VIETNAM IS A KNIFE that was not twisted into me until the end of my second year at University, 1965. Before then, I had been afforded, and allowed myself to enjoy, the luxury of a casual approach to what was happening in that country. The pictures of the Buddhist monks who immolated themselves just before Diem's downfall in 1963 had aroused a momentary, uncomprehending horror in me, but nothing more . . . it was only when the monks again burned themselves to death in 1966, this time in opposition to Ky's regime, that they burned their way through to me as well. What had happened to change my response?

Conscription and Australian intervention in Vietnam had happened. I was required by the new National Service Act to register in the very first ballot. I am ashamed to say I did. I am
also ashamed to say that, at the time, I hoped I would be balloted out. Now, in a paradoxical way, I am glad I was not: I am privileged to have an avenue of resistance that is denied many others in a selective system or conscription (though of course it is open to all to urge and support draft resistance). Like Genet, in Sartre’s biographic analysis, I reassert my freedom precisely within the prison walls that aim to constrain me. I am glad, too, to have been snatched from a purely private and alienated existence to one in which I can feel, and act rationally upon, a sense of human relation to my fellow man. Such a sense of liberation, incidentally, is not just my own idiosyncratic response — it has struck me in nearly all of twenty other draft resisters I have met personally (see the account of the 1969 Non-Compliers’ Conference, Resistance Notes).

But while I feel this way now, it was not always so. In the first instance I reacted in two distinct, even disassociated ways. One reaction was intellectual: the desire to find out just what the Vietnam war was about, and what legitimate claims the Government could exert over me. After reading both the official justifications and the critics of the war, I became convinced of the injustice and untenability, both historically and contemporaneously, of American-Australian intervention in Vietnam. The results of my critical assessment of the history, rationales for, and negotiations concerning, the Vietnam war have been given in several previously published articles, and I will not go into them again here. For a long time I did believe that conscription taken in itself, without reference to Vietnam (which of course it can’t be) might be justified, as perhaps during the Second World War, but further study on the nature and function of conscription changed my attitude on this too (see my analysis of conscription, in “Resistance to Conscription: the Politics of Commitment”).

The other reaction could be described as existential. The letter telling me of my conscription was like a harpoon barb that I suddenly discovered sticking in me. Personal hopes and aspirations, ideas of writing and overseas travel, personal relationships that meant much to me, all dissolved in the coming confrontation with the Army, a confrontation that would leave me either deeply compromised with myself or suffocating in a prison cell. My mood for two years, 1966 and ’67, was one of more or less continual depression. University studies ceased to be of interest in themselves, so much as something I had to get through lest I lose my student deferment. I began to comprehend, for the first time in my life, what it means to be an Aboriginal, a delinquent,
someone born in poverty . . . any person, in fact, who has had his future, his intimate personal future, literally stolen from him by the society in which he lives.

Whichever way I threshed in the search for personal freedom, I eventually felt the sickening tug of the tautening line. If I tried to escape overseas, it meant I would have to leave those I loved. If I joined the army, it would mean complicity with genocide — a repudiation of all the values for which I have strived to live. Also it would mean voluntary submission to a system of military indoctrination and personality moulding of which, as a student of psychology, I had all too much understanding and fear. If I refused to join the army, it meant prison, with the soul-destroying monotony and time-wastage and indignity that constitutes prison life (as a full-time Probation Officer during 1967, I became fully conversant with what prison means, and does, to its inmates.) Conscientious objection procedures were not open to me: at first because I was a particular war objector; later because, despite the broadening of my objection to all conceivable wars (on account of their possible escalation to nuclear war), it became obvious to me that the conscientious objection procedures were simply a means of legitimising, "whitewashing", the whole system by allowing exemption to a predictably small number of absolute pacifists. (For a critique of conscientious objection procedures see A. J. Muste8; American Friends Service Council Report The Draft9).

There seemed no escape. But then a slight wisp of hope appeared in the form of the November 1966 General Elections. There seemed at least a possibility that Labor could win, and would withdraw from Vietnam and abolish conscription. The Bill White case, occurring just prior to the elections, made it just seem feasible that people would vote Labor to secure his release. Despite some equivocal statements from Whitlam, I trusted Calwell and Cairns' assurances at the time that the ALP would use withdrawal of troops to put pressure on America to end the war. But, of course, the ALP did not win, and their promises were not put to the test.

During the whole of the next year apathy and demoralisation engulfed the anti-war movement, myself included. The YCAC's virtually collapsed and demonstrations were rare and dispirited; 1967 was the year of paralysis. (See Roy Forward, "Conscription 1964-1968", p. 137)10

My faith in parliamentary representation collapsed. Instead of retaining its principles and strengthening its campaigning, the ALP under Whitlam effectively withdrew from its anti-war stand — a
sure symptom of parliamentary impotence and moral bankruptcy. What has been said of the English Labor Party applies equally well to the Australian one: “Power corrupts, but lack of power corrupts absolutely”. Freedom in a parliamentary system implies a real choice between two or more parties: if, in relation to the major decisions affecting people’s lives, the parties are functionally equivalent, then freedom does not exist. Elections, in themselves, do not guarantee the existence of freedom: everyone votes in Russia, but since there is no alternative party, freedom does not really exist. During 1967 institutional politics congealed into one big consensus on all the most important issues facing Australia. This consensus has remained in place, jelly-like, ever since; only the occasional bickering squabble on some minor issue sets its wobbling.

Early in 1968, in an effort to discover how apathy and indifference had been overcome in other times and in other places, I studied Gandhi’s campaigns in India, the Civil Rights Movement in America and the CND movement in Britain. I rapidly became convinced of the efficacy of non-violent direct action techniques to mobilise people out of apathy. Such action works not by violent coercion and intimidation but by an appeal to people’s conscience and rationality (not necessarily of those in power so much as of those who might join a movement in opposition to those in power). Such action is distinguished from bourgeois notions of “non-violence” by virtue of the fact that it is not afraid, where necessary, to transgress the legal and institutional boundaries set to dissent (and this is nearly always necessary). Gandhi and King had at least demonstrated the feasibility of such methods, even if they had not succeeded in creating a genuine revolution in their respective societies. 12 13.

With these ideas in mind, I helped in the organisation of the first national anti-conscription demonstration that had been called since 1966: a sit-in outside the Prime Minister’s Lodge on May 19, 1968, at the time when the new amendments to the National Service Act were being considered by Parliament. The tactical novelty of the demonstration was that many of the participants were committed to going to gaol rather than pay their fines. Five eventually did so, myself included. Many people at the time criticised such action as “conscience-salving” and “making martyrs of yourselves”. Such criticism failed to comprehend the possibility that the only answer to demoralisation and apathy is precisely to start putting one’s values into practice no matter how “unrealistic” it seems. The French students, characteristically, had a slogan, “Be a realist — demand the impossible!” By going to gaol rather
than pay fines we hoped to show that a qualitative break must be made with our old methods of protests and action: dissent through the normal channels and in the normal arenas had become programmed into the system. Johnson on his visit to Australia could tolerantly hail the demonstrations as proof we were living in a "democracy".

That actions such as ours exercised some beneficial effect on the general atmosphere is perhaps indicated by the recent action of unionist Clarrie O'Shea in going to gaol for refusing to pay fines imposed on his union under the Penal Clauses. A nationwide strike of several million workers resulted, precipitated not so much by the prosaic demand for wage increases as by feelings of solidarity with a gaol ed fellow-unionist. Non-violent direct action and civil disobedience are powerful forces in a modern society where the mass media quickly communicate to millions what is happening, and feelings of human solidarity may be rapidly generated. Students may not be able to affect the power distribution in society directly, but they can provide models of resistance and alternative action for those exploited or excluded groups who come, as a daily occurrence, into conflict with the ruling bureaucratic hierarchies of society.

If 1967 was the year of paralysis for Australia, 1968 was the year of its reinvigoration — at least among students. Few on campus could fail to have been in some way affected by the new atmosphere that developed during the year — an atmosphere stimulated, on the one hand, by the momentous student struggles abroad — in France, Mexico and on campuses across America — and on the other hand by a resurgence of action on the home campuses. At some universities the action took the form of a renewal of the anti-conscription, anti-Vietnam war campaigns; at others the abolition of non-participatory forms (e.g. at Monash) or resistance to internal university policing systems in the form of disciplinary regulations. Unlike most of the campaigns of two years before, the action was generally initiated by radical groups prepared to use new forms of direct action rather than by reformist ad-hoc committees intent on separating one issue off from all the other issues confronting society. Groups with a theory or philosophy behind them, such as Labor Clubs and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), came to the forefront in place of the older ad-hoc groups such as YCAC who were neither prepared to relate conscription to all the other contradictions of modern society (or even to Vietnam) nor prepared to use direct action when normal constitutional channels had failed. The phenomena of student revolt became the burning issue of discussion at all strata in society.
For the first time marxist and other radical critics of modern society (e.g. Marcuse, Sartre, David Horowitz, C. Wright Mills, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy) began to be read and discussed seriously by students.

The thinking of the New Left in America, and the significance of the May events in France began to make their impact. In the dialectic of events during 1968, we saw a remarkable verification of the fact that direct action is the sociological catalyst and precondition for people to make a serious attempt to understand the theory and dynamics of their society rather than a consequence of such an understanding. It is true, and most essential, that for any given individual, theoretical understanding will later guide his action, but on the sociological level, it is only the catalysis of direct action that catapults individuals into making the attempt at theoretical understanding.

Nineteen sixty-eight was the year of my own liberation — as I suppose it was for countless students the world over. Caught up in, and fascinated by, the interplay between events and ideas, and the need to interpret and clarify them, I read and talked and lived politics for the first time in my life (my previous introverted biases had been to psychology on the one hand, and creative writing on the other). In the course of studying, on the one hand, the situation in other Third World areas such as South America, and on the other (as part of a Fourth Year course in psychology) the nature and extent of industrial conflict, I encountered that chilling experience of Weiss's Marat:

When I investigated a wrong it grew branches
And every branch grew twigs.

The marxist critiques of Sartre and Marcuse were revelations to me — explaining and connecting much of what I had observed only partially in previous years (e.g. on the role of the media; methodology in psychology; social anomie; mental illness; American aggressiveness; organisation man; and of course American and Australian intervention in Vietnam). I studied, with equal appreciation and excitement the origins and ideas of the New Left in America, from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to the rise of SDS. Late in the year the revelation to end all revelations arrived in Australia: Seale and McConville's detailed description of the May upheaval in France, French Revolution 1968. For the first time I became convinced that revolution in a modern industrial society was as historically possible as it was necessary. Just as the Chinese, Cubans and Vietnamese have demonstrated the feasibility of social revolution in Third World countries, the French
students demonstrated to an astonished world the feasibility of revolution in an advanced neo-capitalist industrial society. Acting through the example of their own resistance to police repression, and the mode of running their own universities, the students succeeded in detonating a general strike of over eleven million, including both blue and white collar workers. These workers went on strike mostly without union sanction, in many cases occupied their work-places and, even at the end, refused to ratify the wage agreements made in their name by their trade union "representatives".

Far from merely wanting wage increases, as the bourgeois press reported, their demands were just as revolutionary as those of the students. But for the failure of the Left to resolve its sectional differences, De Gaulle's regime would have almost certainly have been toppled. As it was, there was a power vacuum for several weeks in which (the concomitant of any genuine revolution) a sense of liberation swept throughout France. "Ten days of happiness already!" as one wall slogan put it.

By the end of that remarkable and exhausting year, I had come to the following conclusions:

1 Genocide and crimes against humanity are being practised daily by America and her allies in the Vietnam war (for a definitive substantiation of their commission of these crimes under international law, see In the Name of America, a 422 page report published by the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam).  

2 The Vietnam war is not a "mistake" or "accident" or "miscalculation" of American and Australian foreign policy, but rather a consistent and rational expression of their policies as they have developed in the Cold War and in the Third World context. American policy in particular has been orientated towards protection of her neo-imperialist economic interests throughout most of South America and other Third World countries. Although American economic interests are not directly present in Vietnam, the war is a test of whether American military security for her economic hegemony over the rest of the Third World can be successfully challenged by popular revolutionary guerilla movements. Hence American leaders talk of the necessity of showing that "wars of national liberation" are bound to fail. This hypothesis alone is capable of explaining the seeming irrationality of a policy that has put tremendous strain on the detente with Russia, alienated huge sections of the home public, blocked domestic programs to end poverty,
caused incalculable deaths and misery to millions of people and threatened the world with the possibility of an escalation into nuclear war (only the failure of Russia to respond in the same aggressive manner as America would respond if one of her allies were systematically bombed into the stone age has saved the world from a third and final World War).

3 The full explanation of the Vietnam war, however, lies not only with the factor of protection for the world economic interests of American capitalism, but also in the internal character of modern industrial society, which breeds the kind of alienation that makes toleration of genocide a normal everyday response. This alienation derives from such sources as:

(a) meaningless and monotonous work conditions that leave workers, both blue and white collar, anxious for escape and distraction in their leisure hours (leading thus to an alienation in leisure too).

(b) Commercially-controlled media which functions to create false needs, artificial status aspirations, and alienated consumption patterns: the constant barrage of trivia and mediocrity leaves little opening for the development of an authentic culture, individual identity, and sensibility to the suffering of fellow human beings.

(c) A political system that minimises political participation to the bare minimum of a meaningless choice every three years between two parties whose differences, in relation to the decisions vitally affecting the lives of the great majority of the population, are negligible. The ballot box choice is made in “serialised” isolation from others rather than after rational discussion with one’s fellows (instead the media conduct the “rational discussions” for their passive audiences).

4 The conflict between technology and humanity, as nightmarishly expressed in the image of a multi-million dollar B-52 indiscriminately dropping tons of explosive and napalm on defenceless peasants and villages in Vietnam, is reaching a critical stage both in relation to the nature and risks of modern warfare, and in relation to the dangers of totalitarianism in modern societies. The billions of dollars being spent on chemical and biological warfare by America, Russia, Britain, Australia and Canada are coming to represent a new threat to the whole of humanity. If the once-and-for-all nature of nuclear weapons has had any effect in discouraging the regular
resort to war to resolve political conflicts, then the more gradual and surreptitious processes of CBW may make war a feasible proposition again. In relation to totalitarianism, modern technology is facilitating two dangerous trends:

(a) The benefits and techniques of modern technology are accruing to the dominant elites in society, who are showing no hesitation or scruples about using them to (i) manipulate public opinion, (ii) strengthen the power of the repressive agencies in society (police, security, penal authorities), and (iii) wage war more effectively against poor countries who cannot match their technology. It is by no means beyond imagination that the final, humane, solution to the problem will be political compulsory injection of tranquillisers or other psycho-pharmaceutical drugs.

(b) Automation and technological innovations are displacing blue collar workers into inferior "service" occupations, or into unemployment (this is already happening in America, and will probably start developing in Australia within the next ten years). Unless they can be drawn into a genuine social and human revolution, these displaced blue collar workers may become the usual mass base for fascism. It is significant that poor whites formed a big proportion of the followings of Goldwater and Wallace.

5 The two most revolutionary demands that can be voiced in a modern industrial society are (i) for a right to participate in the decisions affecting one's own life, and (ii) for an end to repression as practised both at home and abroad. These demands are the modern equivalent of Lenin's famous slogan Peace! Bread! Land!, which resonated so deeply with the Russian people, and formed the basis for their collective revolutionary action. The New Left is precisely distinguished from the old in that it has recognised the revolutionary significance of these demands for our society, and is not afraid to use direct action to struggle for them, even when this means great personal risk to its members. The New Left does not aim so much to impose a specific political program on the diverse groups and individuals in society, but rather to galvanise them into demanding their right to make their own decisions in matters that affect them. As Cohn-Bendit has observed, the French workers in May last year did not immediately voice revolutionary demands when they first went on strike and occupied their factories: rather in the very course of their occupations, they began to ask themselves: "why shouldn't we run the factories for ourselves — why shouldn't we be our own bosses?"
other words, their demands did not stem from the teaching of an infra-structure of revolutionary cadres, appropriately equipped with a sophisticated critique of society and theory of workers' control, but rather developed out of the objective situation in which their action had placed them. Significantly both blue and white collar workers went on strike in France, showing that the strike was more about exclusion from decision-making and the right to control their own lives than about differentials in wage levels. Advanced capitalist societies can buy off their populations with increased wages and distractions, but the two demands they cannot, or will not, grant to people is control over their own lives — and the right to refuse or resist, on the basis of individual conscience, compliance with repressive or genocidal policies.

6 Repression abroad and alienation at home will only be ended by a political and social revolution that shifts decision-making power from the present unrepresentative elites to where it really belongs — with individual people. This revolution will take the form of a spontaneously-developing mass movement, probably triggered by direct action on the part of students and young workers. This revolution will not occur inevitably or automatically. Failure to accomplish it, however, will probably result in some form of totalitarianism, either along the lines of Orwell's 1984 or Huxley's softer, but equally nightmarish Brave New World. In his recent study of the origins of dictatorship and democracy, Barrington Moore27 has argued cogently, on the basis of social-historical analysis, that failure to accomplish a genuine social revolution is a pre-condition for later totalitarianism.

One of the central means by which such a revolution is hindered is the prevalence of a hegemonic bourgeois ideology, one of the main features of which is to dissociate ideas from practice, values from their realisation: critical thought is contained purely within the never-never realm of the mind. Universities are seen as places where dissenting intellectuals can buzz away to their heart's content so long as they refrain from acting on the basis of their beliefs.28 Just as during the rise of fascism in Germany, the universities were encouraged to think that, if they refrained from public criticism and action they would succeed in preserving their own freedom, so the universities in advanced capitalist societies are encouraged to think that they can preserve their freedom by not publicly attacking the totalitarian trends and policies in the wider society. Universities instead have become places where an expanding professional labor force is trained to carry out their future work-roles.
in absolute ignorance of the social and moral implications of what they are doing. The "psy-war" psychologists who calmly make tape recordings of the screams and other utterances of suspect Viet Cong, tortured to extract information, are characteristic products of the modern Western university.

These were some of the conclusions I had arrived at by the beginning of this year. Simultaneously with this intellectual development, I experienced a sense of liberation. The fact of conscription no longer seemed the intolerable weight, the negation of my whole future, that it had in the past. Rather the barb that the Government had sunk into me now became the very weapon by which, through open resistance, I could help discredit the aura of legitimacy surrounding the Government's authority both in relation to conscription and our involvement in the Vietnam War. It was also a means by which I could help towards the creation of a new atmosphere of resistance that would encourage any excluded or repressed person in our society, whatever his situation, to assert by direct action his right to make decisions in matters affecting his own life — and to intervene directly on behalf of those now suffering under our genocidal policy in Vietnam.

Soon after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, wild flowers began to appear in the ashes. Out of the ashes of Vietnam flowers have also begun to appear: the revolutionary student movements springing up in industrial societies all over the world. Vietnam alone was capable of making students forget their sectarian or private concerns in a concerted attempt to end the outrage. Everywhere the first reaction was simply one of disgust and repulsion as the images of napalmed children, defoliated jungles, razed villages, spread around the world. Then as the moral rhetoric surrounding American policy collapsed, attention began to centre on the twin factors that made such a war possible: firstly, the outward expansion of advanced capitalism in the form of neo-imperialist exploitation of the Third World, and the military repression such exploitation requires to sustain and protect it; secondly, the internal structurally-bred, alienation of modern society that had led, more by indifference and apathy than by outright callousness, to the toleration of such exploitation and repression. Protest that was once perfectly manageable within the system has now become metamorphosed into the spectre of resistance — a spectre that haunts both capitalist and communist bureaucracies. Contrary to the myths of the Right, student resistance in Western countries has more in common with student resistance in Communist countries than it does with the governments of the latter. Czech students in 1968 were not fighting for capitalism of the Western type, just as French students
in 1968 were not fighting for communism of the Soviet type. Both were fighting for the liberation of human beings from internal or external controls imposed by an alien system or elite.

Before the end of this year, or early in the next, I expect to be sentenced to two years' gaol for refusing to obey a call-up notice — with a possible extra one year's gaol under the Crimes Act for "inciting" young men to resist conscription. I know of forty others who face similar penalties for resisting conscription, including my wife Frances (who is also on the Crimes Act charges). Some of these will be gaoled before me. Zarb and Reisenleiter are already there. I have the greatest admiration for those who first made the leap into total resistance. They must have felt like someone entering a tunnel of darkness — hoping that others are behind them but haunted by the sense that they are not, that they are now quite alone. And, as any draft resister will tell you, it is not only the reactions of authorities that make such action difficult: it is the cynicism of friends and relatives. One expects little or nothing from dehumanised bureaucrats, but cynicism from friends ("You're just trying to salve your own conscience!" "You're trying to make a martyr of yourself!") catches one off guard: it is a sort of repudiation of the whole basis of human relationship — preparedness to understand the other as the other understands himself. I would even go so far as to say that the main deterrent to draft resistance is not so much the coercive threats of the Government authorities as the cynicism of those around one, a cynicism that is an integral component of the hegemonic ideology which functions to preserve the status quo.

In 1966 I wrote, with some despair, at the end of a systematic critique of all the major arguments that were put forth at the time to justify the Vietnam war:

I think considering what we, with so little justification, are doing to Vietnam and its people, that if I ever meet face-to-face a Vietnamese person who lived through, and endured, the present conflict in his country, I will be unable to look him in the eyes. It is not his contempt or hatred that I fear, it is not these that will make me turn my eyes away — it is his pity.

Three years, and a movement later, we have moved beyond the reach of pity. The Vietnamese revolutionaries may justly hold us in contempt for allowing them to suffer so long the results of our failure to successfully resist our Government's criminal actions — but at least we have restored some common human ground.

2 SDS Draft Resistance Group, Resistance Notes Vol. 1. No. 1, 19.6.69 National Non Compliers Conference, (ronoed newsheet available from Centre for Democratic Action Research Library, 57 Palmerston St., Carlton, Vic.).

64 AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW—APRIL-MAY, 1970
3 “Vietnam”, in *Melbourne University Magazine*, MCMLXVI, 1966, Melbourne University SRC.
6 “Peace, Paris and the Product”, in *Melbourne University Magazine*, 1968, Melbourne University SRC.
17 “Inside the Mental Hospital”, in *Farrago*, 10.8.64.
18 Hal Draper, *The New Student Revolt*.
25 Robin Clarke, *We All Fall Down*, The Prospect of Chemical and Biological Warfare, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1968.
28 see “Conscience and Dissent in the Non-Violent Revolution”, *Farrago*, 14.3.69.