

US atrocities in Vietnam documented: Winter Soldier re-released three decades later

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Winter Soldier, a documentary film by Winterfilm. First released in 1972, re-released by Milestone Films, 2005.

Thirty-four years after it was made, the controversial antiwar documentary *Winter Soldier* has achieved a limited theatrical release in cities across the United States this fall. When it was first completed in 1972, it was shown at the Cannes and Berlin film festivals, in movie theaters in England and France, and on German television, but film distributors in the United States wouldn't screen it. It played for a week in a single New York theater and was given a one-time showing on New York City's local public television station. Thereafter, it was consigned to obscurity, its revelations of extensive American war crimes in Vietnam effectively suppressed.

However, in light of the United States' current occupation of Iraq, and the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib, the film has gained renewed attention. Its relevance enhanced by current parallels, the questions the film raises continue to cause consternation both for supporters of American imperialism, and ironically for those promoting the film who advocate protest politics as the means to counter it. Still possessing the power of an unexploded grenade, it is likely that even this re-release will remain limited to the smaller art theaters.

The film was made in February 1971, when more than 125 veterans gathered in a motel in downtown Detroit for the Winter Soldier Investigation, a three-day informal hearing to testify to atrocities they committed and witnessed in their service tours in Vietnam.

The investigation was named in reference to lines written by colonial American pamphleteer Thomas Paine: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summertime soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman" (Thomas Paine, *The Crisis*, 1776-77). Considering themselves patriots in the sense that Paine described, these "winter" soldiers sought to end to the Vietnam War by exposing the atrocities it had engendered.

In the words of Pfc. William Bezanson, "To me, the greatest guilt that any man can suffer is that he died without a good reason. And to me, Vietnam is not a good enough reason. Not when we're destroying the Vietnamese land, property and populace. We're destroying the very moral fiber of this country at the same time."

Drawn from across the spectrum of military units and ranks, the young servicemen, most only in their early to mid-20s at the time, describe in detail the burning of villages, the massacre of civilians, the rape and torture, including live evisceration, of villagers, the tossing of prisoners from helicopters, and the collection of human ears as trophies. As one soldier admits, "the more ears, the more beers."

Their purpose in describing their acts was to establish that such crimes were widespread and indeed endemic to the Vietnam War itself. Details of the My Lai massacre in March 1968, in which 500 villagers were machine-gunned and the village razed, had finally surfaced in the American press, causing popular revulsion and increased antiwar sentiment. Attempting to contain the damage, the court-martial of a handful of GIs and their commanding officer for the massacre at My Lai had finally gotten underway in November 1970. The guilty verdict for Lt. William Calley and the acquittal of his commanding officer, Ernest Medina, would be handed down the same month as the Winter Soldier Investigation.

As with the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib, the US government, military and media sought to minimize these war crimes as aberrations committed by a few "bad apples," rather than a matter of military policy. The Winter Soldier testimony was meant to expose the attempt by the US government to scapegoat a few lower-ranking soldiers for its rampant crimes in Vietnam.

Although this attempted exposure is not entirely clear in the documentary film, which only includes selections of the testimony interspersed with additional interviews with soldiers and other footage, the connection is explicit in the testimony itself. One soldier says, "We all belong to the unit

that Lieutenant Calley belonged to. What's been brought out during this whole testimony is that it's a general policy and not an isolated incident. We're trained from basic training...to kill and that's what we're out there to do. It is not the fault of Lieutenant Calley. It is not the fault of the infantryman in his platoon, but the fault of the U.S. government and the U.S. military establishment."

One after another, the soldiers emphasize that it was a matter of US military policy to relentlessly inculcate racism, dehumanize the Vietnamese as "gooks," and inure the soldiers to the most extreme brutality so that they would kill not only the Viet Cong, but all Vietnamese, without compunction. When asked how they could tell if someone they'd killed was Viet Cong or not, one vet wryly explained, "If he's dead, he's Viet Cong."

What resonates most strongly in the grainy black-and-white footage, beyond the debased nature and incalculable damage to the Vietnamese people of the atrocities themselves, is the damage caused by committing them. The difficulty of these young men in coming to terms with their own process of dehumanization, a process that left many of them obviously traumatized—some in fact declined to speak, expressing instead their need to show solidarity with those who could—and their disillusionment and anger at the government that used them to do its killing are the enduring strength of the film.

Those who endorsed US imperialism's aims in Vietnam, and accepted its rationales, have vociferously sought to discredit the film to this day, saying its revelations are unpatriotic and demoralizing. At its most extreme, *Winter Soldier* was called a hoax concocted by enemy agents of the Viet Cong, like "Hanoi Jane" Fonda and other antiwar celebrities, in order to make America lose the war.

In Democratic candidate John Kerry's 2004 election campaign, the battle over the veracity of these antiwar veterans resurfaced, with footage from the film being used by his supporters to cast Kerry as a war hero—at the New York showing, his one-minute appearance in the film was greeted with catcalls of "traitor, renegade," while those on the right once again denounced the film as a fraud, setting up a counter Web site to discredit it. However, the Pentagon has never been able to refute any of the testimony.

And the soldiers in the film directly repudiate the charge that their testimony betrayed their fellow soldiers. One says that it was not the antiwar protests back in America that were demoralizing; it was not knowing why they were fighting, as government propaganda such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, or the cover-up of My Lai, were increasingly being exposed as lies.

Another vet raises a laugh from the hearing's audience by saying how happy it had made him to hear about a concert

called Woodstock.

The insistence of the soldiers that they were speaking out not only to stop the Vietnam War, but to put a stop to all such wars is the aspect of the film that stands as the sharpest challenge to those who claim protest is sufficient to counter imperialist war.

In 1971, Rusty Sachs testified, "The next slide is a slide of myself. I'm extremely shameful of it. I'm going to show it to you so you can see this sadistic state of mind that my government put me into. I'm showing it in hope that none of you people that have never been involved ever let this happen to you. Don't ever let your government do this to you. Okay—that's me. I'm holding a dead body—smiling."

These words might just as well be those of Pfc. Lynndie England, or any of the other low-ranking soldiers tried for prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, whose defense has sought to establish they were not acting independently when they led naked prisoners around on leashes or stacked them in pyramids, but were following orders from commanding officers and military intelligence to "soften up" the detainees.

A mere three decades later, another generation of young men and women is once again fighting a war of occupation against a largely hostile civilian population, under conditions where such war crimes are again a matter of military policy. How is it possible that the massive protests credited with ending the Vietnam War had no enduring effect?

The pointed condemnations of the American government and militarism in *Winter Soldier*, and the deep-felt, passionate hatred of the war felt by millions, were very much at odds with the official leadership of the antiwar movement, who remained oriented to the Democratic Party. The American population faces a particularly difficult political situation today in part because that leadership followed a policy of pressuring the establishment instead of developing an independent, socialist movement based on the working class.

The film *Winter Soldier* brings both the horror of imperialist war and the failure of protest politics into sharp focus.



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