

The "Vietnam Mamas" : Predecessors of Corporate Rule

Robert J. Gregory

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
Fax : 64 06 3505673 email : R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz*

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ABSTRACT Observations in a community mental health setting led to psychological interpretations to understand the situation of women and children left behind during tours of duty by soldiers during the Vietnam War. Various interpretations were discussed, but in retrospect and over time, the deeper issue was one of the exercise of corporate power by the United States military. This macro-level interpretation would predict that corporations will focus on profits and power at the expense of people and "community," even those working within or dependent upon the corporations.

Toward the end of the 1960's, I worked at a comprehensive, community based, mental health centre in a small town adjacent to a large military post. Trained as an anthropologist, vocational rehabilitation counsellor, and psychologist, I engaged with my new community as an observer-participant, as well as a social science researcher in mental health. Part of my role included consultation with teachers, private and public therapists, a variety of social agencies, and educational agencies dealing with "emotionally disturbed" children.

At this time military activities related to the Vietnam War were at a peak (Lewy, 1978). But even the heavy influx of soldiers did not seem to account for what happened in this particular community. By my informal count, over ninety per cent of the children enrolled in local programmes offering psychological or other forms of help were military dependents. By and large, local and non-military children were not involved in mental health crises and special educational care, at least not initially.

Like others, I became curious about this phenomena, and asked why. No one seemed to have a coherent answer. This paper is a

reflection on events of that era, but some of the ideas have been fully developed only much later. These ideas generated back then have been added to and made applicable to our pre- sent day human communities which may be experiencing high levels of stress from other sources.

The role, conflicts, and situation of the military family, particularly as a significant factor in the "causation" or "development" of emotionally disturbed children, is examined. Military families may, of course, include female sergeants or officers, but at that time (1967-1970), the predominant situation observed was that males were being posted to Vietnam for a year, leaving behind their wives and children. The language used is appropriate for that situation and is not meant to be gender biased.

The views expressed may have special relevance now, some years later from those initial experiences. The children affected then are now adults with their own problems and their own large body of research literature (Olsen, 1993). The deeper interest however lies in our social situation, for around the world, many societies are undergoing extreme levels of stress like that prevalent in that very unusual community then.

THE COMMUNITY

The community in question, located in the American Southeast, numbered about 50,000 people. It had been a relatively quiet and peaceful Southern town, with traditional and largely conservative ways of life and few glimmers of social change or disturbances. This town was suddenly overwhelmed with a very large military population, which swelled during Vietnam. As large numbers of soldiers were flown back and forth, directly and frequently to and from Vietnam,

the levels of social change and social disruption encountered in the stress was enormous. Traditional ways of behaving virtually disappeared, as illegal drug abuse, rampant alcoholism, and violence increased dramatically. Some sectors of the community remained extremely patriotic, others became actively anti-war and radicalized. The traditional split between blacks and whites in this community was, if anything, exacerbated by integration of soldiers at the nearby military post. Civilian traditions of at least partial segregation were overwhelmed by social change. Though conservatives were and remained many, radicals became significant in number and intensity of belief.

Few social ties or agreed upon common grounds were available to hold the social structure of the community together during this time. For example, at one point, the number of addicts using heroin in this particular town was said to be the second highest in the world, after New York City, which of course, had many millions in total population. It was also said that between the town and the military post, some 14 to 20 pawn shops actively solicited and sold possessions and personal property, often as a direct result of the need for cash by addicted persons. Presumably much of that trade was of stolen goods. Another frequently made statement was that on one downtown street, nicknamed "Combat Alley" that the average life span after dark was less than that of soldiers in the front lines in Vietnam. Truly, this was a community heavily impacted by the war, and by social change in an extreme form.

At the mental health centre, a steady of troubled persons sought help, some on their own, others through referrals, and a few brought in handcuffed or with leg irons, by court order. In addition almost every social, health, education, welfare or other agency in town sought ideas, advice, and assistance in meeting sharply increasing needs of their clientele. The agency personnel sought help from those working at the mental health centre, inviting seminars, talks workshops, and consultation on drug abuse, alcoholism, violence, mental illness, mental health, broken families, grief and depression, child-rearing, ethnic and racial conflict, and so on.

The daily, weekly, and monthly cycles of the community altered, so that after dark, Saturday

nights, weekends, and the once a month "Pay-day weekend" became times of danger and violence. Crisis intervention efforts, once reserved for rare and special situations, became routine, matter of fact, daily and on-going activities.

As a staff member an social scientist, I along with my colleagues, witnessed what was taking place, but because of the frenetic activity, we were unable to reflect on or analyze all that was occurring. If anything, we and others attributed the events to aberrant individuals, acting out because they could not handle the stress induced by the war.

THE MILITARY INFLUENCE

The soldier on the front lines is naturally most directly and personally affected by war, but those providing support and military families are under severe and chronic stress too (Giblett, 1987). During the usual twelve months tour that characterized the Vietnam war, many "Waiting Wives" or "Vietnam Mamas" as they were labelled more informally at the mental health centre, and their children needed help in solving problems of living under stress.

The military family has unique characteristics, including a high degree of mobility, authoritarian attitudes or "sergeantitis", and intolerance of deviance or difference (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford, 1950). Mobility prevents members of the military family from developing long-term relationships, as transfers and new assignments take place frequently, often with only brief notice. The family might be called upon to move not only from one post to another, but also to pack up for varying lengths of time for overseas postings as well. At other times, separations saw the soldiers depart, leaving behind a wife and children for "the duration" (Blount, Curry, and Lubin, 1992). Children in this situation appeared to develop few long-term attachments and seemed to be unable to establish intimate relationships with others (Kelley, 1994). Many members of military families make do with short-term superficial relationships, knowing that they or their friends will move soon to entirely new locations.

The successful career soldiers frequently develops "sergeantitis" of the "sergeant syndrome," an occupational hazard. The hierarchical chain of command and the status system

(rank) endemic of the military necessitates both dependency and leadership qualities, that is, thinking and acting only within a rigid framework, and strict, rapid obedience to those in authority. The limited range of possibilities and aggressive action to ensure that subordinates carry out orders may easily lead to intolerance of non-conforming behaviour and any slowness of response on the part of others (Blount, Curry and Lubin, 1992).

Over time, this occupationally influenced behaviour by a sergeant or other military personnel may carry on to their family. The successful or even unsuccessful male sergeant or officer might treat his wife, children and other members of the family as he treated subordinate soliders, that is, aggressive, authoritarian, domineering, and firm behaviour, as in decision making, setting structure, assigning tasks, and carrying out discipline (Blount, Curry and Lubin, 1992). Towards children, such persons might develop strict, rigid, structured relationships with little tolerance for their tendencies to play or stray beyond set limits. Coupled with occasional explosions of temper and physical punishment, children learn from these role models to become submissive or bullies, to behave appropriately when and only when within the confines of an organization where discipline is firm, and to even become authoritarian themselves except when in "free" situations.

The military wife may respond to this highly authoritarian structured, aggressive and occasionally violent male by being passively dependent. She is not able to and does not in fact, make many decisions when he is home. Discipline of children is relegated to the father-sergeant, and the mother invokes the threat of the father as a means to manage or control the children's behaviour. An atmosphere of fear results, albeit with an "on the surface" respect for discipline.

The children learn to cope with this firm and rigid discipline by "toeing the mark". Resentment and anger, though may build up in the children, leading to aggressive and even hostile playground behaviour (presumably because unstructured and without harsh disciplinarians in place). Behaviour in school may be satisfactory, if the teacher uses a rigid classroom structure backed up by firm discipline. Unstructured or unenforced

situations, i.e. playgrounds, may promptly lead to deterioration of behaviour, often through "acting out" on a physical level, i.e. bullying, violence.

The mother and children learn to be passive and dependent but may also maintain resentment and anger about their situation which is not and cannot be expressed in situ. This may lead to "acting out" behaviour when a situation loses structure, including that created by the departure of the military husband and father, as during a tour of duty. On the other hand, the rigidly structured beliefs and behaviour of the sergeant may be psychologically incorporated by the children, and the wife. Consequently their needs to conform to these beliefs might lead not only to intolerance of deviance, but to self-denial, guilt, and a poor self-image, but also extreme patriotism and intolerance for those who appear to be less than patriotic.

THE TOUR OF DUTY

Many career soliders expect, are physically and psychologically prepared, and even perceive attractive inducements (increases in rank and pay, opportunity to travel, greater chances for professional advancement, continued and strengthened peer group support and adventure, as well as occasional belief in the objectives) to go to war. The family, given military, social, and political structures, may gain from some of these benefits, but the most likely result is that the family undergoes more trauma (MacDonald, Chamberlain, Long and Mirfin, 1996). The mother and children's immediate reaction is one of loss, coupled with resentment against the Army. The younger the husband and wife and the more recent the marriage, the greater the stress (Martin and Ickovics, 1987). The trauma of separation is generally prolonged from rumours or the initial receipt of orders to the actual departure. During this time, and after, the wife's resentment, anger, and feelings of separation and loss, may turn to anxiety. This anxiety has a strong reality component, for some men did not return, or returned with severe physical injuries. Many of the returners did not have physical injuries, but carried psychological pathology clearly evident to the family, although such impairment was typically denied or minimized by military peers and authorities (Giblett, 1987).

The wife in such a situation might reduce her own anxiety by becoming increasingly patriotic. She might question sentiments of other people as being artificial or minimal or less than patriotic, for she sacrificed more than others, she surrendered her man. Therefore, she found herself supporting him and the organization involved, and the activities in which he engaged as well. Such wives indeed had a heavy investment in the conduct of the war. Their resentment at losses they felt may have initially focused against the military, but soon turned into resentment against those who were perceived as not equally patriotic, i.e. the hippies, the war protesters, the draft dodgers, drug users, the gay community and anyone who deviated from the so-called as examples.

The children felt a sense of loss too, but sometimes their new freedom from strict discipline from their father enabled them to feel positive gains. Their reaction was sometimes less than that of the mother for their youth and acquaintance with mobility permitted them to handle loss more readily than the mother, particularly if she had not grown up as an "Army brat." On the other hand, more behavioural problems in children were evident than children generally or otherwise (Kelley, 1994).

Most or at least many families weathered the year long term of duty without major crises. Involvement in military post inspired and/or local community social activities, religious groups, volunteer, educational or vocational pursuits provided a means of achieving social support, bridging the time and reducing anxiety. The children might misbehave both in and out of school, but this behaviour was often excused as appropriate for an "army brat."

PROBLEMS

A significant minority of families experienced problems, including those who suffered the death or severe injury of the soldier involved. Many families had strong emotional reactions which led to entrance into mental health and related programmes. Direct services, such as individual or group psychotherapy, and indirect services, including consultation by mental health staff with other agencies or professionals working with these families, were offered in the community. The

needs appeared to increase dramatically as the war enlarged in numbers and scope.

Those of us working at the mental health centre sought explanations for what we observed (Gregory and Meymandi, 1970). We saw individuals and families in strife, unable to cope, alienated, and yet at other times, patriotic and self righteous. We saw children manifesting symptoms while their mothers presented a "picture perfect" image of a loyal and patriotic military wife. We saw ever increasing reliance on alcohol and drugs, and greater levels of violence and abuse. We saw a community coming apart at the seams with conflict and suppressed anger. Making sense of these observations demanded interpretation of the evidence.

Interpretation One

One interpretation of the "Waiting Wives" syndrome was that departure was regarded by the wife, because of the risk faced by her husband in Vietnam, as a grief reaction. This enabled the wife to psychologically prepare herself for her husband's death. And this meant that the wife and children needed and "deserved" help from military, private and public social, health and other agencies.

For a full year, the wife and children had to be ready each and every day for the worst, that is, the formal arrival of two officers to announce that the soldier was dead. If the worst did not happen by the end of the year, then the grief process had to reverse suddenly and the wife had to renew her marital association. The "funeral" ritual and grief was difficult to do, and feelings of conflict and guilt were often associated with this situation. For those working in helping agencies, it did seem that children, and their mothers were seen more after just after the departure and just before and after the return in the various community service delivery agencies.

Interpretation Two

Another interpretation was that when a soldier departed for the year's tour of duty, the wife initially wanted him back. She could try to manipulate the situation to retrieve her husband, but regulations stated the husband would be returned only if the wife was hospitalized and the husband was needed for medical-legal reasons.

Problems with children in theory had no bearing. In practice, too, severe behavioural problems with children were not often recognized by the military authorities and the sergeant's tour of duty was unlikely to be curtailed. The reality however, did not deter the waiting wives from trying their best, subconsciously.

Usually, the distressed wife, when informed that her husband was not likely to come back before "his" tour was complete, agreed that she and her children did not need hospitalisation. She would then focus on adjusting to life without her husband, including activities such as running the household, governing the children, and coping with life. At this point, unconscious processes often led to pressures on the children, that is, the mother wanted her husband back, could not get him back through her own conscious behaviour, but sought to create a situation where severe problems manifested by the children necessitated his return. This led to the children coming to the attention of the professionals in the mental health system. This accounted for the large number of military dependents being seen. Of course, the resources of the community or military were extended and received with positive results, at such times. Typically this strategy did not result in the return of the sergeant.

Interpretation Three

A third factor was that local families relied on friends and relatives for help, while the military family lacked local ties to either relatives or friends. The military wives made use of military established agencies on post, or local agencies, particularly for their children. Local families, sometimes in even greater personal stress, maintained "pride" by "getting by" without use of public agencies. They had learned to "grin and bear it," even though their problems might be similar to those of the military families. The extended families and stable neighbourhoods provided natural support groups that maintained the status quo for the local families. Consequently, the helping agencies were used extensively by military families. Whereas local non-military people resisted public help and used pre-existing kinship and neighbourhood ties.

In the case of this atypical community, one conclusion was that parents, grandparents, aunts

and uncles, and an extended social network were central to the issue of children who surfaced as needing help. Parents were of primary importance in the prevention and treatment of emotionally disturbed young people (Caplan, 1976). But so too were extended families, stable and non-hierarchical communities, and role models or at least examples of non-aggressive and non-military behaviour (Thoits, 1986; Gottlieb, 1983; Holmes-Eber and Riger, 1990).

DISCUSSION

Three explanations (grief reaction, inability to adjust and lack of ties to local support networks) go part of the way towards an account for the peculiar situation of the "Waiting Wives." Undoubtedly each factor had some bearing on the situation. Military families underwent unusual stress during Vietnam and the dependents were heavily burdened by this stress. Special programs, however, were helpful, especially when designed to work with the key person in the family during this crisis - i.e. the mother.

On reflection, years, later, the manifestations so evident in that small community were but a forerunner of a far larger picture. The United States military was, and remains, a larger corporation, intent on winning a war then, at virtually any cost. In retrospect, President Eisenhower's famous words about being beware of a military-industrial complex ring true. Individuals, families and even communities were dispensable, as larger ideologically defined goals were stated and pursued (McNamara, 1994). Costs to individuals or communities were ignored, so intent were the leaders on winning (McNamara, 1994). The military wives, indeed, the human communities, were simply small time bit players caught in the role of victim (Ryan, 1971). Unfortunately, the individuals involved were unable to seize power even though some advocate that such a route is possible (Brislin, 1991). Corporations, without any hesitation, do take control whenever opportunity creates an opening.

Corporations have, in the 30 years since the peak of the Vietnam war, grown in power and scope (Bell, 1964; Keller, 1963; Seabrook, 1988; Mander, 1997). Competition between them has intensified, as friendly and unfriendly mergers,

stiff battles for market supremacy, and "winners and losers" games continue. And as Mander (1997) in particular has clearly outlined, corporations are designed to win at any and all cost in their search for power and control and wealth. His eleven inherent rules of corporates, including the profit imperative, the growth imperative, competition and aggression, amorality, hierarchy, quantification, dehumanization, exploitation, ephemerality, opposition to nature, and homogenization, leave little doubt as to the qualities inherent in corporations and corporate cultures. Individuals and communities, net works of friends, stable relationships all are dispensable as long as the struggle for control, profit margins, and power continue.

One additional characteristic may be that every now and then, the veil of secrecy over what is taking place gets broken - what is latent or hidden becomes manifest and open in the corporate jungle. Most of the time for most corporations, the media shape positive impressions. After all, advertising paints a pleasant picture, and the infighting competition and occasional ugliness that takes place within and between the corporate hierarchies remains commercially sensitive and is therefore blocked from public view. The United States military veil became uncovered during Vietnam, revealing the ugliness of what was taking place to those who looked closely. That the ugliness extended to and included the lowest echelon of their own system mattered not to those in power (MacNamara, 1994).

One has only to read Solzhenitsyn's masterful *Gulag Archipelago* (1974-1978) to realize that, like the "evil empire," the United States military, government and indeed, almost every transnational corporation are increasingly similar to what was the communist state in driving towards ideologically and/or profit defined goals, at the expense of virtually all non-stakeholders, or non-participants. Indeed, the only ones who profit are the very elite, who are rapidly increasing their wealth, power and control (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993; Quick, Nelson, Quick, 1990). Small stakeholders or very small shareholders, though they believe they too are "owners" are also vulnerable. The stock market has only to enter a crash to demonstrate their lack of power.

Accordingly, another arena to consider is the distribution of wealth and global income. The top

one-fifth of the world population has 82.7 per cent of the total of all income. The disparity with others is extreme and growing, for the next one-fifth has another 11.7 per cent of all income. These two fifths account for 94.4 per cent of income, leaving only 5.6 per cent for some sixty per cent of the population (United Nations Development Program, 1992). Three socio-ecological classes, including 1.1 billion over consumers with a per capita income of over \$7,500 US and rich diets, throwaway products, single family homes, and once wardrobes contrasted with some 3.3 billion "sustainers" who have incomes of around \$700 to \$7,500 US per capita, and the 1.1 billion "excluded" who have incomes of less than \$700 per capita per year (Daring, 1995). The lifestyle of the people at the bottom can only be thought of as object poverty and deprivation. The rulers of the corporations obviously, are not sharing their wealth equitably.

Social Change and Still Another Interpretation

Given the swing from a "Welfare State" to a neo-right capitalistic and "me" generation scene in countries around the world recently, some intriguing parallels and similarities emerge. For example, international or global corporate employers move their employees around the world as work requires. The threat of unemployment for middle and lower level workers, and even for many executives, creates still additional stress. Technological changes, competition for the better positions, and reductions in benefits creates stress in obtaining and maintaining a hold on almost every job. Movement and travel required create stress on families as well. Given downsizing, unemployment, underemployment, redundancy, and limited opportunities to gain status and pay increases, enormous personal stress is created for the top executives and managers, and for all others. At the same time, government policies and the elite right wing oriented decision makers who advocate cutting budgets and finding answers to social needs and who further redefine social policy to create cuts in benefits lead to real limits in the quantity and quality of social, health, education and other services. Support groups literally disappear. Inability to use support groups without jeopardizing job prospects fuelled by attitudes of "macho" and

aggressive results oriented task oriented peers and bosses, curtail a psychologically and socially supportive environment for most people.

In a sense, "community" is going or gone. Family violence, bullying in and out of schools by children, high alcohol consumption and an extremely high suicide rate among teenagers as in New Zealand, as one example, reveal that all is not well in the social fabric. The simmering resentment at their life situation coupled with mass media propaganda may even turn the many reasonably successful people against the unemployed, against those on welfare, against people with disabilities, against the gay community, and against those of different races or ethnic backgrounds.

Whether the situation is similar beyond that surface impression of the military empire and transnational corporations is of course, open to further research, particularly that which is multi-disciplinary. But added to an environment that is increasingly polluted, along with a loss of belief in political promises, it is little wonder that extended families, neighbourhoods, and communities virtually around the world are stressed, oppressed, and depressed. The "big picture" illustrates then, a fourth interpretation for the Vietnam mamas, capitalized corporates unleashed to pursue money and power.

In this interpretation, the "Vietnam mamas" were in the process of being destroyed not by napalm, bullets, poison sprays, and bombs as were the people of Vietnam, but by the very "military industrial" corporation that was destroying villages in order to save them. That corporation, the United States military, was chewing up its most vulnerable members in pursuit of strategic goals, whatever they were. Today's corporations appear similar in their profit driven goals and their results, the most vulnerable are being chewed up. Most of the chewing is being done piecemeal, quietly, and without awareness by the public. The Vietnam war opened up the US military as a corporate for public view as never before. The actions of the leaders became overt as the fierceness of the combat, the threat of loss, and the publicity revealed their behaviour.

As a scenario for the future, the picture presented by corporations for the masses is stark. Predatory corporations seek power and money

and is so doing, will destroy people and the environment. The human communities at large, and even the participants in the corporation itself, as when they are deemed surplus to requirements speak of an increasingly hostile and tragic future. Rationing of benefits to include only those who contribute to the power and profit of the corporations, just as was the case with United States military, is likely to continue and increase. The "outsiders" are not only neglected, but sadly, are surplus to requirements.

In many senses, the particular community discussed and the impact of Vietnam on the people was simply a forerunner or preamble of what is emerging around the world. Different sources of stress may be operating, but the human effects are similar. Key and highly visible results seem to be the high rates of illegal drug use, high rates of alcohol consumption, broken families, children growing up in states of uncertainty, transfers and movements of people without regard to any feelings of "community," violence, - in short, an on-going human and community disaster. This situation creates an unpleasant and even dangerous place in which to try to live.

The stress treatment industry has grown up largely in the 1970's and 1980's, witness the dozens or even hundreds of popular books published during that time (Palmer and Dryden, 1996). Psychologists and the clinical approach to treatment of stress on individuals have, if anything, masked the real cause, the actual situation, and the potential future we face.

In the face of this situation, almost unlimited opportunities are available to social scientists to intervene creatively, to create better social, political and other changes on local and micro levels. However, those who would attempt to take on the power and profit of the corporations may be identified, their activities may be noted with computer aided information systems and if they are successful, they may be watched as was Ralph Nader, by corporate or government agencies. The power of the wealthy elite will only be enhanced even further with the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, just as it was and is by GATT, WTO, the Trilateral Commission, the Group of Seven and others. Individual treatment and the clinical approach, locating the problem in aberrant individuals is an acceptable past-time - changing social systems is not.

Though few would agree with the architect of the Vietnam war, Robert Strange McNamara (1994) as he saw himself, i.e. as a builder, there are opportunities to rebuild the fabric of society and the social relationships that were broken by Vietnam and that will be broken by the power of the corporates. Such opportunities may be ephemeral given the march and might of the corporates, but efforts should remain important and worthwhile. Community psychology or other social scientific disciplines, activists in general, and opposition political efforts will be restricted only by their own lack of resources and the obvious dangers of trying to engage where it counts, at macro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) interventions.

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