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Taking to the Streets: The Political Engagement of Anti-war Vietnam Veterans

Veterans of the American War in Vietnam are known for exerting their influence in U.S. politics, most recently during the 2004 Presidential election when a group known as Swift Boat Veterans for Truth formed to oppose the election of fellow Vietnam veteran John Kerry for his high-profile anti-war activism after his return from Southeast Asia. Like Kerry, who later served in the U.S. Senate and as Secretary of State, other Vietnam veterans and small numbers of also became politically active as part of their efforts to end U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. They engaged with political and military figures, spoke out in the media, and even joined the anti-war movement. The modes of political engagement that anti-war Vietnam veterans chose depended on their levels of disenchantment with the American establishment and their ultimate goals. Those who contacted journalists or joined the antiwar movement were the most disillusioned veterans of the war – they had essentially given up on appeals to political and military leaders and were taking their pleas to the public. This paper will discuss how anti-war veterans understood their styles of political engagement, and the arguments they made in these venues, with a focus on those who opted for the most public opposition to the war by speaking to the press, joining Vietnam Veterans Against the War, participating in their own war crimes tribunals, and even taking the risk of public opposition to the war while still serving on active duty through organizations like the Concerned Officers Movement.