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Soldiers as Workers

How We Tried to Unionize the American Military

"Soldiers as Workers" appeared in the April 1976 issue of *The Progressive*, and was written primarily by Tod at least a month earlier as I labored to meet the deadline on the Portugal article for *Radical America*. Editor Erwin Knoll of *The Progressive* was never more than lukewarm about our reporting on Portugal, but a homegrown issue like the evolving campaign to unionize the armed forces, indeed one concretely rooted in a wing of the American Labor Movement and not just a fantasy of New Left agitation, was more compatible with the magazine's broad advocacy for domestic liberties and restraint of U.S. military power.

Our *Progressive* piece traces the genesis of the proposed union drive to the initial warning in an *Army Times* editorial of November 1974, around which our investigative efforts bore no fruit until seven months later when the *Wall Street Journal* published an alarmist article under the headline, "Union Plans '76 Drive to Represent Servicemen; Legalities are Explored and Pentagon Shudders."[i] Given the intensity with which events in Portugal preoccupied us that fall and winter, I find little in the record, other than I. F. Stone's dire prediction, Ed's inquiry to the Defense Manpower Commission, my letter to the AFGE official requesting a meeting, and the intention we expressed to the Ferrys of plans to deepen our study of the existing military unions in Europe – all of which are covered in earlier chapters – to suggest we were doing more in late 1975 than monitoring the topic in sources that came to hand, like the *Army Times*. As always, amnesty continued to receive its steady share of attention, discussed in detail in the next and concluding chapter.

Clearly by early 1976, we'd done enough additional digging to flesh out both AFGE's stated plans, and provide a background sketch on the sector of organized public employees, within which AFGE had the largest membership of white collar workers at the federal, state and municipal level, including civilian employees of the Defense Department and more than 7,000 uniformed National Guard technicians. What made the armed forces ripe for unionization, or so it was framed by AFGE leadership and duly reported by us, was the community of interests between civilian and uniformed military workers who often worked side by side at the same installations; and the "steady erosion of educational, medical and retirement benefits for soldiers… coupled with wholesale job cutbacks and involuntary retirements which affected uniformed and civilian employees equally."

Although the AFGE was not a closed shop, and membership was elective, the potential for collecting dues from even a small minority of the 2.2 million members of the armed forces arguably made wide eyed union officials ache for an excuse to launch the drive. Moreover, the grievances voiced increasingly by service members concerning the "erosion of benefits," offered the union excellent cover for doing so. As AFGE president Clyde Weber put it bluntly while testifying before a Pentagon manpower panel, "Servicemen need someone to protect them, that's for sure." What Weber didn't emphasize, and the brass understood quite well, was that, owing to a recent policy shift, when the union negotiated salary increases on behalf of federal workers, Congress typically extended those gains to servicemembers on the basis of parity [tk]. What no doubt galled the union leadership leaning toward an organizing drive was that GIs were getting a free ride.

Ultimately, it was the very existence of VOLAR in its rocky transitional phase that nurtured the heady vision that a military union was within reach, however such an idea might be

spurred by disenchantment among the troops. And I find it very likely that, were a scholar to one day undertake a study of this uncharacteristically bold initiative by what was a sweetheart union if ever there was one, he or she will uncover a paper trail of research conducted by, or on behalf of, the AFGE evaluating the experiences of our NATO allies where military unions already existed. I find it self-evident that the AFGE entered this game with its head, not its heart. The union's general counsel argued from that purchase before the manpower commission, "It's a volunteer Army now, and that means people are selecting a military career as a means of livelihood – not for patriotic reasons. Servicemen today aren't responding to an attack on the country; they want to be paid."

Pentagon authority, beset by resistance from below on an unprecedented scale for a decade by the G.I. Movement, was suddenly slapped with an unanticipated challenge from a corner of institutional Labor that heretofore had not shown the slightest inclination toward militancy. After all, these federal employees might bargain collectively around wages and benefits, but were denied the right to strike, Labor's most powerful weapon. Nonetheless, the Pentagon's response was cautious, consistent with the unshaken confidence in their democracy that most Americans still exuded, despite the social upheavals stirred by the Vietnam War.

It's inconceivable, for example, that the Pentagon in a post-9-11 world would have issued such a measured legal response to the threat unionization posed to command prerogative, and concede, as we reported in 1976, that "the right of soldiers to join a union is protected by First Amendment guarantees. Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court establish that neither Congress nor the President can simply prohibit soldiers from joining a union or other voluntary association." Even more astounding when looking back was the DOD ruling that permitted

protestors and organizers "to enter any part of a military base open to the general public." Today, the general public enjoys no such privilege.

There was no question, of course, of the Pentagon's meekly bending to the "inevitability" of a military union. Far from it. A Field Command memo was dispatched "to all installations reminding them of Army Circular 532-1, which prohibits commanders from recognizing or bargaining with servicemen's unions." The memo further ordered that headquarters be immediately notified "if any person, military or civilian… is presented with, or otherwise receives, a petition… for recognition of a bargaining unit which includes active duty military personnel in other than off-duty employment." I take this to mean that if a GI to make ends meet for his family worked a shift outside duty hours in a fast food franchise like Wendy's, he could join their union; except, of course, they didn't have one.

That AFGE officials had indeed done due diligence on this projected campaign, was evidenced by their executive council having buttressed the union's case with a memorandum describing military unionism in Holland, Sweden and West Germany, where "military personnel policy is established either through regular collective bargaining, institutionalized consultation, or some combination of the two." These matters of mechanics aside, the argument AFGE President Weber saw as the clincher was that, regardless of the form these European military unions took, they "had not revealed any disturbing or negative effects on morale, combat training, or effectiveness…" nor on "discipline or preparedness."

In our article we credited Dave Cortright's interview with Paul Regouin, the leader of the Dutch conscripts' union, as a concrete instance to support Weber's testimony. On the question of whether a soldiers' union was compatible with military discipline, Regouin offered a pat response. "Discipline can be achieved in two ways. The old way is to say, 'Behave or be placed

in jail.' The other way is for soldiers to see the necessity of the job on their own and be motivated to do it. Many in NATO ridicule the Dutch soldiers, but last year during [joint NATO] maneuvers, [they] scored the highest."

Our commentary stressed the obvious that, "from the soldier's point of view, the record of reforms and concessions won by [the Dutch] was impressive." With an eye toward encouraging union support among officers and non-coms, we argued that "many of the traditional GI gripes [in the Netherlands] appear to be eliminated." We laid those gripes at the commands' doorstep. A workplace harmonized by a reduction of those petty, and not infrequently command driven, injustices that most aggrieved GIs, would also reduce morale deadening, often arbitrary, unit level punishments. These latter were particularly onerous for those in the lower ranks. Any officer could inflict an Article 15, non-judicial punishment, on a subordinate under his direct command, which could take cash from a GI's paycheck, confine him to quarters, and possibly cost him a stripe.

We harbored few illusions that the conservative elements among at the higher echelons in the services or in the government who guarded "traditional values" would find arguments for such reforms persuasive. The habit of bending the will of soldiers to their mission through authoritarian intimidation remained time honored, and still a deeply ingrained holdover from the era of conscription despite a patina of reforms. And it would yet require decades before the relaxing of outdated military customs morphed into a modus vivendi among the ranks adaptable to the control of a professional, in some sense, a mercenary military force. But to degree VOLAR offered antimilitarists like us a target in the mid-70s, we closed our article with a challenge to elements on the Left who were uncomfortable with engaging the military, to - if the

shoe fits - abandon their facile "moralizing" of associating military evil with military service, and begin to look on "soldiers as workers."

Before it appeared in print we had shared a draft of the article in early March with our principle collaborators Steve Rees and his San Francisco crew, and Dave Cortright, working solo, but also on occasion with Max Watts, who kept tabs on what remained of the GI projects in Europe. Cortright had actually beaten us to publication on this issue with articles in *WIN* and *The Nation* magazines.[ii] They were quite good, excellent backgrounders on how the AFGE brain trust had been monitoring developments in VOLAR for some time and had now decided to put the question of organizing GIs before its delegates at the union's annual convention in the coming fall.

"The main concerns of an AFGE military section," Cortright speculated, "would be pay and benefits, with major emphasis on annual cost of living increases." Questions of war and peace, AFGE's Weber had told the Manpower Commission, "must be relegated to… American public opinion." But Weber also indicated a willingness to become involved, not only in "the problems of careerists… such as pensions, military retirement and health care benefits," but also the so-called 'gripe' issues of the rank and file." And indeed, "the union question has arisen at a time of pervasive discontent among the lower ranks," Cortright claimed, and based on service wide AWOL rates that he reckoned as higher than at the peak of GI resistance during Vietnam.

The rise of "discontent among the lower ranks," and its resonance in the "proposals for a military union, had no connection with the older GI resistance," Cortright observed ruefully. At the same time, most of the remaining GI projects – down to approximately fifteen from a 1970-71 peak of 100 – "have independently adopted a trade union perspective. As the GI Movement

has moved into a peacetime, all-volunteer environment, its political focus has shifted from the mission of the military to more immediate problems of day to day life."

Cortright, whose heart and personal story were closely intertwined with his own glory days as a GI dissident and organizer, still clung to the belief that "the anti-imperialist emphasis of a few years ago," remained "latent within many GI struggles," even if now pragmatically focused "on service conditions and restrictions on personal liberty." In some cases these struggles were indeed militant, Cortright insisted, if not actually "anti-imperialist," and cited the "work stoppage aboard the U.S.S. Midway in-mid-1974, and a similar walkout just six months ago in San Diego on the U.S.S. Sterrett," both actions denounced as mutinies by the Navy.

After receiving the draft of our article, a short and pointed letter dated March 16th came to us from Dave Cortright, and began on a sour note. Oddly, it was addressed only to Tod, but perhaps because it made reference to their recent discussion when Tod was in D.C. Cortright, writing on the letterhead of the newly founded Center for National Security Studies[iii] in his capacity as research associate, jumped right into the "problem… with your article… the third paragraph regarding troop attitudes. It's a serious mistake to equate success in military recruitment with positive morale." Moreover, where we had written of a declining rate of AWOLs [valid for the Army], Cortright immediately challenged this assertion, claiming service wide "unauthorized absence rates… are higher than in 1971, the peak of the GI Movement." Thus, we were instructed, "unrest and discontent, generalized resistance if you will, remains high." That's the point we took issue with, that the current "high discontent" in the forces shared any continuity with the politicized GI protests of the war period, and where we detected a note of wishful thinking in Cortright that did not conform to the more limited terrain of struggle the proposed union drive had opened before us.

Our San Francisco comrades were, if anything, even more attached to the notion that organizing among sailors and GIs in the volunteer military might in the short run remain a revolutionary undertaking, even as the struggles they actively engaged in on behalf of sailors and their wives revolved around dangerous shipboard conditions that by no means called the Navy's mission into question. But, where our contact with Steve's group only grew increasingly rich and always respectful in the months ahead, relations with Cortright steadily declined. After voicing in his letter what were in fact valid reservations about our article, Cortright suddenly balked. In "looking back" at what he had written, he thought it might "appear almost hostile." Had he not felt compelled to bare this inner conflict I'm sure both Tod and I would have taken his comments on face value in the give and take we expected, and welcomed, in these exchanges. Not that we were any less headstrong than Cortright, or felt more personal warmth toward him than before; hardly that, the distrust was deep and mutual. We were simply more comfortable in our brashness, always inclined to say what we really believed; Cortright usually played a closer game.

That he viewed our presence in the confines of the GI Movement as an infringement on sacred ground was made even more apparent when he ended his letter with a disparaging indictment of our practice, expressing with ill-concealed condescension his "hope" that Tod and I would "be able to help the union movement… not just through writing but direct action as well." He might have said with more validity that we sometimes moved into action too quickly. And perhaps our article was a case in point; it was sloppy on certain verifiable facts that Cortright had accurately pinned down. But while we did not claim to have a presence in the barracks as did he – a claim based on his on-going links to the remaining GI projects - we would establish our presence with GIs around the union issue in our own way. Cortright's letter created

the distance he intended. And thus the open exchange of ideas among three parties sharing both a history and an ongoing community of interests in these matters would increasingly evolve into discussions on two separate tracks: Cortright would collaborate closely with Steve Rees in the months ahead, doing his best to deflect our input when he could not otherwise avoid us; whereas in this same period, as I've already noted, our collaboration with Steve and his ever shifting roster of collaborators – with Linda Alband always in that mix - had never been closer.

The Progressive article may have had its flaws, but this could not obscure the fact that our excitement at Safe Return to reengage with the GI Movement, as I've already detailed in Chapter 16, was genuine and ripe with content. Other commitments around amnesty and Portugal no doubt limited our involvement toward the end of 1975. But with the New Year we had once again accelerated our research efforts, as evidenced by Tod's presence in D.C. in mid-March, attending the conference where the DOD rolled out its controversial budget for fiscal year 1977 – and where he had likely rendezvoused with Dave Cortright. While in the capital, Tod had also conducted a lengthy interview with Ronnie Ogden, the AFGE national Director of Organization, which, on returning to New York, he dutifully summarized in a three page report for limited circulation.

Ogden had outlined what was a textbook organizing strategy the AFGE would employ, should the union drive go forward. He expressed "a generally negative view of professional associations (Non Com Assoc., Reserve Off., etc.)," as primarily "insurance groups whose only other activity was meeting to drink beer." Ogden did see the National Association of Government Employees (NAGE) based in Boston as a potential competitor, but he dismissed the union's leader as "a real operator… very interested in winning dues checkoffs." As an aside, Tod added that he'd heard rumors that the NAGE was considering a merger with the Teamsters.

And, indeed, Ogden commented that "the Teamsters are becoming a growing problem… actively organizing de-certification efforts and fights for new elections where the AFGE long held contracts." Ogden told Tod this jurisdictional poaching was "well financed and aggressive," and that he feared the Teamsters "might shift their interest to organizing uniformed workers," as well.

Notwithstanding these internecine battles within Big Labor, Ogden said the AFGE was being contacted "spontaneously… by a number of uniformed employees," and described one caller who "had signed up 50 men on his ship who'd support him all the way in forming a local." And Ogden also mentioned "a visit to his office of a 6'8" 280 lb. Airborne Ranger from Ft. Bragg who also wanted to begin work forming a local." Most of the interest in the union, Ogden emphasized, was from "troops in their second hitch… being faced with RIFs [reduction in forces], pass-overs [for promotion], and the like." Such practices had been escalating in recent months, and the DOD's projected budget for 1977 in its attempt to roll back military pay and benefits, would only exacerbate the atmosphere of growing discontent among career minded military professionals, especially enlisted personnel in the middle ranks still hoping to serve twenty years with a nice pension pay off.

For the AFGE to go ahead with organizing the military, Ogden believed, much would depend on "the mood and plans of the union's regional VPs" – who exercised considerable autonomy – "as it does with the national office." Tod, who had been exposed to various levels of organized labor as a boy in Battle Creek Michigan where his dad was president of the local AFL/CIO, was clearly impressed by Ogden, and characterized the voluble Texan as "an effective and confident organizer… well versed in union techniques… who could no doubt relate well to

most lower ranking troops." Whether or not we could work with "Ronnie," however, was an open question. He was not leftist, Tod cautioned. "His hero is LBJ."

Nor had I been idle in New York. On March 16th, the very day Tod was interviewing "Ronnie" in D.C., I had written a letter to Al Kaplan, an AFGE regional VP I had apparently made contact with during a visit to Chicago during the late winter. In my earlier letter to an AFGE official in Washington that past fall – our first documented contact with the union - I had been candid about ATOM's anti-militarist agenda. But to Kaplan I wrote more blandly that "our research foundation, which I mentioned to you, is considering sponsorship of a seminar on the issue of unionizing the military," and would he consider "attending and presenting a paper?"

My more immediate purpose in communicating with Kaplan, however, was to report on a meeting I'd attended at the invitation of Joe Gleason, an AFGE official whose local was based in a large public health facility on Staten Island. "It was a good suggestion," I wrote, "since it familiarized me first hand with the activities, problems and composition of what is probably a fairly representative local." After the meeting, as I passed on to Kaplan, Gleason told me he was ambivalent about "the military question" because, "given the unfavorable public and official attitudes toward public employees and their unions," he feared that "the AFGE wouldn't be able to withstand the attack." Then, moving back on the fence, a not atypical posture for these cautious AFGE officeholders, Gleason considered the opposite line that "the union's status would be enhanced considerably" if the military drive were successful.

My inability to recollect these encounters with either Kaplan or Gleason, or to reconstruct a single image of the visit to Chicago, makes me wonder if, while the record clearly shows I was taking care of business around this union escapade, my emotional capital was perhaps invested elsewhere, on Portugal, not least my impending return there in April. In this document to

Kaplan, however, I clearly stated that Tod and I planned "to touch base with a few locals… next week, mostly on the bases," specifically Ft. Hamilton in Brooklyn and Ft. Dix in New Jersey. As for my impressions of the meeting with the AFGE local in Staten Island, they had apparently lingered just long enough to inform my report to Al Kaplan. Citified New Yorkers, like me, had little occasion to visit suburbanized Staten Island, which we could best reach by ferry at the tip of Manhattan. It was the ferry itself, not New York City's somewhat isolated fifth borough, which was the attraction, the opportunity to get out on the water for a cheap cruise – a nickel each way! - across the New York harbor and back on a pleasant starry, moonlit evening when nothing more compelling offered distraction.

As the months now moved ahead, Steve Rees would engage us in a voluminous correspondence where he increasingly directed his disciplined intellectual energies and research skills to analyzing VOLAR's impact on what remained of the GI Movement. Steve never worked alone, and always drew other activists into his projects, long engaged in the political struggles of Bay Area sailors, and publishing on their behalf the radical broadside, *Up Against the Bulkhead*. But the authorship behind the ideas emanating from his circle, and their packaging in writing, were almost entirely his.[iv]

As for his *métier*, Steve would describe himself as a publisher. He had considerable family money behind him, but I'm not sure how much this fiercely self-sufficient comrade with a collectivist soft spot leaned on that resource. In fact, after dropping out of college in the late sixties and becoming a full time anti-war activist, he had learned to set type, a skill he could fall back on when pressed for income. Nonetheless, Steve was, and has remained in all the years I have known him, a consummate wordsmith; yet his professed creative outlet was, not writing, but photography.[v] Still it was the smell of ink on newsprint, and all the craft and technical

details of paper stock and type and presses and stitching and the business acumen needed to deploy them that combined into Steve's preferred medium for expressing his political passions, much as the related forms of promotion and publicity around our chosen causes fulfilled a similar appetite for Tod and me.

At some point in early 1976, we had connected Steve to Alan Hunter, our editor at *Radical America*, where he hoped to place an essay on the late stages of the GI Movement, and in mid-March Steve wrote that Hunter had accepted his proposal, contingent on a re-write of the draft he'd submitted with a deadline at the end of that month. With its more ambitious scope, that original draft contained a tightly argued political rational for launching a mass newspaper, what Steve envisioned as the equivalent of *Rolling Stone* for American service members and their dependents. It was on the "analytical section (pages 1-24)" of this initial document that Steve was asking for our comments "before the draft for RA is done. If you have any disagreements with the discussion of the origins of VOLAR, our understanding of the significance of reform struggles in the military, on the relation between the military mission and the conditions under which the mission is carried out… we've got to see it soon." Only on bedding their article for *Radical America* in early May, did Steve and his crew move full throttle to circulate in their own backyard their revised proposal for an "antimilitary newspaper" under the touchingly utopian title, "A Proposal from the Bay Area Military Study Group to the S.F. Bay Area Left to intervene in the Anti-Military Movement within the U.S. Armed Forces."

Where we differed with Steve and company, as I immediately responded, was not in their "analytical section," but with how they were presenting the proposed newspaper. "It seems to us an open question as to whether or not the newspaper should have an overtly socialist revolutionary line or *identity during this period* (original italics)." This was misleading. What

Steve was proposing was a mass not a socialist newspapers. I suspect I'd done little more than brief the BAMSG's document, which, counting the appendices – including the articles by Cortright and ourselves – ran to over seventy pages, mostly in single spaced typescript. What I was picking up on was from the concluding section of the document under the heading, *Our Political Perspective*, where Steve was surveying the long view, arguing that "in the period of preparation for the transition to socialism, we must begin by creating a self-conscious revolutionary working class movement by intervening in its day-to-day reform struggles."

The reservation I'd expressed was hardly a matter of ideological dissention. We shared our comrades' faith in the revolutionary verities that had marked the rhetoric of the New Left from the moment in 1965 when a president of SDS demanded that activists name the system – capitalism – behind the war we were opposing. We shared a belief - the lofty aim of revolutionary struggle beyond the time we could foretell - that humans *might* construct "a classless world community" (Steve's words) as envisioned by Marx and Engels. It was in such professions of doctrinal faith that our radical identities were moored to our psyches.

The crux of our difference was not about how much of the revolutionary cat might yet peek from its bag in our on-going radical undertakings, but rather Steve's contention that, in the absence of a soldiers' or 'anti-military' movement within VOLAR – a state of things we all agreed on – "the trends of the last ten years," which is to say the collective experience and history of the GI resistance, had left fertile ground for a level of "self-organization of enlisted people and their wives" that could function at a higher level of political consciousness, independently of the proposed union. We did agree that a military union might in the best of circumstances provide the legal cover behind which a new soldier's movement could emerge if

conditions like those giving rise to Vietnam were to repeat themselves. But for us, Steve's placement of the union drive in a soaring historical vision was a conceptual step too far.

Whatever our dissimilarities in style and substance, evidence abounds that Steve was thinking rings around Tod and I, and was perhaps overly-ambitious on a theoretical level given the limited scope we attached to the tasks before us and the resources available to carry them out, not to mention the barriers of time and space inherent in this bi-coastal collaboration. As always Tod and I were content to test our practice through action, and we seldom had or took the time to delay our forward motion while waiting for others to catch up to our pace. At this stage of things we certainly emphasized the common threads of our respective projects, but in what I now reconstruct from the record it is clear that our narrow concentration on the AFGE union drive was only one minor component in Steve's investigation to understand the mind set of contemporary GIs, and the nature of the institution they served as a prelude to launching his mass circulation monthly.

I have in a five-page letter dated March 23rd - a good portion of which I will reproduce here - a superb example of the breath of research and clarity of expression Steve brought to what was, and would remain for the next year, a mutually fruitful discussion. Ever diplomatic and polite, Steve begins by acknowledging the materials we had been sending him as "quite helpful" – this would have been copies of correspondence and interviews with AFGE officials – before launching into a critique of our article in *The Progressive*. He sought first to establish that:

> Your estimation of the movement in the ranks seems to be the reverse of Cortright's. Where he is overly optimistic, you two sound overly pessimistic. Dave's optimism is revealed in this way: while the level of political demands has dropped compared to the Vietnam era, the breadth of dissatisfaction remains the same, he claims.

In order to back this claim, he cites the number of less-than-honorable discharges, the AWOL and desertion rates, and court-martial and non-judicial punishment figures. First, the numbers themselves are far from consistent service by service. The AWOL statistic, for example, for the last five years have done steadily down in the Army, down and then way up in the Marine Corps, rapidly up in the Navy, and steadily up in the Air Force. So while it's true that the service-wide AWOL rates have "soared to their highest level in modern history," as Dave claims in his *Nation* article, that trend hasn't appeared in each of the four services. But even more important is the way he interprets those figures. All of these categories grouped together are supposed to indicate, he claims, increasing dissatisfaction, or at least conflict of some sort between enlisted personnel and the command.

Your article, on the other hand, points to the command's use of punishment and discharges to purge the ranks of troublemakers. Material I've read in House and Senate Armed Services Committee hearings bearing on the FY1976 DOD budget back up your interpretation. Naturally, Pentagon leaders when called on the carpet interpret those discharge and court-martial and njp [non-judicial punishment] statistics to be a healthy cleaning of dissident elements. And they point to VOLAR's recruiting successes to how they can afford to clean house.

My question is why can't the figures support both Cortright's and your conclusions? At least when dealing with statistics such as these you have to allow for the possibility that these two trends – increasing disaffection and the purge of discontents – could coincide to produce the same numerical trends.

Then came the zinger delicately administered. "I hate to be picky," he demurs, "but the use of AWOL statistics in your article was a bit messy." Steve, being as allergic to conflict as Tod and I thrived upon it, immediately deflects his criticism, suggesting that it was perhaps the fault of our editor, and that such an indignity had once happened to him in an article he's written a year earlier for Pacific News Service, where "one editor took the liberty of adding parenthetically that Marines and sailors are draftees. Of course I was delighted with that," he smoothly injects, slipping us from the hook on which we justly deserved, in this instance, to be impaled.

Steve went on to address the idea I had floated in my letter for "a seminar on organizing and unionizing the military" in early May, which we proposed to sponsor and fund. "What did he think," I asked? "Who should participate, and how should the agenda be established?" His response covered two pages. Noting that I hadn't given them "much more than a clue as to what the seminar would cover," Steve suggested we consider choosing between "two possible focuses." The first, and clearly the option he preferred, would examine the DOD budget from two contrasting trends of analysis. In the first, a point of view he attributes to "old new leftists, academics and church types," it is argued that "the DOD budget has been soaring since the start of the cold war, and that government outlays on social programs can and should take the place of this priority on military spending."

There was a dissenting view, however, which he attributed to "leftwing analysts" like Jim O'Connor of the journal, *Kapitalstate*, which, while also calling for a reduction in defense spending, "show, I think correctly, that the DOD budget has been declining since the Korean War when measured as a percentage of GNP, and as a percentage of total federal outlays. When measured in constant dollars, it has been declining since 1968... [and] it is precisely massive

demand for government social spending that has put a crimp in the total DOD budget." What would really be interesting, Steve wrote, would be to examine the more "theoretical dimension of this debate," to what degree the permanent arms economy was "necessary to the health of the accumulation process," at which point I suspect both Tod and I bailed on what no doubt struck us as a worthy academic project, but far beyond the target we had sighted, and which Steve then signaled as the other "possible orientation" for the seminar, "organizing and unionizing the military… some response to the AFGE thing."

Steve ended the long letter saying he could understand my reservation "totally," about their paper's political line, because their "discussion draft didn't separate out the political perspective" from the paper's "editorial slant." He saw the paper as acting "as a mirror to the mass movement," whereas the editorial commentary would remain "left-wing, revolutionary and socialist. Does this mean editorials will be ideological," he asked rhetorically, and then answered, "No way." "Convey lessons in the labor theory of value? Nope… end every news article trumpeting a call for a socialist revolution? No. It does mean retaining the right to criticize the military mission." All well and good, but what this serious and thoughtful letter also conveyed was that Steve and his co-thinkers still gave short shrift to "the AFGE thing," and thought that topic far too intellectually barren as a focus for our proposed seminar.

We wrote Steve in late March that "we're still working on a response to y'all's proposal." We found their effort to clarify "the relationship between the anti-mission fight and the anti-conditions fight particularly instructive." What we found missing, however, was how they located "the struggle for the union… within that orientation." We then offered some instruction of our own observing that, despite the unsavory practices to which unions could be put, "none of us believes that unions in America are ipso facto corrupt, reactionary to the core." The point

being that, should the union drive emerge, it would do so from within the trade union movement, which we saw as inherently progressive. Shifting to concrete ground, we also asked for the revised draft of their RA article, and for feedback about our own RA contribution on Portugal, which Steve soon provided in meticulous detail (covered in Chapter 21).

We received the draft of their RA article when it was submitted at deadline for publication. Tod and I both thought highly of the piece. "We could not recall," we later wrote in a formal response for a subsequent edition of the journal, "when we last read an article which so thoroughly and artfully discusses the American military from a left perspective." But we maintained our reservations as before around Steve's insistence that – in essence – a newspaper fashioned to appeal broadly to GIs of all services and to survey their grievances – could become a catalyst for organizing GIs in opposition to the military mission during peacetime.

Their article, under the byline of the BAMSG's principals, was set in a narrative organized around two distinct, but intertwining themes, the rise of the volunteer armed forces and the transformation of the "movement in the ranks."[vi] I judge this as a document that deserves canonical status in what is a very limited bibliography on one of the most under-studied cultural and political phenomena of the popular resistance to the Vietnam War. And yet it is absent even among the few standard works that survey the GI resistance, and I have never seen this article by Rees and the others [henceforth Rees] cited in a single scholarly work of the period, or listed in its bibliography. I intend no systematic summary of the article here, and what I have extracted and quoted from tends to serve the story line of this memoir; the article can be read in full as an appendix to this work [tk a link?].

The article begins with an account of the origins of VOLAR, who's "roots reach out in four directions. (1) The requirements of party politics; (2) the economic situation; (3) the U.S.

government's failure to block the revolutionary process in Indochina; (4) the mass upsurge of the sixties and seventies here at home." These factors combined to eliminate the draft and create the Nixon Doctrine, a set of policy changes that reduced military outlays in favor of "increasing demands for social programs," cut the size of the Army by 40%, and reorganized U.S. military readiness to fight 1½ instead of the 2½ wars, the former benchmark established after World War Two. To make up for filling the Army's ranks through conscription, the Pentagon experimented with a series of reforms during VOLAR's developmental stages to incentivize recruitment and achieve service wide quotas.

For example, at Fort Carson in Colorado, the appointment of an ombudsman created "an unprecedented grievance system for low-ranking enlisted people which depended on a democratically elected barracks representative… [with] the power to bypass the chain of command and talk directly to the base commanding officer." The oft cited military historian, retired Air Force Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., despairingly satirized this as "a system of soviets based on the Bolshevik model." Casting a shorter revolutionary shadow, the various service branches all "experimented with a loosening of the regulations governing enlisted people's personal lives: dress codes, haircuts, leave and liberty policy." Decrepit Quonset hut barracks were replaced with modern dormitories, beer was permitted in the mess hall (probably 3.2), KP and other housekeeping duties were transferred to civilian workers, and, to the degree it was possible, military life sought to mirror a nine to five civilian job in a five day week.

That at least was the theory. In practice the military was "sorting out just how far they had to bend to win back the cooperation of those in the ranks." Moreover the reforms were unevenly applied both within and across the services, and the choice to implement or ignore this process was still command driven, as the comment from one division commander stationed in

Korea, Major General Henry Emerson can illustrate. Emerson was old school, and wanted to boost morale among his troops in a more traditional way, "through physical fitness programs that leave everybody so tired they cannot even think about fighting or doping or drinking or anything else." Emerson's name by that time was long known to us through war crimes testimony we had gathered years before from soldiers who served under him in Vietnam, where he was known as Hatchet Hank or Hank the Butcher, a hard charger in military parlance, whose field tactics, not-atypically, gave rise to the kinds of atrocities toward civilians we had been eager to publicize.

Another officer from the senior ranks, Navy Captain Jack Caldwell, saw in these sweeping reforms of personnel policy an open invitation to unionization which would lead to "military unreliability." Caldwell, writing in a quasi-official military magazine, expressed a dim view of unions which "seem to end up controlled by a radical few who use union power, not for the benefit of the members, but to further their own political ends." His bias, of course, beyond parroting the conventional slander toward union leadership, was to assume that the "political ends" he railed against, were not to the benefit of the members.[vii] Rees cited Caldwell for another shibboleth that certainly pushed back against the Safe Return amnesty agenda, noting his complaint that, during Vietnam, "desertion and draft-dodging were excused as evidence of higher morality," which, he lamented, contributed to an "alarming decline" in "loyalty to the nation."

The Pentagon generally overcame the recalcitrance of traditionalist like Emerson and Caldwell, but even where it did succeed in "making the terms of service more favorable to the first term soldier," such reforms according to Rees, "strained an already streamlined DOD budget, causing existing physical plants – ships, planes, buildings – to deteriorate, and delaying new constructions." In attempting to "reverse these budget trends," Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld's proposed budget for FY 1977 "is asking for cuts in personnel costs, and dramatic boosts for procurement." In 1976 benefits were already being cut back, including "elimination of the GI Bill for recruits who signed up after July 1975; gradual reductions in government subsidies, which in the past had kept post exchange rates low; and scaling down incremental pay increases," all of which was justified with the usual empty appeals to "national security."

Rees discusses in some detail the impact of these retrograde policies on the twin manpower issues of recruitment and retention, the latter referring to "the number of people who reenlist." Overall the military was now attracting "a new pool of recruits… more educated, a little older, slightly more rural, less white, less male, more married, and very unemployed." But how many of them could be enticed to reenlist when their first hitch had ended? With military recruiters now "competing with other public and private employers on the open labor market," the atmosphere of disenchantment created by the reduction of pay and benefits played havoc with retention rates. And "those with some chance of getting a better deal outside the military left." Many of those with less chance of a "better deal," but not wishing to face unemployment, had little alternative but to re-up.

It is among those remaining in the service who were discontented generally with the erosion of benefits, and especially those working under conditions that raised health and safety concerns – in the Navy causing angry wives to mobilize as well as sailors – or where there was a lingering culture of racial discrimination toward blacks, or life style issues on matters of personal appearance, that Rees had pinpointed the audience for his mass circulation monthly. Steve was banking on a prediction that "today's grumbling in the ranks could become tomorrow's roar."

Shortly after receiving the article manuscript, I dispatched a newsy letter to Steve in early April informing him that Tod and I were so tied up with other work we hadn't been able to put

our heads together and compare notes for drafting our response. By then Allen Hunter had written me that, while he found Steve's redraft of the article "much improved, clearer in its organization, etc., they do not deal with the implications of the upcoming AFGE drive." Hunter drew this conclusion based on a quick comparison with what Tod and I had published in the *Progressive*. Although this was an oversimplification, I responded to Hunter that, after briefing the article, and reading "the concluding comments several times, it appeared that our "differences…" still held.

With Tod off to Europe for two weeks of personal time after wrapping up our final PIC bulletin, I sketched out an "initial formulation" of those differences for Hunter, and shared a copy with Steve. The gist of what I expressed is as follows: "The stark reality, as we see it, is that the left will not be able to build barracks committees or other mass GI organizations within the military until the union is established. And the left is incapable of building the union at this time." If the choice was between organizing the small discontented strata of enlisted men concerned about "issues of justice, discrimination, individual style, etc.," who were likely to leave the service, and those defending economic interests wanting to stay in, and therefore a coherent working class layer within the military, we should chose the latter… Therefore we must ensure that the AFGE's (or some other union's drive) is successful… Why? Because the right to organize is a pre-condition to introducing the mass of rank and file GIs to progressive political and socialist ideas."

There was nothing personal in this toward Steve and his mates, I was quick to assure Allen Hunter. "We share their politics – very fraternally I should add… Our mutual political perspective is so close that it seems inconceivable we will not be able to work together in this

important activity. We'll continue to send them the materials we develop through our research and interviews with GIs and AFGE union members located on military installations."

As if to offer evidence of this professed good will I mentioned to Hunter that "we are assisting Steve to come east soon." We would "pledge $100 to help defray the expenses of your trip," I wrote Steve that same day.[viii] "You'll probably have to collect it in NYC, since we are very short of cash as this time," which was probably true since we were spending it in three directions as fast as we could raise it. Then, responding indirectly to Steve's comments about our proposed seminar, I told him that Tod and I had decided to postpone it until "a committee can be formed among potential participants to decide the basic questions to be examined and who should be invited. Thus, instead of being a simple program activity for ATOM, it will be transformed into something broader and more meaningful."

Assuming we even intended to organize the seminar on that basis, the idea was clearly overtaken by events, and I do not find recorded in our files when we dropped what was likely just a trial balloon in the first place. Steve's top agenda item for coming east was to spend time with Dave Cortright in D.C. before Dave left for his tour with Max Watts of the remaining GI projects in Europe. Steve and Dave shared the faith that, in some form, the anti-military movement of GIs could still be sustained in its resistance to the command and the mission. And the vehicle they would use to advance that objective would be precisely the newspaper that Steve was committed to creating.

What could be loosely described as the public discussion of our differences - if a readership of left academics subscribing to *Radical America* can be so designated – ended with Steve's rebuttal to our response, which we exchanged in May, and was then published in tandem by the journal that July. In this exercise the authors of the article get the last word, and Steve

penned his with the usual directness and clarity. Picking up on our call to offer full support for the union drive, he appended his dissent to the formula we had stated, to wit: "If the AFGE agrees at its September conference to go ahead with the drive, we agree, work with it. If the drive stalls, yes, work to get it going. Yet we come to the same conclusion as you for different reasons. We do not share your view that 'the existence of a bonafide trade union in the context of an autocratic and hierarchical organization like the U.S. military is inherently progressive.'"

Towing his own line Rees insisted that, "A soldier's union will prove to be combative and democratic only if the lower ranking troops are strong in members and organization. And that strength, in turn, depends on the breath of horizontal organization of GIs in the lower ranks a type of organization a union might stimulate." Such a force existed, he believed, within "movement of soldiers and their wives since the ceasefire [with Vietnam in 1973]… in direct confrontation with the chain of command." And while he agreed with us in general that "just about any soldier's union will compel the military to formally grant more legal, political and civil rights to soldiers," only a soldier's movement from the lower ranks would be "willing and able to exercise those rights."

By late May, on the heels of what he'd written in the rebuttal, Steve suddenly recanted, at least in part. "I'm dissatisfied with our response… what has been our mutual reduction of this problem to dualistic terms. The more the two of you leaned toward the union and the NCOs who would admittedly be key to any drive, the more we leaned toward the lower ranks and the disgruntled elements E-6 and below. Both the union and the independent soldiers' organization require each other… for the full realization of either. I think this is the case even though I agree that the trend in the ranks is away from criticism of the military mission and toward the criticism

of the terms of service and conditions of work. It will be interesting to see if *Radical America* gets any response to our exchange." If it did, I never saw it.

Steve had made one claim in his letter, however, that was fundamentally flawed. It's true that we saw career minded GIs - those at least leaning toward a second hitch and a potential military career - as the backbone of a future union. But support for the union by no means rested exclusively with NCO's. As several polls consistently revealed, a union was favored most strongly by the lower ranks, among whom Steve had mistakenly included non-commissioned officers in the E-6 pay grade who were unlikely to have achieved that rank in their first enlistment. If private soldiers, airmen and able bodied sailors also wanted a union, we understood that it was not about defending career prerogative like PX benefits or dental care for dependents.

On a gut level at least, the lower ranks, even where most of them had no interest in an armed forces career, clearly saw the ideal of an officially sanctioned union as a more viable platform for airing grievances around outdated life style codes, racial discrimination, and the arbitrary application of command authority to enforce discipline, than the resistance model of the war years. As Steve himself acknowledged, "any soldier's union will compel the military to formally grant more legal, political and civil rights to soldiers." We agreed. And from that premise we argued that lower echelon GIs would be better "willing and able to exercise those rights" from the cover of a traditional union than from some amorphous "soldier's movement" where "direct confrontation with the chain of command," to the degree it still occurred in any collective sense, rose and fell around circumstances that were strictly local. And, as Steve also freely admitted, these "confrontations" challenged work conditions, not the military mission.

A matter Tod and I would have found more vexing was Steve's inference, at least in ellipsis, that we had abandoned our orientation toward the military's lower ranks. In distinguishing his position from ours, Steve had somehow misplaced our previous seven years of organizing and advocacy which centered on giving voice to rank and file opposition to the war, and to the wide scale resistance to autocratic command authority and institutional racism that, in part, gave rise to the amnesty movement. As I have repeatedly emphasized throughout this work, Tod and I located our politics in the arena of class struggle, focusing on those extreme forms of exploitation workers often faced when in military service. On this point we were in close accord with our West Coast comrades.

It was perhaps our East Coast style, speaking metaphorically, that Steve had a problem with, our polemical brashness, a poor fit for *Enlisted Times*, the newspaper he envisioned, however left wing editorially, that would aspire to producing copy by the cooler standards of professional reporting. As a result, when Steve circulated his final proposal, and listed the tabloid's provisional staff, to include David Cortright, our names were not included. How this played at Safe Return, I can't really recall; and indeed I have no memory of it at all. If we felt slighted, it did not cause a rift; we fully supported Steve's experiment with considerable mentoring – mostly by Tod – on the potential of direct mail to raise both startup capital and subscriptions. Correspondence between us remained robust and comradely, and there were ongoing personal encounters on one coast or the other. We still saw ourselves as working together, but now clearly taking distinctly different tacks. While Steve devoted all his energies to launching and sustaining *Enlisted Times*, we would observe the AFGE campaign closely, report on it frequently in other outlets, and even engage in minimal agitation and lobbying on its behalf, ultimately seeing the campaign through to the end.

By late spring Tod was back on the case, having traveled to Norfolk, Virginia to attend an AFGE regional meeting over the first two days of June where Ronnie Oden of the union's national office would also be present. While there, Tod surveyed the attitudes about organizing the military of several local AFGE officials. When he returned to New York he drafted a two page report which had the immediacy of a dispatch from the front. In a handful of succinct paragraphs my partner displayed an impressive grasp of the internal politics within the one sector of AFGE's network we were concentrating on, those locals whose membership was employed at military bases, most of whom worked in service sector jobs.

Of a Mrs. Ada Beaslow, president of a Local 53 at the Naval Supply Center, Tod wrote that "her local's sentiment was solid against unionization of naval military personnel. Members felt that not enough was being done for those already organized, in terms of contract adherence, grievance resolution and the like." Those "poor sailors" needed union representation, she added, but Beaslow did not believe the AFGE "was strong enough to take on the responsibility." Furthermore, she had recently attended a District meeting in in Richmond where members from several neighboring states were also represented. She said "no formal vote was taken on military unionization, but she sensed the feeling was "strong against such a step at this time."

A union officer named Parsons who represented members of Local 2225 at the Naval Air Station, corroborated Mrs. Beaslow's assessment. "We feel we should concentrate on civilian employees, not take on additional responsibilities." He was not opposed to the concept, he told Tod, but believed also that the "AFGE lacked the requisite strength for such an undertaking." His local, he said, would soon vote on the question. At the Naval shipyard and hospital, the AFGE had 1,700 employees under contract, and their president of Local 22 "echoed the others' sentiments, adding that the union was facing a difficult fight to just preserve existing contracts in

the period ahead." Tod had moved easily among these union officers, except for a farcical moment with the president of Local 2414 at the Naval Station who refused to talk with him. "He asked if I was with the *Daily Worker*, and demanded that I be cleared by the Navy personnel office first." This guy was dating his obsession with the Red Scare. The CPUSA organ had been rechristened the *Daily World* many years before.

Over the remainder of his report Tod summarized what Ronnie Ogden and his assistant, Harvey Schwartz, also on the scene in Norfolk, were now thinking about unionizing GIs. Ronnie confirmed what Tod had heard from the locals that "nothing had gone out from the national… despite all the press reports." Anyway, "the whole question was phony," Ogden parried dismissively, because the union was now preoccupied with "a likely fight for leadership succession. President Weber is seriously – perhaps terminally – ill, and may have to be replaced at the convention in September," after which Tod glossed *MGM Grand Hotel, Las Vegas*, cueing our certain destination a few months hence.

Tod noted that both these national officials believed "the main impediment to an organizing drive" were the career military who, in supervising a membership that consisted of the lowest pay grades, GS 1, 2 and 3, were seen as "the boss." There was "often deep antagonism… behind the [AFGE] rank and file sentiment against extending membership to uniformed personnel," Harvey Schwartz observed. "They saw these people as gold bricks who live a very easy life compared to the civilians." Schwartz did acknowledge that these AFGE service workers had less contact with the lower enlisted ranks, "who pass through the military." Undoubtedly Tod was surprised to hear of how this unanticipated class contradiction might scuttle the whole adventure, but there was additional cause for pessimism as Ogden and Schwartz saw it. They feared that the "anti-Washington mood" being exploited by presidential

candidates for both parties, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, could cost low grade federal employees their jobs, like the 12,000 AFGE members working in military commissaries.

Tod asked them if they thought my AFGE source in Chicago, Kaplan, was right in predicting that a report from the union's internal Task Force would recommend the drive. Maybe so, but it would have little "impact upon the convention or union leadership," they thought. Ogden, who had his eye on higher office, told Tod "he wouldn't get involved in this issue if he were currently a candidate." Tod ended his report – destined for a very small circulation - by commenting that Ogden's and Schwartz's views were by no means the last word, because, "when Michael spoke with Kaplan the other day, he suggested we were getting an unrepresentative sampling by talking exclusively with military-related locals. Michael will see him the week of June 7th," Tod concluded, "for more detail on this." Another phantom trip to Chicago I cannot account for from memory or documentation.

With the union drive in limbo for the next few months until the AFGE convention, we temporarily put it aside and turned our attention to pressing activities around amnesty, to include an unexpected commitment to one final resister case when the son of our staunch FORA supporter in New Jersey, Kay Israel, was arrested at the airport while changing planes for a flight to his exile home in Vancouver, Canada. We did not hear from Steve Rees again until the end of July. He'd been working with others on creating the pilot issue for *Enlisted Times*, but when his unemployment ran out, he took a part time job typesetting. That still left plenty of time to work on the paper, he said, since he didn't expect the pilot issue to be out for a couple of months. But he was acutely aware of what he'd taken on. "I don't dread the pilot issue work," he mused. "It's the rhythm of monthly production that scares me. As you can see, I'm not exactly brimming with over-confidence. Every element of this thing is fragile at this point."

Then Steve briefly dropped his guard, and ventured, however lightly, into the sectarian arena that was a more natural habitat for Tod and me. “Have you seen the June-July issue of the GIPA bulletin,” he asked? It was “Talmudic… like recounting scenes of the parable of the Rabbi Avraham and the goat.” Steve urged us to read Larry Christian’s reply to an exchange with the Bay Area Group on the AFGE. Christian was with the Center for Soldier’s Rights in San Diego, which I have commented on in an earlier chapter [tk]; he was the groups reigning theorist I believe. Steve was unsparing, ironizing that he was sure Christian “read what we wrote, but then again I’m not at all sure we share the same language… My favorite part is where he faults us for our lack of a scientific and ‘clear and all-encompassing political outlook, an outlook of Marxism-Leninism.’ All-encompassing is right. Except I’d call is tautological.” What Steve had found even more “maddening” was the note on editorial policy inserted by the staff about cutting out from the bulletin’s distribution those guilty of “revisionism and Trotskyism.” In that spirit Steve quipped that they should extend the list to “Protestantism and other heresies. With friends like these.”

I think I have made it clear that I wasn’t much interested in the GIPA orthodoxies, and I’m equally sure I never devoted much time to reading the bulletin, whether from copies sent to us by our Bay Area comrades, or after, when the group which long placed us among the heretics, finally approved our subscription, and only after Steve and Linda vouched for us and kept insisting. To the degree Tod and I looked at the bulletin at all, it was likely for entertainment value, mockingly sharing asides about what Steve had elegantly described as GIPA’s “haughty, self-righteous critique phrased in a deliberately principled sort of language.” We would have seen that as too charitable.

A month or so later, Steve shared a rejoinder to GIPA co-signed with Linda, and launched with a very sarcastic disclaimer: "Since, as you know, we don't share your particular fascination with the scientific precision of the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism, we thought it only fair that we warn your readers that our comments originate from outside that community of true believers." From there they stated the most obvious consequences of GIPA's retreat to orthodoxy, the essence of which can be summarized from their letter with the following lines:

"At a time when the left as a whole has had little intelligent to say about the military or the movement in the ranks, the Bulletin editors propose… to even further limit the publication's subscribers and contributors… The world is not so easily reduced to the good guys and bad guys, revolutionaries and reactionaries scheme you seem so comfortable with. Nor does the M-L trend… have the corner on… stirring ideas and stunning insights. All we are suggesting is that you lengthen your list of admissible perspectives and admit… people doing service work like counseling with no particular political bag, pacifists, radical reformers, and those who identify with sections of the communist movement you consider to be on the other side. There are too few people left who are interested in this sort of work, and there is too little being written for you to be very narrow and hope at the same time to generate a true debate."

Here Steve was defining us as well as himself in the category of as independent activists "of the communist movement" who at times turned an ear to what was being said by various Trotskyist tendencies that these Maoist cum Stalinists viewed as apostates… as if Tod and I gave a shit about what they thought. At the same time we subscribed to Steve's general principal that in the small and ever shrinking world of GI-oriented activism, no group should be excluded from whatever discussion remained; moreover we recognized we might from time to time find some useful bit of information in the GIPA Bulletin. But keeping faith with these self-isolating purists

in San Diego was a low priority for us, all the more that we now viewed the best terrain for on-going involvement with GIs as through the AFGE union drive.

June had seen Steve Rees' trip east, first to consult with Dave Cortright in D.C., and then vagabond a bit through the big metropolis. There'd been a note of reminiscence in a letter afterwards, mostly about going with Kathryn and I to La Puglia on Hester Street, an eatery in Little Italy that combined elements of a *trattoria* – like house wine served in carafes - with a full menu of traditional dishes. Steve looked back on it as a memorable meal. Tucked in this letter of July 27th, Steve mentioned that Linda Alband, fresh back from her own New York adventure, told him Tod was off to Africa, accompanied I'm fairly certain by Pam Booth. I don't believe this was their first trip to Africa together.

At a time when black activists practiced a good deal of separatism from their white counterparts, both Tod and Pam moved comfortably in whatever settings – professional or social - where blacks and whites did mingle. Both of them had been involved in Civil Rights, and had actually met when both were employed in Lyndon Johnson's Poverty Program. For Tod at any rate, Africa would be a favorite, ever expanding, destination, along with Europe and the Middle East, not to mention South Asia and Vietnam, for the rest of his life. He was the most well-traveled person I've even known, rivaled only among my acquaintances perhaps by the British couple, Jenny and Anton, Kathryn and I had met in Morocco. "Accra," Tod's postcard announced, was "shabby and expensive… the people nice." They were next headed "north to the cultural center of the Ashanti."

We were thus into August, and I can only wish fondly that the person I was then had had the good sense to get to the ocean a couple of times that summer. Even a sweltering August in New York can be a delight though, one I would enjoy, alone or in company, to best advantage.

Central Park, closed to traffic on the weekends, stocked with idlers and exercise freaks, as well as an exciting cast of street performers, was always an attraction; outdoor jazz concerts on sultry evenings at the Thompkins Square band shell; a spontaneous drop-in and walk about at the Met or MOMA, but only on the day when entry was free; Cony Island for a seaside stroll along the boardwalk, but not the beach. I grew up on Long Island among some of the country's most pristine Atlantic beaches, and that set my standards for beach play higher than the New York seedy urban strands could deliver. Work days were sluggish during the New York summer, and weekends longer, and in that manner, I suppose, I held the fort while Tod went exploring in Africa. The one political event of note for us, which I will take up in the next chapter, was on August 15th, when Sam Israel got nabbed at Kennedy, and his case absorbed much of our time in September until, toward the end of the month, Tod and I set off for Las Vegas to attend the AFGE annual convention.

I would arrive early for any flight, and Tod typically appear only seconds before the gate was about to be closed. The thought this pattern often provoked for me was, "He's gonna miss this one for sure." He never did. If our political minds followed parallel tracks – and indeed our tendency to huddle conspiratorially to the exclusion of everything and everybody around us became a staple for Kathryn Grody to mimic, always getting a laugh - we were in most other respects very different. Tod was the hearty extrovert, me the cerebral brooder; Tod the night owl, me the morning person. Tod the polygamist, me the serial monogamist. One the other hand, we both had tempers that could flare, and a tendency to fight not flight when cornered.

In Vegas, we'd booked a room in the casino hotel hosting the AFGE convention, a large and gaudy exemplar of its era, the MGM Grand. Required to rise on the early side owing to the convention schedule, Tod and I would wander past the gaming tables and slots while the casino

slumbered, and head to the coffee shop for a bite to eat. The very idea of breakfast was abhorrent to Tod. He refused to even consider the all American standard of eggs and bacon, and insisted on ordering an item not on the breakfast menu, like a cheeseburger with everything. If there was any resistance from the waitress, Tod usually pushed back strongly enough to get his way. I doubt if "flexible" was how anyone who knew Tod would describe him. The fire that killed 85 people at the MGM Grand four years later likely started in the very place we ate there each morning, a warning that destiny invents the vulnerability you might least imagine.

In the late seventies Tod and I had occasion to make several trips to Vegas at a time when the resort was halfway between where it began and where it is approaching the third decade of the twenty first century: a population center of choice for ever increasing numbers of South Western-bound Americans. In 1976 Las Vegas was bifurcated by a skyway, starkly delineating the glitzy recreational strip from the dilapidated neighborhoods of the working poor, mostly Chicanos, the South West's predominant homegrown population for centuries. There was a diminutive downtown in Vegas where scaled down casinos of the first generation still operated along a trail lit by dazzling tubes of neon signage that has become a display of public art springing from the city's own history. A narrow suburban ring did already surround Las Vegas. In fact Tod had a first cousin from Michigan who worked at a local radio station, and who we dropped in on at his tract homes in this green zone at the desert's edge – the desert and its spell not to be discovered this trip, but the next. After convention business adjoined each evening, we forsook the hotel's dinner options and crossed the highway to some hole in the wall where superb *comida Mexicana* better fitted our palates and budgets.

For three successive days we sat or circulated in the hall of the convention we'd come to attend. We had an assignment letter from Erwin Knoll, and were credentialed as members of the

press. For the next twelve months following the Las Vegas convention, we would chronicle the AFGE union drive and our involvement with it, in a series of six articles, not to include our earlier piece in the *Progressive*. It's thin as a record goes, but still we enjoyed something of monopoly in addressing various sectors of the Left on this topic, and, in what we wrote, the essence of the story of an impossible undertaking to unionize the American armed forces is fairly told.

Of these six articles, the first two contained our coverage of the convention, but were not published until early 1977.[ix] Erwin Knoll had probably held the *Progressive* piece since, as backgrounder for an on-going story, it wasn't time sensitive. The assignment for *In These Times*, our first for that radical weekly recently launched in Chicago, didn't come until mid-November. That article was essentially a re-write of what we'd submitted to the *Progressive* where we had reported that in Vegas we found "the pulse of rank and file union militancy is beating more rapidly than many would expect. The 2,500 delegates to the convention were in an insurgent mood." We tallied one irrefutable sign of their militance in the election of Ken Blaylock as president. Blaylock was a tall lanky man with a pompadour hair style reminiscent of a fifties' country rocker. We labeled him "a Jonny Cash lookalike."

President Blaylock faced his exuberant delegates and promised "an era of activism," punctuating his rhetoric by rallying the assembly to approve the creation of a strike fund in defiance of the law that forbade federal employees from "voting with their feet." But the convention's crescendo moment came after Blaylock's impassioned pleading that "GI's needed representation," and the delegates voted overwhelmingly to "repeal the [union's] constitutional ban of military membership." The consensus may have been aided after Blaylock offered a purely self-interested rational for doing so. "Even the threat of enrolling military members," he

stressed, would constitute a "weapon in the union's arsenal." It was this "even the threat" caveat that prompted skepticism, and led us to question in the *Progressive* if the "AFGE's talk about GI unions may, in fact, amount to no more than an arm-twisting exercise to add to its bag of lobbying tricks."

Our zeal for this chase was such that we quickly underplayed such warning signs. We predicted that since the pre-conditions for a union were rooted in widespread discontent throughout the armed services, the AFGE "will probably go ahead with its organizing effort, proceeding cautiously through a thicket of legal, political and economic complexities that would confront any union attempting to represent soldiers." Among progressives concerned with GI organizing, we concluded, "an important debate [ensues] over how to respond to an AFGE unionization drive. So far three distinct viewpoints have emerged:

*The first holds that since bureaucratic and conservative unions like the AFGE have never offered real leadership on such issues as racism and sexism, much less militarism and imperialism, their efforts to sign up soldiers should be ignored or flatly opposed. Any such GI union, it is argued, will only co-opt or obstruct political struggles that may arise in the future.

*A second group advocated support for the principle of unionization, while attempting at the same time to work with "politically advanced" GIs who will ensure that the union that eventually emerges it the "right one." This approach is quite similar to the old bugaboo of the American labor movement – dual unionism."

*A third point of view sees the organization of GIs into a trade union as a potentially progressive step and urges support for the AFGE drive, whatever its shortcomings. GI organizers who participate in the drive from the outset could introduce issues from below. In

this fashion, a militant union could evolve, one capable of fighting for the human needs of its members. This would go a long way toward creating a thinking soldier – one who might ultimately decide that aggression of the sort practices by the United States in Indochina is not consistent with "national security."

We did lay on our position with a visionary dose. Except for that, the three points are summed up fairly, and are considerably more succinct and clearer than how we'd articulated these internal difference in our rounds of correspondence and exchanges of documents. Into both these articles, for *In These Times* and the *Progressive*, we poured all we had gathered on the topics of GI unionism and the transition to the all-volunteer force from what had been circulating in our own small circle over the previous year.

There's no doubt that when Tod and I were back in the Flat Iron Building by early October, we were charged up to cover each new episode flowing from AFGE's epic decision as it unfolded in the months ahead. But amnesty had flared up mightily during the presidential campaign, which by November, saw Gerald Ford dethroned and Jimmy Carter in the White House. Our activities during amnesty's final stages had already absorbed the lion's share of our energies throughout the late summer – initially on behalf of Sam Israel - and would continue to do so throughout the fall and into the early winter of 1977. Soon after taking office Carter put the amnesty question to rest. Tod and I did some mopping up around the issue in the weeks immediately following, and then retired Safe Return. I will backtrack over Safe Return's endgame in the final chapter.

We had long anticipated that emerging opportunities within the all-volunteer force, whatever the outcome of the union drive, that would present us with new terrain for advocacy on behalf of active duty GIs. With that prospect in mind Tod and I sat around our desks, probably sometime in early December, and brainstormed about what to call ourselves next. The name we came up with was Citizen Soldier. An emotional buzz reminds me that, in creating the new name, both Tod and I shared the same kick we'd felt when we'd created Safe Return at a similar juncture in our political work five years before.[x] We quickly designed and printed a Citizen Soldier letterhead, but used it only selectively for the next few months, still depending on Safe Return's name recognition, not least among our donors. We would now have to make a case for a postwar project advocating on behalf of GIs and veterans rights, perpetuating a context that was clearly anti-militarist, if we hoped to retain and redirect their support.

It appears that the first public use of our project's rebranding was in the credit line of our article for *In These Times*, which identified Citizen Soldier as a "committee concerned with rank and file democracy within a military union." That would definitely be one principal emphasis for months to come. But we would increasingly address other issues affecting GIs subjected to military injustice, and by the following year - while this was not anticipated – play a leading role in mobilizing attention around powerful medical issues veterans suffered from exposure in service to deadly radiation and herbicides.[xi] The campaign to unionize the military, however, overlaps with the history of Safe Return, and can be telescoped through the early days of Citizen Soldier, briefly summarizing other military related actions and activities that began then, and were to extend over the next and final five years of my collaboration with Tod Ensign. That saga is properly the subject for a subsequent study.

By declaring a six month moratorium before attempting to offer membership to GIs, AFGE brass who favored the plan gained maneuvering room to line up support among local leadership and rank and file members who, at this stage, were cool, or even hostile, to the change. At the same time a government headwind against the drive was gathering force, most dramatically in the U.S. Senate where thirty six members had already signed on to a bill proposed by the arch-conservative Senator Strom Thurmond that would make any attempt to unionize the military a federal crime. But in the absence of more than threats from Congress and the Pentagon, the field remained clear for us to continue this political joy ride for some months to come.

With the drive on pause we worked the various networks we'd developed over the past year, communicating frequently with a handful of AFGE bigwigs willing to engage with us, and expanding our contacts at military installations among union locals already primed to sign up GI members. After the AFGE's convention in September I'd made a brief detour from Vegas to San Francisco to spend several days with Steve Rees, and to track down a particularly dynamic pro-union AFGE official. This was a 28 year old Hawaiian named Clayton Pao, president of Local 1157 at the Oakland Army base. We then profiled Pao in a sidebar for our article in *In These Times*, reporting that he had led the union's first ever work stoppage during duty hours some months before to protest rumors that the Pentagon planned to shut down the base – an important logistical hub during the Vietnam War – and where members burned an effigy of the post commander.

The post remained open, but the Pentagon retaliated against Clayton Pao and eliminated his job, after which, "at some sacrifice the local voted to create a full-time paid position" for its beleaguered president, now chaffing at the bit while awaiting approval from the national office to

begin signing up GIs. In the months ahead Pao would become a symbol for the potential drive and magnet for attention from all sides scrutinizing this issue, the AFGE itself, every stratum - national and local - of the military hierarchy, the virulent anti-union forces allayed behind Senator Strom Thurmond, elements among rank and file GIs who hoped to be organized, and the media, domestic and foreign, which stirred the controversy and kept it at simmer in the public eye.

Our involvement with the union drive would be most concentrated during the first half of 1977, roughly from late January on into the early summer. In a letter dated February 1 - written on *Enlisted Times'* new letterhead homaging the trippy graphic style of San Francisco's justly celebrated underground comics industry - Steve Rees dispatched a 'mazel tov' to Tod and me for our *In These Times* article. He particularly liked the profile on Clayton Pao, and lauded our "closing which pointed to the AFGE's possible bowing out… A reader really shouldn't miss the union's mixed intentions. What comes through is how fluid the situation is. The contrast between Blaylock and Pao is helpful in this respect." I'm still not certain in retrospect if Steve's skepticism or our optimism in promoting the union was the correct political orientation at the time, when, in both cases, we already saw a successful outcome as unlikely. Tod's and my commitment to 'antimilitarism' meant always finding a stick to beat the Pentagon with; and the specter of a union was just that. Steve's note was

A tide that raised all boats among the pro-union supporters then occurred with the surprise publication, obtained by *The Washington Post*, of a survey conducted by researchers at the Air Force Institute of Technology in Dayton, Ohio on "how officers and enlisted people felt about unions." If the survey hadn't been suppressed outright – and it probably was – neither its authors nor their superiors were in a great rush to make it public. The results revealed clearly

that military authority was being questioned by its personnel on a number of fronts. While only 35% of the enlisted men and women said they would join a military union, another 30% were "undecided," an outcome that demonstrated, if these results were consistent across all the armed forces, that the union question was truly in play in the minds of the troops.[xii]

What the manpower leadership in the Defense Department would have found most embarrassing was having the dirty laundry spoiling the transition to a volunteer force spotlighted in a powerful newspaper like *The Washington Post*. The survey reveals "dissatisfaction" among the troops about, among other grievances, an "erosion of benefits, with pay raises which are considered to fall short of losses to inflation, and a perceived lack of representation of their interests with the Congress." To which the *Post* reporter adds, "They said military unions might reverse these adverse trends." Oddly out of place in this article is the paraphrase of a view attributed to Dave Cortright, "contending that they [unions] would help prevent going into undeclared wars like Vietnam but would not be inhibiting during a declared war." I quote here the reporter, not Cortright, who likely made a more subtle argument, but this crude synthesis was more agreeable to the *Post's* editorial slant, which did not include any frontal criticism on the record of the nation's most sacred cow, its military. And, Senator Thurmond too would find the strawman of Cortright's unorthodox views – distorted or otherwise – gleefully useful for his anti-military union crusade.

What this publicity spike about military unionism prompted from us was a proposal to AFGE National Headquarters. We were asking the AFGE to lend its seal of approval, and ideally, provide partial funding, for a pilot project we hoped to conduct at the twin military installations in New Jersey, the Army's Fort Dix and the McGuire Air Force Base, where we'd already developed a working relationship with local members of AFGE. Our objective would be

to “open up channels of communication between advocates of GI unions and armed forces personnel.”

In this brief document, quoted extensively here, we prefaced our proposal with a cogent argument we believed it was worth our time to lay before the AFGE’s National Executive Council, which “for a number of reasons had decided to move slowly in developing its military union program.” We understood this caution but now attempted to mitigate it:

“A GI organizing drive faces legal roadblocks as well as entrenched opposition from both the Pentagon and Congress. Also, there is some evidence that the “gut reaction” of many Middle Americans to GI unions is largely negative.

We believe that much of this opposition, whether orchestrated or spontaneous, will begin to evaporate once the public has heard from the AFGE and the GIs themselves. The heavy burden of developing an organizing plan, which must receive first priority, makes it difficult for AFGE to undertake the type of public education campaign necessary to win broad citizen support. And only public pressure can begin to reverse the trend of Congressional opposition.

With good reason the AFGE has made a precondition for any organizing drive that systematic dialogue with soldiers, sailors and airmen be established to determine their true concerns and thereby the nature of the organization which could best represent them.

The process of gathering and analyzing GIs’ attitudes on military unions, like the broader campaign for public support, should be started without delay. The very act of creating this dialogue will serve as a counterweight to the “right to work” forces who would impose their knee-jerk opposition to GI unions on the American people outside the framework of public debate.”

What followed was our offer to "survey GIs' attitudes at six representative Defense installations… in San Diego, CA (Navy and Marines); Ft. Bragg, NC; Great Lakes Naval Base, IL; Tinker AFB, OK; Ft. Benning, GA; Ft. Lewis, WA… based on our project model at Ft. Dix/McGuire AFB, in association with interested AFGE members from the affiliated locals and the Second District Office." The plan was to get the permission of the base commanders to distribute a leaflet inviting GIs of all ranks for a "bull session" on the union question, with beer and refreshments, all at our expense, at a venue we would secure off-post. All views would be solicited, including those of representatives of the Defense Department. Information gathered informally during the meeting would be used "to design a more rigorous poll and for additional empirical research for the future."

We addressed the AFGE as Citizen Soldier, under the umbrella of Alternatives to Militarism, Inc. "a public research foundation," and, rather amazingly, provided a candid definition of the broader aspects of our political agenda. The key to how we saw ourselves within the radical antiwar firmament was expressed in this sentence: "ATOM, Inc. opposes militarism, *not* the military (emphasis in the original)." Our Foundation's "principal interest" was "in the area of military justice, service peoples' rights and the alarming trend toward militarization of the world community through the spread of nuclear weapons, increasing sale of conventional weapons, and the like. We believe that the endless spiral of defense spending more than any other factor, is the principal cause of runaway inflation, and intolerable rise in unemployment, and the inadequate funding for social services of government."

Here was certainly a full plate around which, had we actually chosen to organize our work as a research foundations, would have required our study of the military institution with infinitely greater care, and a stream of what at the time we would have dismissed as bloodless

white papers. Admittedly it was our consummate style, as I have much boasted, to posture in the political arena behind such institutional projections and forms, but we were never in danger of trading our addiction to day to day agitation for a pair of armchairs. This is not to suggest that we were incapable of carrying off the plan we put before the AFGE, even to the point of designing a credible polling instrument, as we would demonstrate three years later in our work with Agent Orange veterans.[xiii]

On March 1st, a week after we submitted this proposal, AFGE's National Vice President, Edward S. Karalis sent Tod a brief letter with the answer we very likely anticipated. "This is to advise you that the National Office has decided that the Military do wish to be organized, therefore your proposal of February 10th to canvass the Military is not required." The subtext here can be distilled from the interview Tod conducted with Karalis in Washington just two weeks earlier, and roughly – judging from the placement of my name first in the signature line – just as I was putting the finishing touches on the proposal in New York. I say this with some surprise, since to my eye this proposal has Tod's name all over it. A habit no doubt forged in the discipline of law school, Tod had summarized his meeting with Karalis in a detailed memorandum.

A fair summary of that memo would show that Karalis had confided in Tod the range of daunting obstacles facing the AFGE should it attempt to take the radical leap sanctioned by its members in Las Vegas. Karalis had begun by citing the problem of "employer harassment," which is to say, harassment from the brass, toward pro-union GIs. He emphasized how the military could simply transfer troublemakers to some remote base, or "deny them reenlistment or favorable re-assignments." Karalis made it clear "that a core group is essential to any organizing drive and you must be able to protect this group from being 'picked –off' by

management, if the drive is to succeed." With civil service jobs, he said, the union could file a Rule 19-A complaint, which restrains management from "harassing, intimidating, or otherwise inducing an employee not to participate in union activities." To block similar pressure from the military command structure, no such rule existed.

Another major problem stemmed, in Tod's paraphrase, from 'the long social caste history of the officer/enlisted schism,' which, Karalis observed, made it difficult, if not impossible, to define in what manner both officers and enlisted personnel might be distributed in an appropriate bargaining unit. One danger lay in the likelihood that the military would attempt to broaden control of a given bargaining unit by forcing the union to sign up more officers. Such disputes, Karalis told Tod, "could take months, even years, to settle." Karalis speculated that AFGE's implementation of a GI union plan could develop in the historical context of the La Follette Act of 1908 which granted federal employees the right to organize without yet the right to be recognized, thus suggesting that the Defense Department had the option of granting the former, while withholding the latter. Whether or not Tod brought up our proposal to "canvas" GIs I am prevented from saying since I apparently failed to copy the second page of Tod's memo while examining our archives. From what I do have before me, however, it seems that it was the daunting mechanics of an organizing drive, and not any doubts about substantial GIs interest in a union, that most preoccupied this union official. And, in a sense, his rejection of our offer confirms that conclusion.

Certainly the AFGE leadership had nothing to gain by tying itself to a couple of lefties with an explicitly anti-militarist agenda, turning us loose to stir things up at military bases under their banner. But I have reason to suspect that our proposal to "canvas GIs," as Karalis styled it, may have actually been a red herring, and merely a gesture we could reference when consulting a

small circle of union-oriented leftists and academics in a letter that went out just days after Tod returned from D.C. It was dated February 14th, two weeks before Karalis rejected out offer. We were looking for thoughtful feedback on draft copy for a mailing we intended to distribute directly to GIs on a round of visits to domestic bases, and through the mails to lists of military names, including a number of overseas APO addresses, that we would acquire in the manner we would target potential donors, from our list broker.

Strangely, I have no record of all to whom this serious and lengthy letter was addressed except for the people who responded. We borrowed much of its contents from the proposal to AFGE, except here we were more explicit about how remnants of the old GI Movement, including ourselves, were pursuing "this strategy of unionization as an organizational framework for anti-militarist work among GIs." We candidly advised that "important differences among organizers remain," and referenced a "sketch of our position" in an enclosed copy of our article in the *Progressive*. We must have calculated that a formal proposal to the AFGE – whether sincerely submitted as a shot in the dark or as an outright feint – a question I am unable to determine – it showed a level of engagement with a real union that the Big Labor sympathizers destined to receive this lengthy letter would take note of.

It contained "our primer for GIs on trade unions and specifically on military unions," about which we anticipated some blow back, and our letter offered several disclaimers. For example since we assumed that "the average GI… has little information on the history of the American labor movement, we have deliberately oversimplified a number of historical and political issues. In this TV age, when *People* is one of the few magazines to show real growth, we are wary of too much copy or detail." From this last sentence I suspect that what would be a very attractive eight page tabloid, decorated throughout with drawings by our resident artist, Jack

Larson, was already in some stage of production. Elsewhere I see that we hoped to have this packet in the mails by early April. A third signature appeared on this letter alongside mine and Tod's, that of Ed Sowders. Ed had rejoined the fold in the final days of the amnesty campaign, about which more anon. We closed the letter ask for a response within a week, if not by mail then by phone, and for the recipients to be as specific as possible in their remarks.

I find two responses in the files from individuals representing quite divergent political traditions along the leftwing spectrum. One, Stan Weir, was a confirmed, but unaffiliated, Trotskyist with a long pedigree in rank and file union organizing and an articulate advocate for industrial democracy. The essential tenet of his viewpoint was that workers must surrender significant civil liberties the moment they cross the factory gate. Even their cars could be searched without regard for due process. Stan was also an editor at *Radical America*. The other response came from John Judge, a longtime anti-draft, antiwar activist on the staff of CCCO in Philadelphia.

It was nice to be taken so seriously by someone Tod deeply respected, but Stan Weir's extensive critique over multiple pages held our initiative to a much higher standard than was appropriate to its scope and the objectives we ourselves were aiming for. Weir said he was surprised that the AFGE had let us get as far as it did, and by this time, as I have said, we knew the national leadership was unlikely to let us go farther. Whether or not the union drive would even proceed depended – or so we believed - on the results of the survey among the all the AFGE locals later that summer. In the meantime, our initiative of sampling views on unionization by mailing our tabloid brochure and questionnaire directly to GIs was intended to position us for future developments. If the drive went ahead, we might still be in the thick of it. But our real challenge in the short run was creating an identity and program for Citizen Soldier,

while expressing continuity with our track record and our politics. We would fashion whatever work we could perform on behalf of GIs and vets that would heap dispute upon the military, and, by extension, help in the larger struggle to stay the dogs of war.

Tod wrote Stan a long and respectful letter, acknowledging his "suggestions," having "incorporated several into the text." Otherwise, he politely parried or explained away a number of Stan's objections, mostly by asserting details about the one area in which we had acquired considerable knowledge over the past five years, life in the American military. We would not attempt to "engraft the experience of industrial unionism on GI organizing." We knew unionized soldiers, compared to their civilian counterparts, would still be in the chain of command. And, Tod explained, that's why, even if there had only been a slim chance of unionizing GIs, the progressive consequences would outweigh the many limitations from the baggage of the AFGE and its bureaucratic leadership. It was always that ideal, that beachhead for future militancy in the midst of an unpopular war, that had committed us to this happy fantasy. But the outcome didn't really matter; we knew we were going to work with GIs one way or another.

In exactly what institutional framework that work might occur, was again and very unexpectedly a subject of public debate. A few respectable voices among legislators and military planner were suddenly rising to ask if an all-volunteer force with so many wrinkles could ever be smoothed. Apropos which Tod had ended his letter to Stan Weir with a p.s., alerting him to an article he and I had just finished for the next issue of *In These Times* reporting on an emergent push for reinstatement of the draft. Both the Army and Marine Corps were failing to recruit their required quotas. Whereas, "reserves components… no longer able to rely on the threat of combat to drive thousands into their ranks… are currently 70,000 below their authorized strength of 260,000." [xiv]

Leading the charge on Capitol Hill was Senator Sam Nunn, a Georgia Democrat, who on March 2nd as chair of the Subcommittee on Manpower of the Senate Armed Services Committee, held a one-day hearing which was duly attended by my partner Tod Ensign, the day after he had met with the AFGE's Ed Karalis. Nunn, highly knowledgeable on matters of defense, was one of the most vocal critics of the volunteer system for filling the ranks of the armed forces. In his formal opening remarks Senator Nunn came out breathing fire; Tod summarized the following points:

*Despite the "billions of extra dollars," the All Volunteer Force is operating on the "ragged edge."

*Prospects for future recruitment, cost control, etc. "look even worse."

*Current and potential problems pose serious issues, especially in light of unparalleled expansion of the Soviet military; the U.S. must increase procurement and weapons spending.

*The draft is not the only alternative to the AVF.

*Without any registration requirements (as at present) the Army estimates it would take seven months just to "gear-up" to reserve status.[xv]

*VOLAR [as the initial concept was styled] was mainly a product of anti-Vietnam feeling; consideration of the long-term effects of eliminating the draft was inadequate.

*The Gates Commission issued a report with pre-ordained results; Nixon wanted VOLAR, so Gates was told to give him the rationale. "Gates assumed erroneously that turnover rates would decrease under AVF; at 40% annually, the turnover rate is the worst ever."

Several academics and analysts were then called to address the Senate panel. The first, a professor William King, read in its entirety a fifteen page summary of his report, "Achieving America's Goals: National Service or the All-Volunteer Force," setting the parameters for the commentary that followed, and calling forth Tod's disdainful aside, "maybe U.S. Senators can't read." The lineup after King was Morris Janowitz of the University of Chicago, considered "the dean of American military sociologists;" Richard Cooper of the Rand Institute at Stanford, who had just completed a book on the AVF; and Martin Blinkin of the Brookings Institute in Washington, an expert on the subject of military manpower. Of the witnesses, Tod found Janowitz "the most interesting," not least for being, along with Senator Nunn, a potential advocate for "national service." Although Janowitz preferred to call it "community service," since the term "national…is very unpopular in the ghetto community," though what he could have meant exactly by such an impolitic statement – beyond revealing a phobia toward black militants – Tod does not elaborate.

Professor Janowitz told the subcommittee that the end of conscription and American withdrawal from Vietnam represented a trend away from the traditional massed armed force built around a professional cadre and toward a military force-in-being. He then offered the opinion that the end of conscription was related as much to this structural shift as to Vietnam. Janowitz said the draft had been equitable and was in the American tradition of arming the population. The citizen soldier, he said, was a hallmark of democracy, and integral part of our national fabric. To Janowitz, voluntary "community" service was the modern equivalent of this concept, and that the draft for a number of reasons, not least the changes in the public attitude, could not be revived. He further predicted a similar phase-out of conscription in most European countries,

and only France "for reasons of internal security," would continue the practice. And this would prove to be the case.

Legislators who called for a reduction in size of the U.S. armed forces to 1.7 million members, a very unsafe level warned Janowitz, were "anti-military." National service was a lesser evil to maintain troop levels, he said, or we would become dependents on the use of CIA operations and Air Force bombing strikes. He predicted that over a ten year developmental, 60-70% of eligible youth could be enrolled, and that 40,000 enlistments a year from a pool of 4 million military aged males would be sufficient to meet manpower quotas. He then proposed several ways to induce voluntary participation, including college credits and shortening military tours of duty to two years.

Professor Binkin, in contrast, argued that conscription was a direct casualty of the Vietnam War. Ending the draft, he said, was an emotional not a rational decision. Still, the AVF could be made to work, he said, if given proper government support. There was, however, a demographic concern, Binkin stressed. A declining number of young males required that one in six must be recruited to meet established force levels. If the U.S population continued to decline, one in four would be needed by 1992. To change those percentages, he suggested, planners might revise height, weight, and mental standards for recruits. With a change in weight of 10% either way, for example, the pool of recruits would increase by 5%.

In the view of Professor Cooper, the volunteer force was a success and a viable option for the foreseeable future. Like his colleagues, he did not believe that a compulsory draft would work at present, given that a tiny minority could create enough havoc to wreck the whole program. From the standpoint of the antiwar movement, this might have constituted a political justification for demanding the draft's reinstatement; of course, this was an inconvenient position

to hold for members of the middle class, and not only the pacifists, who sought to avoid the service that workers never could. To make the AVF more attractive to the Defense Department Professor Cooper urged a number of reforms to include increasing the ratio of experienced personnel [bulking up the cadre component], contracting out more and more non-essential functions [eliminating Mickey Mouse tasks like KP that were unpopular with the troops], recruiting more women [as a solution to the declining birth rate], and, given that he felt the DOD budget was too personnel intensive, shrinking compensation for officers to rates for comparable civilian jobs. It was well understood at this point that both Congress and the Pentagon wanted more bombs and a smaller payroll.

Despite Senator Nunn's misgivings about the AVF, and the fact that President Carter himself on a visit to the Pentagon only the day before these hearings commented that "we are concerned about the weakness of recruitment…and to provide for the nation's defense, I will not hesitate to recommend a draft law," it was clear that the consensus among the professoriat who had made military manpower policy their areas of expertise was that, beyond benefiting from additional tinkering, the AVF was here to stay. Calls for national service in a variety of forms to foster the public good and raise the patriotic spirit among the nation's youth, seem to rise and fall with each generation. And half-measures were sometimes taken, as when Carter created AmeriCorps with two million slots as a band aid for youth unemployment.

Beyond that, neither the internal discussions in the academy and private institutes, nor the occasional chatter among pundits, ever gain sufficient traction to move national service beyond the talking stage. No full blown public debate ensues, nor has Congress looked upon such programs as feasible, much less essential, for the purpose of fielding an army. Our activist vantage point was considerably more parochial. The empire would field an army one way or

another. Those in the service called upon to defend the constitution would, under adverse circumstance where they rubbed against the rough side of arbitrary authority, entertain the subversive notion that those same constitutional protections blanketed them. It was our mission to show the collective nature of such grievances, and to give the military establishment as much bad press around them as we could generate.

As I stitch the narrative of this memoir from the pages of our organizational files, the thoroughness of Tod's summary of these hearings on the draft, richer in detail than the abbreviated precis I have reproduced here, is just an added reminder of how deeply he was involved at this foundational stage of Citizen Soldier's existence. He was allowing himself, and me by his leading example, to expand our credibility as Pentagon watchdogs by widening our base of knowledge about the institution we had chosen to monitor and challenge. My own presence in the record over the early months of 1977 is unaccountably slight, and I can't be certain exactly where my contribution centered during this transitional phase. I did spend the first half of April in Morocco with Kathryn Grody. My activities around the office just then were not as likely as Tod's to leave a traceable footprint. Given that my name appears first on several by-lines of this period, I can surmise that it was the research and preparation of initial drafts for our jointly published articles that was keeping me occupied.

I have also been surprised to rediscover what I'd clearly forgotten. There was a much higher volume of proposals to periodicals where we had ambitions to publish, and no evidence in the clipping file that they came to fruition. We did get assignments from *Mother Jones* and the *Pacific News Service*, both of which paid minimal kill-fees – a first for us and a great disappointment – when they rejected what we'd submitted. We contented ourselves with having achieved an on-going relationship with one new outlet, *In These Times*, where we duly sounded

the alarm for the paper's leftwing audience that the bogeyman of conscription may not have been completely settled by the Vietnam resistance, although we did not overemphasize the point. Given our own druthers, we might have argued the principle that a draft was by far a more democratic alternative to a strictly professional army. But we knew that talk about the draft was all hot air.

One news magazine we did manage to break into, thanks to an article focused on our GI union activities by Jeremy Rifken and his then partner, Ted Howard, was called *New Times*, a "glossy, bi-weekly" with the muted anti-establishment editorial line that still lingered in the big city media in the aftermath of Vietnam. Their opening paragraph was highly flattering, if thoroughly exaggerated: "During the past decade, Mike Uhl and Tod Ensign – a political activist team that specializes in hammering away at the military establishment - have become household names – epitaphs actually – among the top brass of the Pentagon." Well, let's just say that there were certainly those in the Pentagon who knew who we were, and who tracked our activities. Ted and Jeremy concluded their article by reflecting the ideological high hopes we'd been peddling that "a GI union may one day lead to a new class consciousness among troops who perceive themselves as workers as well as defenders of the state."[xvi]

As noted above, there had been a second response to our GI Union brochure from CCCO field organizer, John Judge, based in Philadelphia. I'd met John Judge a couple of times during the early days of the amnesty movement when we were attempting to work with the pacifist resister network. We did not bond. CCCO had an honorable pedigree, counting among its founders such pacifist luminaries as A.J. Muste and Dave Dellinger. Among some notable exceptions like Dellinger, who I only met once when we shared a speaker's platform in Brooklyn

years after the Vietnam War had ended, and most of the folks around WIN magazine, I tended to feel a strong aversion toward pacifists and pacifism, not just the self-righteous moralizing, but the sack-cloth posturing of self-sacrifice, a prejudice Tod deeply shared. I have expressed this aversion in a variety of contexts throughout the text, both political and philosophical. We had not been in touch with anyone at CCCO since the organization had refused some time back to exchange mailing lists. When it came to the resistance, donors did not tend to make the same narrow distinctions our groups entertained toward each other. So, Judge's letter toward the end of April probably came as something of a surprise, but in what I suppose was an attempt at irony, he pretended to not have recognized the origin of the enclosed mailing. "At first I didn't realize it came from you," he dissembled, until he "connected the address with Safe Return… I thought it came from some organization fronting for the AFGE."

The subtext was, Oh here are Ensign and Uhl, and now reunited with Sowders, poaching again on the GI resistance reservation. Not a man of subtle mind, Judge made no attempt to integrate his modest put-down within the body of his letter, essentially a thin critique of "the politics of the paper." Among the "worst things," he scored our "lack of analysis of racism or sexism, or a view that unionization would combat… real day to day problems besides working conditions and salary increases." Our greatest lapse in orthodoxy was on a principle no single-minded pacifist could concede, our "assertion… that the switch to VOLAR from the draft 'eroded civilian control of the military." It did not matter that conscription was a more democratic method for assigning military service across an eligible population than the economic draft of the all-volunteer force. The evil to be avoided was military service itself, and an end to conscription meant no young man of conscience was hence force obliged to "resist" that evil. I would go even farther: One of the greatest blows to American democracy was struck in the last

quarter the twentieth century with the abolition of the draft. In consequences the millennial American 'military force in being' is measurably less responsive to civilian control, and the antiwar opposition has lost it greatest source of motivation.

Judge did like "some of the graphics," which to be truthful were the best thing about the tabloid. In it Jack Larson had done some of his finest work on our behalf. In addition to the large cover drawing of Uncle Sam as the finger pointing recruiter, but here under a hard hat proclaiming, "GIs, Get Organized," Jack had penned fifteen other graphics depicting various sectors of industry and the trades that made them hum. Far more than the heavily popularized summary on the history and value of unions, and their relevance to the contemporary GI, the graphics gave to the whole ensemble the professional cast of a well-designed comic book. It was therefore the perfect vehicle to carry our unsolicited questionnaire to a random audience of active duty GIs. The prosaic Mr. Judge acknowledged, "It may even appeal to certain GIs," not his crowd, of course, who would never consider making a career of the military. Nonetheless, he allowed that if we were "going to begin working with active duty folks, you might want to get our Military Counseling Directory," as well as their monthly newsletter, Network News; sample copy enclosed.

Tod devoted two pages in replying to John Judge. He was actually responding to two separate letters, the first summarized above, while the second I do not find. But Tod immediately addressed a concern John had apparently expressed in the missing letter about our handing of a new case, our first under the banner of Citizen Soldier. "To allay any fears you may have about our handing of the case of Ben Ellerd [about which more below], Ben was discharged today [May 4th] from Ft. Dix after spending six days in confinement." Tod must have felt it was again timely to defend the approach to advocacy around GI grievances we had long

preferred by, one might suggest, rubbing Judge's nose in it. "We sponsored Ben's return," he explained, "because we believe that he is *representative* of the vast majority of low-ranking enlisted members today. At Safe Return, we found that there is enormous educational and political value in broadly publicizing a selective "public" case. As for the results to the GIs involved, I can't say that any of them received anything worse than would have been given via the quiet, individual case approach [i.e. CCCO's service model]; in some cases they made out better.

"We took Ben because he is exactly the kind of soldier we want to activate and work with. Like many others, he enlisted for the training and "bennies;" he told us he was very interested in a military career. Despite being continually lied to and fucked over by his superiors, he doggedly sought a remedy within the chain of command for several months. It was a long slow process of disillusionment for him and his family before he decided to desert. It cannot be emphasized enough that we want to work with ordinary workaday GIs for whom going career is a distinct possibility. [C]ounselling projects (including CCCO) are engaged… among those who either 'want-out,' or are seeking to upgrade their bad discharges. In that sense we are not a counselling group. It is obvious that we don't share your views about the proper weight and priority to be given case work… Suffice it to say we want to work with service people who want to 'stay-in' and fight; and who want to fight via the mechanism of an organization of collective self-defense, e.g. a union. We wrote the newspaper with an eye on the constituency I've outlined above."

To Judge's charge that we had failed to mention "racism and sexism," Tod replied tartly: "I can think of fifty other issues it also doesn't mention." As two addicted controversialists Tod and I had by then been long leery of the cultural vanguardists in the movement so tirelessly

laying the foundations for an ideology of political correctness rooted in moral abstraction that has by now firmly alienated the working class. As individual activists we considered ourselves as committed to the struggles against racism and sexism as the rest of the Left. But anyone who had worked with us knew well, especially where we had clashed, that we could not be disciplined into shaping our tactics by rigid adherence to the "correct line" of the purists. We often celebrated the supreme ironies of watching how our high minded critics, unable to limit Safe Return's success, were drawn into our orbit if for no other reason than to feather their own nests. It came as no surprise therefore when John Judge informed us of CCCO's desire for access to whatever GI contact list our mailing produced. No doubt relishing the moment, Tod reminded Judge that "CCCO rejected our request to exchange or rent your donor list last fall. We exchange with virtually every political group in the US, save CCCO. So we feel that the onus rests with your group to change this past policy before further cooperation is discussed." For the record, the west coast branch of CCCO, based in the Bay Area, wrote and praised our GI paper as "excellent."

It must have been only days after Tod returned from D.C. in early March when we had been approached - as Safe Return - for this first case actually undertaken by our successor project, Citizen Soldier which briefly overlapped our unionization advocacy that spring. Ben Ellerd, aged 19, after months of nightmarish conflict with the Army, his health failing, had come home to Oswego, NY on leave from Germany. He then decided not to go back. As he later told the story, he'd "heard through a friend of Safe Return's helping Vietnam war resisters. They interviewed me and decided to take my case." Where we had once made political arguments justifying desertion as an act of resistance to war and the Vietnam era military, Ben's case was essentially a challenge to military recruitment policy in a peacetime Army.

Growing up in a rural backwater of upstate New York, Ben said he "had day dreamed about opportunities that were not available in Oswego." He hoped that he would not only find those opportunities in the Army, but a career as well. He had been aggressively pursued by the local Army recruiter who guaranteed that Ben would be trained in the field he had chosen, nuclear, biological, chemical defense. His training completed, Ben was shipped to a unit in Germany where he assumed he'd be given work he had trained for. Instead he found himself in an administrative job "shifted to mopping floors, garbage pickup and CPO duty (coffee pot operator)." When a superior informed him that the Army recruitment contract only guaranteed training, not work, in his chosen military occupation, Ben filed a grievance with the Inspector General. Not only did the IG ignore the complaint, but Ben's commander, angered that a subordinate had gone over his head, retaliated by sending him to the Motor Pool, where , according to Ben, heavy drugs were rampant throughout that unit.[xvii]

Before coming home on leave, Ben had been diagnosed with a duodenal ulcer, caused, he believed, by severe emotional strain. Back in Oswego, Ben did not immediately desert. He sought "to straighten out [his] problems, making fifteen or so long distance calls to everyone from the Pentagon to the Red Cross," which got him nowhere. Then, hoping "to find a sympathetic ear at the Pentagon," he paid his own way to Washington, where he was told "go back to you unit, it can only be handled by them." He returned home and fell into a deep depression, took "a handful of sleeping pills," ending up in a psychiatric ward where he was ordered into intensive therapy. It was at that point Ben decided not to return to Germany, and sought help from Safe Return.

Work on Ben Ellerd's case ate up little time. Spanning only roughly a month and a half that spring, it had become the occasion for taking another transitional step away from amnesty.

On the 27th of April, not long after my return from Morocco, we chose to formally publicize the existence of Citizen Soldier by announcing Ben's surrender to military authorities at Ft. Dix later that same day. As always, we were prepared to go to court martial, and mobilized the resources at our disposal on Ben's behalf, to include a consultation with my own therapist, David Moltz, whose evaluation we submitted in arguing for Ben's honorable discharge on medical grounds. That proved unsuccessful, and, as Tod had communicated to John Judge, Ben received an administrative discharge under less-than-honorable conditions.

For the moment, Ben was relieved that he would escape the stockade and was now free of the Army. In mid-May, Tod wrote a medical officer at the Army hospital where Ben's ulcer was diagnosed, requesting a copy of the results of Ben's UGI examination as part of our effort to reverse his bad discharge and win a disability rating. News from Oswego four months later suggests we may have had some success. At the end of August, we received a letter from Ben's mother. "Ben is very happy," she wrote, "and has a promising future that Citizen Soldier had a great deal to do with."

We had held that press conference at an odd duck venue called Automation House on E. 68th Street near Park Avenue, described by *The New Yorker* as "a conference center for labor-management and community-city disputes." So I suppose it must have been free, and we gained access on the labor side of that mandate. We gave due attention in our lengthy press release to the action around Ben's surrender. But we also devoted considerable space to placing Ben's case within the context of Citizen Soldier's objectives, "to defend individual soldiers whose rights have been violated by the military… and to assist in the creation and development of a GI Union… an autonomous grievance process not tied to military management." Toward the fulfillment of that second objective we announced the mailing of our "30,000 tabloid newspapers

to active duty personnel." A quickly assembled four paneled brochure told "Ben's story" on one side, and, on the other, reproduced four miniaturized pages of the union tabloid under the heading, "Citizen Soldier's Drive for GI Rights.

Ben's case had actually gotten us Citizen Soldier's inaugural mention in the *New York Times*, although for reasons I cannot reconstruct, the brief article did not run until the 15th of May, more than two weeks after his surrender, and a week and a half following his discharge. The reporter devoted several paragraphs to Ben's personal saga, but pegged her piece around a line that no doubt pleased us greatly. She wrote that Ben had "acted with the aid of an organization that believes his problems are representative of thousands who would benefit from unionization of the armed forces… The issue of unionizing the military has been one of growing controversy since the advent of the all-volunteer forces." It was not Citizen Soldier's ambition "to create such a union," she noted, but to "support a proposal made by the American Federation of Government Employees." This happy juxtaposition, probably an embarrassment to more than a few AFGE officials, brought forth a quote from the union's spokesman who told the reporter that AFGE was "withholding further action pending completion of a poll of the sentiment of its membership this summer." [xviii]

With the AFGE drive in a holding pattern, and Ben's case not overburdening our time, we had remained active all that spring in various union organizing arenas. Our grassroots involvement with the AFGE locals had become largely vicarious, like keeping tabs long distance on the drama Clayton Pao had created around his union advocacy at the Oakland Army Base. A GI activist in Steve Rees' circle had gotten Pao's enthusiastic agreement to sponsor a public forum, around which Steve quickly did up a leaflet which Pao distributed to members of his and the contiguous AFGE apparatus. The leaflet had made its way to Capitol Hill, where Strom

Thurmond read it into the Congressional Record during a meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Thurmond's rant, according to Steve, "generated some heat in the upper levels of the Pentagon."

Steve attended the forum co-hosted by Pao and a regional vice president of the union's District 12, Harold McLeod, who took a position against AFGE organizing the military. The event was held in the union hall at the Oakland base, with forty to fifty people in attendance, mostly members of Pao's local, but also a handful of GIs and sailors. In "carefully chosen words," Steve reported, McLeod told them that Secretary of Defense Harold Brown "had intimated that if Pao went ahead with the meeting that they would close down the base." Clearly this threat hadn't caused either McLeod or Pao to blink. And, in Steve's opinion, this was "a bit of drama, typical of the sense of panic at this sort of initiative at the local level."

The atmosphere of solidarity at the meeting was apparent in what Steve described as the "willingness of every member present, whether for or against unionization, to stand up to the Pentagon's intimidating gestures." Steve said he didn't know how to interpret the member's combativeness, but he knew it was real. "Even McLeod was tough," he emphasized. The argument that a military union "would weaken national defense," McLeod dismissed as "not convincing," a sentiment Steve attributed to the majority there present. And many who supported the union, did so, he wrote, "on the basis of principle, not expediency. People argued that GIs were getting a bad shake, and spoke specifically about Article 15s, and busts for being late to work. They were genuinely moved."

The forum wasn't a bust, Steve concluded but "what Clayton Pao wanted… was some forceful, large showing of active duty people who favored unionization. He didn't get it." Writing up the event for the Pacific News Service, Steve contended that "this forum in and of

itself wouldn't have been worth writing about, but it received so much attention from so many quarters that it assumed some added importance. I did the article because it's become newsworthy, and because I wanted to counter the criticism of Pao implicit in the *Army Times*," which gave the forum front page coverage. Several other major news outlets also covered the story. Steve closed by asking us "how many local leaders are as willing as Clayton Pao to stick their necks out? What do you think you can do to help him out, and how can his initiative be used to encourage more of the same in other locals and districts?"

And, in fact, when Tod wrote Clayton Pao several days after the forum, he displayed the hint of the pessimism gaining on us about the AFGE drive. The coverage, especially in the military trade papers "was quite negative," Tod sympathized. "It may be a setback for those of us who favor the AFGE going ahead, inasmuch as other pro-GI union locals may be more cautious in light of the DOD reaction." Nonetheless, taking up Steve's challenge, Tod grandly reiterated out commitment to the drive. He asked if Pao "would have any interest in trying to organize a Bay Area wide speak-out," around which we would "commit organizers, printing, publicity, etc. to help build a large and successful meeting." Tod offered to send someone, himself I suspect, "with long-term movement/meeting experience, to work in tandem with local 1157… Correct me if I'm wrong," Tod added, and, in a sense repudiating the failure of the Bay Area comrades to fill the seats of Pao's forum with an audience in uniform, "but we think that servicepeople themselves can play a big role in pushing the AFGE family toward an organizing effort."

Steve once again demurred. "Out here our sense is that [a union] simply is not considered a real possibility by enlisted people. It's too remote." This was the response, he said, of people he and his comrades had been approaching during a petition drive where they made

little attempt to move sailors and soldiers toward AFGE initiatives like Pao's, but still aimed at an objective closer to the program those still active in the shrinking GI Resistance network had been pursuing all along. In opposing the AFGE model for representation, their campaign in favor of an independent soldier's organization seemed to be gaining momentum from the bottom up, an effort to which Citizen Soldier offered its full support. We were, and had been, all about airing the scope of grievances among low ranking enlisted men, like Ben Ellerd, even as we supported the union aspirations of the professional military.

We saw no contradiction in pursuing both tracks simultaneously. We had told Steve Rees that we hoped our GI mailing, whittled down to 21,000 – the limit on the military names we were able to acquire – would "provide us with many, many leads." As returns from the tabloid's survey form began to trickle in, a grassroots petition drive among rank and file military encouraged by the Bay Area comrades, Dave Cortright, the remaining GI organizers distributed around U.S. military bases, domestic and foreign, was also gathering steam

Steve and his Bay Area crowd alone had collected 800 names, including 100 sailor who represented half the enlisted crew members of the U.S.S. Higby. In Germany organizers inside and outside the Army signed up 280 soldiers at a base near Fulda, and another 220 troops garrisoned in West Berlin. 60 marines in Iwakuni, Japan put their names to the document, as did 200 soldiers stationed at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. The petition drive in the ranks was undertaken by and on behalf of a group of active duty service members calling themselves, EPOC, the Enlisted Peoples Organizing Committee.

Tod had written Steve Rees in early March about our contact with leaders of EPOC in Washington, and discussed plans with Dave Cortright for a press conference co-sponsored by Citizen Soldier where EPOC would join members of AFGE and present their signed petitions to

a member of Congress. This idea was apparently at an early stage of fermentation, and Tod would bring it up when he next wrote Steve in mid-April on the eve of a return to Washington accompanied by Ed Sowders and Ben Ellerd – in the midst of Ben's case - and where he had again scheduled a meeting with Cortright to discuss the joint press conference with EPOC, now tentatively set for the end of April. By mid-May I was writing to Cortright asking "what if any role do you want us to play?"

There is a reference in my letter to a "statement" Cortright had put out, but which I do not find. I can only speculate that he was going ahead with EPOC in some fashion on his own. And I guess from the press release Citizen Soldier put out soon thereafter, we were about to do the same. We announced that "On Friday May 2 a delegation of active duty enlisted people will present a petition favoring military unions to members of Congress. Acting on behalf of 1,700 enlisted servicemen and women, the delegation will deliver an appeal which argues for a democratic soldiers union and opposes Congressional attempts to prohibit the right to organize."

By this time we had formed an alliance with the most progressive members of the Senate, James Abouresk of South Dakota, who later became an advocate for Arab American rights. "According to the petition," remarked Sen. Abouresk, "the enlisted people see a union that would overhaul the military justice system, provide a workable grievance procedure, enforce enlistment contracts, fight against racism and sexism and protect constitutional rights." A soldier based at Ft. Meade, Maryland elaborated that "we need a union to protect GIs from injustices and petty harassment of military life… What's wrong with a little justice for those who volunteered to serve their country?"

Clearly our emphasis had shifted somewhat toward the program of our organizer comrades, at least we had now made GI grievances not the AFGE campaign the centerpiece of

Citizen Soldier's program. What continued to distinguish our approach was our willingness to engage member of Congress, to include staff on the Senate Armed Services Committee, a contact facilitated by Sen. Abouresk who sat on that committee. Tod, Ed and I had made a swing through a number of military bases gathering potential witnesses to testify at a hearing on military grievance procedures before the HASC Subcommittee on Military Personnel. Of particular note is that nowhere in this latest press announcement is there a mention of AFGE. And while we were not yet ready to distance ourselves from the AFGE drive, by mid-June we were letting a number of our close correspondents know well in advance of the official August 1st deadline, that "the latest rumor around D.C. is that the AFGE locals are going to vote the plebiscite down."

We had by then also deepened our ties on Capitol Hill with a liberal member of the House who by odd coincidence represented the District I grew up in on Long Island. Tom Downey sat on the House Armed Services Committee, and, when Tod and Ed were in D.C. in April, they had run Ben Ellerd by his office looking for support. A few days later, we received a call from a member of the congressman's staff saying that Downey was "taking an active interest in probing conditions [on U.S. military installations] in West Germany."

Tod followed up in a letter offering Downey testimony from "ten enlisted persons, (9 male, 1 female), most of whom are serving in B Company, 122nd Maintenance Battalion, who Mr. Ellerd believes…would be willing to make statements as to drug use and other problems in their units… If Mr. Downey wants to pursue an on-site visit in W. Germany, we would probably have to send an advance person to prepare and develop the witnesses." I find nothing in the record to suggest that our engagement with either of the congressional armed services committees, which had gone back and forth over many weeks, eventually bore fruit.

As we now awaited the second shoe to fall on the unionization enterprise, we busily shopped around for a trademark issue that would truly concretize our antimilitarist mission, and once again capture the public's attention. We would mark time with on-going defense of "representative GIs which was begun by Safe Return." Ben Ellerd's case was the example Tod cited in a letter to our Safe Return supporters of continuity with that practice. The nature of that defense would now revolve around "several service wide issues… fraudulent recruiting and assignment practices… use of an oppressive and one-sided enlistment contract, the use of the chain-of-command as a means of suppressing, rather than correcting, injustices, and the command's demonstrated disregard for the health and safety of most servicepeople." In this Tod not only defined our politics, but served the business side of funding the on-going work by hoping to convince a large percentage of Safe Return donors to move ahead with us on the program of Citizen Soldier.

Tod had informed the folks on the Safe Return list that we were still committed to unionization as the best means for GIs to empower themselves in resolving their grievances, which it remained our role to publicize. And we did that in a brief article for *In These Times* in which we summarized the results of our tabloid survey.[xix] We reported having received filled-in survey forms from "2% of those tolled, a good rate of return" for a direct mail solicitation, where a 1 % return was considered successful. We were all the more satisfied, we explained elsewhere, because our respondents – a tiny percentage of whom may have read our short articles that had run in *High Times* magazine – would have not only been unfamiliar with the organization asking their participation, but would have had to pay the postage themselves for returning the form. As for the "many leads" we had hoped to generate, we now had acquired almost 500 names and addresses of active duty personnel, whatever their opinion on the union question.

Support for the union from this self-selected universe remained strong, we wrote, with 45 percent of the respondents favoring a union outright, and another 34% undecided. Only 21% "were flatly opposed to unionization." The responses were further broken down by rank, with 78% from the enlisted ranks, and 17% from officers (the missing 5% likely omitted that information). Among the lowest ranks, 61% were in favor, while mid and upper level NCOs were split fifty-fifty, 41% in favor, 41% undecided. And of the company grade officers – lieutenants and captains - who registered their views, we had been surprised to learn that "only half were opposed to unionization under any circumstances."

We would retain a robust interest in the fate of military unionism for the remainder of the year as a topic for our leftwing journalism, if not a viable program for our politics. There would be three articles over the course of several months, the first of which sounded the death knell for the AFGE drive. For *In These Times*, under the headline, "Prospects for a military union set back," we wrote, "The effort to unionize the armed forces suffered a major setback in early September when it was announced that locals of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFL/CIO), the union contemplating the drive, had voted four to one against the controversial unionization plan."[xx]

In the article we updated our readers on efforts within both the Defense Department and the U.S. Senate to derail the union plan over the "two months before the AFGE called it quits." The countermoves had indeed been intimidating to AFGE's rank and file who overwhelmingly feared the union could not stand its ground against such formidable adversaries. In August under Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the DOD "issued a new set of regulations designed to severely cripple, if not totally suppress, any organizing attempt. The new regulations prohibit commanders from bargaining with any group representing GIs, and bars individual soldiers from

conducting strikes, work stoppages or any concerted activity that 'obstructs or interferes with the performance of military assignments." To put this in context, what had changed, and no doubt was a direct outcome of the atmosphere of resistance to command authority during Vietnam, was that, prior to this historical juncture, it had not been imagined that such an explicit statement against rank and file democracy would ever be required.

The AFGE had more to fear from S-274, the inflammatory bill introduced by South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, who had made common cause with "far right organizations," Americans Against Union Control of Government and Americans Against Big Labor, who "mailed millions of opinion surveys that condemn the 'unchecked menace' of public employee unionism." At one point the boardroom reactionaries even rolled out retired General William Westmoreland for an Op Ed in the *Times* "Against Unionizing the Military."[xxi] Tacking to the populist left and presenting the hierarch at his patronizing best, Westy allowed that, "After all, the union movement has done great things for our society, and operating within realistic bounds will continue to do so." This from a South Carolinian in a state with, under the banner of laws protecting the "right to work," a vicious history of union busting. Even the AFGE campaign "might be understandable if it grew from evidence that a groundswell of military opinion supported the unionizing." That no such "groundswell" existed, Westy argued, could be deduced from the fact that Clayton Pao's forum "was attended by exactly four curious servicemen. The Federation has never been able to build a case showing a real need for a military union."

The AFGE, of course, understood that the "need" was "real," and only the fear that the military union drive might further weaken and already weak union had ultimately been the cause for the program's rejection by the AFGE locals. The Air Force poll had also shown the receptivity of a plurality of those in the armed forces for an independent body that would protect

their wages and benefits, as well as address their grievances related to the one-sided military justice system. And while the surveying and petition drive of the old network of GI advocates and organizers may have lacked statistical grounding, it would have been difficult to conclude that these activities hadn't revealed a strong pro-union current within the All Volunteer Force.

Westy, naturally, wished to see nothing happen that would challenge command authority in dealing with the troops. But S-274 in the Senate went way beyond this objective. "Thurmond's bill," we reported for *In These Times*, "poses a threat to the rights of GIs, trade unionists and civilian organizers. The bill is an attack on the network of anti-militarist activists and counsellors that has grown up since the antiwar activities of the '60s… Thurmond's bill strikes at these groups presenting a sweeping definition of labor organizations… and any group that participates in the process of resolving individual complaints or grievances… is subject to the act's criminal sanctions."

This was an overreach on Thurmond's part of constitutional proportions, and, after the bill swept through the Senate virtually unopposed, a coalition was quickly formed among "seven national organizations… to defeat the bill in the House of Representatives." Included among the coalition opponents – the ACLU, the National Lawyers Guild, the Center for National Security Studies, CCCO, *Enlisted Times* and Citizen Soldier - was the Association of Civilian Technicians, a hybrid union whose members were civilian DOD employees who simultaneously served in the National Guard. As written the bill would strip these workers of their union representation.[xxii]

The coalition intended to "mobilize the nation's law professors against the legislation," and launch a massive lobbying effort to dissuade members of the House from being a party to a law that would criminalize such "traditional GI organizing activities as discharge counselling,

paralegal representation… not to mention the overt political associations formed by GIs and civilians during the Vietnam War."[xxiii] The bill never came to a vote because Secretary of Defense Harold Brown had convinced members "that legislative efforts would be more vulnerable to adverse court decisions that might lead to more restrictions on the military's ability to suppress union activity that exists at present." Under the circumstances, Brown said, he preferred the option of direct military regulation.[xxiv]

On that note, the once in a lifetime attempt – at least till now - by a mainstream branch of organized labor to unionize the U.S, armed forces went down in a tailspin. We would sum up the whole exercise in a short piece for *The Progressive*, which appeared in the magazine's December 1977 issue, but broke no new ground we hadn't reported for *In These Times*.[xxv] The point, I suppose, was to bring closure to the issue for Progressive readers who had first learned of this campaign in our article from the previous March. We had begun to move on from the AFGE drive by early summer, even as we attempted to consolidate the experience with a book contract. We took the usual care with drafting an outline, and had managed to interest a literary agent to push it, but nothing came to pass. It would be a year before we would satisfy our long term quest to break into book publishing when we were given a contract from *Playboy* for what would be *G.I. Guinea Pigs*, but the subject matter in that case related to a mass issue, the health effects on American GIs of radiation from the open air Atomic tests in the U.S. and the Pacific, and from the spraying of deadly herbicides like Agent Orange in Vietnam. The story of the military union crusade was likely seen as an academic title, and not a trade book for mass consumption.

While I was shepherding around out unsuccessful book proposal, Tod and Pam Booth were off to the Isle of Skye and a tour of Scotland. Their schedule in London overlapped for a day with Steve Rees, who had decided to take a break for six weeks from his labors with Enlisted

Times, and to explore parts of England with his wife Margie. Typical of Steve, a pointed interest in London was to attend a conference sponsored by New Left Review at which two of the journal's heavyweights, Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn were to be the principal speakers. He had regaled us on prior occasions after attending lectures by other prominent leftist in California, like Herbert Marcuse – who he described as a "snappy dresser."

August then found me fulfilling an invitation I had very unexpectedly received from the Sociology Department at the U.S. Military Academy to attend a round table on military unionism. Beyond the letter of invitation, I find no additional documentation to describe what actually occurred on this occasion, when on one sultry summer day I found myself seated around a large conference table at West Point surrounded by high ranking Army officers. The man to my left, a one-star general, leaned over and confided, "You know, there's a dossier on you circulating around here. That was no surprise," I replied. Unfortunately that's about all I can recall about that anomalous occasion. I lacked Tod's lawyerly discipline in such cases to produce a record. Of maybe I was just in a funk, a moment of burn out during a period when the activities we engaged in were of less interest to me than the distractions of movement and acting classes that now increasingly took up of my time. This trend would be reversed significantly in the following year when we took on issues of more direct concern to veterans, and which promised opportunities for concrete impact than our more propagandistic efforts on behalf of active duty GIs.

The GI struggle was one in which Steve Rees himself would grind away for a couple of more years. Prior to his vacation Steve and his staff had finally managed to print and distribute a four-page sampler of *Enlisted Times*, which he announced and included in a promotional mailing. The "sampler," he explained in a post script, was "selected from our 24-page first issue.

The other 20 are already typeset and ready for the printer. And manuscripts for the next two issues are already in hand. Give us your support today, and help us put those articles in print and in the hands of the GIs whose subscriptions will enable us to become self-sustaining." I might have thought at the time that this was a noble experiment doomed to failure. And indeed, it did fail eventually, but not before Steve had managed to produce eighteen [tk] issues of the paper.

Before I loop back in my final chapter to the complete the amnesty story which is the principal theme of this memoir, I must recount one episode where sectarian fallout from that movement reared its head again in the waning months of 1977. It was actually in late spring when I learned from a phone conversation with Steve Rees that the GI counsellors operating at Ft. Dix had obtained the base roster through a Freedom of Information request. I then wrote Steve seeking his intervention on our behalf for access to "the list of troops they'd obtained from the command" for the purpose of circulating out tabloid.

Not only did this counsellor– a man named Chris - ask "not to tell you of their success," when Steve "asked why, Chris said he considered your approach to unionization opportunist. I told him I disagreed with you approach too, and had stated those disagreements publically. But that I thought a more comradely relationship should be built between us all. Anyway, he wasn't swayed an iota."

We would learn the true source of this animus in late July from the copy of a letter Linda Alband had sent to Chris, with whom she had a strong connection through personal contact and correspondence for several years. "In regard to… your difficulties with Safe Return [you] said that a lot of it stems from their history in the amnesty movement. Well, the tone I get from your implication smacks of Dee Knight and company whom I know you have some relations with… I must confess that one of the main reasons I went to NYC in 1972 was to meet Michael and Tod.

I had heard such terrible things about them from so many people in VVAW – basically the rumors were instigated by people I always had a lot of trouble dealing with personally and politically, but sometimes by good people who hadn't any experience in the matters.

Naturally I was curious. Over the five years I have known [Michael and Tod] they have been very responsible to me both politically and personally – and I don't think I'm a special case. They have been much more responsible in the way they have dealt with me than… many other "comrades"… especially those who hold Prairie Fire views… Seems the only time I hear from them is when they want a favor (job printed, someone's phone number)… As far as the Amnesty Movement… I have had something to do with quite a few of the 'big guns'… for the past five years. I have read many of the "documents" passed around that purportedly detail the "crimes of Uhl and Ensign, and have found these to be more an indictment of the problems of the amnesty movement/or the left than an indictment of two men.

And from my experience with Dee Knight who I met months before I met Tod and Michael, from the outset I found him to be one of the slimiest, most opportunist turkeys around… far guiltier of the crimes he accuses Safe Return of than either Uhl or Ensign… People who have been doing amnesty work in the Portland area who were responsible for Dee's getting his status changed so he could legally enter the U.S. have no use for him and wish they had never met him. He is a pretty divisive character. This is not to say that Tod and Michael are without their problems. There is some truth to the allegations leveled against them but there are also a lot of blatant lies (some of which I am in a position to refute. It is also a point to Tod and Michael's credit that they have refrained from answering the 'charges leveled against them,' as this would give them some credibility where none is merited."

Reading this spirited defense of our work and reputations was no doubt a tonic to our ears. And, in responding to Linda, Tod wrote, “your patience in dealing with folks like Chris draws my admiration.” Therein lies the tale: whatever virtues Tod and I possessed, patience wasn’t one of them.

[i]. July 27, 1975,
[ii] . "Unionization and Democracy in the Military," *WIN*, Nov. 20, 1974. "Organizing the Military: The Union Wants to Join You," *The Nation*, February 21, 1976.
[iii]. The Center for National Security Studies was founded by Morton Halperin, and operated in the orbit of the Institute for Policy Studies, where Halperin had been a fellow.
[iv]. This was confirmed for me in a personal conversation with Steve Rees in early 2017.
[v]. A collection of Steve Rees' photos can be viewed online at his site, Music + Mayhem: 1965-1975.
[vi]. "The GI Movement Today: The Volunteer Armed Forces and Movement in the Ranks," by Linda Alband, Steve Rees, Denni Woodmansee. *Radical America*, May/June 1976.
[vii]. "Is the unionization of U.S. servicemen inevitable, or can it be avoided?" *Army/Air Force/Navy Times Magazine*, July 23, 1975.
[viii]. The equivalent of approximately $420 in 2016.
[ix]. "Changes in the U.S. Army Mean Soldiers May Unionize," by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign, *In These Times*, January 12-18, 1977. "A Union of Soldiers," by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign, *The Progressive*, March 1977.
[x]. It was the nature of our process that, even if we had wanted to, we could never recall to whom attribution belonged in either case
[xi]. Highlights of that story are concentrated in *G.I. Guinea Pigs: How the Pentagon Exposed Our Troops to Dangers More Deadly Than War*, by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign (Playboy Books, 1980). Copies of this book, long out of print, can be found at libraries and in the inventories of on-line book sellers. Two chapters in *G.I. Guinea Pigs* on the Agent Orange health controversy appear in my *The War I Survived is Vietnam: Collected Writing of a Veteran and Antiwar Activist* (McFarland, 2016).
[xii]. "Study Finds Support for an AF Union," by George C. Wilson, *The Washington Post*, Feb. 8. 1971.
[xiii]. See *G.I. Guinea Pigs*, Op Cit.
[xiv]. "Will there be a new Draft?" by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign, *In These Times*, March 30-April 4, 1977.
[xv]. President Carter reinstated draft registration, with the full support of Congress for eligible males, 19 and 20 starting July 21, 1980.
[xvi]. "Taking Care of Business: Citizen Soldier," by Ted Howard and Jeremy Rifkin, *New Times*, April 15, 1977.
[xvii]. We did not attempt to document the drug use Ben Ellerd claimed to be pervasive in his unit in 1977. For a take on how the Richard Nixon politically manipulated the reputed widespread drug epidemic in the military during the late years of the Vietnam War, see *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs*, by Jeremy Kuzmarov (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).
[xviii]. "AWOL Soldier Becomes Focus of Controversy over Unionizing," by Judith Cummings, *The New York Times*, May 15, 1977,
[xix]. "Support still strong for military union," by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign, *In These Times*, July 6-12, 1977,
[xx]. "Prospects for a military union set back," by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign, *In These Times*, Sept.28-Oct.4, 1977.
[xxi]. "Against Unionizing the Military," Gen. William C. Westmoreland, *The New York Times*, June 3, 1977.
[xxii]. "Coalition organizes against Senate bill," by Tod Ensign and Michael Uhl, *In These Times*, Dec. 6-12, 1977.
[xxiii]. Ibid.
[xxiv]. Op cit, Uhl and Ensign, Sept. 28-Oct. 4, 1977.
[xxv]. "Unorganizing GIs," by Tod Ensign and Michael Uhl, *The Progressive*, December 1977.