

POWs of an Era

Understanding the Vietnam Generation

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They are children of turmoil and POWs of time—aging activists wrestling with unresolved conflicts of the Vietnam war era. But the Project on the Vietnam Generation hopes to help resolve such conflicts by studying the actions and attitudes of the approximately 60 million 32- to 49-year-olds who came of age during those years.

"No one in the United States or anywhere else that we've heard of is doing what we're doing," says John Wheeler, the project's founder and president. "No one is saying, 'Wait a minute—rather than looking at chunks of time as an organizing principle for knowledge, let's look at a body of people as they move through time.'"

Wheeler, who also is chairman of the board of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, says the private, nonprofit project was begun a year and a half ago because of what he saw as a need of members of the generation to better understand their experiences during that time.

The project, housed in the National Museum of American History, acts as a clearinghouse for information about the Vietnam era and current events related to it. It's a network of about 2,000 scholars and academics from various fields, Vietnam veterans and others who study how such events as the Vietnam war, the civil rights and women's movements, and the Watergate scandal still affect the generation.

"The people who constituted this generation were of an age, at some point of that decade, to have been affected by an event or events in some kind of psychological, meaningful way," says Dr. Steven Sonnenberg, a psychiatrist and the project's director of research. "If you look

back on an experience and have insight you can look to the future without being shackled by the past.

"We think of the Vietnam war as a metaphor to describe the era, but we are not focused on the Vietnam war or plight of Vietnam veterans any more than we are focused on any number of important historical events ... that occurred during those years," Sonnenberg says. "We want to explore the effects of those movements, that discord, that conflict, the way that the era left us wounded but also with potential strengths."

The project—staffed by Wheeler, Sonnenberg, Executive Director Sandie Fauriol, an administrative assistant and an intern—publishes a quarterly newsletter and conducts ongoing surveys of state and local Vietnam veterans memorials, and college and high school courses taught on such era-related events as the civil rights movement and the women's movement.

Staff members plan to begin their first study group this fall. Each year, they hope to have five study groups, of scholars and nonscholars, focus on such topics as the generation's changing values, national leadership roles and the impact of Vietnam-era trauma on the lives of members of the generation. They also plan national conferences at which the study groups would present papers, for distribution later to business and political leaders. The group plans to hold the first conference sometime next year.

Wheeler says he also hopes to conduct polls to get at the "guts of what makes us tick as a generation" and to someday have a museum exhibition of Vietnam Veterans Memorial artifacts, including photos, flags, letters and Purple Hearts.

Still, Wheeler declines discussing long-term goals, since the project



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Project founder John Wheeler, left, Sandie Fauriol and Steven Sonnenberg.

will be reevaluated in about three years.

"We know it's going to take some years to build the mirror, and see what we see of our generation," he says. "If people think that the mirror is worth keeping and expanding, then we'll build the mirror bigger and expand it over time. But the responsible thing to do is to accomplish what we know needs to be done."

The project's present budget is almost \$122,000, which comes from about 20 individuals, businesses and foundations. The largest donors were the Ford Foundation, which contributed \$25,000; the Booth Ferris Foundation, which gave \$15,000; and David Rockefeller, who gave \$10,000.

Wheeler projects a budget of about \$1 million during the next three years. He says \$31,000 is still needed for the first study groups and hopes to receive that funding in the next couple of months.

Executive Director Fauriol says the generation has become more conservative.

"I think people become more con-

servative with age; every generation faces that," she says. "We're activists. We're more mature in our idealism even though we're more quiet now ... We have a great sense of patriotism just as our old generation does. We embrace that."

But Wheeler says certain generational qualities have endured, such as a predilection to join movements, sexual equality in power sharing and child rearing and pragmatic idealism.

But, Sonnenberg says, despite some enduring traits, the generation has often been divided, in many cases resulting in a backlash against the idealism of the past.

"I think that our generation and our nation is experiencing what, if it were an individual, [would be] an identity crisis. I think we're struggling to define our identity and we are struggling to define our values," says Sonnenberg. "I think there's an ongoing confusion of what we are as a nation and where we are going. And that, I think, is one of the legacies and wounds of the Vietnam era."