

Bar luncheon blurb

The political moment:

Richard Nixon was in the White House running for re-election. The Vietnam War—the first war to be shown live on television, with all its horrendous images—was raging, and the American public was getting tired of it. Nixon’s popularity, along with America’s support for the war, was waning, undermining his prospects for a second term.

Vietnam vets were returning from the war, finding that they were not considered heroes for fighting, losing limbs, and watching their friends die for a so-called noble cause, but instead were deemed pariahs because of the acts they committed on behalf of their nation. Many veterans began to advocate against the senseless battles, led by Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

VVAW was the voice of decorated vets who could tell the story, with firsthand credibility, of the terrors unleashed in Vietnam. They were leaders in shifting the public perception about the war by exposing the harsh realities about the conflict and the trauma it caused, not only to American and South Vietnamese soldiers, but to the people of Vietnam.

People across the country were listening. The effectiveness of VVAW’s work hurt Nixon’s campaign, and he needed a way to stop it.

The tie to Watergate:

Watergate provided a convenient defense for the government’s outrageous actions against VVAW. In June of 1972, the offices of the Democratic National Convention were burglarized by five men associated with Nixon’s re-election campaign.

In an effort to shift blame, the government engaged in a series of coverups designed to conceal the Nixon administration’s involvement, including the fabricated claim that the VVAW was a threat to national security and that it was working hand in glove with the Democratic Party to cause mayhem and violence at the Republican National Convention in Miami in August of 1972.

Gerald Arch, a former consultant to James McCord, who was the security chief for Nixon’s campaign and one of the five burglars, testified at the Senate Watergate hearings that he and the Watergate defendants spent six days discussing possible defenses, finally settling on duress: the inherent right to break the law to prevent a greater harm. The “greater harm” they decided on was violence directed toward the president and other Republican officials at the convention, and in their telling of the story, VVAW was planning on inciting violence

at the Miami convention, thus the need to break into the Democratic Party's offices to gather intelligence.

The irony is that VVAW had a reputation with law enforcement as an organization seeking to collaborate on nonviolent solutions to ending the war. In fact, the Washington Post noted that "the charges against the Gainesville Eight contrast sharply with the observations of numerous federal officials that both the leaders and rank and file of the VVAW had frequently acted to diffuse potentially violent situations and isolate troublemakers in Miami [during the convention]."

The VVAW was a handy scapegoat, as the organization had been under investigation for some time and its Florida director, Scott Camil, had already been arrested and charged in two previous cases in their zeal to corral him. As a matter of fact, Emerson Poe, Scott's assistant regional coordinator, was a spy who had been planted in VVAW to infiltrate the organization and gather incriminating evidence.

So effective was Poe's duplicity that Scott grew to consider him one of his best friends. At the trial (back in those days, there were no witness lists—each side learned about the existence of witnesses as they walked into the courtroom and took the stand), Scott watched in disbelief as Poe seated himself in the witness box, feeling the gut punch as he realized his "friend" had in fact been a government agent whose mission it was to bring Scott down and send him to prison.

The indictment:

The Department of Justice, under Attorney General John Mitchell, had been weaponized against anti-war protestors, leading to indictments against not only the Eight, but the Chicago Seven, the Camden 28, and other prosecutions in Seattle, Detroit, New York, Harrisburg (Pennsylvania), and more. All ended in acquittals.

Mitchell was later sentenced to prison for his efforts to suppress the anti-war movement.

The trial:

You'll hear more about the trial itself during the discussion Friday, but longtime Gainesville lawyers may recognize the name Winston Arnow, the federal judge presiding over the case. He was a Gainesville native who practiced in the local firm Clayton, Arnow, Duncan, Johnston, Clayton, Quincy before his appointment to the federal bench in Pensacola.