

“Goodbye My Darling, Hello Vietnam”

By Edward O'Mahony

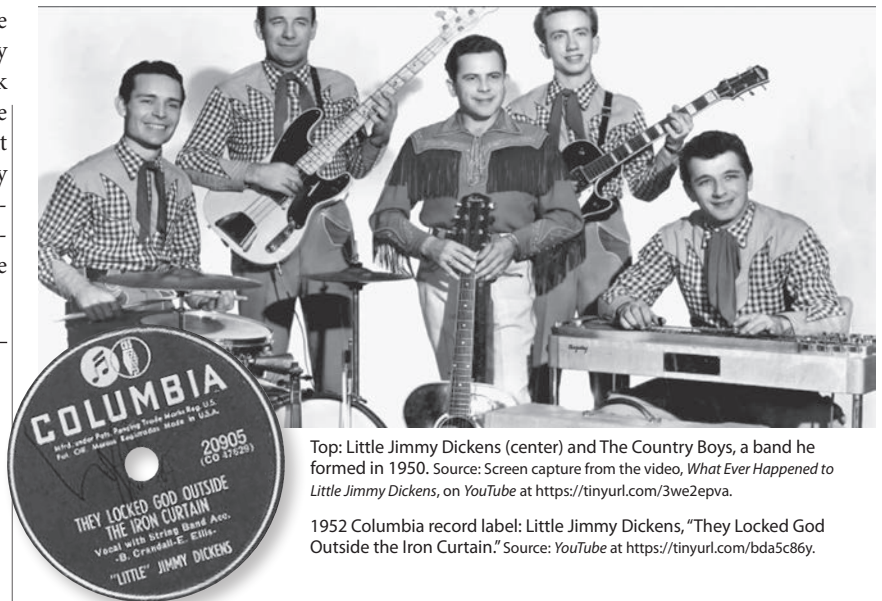
Editor's Note: A plurality, if not a majority, of *EAA* readers are American professors, teachers, or students. Learning the history of Vietnam-era music assists these readers and others to think historically about the Cold War, and how the perpetual debate about US involvement in the world, dating back to President Washington's farewell address, intensely influenced ordinary Americans because of extensive media innovations, in the Vietnam era and now. Finally, learning about Vietnam—see the interview with Professor Lauren McKee beginning on p.60—has the potential to inspire more young Americans to learn about Asia.

American memories of the Vietnam War are often strongly associated with rock and pop music and the anti-war protest songs of the period. According to the Vietnam War historian George Herring, this was largely due to the work of a small group of college students who took the lead in protesting the war in Vietnam. These students fused protest with pop music and thereby “helped fix the minds of a generation.”¹ This tendency has been reinforced by the numerous Vietnam War movies, such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Good Morning Vietnam*, which incorporated 1960's music in their soundtracks.

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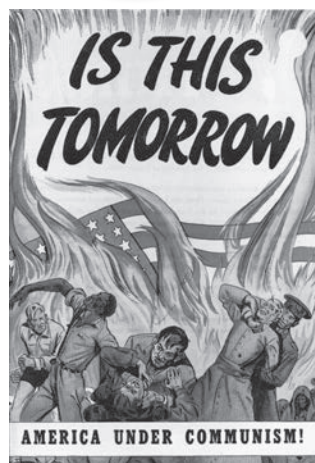
But this is only part of the story. The vast majority of soldiers who served in Vietnam came from white, working-class backgrounds, many of them from the southern and mid-western parts of the country.² While many of them listened to rock and pop music like their contemporaries, a lot of them also listened to country music, a genre of music reflective of their culture. By examining country music lyrics from this time period, it is possible to see how attitudes towards US policy in Vietnam began to divide the country and lead to a split that has still not completely healed.

In general, country music has always reflected the beliefs, feelings and lifestyle of the southern white working class in the United States, people who have traditionally seen themselves as strongly religious and patriotic. This patriotism often took the form of a reflexive support for the country and the government, particularly during wartime.³ Country music owes its origins to the traditional ballads of the British Isles, particularly those songs brought over by Scots-Irish immigrants in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 1920s, record companies realized that there was a demand for what was then termed “hillbilly music,” particularly among white rural Southerners. Country music continued to grow in popularity throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

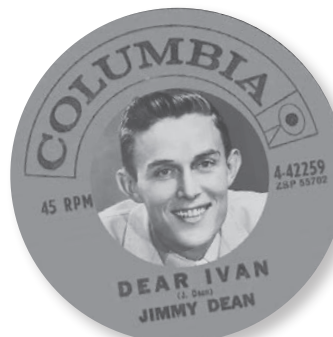


Top: Little Jimmy Dickens (center) and The Country Boys, a band he formed in 1950. Source: Screen capture from the video, *What Ever Happened to Little Jimmy Dickens*, on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/3we2epva>.

1952 Columbia record label: Little Jimmy Dickens, “They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain.” Source: YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/bda5c86y>.



Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism! was an anti-Communist, propaganda comic book published by the Catholic Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1947. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/46j75bdu>.



Composite image. Source: Label art on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/mrys695a>. Portrait at MUSICREWIND at <https://tinyurl.com/ywtj89y3>.

During World War II, country music singers (like most musicians of the time) were strongly supportive of the US government and military. However, as people began to realize that the war was going to be a long, costly affair, the songs began to focus more on the anguish of families and soldiers far from home.⁴ These two themes, strong feelings of patriotism and the suffering of families and soldiers as a result of war, were the basis for a lot of country songs during later conflicts, particularly Korea and Vietnam.

The Cold War began soon after the end of World War II. Communism, with its denial of God and basic freedoms, was anathema to most Americans of the time. It was particularly obnoxious to fans of country music who embraced a form of “plain folk Americanism” that based itself around an emphasis on individualism, deep patriotism, and Protestant Christianity.⁵ This combination of cold war themes and Christianity became a hallmark of many country songs during this period, most notably the widely-recorded “They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain” (1952).

The early 1960s saw a number of events, most notably the Cuban Missile Crisis, that began to change American attitudes towards the threat of nuclear weapons. This was reflected in one of the few country songs of this period to address the Cold War, Jimmie Dean's “Dear Ivan.” In the song, Dean argued that governments were the problem and that all problems could be solved if the ordinary people of both the US and the USSR were to meet and discuss matters under God's guidance.⁶

Country Music and the Vietnam War

This song, however, should not be seen as a criticism of the US government or its Cold War policies, but simply a re-affirmation of belief in common sense and God's grace. The early 1960s also saw the development of the urban folk revival scene, which did criticize these policies. This was extremely ironic, because both country music and the protest music of the folk revival both trace their origins to Anglo-American folk songs.⁷

Part of this division between the musical styles reflected class divisions. Some of the best known folk revival singers, such as Woodie Guthrie, came from middle class backgrounds, while Pete Seeger was a Harvard drop-out. Their audiences were from similar backgrounds in the major urban centers of the east and west coasts, and the folk revival movement was particularly popular among college students.⁸ This was also the social group that was later to be most involved in the antiwar movement.

In 1954, the former French colony of Indochina was divided into a Communist North Vietnam and an anti-Communist South Vietnam. The United States was a strong supporter of the South Vietnamese government, despite its reputation for corruption and brutality. By the early 1960s, however, the South Vietnamese government was on the brink of collapse, with large parts of the countryside under the effective control of local Communist guerillas known as the Viet Cong, supported by regular troops from North Vietnam.

Protests against American involvement in Vietnam had started as early as November 1963 on the campuses of the universities of Michigan and Chicago. In April 1965, the protest organization "Students for a Democratic Society" (SDS) organized the first national demonstration against the war in Washington DC. Although only a minority of American college students actually opposed the war, and even fewer actively protested it, those protesters were able to use television coverage to make a splash



SDS flier promoting the April 17, 1965 protest in Washington, DC. Source: *The Vietnam Project* at <https://tinyurl.com/yeenwkc4>.



1967 Anti-Vietnam war march in San Francisco, CA. Source: National Museum of American History, Behring Center at <https://tinyurl.com/yke4zyun>. Photo by Lisa Law.

much greater than their numbers would suggest. They set the tone for the early antiwar protests and raised public consciousness about the conflict.⁹

In general, there were three main groups within the early antiwar movement. The first group were the pacifists, who opposed all war on moral grounds. The second group were the New Left, consisting mostly of young people from upper middle class backgrounds and elite universities. They joined older leftist, Marxist-influenced organizations in condemning the war as an example of American imperialism and the capitalist system exploiting poor people on behalf of the American ruling class. While the New Left wanted to overthrow the system, antiwar liberals, the third and largest group, saw themselves as patriotic Americans trying to stop a terrible mistake. They argued that the United States was betraying its own values by supporting the corrupt South Vietnamese regime and using such inhumane weapons as napalm and cluster bombs on defenseless people. They also argued that the conflict in Vietnam was basically a civil war that was of no real importance to the United States and which was distracting the country from more important issues, such as tackling poverty.¹⁰

Ironically, the hippie movement of the 1960s, which is popularly associated with the antiwar movement, as seen for example in the 1994 movie *Forrest Gump*, was not really involved in organizing antiwar demonstrations, although they certainly took part in them. The movement, which initially revolved around the novelist Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, helped inspire and often overlapped with the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s, with its focus on environmental concerns, women's rights, and a rejection of traditional forms of authority.

Most hippies (and members of the counter-culture) were opposed to the Vietnam War. The long hair and colorful costumes of the hippies often stood out during marches, most notably during the March

Soldiers of the Army of Vietnam (ARVN) 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment, are airlifted to "Landing Zone Kala" northeast of Kham Duc Vietnam, by US Army UH-1H Hueys during Operation Elk Canyon, July 12, 1970. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yhxpbdpa>.



on the Pentagon in October 1967. Hippie bands such as Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead, were closely associated with the counter-culture movement and regularly took part in the protests, although none of their songs directly addressed the war. Ironically, the Grateful Dead and other counter-culture groups such as the anarchist theater troupe The Diggers were often at logger-heads with the more serious New Left political activists from Berkeley, who despised the hippies for being hedonistic and antirevolutionary. The activists also seem to have resented the fact that the hippies were getting most of the media attention.

It probably did not help that the Grateful Dead and The Diggers both had close connections with the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, who shared the counter-culture's rejection of authority, but who despised the peace movement and regularly beat up anti-war protestors. (Editor's Note: The Grateful Dead played benefits sponsored by anti-war organizations partially out of a fear of being busted for LSD, but also because of an intense aversion for being used by political activists or politicians of any stripe. The Grateful Dead avoided any public statements whatsoever about the Vietnam War.)¹¹

Many Americans, particularly working-class people, found the behavior of the hippies to be deeply offensive. They could not understand how people could oppose the government during a time of war. For many Americans, the college protesters (and in particular the hippies) were elitists attacking American troops who were risking their lives while the college students were at little risk of being sent to war.¹² There is considerable evidence that people's hatred and revulsion against the hippies actually helped increase support for the war for much of the 1960s.¹³

Most of the early anti-war songs of the pre-1965 era, such as Pete Seeger's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" (1955) and Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind" (1963) were generic in nature, expressing a desire for universal peace. Even such later anti-war songs such as Phil Ochs's "What Are You Fighting For" (1963), Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" (1965) or Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" (1965) do not make any direct mention of Vietnam, although they later became staples of the anti-Vietnam War movement.



Pete Seeger at a War Protest in Washington DC. Source: United States Foreign Policy, History & Resource Guide, *Protest Music of the Vietnam War*. <https://tinyurl.com/wv3nmusm>.

The anti-war songs that did mention Vietnam in the early years of the war tended to be highly satirical, to a certain extent reflecting the attitude of elite college students leading the anti-war movement. Phil Ochs's song "Talking Vietnam," (1964) made merciless fun of government rationales for the war, while his "Draft Dodger Rag" (1966) was an extremely funny satire on avoiding the draft. This satirical approach was continued by Country Joe McDonald in his song "The I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" (1966) and Arlo Guthrie in his song "Alice's Restaurant Massacre." (1967). The one major exception was Pete Seeger's "Ballad of the Fort Hood Three," (1966), which used a traditional folk-song approach to tell the true story of three soldiers who refused to serve in Vietnam.

In February 1965, President Johnson had ordered the bombardment of North Vietnam, which was followed a month later by the introduction of ground combat forces in South Vietnam. The vast majority of Americans were completely unaware of events in Vietnam prior to the introduction of American combat troops into that country. These events led to a surge of "rally-round-the-flag"



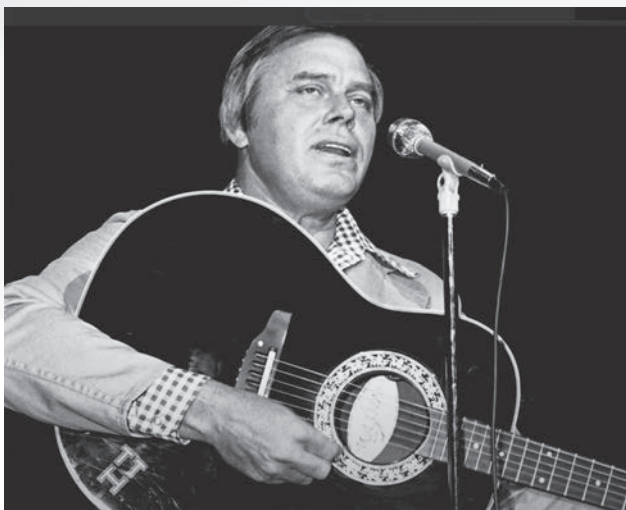
The Fort Hood Three were three United States Army soldiers (left to right: Pvt. Dennis Mora, Pvt. David Samas, and PFC James Johnson) who refused to be deployed to fight in the Vietnam War on June 30, 1966. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/2rvyr5yb>.

Thousands gather at United Nations Plaza in New York City on April 15, 1967, for a peaceful demonstration against America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Source: *Voice of America* at <https://tinyurl.com/y6nbs4jf>.





Operation Linebacker II (1972) was the single largest saturation bombing campaign of the war: for eleven days straight, hundreds of B-52s pummeled the industrial cities of Hanoi and Haiphong.
Source: *Bombing Missions of Vietnam* at <https://tinyurl.com/53vda7j>.



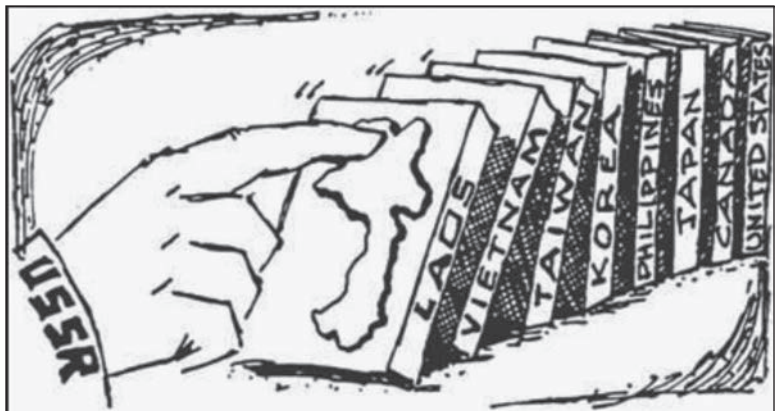
Tom Hall. Source: Screen capture from the video, *The Life and Tragic Ending of Tom T. Hall* on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/bddt7t5r>.

patriotism throughout the United States, and the initial reaction of most people was to support the government and the policy of intervention, not the anti-war movement.¹⁴

This surge in patriotism was reflected in country music songs of the period. Prior to 1965, country music had ignored events in Vietnam, reflecting the views of its base. The introduction of combat troops not only led to a surge in rally-round-the-flag songs, but also songs that harshly criticized the opponents of the war. The first country song to address the conflict was Tom Hall's "Hello Vietnam" (1965), which was sung by Johnny Wright. It combined traditional themes of patriotism and the "girl left behind" motif, with the specific need to stop Communism aggression in order to safeguard the United States. Hall's view reflected the contemporary concept of the domino theory, the idea that the fall of one nation to Communism would lead to all the other countries in the region collapsing as well. This can be seen in the following lyrics of the song: "Kiss me goodbye and write me while I'm gone/Goodbye my sweetheart, Hello Vietnam/A ship is waiting for us at the dock/America has trouble to be stopped/We must stop communism in that land/Or freedom will start slipping through our hands . . ."¹⁵

The song was a huge hit and spent twenty weeks on the American Billboard Country chart, with three weeks at number one.¹⁶ Hall's combination of the themes of patriotism, lost love, and support for the domino theory was reflected in most of the sub-

Hall's references to stopping Communism (i.e. the domino theory) should be seen not just as support for the government's policies, but also as a response to the growing anti-war movement of the time.



In an April 7, 1954 press conference, President Dwight D. Eisenhower coined one of the most famous Cold War phrases when he suggested the fall of French Indochina to the communists could create a "domino" effect in Southeast Asia.
Source: The XVIII Airborne Corps at <https://tinyurl.com/3tajfa4m>.

sequent country songs of this period. Hall's references to stopping Communism (i.e., the domino theory) should be seen not just as support for the government's policies, but also as a response to the growing anti-war movement of the time. Hall directly addressed those protests in his next song, "Tell Them What We're Fighting For," which was released a few months after "Hello Vietnam."

In the song, which was sung by Dave Dudley, Hall took on the persona of a US soldier in Vietnam writing to his mother. He talks about how he had received a letter from his mother telling him that there were people marching in the streets against the war, and he begs his mother to tell those people why Americans are fighting in Vietnam. Ironically, in the song, Hall does not actually mention Vietnam. Instead, he has his protagonist say that Americans are fighting for the "old red, white, and blue" and, more importantly, to protect America itself from invasion. After



Kris Kristofferson in 1978.
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/mrxxfwvt>.

*I said it's a shame that every man who ever
died up there in that far off land
Was dyin' so that you wouldn't have to wake
up dead*

—Kris Kristofferson, "Vietnam Blues," 1966

however, who seems to have regarded the protestors as misguided people who just needed to be properly educated, Howard explicitly condemns the protestors. According to Howard, the protestors were cowards and traitors, who would prefer to "live as slaves" rather than defend their homes.¹⁹ Alan Peltier adopted a somewhat different approach towards the protesters in his song "Day For Decision," released in the summer of 1966. He criticized them as cynics whose "heroes are the fast guys who get away with things." But Peltier warned that: "Democracy is a frail and fragile instrument" that could only survive if people returned to a belief in patriotism.²⁰

At the same time, more country songs were starting to focus on the so-called "plight-of-the-soldier" theme.²¹ Country songs stopped trying to justify the war and began to focus more on the suffering of soldiers while still condemning the protestors. In March 1966, actor and singer, Kris Kristofferson released "Vietnam Blues," sung by Dave Dudley. Kristofferson, a former Rhodes scholar, came from a military family and had served as a helicopter pilot in the US army in the early 1960s. In "Vietnam Blues," the protagonist is a soldier on leave from Vietnam who encounters hippie anti-war protestors who want him to sign a telegram of support for Ho Chi Minh. This reminds the soldier that he had just read a telegram that his buddy had died in Vietnam. The soldier responds sarcastically to the protestors by noting: "Another held the sign that said we won't fight/I thought to myself boy ain't that right/To leave a lot of our soldiers die instead/I said it's a shame that every man who ever died up there in that far off land/Was dyin' so that you wouldn't have to wake up dead..."²²

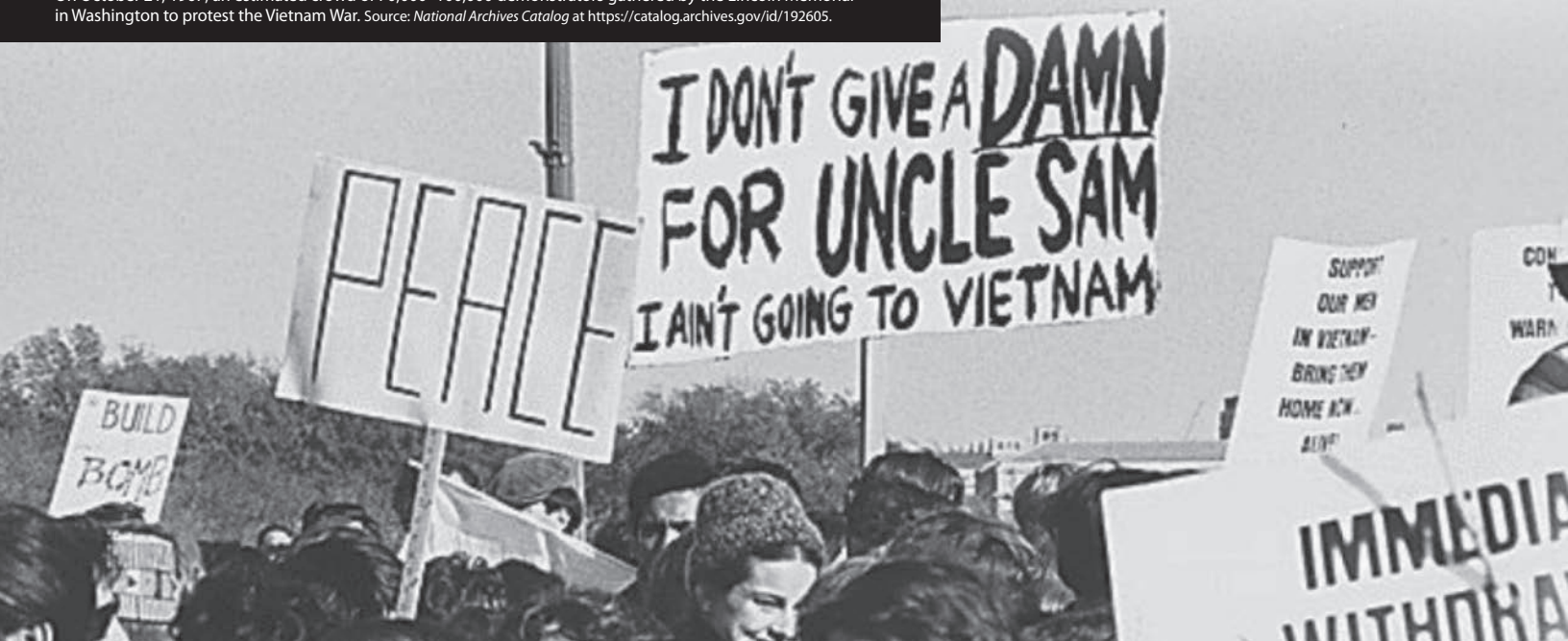
Pat Boone, one of the most popular singers of the period, responded to the growing counter-culture and anti-war movements with sarcasm and contempt in his song "Wish You Were Here,

making references to Pearl Harbor and the Korean War, the soldier states: "But the world must learn/that we will fight/we will protect our shore..."¹⁷

The song reached No. 4 in Billboard's country charts when it was released in November 1965. It was followed shortly afterwards by another Hall composition "Keep the Flag Flying," in which a soldier promises his dying buddy to keep the American flag flying over the United States and (somewhat surprisingly) Vietnam. This emphatic, pro-government approach was reflected by a number of other country song writers in the period 1965–1966, most notably Dave McEneaney's song "It's for God, and Country, and You, Mom (That's Why I'm Fighting in Vietnam)," which was released on New Year's Day in 1966 and rather explicitly states what the songwriter believes the war is all about.¹⁸

This period also saw a shift in attitudes towards the anti-war protestors. Harlan Howard's "The Minute Men (Are Turning in Their Graves)," released in 1966, continued the trend established by Tom Hall of reiterating the domino theory. Unlike Hall,

On October 21, 1967, an estimated crowd of 70,000–100,000 demonstrators gathered by the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to protest the Vietnam War. Source: National Archives Catalog at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/192605>.





Twentieth Century "Angel of Mercy," D. R. Howe treats the wounds of Private First Class D. A. Crum, Company H, 2nd Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, during Operation Hue City. Source: *National Archives Catalog* at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/532484>.

Buddy." This was one of the few songs credited entirely to Pat Boone as a writer. A strong Christian and conservative, Boone was beginning to shift from pop songs to country and gospel music during this period. In the song, Boone took on the persona of a soldier who was "sleeping in the jungle/And ducking real bullets," but who was in South Vietnam because it was "a job that must be done." The soldier then compared his life with that of his friend, who was leading campus demonstrations and who had let his hair grow so that he looked like "Something [that] crawled out of a cave."²³ The song reached No. 49 on the US Billboard Hot 100 and was later included in his 1966 album of the same name.

Part of this hardening of views may have reflected changes in public support for the war. After the initial rally-around-the-flag phase, the American public continued to show general support for the war from about the middle of 1965 until the late spring of 1966. By mid-1966, however, there was the beginning of a decline in public support. By this stage, almost all Americans were aware of developments in Vietnam. Television was bringing images of the war into their living rooms, and Americans were becoming aware of the increasing casualties and the anti-war movement was beginning to grow.²⁴

As noted earlier, many college students opposed the war on moral grounds, although it is likely that a lot of male students also resented the draft's interruption of their planned careers and feared being killed in Vietnam. For members of the general public who were starting to turn against the war, much of their frustration revolved around the "search and destroy" tactics of the US military, which required ever-growing numbers of US personnel but did not seem to be achieving any practical objectives.²⁵ In their response to this growing anti-war movement, Hall and many of the other country song writers appear to have recognized this fact. While they heaped scorn on the student protestors, they also felt that they had to provide legitimate arguments in favor



1965 promotional image of Loretta Lynn.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/4yetytnt>.

*Don't misunderstand
I know he's fighting for our land
I really love my country
But I also love my man
He proudly wears the colors
Of the old red, white, and blue
While I wear a heartache
Since he left me for you*

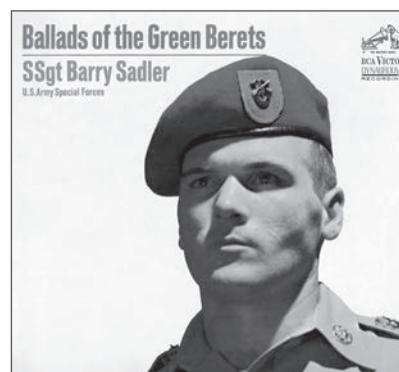
—Loretta Lynn, "Dear Uncle Sam," 1966

of the war to meet the criticism coming from members of the general public.

At the same time, the increasing casualty numbers among US forces were starting to be reflected in country music. In February 1966, one of the greatest country stars of the period, Loretta Lynn, released "Dear Uncle Sam." In the song, the protagonist is a wife who writes a letter to the government about her husband who has been drafted. She emphasizes how much she loves her country and that she understands why the government needs him. But she also talks about her own need for her husband, whom she describes as proudly wearing "the colors of the old red, white and blue."²⁶ The song ends on a melancholy note when she opens a telegram informing her of her husband's death in combat. Lynn's focus on the nec-

essary, but deeply personal, costs of war was reflected in another song that was also issued in February 1966, Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Beret."

Sadler was a special forces medic who wrote the song while he was recovering from wounds sustained in combat operations in Vietnam. He first sang the song in public on the Ed Sullivan



Ballads of the Green Berets album cover.
Source: *YouTube* at <https://tinyurl.com/2p84vuzw>.

show on January 30, 1966, while in full dress uniform. Sadler's song sold over two million copies over the following two months, while his follow-up album *Ballads of the Green Berets* sold around one million copies in the five weeks after it was released. It was a major hit on both the country and the pop charts of the time. Ironically, the song does not even mention Vietnam, stressing instead the elite training that men have to undergo in order to win the coveted green beret. Nevertheless, there is an implicit reference to the cost of the on-going war towards the end of the song, when Sadler wrote: "Back at home a young wife waits/Her Green Beret has met his fate/He has died for those oppressed."²⁷

The historian Christian Appy noted that the success of the "Ballad of the Green Berets," with its unabashed support for military service "radically jars with common memories of the 1960s," which was supposedly dominated by images of peace and love. As Appy wrote: "Yet the culture of the mid-1960s resisted such clear-cut labels. Millions of young Americans liked 'The Ballad of the Green Berets' and the folk songs of Peter, Paul, and Mary. The emotions they touched had something in common. Like so much else in that era, they encouraged young people to think about their relationship to the world

and to history—to have grand aspirations and commitments."²⁸ Part of the reason for this attitude, Appy argued, was the generation that grew up during the Vietnam conflict was one of the most patriotic that had ever existed, including many of the antiwar protestors. This was a generation that had grown up with stories of American heroism in World War II and Korea. In fact, studies have found that one of the biggest groups of supporters of the war were young males.²⁹

By early 1967, there was growing frustration with the conduct of the war. Most Americans still supported the war, but felt it was not being prosecuted properly. Public opinion polls indicated that Americans wanted an escalation of the conflict in order to bring it to a rapid and victorious conclusion.³⁰ While the number of American forces in Vietnam did increase dramatically in 1967, ultimately reaching a highpoint of 546,000 troops in early 1968, the

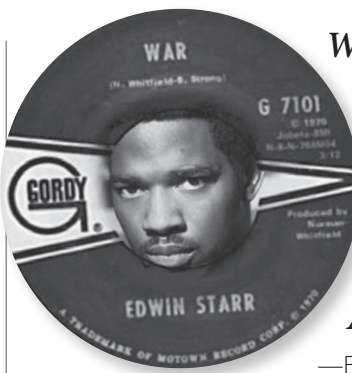


Photo of Edwin Starr.
Source: Wikimedia Commons
at <https://tinyurl.com/kc7bj8e6>, and label: <https://tinyurl.com/4p65h689>.
© Motown Records.

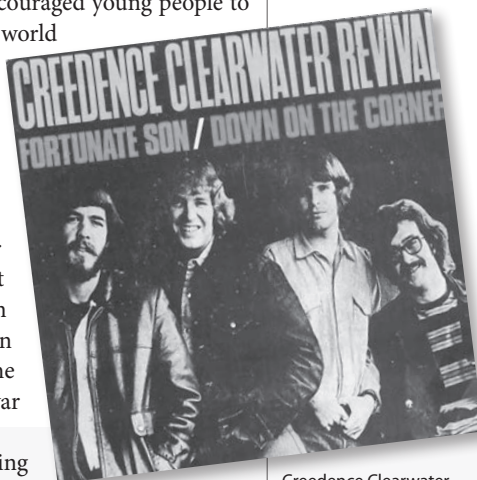
WAR, I despise

*'Cause it means destruction of
innocent lives*

*WAR means tears to thousands
of mother's eyes*

*When their sons go off to fight
And lose their lives*

—Edwin Starr, "WAR (What is it Good For?)," 1969



Creedence Clearwater Revival album cover.
Source: discovermusic
website at
<https://tinyurl.com/4z5jun67>.

continued failure of the "search and destroy" tactics gradually led to a growing disillusionment with the war.

This was reinforced by the shock of the Tet Offensive in January 1968, which revealed the hollowness of the military's declarations of imminent victory. Nevertheless, as George Herring noted: "Support for the war itself remained remarkably steady between November 1967 and March 1968, hovering around 45 percent."³¹ The majority of Americans wanted an end to the war, but they were split on how to achieve that end. Even in November 1968, only 19 percent of the American public wanted immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. Richard Nixon was elected president during this time on a promise to achieve "peace with honor."³²

During this time, country songs stopped overtly supporting the war, focusing instead on supporting the troops and criticism of the counter-culture and antiwar movements. By contrast, rock and pop music finally began taking notice of the Vietnam War. Although popular memories of the Vietnam War associate rock music with the anti-war movement, most musicians at the time stayed away from any discussion of the war. Rock music was a business, and anti-Vietnam war songs generally did not sell well.³³ Ironically, one of the songs most often associated with the anti-war movement at the time, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," by the English band *The Animals*, was about escaping poverty in an English industrial city.

This may have reflected the fact that young men, as noted above, were both the main purchasers of rock music and some of the biggest supporters of the war.³⁴ Nevertheless, as public opinion

1968 Tet Offensive. Marines riding atop an M-48 tank cover their ears as the 90mm gun fires during a road sweep southwest of Phu Bai, Vietnam. Source: National Archives Catalog at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/532483>.





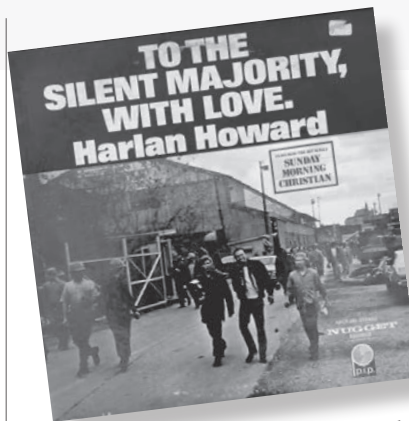
More than 300,000 Black Americans served in Vietnam. Though only about 12 percent of the US population, Black service members were 16.3 percent of the armed forces, and up to 25 percent of enlisted men in the Army. Because of this over-representation, the casualty rate for Black troops was disproportionately higher. Source: African American Veterans Monument at <https://aavmwny.org/war/vietnam-war/>.



Merle Haggard in 1971.
Source: Wikimedia Commons at
<https://tinyurl.com/ymdeytys>.

*I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all*

—Merle Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee,” 1969



To the Silent Majority, with Love. Harlan Howard, album. Source: YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/57273e27>.



William Calley Jr. mugshot for charges involving the My Lai massacre. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/3sby7snp>.

shifted against the war in 1968–1969, a number of songs finally began to address the war seriously, such as Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” (1969), which heavily criticized the inequities of the draft system that affected working-class Americans far worse than their middle-class peers. One of the most clearly anti-war songs of the period was the Motown hit “War (what is it good for)” (1969) by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, as recorded by Edwin Starr, reflecting the high casualty rates suffered by African American troops in Vietnam. While African Americans did not join the antiwar protests in large numbers, their growing resistance to the military draft and discontent within the military were starting to undermine the war effort.³⁵ But most of the anti-war songs of this period adopted the approach of the early 1960s and focused on criticizing war in general terms, such as Cat Stevens’s “Peace Train” (1971) or John Lennon’s “Imagine” (1971).

In November 1969, President Nixon gave his so-called “Silent Majority Speech,” in which he announced his plan for the Vietnamization of the war and asked for the support of the “silent majority.” The response was immediate, and Nixon received overwhelming public support for his policies from the American public.³⁶ Shortly before Nixon gave this speech, Merle Haggard released his song “Okie from Muskogee,” which struck a chord among country music fans tired of what it perceived to be the

counter-culture and its criticism of America.³⁷ Haggard’s success led to a number of similar songs being produced, including Bill Anderson’s “Where Have All Our Heroes Gone” (1970) and Harlan Howard’s “Mister Professor” (1971), from his album *To the Silent Majority With Love*. Both songs attacked the hippies, with Howard in particular blaming liberal professors for teaching students atheism and encouraging them to engage in draft avoidance and protest marches.³⁸

However, a sense of bitterness now began to manifest itself in songs that dealt with the war, and in particular the treatment of returning soldiers. This was a theme that was notably only later addressed by musicians from other genres, for example Billy Joel’s “Goodnight Saigon” (1982) and Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” (1984). As early as 1967, by contrast, the country singer Mel Tillis had described the problems facing a paraplegic veteran in “Ruby Don’t Take Your Love To Town.” Although Vietnam is not explicitly mentioned, the protagonist tries to tell his wife that it wasn’t his fault that he was injured in “that crazy Asian war” and begs for her understanding.³⁹

As the war started to wind down in the early 1970s, this bitterness came strongly to the fore. In 1971, Tom Hall released “Mama Bake a Pie (Daddy Kill A Chicken).” In the song, a soldier who has lost his legs tries to maintain a positive front while dealing with his injuries and the fact that his girlfriend has left

him. In a biting comment, the soldier finishes the song with the words: “I see here in the paper/Where they say the war is just a waste of time.”⁴⁰ Shortly afterwards, Julian Wilson and James Smith released “The Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley.” A spoken-word record, the song was set to the tune of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” with vocals by Terry Nelson. The song gave a romanticized and heavily sanitized version of the life of Lt. Calley and the massacre at My Lai for which he was responsible.



Gordon Sinclair. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/mvv36dbw>.



Tex Ritter. Source: Country Music Hall of Fame at <https://tinyurl.com/mump9wdz>.

*I can name to you five thousand times when the
Americans raced to the help of other people in
trouble.*

*Can you name to me even one time when someone
raced to the help of the Americans in Trouble?*

*I don't think there was outside help even during
the San Francisco earthquake.*

Our neighbors have faced it alone.

*And I'm one Canadian who is damned tired of
hearing them kicked around.*

—Gordon Sinclair, “Americans,” 1973

The bitterness that many people felt about the nature of the war comes strongly to the fore in the following lines: “I’m just another soldier from the shores of the USA/Forgotten on a battlefield ten thousand miles away/ While life goes on as usual from New York to Santa Fe/I’ve seen my buddies ambushed on the left and on the right/And their youthful bodies riddled by the bullets of the night. . . . With our sweat we took the bunkers, with our tears we took the plain/With our blood we took the mountains and they gave it back again. . . .”⁴¹ At the end of the song, Calley justifies his actions before God by claiming he was simply a soldier doing his duty. Although the song was played only sporadically on the radio because of its controversial nature, it sold over 250,000 copies in its first week, reaching No. 49 on Billboard’s country charts and No. 37 on Billboard’s pop charts.

As the war came to an end, country music returned to its traditional motifs. In June 1973, the Canadian radio broadcaster Gordon Sinclair read out an editorial he had written. In it, Sinclair gave examples of all the times the United States had provided help to other nations. He acknowledged that Vietnam had been a divisive and controversial conflict, but he emphasized his belief that America would come together again as a nation and resume its rightful place as the leader of the free world. The American country music star Tex Ritter and the Canadian singer Byron MacGregor both recorded the editorial with background music. MacGregor’s song reached No. 4 on

the Billboard pop charts, while Ritter’s single reached No. 35 on the country charts. It was perhaps a fitting musical end to the conflict. ♦

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