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A soldier lies in the sand, bullets cracking all around him. Blood pours from a wound in his flak jacket, and he can't move his legs. All that Sergeant Ron Kovic, born on the Fourth of July in 1946, wants to do is live. That's all. And he does. Later, lying on his back among an airplane hanger full of wounded and dying soldiers and civilians, he dictates a letter home to his Mom and Dad. "I am hurt pretty bad, but I have done it for America and it is worth it." He is put on a plane and leaves Vietnam forever.¹

Thus begins Ron Kovic's story, *Born on the Fourth of July*, a novel that takes us on a very personal, and at the same time, a national journey that changes him from an idealistic, patriotic young American into a paralyzed, disillusioned veteran of the Vietnam war. We see him on the night before he leaves to join the Marine Corps in 1964, standing rigid at attention with his hand over his heart in his darkened living room as "The Star-Spangled Banner" plays on his television, "feeling very patriotic, chills running up and down my spine."² And we watch as his attitude toward America and its leaders changes slowly and painfully after he returns, wounded, from Vietnam in 1967. His growing disillusionment ultimately leads him onto the floor of the 1972 Republican National convention where he shouts, "Stop the bombing, stop the war," as Richard Nixon gives his acceptance speech for his party's nomination for "Four More Years" as President of the United States.³

Kovic's own transformation reflects in many ways how the bitter, divisive struggle about the morality and rightness of the war – and the very meaning of the word "patriotism" – developed all across America during those years. On the one side were those who believed that by not supporting a war that their leaders could not explain, they were protecting soldiers from fighting in an unjust war, and on the opposite side were those who believed that once we are at war, patriotic Americans should follow their flag and leaders anywhere. These contradictory feelings ran deep in America and split the country as it hadn't been divided since the Civil War. Kovic's questioning of all that he once believed in reflects the struggle being undergone by many Americans as the nation moved from the relative peace of the 1950s into the turbulent decade of

the 1960s, a decade that was growing increasingly angry and violent by the time Kovic returned in 1967.

Through Kovic's eyes, we see that the America he comes home to in 1967 is a much different one than he left just three years before, although it will be awhile before he gets out into that world. After weeks in St. Alban's Naval hospital, he is transferred to a veteran's hospital in the Bronx where he and hundreds of other young, wounded soldiers who fought in Vietnam come home to America, only to exist in conditions so deplorable it is hard to imagine – lining up in their wheelchairs for an assembly line of enemas, throwing breadcrumbs under the filthy radiator to keep the rats from chewing on their numb legs at night, laying in their own feces waiting for an aide to clean them up. Yet, he tells the older veterans there that he still believes in the war. “Didn't I prove it by going back a second time? I look them all right in the eye and tell them that we are winning and the boys' morale is high. But more and more what I tell them and what I am feeling are becoming two different things.”⁴

While trying to accept the tragedy and hardships of his paralysis, Kovic remembers his happy childhood spent growing up in a small community outside New York City during the 1950s, and we can see how his patriotism and love of God and country – like that of many other Americans of that era – were formed. His Dad worked hard at the A&P, and his Mom stayed at home to raise him and his sister. He went to the Catholic Church every Sunday and remembers how his parents worried that “watching Elvis Presley would lead to sin. I loved God more than anything else in the world back then and I prayed to Him and the Virgin Mary and Jesus and all the saints to be a good boy and a good American.”⁵ He and his best friends in their working-class neighborhood – a neighborhood that would later lose “a lot of good boys” in Vietnam⁶ – watched television, played baseball and football, and went to the movies where they watched Audie Murphy in *To Hell and Back* and John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. They played “war” on Saturday afternoons, studied the Marine Corps Guidebook, and “just as we dreamed of playing for the Yankees someday, we dreamed of becoming United States Marines and fighting our first war.”⁷ They joined the cub scouts and watched parades on Memorial Day and fireworks on the Fourth of July. They worried about Sputnik. “We were losing, I thought, we were losing the space race, and America wasn't first anymore,”⁸ and about the Communists, “who were all over the place back then.”⁹

Although working-class neighborhoods like Kovic's would eventually send and lose more young men in Vietnam than more affluent ones, their attitudes mirrored that of most Americans in the early to mid 1960s. As Mark Lytle notes, although we tend to remember the early 1960s as a time of idealism that evokes images of the Peace Corps, or civil rights protestors, hippie communes, or anti-war protestors, there were "other styles of idealism that shaped the era just as much," such as the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). Without these strong opposing viewpoints, Lytle argues, "the uncivil war could never have become so fractious."¹⁰ Love of God and country, and respect for soldiers and government leaders was strong as "the majority of Americans still embraced an uncritical patriotism."¹¹ When two Marine recruiters, marching in perfect step in their dress blue uniforms, came to Kovic's high school, he and his friends felt an incredible sense that they wanted to become part of what the Marine Corps offered – "we could serve our country like the young president had asked us to."¹²

Fear of communism was widespread during the early Sixties, and America's sense of "us against them" ran high. In 1954, President Eisenhower had "likened the loss of Vietnam to the Communists to a 'falling domino,'" and later President Kennedy, although he was uncertain about the possibility of winning, continued to believe in the domino theory and "never seriously considered abandoning the American commitment to the preservation of a noncommunist South Vietnam."¹³ Not only were most Americans afraid of communism, but they were afraid of losing in general. Americans, other than Southerners during the Civil War, had never lost anything they had chosen to pursue. As Kovic's drill sergeant shouted over and over at the young men he was fashioning into soldiers, "*WE HAVE NEVER LOST!*"¹⁴ These beliefs were part of the reason so many people trusted their nation's leaders when they said it was necessary to go to Vietnam and stay there, and why Ron Kovic was so proud to join the Marines.

In 1965, Kovic was on his first tour of duty in Vietnam when President Johnson gave his State of the Union Address in January of that year. Lytle notes that "almost no one who heard the President that night had any idea that the United States might be on the verge of crises at home or abroad." The nation "had reason to be optimistic. Americans had never had it so good. National wealth was growing at an annual rate of about five percent. Income was up, unemployment down, inflation barely over one percent a year."¹⁵ And there were other reasons to be hopeful. "Cold War tensions had abated somewhat, and "about the only comment in his

address that might have applied to Vietnam was Johnson's assertion that to 'ignore aggression would only increase the danger of a larger war.'"¹⁶ Yet, Lytle argues, in escalating the war by following his advisors' advice to intensify the bombing in Vietnam, Johnson would give many in the country a new cause, as "the nation's attention shifted from the civil rights movement and the Great Society to a fundamental debate over the war and the ways it reflected on the character of American society."¹⁷

Kovic slowly begins to venture out into the world after his return home in 1967. When he attends the Memorial Day parade in his neighborhood, he begins to sense changes in attitudes toward the war both in himself and the community. His father helps him dress and into his wheelchair. "The whole town's proud of him and what he did," says one of the two men from the America Legion who come to take him to the parade. "'We're gonna make certain,' the tall commander said, 'we're gonna make certain that his sacrifice and any of the others weren't in vain. We're still in that war to win,' he said, looking at the boy's father." His father nods in understanding.¹⁸ On the way to the parade, they pick up another of Kovic's childhood friends who had also been wounded in Vietnam, and they recall others from the neighborhood that had been injured or killed. But when they get to the parade, instead of people waving and cheering, the crowd stood, "staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren't even there. [...] And he couldn't understand what was happening."¹⁹ Later, the tall commander faces the crowd and, "almost crying now, he shouted to the crowd that they couldn't give up in Vietnam. 'We have to win...' he said, his voice still shaking; then pausing he pointed his finger at him and Eddie Dugan, 'because of them!'"²⁰

Although the crowd had been silent, they began to applaud loudly. But, Kovic doesn't know how to feel anymore. "The speeches continued, but the more they spoke, the more restless and uncomfortable he became, until he felt like he was going to jump out of his paralyzed body and scream. He was confused, then proud, then all of a sudden confused again." "He wanted to listen and believe everything they were saying, but he kept thinking of all the things that had happened that day and now he wondered why he and Eddie hadn't even been given the chance to speak."²¹ Kovic was angry that the older men felt they had a right to speak for them, and that their voices – the boys who knew what the war was really like – weren't being heard. "He sat back, watching the men who ran the town as they walked back and forth on the speaker's platform in their suits and ties, drinking their beer and talking about patriotism."²² Kovic was

beginning to lose his blind patriotism and pride in his country and its leaders. And while some people in the neighborhood seemed to not really care at all anymore, others were as fervently patriotic as ever. Eventually, Kovic would meet and join with those who, like himself, were questioning the value of maintaining the war.

While the war in Vietnam escalates along with protests against the war, Kovic finds himself living aimlessly. He begins drinking heavily to forget the loss of his legs and his sexuality, and the fact that he will wear a urine bag by his side for the rest of his life. His father works long and hard to build a ramp into the house and refit a special bathroom for his son, cleaning him up and carefully putting him to bed when he returns home drunk, never saying anything. After a trip to Mexico, the first time he went somewhere by himself since he had come home from the war, Kovic returns determined to walk again. But he pushes himself too hard and breaks his leg so severely they want to amputate. While in the V.A. hospital, he is isolated and labeled a troublemaker because he “asked for a bath. I asked for the vomit to be wiped up from the floor. I asked to be treated like a human being.”²³

Kovic is there for six months, and during that time he feels himself changing. “The anger is building up in me. It has become a force I cannot control. I push the call button again and again. No one comes. I am lying in my own excrement and no one comes.” When an aide finally walks by an hour later, “he sticks his head in the door, taunting me and laughing. ‘I’m a Vietnam veteran,’ I tell him. ‘I fought in Vietnam and I’ve got a right to be treated decently.’ ‘Vietnam,’ the aide says loudly. ‘Vietnam don’t mean nothin’ to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass.’”²⁴ The aide’s attitude sadly mirrors that of many Americans at that point, as the confusion and anger at the war was often directed at those who had gone to fight. Kovic spends a great deal of time thinking about “the war and the wound and the hospital.” His mother and father come to visit, but he doesn’t tell them that he is “just beginning to see what it all adds up to. It would only hurt them if they knew.”²⁵

The division between parents and children about the war and its consequences was felt by many families across America as some families saw their children shipped to Vietnam and watched as students here on college campuses began to step up their protest against the war. Lytle notes that initially Vietnam provoked little sustained dissent, but with the “teach-ins” in March of 1965, dissent against the war began to broaden and involve more than just students. “No event more clearly reveals the process by which the Vietnam War divided the nation’s

elite.”²⁶ The faculty at the University of Michigan was growing increasingly uneasy with the bombing, and began looking for a way to voice their opposition to the bombing. They decided to hold a symposium modeled on the civil rights freedom schools to devote a night to “seminars, lectures, informal discussions, and a protest rally to focus attention on the war, its consequences, and ways to stop it.”²⁷ Although nothing very radical happened at Michigan, Lytle notes that “here was a small step toward a more democratic or egalitarian university culture. Such a trend deeply offended conservatives who valued authority embedded in hierarchies.”²⁸

The Michigan teach-in was also significant for the media attention it attracted. Although critics often accuse the media for America’s losing, or at least “choosing to not pursue” the war in Vietnam, initially the media were very favorable to the government’s pursuit of the war. Thus, much of the news commentary about the teach-in and other campus activities at this time was hostile to the “outbreak of political fervor at the nation’s leading schools” since, as Lytle notes, “most leading journalist accepted the premises of the cold war consensus. Many critics implied that the campus debate had been inspired by ‘Communists and crypto-Communists.’”²⁹ Lytle also goes on to note that these “early protests were significant not so much for the numbers they attracted (which were relatively small though large by past standards), but for who the people were and where they came from.”³⁰ As the intellectuals began to criticize the war, J. Edgar Hoover fed Johnson’s worries about their disapproval with the idea that “Communist agents with funds from Hanoi and Moscow had organized the protest,” which allowed Johnson to dismiss the substance of the protestor’s criticism of the war.³¹

When Johnson sent the Marines into the Dominican Republic in 1965 to, in reality, fight against a democratic coalition seeking to overthrow a “repressive and corrupt right-wing military dictatorship” that happened to have the backing of the United States, most American accepted his rationale that “Communism had again reared its ugly head.” Yet, “those in the antiwar camp were not alone in condemning his actions to send the Marines.”³² One of the most prominent was Senator William Fullbright, who began to criticize the administration on Vietnam. In addition to spreading within the political establishment, antiwar sentiment began to grow among the cultural elite, as apolitical events such as a White House Festival of the Arts became political when artists refused to attend because they opposed the President’s Vietnam policy.³³ Antiwar sentiment was spreading, but there was little national organization to manage the movement.³⁴

Although still angry at the war, Kovic had returned to school, and wearing a tie and sweater every day and sporting a short haircut, he buried himself in his books, “cutting myself off from the other students. It was as if they threatened me – particularly the activists, the radicals.” Although he had begun to question the rightness of the war in his own heart, he still had difficulty accepting that his long-held beliefs could be wrong. He remembers,

I was in Vietnam when I first heard about the thousands of people protesting the war in the streets of America. I didn’t want to believe it at first – people protesting against *us* when we were putting our lives on the line for our country. The men in my outfit used to talk about it a lot. How could they do this to us? Many of us would not be coming back and many others would be wounded or maimed. We swore they would pay, the hippies and draftcard burners. They would pay if we ever ran into them.

But the hospital had changed all of that. It was the end of whatever belief I’d still had in what I’d done in Vietnam. Now I wanted to know what I had lost my legs for, why I and the others had gone at all. But it was still very hard for me to think of speaking out against the war, to think of joining those I’d once called traitors.³⁵

But, in the spring of 1970, Kent State changed all of that. “Four students had just been shot in a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia. For a moment there was a shock through my body. I felt like crying. The last time I had felt like that was the day Kennedy was killed.”³⁶ He went down to the campus and thought carefully before deciding to participate in the march to the rally. “I was still acting like an observer.” But as the day wore on, the last speaker said there was going to be a rally in Washington that Saturday, and Kovic decided to go. A friend of his had been giving him books about Vietnam for awhile, and they had begun having long discussions. He asked his friend to go to the rally with him, and when they got to Washington, the rally was peaceful, full of speeches and people milling around together. As the day wore on, people, some naked, jumped into the Reflecting Pool.

But, later, reminiscent of so many instances during the civil rights protests where those in power manage to use brute force to disrupt situations that would have ended peacefully on their own, the police “decided to attack. And they did – wading their horses into the pool, flailing their clubs, smashing skulls.” It was then that Kovic ceased to be an observer. The demonstration had “stirred something in my mind that would be there from now on. [...] In the war, we were killing and maiming people. In Washington, on that Saturday afternoon in May, we were trying to heal them and set them free.”³⁷

Kovic begins speaking out against the war, and school becomes less important. Later in the year, though, he moves to California with a friend from his old neighborhood, and spends most of his time relaxing and not thinking about the war. But when he reads about a group of vets who had gone to Washington and thrown away their war medals, Kovic “suddenly knew my easy life could never be enough for me. The war had not ended. It was time for me to join forces with other vets.”³⁸ He becomes active with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and begins speaking, often appearing on television. He becomes more and more vocal. “I think I honestly believed that if only I could speak out to enough people I could stop the war myself. I honestly believed people would listen to me because of who I was, a wounded American veteran.”³⁹ But the war didn’t stop, and his friends “told me I was beginning to sound like a broken record.” But he continued to protest the war.

In Los Angeles, Kovic, along with other veterans and ordinary citizens picketed Nixon’s campaign headquarters, shouting at anyone who passed by. But most of the onlookers walked past as if they aren’t even there. Kovic speaks briefly to a fellow protestor with long red-hair who has been at other rallies when all of a sudden the police move in. Kovic’s wheelchair becomes stuck, and quickly the redheaded protestor grabs his hands and shouts, “You’re under arrest.” Kovic falls to the ground and people are kicking his paralyzed body. “Kicking me and hitting me with their fists, they begin dragging me along. They tear the medals I have won in the war from my chest and throw me back in the chair, my hands still cuffed behind me.” When he is finally taken to the hospital, the men who have beaten him realize what they’ve done. “They have just beaten up a half-dead man, and they know it. They are very careful now, almost polite. They help me put my clothes back on when the doctor is through with me. ‘I was in Vietnam, too, the redheaded man says, hesitating. ‘We don’t want the war either,’ says the other cop. ‘No one wants war.’” The Vietnam war managed to cause great anger and uncertainty as it bitterly divided people during those years. A few minutes later, when another officer asks Kovic what his name is, he answers, “‘Ron Kovic,’ I say, ‘Occupation, Vietnam veteran against the war.’” The policeman answers in disgust. “‘You should have died over there, he says. He turns to his assistant. ‘I’d like to take this guy and throw him off the roof.’”⁴⁰

The hostility against those who spoke out against the war was mirrored throughout America and had deep roots. As Lytle argues, especially throughout the early to mid-60s, “the vast majority of Americans backed the war effort, though they had little understanding of the

scale of American involvement or the reasons Americans were fighting. Instead, they rallied behind their president, their boys in battle, and their nation's fight to contain communism."⁴¹ Maurice Isserman notes that part of the reason for the embittered polarization about the war grew out of the fact that the war was never given a clearly defined strategic or territorial goal with single event that clearly marked its beginnings. The most consistent explanation was "the defense of the Cold War 'credibility' of the United States – in itself a murky, ambiguous goal."⁴²

As protests against the war grew and spread beyond the students, the media began to give more attention to the war, although pressures from the administration "encouraged self-censorship by the media, especially television. Almost the only place Americans could learn about the war as in the newspapers and journals that generally adopted a pro-administration stance." As most Americans heard a generally pro-war viewpoint, the public was inclined to view protestors "with hostility or as outright traitors."⁴³ That changed to some degree and in some people as the war went on, and as the human cost of the war grew. There was a growing outcry against the war, but there was also a great need for many to cling to the hope that the war hadn't been in vain and their leaders hadn't lied to them.

In August 1972, Ron Kovic and a convey of "cars and buses, trucks and jeeps, painted with flowers and peace signs, a strange caravan of young men wearing war ribbons on torn utility jackets and carrying plastic guns," drives to Miami for the Republican National Convention.

And now it is we who are marching, the boys of the fifties. We are going to the Republican National Convention to reclaim America and a bit of ourselves. It was war and we are soldiers again, as tight as we have ever been, a whole lost generation of dope-smoking kids in worn boots coming from all over the country to tell Nixon a thing or two. We know we are fighting the real enemies this time – the ones who have made profit off our very lives.⁴⁴

This time, when they arrive in Miami, they are greeted by "hundreds and hundreds of well-wishers yelling and cheering and clapping the arrival of the veterans. People were dancing in the streets, playing flutes, running up to us, Yippies and Zippies shoving handfuls of joints into our laps."⁴⁵ On the night of Nixon's acceptance speech, a TV producer that Kovic knows gets him past the guards at the entrance with his press pass. Kovic, with his long hair, unkempt clothes, and wheelchair looks out of place, but he doesn't care. "I've got just as much right to be up front here as any of these delegates. I fought for that right and I was born on the Fourth of

July.”⁴⁶ He shouts that he is a disabled Vietnam veteran, and about the horrors of the veterans hospital. He calls Nixon a liar, and yet no one seems to pay much attention. “I kept shouting and speaking, looking for some kind of reaction from the crowd. No one seemed to want to even look at me.”⁴⁷ He does catch the attention of Roger Mudd, who interviews him for CBS news.

I’m a Vietnam veteran. I gave America my all and the leaders of this government threw me and the others away to rot in their V.A. hospitals. What’s happening in Vietnam is a crime against humanity, and I just want the American people to know that we have come all the way across this country, sleeping on the ground and in the rain, to let the American people see for themselves the men who fought their war and have come to oppose it. If you can’t believe the veteran who fought the war and was wounded in the war, who can you believe.”⁴⁸

Kovic and two other Vietnam veterans somehow manage to remain on the floor and line up, “wheelchair to wheelchair, facing the platform where Nixon would speak.”⁴⁹ Nixon is announced to a thunderous roar, and when he begins to speak, Kovic and his friends begin to shout at the top of their lungs: “Stop the bombing, stop the war, stop the bombing, stop the war.”⁵⁰ They are finally pulled away by Secret Service agents. Kovic remembers that, “a short guy with a big Four More Years button ran up to me and spat in my face. ‘Traitor!’ he screamed, as he was yanked back by police.”⁵¹ When they found themselves outside, with the doors padlocked behind them so no reporters could follow them for interviews, Kovic and his two fellow vets sat holding each other. “We had done it. It was the biggest moment of our lives, we had shouted down the President of the United States and disrupted his acceptance speech. What more was there to do but go home? I sat in my chair still shaking and began to cry.”⁵²

Yet, Kovic doesn’t end his remembrances here. Like everything else about this ambivalent, divisive war, there is more for him to reflect on. He reflects on Vietnam once again, and tells of losing friends and fellow soldiers; of killing women and children and old men in a village; of soldiers weeping and begging for forgiveness for what they had done. The Vietnam war, with its life and death ramifications, became a polarizing flash point that touched upon many of the issues that divided so many Americans during those years – politics, patriotism, class differences, social dissent, the growth of the counterculture with its sex, drugs, and rock and roll. There were no easy answers to be found in America’s Vietnam. The change from the hopefulness of the early decade to the angry frustrations at its end mirrored many American issues and personal lives. Kovic ends his book with a reflection on his childhood in the 1950s

and early 1960s, remembering all the carefree things he and his friends had done when the world was a stream of endless possibilities. “It was all sort of easy. It had all come and gone.”⁵³

¹ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976, 3-14.

² Ibid, 62.

³ Ibid, 169.

⁴ Ibid, 29.

⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁶ Ibid, 87.

⁷ Ibid, 44-45.

⁸ Ibid, 47.

⁹ Ibid, 49.

¹⁰ Mark Lytle, *The Uncivil War: America in the Vietnam Era*, Manuscript, to be published 2004, From Chapter 8: Teach-in, Strike Out: The Uncivil War Heats Up, 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kovic, 61.

¹³ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 72, 78.

¹⁴ Kovic, 79.

¹⁵ Lytle, 9.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid, 8.

¹⁸ Kovic, 84-85.

¹⁹ Ibid, 90.

²⁰ Ibid, 92-93.

²¹ Ibid, 93.

²² Ibid, 94.

²³ Ibid, 114.

²⁴ Ibid, 116.

²⁵ Ibid, 118.

²⁶ Lytle, 12.

²⁷ Ibid, 13.

²⁸ Ibid, 14.

²⁹ Ibid, 14.

³⁰ Ibid, 15.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 17.

³³ Ibid, 17-18.

³⁴ Ibid, 19.

³⁵ Kovic, 119.

³⁶ Ibid, 120.

³⁷ Ibid, 125.

³⁸ Ibid, 133.

³⁹ Ibid, 136.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 138-42.

⁴¹ Lytle, 28.

⁴² Isserman, 67.

⁴³ Lytle, 29.

⁴⁴ Kovic, 158.

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- ⁴⁵ Ibid, 161.
⁴⁶ Ibid, 163.
⁴⁷ Ibid, 164.
⁴⁸ Ibid, 165.
⁴⁹ Ibid, 166.
⁵⁰ Ibid, 168.
⁵¹ Ibid, 169.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵³ Ibid, 208.

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A&S 513: Methods of Inquiry
Decade of Dissent: the 1960s
Dr. Mary Ann Wynkoop