America in Protest: Records of Anti-Vietnam War Organizations

Part 1: Vietnam Veterans Against the War
An Index to the Microfilm Edition of

America in Protest: Records of Anti-Vietnam War Organizations

Part 1: Vietnam Veterans Against the War

Guide Compiled by Todd Dewey

Primary Source Media
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Scope and Content Note ................................................................. vi
Editorial Note ............................................................................. viii
Reel Index .................................................................................. 1
Subject Index .............................................................................. 5
SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) started in 1967 with six Vietnam veterans marching for peace in New York City. The purpose of the organization was to give voice to the returning servicemen who opposed the on-going war in Southeast Asia. From six soldiers in 1967, the ranks of the membership eventually grew to over 30,000. Over four decades later this organization still exists, which makes this collection of over 21,000 pages relevant for those interested in today’s antiwar movement and its history during the Vietnam War era. In an attempt to keep this group under close watch, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) maintained diligent surveillance of the VVAW almost from the inception of the group’s activities and running through 1975, when the United States ended its presence in Vietnam.

This microfilm publication consists of FBI reports dealing with every aspect of antiwar work carried out by the VVAW. The collection also includes surveillance on a variety of other antiwar groups and individuals, with an emphasis on student groups and Communist organizations.

The collection opens with numerous reports, newsletters, and position papers, as well as an FBI historical overview on the leading antiwar organizations during the Vietnam War era. The first two reels of the collection do not follow a chronological order, however starting on the third reel and concluding on the final reel, the collection flows from mid-1971 through late 1975. Some of the more in-depth reports conducted by the FBI include detailed surveillance of national and steering committee meetings, where major decisions, debates, and elections took place. At these meetings the VVAW generalized experiences from local chapters, organized for demonstrations and campaigns, and formulated plans for working within the broad Antiwar Movement. In addition, financial decisions, elections of officers, and updates on legal cases were reviewed at these meetings.

The collection includes a wide range of position papers written by antiwar movement activists. The papers in many instances were open letters to the broad Antiwar Movement, and included topics such as sexism and racism in the movement, the struggle for amnesty, and the debate on pacifism as a strategic tactic. The anti-imperialism controversy was an ever-present debate in the movement and can be found in numerous position papers in the collection.

The FBI maintained extensive surveillance on college and university campuses with informants reporting on the slightest activity by antiwar groups and individuals. VVAW campus chapters were monitored closely in states such as Florida, New York, California, Texas, and Ohio. The FBI kept close watch on other groups and organizations on campus, most notably the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Detailed information on the rise and eventual split of the SDS are covered in the collection. There is also documentation on the Kent State shootings and subsequent campus strikes.

Wherever Communist and Socialist organizations were involved in antiwar activities, the FBI made certain that they were closely followed and this is highlighted throughout the collection. Detailed reports by informants and internal FBI memos discussed the “danger” of Marxist groups and their influence inside the VVAW, in particular, and the Antiwar Movement in general. The Communist Party USA and the Socialist Workers Party, including their youth and “front” groups, received a tremendous amount of attention by the FBI. Specific radical groups, particularly the Revolutionary Union, receive extensive coverage in the FBI reports, because they were “blamed” for some of the most serious conflicts inside the VVAW.
In 1972, the VVAW, along with many other antiwar groups, planned demonstrations for the Republican National Convention in Miami. VVAW’s showpiece demonstration in Miami was the successful silent march of over 1500 Vietnam veterans through downtown Miami Beach to President Nixon’s hotel, where VVAW leaders demanded the immediate improvement of treatment for returning Vietnam veterans and the withdrawal of the remaining troops in Southeast Asia immediately. Numerous other demonstrations during this time, including the so-called “Battle of Miami,” led to arrests of many veterans.

The uncovering of the Watergate scandal in 1973-1974 reinvigorated the antiwar movement, with much of the activity revolving around the call for Nixon’s impeachment. The FBI collected reports from every region of the country regarding the protests and rallies surrounding the Nixon impeachment.

This microfilm publication includes a number of legal cases revolving around constitutional rights, wiretapping, and civil rights. Plaintiffs in the cases included students, veterans, and activists who sued on the grounds that their civil liberties were infringed upon by the federal government. William Kunstler represented veterans who fought for their rights in New Mexico, while the prisoners from the Attica Uprising entered what would become landmark decades-long litigation. The National Lawyers Guild represented hundreds of antiwar organizations and members in the 1982-1989 case against the U.S. Attorney General for the illegal monitoring of Vietnam War protestors.

The FBI made certain to keep close surveillance of some of the more well-known and famous antiwar activists such as Jane Fonda and John Kerry. Their public appearances, speeches, and movements were extensively monitored—these detailed reports are found throughout the collection. Surveillance reports on the prolific antiwar writer and historian Howard Zinn are also well represented.

The final segment of the collection has a significant amount of material from 1975, and offers some fascinating documents surrounding expulsions, resignations and debates in the VVAW, as well as other antiwar organizations. A major discussion found at the conclusion of the collection relates to the future of the VVAW. As American involvement in Vietnam came to an end in the spring of 1975, the VVAW struggled with the future of their purpose--do they continue to oppose “all imperialist wars” or do they simply fold now that the Vietnam War had ended. Final documents include in-depth and lengthy letters of resignations by some of the more experienced leaders of the VVAW.
EDITORIAL NOTE

The materials in this publication have been released under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Under FOIA regulations, the FBI and other federal agencies reserve the right to withhold or delete any documents or segments of documents due to privacy concerns, confidentiality of sources, and/or matters of national security. There are documents in this collection that have portions withheld. Primary Source Media has microfilmed these documents in their entirety, as released.

The FBI’s file designation system consists of three parts. The first three numbers indicate the kind of offense the FBI was investigating when it opened the file. In the case of the VVAW surveillance, the file number begins with “100” and thus would be classification 100, or an investigation into domestic security. The numbers following 100 signify further internal FBI identification for each particular file.

Publisher’s Note: The last 300 pages of Reel 21 should have been filmed at the end of Reel 18. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause researchers.
**REEL INDEX**

**File 100-HQ-448092**

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# REEL INDEX

## REEL 6

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*National Lawyer’s Guild v. Attorney General*

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<td>Section 43</td>
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## REEL INDEX

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[54]</td>
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<td>Section 69 December 1974 / January 1975</td>
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# REEL INDEX

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**SUBJECT INDEX**

The following index is a guide to major subjects found in this microfilm publication. The first number after each entry refers to the reel, while the number following the colon refers to a numbered folder on that reel. Hence 11:121, 122 directs the researcher to the folders numbered 121 and 122 on reel 11. Each folder is located on the reel in numerical order and introduced with a title page. These subjects will not necessarily be found at the beginning of the designated folder, but will be located within it. This subject index is best used in conjunction with the reel index, which lists not only folder numbers, but folder titles as well.

**African Americans**  
antiwar movement and, 18:76

**Agnew, Spiro T.**  
protests and boycotts, 10:43

**Alabama–Mississippi region**  
10: 43

**Albany, NY**  
regional meeting, 13:56  
VVAW chapter, 9:38

**American Committee for Fourth International**  
2:16

**American Indian Movement (AIM)**  
antiwar movement and, 12:50; 17:70; 20:82  
Wounded Knee, SD, 12:52

**American Veterans Movement**  
antiwar movement and, 19:77  
Kovic, Ron, 17:73  
see also G.I. Alliance  
see also National Association of Concerned Veterans  
see also Veterans’ rights  
see also Veterans Union  
see also Vets for Peace

**Amnesty**  
position paper, 14:61; 17:73; 19:79, 80; 21:84  
see also Midwest Amnesty Conference

**Anti-imperialism**  
debate, 1:4; 20:83; 21:84, 85, 86  
position paper, 19:77; 20:81

**Anti-Imperialist Bulletin**  
14:61

**Anti-Imperialist Caucus**  
California, May 1975, 21:86  
national meeting, June 27-30, 1975, 21:84

**Antiwar Movement**  
analysis of 1968, 3:18  
analysis of 1972, 11:46, 47  
analysis of 1974, 19:80  
anti-imperialism and, 19:77  
Fonda, Jane, 1:12; 2:14; 3:19; 10:45  
future of, 1:4; 17:71; 18:75; 21:84, 85, 86  
leadership, 5:24; 21:85  
Nixon impeachment, 15:65  
onviolence in, 3:18  
Post-Vietnam Syndrome, 13:56  
Republican National Convention, 10:43  
sexism in, 2:13; 17:73; 19:77; 21:86  
Socialists in, 15:64; 17:72; 19:80; 21:84  
unity, 1:3  
VVAW policy position paper, 5:26  
women's rights, 2:13; 17:73  
see also Protests and demonstrations

**Antiwar organizations (general)**  
affiliation with Communists, 20:82, 83  
history of, 10:43

**April 19th Demonstration**  
1:11

**Arlington National Cemetery**  
protests and boycotts, 2:13

**Association of the Vietnamese Patriots in Canada**  
17: 72

**Attica Brothers Legal Defense**  
1:1, 2
Attica News
1:1

Attica uprising
prisoner rights, 19:77, 79
see also Attica Brothers Legal Defense

Auburn University, Auburn, AL
campus activities, 10:43

Black Panther Party (BPP)
1:12; 9:41

Black United Front
protests and boycotts, 3:18

Buffalo, NY
National Steering Committee meeting, 19:77
regional conference, 17:72

Burlington, VT
protests and boycotts, 19:78

"Cairo Convoy"
3:17; 10:45

California
Anti-Imperialist Caucus, 21:86
chapters, 12:52; 15:62
"Impeach Nixon" Regional Conference, 17:73
Los Angeles airport, 6:30
Los Angeles chapter, 21:88
Palo Alto, 10:44
Sacramento, 9:41
Santa Barbara, 12:50
Santa Cruz, 19:78
university campus activities, 12:52

Camil, Scott
antiwar movement, 4:21; 7:34; 9:38; 12:51; 14:59
VVAW leadership, 4:21; 7:34; 9:38; 12:51

Campus activities (VVAW chapters)
Albany, New York chapter, 9:38
arrests, 18:75
Auburn University, 10:43
California chapters, 12:52; 15:62
Cincinnati, OH chapter, 12:52
Florida chapters, 2:16; 12:52
general, 5:24; 12:53
Jacksonville, FL chapter, 7:32; 8:37; 9:38
Kansas City, MO chapter, 2:16; 3:17; 10:42
Kent State University, 2:14; 12:51
Killeen, TX (Fort Hood) chapter, 5:25
Los Angeles, CA chapter, 21:88
Minnesota chapter, 9:41
Mohr, Reginald, 11:48
New Haven, CT chapter, 6:29; 9:38
New Orleans, LA chapter, 12:52
New York chapters, 12:52
Oklahoma chapters, 9:41
Southern Methodist University, 6:20, 29
Students for Democratic Society (SDS), 3:17
University of Arkansas, 2:13
University of Florida, 4:21; 7:32; 13:57
University of Oklahoma, 4:23; 6:31
University of South Florida, 12:51
Yale University, 5:26, 27; 6:29
see also Civil disobedience
see also Protests and boycotts

Chicago, IL
National GI Conference, 19:79
National Steering Committee meeting, 11:46, 49; 12:50

Chicago 8 Amnesty Trial
1:2

Chile
1973 coup d'etat, 17:73

Cincinnati, OH
university campus activities, 12:52

Civil disobedience
antiwar movement, 21:84
Ford, Gerald, 17:70, 71
see also Protests and boycotts

Civil rights
9:40

Coal miners
antiwar movement and, 1:5, 5a

Coffee houses
antiwar movement and, 15:63

Colorado
Denver, 5:26
Columbus Freepress
14:61

Communist Party
antiwar movement and, 1:12
organizations, 20:81

Communists
American Committee for Fourth
International, 2:16
general, 10:42; 15:64
informants, 19:78
VVAW and, 10:42; 17:71; 21:88

Conference on the 5th Anniversary
Founding of the Provisional
Revolutionary Government of the
Republic of South Vietnam
17:72

Connecticut
Groton Naval Base, 6:28, 29
Naval Training Reserve, Fort Hale Park,
New Haven, 5:27
New Haven, 6:29; 9:38
U.S. Coast Guard Academy, 6:31
see also Yale University

Constitutional rights
1:7; 2:15; 3:17; 8:35, 37; 10:45; 17:70

Davis, Angela
1:2

Democratic National Convention, 1968
protests and boycotts, 21:88

Denver, CO
National Steering Committee meeting,
5:26

District of Columbia
Capitol Hill protest, 2:13
Lincoln Memorial protest, 2:13; 5:5
see also July 1-4, 1974 National
Demonstration

Economy
racism in, 1:5a

Education
African American history, 18:76
teach-ins, 7:32; 21:88

Ellsberg, Daniel
Pentagon Papers, 3:20

Employment crisis debate
antiwar movement and, 19:80

Energy crisis debate
15:62

Expulsions
from the antiwar movement, 12:50;
21:85, 86

Factionalism/infighting
antiwar movement, 14:60
debate and infighting among activist groups,
12:50; 21:85, 86
Students for Democratic Society (SDS),
6:28

Fifth Avenue Vietnam Peace Parade
Committee (FAVPPC)
3:17

Flag debate
antiwar movement and, 3:17

Florida
campus activities, 2:16; 12:52
Gainesville, 13:57
Jacksonville, 7:32; 8:37; 9:38
regional conferences/conventions, 3:18;
7:32; 12:51
south, 9:39
Tampa, 12:51, 21:87
see also University of Florida
see also University of South Florida

Fonda, Jane
antiwar movement, 1:12; 2:14; 3:19;
10:45

Ford, Gerald
civil disobedience against, 17:71
pardon of Richard Nixon, 21:86, 87
protest against, 19:78

Fort Hood, Texas
demonstration at, 5:24

Freedom of the Press
15:62, 65; 17:73
Gainesville, FL
   campus activities, 13:57
   regional conference, 7:32

Gainesville 8 Trial
   1:9; 11:47; 13:57; 17:70

Gateway Arch, St Louis, MO
   protests and boycotts, 6:30

GI Alliance
   2:16
   see also National Association of
      Concerned Veterans
   see also Veterans Union
   see also Vets for Peace

GI Bill debate
   antiwar movement, 1:5
   see also Veterans’ rights

GI Movement Newsletter
   14:59

Groton Naval Base, CT
   protests and boycotts, 6:28, 29

"Guerilla Theater"
   4:21; 10:45

Hassett, Steve
   antiwar movement, 21:85

Highway 13/GI Unity
   1:5

Houston, TX
   National Conventions, 5:25, 26
   National Steering Committee meeting,
      7: 34

Hubbard, Al
   antiwar movement and, 4:21, 22; 7:34

Illinois
   Chicago, 11: 46, 49; 12:50; 19:79

Impeachment
   Nixon, Richard M., 1:2; 15:64, 65;
      16:68, 69; 17:70, 72; 18:74, 75, 76;
      19:77, 79; 20:81

"Impeach Nixon" Regional Conference
   California, 17:73

Indo China Peace Campaign (IPC)
   protests and boycotts, 20:81

Informants
   general, 1:9; 1:12; 2:16; 5:24; 8:36;
      9:38; 10:42; 14:59; 15:62; 17:73;
      18:76; 19:80; 20:82
   revolutionary groups, 19:78, 79
   Socialist Worker's Party (SWP), 1:12
   Students for Democratic Society (SDS),
      1:12
   Winter Soldier Investigation, 2:14
   Workers World Party (WWP), 1:12
   Youth Against War & Fascism
      (YAWF), 1:12
   Youth International Party (YIP), 1:12

Japan
   VVAW chapters, 17:73

July 1-4, 1974 National Demonstration
   1:1; 17:72, 73; 18:74, 76

Kansas City, MO
   general, 2:16; 3:17; 10:42; 14:59
   National Steering Committee meeting,
      4:21, 23

Kent State University
   campus activities, 2:14; 12:51
   general, 11:48, 49

Kerry, John
   antiwar movement, 2:13; 3:20; 4:21, 23
   VVAW leadership, 2:13; 4:21, 23

Killeen, TX
   5:25

Kovic, Ron
   American Veteran Movement, 17:73

Kunstler, William
   3:18

Labor
   antiwar movement and, 19:77
   coal miners, 1:5, 5a
   unemployment, 19:80
   Women Strike For Peace, 21:88
   Worker Student Alliance, 2:16
   see also People’s Labor Party
   see also Socialist Worker’s Party
see also Workers’ World Party
see also Youth Workers Liberation League

Labor unions
antiwar movement and, 1:5; 6:28
postal workers strike, 21:85
Sikorsky Aircraft strike, 6:28
United Farm Workers (UFW), 1:1

Latin America
Chile, 17:73

Lawton, Gary
1:9; 21:88

Legal matters
Attica brothers Legal Defense, 1:2
Chicago 8 Amnesty Trial, 1:2
civil rights, 9:40
constitutional rights, 1:7; 2:15; 3:17;
8:35, 37; 10:45; 17:70
Gainesville 8 Trial, 1:9; 11:47; 13:57;
17:70
general, 1:5a, 11; 13:57
Kent State University, 11:48, 49
Kunstler, William, 3:18
Midway Trial, 1:2
National Lawyers’ Guild v. Attorney
General, 11:47; 13:57; 14:58, 59, 60
prisoner rights, 1:2
student rights, 3:17
veteran rights, 1:7; 2:13, 15; 14:61
wiretapping, 9:40

Lincoln Memorial
protests and boycotts, 2:13; 5:25

Los Angeles Airport
protests and boycotts, 6:30

Louisiana
New Orleans chapter, 12:52

McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey
protests and boycotts, 5:25

Mid-Atlantic chapters
organizations, 9:39

Middle East
Palestine, 1:5

Midway Trial
1:2

Midwest Amnesty Conference
Cincinnati, OH, September 21-23, 1973,
14:60; 16:66

Military-industrial complex
position paper, 1:5

Milwaukee, WI
chapter, 7:33; 11:48; 17:73
National Steering Committee meetings,
8:37; 10:44; 11:48; 16:68, 69; 17:73;
21:85
Veterans Union, 7:33

Minnesota
chapter, 9: 42

Missouri
Kansas City, 4:21, 23
Kansas City chapter 2:16; 3:17; 10:42;
14:59
St. Louis, 14:58, 61; 20:81

Mohr, Reginald
FBI agent, 11:48

My Lai Incident
2:14

Narcotics arrests
antiwar movement and, 8:36

National Association of Concerned Veterans
15:62
see also G. I. Alliance
see also Veterans Union
see also Vets for Peace

National Clearinghouse of VVAV
5:27

"The National Collective"
position paper, 20:81

National Committee Against Repressive Legislation
4:21
National Conventions
Houston, TX, April 7-11, 1972, 5:26
Houston, TX, May 1972, 5:25
Norman, OK, Nov 5-7, 1971, 4:21

National Defense Committee Meeting
St Louis, MO, 18:74

National GI Conference (G.I. National Conference)
Chicago, IL, 19:79
General 20: 81

National Lawyers' Guild v. Attorney General
11:47; 13:57; 14:58, 59, 60

National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC)
2:14

National Steering Committee meetings
Buffalo, NY, August 8-12, 1974, 19:77
Chicago, IL, Jan 4-8, 1973, 11:46, 49; 12:50
Denver, CO, Feb 18-21, 1972, 5:26
Houston, Texas, April 7-11 1972, 7:34
Milwaukee, WI, April 11-15, 1974, 16:68, 69; 17:73
Milwaukee, WI, July 21-24, 1972, 8:37; 11:48
Milwaukee, WI, July 3-8, 1975, 21:85
New Mexico, April 19-22, 1973, 13:54, 56, 57
Ohio, December 26-31, 1973, 15:63, 64; 16:67
Palo Alto, CA, September 29-October 2, 1972, 10:43, 44
St. Louis, MO, August 23-27, 1973, 14:58, 61
St. Louis, MO, December 27-31, 1974, 20:81
see also National Conventions
see also Regional conventions/conferences

Naval Training Reserve, Fort Hale Park, New Haven, CT
protests and boycotts, 5:27

New Hampshire
Pease Air Force Base, 5:25

New Haven, CT
Naval Training Reserve, Fort Hale Park, 5:27
protests and boycotts, 6:29

New Jersey
McGuire Air Force Base protest, 5:25
regional conference, 16:66; 17:72

New London, CT
U.S. Coast Guard Academy, 6:31

New Mexico
National Steering Committee meeting, 13:54, 56, 57
New Orleans, LA
university campus activities, 12:52

New York City
protests and demonstrations, 2:13

New York state
Albany, 13:56
Buffalo, 17:72; 19:77
regional conferences, 16:66; 17:72
1972 Spring Action Program, 10:43
state meetings, 11:46; 12:53; 15:65
university campus activities, 12:52

Newsletters
Anti-Imperialist Bulletin, 14:61
Attica News, 1:1
Columbus Freepress, 14:61
Freedom of the Press, 15:62, 65; 17:73
general, 10:45; 13:56
GI Movement Newsletter, 14:59
Highway 13/GI Unity, 1:5
Revolution, 1:1
SEMPER FI/"The Right", 13:57; 14:58, 59, 60
Suffolk Street, 1:1
The Veteran, 14:61
VVAW Newsletter, 13:55; 18:74
VVAW/WSO Newsletter, 14:59; 16:68
Winter Soldier, 1:1, 2, 5a; 14:61; 19:80
Wounded Knee, SD, 12:51
WSO Newsletter, 15:65
Yokosuka, Japan chapter, 14:60

1971 Fall Demonstrations
3: 18
1972 Spring Action Program
New York, 10:43

Nixon, Richard M.
impeachment of, 1:2; 11:47; 15:64, 65;
16:68, 69, 70, 72; 18:74, 75, 76;
19:77, 79; 20:81
pardon protest, 19:78; 20:83
presidential inauguration 1973, 11:48, 49

Nonviolence debate
antiwar movement and, 3:18

Norman, OK
regional conference, 4:23
National Convention, 4:21

Ohio
Akron, 20:82
Cincinnati chapters, 12:52
National Steering Committee meeting, 15:63, 64; 16:67
see also Kent State University

Oklahoma
chapters, 9:41
Norman, 4:23

Operation Dewey Canyon III
protests and boycotts, 2:14

Operation Last Patrol
protests and boycotts, 9:40; 11:46

Operation Rapid AmericanWithdrawal
protests and boycotts, 1:12

Organizational Committee for Fifth Estate
general, 16:69

Pacification
position paper, 13:54

Pacifism
4:23

Palestine
1: 5

Palo Alto, CA
National Steering Committee meeting, 10:43, 44

PAVPPC
3:17

Peace Action Coalition
4:22

Pease Air Force Base, Portsmouth, NH
March 3-5, 1972, 5:25

Pennsylvania
Pittsburgh 3:18

Pentagon Papers
Ellsberg, Daniel, 3:20

Peoples' Coalition for Peace and Justice (PCPJ)
conference, June 25-27, 1971, 2:16
general, 2:14; 8:35

“People's Convoy to Stop Nixon”
protests and boycotts, 8:37

People's Labor Party (PLP)
2:14; 2:16; 8:36
see also Socialist Worker’s Party
see also Worker’s World Party
see also Youth Workers Liberation
League

Pittsburgh, PA
protests and boycotts, 3:18

Post Vietnam Syndrome
Veterans’ health rights, 13:56

Postal workers strike
21:85

Presidential inauguration, 1973
protests and boycotts, 11:48, 49

Prisoner rights
1:2; 17:73; 19:80; 20:81

Prisons
Attica uprising, 1:1, 2; 19:77, 79
general, 1:9; 21:88
Lawton, Gary, 1:5a, 11
organizing in, 1:3

Pro Indochinese Independence
protests and boycotts, 20:81
Protests and boycotts
Agnew, Spiro T., 10:43
Akron, OH, 20:82
amnesty, 19:80; 21:84
April 19 demonstration, 1:11
Arlington National Cemetery, 2:13
Black United Front Boycott, 3:18
Burlington, VT, 19:78
“Cairo Convoy,” 10:45
campus activities, 4:23; 6:28
campus strikes, 8:36
Capitol Hill, 2:13
civil disobedience, 6:30
coal miners, 1:5a
Democratic National Convention, 21:88
Fort Hood, TX, 5:24
Gainesville, FL, 13:57
Gateway Arch, St Louis, MO, 6:30
general, 1:11; 2:15; 3:17, 18, 19; 4:22;
5:26; 6:30; 10:43; 11:46; 12:52;
15:63; 16:66, 67; 17:72; 20:81
Groton Naval Base, CT, 6:28, 29
Guerrilla Theater, 4:21
Indo China Peace Campaign (IPC),
20:81
July 1-4, 1974 National Demonstration,
1:1; 17:73; 18:74, 76
Lincoln Memorial, 2:13; 5:25
Los Angeles Airport, 6:30
McGuire AFB, New Jersey, 5:25
Milwaukee VVAW chapter, 17:70
Mohr, Reginald, 11:48
Naval Training Reserve, Fort Hale Park,
New Haven, CT 5:27
New Haven, CT, 6:29
New York City, 2:13
1971 Fall Demonstrations, 3:18
1972 Spring Action Program, 10:43
Nixon pardon, 19:78; 20:83
Operation Dewey Canyon III, 2:14
Operation Last Patrol, 9:40; 11:46
Operation Rapid American Withdrawal,
1:12
People's Convoy to Stop Nixon, 8:37
Pittsburgh, PA, 3:18
Presidential Inauguration 1973, 11:48,
49
Pro Indo Chinese Independence, 20:81
Republican Headquarters (Seattle WA),
6:31
Republican National Convention, 8:35;
9:40; 10:43
Sikorsky Aircraft, April 17, 1972, 6:28
Southern Methodist University, 6:30
Spring Action Program, 10: 43
Statue of Liberty, 2:13
Tampa chapter, 12:51
troop escalation, 6:30
United Farm Workers, 1:1
United Nations, NY, 6:29
U.S. Coast Guard Academy, 6:31
University of Arkansas, 2:13
University of Oklahoma, 6:31
Valley Forge II December 24-31, 1971,
5:25
veterans’ health rights, 1:1, 5a; 16:68;
17:70; 19:79; 20:81; 21:85
veterans’ rights, 1:1, 5, 10; 2:15; 19:77;
20:82
Wall Street, 2:13
Westmoreland, William, 5:26
Winter Soldier Investigation, 2:14
Wounded Knee, SD, 12:50; 12:53;
13:54
see also Campus activities
see also Civil disobedience

Puerto Rico
independence and antiwar movements,
1:1, 2

Racism
in armed forces, 1:5
in economy, 1:5a

Recruitment
20:81

Regional conventions/conferences
Archer, FL, Sept 4-6, 1971, 3:18
Auburn, AL, October 1972, 10:43
Buffalo, NY, 17:72
Florida, March 3-4, 1973, 12:51
Gainesville, FL, May 27-28, 1972, 7:32
Milwaukee, WI, December 29-31, 1972,
11:48
New York-New Jersey, 16: 66
Norman, OK, November. 5-7, 1971,
4:23
Oneonta, NY, July 27-28, 1974, 18:76;
19:78
Sacramento, CA, Fall 1972, 9:41
Santa Barbara, CA, February 16-18, 1972, 12:50
Santa Cruz, CA, September 14-15, 1974, 19:78
See also National Steering Committee meetings

Republican National Convention, 1972
Florida chapters, 7:33
Miami FL, 2:13; 6:31; 7:32, 33; 8:37; 9:38, 40; 10:42, 43, 44
protests and boycotts, 8:35; 9:39, 40; 10:43

Revolution
1:1

Revolution Youth Movement (RYM)
2:16; 3:18; 8:36

Revolution Youth Movement II (RYM II)
4:21

Revolutionary Union (RU)
expelled from antiwar movement, 21:85
general, 1:1; 17:73; 20:81

“Round Robin Reports”
chapters, 16:68

Rusk, Dean
2:13

Sacramento, CA
regional conference, 9:41

St. Louis, MO
chapter, 1:5
Gateway Arch, 6:30
National Steering Committee meeting, 14:56, 61; 20:81

Santa Barbara, CA
regional conference, 12:50

Santa Cruz, CA
regional conference, 19:78

Seattle, WA
Republican Party headquarters, 6:31

SEMPER FI/"The Right"
13:57; 14:58, 59, 60

Sexism
antiwar movement and, 2:13; 17:73; 19:77; 21:86

Sikorsky Aircraft Company
strike, 6:28

Socialists
antiwar movement, 15:64; 17:72; 19:80; 21:84
informants, 19:78
see also Youth for Socialist Alliance
see also Youth Socialist League

Socialist Worker’s Party (SWP)
general, 3:19; 9:41; 20:81, 83
informants, 1:12
see also People’s Labor Party
see also Workers’ World Party
see also Youth Workers Liberation League

Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF)
4:21; 5:24

Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX
campus activities, 6:20, 29, 30

Southern Students Organizing Committee (SSOC)
5:24

Southwest U.S. chapters
9:39

State meetings
New York, 11:46; 12:52, 53

Statue of Liberty
protests and boycotts, 2:13

Student Mobilization Committee (SMC)
2:14, 16

Student rights
legal matters, 3:17

Students for Democratic Society (SDS)
campus activities, 3:17
factionalism/infighting, 6:28
general, 2:14, 16; 3:18; 5:24; 8:36; 9:41
informants, 1:12
**Suffolk Street**
1:1

**Tampa, FL**
chapter, 12:51; 21:87

**Teach-ins**
antiwar movement, 7:32; 21:88

**Texas**
Houston, 5:25, 26
Killeen, 5:25
*see also* Southern Methodist University

**Torture**
position paper, 13:54

**unemployment debate**
antiwar movement, 19:80

**United Nations**
protests and boycotts, 6:29

**U.S. Capitol**
*see* District of Columbia

**U.S. Coast Guard Academy**
protests and boycotts, 6:31

**Unity debate**
antiwar movement, 1:4; 18:75

**University of Arkansas**
campus activities, 2:13

**University of Florida**
campus activities, 4:21; 7:32; 13:57

**University of Oklahoma**
campus activities, 4:23; 6:31

**University of South Florida**
campus activities, 12:51

**Valley Forge II**
protests and boycotts, 5:25

**Vermont**
Burlington, 19:78

**The Veteran**
14:61

**Veterans’ health rights**
antiwar movement, 1:1, 5a; 16:68; 17:70; 19:79; 20:81; 21:85
Post Vietnam Syndrome, 13:56

**Veterans’ rights**
general, 1:2
antiwar movement, 1:1, 5, 10; 2:15; 19:77; 20:82
legal matters, 1:7; 2:13, 15; 14:61

**Veterans Union**
Milwaukee, 7:33
*see also* G.I. Alliance
*see also* National Association of Concerned Veterans

**Vets for Peace (VFP)**
4:21
*see also* G.I. Alliance
*see also* National Association of Concerned Veterans

**Vietnam War**
conclusion of US involvement, 21:86

**VVAW (general)**
constitution, 4:21; 5:25; 12:51
elections of officers, 21:88
finances, 5:25; 13:55; 21:86
future, 17:71; 21:84
general, 18:75
recruitment, 20:81
“Round Robin Reports,” 16:68
statement: "An Introduction", 11:46
surveillance history, 1:12

**VVAW—leadership**
Boggio, James, 21:88
Camil, Scott, 4:21; 7:34; 9:38; 12:51
Hassett, Steve, 21:85
Hubbard, Al, 4:22; 7:34
Kerry, John, 2:13; 4:21, 23
resignations, 21:84, 85, 86

**VVAW Newsletter**
13:55; 18:74

**VVAW/WSO Newsletter**
14:59; 16:68

**Wall Street**
protests and boycotts, 2:13
War Resist League (WRL) organizations, 3:17

War Resisters organizations, 3:17

Washington state Seattle, 6:31

Weatherman 2:16

Westmoreland, William protests and boycotts, 5:26

Winter Soldier 1:1, 2, 5a; 14:61; 19:80 see also WSO Newsletter

Winter Soldier Investigation 2:14; 3:20; 3:17; 16:68

Winter Soldier Investigation II 4:22

Winter Soldier Retreat 13:55, 56

Wiretapping legal matters, 9:40


Women Strike For Peace 21:88

Women's rights antirwar movement, 2:13; 17:73

Worker Student Alliance 2:16

Workers World Party (WWP) informants, 1:12 see also People’s Labor Party see also Socialist Worker’s Party see also Youth Workers Liberation League

Wounded Knee, SD American Indian Movement, 12:50, 51, 52, 53; 13:54

"Wrist rockets" weapon report/description, 1:2; 8:36, 37

WSO Newsletter 15:65

Yale University campus activities, 5:26, 27; 6:29

Yokosuka, Japan chapter, 12:53 newsletters, 14:60

Youth Against War & Fascism (YAWF) informants, 1:12

Youth for Socialist Alliance (YSA) 2:14; 3:19

Youth International Party (YIP) informants, 1:12

Youth Socialist League (YSA) 2:16

Youth Workers Liberation League (YWLL) 3:17 see also People’s Labor Party see also Socialist Worker’s Party see also Workers’ World Party

Zinn, Howard leadership in antirwar movement, 5:24
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