Or I'd alter my route and stop at the Veselka, further up Second Avenue at E. 9th Street, for the Ukrainian version of Jewish penicillin, veal and cabbage soup, or eggs with kielbasa.

By the time I reached the elevator of our building I would be carrying a 'black no sugar' coffee in one of those cardboard take-out cups ubiquitous throughout the city, Mediterranean blue, stamped with scenes of classical Greece. Before Starbucks and boutique java, it was widely held that all the coffee shops in town - not to be confused with the coffeehouses of the Greenwich Village Beat scene where real coffee - espresso - was sold - were owned by Greeks.

Till I was 19, I had never even tasted coffee, finding the aroma unappetizing. Kids where I grew up weren't big coffee drinkers in those days. Office life made me a java junkie. But it was Brazil that compelled me to drink the beverage for the first time. As a student in Rio, there were occasions when a Brazilian of little means would invite me for a *cafezinho*; this treat was the most he could afford. For me to say I didn't consume the national beverage felt like very bad form. I could hardly refuse. The *barista* would wait till a customer filled his tiny cup with sugar - literally to the brim - before dispensing the black syrupy liquid. Thus when I started drinking coffee regularly as part of the New York office ritual it took about six month, adding a few less granules

from the little sugar packets every day, till my coffee was sweetener free. Such was the ideological fervor in those days to eliminate white processed sugar from one's diet.

Tod, being a night owl and late sleeper, I'd often have an hour or two alone to sip my coffee, brief the late edition of the *Times* and peruse the morning's mail, to include many broadsides and flyers that called for action from the far flung reaches of the Movement. I would track my mental score card of the Left, its players and competing lines, from such weeklies as the *Militant*, organ of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, the Maoist *Guardian*, the New Left *Liberation News*, and that other incendiary tabloid, *The Black Panther*, along with a host of other *counter-cultural* and *underground* periodicals distributed nationwide, some by GIs still on active duty. But Tod and I were also inveterate correspondents, virtually a lost art in today's era of telegram-style electronic email and messaging. The carbon-set of every letter we composed went into a chronological - or 'Chron'- file, whereas virtually every scrap the postman delivered we stuffed into files labeled 'Incoming,' forming a collection that today is housed at Cornell University in dozens of boxes.²

The letters in those boxes document chronologically and in detail how, between October and December 1971, Tod Ensign and I engineered the new direction we were looking for. It was this meandering process that James Reston, Jr., in a book-length work appearing almost two years later, would compress into the arrival of a single letter from "a despairing... draft resister in Paris," who wrote that "the exile community there was dwindling, and one of the 'old timers' was about to pack his bags... and return home." Could CCI contact a lawyer, he inquired, "to help in his reentry?"³

We quickly assessed the possibilities. Tod, of course, was a lawyer. But what would be the political angle for defending a returning exile, not the civilian draft resister whose letter Reston describes, but the “old timer” in question being an Army deserter who’d already served in Vietnam? This was the conundrum Tod and I had toyed with all that fall of 1971. The most promising avenue pointed to the public discussion increasingly underway about the fate of young men of conscience who had fled the country to avoid fighting in a war they opposed. Now, if Vietnam was truly winding down, under what circumstances could these men be allowed to return home? The only viable solution would be to declare a general amnesty, especially after all the American prisoners of war had been returned by Hanoi, and all our troops brought home, neither of which condition would be fully met for another two years, though no one at the time could have predicted they would occur as soon as they did.

When asked at a press conference in October 1971 about granting amnesty President Richard Nixon had curtly responded with a single word, “No.” In the months ahead, whenever the subject was raised Nixon continued to voice strong opposition to amnesty, always dismissing the extent of the resistance to the draft while diminishing the size of the exile community it had spawned to “a few hundred cases... who deserted their country in time of war.” In fact some estimates put the size of the war-generated exile community in the tens of thousands. And that included only those who’d fled before being drafted. What about the men who’d been in uniform and took French leave? Many of them also found asylum aboard, but it was believed that most were living underground in the United States. In 1971 alone, Jim Reston would report, the Pentagon figure for incidences of desertion - defined as absence from one’s unit for more than thirty days -

was 98,324.⁴ Given CCI's established orientation toward working with those who'd served in the military, our contribution to the amnesty debate would seek to emphasize, not the resisters of conscience, but the resisters in uniform.

Over the course of the Vietnam War there would be more than 500,000 desertions from the ranks of the U.S. armed forces, a figure far surpassing any previous American war. But did these acts constitute resistance to the war in Vietnam? "Yes," Tod and I would argue for the next five years, the period during which the campaign for amnesty occupied a small corner of the nation's body politic. It would be our contention that acts of desertion when framed by the immoral and, by now, widely unpopular wars in Indochina were objectively acts of resistance even when clouded by an inability on the part of those who deserted to articulate their actions in conventional political or pacifistic language. Furthermore we maintained that, for the purposes of amnesty, all these cases of desertion would have to be examined uniformly. Any attempt to sort out from among these vast numbers those whose actions could be characterized as substantially political from those who were motivated by other factors - often a healthy rejection of racist or abusive military command authority - would be, not just futile, but unjust.

Here we were confronting the befogged class-divide in U.S. society that had disproportionately shunted blue collar and minority Americans into military service and combat, while offering one sector of its masculine youth, overwhelmingly white and middle class, the education and social underpinning required to either avoid the draft through any number of avenues of exemption, or for that minority actually snared by conscription who would chose exile over service, the indispensable cultural trappings to arrive at and act upon abstract predicaments of conscience.⁵ We supported and honored

all acts of resistance to the Vietnam War; but as a political priority we would focus on those resisters who were least likely to be championed in their long-shot bid for amnesty and repatriation without strings or penalties. Sometime in late December we arrived at the name of the organization that would replace CCI and sustain our involvement in the battle for amnesty. We would call ourselves SAFE RETURN: Committee in Support of Self-Retired Veterans (Deserters).

In another sense it was not so much the campaign to win a just amnesty for draft and military resisters that had stimulated - at its most exposed nerve - our reorientation. The real dilemma confronting Tod and I, along with thousands of other antiwar activists, was how to initiate viable activities during the Vietnamization phase of the war that would prevent the American public from ignoring the harsh reality that the U.S. role in the violence still engulfing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, was far from over. Tens of thousands of U.S. troops continued to occupy our bases in South Vietnam, and in December 1971 they were fighting and dying there every day. The peoples and land throughout Indochina were still being ravaged and raked by an obscene pounding of ordinance far outstripping all the destructive power unleashed during World War Two, including the two atomic bombs dropped over Japan - a shocking statistical fact history would later record without dissent even from pro-war revisionists. When Tod and I created Safe Return we did so with an eye toward adapting an emerging post-war political debate to a purpose that remained our unwavering priority and deepest commitment, continued organized opposition to the invisible but on-going war.

The letter commenting on the low mood of the Paris exile community came from Joe Heflin, a draft resister who was living there. Heflin was affiliated with the

International Quaker Center, an informal contact point for U.S. military deserters who were granted political asylum by the French government, because President Charles De Gaulle had sanctioned this affront to the Pentagon to flaunt his disdain for the American War. The previous July, after attending the International Enquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Oslo, Tod went to Paris where he met Joe Heflin along with several of his closest comrades among the Paris-based deserters.

We would solidify this contact with Heflin through a steady exchange of letters in the months ahead, over the course of which we had begun to consider several scenarios for dramatizing the amnesty debate. Our approach with the war crimes issue had been to create forums where veterans could address the public in their own words about how their experiences with atrocities in Vietnam had turned them against the war. Now we would employ a similar technique for exiled deserters who would voluntarily return to the U.S., or who would surface from their domestic hiding places, as test cases for amnesty demanding complete exoneration for their legitimate acts of resistance to a war that most Americans now viewed, at best, as a mistake. This was not just our polemical line of attack, but one argument for the defense, legally and in the court of public opinion, with each case. If the war was wrong logic then dictated that these men were right and deserved praise not punishment.

The logic of our polemic notwithstanding, we knew full well that the American public would be far more likely to forgive the war makers than the war resisters who, like the antiwar movement itself, had rubbed their noses in the stench of a *sale guerre*, a dirty war that, in defeat, would blemish forever the country's self- image of military invincibility. Those premature moralists who'd left the country, the deserters in

particular, could rot in hell most Americans undoubtedly believed when catching the first whispers for amnesty that began to infiltrate the political ether by late 1971.

I derive this opinion from the almost universal opposition at the time among elected politicians to anything Tod and I would have considered a just amnesty. For us this was just another lost cause from day one, but we would fight tooth and nail for it because it provided the best available means for continuing to bring discredit upon the Vietnam War. The hot phase of the American War in Indochina may have been drawing to a close, but the battle for history was only beginning. We admittedly entered this campaign to piggyback the amnesty issue for wider political ends, but we were determined not to use the resisters. We would make it abundantly clear to each man whose return we agreed to sponsor that no guarantees of avoiding prosecution or penalty could be offered. At the same time we believed that by bringing a maximum amount of public pressure and publicity to bear on each test case, the punitive consequences an individual resister faced could be minimized. Indeed, that prediction would prove to be substantially, though not entirely, accurate.

The selection of the first case would be pivotal in helping to determine the long term validity of our campaign. There were several potential candidates for that initial role, the Paris based-deserter mentioned by Heflin among them. But the field of possibilities extended well beyond Paris. Links with the principal communities of exiled deserters, Canada and Sweden, were well-integrated within the GI resistance networks. There were Coffee Houses and counseling centers in the vicinity of most major U.S. military installations where individual GIs, many on orders to the war zone, might make contact with the so-called underground railroad that would spirit them safely to Canada.

Those who fled American units based in Germany would be more likely to find themselves in Sweden. The Paris community was relatively small, since France offered resisters political asylum only, not economic assistance and other social benefits available in Sweden and Canada.

When I had testified in Stockholm at the First International Enquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Indochina in October 1970, I'd met a number of American deserters who'd given me an issue of their newspaper, *the second front*.⁶ One article under the headline "...better deal from Swedish gov't," outlined the support any American deserter could expect who sought refuge in that progressive corner of Scandinavia:

Sweden's been good for R&R ever since we were first allowed to base here in the spring of '67. Now things are even better... the Minister of the Interior... ordered even more money and aid... rooms, jobs, grants to schools... On top of that he promised that... none of us will be sent stateside no matter how hard they scream in the Pentagon... So now... more guys can come up for the beautiful Scandinavian summer and tell their COs, "Hell no, we won't go to the Nam." Don't put up with Army life any longer. Come to Sweden for permanent leave!

The notice paints a rosy picture. But there was perhaps in this invitation an unconscious element of 'misery loves company.' Even under the best of circumstances foreign exile was a lonely, and for many, a troubling experience, especially for the more untraveled and undereducated deserters for whom learning Swedish was only one formidable obstacle to full social integration in a culture that, after the romance wore thin, many would always perceive as incomprehensibly foreign.

Exiles might put up a brave front, but even in Canada where cultural adaptation was considerably easier, being cut off from everything and everybody they'd grown up with, not being able to attend a sister's wedding or a grandfather's funeral, was an emotional burden for all the resisters, not just the ex-GIs whose social profiles undermined their prospects to succeed as permanent immigrants. We would learn in the course of our work with Safe Return that there had been incidents in Sweden involving a small minority of American deserters in forms of crime that were rare, if not unprecedented, in that rigidly straight-laced society including a highly publicized bank robbery.⁷ Through the resistance grapevine we were hearing more and more that many exiled Americans, not just the chap referred to in the letter from Paris, were getting ready to pack it in and come home, to take whatever medicine awaited them. At least now, the joking went, they wouldn't be sent to Vietnam.

When an article by Jim Reston appeared in an October issue of the New Republic making the argument for a full amnesty, Tod and I quickly conceived another bold idea for our campaign.⁸ In sensing the possibility of an alliance with a writer who'd already shown sympathy for our work, we decided to contact Reston, who would later recall:

I received a telephone call from Mike Uhl asking if I was interested in doing a book on the return of a deserter. I had first met Mike in Washington the year before at the National Veteran Inquiry... I admired... the work of the Commission [CCI].... and felt deeply that the political and command responsibilities for the personal and technological assault of the American military on the Vietnamese people lay squarely with the highest levels of decision-making... [T]he government never admitted

responsibility... but the question of amnesty had potential for the revitalization of the debate on war crimes... Mike's proposal intrigued me greatly... because this appeared to be a dramatic way to force the amnesty issue on the military and on the country at large. The Safe Return proposal was an opportunity for me to personalize the issue.”⁹

That's exactly what Tod and I had in mind. We told Reston that we were considering three candidates for our initial test, prosaically code-named X, Y and Z. In what Reston would wryly describe as “a somewhat cloak and dagger correspondence,” a true poke at Tod's and my penchant for intrigue, we weighed back and forth, not just criteria for the ideal first case, but the merits of two competing return scenarios. One, covert, we tagged the Daniel Berrigan option, where the deserter would pop up around the country at antiwar events, always anticipating arrest, versus an open challenge by returning the man directly to military authority. It was this latter approach we would finally agree upon, finding the covert alternative unrealistic for a number of reasons. For one, whomever we chose, our deserter would not be a highly visible and articulate Movement celebrity like Dan Berrigan, S.J. who'd gone underground to avoid prosecution for burning military draft records in Catonsville, Maryland, then kept a step ahead of the FBI for months while appearing frequently in public to denounce the war.

The holidays came and went. Tod spent a few days with his folks in Battle Creek, Michigan, while I stuck to the city, and joined my own family gathering on Christmas Day at my sister Barbara's in the Bronx. New Years itself is a blur. But I have a vague recollection of wandering up to Times Square with Tod to watch as the hordes of out-of-towners gathered there to bring in the nationally televised passage to 1972. At midnight

the air was filled with the sweetened rendition of Auld Lang Syne by Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians, broadcast live from the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria. After that we probably drifted back to the Tod's girlfriend Pam Booth's apartment in the Village and made the rounds of the local gin mills where city denizens like us, liberated from our formative years in the provinces, celebrated such holidays with urban disdain beyond the scrutiny of the national audience tuned into the mob scene at Times Square.

By early January Tod and I began to fine tune the plans for what we hoped would be a spectacle in its own right, our first big action to dramatize amnesty. We considered all three men we profiled to Reston as viable cases for our campaign, Heflin's Paris-based desperado; a Puerto Rican GI, two years underground in Japan who'd cleverly made his way to Paris; and a Green Beret who'd fled to Sweden when faced with a court martial for publically refusing orders to Vietnam. The question remained, who would be first? All that fall and into early winter Joe Heflin kept us posted on how the exiles in his circle were responding to the Safe Return initiative; there were questions and suspicions that needed sorting through.

The idea, daring in its originality, that amnesty could be aggressively linked with on-going opposition to the war was not immediately obvious to many exiles. Not only was talk about repatriation perceived as a potential distraction from the antiwar effort, some feared it could also be interpreted as a resister's repudiation of the consciously political act that sent him into exile in the first place. As amnesty became increasingly debated in the U.S. press, it was not uncommon to read the defiant words of an exiled war resister telling some reporter it was the war makers who needed amnesty, not him.¹⁰

From every corner the exiled community rose to address the amnesty debate directly through some provisional or formally constituted body of its own. “We U.S. war resisters,” read an *authorized* statement from Canada, “consider the current talk in America about amnesty as being ludicrous... it cannot be allowed to obscure the grave issue of Nixon’s escalation...[of the war]” A broadside issued by the American Deserters Committee in Stockholm was more pointed: “While we take positive note of the concerns of humanitarian Americans for the repatriation of war exiles, the discussion is being used by the war profiteering establishment as a ploy to cover-up... continuation of U.S. aggression in Indochina.” A more subtle response from the Union of American Exiles in Briton picked up on Safe Return’s essential theme. “On the subject of repatriation... the primary distinction between draft dodgers and deserters is one of social class, so that any action that excludes the latter is class legislation.”

Over the next six month, through patient repetition, Tod and I would make the case for the Safe Return antiwar strategy, gradually establishing common ground with much of the exile leadership, its most active and politically engaged individuals. This process, much of which is documented in our correspondence, was steadily accomplished through the mails, and in a series of personal meetings with exiles in Canada and Europe. The first such meeting would take place after the New Year, when Tod and I were able to assemble the three immediate candidates for our campaign, X, Y and Z, for a parley at the Quaker Center in Paris.

Moving on a parallel track, we had already met with Jim Reston, agreed to secure an agent and to jointly approach several New York publishers with a proposal for a book that would narrate the dramatic public surrender of a deserter returning from exile and

demanding amnesty. That we weren't the only ones pushing for a title on this general topic became clear with a speedy rejection from editor Danny Okrent at Knopf, who'd published our paperback on the Dellums War Crimes Hearing. Knopf, Okrent wrote, decided to go with the homecoming story of a beleaguered draft evader instead of a deserter.¹¹

Our proposal promised a deserter but could not yet produce one. That outcome would be excruciatingly delayed for two full months after the early January meeting in Paris, the specific details of which my memory has virtually erased. I had first traveled to Paris in the summer of 1970, and was now revisiting the city for the third time in a little over a year. Typically, Tod and I would have stayed in some flea bag, a ten-buck-a-night Frommer's down 'n outer on the Left Bank. Entranced during those earlier visits by the city's low slung horizontality spiked with Gothic accents, and the seductive café-centered lounging one associated with the expatriate literati, I am sure I did not deny myself certain extracurricular pleasures, whatever the scripted agenda for the trip.

I vaguely recall strolling along the Seine amidst the book stalls- whether open or not in the January cold I cannot recall - and in admiring the impressionist canvases at the Musee de l'Orangerie set on the lawns of Tuileries Gardens, already an obligatory stop on each return to Paris, then and for years thereafter.¹² And I have a distinct memory of Tod and I searching one evening - and finding on the Boul Mich - a bar that stayed open till midnight. As the two of us rocked an American pinball machine, I repeatedly regaled the barkeep with my new pet phrase in French, *autre demi de pression, se vous plait*, another short draft please. The significance of finding this particular bar was that most of the city's establishments serving alcohol were closed by ten, the real nightlife in Paris

being confined to the pricey bistros and cabarets. For the working masses, Paris - at least in the early Seventies - was, like London, much more straight-laced and restrictive in its nocturnal public drinking practices than, say, New York City.

Back in New York, events did not move as rapidly as we had hoped. The situation remained frustratingly ambiguous until early February when we heard from the Green Beret who had traveled to Paris from Stockholm - his name was Gerry Condon - declining Safe Return's offer. "Europe," Gerry wrote, "remains the most appropriate place for my present energies." His letter was friendly, but not uncritical. "You've got a well-planned, well-timed program which may reap surprising fruit, but if you do not yourselves emphasize the darker possibilities to your 'would-be's' or 'may-be's,' then you're not being completely fair to those persons, or to the campaign itself."

"We are disappointed," Tod replied, "... a real letdown psychologically and politically..." We had not intended, he added, "to downplay the possible risks," requesting "to know more about the general discussion you had on this issue." In the remainder of the letter Tod attempts to change Gerry's mind, arguing that "you could probably make the strongest and most visible fight of anyone we've met." Were Tod and I pressuring Gerry, as it might appear in retrospect? A bit perhaps, since without a test case, Safe Return's efforts were dead in the water. But a letter from Joe Heflin crossing with Gerry's had raised our expectations that the Stockholm-based deserter might indeed reconsider. In discussions with fellow exiles in Paris, Heflin wrote somewhat breathlessly, Gerry had emphatically endorsed the whole SR approach, and indeed "strongly considered" being one of the first to return, going so far as to inform the ADC (American Deserters Committee) leadership in Sweden before deciding to "postpone the

action temporarily.” This was bad cop, good cop, with Gerry in both roles, positive news overall, but no solution to our short term dilemma. The second of the three deserters under consideration, also begged off, also “temporarily.”

This was the man we’d dubbed Y, a Puerto Rican marine named Jose Claudio from New York City, where his mother continued to live in the South Bronx. At Jose’s request in Paris we would later meet with his mom and an aunt at our office on Fifth Avenue. It was an awkward moment. The two women, visibly uncomfortable, spoke English haltingly. They weren’t quite sure who we were, nor what our relationship to Jose could have been. As we spoke of helping Jose come home, our rhetoric conveying, if nothing else, the evangelical hubris of the New Left, the two women sat sheepishly, nodding politely. They left the office never to be seen again, but reassured at least by the first hand report on Jose’s good health and high spirits, and about the aid he was getting in Paris through the Quaker Center. Jose’s mom had her own solution to her son’s upended existence; he should get married she said. After the meeting with his mom, Jose wrote touchingly that, “A kindness to my mother is a kindness to me.” Still, I never got the sense that Jose had given serious consideration to our offer.

If Condon was Safe Return’s ideal first candidates that was not the message we communicated to Jim Reston who would give a very different account when he came to write his book. Quoting Tod, Reston reported that we had reservations about Gerry. Not only had Gerry not been to Vietnam like the other two candidates - a status which insulated them from knee jerk charges of fleeing the war from cowardice - but he was a druggie. It now seems clear, in re-reading the archival record, that this characterization was simply a red herring we dragged across Jim Reston’s trail to maintain a degree of

control over his story, both the content and the politics. As the record also confirms, there would be other trivial deceptions practiced on our erstwhile collaborator, and nor would this, alas, be our only act of insensitivity toward our clients.¹³

Ultimately we choose “X,” the deserter Joe Heflin had first written us about. To be fair he was always the front runner, if not the intelligent choice, since he was the most desperate to abandon exile life, and therefore the most willing to risk what he no doubt looked upon as an uncertain enterprise - a point of view never shared by Tod or myself. At the same time our Paris contact had warned us that “X” might be unstable. But that was hardly surprising as Reston observed, “What could you expect after all he’s been through?” What did bother our designated author wasn’t “X’s” potential instability, but the prospects that our man would “get it in the end.” Had Reston not witnessed our relative success with the National Veterans Inquiry the year before where, in his own words, we proved “adept at stage managing events that capture wide press coverage,” he may have had more cause for concern.¹⁴

Tod and I could be cocky, even overconfident. But we did know something about our adversary. The unprecedented scope of the desertion problem was just one more black eye for the Vietnam-era Pentagon, which now desperately hoped to eliminate the chronic disaffection inherent in a citizen-based army by converting as quickly as possible to an all volunteer force. The brass didn’t need more negative publicity to further tarnish the image of the military calling. We counted on the fact that, depending on how much public notice and support we could bring to bear on a given public challenge, the Pentagon would be disinclined to fight this battle in the open. While the military still viewed desertion as a serious offense it had been many decades since the U.S. had treated

it as a capital crime, even under fire. But a general court martial could impose a stiff sentence of five years hard labor. If we could win a quick administrative discharge with little or no jail time both Safe Return and the men we sponsored would call that a victory.

Tod had written to Paris asking Joe Heflin to determine if “X” was indeed ready to come home and face the music publicly as a the first test case for amnesty. In the meantime we performed the necessary outreach among groups and institutions, mostly on the pacifist and exile wings of Movement that were also making noises about amnesty. There were a handful of members of Congress who could be relied upon, one of whom, New York’s feisty left wing feminist, Bella Abzug, to provide political cover at critical moments in the subsequent dispositions of several of our cases. Tod’s sister, Deborah, introduced us to her boss, Joyce Johnson, the editor who would acquire Jim Reston’s book for McGraw Hill after we were able to convince her there was indeed a subject to be written about. Many months later, well before Reston’s book would appear, Johnson showed Tod and I a dog-eared, coffee-stained manuscript that I recall her saying had come in ‘over the transom.’ She gently fingered the pages predicting it would emerge as the most important soldier’s memoir of the Vietnam War. It was Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*.¹⁵

By the end of January Tod and I had done enough outreach, and read up sufficiently on the legal aspects and historical record of amnesties granted in the United States to feel confident about launching our new committee publicly. We carried the press release around by hand, as was our habit, to sell the story directly to assignment editors or reporters who’d covered our work in the past, hitting all the city’s major news outlets. Then on a Thursday, February 3, 1972 at 10 a.m, we held a press conference at

the Roosevelt Hotel on 45th and Madison, announcing Safe Return, and our plan “to assist some of the many self-retired veterans (a/k/a deserters) who wish to return to their homes.”¹⁶ The Roosevelt was by then something of a second-rater; in my parents’ day it had been grand enough to host Guy Lombardo’s annual performance on New Year’s Eve, before he and his Royal Canadians moved on to the Waldorf.

With the wisdom of hindsight I am ready - even eager - to admit that the scope of promises projected in our press handout far outstripped the available resources to carry off such ambitious undertakings. Still it amazes me how much we would accomplish, often in spite of ourselves. I can’t escape some embarrassment, however, in re-reading the remarks I had drafted on the back of a press release to announce this political initiative to the media, the best evidence I have at hand to remind me of just how far left the New Left culture had drifted from the American mainstream, and yet how readily one could spout such robotic tom-foolery in those times and still be listened to. As an appropriate gesture of self-abasement, I reproduce excerpts from that statement here.

Today thousands of Nixon’s mercenaries [I had crossed out South Vietnamese soldiers!] flee in the face of advancing and victorious soldiers of the Vietnamese liberation forces. The reason why they [the Army of South Vietnam] do not fight is essentially the same reason that brought thousands of Vietnam vets forward to condemn US aggression and war crimes policies; the same reason that motivated thousands to refuse induction or to voluntarily resign from military service; the same reason that active duty GIs engage in militant resistance within the military against incredible indignities and repression; the same reason why the

majority of Americans have come to totally reject the war... That reason is simple. They have no cause. They fight only to increase the wealth and privilege of those who rule them.

One important lesson we learn from the people of Vietnam is that victory is hard to achieve, but it can be won. Oppressed and working Americans also have a long and honorable heritage of struggle. Our presence here today reaffirms and lends impetus to that struggle.¹⁷

It's a mouth full, I admit. But, truth be told, while I would be more subtle, more coherent, more detailed, in the formulation of my argument today, I still agree substantially with the gist of that statement. In the late fall of my life I've not become the *mature* conservative of the well-worn Churchillian prophesy. But that's another story. What attaches here is the extraordinary fact that with such admittedly rough hewn rhetoric one could still in those unique times draw attention to a radical cause and get coverage in the New York tabloids, two of the largest circulation dailies in the world at that time. On this occasion, the Times ignored us, although the paper would eventually give Safe Return plenty of ink as the campaign heated up. But both the Daily News and the New York Post reported without editorial comment Safe Return's "plan to return several military deserters to the United States to face trial, both as a test case [for amnesty] and to bring public attention..."¹⁸

Our manner of approaching the media through conventional forms of press agency was one of many stylistic choices Tod and I would continue to develop in the years ahead that made us unpopular with the more priggish branches of the peace movement who had no talent for attracting - or who even disdained - coverage in the

straight press. Our critics - often, to be blunt, our competitors - would call us slick, or, if they were linked to some sect or party with roots in the Old Left, *petit bourgeois*. We called ourselves savvy and effective, and them inept and envious. But there was more to it than that.

There are many misconceptions about Sixties and Seventies, not least that the prevailing 'peace & love' rhetoric had much bearing on the way protagonists actually behaved. Like our contemporaries in and out of the Movement Tod and I were products of the Forties and Fifties who'd grown up on an American diet of individualism and competitiveness. Those proclivities, rhetoric and appearances notwithstanding, were not much disturbed by the generational upheaval brought on by the Vietnam War. The principal target of the Sixties youth rebellion on the home front was parental authority in both its familial and institutional - *in loco parentis* - expressions.

The youth movement was as much as anything a fight for civil rights: the right to control our living spaces, including our dorm rooms; the right to control our bodies, to come and go without curfews; the right to dress as we pleased, even in the classroom; the right to experiment with sex, and even recreational drugs; the right to live together as couples without marriage; the right to express our political opposition freely outside the frames of conventional debate, and without the threat of repression or recrimination; the right for women, gays, lesbians and minorities to share these same rights. As for the actual practice of politics, in or out of the Movement, it remained a struggle over power, and political struggle is not, and has never been, for the faint hearted.

So before getting any farther into this story I want to state up front that Tod's and my involvement with the emergent campaign to demand amnesty for all resisters of the

Vietnam War was seldom marked by ‘peace and love.’ For me that decade-plus of full time political activism between 1969 and 1981 was exhilarating and contentious, more or less in equal measure. If, however, one acknowledges that opposition or criticism brings personality into play, then we brought much of the contention on ourselves. We were neither of us gifted diplomats or tacticians. When someone crossed us we tended to respond in kind. And yet, while we could be extremely difficult in our personal dealings, in most disputes we could still claim the high ground of principle to justify our actions, if not our behavior.

What Safe Return advocated was universal, unconditional amnesty for four categories of war resisters, those who (1) refused induction into the military; (2) “deserted” the military in de facto protest of the war in Indochina; (3) received less-than-honorable discharges as a result of resistance to the war or racism; or (4) were, remained, or still could be imprisoned because of their resistance to the war.¹⁹

Among our confederates in this Movement only the grassroots radical activists and the members of the exile communities shared these broad demands for amnesty. Most of our established organizational or institutional allies, including the Amnesty Project of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and projects sponsored by the National Council of Churches (NCC), had reservations in varying degrees about extending such a wide net over the definition of war resistance.

The difference in orientation was easy to explain. While each of these well-established entities may have been viewed as left leaning, certainly very liberal, by the media and most Americans, and had large national constituencies, they were much more

invested in the mainstream than a couple of freewheeling New Left radicals like us. Liberal or otherwise, they were limited by their histories, their specific mandates or programs, or their philosophic orientations in how far to the left they could wander. In fact most of the folks we worked with in these groups were culturally quite traditional, belonging to what radicals of the times derided as the “straight” world, an updated twist on the stock put-down used by Beats in the Fifties who bearded the “squares.”

When it came down to it, these high profile liberal groups only really felt comfortable defining political resistance in intellectual or quasi theological terms as acts of enlightened individuals with tender consciences. If some poor kid in Appalachia from a broken home with a 10th grade education and an anti-authority complex was offered ‘three hots and a cot’ by an Army recruiter, he took the offer because he didn’t have a lot of other options. Finding it hard to adapt to military’s authoritarian structure, and maybe not keen on being led to the slaughter as cannon fodder - but without the necessary skills to mount a verbal defense for this internal dilemma - he might still have found the moxie to beat a path for Canada.

Someone like that from the unwashed masses might be viewed with pity by our more powerful and prominent collaborators, a potential client or candidate for charity, but not as a bonafide political subject acting in his own name. Such was the social analysis that led New Left upstarts like Tod and me, with contempt for mainstream morality to accept class, not conscience, as the appropriate basis for defining military resistance.

Nevertheless all players in this movement embraced the call to extend amnesty to deserters... *in some form*. The real differences emerged through the manner in which these diverse organizations approached the political process. The larger groups tended to

function as brokers, willing to negotiate with the government for the best possible deal in the “real world.” The radical activist community did not see its role as negotiator with the war makers. Our demands were irreducible even while we understood them to be, not just unlikely, but non-achievable. Eventually the government would do what it would do, subject to whatever strength and pressure we could build from below. From the start we refused to help engineer a program that would favor one group of resisters over another, or place conditions and penalties on resisters as the price for their repatriation.

Tod and I did not play in that “real world” arena, nor did we have ambitions to do so. We were content to be radicals living in a time and place where our society produced sufficient surplus to underwrite what was for us—essentially—a choice of lifestyles as much as politics. As such we prized above all else the prerogative to act on our own initiative. If the price of monetary support from one of these established groups within our coalition meant having to compromise how we functioned programmatically, or what we espoused politically in the public realm, then we had no reluctance to forego such assistance. We would strive to make ourselves independent of those who either attempted to undermine how we projected the amnesty issue, or to control how we operated in the Movement. And that’s what ultimately would stick in the craw of our putative institutional allies, not the fact that, on this or that point, we differed with them politically, but that we would in time develop a funding structure to escape their financial control.

We moved ahead guided by our own lights. Despite having no reply from the exiled deserter chosen for Safe Return’s maiden test case, Reston, Ensign and I nonetheless departed on Sunday March 12, 1972, and

...flew overnight from New York to London, and on Monday hopped over to Paris. We collapsed in a small hotel on the Rue des Ecoles... At eight o'clock Monday night, we gathered again in a tiny Vietnamese restaurant... Over Fish Laquer and nuoc mam... [Reston] learned for the first time that X was John David Herndon.²⁰

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1. James Reston, Jr., *The Amnesty of John David Herndon*, McGraw Hill 1973; henceforth Reston. The quote is from Reston's narrative, and is a paraphrase of sentiments expressed over several months and several letters by Paris based draft resister Joe Heflin.
 2. The collection contains my personal papers, as well as the many boxes of organizational records, designated Citizen Soldier, documenting my decade long collaboration with Tod Ensign; henceforth Cornell.
 3. Reston.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Of the "2.5 million young American enlisted men who served in Vietnam... from the 27 million men who came of draft age during the war... roughly 80 percent came from working class and poor backgrounds." Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Veterans*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
 6. There is an account of this event in *Vietnam Awakening*.
 7. Tod tells a funny story.
 9. Reston.
 10. See, for example, Newsweek, January 17, 1972, which ran a cover story, "Amnesty for War Exiles. Which side needs the pardon?"
 11. Okrent would some year's later gain considerable visibility as a baseball maven on the documentary series Ken Burns devoted to the national sport, and subsequently, as the inventor of rotisserie league baseball.
 12. I calculate, off hand, that between 1970 and 1979, I visited Paris ten times. During those years, the *Jeu de Paume* remained open, and home to a small, but enchanting collection of impressionist canvases.
 13. This was a slur that alienated Tod and I from Gerry and was only recently atoned for after thirty-seven years in the course of writing this account - and in a period of antiwar opposition in which Tod, Gerry and I remain as active as we were during Vietnam - from opposite coasts - as comrades in a national organization known as Veterans For Peace (VFP). In all those passing years, I now realize, I had only actually met Gerry once during the Safe Return period, possibly only that time in Paris, after which I'd written that I'd enjoyed meeting him and felt we stood on pretty common ground. And I'd enclosed sixty dollars to reimburse his return fare to Stockholm. I reconnected with Gerry at a VFP national convention in Seattle in 2006. When I wrote, asking him to share his recollections of the amnesty period, of the contact he once had with Tod and I

through Safe Return, he replied candidly that he had found Tod's comment in Reston's book, - which I have no doubt reflected my own tactical position as well, if not my actual views - "slanderous and hurtful. I may have been a little buzzed when I met Tod in Paris. But my use of alcohol and drugs was relatively light and pretty much the norm for those times."

14. Cornell.

15. ID Joyce Johnson, successful novelist, memoir of Kerouac...

16. Cornell.

17. Personal papers.

18. "New Group Will Assist Deserters," New York Post, February 3, 1972; "Map Test Trial of Deserters," New York Daily News, February 4 1972; "Self-retired veterans' form an organization," by Gene Tournour, The Daily World, February 4, 1972.

19. Cornell. Taken from the SAFE RETURN brochure.

20. Reston.