4. The Vet Centers in Crisis: Body Count, Fleeing Counselors, and a Silent Director

The Reagan era marked the re-ascendancy of a hard-line conservatism in America, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since the early 1950s. Reagan served up his reheated Cold War politics with a dazzling Hollywood smile, but he and his administration had little use—and scarcely more tolerance—for anyone who did not fit into the white, middle-class, hardworking, law-abiding, flag-waving, Communist-hating, Protestant mold. In Reagan’s world, the kind of guys who began showing up at Vet Centers—and oftentimes the guys who ran them—fell mostly into one big category that, if he were being generous, he might call degenerate.

There were, of course, some Vietnam veterans who made a career of outraged, ripping off, and getting back at the American government, and the Vet Centers were just another weapon for them to wield against the Washington fat cats, who had already stripped them—or so they believed—of faith, hope, honor, and decency. For the first year or two of the Outreach program, Vet Center scandals abounded. The team leader of the San Diego Vet Center was caught using his government van to import cocaine from Mexico. In Fort Lauderdale, a group of armed Vietnam vets took over a Vet Center and held it for several days. But the government also was not above manufacturing a few scandals of its own.

The two Alabama Vet Centers, in Birmingham and Mobile, were headed by
notoriously antiwar veterans, a fact that drew fierce criticism from Alabama's Republican Senator, Jeremiah Denton, himself a highly decorated Vietnam POW. Having recently discovered a black nationalist, terrorist group running guns and drugs out of Mobile, Denton was convinced that activist Vietnam vets were behind it, and that Alabama's Vet Centers were being used to recruit bodyguards and assassins to protect these criminal operations. A whole slew of law enforcement agencies, from the FBI down to the Alabama Bureau of Investigation (ABI), were only too happy to formulate an entrapment scheme that could shut down such a vile conspiracy, perhaps the whole Vet Center program, and put an end to this horrendous misuse of government funding. One government agent even claimed, later in court, that "delayed-stress syndrome" had been concocted merely as an alibi in case the veterans were ever caught. The worst part was that the VA gladly cooperated in what was later dubbed "Vetscam" (after another famous FBI entrapment plot of the time, Abscam). In a press release afterward, VA administrator Robert Nimmo claimed he had merely been helping "cleanse" the Vet Center program of those who threatened its "integrity."

The primary target of Vetscam was a peer counselor in the Birmingham Vet Center and former First Cav combat artilleryman named Tom Ashby. Not only had Ashby founded the first Alabama chapter of VVAW, but he had subsequently made enemies in the conservative white establishment by his prominent civil rights and prison-reform work. He was especially concerned with the plight of Vietnam vets in prison and founded Alabama Veterans' Services in large part to do prison outreach as well as discharge upgrading. Ron Bitzer of the Center for Veterans' Rights called Ashby "one of the outstanding organizers of veterans" and praised his "credible track record."

Additional targets were the Birmingham team leader Don Reed, a former three-tour Army combat helicopter pilot who had also been a leader in VVAW, and the Mobile team leader Dave Curry, an exceedingly bright man whom the Army had sent to counterintelligence and language schools and who had worked undercover in Vietnam as part of the Phoenix (later renamed Phung Hoang) program. Enraged and disgusted by the political assassinations he had helped arrange, Curry asked and was permitted to resign from active duty in 1971. He proceeded to get his M.A. in sociology from Ole Miss, writing his thesis on hallucinogen users, and his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, writing a brilliant, book-length thesis (later published under the title Sunshine Patriots) on those men in his generation, vets and nonvets alike, who had "run afoul of the military." In fact, despite his academic success, Curry's own life and his marriage went to pieces as he tried to shut out his immense guilt from the war with too many hours of work and vast quantities of booze and drugs. It was only through the intervention of Tom Ashby and the sympathetic camaraderie in VVAW, he would later say, that he survived at all. Like Ashby, he also commit-
ted himself to the cause of numerous oppressed minorities, including southern blacks, gay people, and incarcerated veterans. The prospect of helping other vets at the Mobile Vet Center seemed a further means of recovering the sense of purpose he had lost in Vietnam and that he’d spent many self-destructive years in search of.

Unfortunately, the Mobile Vet Center, months in being readied, was shut down before the first veteran client could enter. It was seized on opening day, February 17, 1982, by government agents, and the Birmingham Vet Center was closed the same day. Ashby, Reed, and Curry were all charged with distributing (not selling) a few grams of cocaine to another Vet Center employee, a Marine combat veteran named Grady Gibson. Reed, a highly decorated war hero, was soon released on a three-year probation, but Ashby and Curry went to trial before a notoriously reactionary, anti-civil libertarian judge (a Reagan appointee), W. Brevard Hand, and a poorly educated rural jury. The prosecutor Jeffrey Beauregard Sessions III had previously indicted sixteen black NAACP members for “conspiracy to commit vote fraud” because of their work registering black voters—a case that was thrown out. During the trial, Sessions attacked Ashby for his civil rights work and Curry for his graduate thesis on “drug use.” The lifestyle of both men was used to discredit them—such as the fact that they admitted smoking pot with veteran friends or occasionally doing a few lines of cocaine after a softball game. Found guilty, Curry was sentenced to 34 years in prison and fined $80,000, while Ashby got 30 years and a $59,000 fine. Though the sentences were later reduced somewhat, both men’s careers were permanently destroyed and their personal lives shattered for more than a decade.

In a period when rich white businessmen like auto designer John Z. DeLorean often got off scot-free on cocaine-trafficking charges far more substantial than those brought against Ashby and Curry, the country clearly had a different standard of justice for Vietnam veterans. Reed, Ashby, and Curry were hardly criminals by any stretch of the imagination. They were Vietnam combat vets who, like tens of thousands of their peers, had little use for regulations or spit-shine propriety. They had been taught to get a job done and to take care of their comrades, and they had thought of Grady Gibson as one of their own.

It came out at the trial that Grady Gibson was a government agent who had been sent to the Birmingham Vet Center to inveigle Ashby and the others into a criminal conspiracy. In fact, he had told Reed, Ashby, and Curry that he had a bad cocaine addiction and had pleaded with them to get him a little cocaine to keep him from going into withdrawal; at the same time, Gibson told them he was about to come into a big inheritance which he would donate to Alabama Veterans’ Services. Although Gibson claimed to be a bemused war hero like Reed, the truth was he had deserted the Marines just after his return from Vietnam, had been court-martialed and given a bad discharge, and had subse-
quently gotten in trouble because of his own heavy drug use. The easiest way out for him was to become an informer for the ABI, and eventually he became one of their chief drug agents. In 1987, he and another ABI informer, Eddie Hart, were convicted of murdering Hart’s teenage wife to collect on an insurance policy worth $300,000. Gibson was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Among the more outrageous aspects of the entrapment was the fact that Gibson had worn a body mike and secretly tape-recorded supposedly confidential Vet Center counseling sessions, and then these tapes were played before the judge. Confidentiality was further breached when client files were confiscated by the prosecution and inspected for months. But despite such legal and ethical violations, and despite the fact that many newspapers, like the Mobile Press-Register, used Vetscam to denounce the entire Vet Center program as a “nonessential drain on the federal treasury,” Operation Outreach’s new director, Art Blank, refused to speak up in Ashby and Curry’s defense; in fact, he announced publicly that he was “cutting them loose.” Blank had already come under fire because more than 10 percent of the staff in his program were former VVAW members, and so he hastened to distance himself from Ashby and Curry’s “irresponsible actions,” even to the point of denying he had ever been a VVAW member himself. Likewise, Senator Cranston, according to his deputy general counsel Bill Brew, tried to do “damage control” by disowning Ashby and Curry and letting them “take the fall,” in order to insure that the Vet Center program survived.

Clearly, one couldn’t expect prominent government officials to countenance lawbreaking, but one could have expected someone to speak up for the years of dedicated civil rights, prison, and veterans’ work Ashby and Curry had both performed, and to see that the punishment meted out to them was not so far out of proportion to the technically illegal but relatively harmless acts they had done out of friendship—not for profit or with criminal intent. Besides, a great many other veterans were unfairly made to pay the price as well, like the majority of their coworkers, who were also fired or suspended. The Birmingham and Mobile Vet Centers, with their long list of waiting clients, did not reopen for many months. When they did, they were no longer the vet-friendly places they had been under Reed and Ashby, and there were many subsequent staff resignations to protest the new bureaucratic rigidity.206

Robert P. Nimmo remained VA administrator till November 1982, and during his term Vet Centers a great deal. All those who hated the Vet director and various medical the country—knew