

All Enemies, Foreign and Domestic: The Road From Vietnam to the Capitol Steps

By George Black

WATCHING THE MOB SURGE TOWARD THE STEPS of the Capitol on January 6, it was hard not to wonder whether the United States was any longer a nation or had degenerated into what a Turkish diplomat, speaking about the Middle East, once famously described as a warring collection of “tribes with flags.” The crowd seethed with flags and banners: Stars and Stripes as big as panel trucks, some with the superimposed head of Donald Trump; the battle flag of the Confederacy; the yellow Gadsden flag, with its coiled rattlesnake and its “Don’t Tread on Me,” first raised in 1775 by the Continental Marines and then appropriated by the Tea Party and the Republican base.

But there were other flags, too: the red and yellow stripes of the former South Vietnam; Trump as Rambo with his rocket-propelled grenade launcher. And then, in one of the few moments of relative decorum, the mob paused to pose for selfies in front of the somber black flag that hangs in the Capitol Rotunda, honoring the nation’s prisoners of war and missing in action left behind in Southeast Asia.

Echoes of the war in Vietnam were everywhere that day. But why? What did that say about the conspiracy theories that animated the rage of Trump’s most passionate followers? It

in the weeks and months leading up to the Capitol insurrection.

Any talk of conspiracy theories these days tends to conjure the lurid delusions of QAnon, of Satanic child sex traffickers huddled in the basement of a Washington pizza parlor. But a major-league conspiracy theory has to rest on a much more coherent intellectual framework, one that grows out of plausible if debatable complaints and critiques and then thrives and mutates in the fertile soil of unacknowledged grievances. Behind the tabloid headlines about Hillary’s emails or Hunter Biden’s laptop are the machinations of a malignant global elite, bent on the destruction of the United States and the creation of a New World Order. These ideas have their roots in the misdirected patriotism and deep veins of paranoia in American politics, in the anti-communism of the John Birch Society, the radio broadcasts of Father Charles

Coughlin, and the Cold War witch hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy. But they crystallized into a coherent worldview only with the trauma of Vietnam.

The United States had never before lost a foreign war, and it shredded the shared American story of virtue and might. Something so unprecedented demanded an explanation. Military commanders and their civilian allies insisted that the finest fighting machine



Riot at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Photo by Blink O’fanaye.

the world had ever seen had never lost a single encounter on the battlefield. So responsibility had to lie elsewhere, with “a feckless government and faithless citizenry,” in the words of the historian Michael J. Allen.

The grievances and conspiracy theories that took shape after the war in Vietnam had a lot in common with the Lost Cause mythology of the Confederacy, and even more with the *Dolchstoss*, the “stab in the back” theory that sought to explain Germany’s defeat in World War I and contributed mightily to the rise of the Nazis. The task the most extreme conservatives set themselves after Vietnam was to identify the enemies within and root them out by any means necessary. In this scenario, military veterans, with their patriotism, their discipline, their mastery of arms, and the backing of the Second Amendment,

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turns out that there is a clear throughline connecting the grievances of right-wing military officers in the wake of the defeat in Vietnam to the conspiracy theories that erupted into full view

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were uniquely placed to take up the challenge.

Every soldier had sworn an oath on enlistment: “to defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” The troops had fought the foreign enemy in the way they were trained to do; from now on, the key word was *domestic*.

If the conspiracy theory had a single point of origin, it was arguably a report by Morley Safer of CBS News in August 1965, showing Marines burning straw huts in the village of Cam Ne, near Danang. The practice was not new, but this was the first time Americans had seen it on TV. Incensed, Lyndon Johnson called the network president and accused CBS of having “shat on the American flag.”

As the war ground on, and public support waned, senior ranks of the military increasingly complained that the press was “not on the team.” There was a good deal of truth to this. By and large, reporters didn’t see being on the team as part of their job description, and they took to mocking the military’s daily briefings in Saigon as the “Five O’Clock Follies.”

It’s generally agreed that the turning point of the war was the 1968 Tet Offensive, which brought one shocking image after another into American living rooms: the Viet Cong breaching the walls of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon; the brutal street fighting in the historic city of Hue; Eddie Adams’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of Saigon Police Chief Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a prisoner in the head. Conservatives complained that all these images had been stripped of their essential context. The embassy attackers were not an elite commando unit but a ragtag group of amateurs. The real story of Hue was not the potency of the Viet Cong but the heroism of the Marines. And Gen. Loan’s prisoner had just murdered an entire family, including women and children.

But if the course of the war pivoted on one single thing, it was what came to be known as the Walter Cronkite moment. “What the hell is going on?” the CBS anchor asked when the Tet Offensive began. “I thought we were winning this war.” When Tet was over, he elaborated on his disillusionment in a one-hour TV special, which he later described as his “proudest moment.” It threw LBJ into a funk from which he never recovered. “If I’ve lost Cronkite,” he said, “I’ve lost Middle America.”

A good number of senior military officers saw a repeated pattern in this reporting, and it raised an

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ominous question. Was this a structural problem, reflecting the imperatives of the media, television’s demand for arresting images? Or was something more sinister afoot? Did reporters actually want America to lose the war, and were they deliberately steering public opinion in that direction? Was the real agenda of the media to propagate what today we would call Fake News?

Much though they distrusted the press, conservative officers placed equal blame for the disaster on the civilians in government. The most outspoken of them invariably came from the branches of service that saw themselves as the military elites: the Green Berets; the Airborne divisions; the Marines; the fighter and bomber pilots. They claimed a unique understanding of why the war had been lost,

based on their personal experiences up along the Demilitarized Zone, the mountainous border with Laos and Cambodia, and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Washington establishment had been cowed by

too many legalistic red lines: the neutrality of these neighboring countries; the bar on ground troops entering North Vietnam; and the ultimate taboo, the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

If these officers had a godfather, it was Maj. Gen. Jack Singlaub, who had commanded the secret war in Southeast Asia as head of the innocuously named Studies and Observation Group, an assembly of Green Berets, Marine recon units, Navy SEALs, South Vietnamese Special Forces, and tribal irregulars and mercenaries. Singlaub had a soldier’s contempt for Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his cohort of “clipboard professors” and “cost-effectiveness whiz-kids,” unable to tell the difference between a war game and a real war.

“It was very clear to me,” wrote Lt. Col. Oliver North, who had served as a Marine lieutenant on the edge of the DMZ and would later join forces with Singlaub to secretly fund the Nicaraguan Contras, “that the politicians in Washington had decided that we were going to fight a war but then chose not to win it. . . . [T]he political leaders of this country lost their will.”

Ironically, this disgust for political leaders had a lot in common with the critiques by liberal critics of the war. “The immense impact of Tet on the public consciousness and the attitude of Congress,” wrote Daniel Ellsberg, “can be understood only against the background of the intense public lying over the

preceding six months.” Writing in *The New Yorker*, Neil Sheehan, author of *A Bright and Shining Lie*, went further. After reading the Pentagon Papers, which Ellsberg had leaked to him, Sheehan concluded that there was “an inner government in the United States, a centralized state, far more powerful than anything else, for whom the enemy is not simply the Communists. Everything else—its own press, its own judiciary, its own Congress, foreign and friendly governments—all these are potentially antagonistic.”

Though Sheehan’s politics were diametrically opposed to his own, Maj. James “Bo” Gritz, a legendary Special Forces commander widely believed to have been the real-life model for Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo, seized on the journalist’s critique to validate his own conspiracy theories. As with the press, if Washington liberals had designed policies that led to America’s humiliation, was that by accident or design? Was the drive to create a New World Order in fact being directed by what we would now call the “deep state”?

The third pillar of this supposed conspiracy grew out of the cultural turmoil of the Sixties. In their various ways, the movements for racial equality, for women’s and LGBT and reproductive rights, were all seen as mortal threats to the American way of life. But the anti-war protesters were the most treasonous of all, burning their draft cards and hurling their medals on the steps of the Capitol. The most hated of all the anti-war vets was the former commander of a patrol boat in the Mekong Delta who testified before the Senate in the week of those protests in April 1971, denouncing American war crimes. His name was John Kerry. In later years, the most loathed of the draft dodgers was a young man who had taken refuge among the dreaming spires of Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, who would also rise high in the Democratic Party, all the way to the presidency. This was Bill Clinton.

After Vietnam, the conspiracy theorists believed, the anti-war movement had targeted America’s elite institutions. It populated the news media with Cronkite wannabes, set out to seize control of the educational system, and staffed up the junior levels of the Carter administration, rising steadily from there through the ranks of the Democratic Party. Its members would be the nation’s self-appointed “experts,” silencing conservative voices. A big problem in Vietnam, Singlaub wrote, had been “the overall public gullibility, tinged with apathy.” Now the enemy within aimed to take advantage of those vacant and vulnerable minds.

“I had a pretty good idea who the domestic enemies were,” said William Scott Magill, who served in the Marines from 1965 to 1971 and would later form an organization called Veterans in Defense of Liberty. “One of easiest ways to stay out of the war was to stay in school, and one of the easiest ways to stay in school was to get a degree in education. Many, many of them did, and they have now risen to the upper levels of the educational process, and they have been ideologically subverting generations of Americans. . . . That was a big step in the socialist-Communist takeover of America.”

The Politics of Grievance

Right-wing officers like Singlaub, North, and Gritz found a ready audience in the most disaffected of the ordinary grunts. Their resentments were not unjustified. They had returned home from Vietnam to none of the celebrations or ticker-tape parades that had greeted the veterans of earlier wars. No one knew how to deal with them, least of all their own families, wives, and girlfriends. When Jimmy Carter extended an amnesty to draft evaders in 1977, wrote Oliver North, “It was like a final drop of acid in the deep wounds of Vietnam veterans.” In the popular culture, they were largely reduced to stereotypes: the self-pitying, wheelchair-bound Luke in *Coming Home*; the emasculated, rage-filled Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*; the deranged Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*; or just the babbling homeless guy on the street corner.

Many of their grievances reflected legitimate anger at the indifference or active hostility of the federal government. Tens of thousands of veterans fought a lonely battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, many languishing in dismal Veterans Administration psych wards or driven to suicide. Despite Ronald Reagan’s

rhetoric about the war in Vietnam being “a noble cause,” his administration slashed the VA budget and suppressed or minimized findings that suggested an association between the high rates of cancer and other serious diseases among veterans and

their wartime exposure to the toxic defoliant Agent Orange.

The veterans’ movement splintered in many different directions, unable to agree on a common narrative of the war. Some gravitated to the mainstream service organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. The ex-Marine Bobby Muller, another veteran of battles along the DMZ, founded Vietnam Veterans of America. Veterans for Peace were more outspokenly liberal. But if any single issue transcended these differences, it was the fate of the men who had been left behind on the battlefield, missing in action or still held prisoner.

The vets rallied behind the emotional symbol of the POW/MIA flag, with its stark image of a soldier’s bowed head, framed by a strand of barbed wire and a watchtower. It was the POW/MIA issue, more than any other, that endured long after the war was over, forming a through line of resentment that can be traced all the way to the present. It bred accusations of betrayal by political elites, animated the smear campaigns that blighted one presidential election after another, and brought ideas that were incubated on the outermost fringes of the far right into what has become the mainstream of the Trump-era Republican Party.

Until the war in Vietnam, “prisoner of war” and “missing in action” were two distinct concepts. But in 1969, with public support for the war rapidly eroding, the Nixon administration conflated the two categories. Nixon’s public rationale was that America was obliged to go on fighting in order to bring home the

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what if

i

What does it mean to want
an age-old call
for change
not to change

and yet, also,
to feel bullied
by the call to change?

How is a call to change named shame,
named penance, named chastisement?

How does one say
what if
without reproach? The root

of chastise is to make pure.
The impossibility of that—is that
what repels and not
the call for change?

ii

There is resignation in my voice when I say I feel
myself slowing down, gauging like a machine
the levels of my response. I remain within
so sore I think there is no other way than release—

so I ask questions like I know how
in the loneliness of my questioning.
What's still is true; there isn't even a tremor
when one is this historied out.

I could build a container to carry this being,
a container to hold all, though we were never
about completeness; we were never to be whole.

I stand in your considered thoughts also broken,
also unknown, extending
one sentence—here, I am here.
As I've known you, as I'll never know you,

I am here. Whatever is
being expressed, what if,
I am here awaiting, waiting for you

in the what if, in the questions,
in the conditionals,
in the imperatives—what if.

iii

What if over tea, what if on our walks, what if
in the long yawn of the fog, what if in the long middle
of the wait, what if in the passage, in the what if
that carries us each day into seasons, what if
in the renewed resilience, what if in the endlessness,
what if in a lifetime of conversations, what if
in the clarity of consciousness, what if nothing changes?

iv

What if you are responsible to saving more than to changing?
What if you're the destruction coursing beneath
your language of savior? Is that, too, not fucked up?

You say, if other white people had not . . . or if it seemed like
not enough . . . I would have . . .

What if—the repetitive call of what if—is only considered repetitive
when what if leaves my lips, when what if is uttered
by the unheard, and what if

what if is the cement of insistence
when you insist what if
this is.

v

What is it we want to keep conscious, to stay known, even as we
say, each in our own way, I so love I know I shrink I'm asked
I'm also I react I smell I feel I think I've been told I remember I
see I didn't I thought I felt I failed I suspect I was doing I'm sure
I read I needed I wouldn't I was I should've I felt I could've I
never I'm sure I ask . . .

You say and I say but what is it we are telling, what is it
we are wanting to know about here?

vi

What if what I want from you is new, newly made
a new sentence in response to all my questions,

a swerve in our relation and the words that carry us,
the care that carries. I am here, without the shrug,
attempting to understand how what I want

and what I want from you run parallel—

justice and the openings for just us. ■

Claudia Rankine, "what if" from Just Us: An American Conversation.
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hundreds of men being held in North Vietnam. That November, he signed a bill declaring a National Day of Prayer for U.S. Prisoners of War in Vietnam, and to mark the occasion, a Texas billionaire named Ross Perot paid for full-page national newspaper ads showing two young children praying, “Bring our daddy home safe, sound, and soon.” Nixon’s true goal, Neil Sheehan argued, was “to buy time and divert attention from the fact that instead of ending the war he was trying to win it.”

By 1972, some four million Americans were wearing nickel-plated POW/MIA bracelets. By that time, Nixon had “Vietnamized” the war and was looking for the exit ramp. With this, the issue took on a very different coloration: no longer a pretext for prolonging the war, bringing the prisoners home was central to Nixon’s promise of “peace with honor,” airbrushing the imminent reality of defeat. The POW/MIA flag was born in January of that year, the brainchild of a group called the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

Families of the missing had begun to organize as early as 1966, at the initiative of the wife of James Stockdale, a Navy pilot who was being held in the notorious Hoa Lo prison, the Hanoi Hilton, his cell two doors away from that of his fellow pilot John McCain. From the outset, the politics of the POW/MIA families were a tangled web of race, class, and gender.

Sybil Stockdale was a highly educated woman with a master’s degree from Stanford. Those who coalesced around her, the wives, mothers, and sisters of lost airmen, embodied a feminine ideal, a telegenic vision of a wholesome, traditional, middle-class America under siege from the cultural upheavals of the Sixties. They lived in immaculate homes with manicured lawns on Navy, Air Force, and Marine bases, mostly in Southern California, the spiritual heartland of the John Birch Society and the right wing of the Republican Party. Stockdale herself, who was introduced to Nixon by Governor Ronald Reagan, was a fierce conservative. “We should land U.S. Marines on North Vietnam and claim it as U.S. territory,” she said. And the women were all white, like the airmen themselves, three-quarters of whom were from the officer class—a demographic quite different from the working-class kids fighting on the ground, of whom African-Americans and Latinos accounted for more than one in six of the dead.

Following the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, Operation Homecoming brought the release of 591 American prisoners. This time there was a ticker-tape parade, paid for by Ross Perot. But when the war ended two years later, about 2,500 men were still listed as missing. The great majority were airmen, and they included a few dozen “discrepancy cases,” mainly men who were reported to have survived their shootdown or capture. These cases left a loophole through which Henry Kissinger drove a train. With every missing man a potential live prisoner, the demand for a full accounting of their fate required Vietnam to prove a negative—and this was the main justification for a trade embargo that lasted until 1994. In effect, POW/MIA politics were, as Clausewitz might have said, war by other means.

A slew of POW rescue movies like *Rambo* also turned Gritz into something of a right-wing folk hero, and his political influence outlived the fiasco of his secret adventures.

Even as veterans rallied behind the POW/MIA flag, official policies on recovering the missing men opened new fissures among the families and their supporters. For the likes of Jack Singlaub and Bo Gritz, even Kissinger was already on the enemies list. Singlaub deplored his handling of the Paris Peace Accords, which he saw as a giveaway to North Vietnam. Gritz was more vehement, calling for Kissinger to be tried for treason, “as an accessory to the murder of our POWs who died in Cambodia and Laos after he turned his back on them for ‘economic and political considerations.’”

When the war ended, there was an overwhelming consensus in Washington that determining the fate of the missing was the most urgent priority. A House select committee charged with bringing “final resolution” to the question reported in 1976 that “no Americans are still being held as prisoners in Indochina.” Two years later, a presidential commission reached the same conclusion. But to the League of Families, this was not closure but a cover-up. Their message was amplified by a rising star in California Republican politics, Robert Dornan, who later became a

member of Congress for Orange County and was one of the first to grasp the importance of right-wing talk radio and TV, even before Reagan’s Federal Communications Commission abolished the Fairness Doctrine in 1986. Others, too,

latched on to the power of this new medium, such as Oliver North, the first person to guest-host Rush Limbaugh’s hit radio show, and Bo Gritz, who promoted the idea of an alternative media ecosystem to circumvent *The New York Times* and the TV networks and cut through the fog of official lies.

The League also enlisted the support of conservative celebrities like Charlton Heston, who declared that the POWs were “still there to this day, locked in bamboo cages, used as slaves, forced to drag plows in rice paddies.” Funded by Perot, Clint Eastwood, and *Star Trek*’s William Shatner, Gritz set out to find them.

He recruited a team of mercenaries for what he called Operation Lazarus—fellow veterans of the Special Forces and Navy SEALs and anti-Communist Lao rebels who had previously worked for the CIA. Wearing a POW/MIA bracelet in honor of Jimmy Mills, the brother of the League’s president, Ann Mills Griffiths, he led them on four failed missions to Laos and another four to the “Golden Triangle” on the borders of Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. To many, he became a figure of fun, ridiculed for escaping from Laos on one occasion by swimming across the Mekong to Thailand in his underwear. Yet a slew of POW rescue movies like *Rambo* also turned him into something of a right-wing folk hero, and his political influence outlived the fiasco of his secret adventures.

Perot had told Gritz that he was “not interested in bones,” because “dead men tell no tales”—and survivors’ tales were what he was after, because that was the only way the great cover-up would be exposed. There was a cleavage now in the ranks of the

League and the government agencies in charge of POW/MIA policy, as more and more family members and officials peeled away from what had become an article of faith on the far right. Realizing that the existing hard-line policy was doing nothing to find POWs and very little to repatriate human remains, Reagan dispatched a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Jack Vessey, as a special envoy to Hanoi. The “Rambo faction” saw this, correctly, as a first small step toward normalizing relations with the hated Communist regime. Even the Reagan administration was now suspect. Vessey’s mission led eventually to the opening of a POW/MIA office in Hanoi and a shift away from the fruitless search for live prisoners in favor of a joint U.S.-Vietnamese program to excavate aircraft crash sites. Ann Mills Griffiths was invited to join an interagency policy group, with access to classified documents—unheard-of for a civilian. So she, too, was now just another insider, complicit with two governments that lied as easily as they breathed.

Meanwhile, the symbolic meaning of the POW/MIA flag had become steadily unmoored from its contentious origins. Between 1983 and 1991, the United States executed quick, cheap military victories in Grenada, Panama, and Kuwait. After Operation Desert Storm, the troops came home to a heroes’ welcome, and President George H.W. Bush declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.” For many Vietnam vets, Oliver North said, this only rubbed more salt in the wounds. They derided those who had fought in Desert Storm as “100-hour warriors” and asked where their own parades had been. But the public had moved on. America was now a nation where people began to say, “Thank you for your service” as routinely as they said, “Have a nice day.” With Vietnam receding into the rearview mirror, the POW/MIA flag morphed into an easy symbol of bipartisan support for all veterans, past and present; it was installed in the Capitol Rotunda in 1989 and recognized by Congress as “the symbol of our Nation’s concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing, and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.” No other war was mentioned, and the image of a prisoner on the flag said nothing about MIAs. There had been no hard evidence for 15 years of any surviving POWs, yet Perot, Gritz, and the Rambo faction had been remarkably successful in keeping the myth alive. In 1991, even as Bush outlined a four-step “road map” to normalized relations with Vietnam, a *Wall Street Journal* poll found that 69 percent of Americans believed that prisoners still languished in Southeast Asian jails, though for what reason other than inscrutable Communist sadism no one could say.

Taking Our Country Back

After the failure of his rescue missions, Bo Gritz made brief forays into national politics, running for the vice presidency in 1988 and the presidency four years later, under the slogan of “God, Guns, and Gritz.” After this, he wandered off into the

netherworld of anti-government militias and the Christian Identity movement, promoting his martial skills through a training program called Specially Prepared Individuals for Key Events, or SPIKE, selling nutritional supplements, ranting on his talk radio show about a New World Order in which Americans would be forced to learn Esperanto and stamped with a Universal Bar Code—“the mark of the beast discussed in Biblical prophecy.”

It’s tempting to dismiss this as tinfoil-hat craziness, yet many of those who charged election fraud last November and stormed the Capitol on January 6 would have endorsed the core message that Gritz laid out in his 1993 autobiography, *Called to Serve*. The federal bureaucracy had to be cleansed of “human sewage.” The “controlled establishment media” were concealing the truth about forces within the government “dedicated to the decay and eventual demise of America as established under the Constitution—a Nation under God.” A final war between the forces of

Good and Evil was coming, and veterans would be called upon to lead it.

But there would be many preliminary battles before the big one arrived, and they had to be fought on the commanding

heights of politics. The adversaries were a parade of presidents and presidential aspirants: George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, John McCain, John Kerry, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton—all of them hostile to American values and advocates, in their differing ways, of the New World Order. Ross Perot would play an instrumental role in the first of these battles, announcing in February 1992 that he would contest Bush’s reelection, as an independent.

People knew two things about Perot: he was inordinately wealthy, and he had devoted more than 20 years to his crusade on behalf of American POWs in Southeast Asia, real or imagined. As his running mate, he chose the former POW and Medal of Honor winner James Stockdale, whose wife had launched the first effort by POW/MIA families back in 1966. His campaign manager, Orson Swindle, was another alumnus of the Hanoi Hilton, where he had shared a cell with McCain. Anyone who had thought the issue was dead was wrong. In August 1991, shortly after Bush announced his road map to normalized relations, the Senate appointed a select committee to investigate yet again whether any POWs remained alive. Although it was bipartisan, headed by John Kerry and John McCain, it planted the seeds of renewed conflict, since it also included several POW/MIA true believers from the right wing of the Republican Party, such as Jesse Helms of North Carolina, Bob Smith of New Hampshire, and Chuck Grassley of Iowa.

Perot offered only the vaguest of policy ideas, a mishmash of economic nationalism, resentment of elites, and unhinged fantasies. “Mr. Perot has shown a great appetite for conspiracy theories,” *The New York Times* wrote, “lending an open ear to theories of secret global cabals, to Byzantine tales of vast criminal enterprises undertaken with secret Government approval.” One of his more bizarre claims was that Black Panther hit squads were planning to assassinate him, on orders from Hanoi.

Perot held raucous rallies in cities like Dallas, Denver, and Tampa, with flashing electronic signboards that said, “Take Our Country Back.” The *Baltimore Sun* described the Dallas event as “an interminable rally at which thousands of decent citizens trying to do good had to indulge the high-pitched ravings of an egomaniacal clown.” Midway through the campaign, Perot briefly withdrew from the race after being told that the Republican establishment was planning a campaign of dirty tricks to destroy his candidacy. The warning came from a former Green Beret who claimed to have found live prisoners in Laos but had been ordered by the CIA to “liquidate the merchandise.”

Three months before the election, Perot told the Senate Select Committee that there was “overwhelming evidence” that the government had abandoned surviving POWs in Laos and that officials had “covered up, dissembled, and finessed” this dark truth for 20 years. He drew massive support from the radical faction of the POW/MIA lobby, and when Bush addressed the League of Families at its annual convention, he was shouted down by chants of “No more lies! Tell the truth!” Bush exploded with anger: “Would you please shut up and sit down!”—a phrase that promptly appeared on the T-shirts sold at Perot’s rallies.

Years later, the veteran Democratic strategist James Carville made the obvious comparison: “If Donald Trump is the kind of Jesus of the disenchanted, displaced non-college-educated white voter, then Perot was the John the Baptist of that sort of movement.” In the end, the Texas billionaire took 19 percent of the vote. Whether this was what cost Bush reelection remained an open question, since Perot drew votes from all across the political spectrum. But the bottom line—in one of those be-careful-what-you-wish-for moments—was that Bill Clinton, whom the Vietnam revanchists despised, was the winner.

Clinton marked his first Memorial Day as president by visiting the Vietnam Wall in Washington. Introduced by Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he called for an end to the divisions of the past, only to be greeted by boos and cries of “traitor!” and “coward!” from vets wearing combat fatigues emblazoned with POW/MIA flag patches. On the same day, McCain and Pete Peterson, another former inmate of Hoa Lo prison, flew to Hanoi for more talks about the fullest possible accounting of MIAs. Soon after they got back, McCain and Kerry wrapped up their committee’s final report. Like the first official investigations in the 1970s, it concluded that there was no evidence that any POWs remained alive, adding that both Laos and Vietnam were now actively cooperating in the search for the remains of those who were dead.

The business community had been clamoring for years for access to the Vietnamese market, which added big corporations to the ever-lengthening list of domestic enemies, proof that their hunger for profits and their willingness to ship American manufacturing jobs overseas was greater than their anti-communism.

Clinton waited for the Select Committee’s report and a Senate resolution, passed over the objections of Smith, Helms, Grassley, and other right-wingers, before finally declaring an end to the trade embargo in February 1994. In July 1995, he resumed full diplomatic relations, the final insult. His first ambassador to Hanoi would be the former POW Pete Peterson.

Payback Time

The next target for the far right was John McCain. Since the 1970s, conservatives had built a formidable infrastructure of think tanks, policy shops, activist organizations, and religious groups devoted to “family values.” In 1981, following Reagan’s election, many of their leaders had coalesced in a secretive group called the Council for National Policy, whose history is recounted in detail in Anne Nelson’s book, *Shadow Network*.*

CNP’s members included Jack Singlaub and Oliver North; the anti-tax zealot Grover Norquist; Paul Weyrich of the Heritage Foundation; and Richard Viguerie, the pioneer of direct mail. Religious leaders like Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition

and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council joined later. Over time, it expanded to include an array of right-wing luminaries who rose to prominence in the Obama and Trump years, such as Steve Bannon, Kellyanne Conway, Wayne LaPierre of the NRA, Jenny Beth Martin of the Tea Party Patriots, and—under the alias of “Ali Akbar”—Ali Alexander, organizer of Stop the Steal.

One thing that set these people apart from traditional conservatives was their mastery of communications, especially talk radio, targeted political campaign materials, email, and the new online platforms and blogs that were beginning to flower when McCain, even years later a self-confessed neophyte on “the internets,” announced that he would oppose George W. Bush for the 2000 Republican nomination.

When Donald Trump caused shock waves in 2015 with his attack on McCain’s credentials as a war hero (“I like people who weren’t captured”), he was actually saying nothing new. The right wing of the POW/MIA movement had hated McCain for years and belittled his heroism. When he ran for reelection in Arizona in 1992, he was savaged as a “liar, traitor, Communist sympathizer, betrayer of everyone who ever served in the U.S. armed forces.” McCain, never one to bite his tongue, responded in kind, condemning the live-POW lobby as “some of the most craven, most cynical, and most despicable human beings to ever run a scam.” But his famous temper only proved to them that his six years in the Hanoi Hilton had left him mentally unstable.

The crucial showdown in the primaries was in South Carolina, where the Republican operative Lee Atwater had honed his skills as the master of negative campaigning. It was one of the nastiest in memory, designed in a way that allowed Bush to distance himself from the smears. “I paint my face and travel at night,” said

*Disclosure: Anne Nelson is this author’s wife. See also her [articles](#) in the *Washington Spectator*.

the Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed about such efforts, which involved push polls, phone banking, and targeted email blitzes: "You don't know it's over until you're in a body bag."

McCain's wife was said to be a drug addict; he had supposedly fathered a Black child out of wedlock; worst of all, he was a Manchurian candidate, brainwashed by his North Vietnamese captors (proof, Trump was later assured by retired Lt. Gen. Thomas McInerney, a pilot who had flown more than 400 combat missions in Vietnam and one of the most conspiracy-minded of the veterans, that torture works).

"The Cambodian Khmer Rouge has claimed that 'McCain is a Vietnamese agent,'" wrote Paul Weyrich in a mass email circulated through his Free Congress Foundation. The sole source for this was a website created by a fringe POW activist, Ted Sampley, who had served with the 173rd Airborne and the Green Berets in Vietnam and was also the author of the "Manchurian candidate" trope. There was no proof of this, Weyrich acknowledged, "but there must be some basis for the opinions expressed by otherwise rational people." It was an early foretaste of a technique that Trump and his supporters would later master: spread baseless rumors and disinformation; cause a noisy outcry by those prone to believe conspiracy theories; and then, in one of Trump's favorite lines, "A lot of people are saying. . . ."

In 2004 it was John Kerry's turn, and this time an entire presidential campaign turned on hatreds that went all the way back to Vietnam. In response to Kerry's scalding testimony to Congress in 1971 and the creation of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Nixon cast around for a counterweight. His political enforcer, Chuck Colson, another future star of right-wing talk radio as a fervent born-again Christian, found a veteran named John O'Neill, whose group called itself Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace. Like Kerry, O'Neill had commanded a small naval patrol boat in the Mekong Delta, a swift boat. The two men debated each other on *The Dick Cavett Show*, and it was generally agreed that Kerry wiped the floor with his opponent.

Revenge, it's said, is a dish best served cold, and O'Neill waited more than 30 years for his. He and eight others founded Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in the offices of a Dallas P.R. firm in

April 2004, just after Kerry clinched the Democratic nomination. It was, among other things, a useful distraction from George W. Bush's own unraveling war in Iraq: CBS's *60 Minutes* had broken the Abu Ghraib torture story just two days earlier.

The spectacular success of the "Swifties," joined later by POWs for Truth, was based, like the campaign against McCain, on their mastery of the full range of media platforms, which had now expanded to include novelties like Myspace and Facebook. It was like being in the Hanoi Hilton, one former POW said: The prisoners weren't allowed to talk to each other, so they developed a "tap code" to evade the guards. In this case, the guards were the gatekeepers of the elite media, and so, O'Neill decided, "What we need is some kind of a tap code, some way of

getting our message out and around the mainline media, past the three major networks and *The New York Times*."

They raised millions from T. Boone Pickens and other wealthy donors in Texas, blanketed talk radio, and took their message to Fox News, which was emerging as a serious challenger to the established networks. They ran expensive TV ads, accusing Kerry of lying about his war record, targeted at

swing states and designed by the same firm that had produced the infamous "Dukakis in a tank" ad in 1988. They put together a slick website, still something of a novelty in those days, and used it to raise money from 150,000 small donors. Finally, in August, they released a book, *Unfit for Command*, authored by O'Neill and a member of the Council for National Policy, a Harvard-educated conspiracy theorist named Jerome Corsi.

The beauty of the Swift Boat effort was that all of it, like the earlier smear campaign against McCain, was plausibly deniable by the Republican Party, to which it had no formal links. Again, the timing was good, because Bush himself was constrained from criticizing a Vietnam veteran at the very time his own wartime record in the Texas Air National Guard was under scrutiny following another sensational report on *60 Minutes*, just two months before the election.

"A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes," a Kerry communications adviser said ruefully, quoting the old line from Mark Twain. But the Republicans drew a clear lesson from Kerry's defeat: disinformation worked.



Roy Hoffmann, one of the founders of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, speaking at the 32nd Annual Conservative Political Action Conference. Broadcast live on C-SPAN in 2005.

Rolling Thunder

Barack Obama—or Barack *Hussein* Obama, which became the preferred usage on the Republican right—was up next. He was too young to have served in Vietnam, of course, but Jerome Corsi provided the link. In the course of researching his 2008 book, *The Obama Nation*, which he promoted on Alex Jones's Infowars, Corsi was arrested in Kenya while looking into Obama's family background. Over the next two years, other right-wing commentators and provocateurs picked up the theme. Dinesh D'Souza portrayed Obama as a radical leftist who had inherited from his Kenyan father the idea that America was "a force for global domination and destruction." Rush Limbaugh told his 20 million dittoheads that the new president was "more African in his roots than he is American." A writer for *National Review*, Andrew C. McCarthy, published *The Grand Jihad*, which depicted Obama as part of a global alliance between American leftists and radical Islamists to impose Sharia law on the West—another addition to the ever-evolving array of forces conspiring to create a New World Order.

Corsi topped them all with his January 2011 book, *Where's the Birth Certificate?* Trump picked up the theory on Fox News a few months later, and Fox took it from there. We tend now to associate birtherism primarily with Trump, but as with his attacks on McCain, he was simply jumping on a wave that had already been created on the extreme right, adopting attack lines that were poured like honey into his willing ear.

A lot of ink has been spilled on the struggle to understand how this man became the unlikeliest of standard-bearers for the Republican Party. What was one to make, for example, of the apparent hypocrisy of conservative evangelicals who rallied to someone whose personal life was an insult to everything they stood for, a man so manifestly lacking in any religious beliefs, any basic knowledge of Scripture, and indeed any discernible moral compass? But these questions missed the point. It was precisely this ethical and intellectual void that made Trump the perfect vehicle for anyone who learned how to flatter him, not only conservative evangelicals but conspiracy theorists and single-issue crusaders of every stripe, from anti-abortion militants and white supremacists to anti-immigration activists and lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry, all unified in their hostility to the Deep State and Fake News.

Trump himself was little more than a needy bundle of insecurities, beset by enemies real and imagined, and with a laundry list of personal grievances. Each of the powerful forces on

the far right was driven by its own politics of grievance, which reflected the massive inroads made since the Sixties by the enemy within. Freedom of religion was being trampled by radical secularists; industry was being stifled by overzealous regulators and unelected bureaucrats; First Amendment rights were being silenced by political correctness; the Second was under siege by fanatics who wanted to disarm America. Senior retired officers complained that the sacred values of the military were being eroded by social engineers who wanted women to serve in combat units. Veterans for Trump brought together a younger generation of those who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan with retired stalwarts of the Vietnam era like Maj. Gen. Patrick E. Brady, a helicopter "dust-off" pilot who had flown more than 2,000 combat missions; Maj. Gen. Paul Valley, one of the most strident of the conspiracy theorists, a birtherist and a military analyst for Fox News; and Petty Officer Michael E. Thornton, a Navy SEAL who had won the Medal of Honor for heroism in action on the DMZ.

These grievances were much bigger and more politically substantive than Trump's, but he was happy to meld the two together, seeing their enemies as his enemies, hoaxers who wanted to delegitimize his election. But Trump had another great appeal for the far right: the megaphone he

gave to their resentments put boots on the ground, both literally and figuratively—the raucous crowds of disaffected white working-class voters who had turned out at the rallies for Ross Perot, but in much greater numbers, and the right-wing veterans who stood ready to provide the muscle, sensing that the moment was drawing near when they would be called upon to act on their oath "to defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic." Though these veterans were not large in number, they were a critical part of the Trump base, and they had kept the faith they brought home from Vietnam through their reverence for the POW/MIA flag and their love for the roar of motorbikes.

There was nothing inherently political about a Harley-Davidson, though most of the bikers tended conservative. But riding these big machines was a powerful bonding experience for countless thousands of vets, as it had been earlier for the Hells Angels, who were inspired by the exploits of World War II fighter pilots. The post-Vietnam generation wore leather jackets emblazoned with the insignia of their units and the patriotic symbols of wartime—eagles, flags, M-16s, grinning skulls, and



lightning bolts. Biking was a powerful assertion of their masculinity, and even as their paunches swelled and their beards turned gray, it recreated the rush of adrenaline they had experienced in Vietnam and the camaraderie of the foxhole, where you had your buddy's back and he had yours. For many, it was just a good excuse for drinking and partying.

There were many different veterans' motorcycle clubs. Leathernecks MC was for Marines only; others were open to all arms of service. Some were reserved for combat veterans; others welcomed those who had served in any capacity. Some were for Vietnam vets only; others embraced those who had fought in Iraq and Afghanistan or the mini-wars like Grenada and Panama. The Patriot Guard Riders specialized in forming an honor guard at vets' funerals. Veteran Bikers MC was overtly inspired by Christian values; its motto was GCCV—God, Constitution, Country, Veterans.

In 1987, members of one of these groups, the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club, gathered in New Jersey for a vigil in honor of POW/MIAs. One of them proposed the idea of an annual ride to the Vietnam Wall in Washington that

could keep the issue alive. Like most of the conservative activist vets, its founders had served in what they saw as elite combat units: Marines, Airborne, Green Berets. One of them was Ted Sampley, author of the "Manchurian Candidate" smear against McCain. A friend of Sampley's suggested that they call their group Rolling Thunder. This would evoke the roar of massed motorbikes as they crossed the Arlington Memorial Bridge on their way to the Wall, but it was also the name of the four-year bombing campaign of North Vietnam.

The first annual ride, on Memorial Day 1988, attracted just 2,500 riders, but the snowball effect was extraordinary. Thirty years later, Rolling Thunder was bringing half a million bikers to Washington, with thousands flying the POW/MIA flag. Loosely organized, Rolling Thunder embraced many independent bikers' clubs and had dozens of vibrant state chapters. Missouri was a particular stronghold, and its state president was Dr. William Scott Magill, the Marine and Army Medical Corps veteran who had expressed such a clear vision of how anti-war activists had taken over the nation's educational system to indoctrinate students with anti-American and anti-Christian ideas.

The Venn Diagram

Magill is not a well-known figure outside of right-wing circles, but he is a singularly interesting one, and Missouri, too, has its distinctions, being the land of Phyllis Schlafly, Rush Limbaugh, and Senator Josh Hawley. Magill's hometown of Springfield is a deeply conservative place, one of a handful of cities that lays claim to the title of "Buckle of the Bible Belt," home to the national headquarters of the Assemblies of God, by far the world's largest Pentecostal denomination, and the rapidly growing Baptist Bible Fellowship.

If one were to draw a Venn diagram of the contemporary far right, Magill would stand, perhaps uniquely, at the center of all its overlapping circles and alliances.

A career ob-gyn who had delivered some 4,000 babies, he is a vehement opponent of abortion. He was an active biker until age began to take its toll, although he remains a leader of that community. He is an outspoken advocate of veterans' rights and the special role of vets in defending the Constitution. He frequents the outermost



Participants of the Motorcycle Escort of Traveling Vietnam War Memorial Wall. Photo by Robert Batina.

planets in the galaxy of right-wing talk radio and TV, his resonant bass-baritone sometimes faltering when he speaks about the intensity of his patriotism. And he is a columnist for WorldNetDaily, most notorious as the main platform used by Jerome Corsi to push the birtherist theory and classified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group closely associated with the militia movement.

But Magill is also a fixture in state Republican Party circles, with at least one foot in the political mainstream. He is a former president of the conservative Missouri Republican Assembly, part of a national federation that describes itself as "the Republican wing of the Republican Party," yet he is also well connected to the state's political leadership, including more moderate figures like Senator Roy Blunt. And he is a member of the Council for National Policy, whose internal membership directory for 2020 gives a sense of the range and diversity of his interests: abortion, the Bill of Rights, creationism and intelligent design, defense, health care, Judeo-Christian values, media, political philosophy, radical Islam, religious freedom, terrorism, and veterans' issues.

Magill recognized the seismic importance of the rise of the Tea Party in the 2010 midterm elections. But while he admired the insurgents, he found them lacking in the essential discipline

only the military possessed. His response was to close down his medical practice in Springfield and found Veterans in Defense of Liberty, inspired by a conversation with a fellow vet who told him, “If America is going to be saved, Marines are going to save it.” VIDOL may be unique among veterans’ organizations, and among groups on the right in general, in having an explicitly military structure. It is divided into eight regional “divisions,” with 50 state “regiments” and “battalions” that correspond to congressional districts. VIDOL claims around 500 affiliates. Its mantra, Magill said, is, “We will storm any hill where liberty is challenged.”

He had a growing conviction that America was locked in a war of survival, which he traced back to the lessons the anti-war movement had learned from Stalin. “America is like a healthy body,” he quoted the Soviet dictator as saying, “based on three things: morality, patriotism, values. Attack those and it will collapse from within.” The central threat, Magill believed, came from the hollowing out and takeover of the Democratic Party, and the stakes were apocalyptic.

Magill’s small board of advisers reflected each of the various conservative camps in which he had a foot. It included two genuine war heroes. Retired Maj. Gen. James Livingston had fought in Vietnam with the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Marines, the “Magnificent Bastards”; in 1975, he was the operational commander of the evacuation of Saigon. Retired Col. Don “Doc” Ballard had been a Navy corpsman, also attached to the 4th Marines. Both men were awarded the Medal of Honor for their heroism in battle on the DMZ in the spring of 1968, shortly after the Tet Offensive. A third member of Magill’s board, a retired major, had been an adviser to the South Vietnamese police.

A further connection to Vietnam was James S. Robbins, a writer for the conservative *Washington Times*, who had just published a revisionist history of the Tet Offensive called *This Time We Win*. Despite the sly reference to Rambo’s famous line—“Do we get to win this time?”—it was a serious and sober analysis, echoing established criticisms of the “Cronkite moment” and the perfidy of civilian politicians, but with a new twist: a warning that radical Islamists had embraced the lessons of Tet, understanding that spectacular attacks, sensationalized by the media, could undermine America’s will—always the nation’s Achilles heel.

Magill’s board also included two fellow members of the Council for National Policy: Colin Hanna, head of an organization called Let Freedom Ring and a member of the CNP board of governors, and William J. Federer, an author and commentator who was a fixture on conservative talk radio and Fox News. Gary Meredith, meanwhile, was a fundraiser and media analyst affiliated with the Heritage Foundation and Hillsdale College, an otherwise obscure institution whose successive presidents were members of the CNP. So reportedly was Hillsdale alumnus Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL, brother of Trump’s education secretary, Betsy DeVos, and founder of the private military contractor Blackwater USA.

The VIDOL board was rounded out by two celebrities from the far right of the Republican Party: Kris Kobach, an

immigration hard-liner, Kansas secretary of state, and later head of Trump’s short-lived election fraud commission in 2017; and Sharron Angle, who had run against Senate leader Harry Reid in Nevada in 2010. In many ways a precursor of present-day figures like Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert, Angle is best remembered for her hope that it wouldn’t be necessary to find “Second Amendment remedies” to remove her opponent.

Biking was always central to Magill’s identity. He organized regular “Awareness Rides” and veterans’ banquets that featured prominent speakers like Artie Muller, the national director of Rolling Thunder, and Garnett “Bill” Bell, who had headed the Pentagon’s POW/MIA office in Hanoi until parting ways in 1993 after official policy shifted away from the search for live prisoners.

At a national level, the bikers’ movement was becoming more politicized. Rolling Thunder endorsed Trump, and he addressed its annual rally in 2016, but by that time the organization was beginning to lose momentum as its members found another outlet for their passions. Bikers for Trump had been started in 2015 by a chainsaw artist and aspiring Republican politician from South Carolina, Chris Cox. He had first made a name for himself two years earlier by cleaning garbage from war memorials during the 16-day government shutdown, and was inspired by Trump’s ostensible support of veterans. Cox, whose own favored ride was Harley-Davidson’s Street Glide Screamin’ Eagle—the nickname of the 101st Airborne—formed Bikers for Trump with the initial purpose of forming a “wall of meat” at the candidate’s rallies, supplementing law enforcement and deterring protesters. The group grew rapidly, and by the time of Trump’s inauguration in January 2017—at which, Cox told Fox News, its members had “served many knuckle sandwiches” to protesters—it claimed 200,000 members.

The most radicalized segments of the bikers’ movement gravitated naturally toward Cox’s organization, groups like the Bikers for Christ Motorcycle Ministry and Veteran Bikers MC, founded in West Virginia by an Air Force veteran, Aaron Edison, who had enlisted at the tail end of the war in Vietnam and was known in the biker community as MoonDogg. VBMC embraced both Vietnam-era and younger Iraq and Afghanistan vets and made no secret of its values and loyalties. It claimed overtly Christian inspiration, and MoonDogg flooded his prolific social media accounts with inspirational Bible verses interspersed with apocalyptic warnings of the dangers posed by the Democratic Party. VBMC’s banners, its videos, and MoonDogg’s own biker jacket were a kaleidoscope of images of machine-guns, the POW/MIA and Gadsden flags, and the insignia of the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters, to both of which VBMC pledged its “100 percent allegiance.”

Both of these organizations were true believers in the New World Order conspiracy theory. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the Three Percenters were formed “to spread the

The central threat, Magill believed, came from the hollowing out and takeover of the Democratic Party, and the stakes were apocalyptic.

ideology and beliefs of the [1990s] militia movement.” Their symbol “III” enshrined the fallacy—a favorite of Bo Gritz’s—that only 3 percent of Americans had risen up against British rule, the point being that a tiny, highly motivated minority is all that’s needed to overthrow tyranny. The Oath Keepers, who were founded in 2009 by a former Army paratrooper, Stewart Rhodes, took their name from the soldier’s oath to “defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Much more organized and disciplined than the Three Percenters, let alone the headline-grabbing Proud Boys and the Boogaloo Bois, they focused their efforts on recruiting both active and veteran members of the military and law enforcement. After 2014, the Oath Keepers became a familiar presence at high-profile events like the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, that followed the police shooting of Michael Brown, and the standoff between federal agents and armed supporters of the Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy.

The Oath Keepers, already excited by Trump’s ride down the golden escalator at Trump Tower, were further energized by the publication in November 2015 of an essay called “Tet, Take Two.” The author, Matthew Bracken, a former Navy SEAL and author of a series of novels under the collective title *Enemies Foreign and Domestic*, took off from well-worn ideas about the “Cronkite moment,” identifying the CBS anchor as “secretly a leading propagandist for international socialism” and “a classic traitor.” The global mainstream media, Bracken wrote, was “infested today with hundreds of Walter Cronkites, both in front of and behind the cameras.”

To this, Bracken added James Robbins’s extension of the Tet analogy to radical Islamism, before propelling the connection several steps further. The latest iteration of the New World Order conspiracy, Bracken wrote, was “a Muslim-jihad version of the 1968 Tet Offensive,” the groundwork for this having been laid by the invasion of Europe by hordes of Muslim immigrants and refugees, thanks to the open-borders policies underwritten by George Soros.

To Bracken, the impending cataclysm that Bo Gritz had predicted was drawing closer. “Three great forces [Islam, international socialism, and nationalism] are now set in motion,” he wrote, “for a 2016 showdown and collision that will, in historical terms, be on a par with the First and Second World Wars.” For the Oath Keepers, the implications were clear. Trump’s election would be the firewall, and the soldier’s oath to defend the Constitution would inspire his foot soldiers.

One More Hill To Take

Scott Magill, too, was elated by Trump’s election, which he ascribed to “the intercession of Divine Providence.” In 2017, he decided it was time to put his bikers’ boots on the ground in a more serious way. When Trump arrived in Springfield on August 31 for a rally at which he unveiled his proposals for tax reform, a dozen veteran riders formed a flag line by the podium. In Magill’s account of the event, a busload of protesters showed up, but as soon as they saw the intimidating line of beefy Vietnam vets, they turned tail and ran. “The big advantage we have,” Magill said in

one of his radio interviews, “is that the other side, be it antifa or BLM, if it ever comes to that, most of them have never had to face down true testosterone.” Two days after the rally, he formed Liberty Riders of America, as VIDOL’s “Cavalry Division.”

The nation had still not done enough to honor its veterans, Magill thought. Rolling Thunder had long believed that the POW/MIA flag in the Capitol Rotunda was not sufficient tribute, and had lobbied for years for the installation of an empty “chair of honor” like those it had succeeded in placing in a number of state capitols. On behalf of Liberty Riders, Magill, using his influence with Missouri Senator Roy Blunt, made it happen, and the empty chair now stands in Emancipation Hall. The symbolism of the inauguration ceremony in November 2017 was extraordinary. Mitch McConnell, Paul Ryan, Nancy Pelosi, and Elizabeth Warren all made speeches. An emblem born out of grievance and rancor, honoring a war lost 42 years earlier and prisoners who had not existed for decades, had in the end united conservative Republicans and progressive Democrats in a town where bipartisanship was an almost forgotten concept. Magill, whose radio interviews often displayed a wry sense of humor, must surely have relished the irony.

Rolling Thunder itself was losing steam by this point, beset by funding shortfalls and eclipsed by the rise of Bikers for Trump, and on Memorial Day 2019, it held its thirty-second and final ride to the Vietnam Wall. But Magill refused to accept that the annual ritual was over. In its place, he organized a 250-mile ride from Springfield to the life-size replica of the Wall that had been inaugurated in 2018 in Perryville, Missouri. It was “the most distinguished and fascinating site of its kind in the country,” said retired Lt. Gen. William G. (Jerry) Boykin, yet another member of the CNP, who had served with the 101st Airborne in Vietnam, went on to command the elite Delta Force, and was reprimanded by the Bush administration for telling church groups after 9/11 that the war on terror was a battle between God and Satan. Like Rolling Thunder, Magill’s ride to the Missouri Wall would be an annual event, and the first two were greeted by Republican dignitaries like Senator Blunt and Governor Mike Parson and military leaders like Maj. Gen. Patrick Brady of Veterans for Trump.

As Trump’s presidency lurched from one crisis and scandal to the next, Magill kicked his efforts into higher gear. Like Rhodes and Bracken, he saw the final battle approaching. “We’re not only talking about the future of America, because we are the salt and light of the world,” he told an interviewer on a Christian radio station, “and if America goes down the rest of the world goes into a thousand years of darkness. We are the only ones who can stop that process, with the Lord’s help of course.”

Zelig-like, Magill seemed to pop up everywhere, holding forth on culture-war issues from abortion to women in the military, appearing as a panelist at the annual meeting of Phyllis Schlafly’s Gateway Eagle Council, where Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn was the first recipient of the Gen. Jack Singlaub Award for Service to America. Magill launched a new program called Champions of Liberty, with weeklong training sessions for veterans in

constitutional principles and the foundations of Western civilization. Former Missouri senator and governor, U.S. attorney general, and fellow CNP member John Ashcroft endorsed the project as “a strategy for National Survival.”

Dime-store conspiracy theorists like Bo Gritz tend to fixate on absurdities like the forced teaching of Esperanto and the Universal Bar Code as the mark of the beast. The more sophisticated think in broader terms. The real beauty of a serious conspiracy theory is that it is seamless; every significant negative event is only further evidence of the enemy’s machinations. When the nation was hit by the serial crises of 2020—the pandemic, the protests for racial justice, and the November vote, all posing a cumulative threat to Trump’s reelection—Magill went into overdrive.

He deployed dozens of his bikers at Back the Blue rallies and Black Lives Matter protests, which he compared to 9/11. But above all, he brought his unique combination of medical and military credentials to the fight, with radio interviews, essays, and TV appearances throughout the late winter and spring. He began with a March 10 essay for *Christian News Journal* claiming that Covid-19 was manmade, created in Wuhan, and “weaponized” by “America’s domestic enemies.” In early April, still six weeks before Trump announced that he was taking hydroxychloroquine, Magill was promoting it as a “silver bullet” on a site called GLA News (“Shines a Light on Truth”). He found a much larger audience for his claims through the One America News Network, backed by black-and-white footage of patrol boats in the Mekong Delta and Marines jumping out of helicopters. “Every service member that served in Vietnam,” he said, “was on chloroquine during their whole tour of duty and for three weeks after that, without any problem.”

In an extended two-part interview on One America a month later, Magill rejected the term “pandemic.” Covid-19, he said, was a hoax cooked up by “DemPanic swamp rats” to create a double threat: “the Wuhan coronavirus” and “a more deadly cultural virus” designed to intimidate and weaken America through the use of masks and lockdowns. The Democrats’ purpose was “to bring the deaths as high as possible, to continue this for as long as possible, in order to tank the economy as much as possible.”

In an essay for WorldNetDaily, “Tony Fauci and the Trojan Horse of Tyranny,” Magill laid bare the web of political and economic interests linking “Obi Wan Fauci,” Dr. Deborah Birx, the Wuhan virology lab, Xi Jinping, Bill Gates, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of the WHO, UNITAID, the Clinton Foundation, Gilead Sciences (which holds the patent to Remdesivir), and, to no one’s great surprise, George Soros. The “DemPanic” conspiracy was, as Magill wrote, “a convoluted issue indeed.”

This left only the matter of election fraud, and Magill, with Kris Kobach as one of his advisers, joined an extraordinary event in late October called 20 Days to Save the U.S.A. Convened by a talk-show talent booker from North Carolina, this featured a motley array of speakers that ranged from home schoolers,

stand-up comedians, advocates of ingesting disinfectants, authors of self-help manuals, former slaves from South Sudan, and “behavioral change experts,” to some of the genuine stars of the far right: Rudy Giuliani; Dinesh D’Souza; Rick Gates; Franklin Graham; Lt. Gen. Thomas McInerney; Randall Terry of Operation Rescue; and half a dozen members of the CNP, including Lt. Gen. Jerry Boykin, CNP Gold Circle member Tom Fitton of Judicial Watch, and Ed Martin, president of Phyllis Schlafly Eagles and former chairman of the Missouri Republican Party.

Finally, on January 1, with the election lost and the apocalypse drawing closer, Magill issued the final call: for VIDOLs “Fellow Warriors and Friends” to converge on Washington five days later.

Chris Cox of Bikers for Trump was also supercharged by the pandemic and the coming election, and held nightly rallies for unmasked crowds at the August gathering of bikers in Sturgis, South Dakota, a notorious superspreader event. At the January 5 Stop the Steal rally in Washington,

at which Gen. Michael Flynn compared the fight to the Civil War, Cox urged the crowd to emulate previous generations of veterans “that died for us and spilled blood. Now it’s up to us here in the continental USA, in domestic America, to stand up for the sacrifices they made. . . . I for one will take the first bullet. If

there’s anyone out there from antifa or Black Lives Matters [*sic*], put your first fucking bullet in my chest, OK?”

Meanwhile, MoonDogg, the leader of Veteran Bikers MC, was one of the first to issue the appeal for a January 6 “March on Congress”—as opposed to a rally at the Ellipse—posting an announcement on Twitter that had circulated as early as December 18, the day Ali Alexander created Stop the Steal. With hashtags, email addresses, and Twitter handles that were subsequently deleted, including accounts registered in Bulgaria, Denmark, and Turkey, the appeal that MoonDogg posted made its way through the more obscure byways of social media, disseminated by local Republican Party organizations in Florida, California, and Ohio, and individuals like the conspiracy theorist Matt Couch, “the D.C. Patriot,” and even Juanita Broadrick, who had accused Bill Clinton of rape while he was governor of Arkansas. Broadrick had by this time attached herself to QAnon, speaking at a QAnon rally in Arizona where the other featured speakers were Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County and Jim Watkins, a former Army helicopter mechanic, founder of the online message board 8chan, and thought by many to be the anonymous Q.

MoonDogg himself was eager to join the final push to overturn the results of the election, and revved up his bike in Grafton, West Virginia, for the 200-mile ride to Washington, where he joined the mob, posting videos as they advanced on the Capitol steps and afterward adding photographs of gallows with demands for the execution of treasonous elected officials.

There is no evidence that MoonDogg broke any laws himself

that day, but the veterans of the Oath Keepers, to whom he had sworn “100 percent allegiance,” broke the most serious ones. Their leader, the former paratrooper Stewart Rhodes, had told his followers on January 4 that it was “time to stand!” And stand they did, the conspiracy theorists themselves now morphing into conspirators.

Eight of the 18 individuals charged with conspiracy on January 6 were veterans, equally divided between Oath Keepers and Proud Boys. They were from Virginia and Kansas, Hawaii and New York, Ohio and Florida. Three were ex-Marines, including a retired officer with 22 years of service. They were the leaders of the military-style “stack” that led the assault, dressed in helmets and battle gear, with walkie-talkies and hand signals, bent on rooting out the domestic agents of the vast and shadowy international conspiracy that threatened the survival of the nation, inspired by the oath they had sworn to the Constitution and the lessons their predecessors had learned half a century earlier, on the battlefields of Vietnam.

As they marched up the Capitol steps in “Ranger file,” each with a hand on the shoulder of the man ahead, it was hard not to think back to Bo Gritz, whom Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, called “THE” American soldier, a man who had spent his career storming hills in Southeast Asia.

“The Army of the United States produces the world’s best soldiers,” Gritz declared in *Called to Serve*, his autobiography. “Our oath is to defend America against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Today, we have one more hill to take: Capitol Hill!” Gritz wrote those words in 1993. The events of January 6 turned them into an enduring reality. ■

George Black’s writing has appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine and many other publications. His forthcoming book, The Long Shadow: A Story of War, Peace, and Redemption in Vietnam, will be published by Knopf.

Remembering Ramsey Clark

Ramsey Clark, former attorney general under Lyndon Baines Johnson and progressive civil rights attorney who ran twice for U.S. Senate from New York, died at 93 in his Manhattan home on April 9, 2021. Mark Green—on the staff of both the 1974 and 1976 campaigns—recalls the experience of trying to combine Clark’s principles with New York politics.

NOVEMBER 5, 1974: WE HAD LOST, AND WE HAD won. True, incumbent Senator Jacob Javits had prevailed by seven percentage points. But Ramsey had violated all the rules—from doing no polls, imposing a \$100 limit on contributions, and mentioning the PLO by name to migrating from Texas to run in New York—and still, he won the primary and scared the arrogance out of the moderate Republican. I thought that his surprising performance could set him up to beat James Buckley, who had won the other New York Senate seat with only 39 percent of the vote in a three-way contest in 1970.

October 19, 1975: U.N. Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan announces on *Face the Nation* that it would be “dishonorable” to leave the U.N. and run for any office and that, if he did, people should vote against him. (Eight months later, Moynihan declared his candidacy for the 1976 Senate race in New York.)

March 4, 1976: Ramsey, me, and Ken Lerer, the 24-year-old campaign coordinator, meet at Ramsey’s spacious, airy, book-strewn apartment on West 12th Street.

“My announcement on March 15 is fine, but I won’t miss the Brooklyn Law School class I teach that afternoon just to hit a third upstate city. The only reason you say it three times in three places is to get on TV, and after a while people don’t think you’re for real. . . . And no need to list the private organizations I help [e.g., the ACLU, Martin Luther King Memorial] on our campaign literature because it would be exploiting them for self-gain,” he said in his soft-spoken but firm way. “And I’d rather you also not contact Ethel Kennedy, either, because I just asked her to join DISARM [a militant gun-control group] and don’t want to mix the two.”

As his campaign manager, I can’t help but be simultaneously frustrated and charmed by this political paladin.

March 14, 1976: This morning, we arrive at 9:30 a.m. in Syracuse for the Women’s Division meeting of the Democratic State Committee. Each Senate candidate is allowed five minutes for a statement. Ramsey takes 4:05, opens by urging the audience to support Mo Udall for president, and closes with “Vote your conscience and America will be strong.” Representative Bella Abzug, an unannounced but possible opponent, consumes 10 minutes, lists herself as the author of more bills than Sam Rayburn enacted as speaker of the House, and ends with “A stag Senate is a stagnation.” (On June 28, eight minutes before the filing deadline, Bella officially throws her hat in the ring, giving up a safe House seat to run for Senate. I am disappointed but admire her guts.)

March 25, 1976: I ask Ramsey if he’s made any of his 50 assigned calls for money or endorsements, but he changes the subject, as he often does when I inquire, adding that “people should act out of free will, not because of any outside pressure.” I accuse him of never having accepted the new technology called the telephone. He agrees and laughs. Bella Abzug believes in the telephone.

April 9, 1976: I’m getting criticism from allies about his high-minded, eloquent speeches, like one in which he made sympathetic reference to Black radical Huey Newton. “Mark,” he says (whenever he starts a sentence with my name, I know I’m in trouble). “I’m a free man. You can never let other people tell you what to say, if you believe in what you’re saying. I was just comparing a chapter of Newton’s book that paralleled a passage in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography. Am I not supposed to say that?”

OK, then.

July 8, 1976: About 60 people donate a total of \$2,000 at a fund-raising party at Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s town house. One of Ramsey’s answers in the Q&A session startles some of the guests. He’s asked

about the recent Entebbe, Uganda, raid to free Israeli hostages, and the largely Jewish crowd waits for the inevitable answer, which doesn't come. "It was, of course, a heroic act, but four Israelis died and so did 20 Ugandans. We don't know if they would have died if there had been negotiations. We do know that violence begets violence. We need a long-range solution, like an International Court of Justice, something I've been working on for years."

July 12–16, 1976: Democratic National Convention week. The floor of the Convention is a carnival—loud, boisterous, other-directed. In short, *terra infirma* for Ramsey but home turf for Bella. Ramsey sits unobtrusively in the middle of the New York delegation, seeks out no media, and refuses interviews during speeches because, he says, "I'm trying to listen."

Bella, on the other hand, patrols the aisles, personally hands out campaign buttons, woos celebrities to enlist their support and marches over to every network reporter and camera person she can spot. Coverage of her in New York and nationally is huge.

September 7, 1976: Moynihan and Abzug have been slug-ging it out in the press—Bella linking him to Nixon (for whom Moynihan worked in the White House) and Moynihan charging her with "McCarthyism." Their exchanges are mutually demeaning, but they are producing enormous coverage that cements the notion that it's a two-person race.

In response, Ramsey holds a press conference to contrast their bickering with his substantive campaign. A UPI reporter, indirectly referencing Bella's public persona, asks Ramsey if people think that he's a weak leader. Ramsey quietly answers, "You know, people who tell you how tough they are are usually weak. If you're strong, you don't talk about it," and concludes by quoting Carl Sandburg's famous comment about Lincoln, "Not often in human history does there come a man who is both steel and velvet, as hard as a rock and as soft as drifting now." The room explodes in applause, and several staff cry.

September 10, 1976: *The Gramercy Herald* endorses Ramsey . . . and *The New York Times* endorses Moynihan after Bella refuses to say if she'd endorse Moynihan were he the nominee, which offends the *Times*' publisher. Ramsey's comment on the endorsement: "And I thought that there was some rationality to life."

September 10, 1976: After a breakfast at the request of two Abzug friends, I report to Ramsey that they and Gloria Steinem had asked me to urge him to drop out of the primary (now only

three days away) so his liberal votes would go to Bella, otherwise Moynihan might win. "Mark," he says, "that would be unprincipled. All our people have worked so hard and deserve us giving ourselves a chance to win. Of course I'd prefer Abzug to Moynihan, but dropping out now would be to manipulate the process."

When I reported this back to Abzug supporter Dick Aurelio—who had been one of those at the breakfast and would later found NY1—he expressed no surprise. "A campaign's emotional momentum—fueled by a year of effort, the importance of the goal, the possibility of a miracle, and too little sleep—probably made it impossible to suspend Ramsey's campaign at this point."



Mark Green (center) and Ramsey Clark (second from right) in 1976.
Courtesy of the author.

September 12, 1976: The *Times*' Tom Wicker writes a column that eases the pain but not the impact of the paper's endorsement: Clark's "been putting forward sensible or at least provocative proposals on an enormous range of issues, avoiding personal attacks, appealing to the common sense and even the idealism of the voters. . . . His reward is that Mr. Moynihan and Mrs. Abzug are the front-runners."

September 14, 1976: Primary Day! Bad early signs: A cabbie that morning tells me he's for Moynihan because "Clark dresses like a bum." At my barbershop that day, a woman stylist says she'll vote for Bella because "she's loud, so at least you can hear her. Clark is nice but very quiet."

Postscript: Moynihan beats Abzug by one point (easily within the margin provided by *The New York Times* endorsement)—with Ramsey a distant third—and goes on to defeat Buckley and serve four distinguished terms. Ramsey continues his work as a lawyer for so-called "radical" causes and some of the most despised defendants in the world. Abzug blames me the rest of her life for her loss, later failing in comeback bids for mayor and the House. While I'm serving 22 years later, in 1998, as the public advocate for New York City, Moynihan's wife, Elizabeth, hints that I should consider running to succeed him in 2000 . . . but a former first lady does so instead and gets a hard-earned win.

My three takeaways: I begin to understand better the observation that sometimes in politics you have to rise above principle, that virtue is not always its own reward, and that Ramsey Clark was one of a kind. ■

Mark Green is the author or editor of 25 books, including Bright Infinite Future, and, with Ralph Nader, Wrecking America: How Trump's Lawbreaking and Lies Betray All.