

Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan was held March 13th through March 16th, 2008 at the National Labor College in Silver Spring, MD. It was sponsored by Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), with the help and support of Veterans for Peace (VFP), Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), Military Families Speak Out (MFSO), and others.

The term "Winter Soldier" comes from Thomas Paine, during the American Revolution, when he spoke of and gave thanks to those "Winter Soldiers" who stayed past their enlistment, fought during the winter at Valley Forge and helped turn the tide and win the Revolution.

In 1971, during the American war against the people of Vietnam, American veterans, sponsored by VVAW, held the first "Winter Soldier Investigation" (WSI), "An Inquiry into American War Crimes".

The idea was that the American public had a right to know the true nature of the conduct of the war against Vietnam, that the American public was not getting that information from the American government, and that it was the duty of Patriotic American Veterans to continue to serve our country, after serving in Vietnam, by providing the public with the reality of the war as carried out by us, the troops on the ground, with our first-hand accounts.

I was one of the Vietnam Veterans who testified at the first WSI. I went there supporting the war but believing the public had a right to the truth. During the course of 3 days, the environment allowed me grow personally and politically. During my interviews with the filmmakers, I was asked questions in a non-threatening manner that I had never been asked and had never thought about before.

The process of thinking about the questions and giving honest answers allowed me to come to the realization that the war was wrong. I also made the decision to join with the other veterans there to help turn VVAW into a national organization known as VVAW, Inc. and to work against the war.

It was our hope that we would not only end the war but that our country would learn from the mistakes of Vietnam and never allow this to happen to another American generation.

So it was with mixed feelings that I attended Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan.

On one hand, I am very unhappy, to say the least, that my government has done to my children's generation in the sands of Iraq the very same thing that it did to my generation in the rice paddies of Vietnam. The fact that I and many other good citizens have been helpless in our attempts to control our government has also been very discouraging.

On the other hand, I know what it is like to be a combat veteran who wants to educate the public and stop the war and who does not have support of other veterans. I could not let that happen to this generation's combat veterans. So I am proud to support and stand by the members of IVAW.

I thought that I would be able to handle the testimony but I found myself streaming tears every day.

While thinking about writing this article, I am overwhelmed by the fact that there is so much to tell about the testimony and I will only be able to relate a small portion of what I heard.

At the first Winter Soldier, we came as we were. Most of us had long hair, beards, wore T-shirts and jeans, and testified using all of the profanity that we were used to.

At Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan, everyone who testified was dressed in business-type attire and, because of the live coverage, there was very little profanity. This approach allows those who judge people by their looks and language to be more open to the information that these veterans

have brought with their first-hand accounts. This was a smart idea.

Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan lasted 4 days and consisted of 13 panels. The panels were:

Winter Soldier and the Legacy of GI Resistance

Rules of Engagement: Part 1

The Crisis in Veterans' Healthcare

Corporate Pillaging and Military Contractors

Rules of Engagement: Part 2

Aims of the Global War on Terror: the Political, Legal, and Economic context of Iraq and Afghanistan

Divide to Conquer: Gender and Sexuality in the Military

Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy: Part 1

Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy: Part 2

Civilian Testimony: The Cost of War in Iraq and Afghanistan

The Cost of the War at Home

The Breakdown of the Military

The Future of GI Resistance

I have 24 pages of notes from these 4 days and I am going to touch on some of the things that impacted me the most. There was a kind of magic at the first Winter Soldier that was repeated at the second.

When veterans come home from war, they become dispersed throughout our civilian society.

Regardless of which war we fought in, we tend not to share our painful experiences with others, especially those who are close to us. Many of us feel that civilians will not understand us, that they do not understand the real nature of warfare, or that they will be judgmental. We don't want to burden our loved ones with our pain so we keep it inside of us, where sometimes it festers and explodes in fits of anger that we don't even always understand. This is not healthy and some of our PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) spreads to the very loved ones we try to protect with our silence.

At Winter Soldier, we become surrounded by others just like ourselves. We know that there will be lots of understanding and support. This allows us to make ourselves vulnerable, open up and bare our souls. This is very therapeutic for us and is as important to me as is giving the public an accurate picture of what we are doing on the ground.

My good friend Zollie Goodman testified on "**The Crisis in Veterans' Healthcare**" panel. Zollie and his wife Daisy have become good friends of my wife Sherry and me. They stay with us whenever they visit Gainesville. Zollie testified about how, while he was deployed, Daisy started having complications with her pregnancy. She was unable to get medical help and lost their child. Daisy sat with us during Zollie's testimony and was devastated. Later, I asked them why they had never told us about this. Daisy said that it was a private matter and they did not tell people about it because it was too painful. They did not intend to share this story when they went to Winter Soldier, but the atmosphere there, with everyone opening up and making themselves vulnerable, allowed them to also open up and get some of that weight off of their shoulders. This is the magic that I am talking about.

On the same panel, Joyce and Kevin Lucey testified. Their son, Corporal Jeffrey Lucey, was having psychological problems after coming home from Iraq. He tried to get help at the VA. The red tape, run-around and long delays in being able to get help ended when Joyce and Kevin came home to find their son Jeffrey dead -- he had hung himself. Kevin told us how the night before, Jeffrey asked his dad if he could sit on his lap. His father rocked Jeffrey, a combat Marine, on his lap as they held on to each other. It was Jeffrey's last place of refuge. In his suicide letter,

he apologized to his parents and asked them to please remember him as the happy kid he was before he went into the Marines.

The Luceys spoke about how when Jeffrey was in Iraq they worried and prayed for his safety. They thought once he got home he would be fine. The son who came home was different from the son who left and he had more psychological pain than he could live with. The Luceys never realized that their son's psychological damage could be fatal.

This made me think that most people who have loved ones serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are only thinking about their physical safety and aren't prepared for the psychological damage that their loved ones will come home with. This is a hidden epidemic -- its surface is just being scratched. The majority of those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan are still serving; of those who have gotten out of the service, 33% have filed with the VA for PTSD. According to a CBS study, "One age group stood out. Veterans aged 20 through 24, those who have served during the war on terror. They had the highest suicide rate among all veterans, estimated between two and four times higher than civilians the same age." The study also found "In 2005, for example, in just 45 states, there were at least 6,256 suicides among those who served in the armed forces. That's 120 each and every week, in just one year."

The testimony from the **Rules of Engagement** panels was very similar to Winter Soldier 1. Jeff Smith of Orlando testified that the turning point for him came when a farmer was shot and killed while irrigating his crops at night. The reason he was irrigating his crops at night is that that was when the electricity came on and provided the water. What upset Jeff the most was that his superiors knew that was why the farmer was out there, but that didn't matter -- he was violating the rules by being out there at night and so it was okay to shoot him.

I was surprised to learn that people carrying shovels were legitimate targets because they use shovels to bury explosive devices. You don't want to go out on your roof with your cell phone to get better reception because people using cell phones on a roof top are legitimate targets since cell phones are used to set off explosive devices. Some soldiers carry shovels and extra rifles with them (called drop weapons) so they can drop them on dead bodies to justify the killing. I guess you might call this an improvement from Vietnam since we did not have to plant weapons to justify our killing.

It does not matter what you think or believe about a war or what your intentions are before you get there. Once you are there and the reality of war hits you, you change. As soon as you see friends getting killed and wounded, the Mission Changes. The new Mission becomes Survival; you want you and your buddies to make it home safe and sound.

The nature of a war of occupation is such that things only get worse. When you cannot tell the difference between the people who support you and the people who want to harm you, you make mistakes. Everyone is a potential enemy. You tend to err on the side of safety for you and your buddies. A Marine named Jason Washburn told how a woman was coming toward them carrying a large bag. He raised his hand to motion her to stop; she did not. Acting out of fear of an explosive, they killed her. The bag turned out to be groceries; she was bringing food to them. Not only does this scar our troops but you better believe that the family and friends of that woman are no longer supporting our troops. You end up with what is called a dead man's spiral. The harder our troops fight to survive, the more they err; the more people they drive into the arms of those trying to kill our troops, the more casualties we take. This is the opposite of "Winning Hearts and Minds". A number of the people who testified made public apologies to the Iraqis for what they had done.

The fact of the matter is that we invaded Iraq and destroyed their way of life to impose upon them a way of life that our government in its condescending arrogance considered better for them. We did this in violation of international law and in my mind in violation of ethical and moral conduct. What our

government now hopes to accomplish for the people of Iraq is a country that is stable, where the different factions are not trying to kill each other, where there is no tolerance for Al-Qaeda or Hezbollah, where the people have running water, electricity, food in the stores, medicine in the hospitals, physical safety on the streets. We would want them to be secular rather than fundamentalist. This is what our government would consider victory and this is exactly what the people of Iraq had under Saddam Hussein.

I know of no way that we can, with force of arms, take this society that we smashed and crippled and give the people back the stability that they had.

The **Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy** panels show us another side of war. In order for our troops to be willing to kill others, they must be trained to believe that the lives of our people are more valuable than the lives of the inhabitants of the country we happen to be occupying. They must believe that the other side has it coming. Liam Madden, a Marine, said, "Making the enemy into something less than human is fundamental to prosecuting a war."

The Cost of the War at Home

[Adrienne Kinney, a former NSA \(National Security Agency\) employee, spoke about how they broke the rules, spied on Americans and were told not](#) to mention it in their reports. They spied on journalists, the Red Cross and NGOs (non-governmental organizations). She spoke of how all of these things are now legal and the destruction of the Constitution is the most damaging cost of this war.

Carlos Arredondo, whose son Alex was killed in Iraq, spoke with anger about how the military is allowed to come on high school campuses and "seduce" the children. When the Marines came to his home to notify him about his son's death, Carlos ordered them to leave. When they refused, he took a can of gasoline and burned their vehicle. He got caught in the fire, received 3rd degree burns and was taken to the hospital. His bill was \$42,000 and the hospital put a lien on his house to get their payment.

Divide to Conquer: Gender and Sexuality in the Military

Jeff Key, a Marine, spoke about the idea that showing your emotions and crying is somehow "feminine" or "gay".

Margaret Stevens said that for many female recruits, their first sexual encounter is with their recruiter. In the West Los Angeles VA Healthcare Center, 41% of woman veterans have reported being sexually assaulted while serving in the military. According to the Department of Defense, in 2006 there were 2947 sexual assaults in the military and in 2007 only 8% of the accused rapists were referred for Courts-Martial. Anyone think that the military is a good career choice for your daughter?

Corporate Pillaging and Military Contractors

Kelly Dougherty, who served as an MP, spoke about how her unit would use deadly force to protect KBR (Kellogg, Brown & Root) vehicles and when the vehicles would break down, they would abandon them and destroy them on a daily basis. Since all of the no-bid contracts are cost plus contracts, the contractors get back all of the money for their cost including replacement of abandoned vehicles and, on top of that, they get a percentage of all their costs. So the more they waste, the more they make.

The privatization of the war has made the use of mercenary forces from companies like Blackwater very profitable for the private sector and, since they get paid an enormously larger salary than the troops, this drives up our cost as taxpayers. These mercenaries also operate outside the rules of war and are not held accountable for their actions. In fact, they have immunity. It was the killing of 4 Blackwater contractors in Fallujah that resulted in the turning of Fallujah into a free fire zone resulting in the death of thousands of Iraqi's and many Marines. The uncontrolled conduct of these contractors has actually undermined our efforts and the safety of our troops.

It seems to me that we need a constitutional amendment that says that any time American troops are in a war, all corporations that supply the troops and the war effort must do so at cost; in other words, no war profiteering permitted! If our children are asked to prove their patriotism by being willing to give up their lives and safety for their country, why shouldn't the corporations be willing to prove their patriotism by giving up their profit for their country in time of war?

Aims of the Global War on Terror: the Political, Legal, and Economic context of Iraq and Afghanistan

This panel was about the obvious -- that this is really a war for oil and that this war is illegal. Amy Goodman hit the nail on the head. She spoke about how the consolidation of the media has narrowed the spectrum of opinion that used to allow us to see different sides of an issue. She spoke of how private corporations use the public airways for profit and power, not for the public good. I remember in high school when they used to teach the proud history of our revolutionary heritage, we were taught that the press was actually the 4th branch of the government and the press's duty was to be the public eye on the other three branches. The consolidation of the media has taken away our public eye and replaced it with corporate government propaganda.

It was the exposure of the massacre at My Lai, March 16th, 1968 (with photos in Life Magazine) that led to the first Winter Soldier. The last day of the Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan testimony took place on the 40th anniversary of this tragic historic event.

The first Winter Soldier had 3 days of panels; they were all recorded on film. The film was made into a 93-minute documentary called "Winter Soldier". All of the rest of the film was destroyed in a fire, lost forever; all we have left today is that 93 minutes. The press ignored our Winter Soldier so until recently, when it was re-released on DVD, most people had never even heard of it. This time, Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan was streamed live and blogged all over the world via the Internet and even though the "main stream corporate press" of the United States ignored it, internationally, Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan was the number one news story on the first day of testimony. There is no way that this history can be covered up.

The **Civilian Testimony: The Cost of War in Iraq and Afghanistan** panel was another heartbreaking panel. As a parent, it made me angry to hear mothers speak about how "terrifying" it was for their children having armed soldiers breaking down their doors in the middle of the night pointing guns and screaming at them while the men of the family were bound, hooded and taken away. Every time they spoke of how "terrorizing" it was for their children, it stung my soul. I wonder how many Americans would be okay with this happening in our homes to our children. It struck me that if the Iraqi families are feeling terrorized, doesn't that make us the Terrorists?

The Future of GI Resistance

Camilo Mejia said it all, "We are still soldiers. We are just not their soldiers anymore. We are the new Winter Soldiers."

For more information on Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan go to:

www.ivaw.org

<http://www.afn.org/~vetpeace/>