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Veterans Who

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Washington

The Commander in Chief was on the television screen in full color gravely explaining how the government of South Vietnam had "hastily ordered a strategic withdrawal."

"Yeah," said one of the 20 or so young men gathered around the table, "they backed up about 25,000 miles."

The young men were members of the Veterans' association of the college. All but two had seen action against the North Vietnamese. They exchanged smiles as the Commander in Chief detailed Hanoi's transgressions.

"Meanwhile," he said, "they continued, to receive large quantities of supplies and arms from their friends."

"Yeah," said a voice, "from their friends, the South Vietnamese. With

our troops and our tanks . . ."

"Bingo," a voice called out. "Bingo" ran around the crowded little room.

The Commander in Chief was saying he "must, of course, consider the safety of some 6000 Americans who remain in South Vietnam."

"Those mothers," murmured a bearded young man, "they have a way out any time they want. They're the contractors who have been over there raking in the ducats from the beginning, and they'll be there at the end, taking every last penny."

The Commander in Chief gave out the sums he would need to express his concern and the country's resolve. It came to a billion dollars.

"There's Rockefeller up there behind him," somebody pointed out. "Maybe he'll donate a million to his favorite orphanage."

The Commander in Chief urged Congress to "clarify its restrictions

on the use of military forces in Southeast Asia for the limited purposes of . . ."

"Man, that's how it all started," drawled somebody sitting on the floor.

The Commander in Chief read a letter from the new acting president of Cambodia.

"Their other president got out," the bearded man observed. "This one's gonna leave, too. He's gonna get real sick real soon."

The Commander in Chief moved into his impassioned plea for the preservation of the CIA.

The Vets loved the line about the CIA being of maximum importance "to some of you in this audience who might be President."

"I'll tap your phone, too," said one. The congressional audience was applauding fervently.

"Why are they clapping?" one of the vets asked.

Scuffed at the Chief

"They're paid to clap," was the answer.

After the Commander in Chief had finished his presentation of what he called "the real world," the veterans began to talk about what it all meant.

Teddy Harvin, 31, who spent 1966 and 1967 as a member of the 3rd Ordnance Battalion, fighting for places that have all been over-run, said he thought the President was talking about nuclear weapons. "There's nothing else left," he said.

But James Palmer, 27, who had served in a 1st Air Cavalry helicopter unit, said it meant they were going to be redrafted.

"I won't go," said Harvin.

"That's what you said the first time," Palmer jeered. "They are going to give it to you, man."

A correspondent for the Netherlands television who came to record their reactions invited the veterans, one by one, to state their views for the Dutch people.

Leon Barnett, 24, who was with the 92nd Battalion at Da Nang, was asked how he felt when it fell.

"I felt like it was going to fall all the time I was there," he said simply. "The South Vietnamese had it too well."

Gary Haney, 25, an ex-Marine who had been in Pleiku, said he was a little bitter that he got "caught up in something immoral," but not surprised at the outcome. "They are better fighters and they have a cause. Sooner or later they were going to win. It came sooner, that's all."

Palmer piped up from the sidelines "The CIA will be at everybody's house tomorrow morning. The FBI finds you, the CIA kills you."

At length the Dutch correspondent, who was getting a little more than he bargained for, called Palmer to the microphone.

Palmer said he had been wounded seven times and had spent four years

in the hospital. He has a long scar on his jawline. He said it once took him nine months to get a veterans' check.

He was asked how he felt about the Vietnamese tragedy.

"It's those people's country. So who's giving up what? You can equate it to a policeman. He came into a house to break up a fight between me and my brother. He is wrong because it's my house and my brother."

The correspondent pressed him for some expression of sympathy for the people.

"They are getting what they deserve," Palmer said. "When I was over there, they charged us \$3 for a Coke. They should get what the Vietnam veteran gets in America — nothing."

"Right on, brother," said several of the others. "Right on."

And for the first time that evening in Room 114, applause was heard.