

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Sen. John Kerry's Struggle for Leadership of a Vietnam Veterans Antiwar Group in 1971 Ended With His Resignation at a Stormy Meeting in Kansas City, Where Militants Advocated Violence Against the U.S. Government

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BODY:

Gerald Nicosia is the author of "Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement" (Crown Publishers, 2001, forthcoming in a new edition from Carroll & Graf this August). His research for the book included a Freedom of Information Act request to the FBI in 1988 for records of the agency's surveillance of an antiwar group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. On June 21, 1989, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts wrote a letter urging the Justice Department to open the files to Nicosia because they would "contribute significantly to the public's understanding of the government's role in Vietnam. . . ." The FBI began releasing the documents nearly 11 years after Nicosia's request, and, eventually, 14 boxes containing 20,000 pages were delivered to his home. By then, however, his manuscript was finished.

The documents sat unread until this year, after Kerry became the expected Democratic Party candidate for president. In preparing this article, Nicosia reviewed the documents, interviewed more than two dozen people and drew upon the original reporting for his book. On March 25, after CNN broadcast a report about the files in his possession, three of the boxes were stolen from Nicosia's home in Marin County. The Twin Cities Police Department continues to investigate the theft.

In this article, direct quotations from the files are from a variety of documents, including reports by FBI agents and news clippings the agency saved. The accuracy of those reports could not always be verified.

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Arguably the most telling piece of information in the FBI files on Sen. John F. Kerry is his speech at the University of Nevada Las Vegas on Sept. 30, 1971. He was at the height of his success as a spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, a motley, grass-roots group of about 20,000 war veterans trying to bring an immediate end to the Vietnam War.

Although the peace movement comprised hundreds of groups, this veterans organization caught the nation's attention that year with a series of actions in Washington, D.C. Millions watched televised images of long-haired, angry veterans in fatigues, many bearing scars or missing limbs, throwing their medals over a wire-mesh fence at the Capitol. Another image that stood out was of a ruggedly handsome young Navy veteran with a Silver Star, Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Vietnam War was an abomination, continued for the vanity of politicians while taking American and Southeast Asian lives for no good reason. That speech made Kerry a national figure, and he began speaking around the country. The FBI documents reveal that he earned as much as \$1,200 plus expenses for a single appearance—a substantial amount in 1971.

Long before the era of PCs, the Internet and digital text, Kerry's comments would have been lost to posterity had not the FBI been recording them—sometimes with a tape recorder, sometimes in notes and sometimes by pulling newspaper clippings. The Kerry who emerges from those files is a man far less guarded than the candidate we know today—a man

experiencing a visible conflict between head and heart. "My 10 years of political consciousness in America is very wrapped up in gravestones," he told the 200 students at the Las Vegas campus. "These are the gravestones of John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, the Kent State students, the men of Attica and the other 53,000 brothers in Vietnam."

Here he was, a New England Brahmin educated at Yale and St. Paul's School, coaxed by class, culture and schooling to avoid emotional expression, telling students he couldn't get dead people out of his head—and not just the Kennedys and the civil rights leaders, but also American students killed by a government suppressing dissent; prisoners and guards shot in a massive fusillade to quell a rebellion at New York's Attica prison; and every American soldier who had lost his life in the Vietnam War.

Kerry's anger and pain were close to the surface. In Las Vegas, the files show, he said his life would be dedicated to awakening Americans. "Somewhere, somehow, we lost track of where we are as a nation," Kerry lamented. He called for a "resensitization and revolution of America." "People must realize the disparity between the America of the speeches and the America of the streets. The thought 'power to the people' is not revolutionary. Our country was founded on this concept."

For those remarks and others, the FBI regarded Kerry as potentially subversive and dangerous to the "national defense interest." But that was no surprise. It regarded the organization he led, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, as a security threat, and conducted a 20,000–documents–deep surveillance that gave thousands of special agents, informants, infiltrators and bureaucrats work for 10 years: 1967 to 1977.

Although the surveillance began in mid-1967, files show the real push began in the Oval Office, after the VVAW ran a full-page advertisement in the New York Times on Sunday, Nov. 19, 1967, signed by 65 veterans opposed to the war. Many people in the military reacted favorably to the ad, including retired Army Brig. Gen. Hugh B. Hester, who declared, "This is the best advertisement the peace movement has."

Reaction at the Pentagon was different. An FBI memo from Washington agent D.J. Brennan Jr. to fellow employee W.C. Sullivan on Nov. 19 says "Secretary of Defense [Robert] McNamara was very incensed" by the advertisement and planned to go to the White House "first thing Monday morning" to discuss it with President Lyndon Johnson. Out of McNamara and Johnson's fury came a demand that the FBI run name checks on most of those who had signed the ad, apparently in the hope that they could be proven to be fake vets, since the phrase "alleged veterans" is thrown about in several memos.

The FBI dragnet rapidly grew—eventually pulling in members of organizations labeled "VVAW sympathizers," such as the Society of Friends and Unitarian Universalist Churches and even the Mothers For Peace. Inevitably, recently discharged Navy Lt. John Kerry would fall under the FBI's watchful eye.

The surveillance captured Kerry's swift rise in the VVAW, his growing unease with its turn toward a more radical agenda, and his resignation in Kansas City at a meeting so disturbing and contentious that it is still vivid in the memory of many of the participants—though apparently not remembered by Kerry himself.

Kerry had been introduced to the vvaW in 1969 by his sister Peggy, but his attention was focused on running for Congress in Massachusetts at that point. After deciding not to run in 1970, he and his new wife, Julia Thorne, traveled to France in May to meet Madame Nguyen Thi Binh and other Viet Cong and Communist Vietnamese representatives to the Paris peace talks, a trip he now calls a "fact-finding mission." Shortly after his return, Kerry agreed to take part in the VVAW's first major national action—Operation RAW (for Rapid American Withdrawal).

Operation RAW involved a march over Labor Day weekend by 300 vets along the 86 miles of George Washington's route from Morristown, N.J., to Valley Forge, Pa. Vets would carry toy M-16 rifles and perform "search-and-destroy skits," so-called "guerrilla theatre," in little towns along the way to demonstrate the brutal things they had actually done in Vietnam. As the event approached, the FBI enlisted the help of police departments and federal intelligence agencies, including, the files show, the Naval Investigative Services Office, the Office of Special Investigations of the Air Force and the Army's 108th Military Intelligence Group.

In the hundreds of documents the FBI amassed before Operation RAW, Kerry's name was mentioned just once, in a two-page document listing speakers to appear in Valley Forge at the end of the march. "John Kerry" appears as a warmup speaker before, among others, actors Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda.

The march came close to violence many times. But Kerry had hedged his bet. He didn't march. Instead, he arrived at Valley Forge to speak, then left. He made a powerful impression nonetheless. In the files, an FBI agent refers to "one John Kerry" and includes words from Kerry's speech. Their eloquence jumps from the page:

"We are here because we, above all others, have earned the right to criticize the war in Southeast Asia. We are here to say that it is not patriotism to ask Americans to die for a mistake and that it is not patriotic to allow a President to talk about not being the first President to lose a war and using us as pawns in that game."

It turns out the agent had not noticed the words when spoken, but had been struck by them when reading about Operation RAW in the Sept. 8 Philadelphia Inquirer.

The next big event by the VVAW began in late January 1971, at a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge in Detroit. Kerry attended the Winter Soldier Investigation, reluctantly. Despite claims by recent Kerry-bashers, including Vietnam veteran Stephen Sherman in the Wall Street Journal (Jan. 26, 2004), that Kerry was the "emcee" of Winter Soldier, not a single FBI document concerning that event bears his name.

Winter Soldier "shattered" Kerry, he said to me in a 1988 interview. More than 100 veterans spoke. Kerry saw their discharge forms and talked with the vets enough, he said, to become satisfied that most were telling authentic stories—of torturing and murdering Viet Cong prisoners, raping village women, shooting villagers for target practice, cutting off ears and other body parts. These accounts were news to him and educated him, he said then. "It was a very, very heavy, difficult kind of thing to listen to, and it was painful."

Others wondered at the time if Kerry had made peace with his memories. Jack Smith, a veteran from Connecticut, says in a recent interview that he could see from Kerry's eyes that he was struggling as he listened to veterans telling painful war stories. Peggy Kerry says that her brother "had the anguish" shared by so many other vets just back from Vietnam; she says he suffered "indescribable pain" about the people who'd died in the war, and that he would sometimes wake up screaming from nightmares that continued even into his present marriage with Teresa Heinz Kerry. At a rally on Wall Street in April 1971, the files show, Kerry spoke of being "guilty" like everyone else in the country "for having allowed the war to go on"—a burden that, he said to me in a second interview, in 1989, could have "croaked" him if he had not been personally strong enough to deal with it.

Winter Soldier was held in Detroit because its sponsor, Jane Fonda, wanted to reach the "working class." By then, Kerry's public speaking had impressed two VVAW founders, Jan Barry and Sheldon Ramsdell. After Kerry's speech at Valley Forge, Ramsdell had told Peggy Kerry: "Whoa! He looks like Lincoln, and he sounds like a Kennedy. Get him on the road!" Kerry quickly became what the FBI calls several times "National Spokesman for VVAW."

But the Winter Soldier meeting received virtually no publicity, which bothered Kerry, and gave him an opening. He called upon VVAW leaders to demonstrate in Washington, a proposal that brought Kerry his first taste of the opposition that would drive him from the organization later in 1971. Many veterans, especially the grunts, were tired of being led by officers. Mike McCusker, a former Marine sergeant who was then VVAW Oregon coordinator, says the dispute was between the "top-downers versus the bottom-uppers." McCusker says he and the other bottom-uppers won—for the moment—but only by agreeing to go along with the demonstration in Washington, known as Operation Dewey Canyon III.

The next month, in February, McCusker recalls walking into VVAW's national office in New York and discovering to his dismay that Kerry was in charge of the meeting. Organization leaders were gathering for their first national steering committee meeting. Kerry looked "stiff and starchy," a "top-downer" if McCusker had ever seen one. But, he says, Kerry won him over in two ways. First, he saw that as the room filled with vets, Kerry loosened up, as if these truly were his brothers, people with whom he felt safe and comfortable. Second, Kerry began sounding unlike an officer, talking about his Paris trip to meet the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong delegates and about his great respect for the Vietnamese. Kerry and McCusker developed an immediate rapport.

After the New York meeting, Kerry began stumping the country to raise funds for the demonstration in Washington. FBI files show that the agency was unsure what to make of him, for despite his tailored suits, Gucci loafers and "JFK" monogrammed sweaters that other vets kidded him about, and despite the patrician manners and stock patriotic phrases, Kerry seemed to harbor, and at times openly express, some fairly radical beliefs. The files contain an array of his edgy political positions, including his statement in Philadelphia that "Ho Chi Minh is the George Washington of Vietnam." Southeastern VVAW coordinator Scott Camil says that he heard Kerry make the comment several times. Also in Philadelphia, according to the files, Kerry noted Ho Chi Minh's understanding of the United States Constitution and his

efforts "to install the same provisions into the government of Vietnam."

Kerry also attacked President Richard Nixon as relentlessly as he praised Ho Chi Minh, but his criteria for both, Camil says, was honesty and sincerity. What Kerry held most against Nixon was that he had been elected in 1968 on a promise to end the war, yet by mid 1971, Nixon had extended the ground war into Laos and Cambodia and had begun plans to massively escalate the air war against North Vietnam. "Nixon ran 3 1/2 years ago saying, 'I have the secret plan for peace,' " the files say Kerry told one audience, "and now, the only promise he has kept is that the plan is still a secret."

Though Kerry at times lectured VVAW to stick to the single issue of ending the war, and to eschew attacks on racism, poverty and other broader issues, Kerry himself often condemned social injustices. He told an audience in Reno that, "The United States has become a society based on whose ox is being gored," and in Oklahoma City, he warned, according to a newspaper account, that the country must change its political power structure to avoid violent efforts to seize power.

Anyone who thinks, as some veterans do, that the young Kerry calculated his remarks with an eye toward running for president some day will have to deal with the many unequivocal charges he made against his own government and society as recorded in the FBI documents. At times, Kerry sounded more like Eugene Debs than today's typical Republican. One newspaper reported: "Kerry said it is wrong for some persons to make millions of dollars and pay no taxes while others barely making a living have to pay them," and that "of 234 congressmen's sons eligible for service in Vietnam, only 24 went there and only one of them was wounded."

Indeed, the files show that Kerry was far from politically correct even within his own organization. He joined in the dedication of Victor Westphall's Vietnam War memorial, an activity hardly prescribed for VVAW leaders, in Angel Fire, N.M., on May 18, 1971. Nixon sent a supportive letter about the memorial to Westphall that month. An FBI agent, apparently spotting the potential for embarrassing Kerry by putting him on the same side of an issue with Nixon, forwarded both texts to the bureau's Washington office.

The Kansas state coordinator for VVAW, John Musgrave, who spoke beside Kerry at a couple of colleges, says that Kerry impressed him by "always speaking directly from the pain and misery of a combat veteran. He adds, "I believed every word he said in those days." Musgrave, a Marine veteran who almost lost his life to three AK-47 rounds, recalls that Kerry touched hearts with his honesty and deep feeling—as though he were speaking for America's conscience. He believes that Kerry played a major role because "the nation needs to hear what combat vets have to say, and Kerry was able to tell them." Musgrave is angry at Kerry today mainly because he believes that Kerry "has stopped speaking that way, and he owes it to the American people to speak like that again—like a human being, not a politician."

The five-day Dewey Canyon demonstration was to begin April 19, 1971. Kerry's speaking fees had raised nearly \$100,000, but the files show that he was outraged to learn that \$94,000 had been spent for an advertisement in the April 11 issue of the New York Times. He told VVAW leaders that "further funds should be spent providing transportation rather than advertisement." He was fiercely upset to learn that 5,000 veterans around the country couldn't afford bus fare to attend the march.

Kerry then called his friend Adam Walinsky, who had ties to the Democratic Party, and Walinsky led Kerry to the Seagram Building in New York for a meeting with Seagram CEO Edgar Bronfman, Rabbi Abe Feinberg, former Undersecretary of Commerce Howard Samuels, and other big Democratic Party fund-raisers. Kerry walked away with \$50,000, which was forwarded to vets through the offices of Democratic Sens. George McGovern of South Dakota and Mark Hatfield of Oregon. In one of the funnier sections of the files, FBI agents who got wind of the \$50,000 scrambled to figure out how the money suddenly appeared in VVAW's hands, apparently in search of the "subversive influences" they were always looking for in the organization.

Another project Kerry supported, outside of the political limelight, was the Vietnam Casualty Farm operated by VVAW in Chesapeake, Va. There, vets who were unemployed, homeless, or otherwise at loose ends could live, do farm work, take workshops, get job training, receive medical treatment for drug abuse and various health problems, and obtain support to help them adjust after the war. The Casualty Farm was one of the many projects developed by VVAW to aid veterans after the war, including "rap" sessions for post-traumatic stress disorder, an Agent Orange study group, a literary publishing wing for veterans, a task force to rewrite Veterans Affairs legislation and reform the VA health-care system, and a Capitol Hill office to lobby for better GI benefits, veteran employment programs, plus a drug amnesty program to include special VA hospital "drug wards" for addicted veterans. These were VVAW good deeds that founder Jan Barry recalls wishing the FBI would pay attention to, rather than just focusing on antiwar activities.

For lack of money, many veterans never made it to Washington for Dewey Canyon. But thanks to Kerry's last-minute fund-raising, more than 1,000 streamed into the capital on Sunday, April 18, the eve of the demonstration. What seemed to worry the FBI most was Kerry's presence. The files show a warning passed directly to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that "Congress may be influenced" by Kerry's proposals. The FBI knew that the vets planned to "conduct intensive lobbying activities in Congress to legislate the immediate end of the United States participation in the Indochina War," which included passage of the McGovern-Hatfield bill to cut off funding for the war by the end of the year.

It is interesting, and perhaps revealing, that with all the FBI monitoring of Kerry's public speaking, the one speech it failed to record, or even to comment on, was the most famous one of his life: his address to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22, 1971, the day before the Washington march ended and the veterans threw back their medals. That was the speech that later got him in trouble with conservative veterans' groups for implications that most Vietnam veterans had committed atrocities—although, as Barry has pointed out, Kerry was just repeating the disturbing assertions he had heard months earlier at Winter Soldier.

The FBI seemed uncharacteristically cowed by the historical dimensions of Kerry's televised appearance before the Senate committee. According to documents in the files, the agency temporarily scaled back its surveillance of VVAW in part because of what the FBI termed "the degree of favorable publicity received." As one agent wrote: "Considering sympathy for VVAW as result of their peaceful demonstration in WDC [Washington, D.C.], 4/71, and claims of ill treatment at hands of Justice Department which evicted them from the Mall, it is probable that considerable publicity would work in their favor and definitely against FBI." To get an idea of how far the vets had come out from under the shadow of FBI surveillance and into the public consciousness, one need only read the quip of a veteran at the march, also preserved in the FBI files: "Tourists were snapping pictures of us faster than the FBI."

The files also suggest that at least some agents were being won over by Kerry. In a rare exception to the habitually dull FBI language, one agent seemed to praise Kerry by contrasting him with Al Hubbard, a militant Air Force vet who claimed to have flown on secret U.S. support missions to the French in their war against the Vietminh in the early '50s. Hubbard had close ties to the Black Panthers, a black extremist group in the '60s that espoused armed overthrow of the U.S. government. Hubbard had been a force in turning the VVAW into a confrontational, in-the-streets, hard-core activist group.

Most VVAW leaders were being "overshadowed by a more popular and eloquent figure, John Kerry," the agent wrote. "Kerry was featured on the television show 'Meet the Press' and he also appeared in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee room. Kerry was glib, cool, and displayed just what the moderate elements wanted to reflect. It appears that Al Hubbard revealed his own ambitions of becoming the VVAW National leader by lying about his former military rank. He claimed to be a captain, but in reality he was a sergeant."

Another memo recounts an episode from the day after Dewey Canyon, when hundreds of thousands of demonstrators mobbed Washington for the mass antiwar demonstration sponsored by the Communist Party-affiliated People's Coalition for Peace and Justice. As various Communist and Socialist groups began arguing on the podium, "some individuals claiming to be veterans tried to tear down one of the gates surrounding the podium," states the FBI report. They were "held off," the agent recounts in a tone of wonder, "with the promise that John Kerry would speak for the veterans." It is safe to say that no other Vietnam veteran in those 20,000 pages receives such adulatory treatment.

Kerry's public image was perhaps tarnished most in 1971 by his attempts to hasten the return of American POWs. The files record that Kerry made a second trip to Paris that summer to learn how the North Vietnamese might release prisoners. The files also record that he held a press conference with relatives of POWs to accuse Nixon of "using the prisoners of war for political purposes." Other kin of POWs, backed by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, showed up at the conference to denounce Kerry for using the prisoners for his own political purposes. "What are you running for now, Mr. Kerry?" one of them demanded. A newspaper account reported that the VFW regarded Kerry as "public enemy No. 1." In an interview, former Green Beret Capt. Rusty Lindley, VVAW's legislative director at the time, says Nixon's hatchet man Charles Colson had more than a little to do with the staged arrival of those anti-Kerry families.

In any case, those denunciations were merely icing on the cake, as Kerry had already been castigated by none other than the national commander of the American Legion, Alfred Chamie—also duly recorded in the FBI files. Chamie deplored the possibility that the Washington demonstration might cause the loss of "the vast treasure in lives and material already expended" on the war.

As 1971 wore on, something called "the sergeants rebellion" began to grow in VVAW. Based largely in the southern

chapters, it comprised mostly enlisted men, many of them Marines who had seen the heaviest combat in Vietnam. Partly it arose out of frustration over the continuing war, and partly it came from that "bottom-up" impulse that had arisen at Winter Soldier. The rebellion came from grass-roots organizers in Florida, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Oregon and other places far from New York. These regional, state and city coordinators did not want to be constrained by the national officers, most of whom had also been military officers. The rebels felt that the national officers failed to understand the politics in America's conservative rural byways and focused their activities too much inside the Beltway.

Instead, the rebels wanted to infiltrate and leaflet military bases and take other confrontational steps deemed too radical by the national office. At the same time, a slew of true leftist organizations, including the Socialist Workers Party, the Maoists of the Progressive Labor Party and Maoists of the Revolutionary Union, were quietly infiltrating the VVAW—often pushing the group toward law breaking and violence. Through the later months of 1971, the FBI documents record John Kerry struggling to contain these various impulses, and to insist on legal, nonviolent protest—or, as he emphasizes at George Washington University in September, "to utilize the political process to bring an end to the war in Vietnam." He was so effective that many rebels concluded they could never move the organization in their direction until Kerry was replaced.

Some rebels confronted Kerry at the second national steering-committee meeting of VVAW in St. Louis in June, a meeting heavily bugged by the FBI. They condemned him for his "class background" and "public behavior" and accused him of having "a stake in the profit-motivated system now in existence." Despite their opposition, Kerry won reelection to the executive committee. The FBI files include an astonishing internal memo from the militant Ft. Hood-Killeen chapter of VVAW. It articulates both contempt for Kerry as a would-be national leader and respect for his prowess at organizing and controlling those who disagree with him. The writer alerts fellow members to watch for tricks by which Kerry has "manipulated the veterans movement from becoming a real working militant organization." If there is a theme to the Kerry references throughout the FBI pages, it is the respect he is paid even by his enemies.

The climactic moment in Kerry's relationship with the VVAW occurred at the organization's third national steering committee meeting in Kansas City, Nov. 12 through 15, 1971. It is that meeting that presents the most questions for Kerry today.

Until two months ago, Kerry insisted that he had never attended any of the sessions in Kansas City, saying that he had resigned from the VVAW in June at the St. Louis meeting. After a Los Angeles Times review of a portion of the FBI files found that Kerry had been at Kansas City, the candidate said his memory must have been faulty. A full review of the FBI files shows that Kerry not only was in Kansas City, but he also attended the most controversial and explosive session the group ever held.

As the meeting approached in 1971, the FBI clearly knew big changes were coming. The agency not only bugged the meeting halls but arranged for numerous agents and undercover "sources" to be on hand, including one paid informer from Arkansas, a crazy, violence-prone, washed-out Green Beret vet named Bill Lemmer.

By then, Kerry was well aware of opposition to him within the VVAW. Just the week before, he had faced an incipient coup in Norman, Okla. Lemmer had gone there to hear Kerry speak, and to speak at a Winter Soldier hearing. Lemmer was among a group of veterans who, according to the files, harassed Kerry. Although Kerry's audience was "quite large," a "source" whose name is blacked out (but whose aggressive language was typical of Lemmer) reported to the FBI that "many persons were upset because of the attitude of John Kerry and it appeared Kerry was the only reason for the convention." Another blacked-out source (possibly the same one) reported that "the entire conference lacked coordination and appeared to be a platform for John Kerry, National Leader of VVAW, rather than for VVAW and Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI)."

Curiously, those two undercover reports don't jibe with several other "source" reports, or with newspaper accounts also saved by the FBI. They indicate the conference was well organized, and that Kerry was well-received. Lemmer, who was exposed two years later as the principal agent provocateur at the trial of the Gainesville Eight (eight VVAW members indicted for conspiracy), was often known to invent reports of VVAW's violent intentions, and his reports were later found quite unreliable.

The files about the Oklahoma meeting are murky, partly because the FBI redacted large sections with black marker before they were released. But two facts stand out. Kerry cut short his attendance, perhaps in the face of hostility. Also, the FBI suddenly focused on Kerry again, with a teletype sent to the Washington bureau: "Furnish characterization of John Kerry."

The Kansas City gathering opened dramatically with a meeting at 4:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 12 in a conference room on the local campus of the University of Missouri. It was closed, with only national leaders and regional and state coordinators allowed in—about 50 vets. All national officers were present, except for Hubbard. Acting as chairman of the meeting, national officer Mike Oliver began by reading a telegram that Missouri-Kansas regional coordinator Johnny Upton had just received from Hubbard in Paris. According to the FBI documents, "The telegram stated that Hubbard was in contact with the North Vietnamese peace delegation, and that Hubbard was confidentially told that the next prisoner of war (POW) release would be made to VVAW." Oliver told the group that a VVAW delegation of five people was going to Hanoi in December, just before Christmas, and hoped to bring home several POWs. The purpose, Oliver explained, as stated in the FBI file, "would be to demonstrate to the persons participating in the national actions that VVAW had real power and had effected the release of the POWs."

Then Oliver dropped a bombshell. Hubbard, he said, had concluded his negotiations with the North Vietnamese that morning and was currently on a plane en route to Kansas City—expected to arrive in an hour or so.

Kerry evidently kept his cool, as there is no record in the file of anyone objecting at this point. He and Hubbard had had a brief falling out after Hubbard lied about his rank on "Meet the Press," but they had patched it up for the sake of the organization. The FBI files even record them having a chicken dinner together at the St. Louis meeting. But Kerry had tried to distinguish between his own trips to meet with the Vietnamese in Paris, which he considered necessary to fight through the lies of his own government, and actual negotiations with the enemy, which Kerry knew were illegal. There was no question now that Hubbard, as one of the other vets at the meeting puts it, "had gone over to the enemy side."

Kerry, the FBI files tell us, "announced to those present he was resigning from the executive committee for personal reasons; however, he would be available to speak for VVAW." The report of a separate undercover FBI source adds, "John Kerry mentioned on Friday that he was going to resign his position on the national executive committee because of politics," presumably referring to Kerry's possible run for Congress the following year.

Two hours into the meeting, Hubbard arrived by taxi, and the fireworks began. Kerry, the files show, "attempted to get Al Hubbard voted out of the executive meeting." Hubbard, as one of the original organizers of VVAW, still had a strong following and beat back the attack. Then Skip Roberts, another national officer aligned with Kerry, declared that all six national officers should resign to allow for a fresh start. The motion lost by two votes.

By Saturday morning, trouble was brewing and everyone knew it. Members of the "sergeants rebellion" were agitating for the national officers to step down and make way for more confrontational-minded local leaders to stage attention-getting (and maybe illegal) actions. There was talk by the Philadelphia chapter of a takeover of the Statue of Liberty. The group met in an open meeting, run by Oliver, at a church called the Institute for Human Studies at 2 W. 40th St. The files show that tempers flared over the issue of the national office refusing to share authority with local chapters. An attempt was made to divide responsibilities between state and regional coordinators, but Oliver consistently called only on the regional coordinators, and many of the delegates began to feel they were being scammed. Especially outraged were delegates from Detroit, who demanded the same voting power as the Michigan regional coordinator. Oliver consistently avoided dealing with them.

The vets discussed national antiwar actions that VVAW would stage over Christmas in five parts of the country. Many coordinators pushed for civil disobedience. Scott Camil recalls becoming incensed by "really stupid ideas," such as burning Christmas trees in front of public buildings—an action that was approved after the rejection of Hubbard's suggestion that VVAW napalm the national Christmas tree just after Nixon lighted it. Camil "was thinking like a Marine," he says, explaining that Marines were taught to "attack the head of the snake, not the tail." At the time of the Washington march, Camil proposed "taking out" the prominent senators and congressmen who consistently voted in favor of the war. His assassination plan had little support, and he had put it aside as impractical. But now in Kansas City, in an effort to "push people's buttons" and "get them to forget about the crap" of burning Christmas trees, Camil says he again brought up his assassination plan, dubbed a "domestic Phoenix program," a name derived from an actual assassination program sponsored by the U.S. government, which chiefly targeted Communist civil leaders in South Vietnam.

The meeting descended into chaos, according to several people who were there. VVAW's Kansas City coordinator Randy Barnes describes "people standing up on the tables yelling and screaming at each other." Someone found bugs planted by the FBI. The group decided to move to a more secure location, but before the meeting reconvened, Camil met with supporters, including many members of the "sergeants rebellion," at a small house. Most were Southerners, ex-Marines and enlisted men (Camil himself had been a Marine sergeant). Also part of this "rump group" were Lemmer and

another undercover FBI informant, Karl Becker, who would also play an important role in the government's indictment of Camil and seven other VVAW members the following year, for supposedly planning a violent assault on the Republican National Convention in Miami—indictments that led to the notorious Gainesville conspiracy trial in the summer of 1973.

No one in VVAW knew yet that Lemmer and Becker were working for the FBI, but Camil recalls that their encouragement of his Phoenix proposal helped push him from using it for shock value to believing it could be achieved. Lemmer, who represented himself to Camil as having been a "CIA assassin type" in the military, was especially effective in rousing Camil's excitement about the plan. Camil went to the second session prepared to demand a vote on it.

The meeting reconvened at St. Augustine's Catholic Church, 7801 Paseo Blvd., in Kansas City, and it was again closed—meaning only national officers and regional and state coordinators. Several things about it are still unclear, especially the chronology, but there is no doubt that it was the most intensely angry leadership meeting that had yet taken place. And there is also no doubt, if the files and witnesses are to be believed, that Kerry was present for all of it.

Because wives and girlfriends, like ordinary delegates, were locked out, Julia Thorne Kerry, John's wife, sat outside on the grass—it was a warm, sunny November day—with a bunch of other women that included filmmaker Nancy Miller Saunders, the girlfriend of Arkansas-Louisiana coordinator Don Donner. Saunders says she remembers a lengthy conversation with Julia Thorne Kerry there, as do two other people interviewed: Rusty Lindley and Wayne Beverly, one of the Texas Marines sympathetic to Camil, who was barred from the meeting because he was not a coordinator.

Multiple FBI reports—most of them partly blacked out—show that the session began with Hubbard describing his negotiations in Paris. He said that North Vietnamese negotiator Xuan Tui had advised him that if a VVAW delegation came to Hanoi just before Christmas, the Vietnamese might allow them to take home several POWs. Then another vet named Joe Urgo joined forces with Hubbard. Urgo had been to Hanoi the previous August and claimed to have met with many officials, including leaders of the North Vietnamese Army, with whom he spoke of making tapes for broadcast over Radio Hanoi to get American troops to stop fighting. He also claimed to have made progress in arranging for a VVAW delegation to negotiate the release of several American prisoners. Hubbard and Urgo talked of working together on the latter project and began signing up vets to go to Hanoi. Somewhere during the discussion, Hubbard mentioned that his trip had been paid for by the Communist Party U.S.A.

The FBI files say that during the meeting, Kerry "again tried to have Al Hubbard voted off the executive committee," and failed. Also at some point, the files show, Kerry exploded in a tirade against Hubbard, claiming he had failed to find any military records to confirm Hubbard's service in either the Air Force or Vietnam.

As the meeting continued, topics became graver. There was discussion of another VVAW caravan to bring food and medicine to the beleaguered black community in Cairo, Ill., which was under violent attack from several white supremacist groups. Earlier VVAW convoys there had been closely monitored by the FBI, especially since VVAW members often brought their own guns along for defense. There was also discussion of a proposal to encourage active-duty troops in Vietnam to extend the normal Christmas holiday truce by refusing to take up arms after the truce ended. Several vets objected to that as putting GIs at risk of being court-martialed.

Seeing an opening, Camil put his Phoenix plan on the table. Although a lot of the discussion is blacked out, there is reference in the documents to Hubbard and Camil being "closely aligned." There is also a passage suggesting that Hubbard proposed a variant of Camil's Phoenix program, which substituted kidnapping for killing:

"A second proposal, 'Phoenix Operation,' . . . was proposed by a national leader, possibly Hubbard. This proposal would have called for a well-trained VVAW group in Washington, D.C., to kidnap a United States senator, representative, or Government official to hold for ransom to pressure for ending of the war."

The documents don't say whether Kerry's diatribe against Hubbard began at this point. One document states: "John Kerry . . . reportedly in disagreement with Hubbard over VVAW participating in militant actions; Kerry wants VVAW to stay strictly nonviolent."

Several VVAW members have recounted details of this floor fight in interviews. Musgrave recalls how Hubbard clammed up and let Oliver speak in his defense. Others describe Hubbard cringing and looking close to tears as Kerry relentlessly battered him. Finally, as California-Nevada coordinator Lee Lubinsky recalls, Hubbard pulled down his pants to show a large scar on his back and thigh, offering it as proof that he had been in a plane crash in Vietnam.

Soon afterward, witnesses say, Hubbard fell against a table and dropped to the floor, making a crash so loud it was

heard outside the church. Vets helped him to his feet, and he asked to be driven to the airport, saying his stomach ulcers were bleeding and he needed to rush to his doctor in New York. The FBI files say: "Hubbard remained at Kansas City until Saturday afternoon, at which time he claimed illness and said he was returning to New York to enter an unnamed hospital."

After Hubbard left, Camil's Phoenix proposal was voted on, and turned down—although, according to Camil, many members from Camil's southern following voted yes. The vote does not show up in the files but could be in a section the FBI blacked out. Then other proposals came up—many of which are listed in the FBI files, including the projected takeover of the Statue of Liberty, which the group approved.

Toward the end of the meeting, the rebellious Detroit delegates outside forced their way in. They accused Oliver of arranging secret hand signals with the Michigan regional coordinator to keep certain issues from being raised. Oliver confessed and offered to resign. The FBI files indicate that Kerry was still in the church at this point because he too was accused of "misconduct," apparently because of his close association with Oliver.

A file document states: "He [Kerry] inferred that he had been accused wrongly of misconduct in office, and therefore, he did not want to have anything more to do with [sic] any official capacity with the VVAW . . . it appeared that he was alienated by the incident involving the Detroit delegation."

After the two resignations, the meeting could not be brought back to order, and so it was adjourned for the night. The so-called Phoenix proposal was never officially raised again.

The files record that on Sunday, Nov. 14, with Oliver out, Camil chaired the morning meeting. According to a file document, Kerry "announced that he had resigned his post, but would continue to work with VVAW on his own terms." One of the regional coordinators, John Lindquist from Milwaukee, says that he heard Kerry read his letter of resignation.

Whether Kerry should have reported the "assassination plot" to authorities is a question some critics have raised. The FBI documents say the proposal "seemed to be only an idea for discussion" rather than an actual conspiracy to kidnap or murder. Another possible explanation comes from Rusty Lindley. "The organization was breaking down so badly at that point that we couldn't tell if violent ideas were being introduced by infiltrators or genuine vets," he says. Considering that two FBI paid informants, Lemmer and Becker, were involved in the plot, it would seem the FBI has some questions to answer, too.

Jan Barry says that he has some specific questions he'd like put to the FBI—such as why, since the FBI knew about the "assassination plot," it never brought charges against anyone, or why the agency didn't add it to the indictment the government brought against Camil the following July.

Barry wonders whether the Phoenix proposal may have been an early attempt by the federal government to bring down VVAW, just as it sought to destroy the organization the following year with the Gainesville conspiracy indictments. Defending against those charges nearly bankrupted VVAW, even though all eight defendants were acquitted.

Certainly none of the vets I have spoken to who were with Kerry in Kansas City feel he did anything to be ashamed of, and none harbors resentment against Kerry, not even Hubbard, whose role in the organization was permanently diminished after Kerry literally brought him to his knees.

"John Kerry had his own agenda, and I respect it," Hubbard told me in an interview in 1992, "and I rather appreciate today how he went about that agenda. And there were times when he and I disagreed on things, but overall I have a great deal of respect and admiration for John, and I particularly have a great deal of respect for what he's doing these days [in the Senate]. I think he's a guy of integrity."

Kerry still claims that "he has no personal recollection" of the tumultuous Kansas City meeting, though he qualified this with a statement from his spokesman David Wade on March 18 that "if there are valid FBI surveillance reports from credible sources that place some of those disagreements [with Al Hubbard and other VVAW leaders] in Kansas City, we accept that historical footnote in the account of his work to end the difficult and divisive war."

Several people at the Kansas City meeting recently said to me or to mutual friends that they had been told by the Kerry campaign not to speak about those events without permission. Others close to Kerry deny that they were in Kansas City, though the FBI files irrefutably place them there. John Musgrave says he was asked by Kerry's veterans coordinator to "refresh his memory" after he told the press Kerry was in Kansas City. Not only is Musgrave outraged that "they were trying to make me look like a liar," but he also says "there's no way Kerry could have forgotten that meeting—there was

too much going on."

I recently saw an e-mail exchange between Winterfilm director Bob Fiore and members of his film collective stating that the Kerry campaign wants to keep the Winter Soldier film—which records veterans' atrocities testimony in Detroit—from being distributed again until after the election. Camil and others I interviewed have said that the Kerry campaign told Camil he could not work as a Kerry organizer in Florida. Despite numerous requests made to Kerry's campaign staff and his family for a month, he said he was too busy to grant an interview for this story.

Many vets I spoke to are angry or disappointed about what they see as Kerry's retreat from VVAW—not least of all Joe Urgo, who remembers being in that Saturday afternoon meeting with Kerry when he confronted Hubbard. "It was extremely important that people like Kerry—especially officers—spoke out against the war," Urgo says. "He came and shone and added something to all our efforts. I'm saddened that he hasn't kept to it. It was a tremendous thing for someone like him—with Yale and all that rich background—to step over the line and join working-class guys like me. But then he saw this thing getting out of control, and it was too much for him to handle. He saw it as a liability to his political career, back then, 33 years ago, and I'm afraid he sees it as a liability for him again now.

"But the Republicans are going to keep using his membership in VVAW against him, until he makes a clear statement. He has to clarify everything, not only what happened in Kansas City, but also why his politics changed—why he's moved more to the middle of the road. That's what's being hidden here."

Annie Bailey, wife of VVAW regional coordinator John Lindquist, on the other hand, is bitter about efforts to revisit those frantic, angry days before the war ended. "When Kerry resigned," Bailey recalls, "we always knew that someday he'd come round again and be our ally on veterans' issues, that he'd help us get PTSD and Agent Orange recognized, and help us with the battle we're still fighting to keep the VA hospitals adequately funded." It angers her, she says, "that we might lose him now just because of all that crap that Scott Camil was talking a long time ago."

McCusker has his own thoughts about the Kansas City meeting. "We'd just gotten back from the killing fields of Vietnam," he says. "What the hell did they expect us to be talking about? . . . It would have been unnatural if someone didn't come up with the idea of hitting someone

"The hell with this crap! John doesn't need to respond to it. I sensed the strength in him when he was standing up to Hubbard. He had the strength to stand up to somebody who wasn't doing a good job, and he can do it again . . . He just needs to come out and say, 'This is what I stand for,' like he used to."

Asked if he was optimistic about that happening, McCusker replied, "I'm just hoping it does."

CORRECTION-DATE: May 23, 2004

CORRECTION:

Photo caption — A photo caption with an article about Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kerry in today's Los Angeles Times Magazine says Sen. Ted Kennedy and Kerry are shown in New York in a 1971 photograph. The photo was taken in Washington, D.C.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: (no caption) PHOTOGRAPHER: Copyright Fred W. McDarrah PHOTO: (no caption) PHOTOGRAPHER: Copyright Fred W. McDarrah PHOTO: FBI paid informant Bill Lemmer, left, and VVAW member Michael Damron at University of Arkansas in 1971. PHOTOGRAPHER: Nancy Miller Saunders PHOTO: Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy and John Kerry in New York on April 21, 1971 PHOTOGRAPHER: Sheldon Ramsdell PHOTO: VVAW members, from left, Scott Camil, Bill Unger and John Musgrave in Florida, 1975. PHOTOGRAPHER: Courtesy Scott Camil PHOTO: Al Hubbard at the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit, 1971. PHOTOGRAPHER: VVAW archive

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