

Excerpted from



WHAT'S GOING ON?

California and the Vietnam Era

EDITED BY

MARCIA A. EYMANN AND CHARLES WOLLENBERG

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Building 590 at the Oakland Army Base filled with cots used for overnight billeting by soldiers on their way to Vietnam, 1967. This is the building that now houses the museum's collection storage.

OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION

What's Going On?

California always has been a social laboratory and harbinger for the nation. What happens in the most populous (and diverse) state reverberates throughout the United States. No time was this more the case than during the late 1960s and early 1970s. . . .

—Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, 2003

Marcia A. Eymann

IN 1990 I arrived in California from the Midwest seeing the state for the first time. I had moved to California to take the job of curator of photography in the History Department of the Oakland Museum of California. As part of my orientation to the museum I was given a tour of our collections facility, located on the then-active Oakland Army Base. After passing through a military guard station, we entered the grounds of the base. As we drove to our destination, we passed countless structures, which reminded me of scenes from Hollywood World War II films with their classic 1940s military architecture. I have to admit a level of sheer pleasure as I imagined myself a part of one of these films, realizing that this base would not have looked much different in 1945 than it did in 1990. As we approached the collections facility, we parked in front of a set of padlocked wooden double doors, with a sign above it reading 22. Upon entering the building I was transported mentally to another movie (after all I was in California, the land of movies), this time the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, showing aisle after aisle of shelving units holding a wide range of museum objects. This was a huge cavernous building with sheet metal roofing above

exposed, large wooden trusses that creaked and moaned to their own rhythm as we walked its bare concrete floor. It was cold and damp, more haunting than welcoming. As I toured down the artifact aisles, familiarizing myself with the range of the museum's collections, I could not help but notice the rather primitive signage attached to support beams and hanging from the trusses reading: "DO NOT LAY ON BED WITH FOOT GEAR ON," and "Thru This Door To Bay 4 Latrine," and finally "NO SMOKING IN BED." What was this building used for before us, I asked my colleague? She explained that during the Vietnam War troops would bunk overnight in this warehouse before being shipped overseas. "Wow, and they just left all of this stuff here?" I asked amazed. "Oh yeah, and there's more than just the signs. Check out the writing on the walls," she replied. So I did. Walking along the front wall of the building, I began reading graffiti left by soldiers in the 1960s and 1970s. Immediately what struck me was that the guys writing this were not just from California, but were from all across the country, and were literally recording their last stop, after what had been for many a cross-country journey before leaving for war. These soldiers

used the walls mainly to record their names, where they were from, date of induction, and their “ETS” (estimated time of service), or in other words, when they would return. Below Tony Earl tells you where he is from and where he is going but not when he will be back:

“Tony Earl RVN [Republic of Vietnam] January 12, 1973, Indiana.”

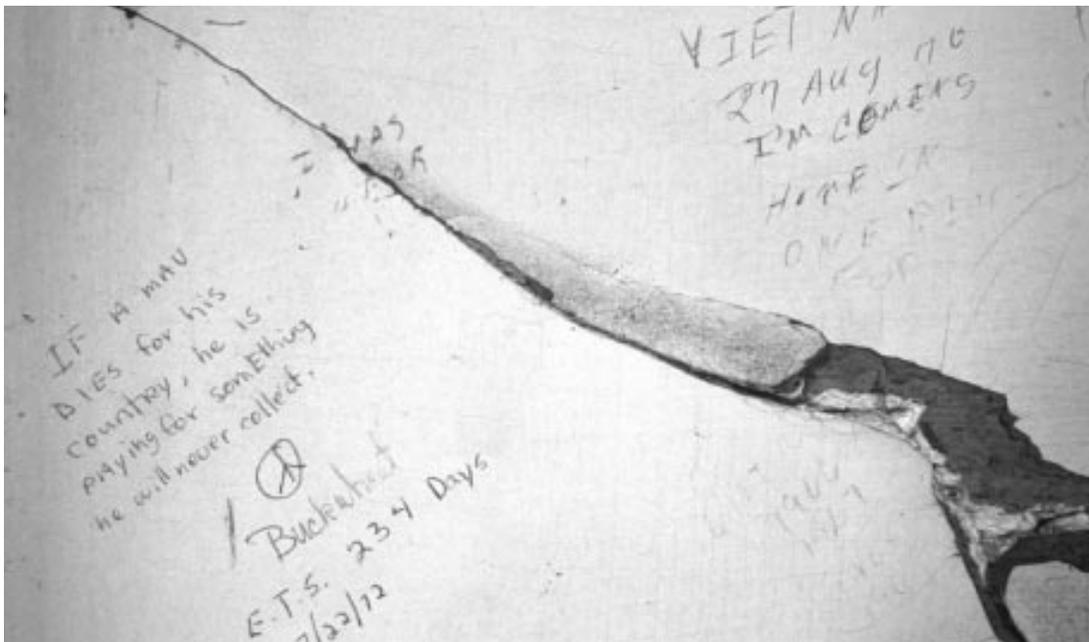
Others were poems demonstrating what was going through the minds of these young men and their attitudes about war:

“Bob was here with plenty to do, Be back from NAM in '72. Left this town in '71, won't come back till my time is done.”

“if a man dies for his country, he is paying for something he will never collect.”

Hundreds of markings covered the walls giving me another view of what California was all about. I came to the Golden State with many stereotypes already implanted in my mind. Now that image of a state, filled with hippies and antiwar protesters, beaches, and everything Hollywood, was being replaced by a new image, of a scared and sometimes angry young man on his way to war leaving his mark to confirm that he was there and would return. California was a gateway to the war for hundreds of young men from all across the nation. This cold impersonal army warehouse marked the soldier's last mainland stop on their journey to war. Their writings were the beginning of my journey in understanding a complex piece of California history, and the momentous role the state had played in events of the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1999 I was asked to produce a small adjunct



A detail of the soldier's graffiti found on the walls in Building 590 at the Oakland Army Base.

exhibit concerning the Bay Area during the Vietnam War, to bring a California focus to the touring photographic exhibition, *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina*. The museum would eventually back out of the traveling show, but in this process we realized that we had a great deal of information that merited a larger format display. A project team was formed to create an exhibition that would demonstrate California's significant role during the Vietnam era.

From the beginning everyone was aware of the sensitive nature of our topic. We understood that the topic meant working not only with living history but also with individuals for whom the wounds of war remained open. We soon discovered deeper scarring than anticipated. Thirty years was not enough time to heal. Many veterans of the era still carried trauma of the war, some bitter toward their service and treatment by the public and others continuing to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A number of veterans have felt and continue to feel that they had been stereotyped by the media as crazy or criminals. Like the veterans some Vietnamese Americans living in California and the nation remain angry and politically charged by the loss of their homes and country, but also by the way in which they have been marginalized and dismissed by American society as a whole. Since the end of American involvement in the war in 1973 Vietnamese have been making America, and in particular California, their home but they are generally excluded from historical narratives of the war, and like the veterans, find themselves stereotyped by media. In addition to Vietnamese we could not forget refugees from Cambodia and Laos including the Hmong who fought side by side with U.S. troops against the Vietcong and also now call California home. The range of individuals whose lives were im-

pacted by war does not stop with veterans and refugees. Political activists, politicians, mothers, wives and the generation that has grown up since the end of the war continue to feel the effects of the Vietnam era.

This exhibition would be the first time a museum would do an in-depth historical study of how one region was changed by the Vietnam War. It provided an opportunity to look at the war from a myriad of perspectives that only exist in California and a new direction in interpreting a deeply contested and often stereotyped period in the history of the state. After discussions with scholars, veterans, former antiwar activists and Southeast Asian refugees, we decided to tell this story by allowing the voices of individuals who had lived through the time to present different perspectives and points of view. We believed that oral histories along with historical artifacts should be the interpretive thread of the exhibit, providing a range of experiences from the time demonstrating the complexity of the era. Music would play a similar role. The music in the 1960s and 1970s helped to shape peoples attitudes during the war and still serves as a trigger for memory and emotions that can transport people to another time and place.

From the beginning the approach to this exhibition was the reverse of what is traditionally done in historical writing and exhibitions. Normally in conducting a project of this nature, in-depth research would first be conducted from which broad ideas and concepts developed. In the case of California and the Vietnam War we began with a series of broad statements portraying the California experience as an exaggerated version of the national experience. Due to the state's deep investment in the military-industrial complex, its importance as a center for both protest politics and conservative activism, as well as the state's identity politics, media industries, and the presence of the largest Southeast Asian

refugee population in the nation, California was at the vortex of the storm created by the Vietnam War. To test the validity of our ideas the team conducted multiple interviews and read as much scholarship related to the war and California as we could locate. From there we began researching and validating our themes, the first of which related back to the graffiti at the army base. We believed that California during the Vietnam War served as a point of entry and departure for most of the troops. We also explored California as a major player in the nation's "military-industrial complex." Validation came very quickly as I spoke to the official U.S. Army historian who told me that if you had been Army personnel unquestionably you would have processed through California on your way to the war or coming home from the battlefields. Indeed, between 1965 and 1968, 222,750 soldiers passed through just the Oakland Army Base alone en route to the Pacific. Indeed, the graffiti had led us in the right direction, but there was more. During the Vietnam War, the Oakland Army Base was also the largest military port complex in the world. During the first eight years of the war more than 37 million tons of cargo passed through the base to and from Vietnam.

From the military we were led to the private sector. By the end of 1967, to speed up the arrival of troops and deal with the volume of soldiers who were rotating in and out of the military on one-year tours, the U.S. military began contracting with charter airlines to fly soldiers to Vietnam rather than ship by boat. One of the largest contracts was awarded to World Airways, also based in Oakland. Along with troop transport, World Airways in 1968 started Rest and Relaxation (R&R) flights for battle-weary troops from Vietnam to San Francisco, Australia, and Japan. In addition, it held the contract for the delivery of *Stars and Stripes*, the mili-

tary newspaper, to Vietnam from Japan, where it was printed. It would become famous as the airline that flew the last flight out of Danang at the end of the war in 1975 and as the carrier of the first airlift of Vietnamese orphans to the United States that same year.

Many other California bases and companies participated in the war effort. Through our research we were learning of California's heavy investment in the nation's "military-industrial complex." By 1965 California was the leading recipient of defense dollars and had the largest number of military installations of any state.

The next phase of the project centered on the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). In a normal exhibition project of this size (6,000 square feet), one of the initial steps is to apply to the NEH for a planning grant. As part of this process, we placed our first conference call to our programs officer at the NEH. From earlier interviews we learned that people needed to tell their own stories of the time. So it was for our programs officer who described his experience as a marine, including his return flight from Vietnam. He knew he was home only when he finally caught sight of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The same conversation made clear that in order to receive an NEH grant we had to present a subject that was of national significance. It is easy to convince the NEH that events in Washington, D.C., or New York have national significance, but California was a much harder sell. In order to demonstrate California's importance, we argued that the tide of national events shifted in the 1960s, often moving from West to East. We had to move beyond the stereotype of California and the Bay Area, in particular, as only a bastion of liberalism and radical politics. We were going to have to break through the myth to understand the complexity of California life and politics.



Interior of a World Airways plane during one of their flights for Operation Babylift, April 1975. For safety, the smaller children and infants were strapped into cardboard boxes donated by a local Oakland stationery store.

OAKLAND TRIBUNE COLLECTION, GIFT OF ANG NEWSPAPERS
OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA



Disneyland's Main Street USA soon after opening, July 1955.

MIKE ROBERTS, PHOTOGRAPHER
OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

A diverse group of supporters at a Free Speech rally in front of Sproul Hall on the University of California, Berkeley campus, December 7, 1964.

HELEN NESTOR, PHOTOGRAPHER
OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA, GIFT OF THE ARTIST



To accomplish this goal we began an analysis of California history beginning in the 1950s. California in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, more than any other state, represented the American dream come true. In *Suburban Warriors*, Lisa McGirr writes, “No state in the nation in the mid-twentieth century represented the promises of the United States more than California.” The West and, in particular, California have always been perceived as a place where an individual can literally reinvent himself or herself. It is the land of personal expression, innovation, and experimentation, providing an escape from the traditions and structure of the rest of the country. It expanded the dreams of what life could be for all Americans. In a 1945 *Life* magazine article the author predicted that the “California way of life . . . may in time influence the pattern of life in America as a whole.” This prediction was to prove itself true as the state was flooded with new residents and postwar economic prosperity. The state projected the image of an idealized way of life with sunny weather, sandy beaches, and a suburban lifestyle. Images of Hollywood and Disneyland, and the music of the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean, became popular culture icons in the 1950s and 1960s. As the most suburbanized region in the world, California became the birthplace of national trends in fashion, music, film, and lifestyle.

By 1962 California was the most populous state in the nation and the home of a large percentage of the baby boom generation. Peaking in 1957, the baby boom continued until 1964, accounting for roughly one-third of the population at that time. In the 1960s seventeen-year-olds emerged as the largest single age group in America. They were quickly dubbed “the best and brightest,” raised on patriotism, the promise of technology, and the fear of Communism and the bomb. They would swell California’s educational system in the

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1950s and in the 1960s pushing it to become a national model for higher education and Mecca for the youth culture of the era.

These same boomers, raised on the flag, apple pie, and duck-and-cover preparedness drills were infused with patriotism, hope for the future, and, paradoxically, social rebellion. The patriotism and optimism would carry a generation on an idealistic wave toward the New Frontiers promised by President John F. Kennedy. *Home Before Morning*, Lynda Van Devanter’s 1983 biography, epitomizes this idealism when she writes, “I was part of a generation of Americans who were ‘chosen’ to change the world. We were sure of that.” The rebellious side would lead to youthful activism focused against middle-American conformity. The Free Speech Movement on the University of California’s Berkeley campus during the fall of 1964 epitomizes this rebellious activism. The student protesters initially represented a wide range of groups and clubs, including Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Young Democrats, CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), The Independent Socialist Club, SLATE (a leftist student political organization), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Women for Peace (also known as Women Strike for Peace), and the W.E.B. DuBois Club, as well as the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), Young Republicans, and California Students for Goldwater. The activism of the boomer

Bob Hope, John Wayne, and Dean Martin show their support for Republican nominee for governor, Ronald Reagan, during a “Californians for Reagan” event at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, 1966.

COURTESY OF RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY



generation, both on the left and the right, focused on resisting impersonal, bureaucratic structures—big corporations, big unions, and multiversities. The rebellion would take on greater strength and momentum as the boomer generation tackled the issues of the Vietnam War.

Raised on the cold war, educated more than any other generation, they were also the first to grow up with television. Both the television and film industries (predominately located in California) promoted the ideology and tension of the cold war and legitimized the use of force to combat Communism. On both the small and the large screen boomers were inundated with a plethora of combat films and westerns portraying American military forces as omnipotent, all-powerful, and always right. At the same time, television served to politicize the boomers. They watched as civil rights activists were beaten and harassed by police officers in the streets in America’s South. The nightly news brought these events into their homes and daily lives

pushing some young people to challenge the nation to live up to the ideals on which it was based.

Just as the antiwar movements also were composed of multiple factions and coalition groups, so too was the state as a whole. California during the era magnified the political split between conservative and liberal. The millions of Americans who migrated to the Golden State in the 1950s and 1960s to take new jobs in the defense industries settled into single-family homes living out the American dream. In Southern California, in particular, some of these new westerners began a conservative political revolt. The new migrants brought with them their wish for a new beginning and prosperity along with their American ideals as the “greatest generation” who had won World War II. Now they carried the torch of freedom and democracy for the world. Their staunch belief in the fight against Communism would lead them to campaign for Barry Goldwater in his 1964 presidential bid, and Ronald Reagan in his run for governor in 1966. As Jonathan M. Schoenwald states in *A Time for*

Choosing, “If New York City in 1965 was a test case for conservative principles within and without the GOP, California in 1966 offered a similar scenario as the gubernatorial election promised to serve as a referendum on the future of the conservatism and liberalism.” In that 1966 election Ronald Reagan, always a speaker who listened to his audience, took to heart the complaints he was hearing from the parents of the rebellious youth of the state. It was from these complaints that Reagan first coined his famous line of “cleaning up that mess in Berkeley,” and used Middle America’s reaction to the antiwar protests to win the governor’s office. Reagan became the voice of the silent majority. His form of “cowboy conservatism” appealed to the American public and eventually would lead him to the White House in 1980.

California also dramatized the national split of Left and Right, “hawk vs. dove,” through the personalities of Hollywood celebrities. Just as the nation split, so did Hollywood, albeit on a much higher profile level. On the right and representing the World War II generation was John Wayne, and other celebrities such as Bob Hope and Roy Rogers. On the left was a youthful Jane Fonda, along with Donald Sutherland, Warren Beatty, and others. This split was played out in the press and on film as Wayne’s 1968 pro-war production of *The Green Berets* was counter-pointed a decade later by Fonda’s 1978 antiwar film, *Coming Home*. These films say as much about the nation’s state of mind at the time they were made as they do about the celebrities who made them.

The significance of Jane Fonda and John Wayne became clear early in the project. Fonda was mentioned, positively or negatively wherever we went. She was one of the dominant figures to emerge from the period, partly because of her controversial nature, but also

because of her Hollywood status. Wayne also came up numerous times, particularly with veterans who had been raised on his films and his portrayals of the heroic American fighting man.

The young men and women who went off to fight the war were permanently changed by what they did and saw in Vietnam. According to Vietnam veteran, John Baky, “California was the Promised Land, and all of a sudden we finally got there as East Coast Boys and had to leave right away. And we weren’t just leaving, look where we were going.” California was their last connection with home and also the dream of what America had to hold and what they might never have the opportunity of truly experiencing.

During the war California would also be a base for antiwar activism in the military, and the state would play a major role in the veterans’ movement that created Vietnam Veterans’ Against the War (VVAW), promoted groundbreaking treatment of PTSD and the effects of Agent Orange, and campaigned for disabled people’s rights and the restructuring the Veterans Administration. Just as these men and women had once traveled across country on their way to war, they traveled again as protesters to bring national attention to the rights of veterans of an unpopular war.

We still needed to address the Vietnamese and other war-related refugees from Southeast Asia. As with veterans, every effort was made to reach out to this community for its input. First we invited local Vietnamese American scholars and followed up with a series of community gatherings that would include both first- and second-generation Americans.

The community groups quickly let us know that we were to refer to them as refugees, not as immigrants, since they were forced to leave their homeland. California became home for the largest percentage of refugees

California was the Promised Land, and all of a sudden we finally got there as East Coast Boys and had to leave right away. And we weren't just leaving, look where we were going.

from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Orange County in Southern California is the home of the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam and San Jose has the largest Vietnamese community within a city limits. The city of Long Beach has the largest population of Cambodians and California's Central Valley is the place where many Hmong and Mien from Laos have relocated. In all of these cities and towns, strong, vibrant communities have been formed. California served as the point of entry for the refugees, and even though a large percentage were originally sponsored to move to other areas of the country, many found their way back to the Golden State. An educator, originally from England, who had worked in the refugee camps in Thailand, told me of the trauma and struggle of the Hmong people who had fled from Laos by foot into Thailand. In the camps the Hmong would talk of new beginnings with families in Fresno. Having grown up in England the educator assumed that Fresno was a city in Thailand, and was surprised to find that Fresno was in California. The road to California was already well established by the early 1980s.

As a public institution, the Oakland Museum of California's mission is to examine the history of Cali-

fornia and demonstrate its importance and uniqueness. As a public museum we use exhibitions and public programs to communicate this message with diverse audiences. This book and the accompanying exhibition focus on how its citizen's lives were changed. The book and exhibition also examine how events in California reverberated across the nation, politically, socially, and culturally. They address the war in Southeast Asia only in the context of its impact on the lives of individuals now in the United States. We are challenging the reader and museum visitor to look at history through a new and different lens, not as seen from the battlefield but in light of direct repercussions of war in California during and after the war itself.

It is particularly difficult to discuss the Vietnam War since so many people experienced the events first hand and are still profoundly influenced by them. There is a personal ownership of the time and what they saw and how their lives were changed. Each evening on the nightly news they saw the war unfold on their television screens and heard CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite complete his broadcast stating "And that's the way it is." And they believed that it was. Those images and experiences are still in their minds just as the battles and losses are with veterans and refugees. Each has his or her own truth but with this project we hope visitors will be challenged to look at that period through someone else's eyes. We must also engage a new generation who has grown up since the end of the war, whose primary source for information on the war is motion pictures and television.

Our book and exhibit have only begun to scratch the surface of the multiple stories that could and need to be told. But what we can do is provide a beginning point for Americans to understand how war transforms a society and individuals, and how that complex process

of transformation continues long after the last treaty has been signed. We live today with the legacy of the Vietnam War and as a nation we need to integrate that legacy into our larger history. After four years of hard work and study, we hope we have contributed to that process with *What's Going On?* There are multiple themes that could have been included in this publication including broader representation of the Cambodian and Laotian immigrants, the origins of the alternative press, music and artistic developments but all books have a limit in size and scope. It is the editor's hope that others will continue on with the research and continue to examine the impact of the war on California and other regions of the nation.

This book deals with the major themes of the exhibit by going into greater depths than can be done in an exhibition format. Chapter one by Charles Wollenberg explains the role of California as a microcosm and magnification of the national experience. Marc Gilbert's chapter provides key historical background on California's deep investment in the nation's "military-industrial complex." In chapter three, Jules Tygiel provides an overview of the career of Ronald Reagan and the beginnings of his rise to power in the Golden State.

The next chapters focus on the social revolutions of the period with Jeff Lustig analyzing the role of the antiwar movement in the state and Ruth Rosen discussing the roots of the women's movement. Clayborne

Carson provides a personal account of the black power and black protest movements of the era as he places himself as student in the center of these events as they unfolded in California.

Chapter seven by George Mariscal explores the political movements of the Chicano community as related to the antiwar movement. He also tells the story of the Chicano veteran and the communities' strong belief in the tradition of military service and the conflict.

Khuyen Vu Nguyen examines the significance of memorials in processing and healing a community and the nation. John Burns in chapter eight also looks at the veteran experience relating it directly to California. For many GIs during the war California represented "The World" and Burns discusses the role California played in a soldier's life.

Noted Vietnam War scholar Robert Schulzinger summarizes the continuing legacy of the war in California, from Hollywood to the establishment of trade and diplomatic relations with Vietnam in the 1990s. Finally, Andrew Lam, a Vietnamese refugee himself, looks at the Vietnamese community in California today. In examining traditions and transitions of this diverse community, he provides an intimate portrait. All of the chapters work together to represent the range of stories of the era and to provide a sense of the complexity of the period and its continuing legacy.