



# THEY REALLY READ IT FOR THE ARTICLES

By Amber Batura and Jacqueline E. Whitt June 25, 2020  
<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/podcasts/playboy-in-vietnam/>

Welcome to **WAR ROOM** the official podcast of the U.S. Army War College Online Journal. Graciously supported by the Army War College Foundation, please join the conversation at [warroom.armywarcollege.edu](http://warroom.armywarcollege.edu). We hope you enjoy the program.

**Jacqueline Whitt:** Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Jacqueline Whitt** Professor of Strategy at the US Army War College and the War Room Podcast Editor. Thanks for joining us today. On today's episode we're going to think about the relationship between military culture, morality, sex, pornography and material culture. I'm joined by **Dr. Amber Batura** in the studio today. Amber earned her PhD from Texas Tech University recently, where her focus was on 20th century American military history and her dissertation examined the impact of Playboy magazine on soldiers' experiences in the Vietnam War. She also authored a column for the New York Times series Vietnam, 1967 on the topic and she's written about this and has lots to say. So, Amber, thanks for joining me on War Room.

**Dr. Amber Batura:** Thank you for having me.

**JW:** Alright, so this maybe sounds like a strange dissertation topic for a military historian. Can you tell us really briefly about how did you decide to write a dissertation about Playboy in the Vietnam War?

**AB:** It wasn't something that I originally intended to do at all. I was studying icons of femininity in the 1960s and 70s and came across the Playboy bunny, was really intrigued by some things I discovered about her, and at Texas Tech, we house the Vietnam Center in archive which is what we like to say the largest nongovernmental archive on the Vietnam War. So, I decided since we also have collections ranging from the anti-war movement and things like that, I would use that to look into this. So, I did a search for Playboy in that archive and had over 2000 hits, a lot of which were pictures with the Playboy logo or icon on tanks and planes and helicopters and patches, and I kind of became interested in why is Playboy all over the Vietnam War? Then 2011, Texas Tech sends us to Vietnam on a study abroad. Went there, was in a small village outside of Hanoi when we ran across a Playboy store on the site. A village that was not... electricity was questionable a little bit, and then there was a Playboy store. And so, I decided I have to know why this is here and why is it still here. Why was it branding the war basically and why is it now right outside Hanoi?

**JW:** It's always interesting to talk to historians about how they start their research and so often it is a curious source. It's a curiosity or a question if you say, this doesn't seem to fit, this doesn't quite make sense, let me find out more about it. So, as you dove in to the material, into the subject, what did you find? Why is Playboy all over the Vietnam War?

**AB:** Well I came at this... approached this differently because I didn't really know anything about Playboy except for probably our generation was like the Girls Next Door TV show and

Pamela Anderson. So, my view of Playboy was very skewed, so I was just kind of wondering, why something that I would have thought was pornography was such a big component in the war and why it popped up so much. And when I started exploring and actually reading the magazine, which I can now say I read for the articles...

**JW:** You have read it for the articles.

**AB:** I realized there's a lot more to the magazine especially in the 60s and 70s than what our pop culture memory allows us to realize. And so, I found that actually the 60s and 70s, the question for me was why was Playboy important? And my initial answer without really doing the research was naked women.

**JW:** So, a hypothesis?

**AB:** Yeah, was naked women. But then there was not a lot of naked women in Playboy. So, in the 60s and 70s there was no full-frontal nudity at all. And there was more explicit pornography readily available to soldiers. So that question, that answer no longer made sense, and I began reading it and realizing there's a lot more to offer the soldiers. And so, I found that it's a combination of sort of the pinup images that kind of carry on the tradition from World War II, as well as discussions of what's going on stateside, what's going on in the antiwar movement, what's going on in the war itself that people were attracted to.

**JW:** When we think about what Playboy offers to soldiers who are overseas, who are in Vietnam, and you started to sort of talk about this, it sounds like Playboy is a place where conversations are happening. How did you find soldiers sort of interacting with Playboy as a physical object, as a magazine, as a periodical with something that they would interact with?

**AB:** So, for sure the number one reason that a soldier picked up a Playboy magazine was for the centerfold, for the images. I don't want to detract from that in anyway because that was really important to a lot of people, and whether they read it or not is a little more up in the air, but enough people read it. I have enough oral histories for that. So, the number one thing that they pick this magazine up for was the centerfold. And the centerfold and the images became really important to soldiers as sort of talismans. You see the pinup becoming one, just kind of the connection back to the world. So, there wasn't a lot of opportunity for young men in Vietnam to interact with American women, so by looking at Playboy, they could have those images of the girl next door. But you also had them using those images like short-timer calendars to count off their time in the war. There's one story of a guy who had carried around an image of Connie Mason. I don't remember what year she was. He'd had it for probably over a year. He was a reporter attached, I think with the Marines, and he sits down one day to write up a report, and the wind blows his Connie Mason image off his typewriter, so he jumps up to go grab it, and where he was sitting explodes. So, he writes to Playboy...

**JW:** It's like a different version of the Bible in the breast pocket.

**AB:** Yes. Yes, he writes to Playboy and he tells this story and he asks, you know, I still have time here and I don't think I can make it without Connie. Can you send me another centerfold

because it had been so many years, he couldn't find one. And so, they got her centerfold and they got her to sign it and they sent him an autographed copy so that he would finish the remainder of his tour with her. And so, it becomes these physical... these images become like physical talismans for them during the war in a lot of ways.

**JW:** It's almost an example of again, physical culture, material culture, and it could be any number of things. So, in some cases, it's a Playboy centerfold, in other cases it could be a rabbit's foot, the Bible in the breast pocket. There're all sorts of ways that soldiers...

**AB:** There's also a Playboy in the breast pocket.

**JW:** I wonder... they seem not as thick as Bibles.

**AB:** The 1960s and 70s ones were almost 300 pages give or take. And so, I don't know how it's possible, but a soldier writes in—and we can talk about this to Playboy—and says that he wanted to thank them for literally saving his life. He had folded the magazine—and I don't know how he managed this into force—and then put it in his chest pocket, and he was shot, and it stopped it from entering his heart.

**JW:** Whether this is in the realm of mythology or how this happens, the physics of folding paper that many time...

**AB:** It was not only did he write to Playboy, but a newspaper article covered it, a local newspaper article covered the story as well, so it's in the methos.

**JW:** The story is out there. When soldiers interact with Playboy... You talked a couple times about soldiers writing to Playboy. So, it seems like their appropriating and using Playboy in country for all sorts of different reasons, but they're also communicating sort of back with the magazine. What kind of interaction did you find there?

**AB:** So that actually became I think the most interesting part of writing the dissertation. I didn't expect to find this at all, but it kind of became a lesson too for historians, especially as we look to try to find the voices of actors, as we try to find actors' voices. You can find these in very weird unexpected sources, and Playboy happened to be one of them. So, Playboy has four different features in the magazine for readers to write to the magazine to have a conversation. So, they have kind of a typical Letter to the Editor called Dear Playboy. They have the Advisor Column where you can write in with questions ranging from what cufflinks should I wear, how do I match my shoes to my belt kind of questions, to asking really, a lot of times, personal questions about... one of my favorites was a question about, you know, I'm a virgin and so is my intended spouse, and we don't know what we're supposed to do and what would you suggest to us on our marriage, on our wedding night? And Playboy has these actually really sympathetic kinds of responses to questions like that. And they have two other features that you can also write in and talk, discuss. The Playboy Advisor, when that comes out, you can discuss that, and you can discuss some of the other articles. And so, soldiers wrote into these quite frequently. There's a lot in the Advisor where soldiers or young men who are about to be drafted ask—there's a couple of times where they ask—what do draft classifications mean? What do I do if I my number gets

called up? Kind of asking advice on, I don't want to go to war but what do I do? And Playboy tries to advise them to the best of their ability. So, Playboy will run articles later. When Hefner starts doing the philosophy and talks about kind of military justice in a couple of incidences, you get a lot of soldiers writing in about their experiences in Vietnam with drugs and other illegal activities, and kind of what their experience is with the justice system.

**JW:** Does Playboy have, at any point, a sort of editorial stance on the war?

**AB:** So, they don't have a traditional editorial, but they do, into the 60s and 70s, become a lot more political. Initially when the magazine was created, the very first edition has kind of the only traditional editorial in it where Hefner kind of defines what Playboy is, and it's the oft quoted where he talks about, they're not taking on any of these big issues or politics or anything, it's just an entertainment magazine for men so that they can be comfortable. But by the 60s and 70s they've kind of moved away from that. Hefner himself points to 1968 and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago as one of the defining moments for him to get involved more with politics because he experienced the riot and he got hit by an officer.

**JW:** The personal is political in all sorts of ways.

**AB:** Yeah, potentially spanked by a billy club. His editors at that time too were young men and they were concerned with all of this, so you start to see a shift there. There is no traditional editorial but, in the archives, I was able to find where somebody had written in asking what their opinion on the war was, and they sent them a list of 7 to 9 articles that they said defined kind of where they stood on the war. It is very sort of antiwar. It's very much anti-policy really, they didn't they didn't approve of the policy in Vietnam, but they were very supportive of the soldier.

**JW:** When we think about the Vietnam War, one of the figures that sort of looms largest in the mythology is Jane Fonda. And we think about American sex symbols, again these icons of femininity, how do we understand the relationship between sex, pornography, Playboy, Jane Fonda, soldiers who are young men, and what's happening in Vietnam? Is there a connection between all of these things?

**AB:** I think there's a connection between sex and violence and sex and war. And there's just a connection between sex and human beings.

**JW:** It turns out it's part of what humans do.

**AB:** Yeah, of the thing, that's how that's how we got here. And so, it's hard to—especially because the military I feel like produces this hyper masculine culture a lot of the times—it's really difficult to remove the sexuality from it, and so you have these hypermasculine cultures, environments, in a hyperviolent context. Often times until recent history, they're removed from women.

**JW:** Yeah, it's homosocial for much of its existence.

**AB:** Yeah, and so especially in Vietnam, kind of the only experience they would have had with American women were nurses and donut dollies and women who were volunteering or women who served in kind of more secretarial positions and things like that. They didn't have a fellow soldier fighting with them. So, I think that the combination of combat, the combat experience, and being far away from home and kind of living in this, even if you're in the rear, you're still living in this situation where it's, you know, bouts of extreme terror and maybe long periods of boredom, but you're still questioning every day—is this the day that a bomb hits us? Or, there's that that level of fear, of mortality. And so, sex comes into that because it's human nature, it's human reaction. So, I feel with pornography, with Playboy, with Jane Fonda and all of those, that's kind of a tie between our understanding of sexuality—what we think sex should be and then, where we find ourselves in combat. I often think that combat causes your moral compass to shift. For most people murdering somebody is not, you know killing somebody is not, something on their moral compass.

**JW:** Yeah, it's in fact outside of the bounds of moral codes pretty much across time and space.

**AB:** But war requires you to shift that focus a little bit, and then with that, you are having to kind of then negotiate the rest of your moral compass. I'm actually talking about this at SMH this weekend – that pornography becomes a site where they want to regulate morality a lot, especially in the context of the military, which to me seems counterintuitive. But I think that's where it comes from, is their moral compass is so off because of what they're having to do or in what they're seeing and what they're experiencing that by regulating this other part, or controlling this other part, or participating in this other part, they are able to have some control that they feel they don't have anymore.

**JW:** Reinforcing this idea of a sort of a normative idea of what sex should be, how soldiers should behave, regulating sexual behavior.

**AB:** Yeah...

**JW:** It becomes a way to, not mitigate, but to maybe offset some of the moral problems introduced by extreme application of state-sanctioned violence.

**AB:** Yes. Yeah, because you can kind of see something similar when you talk about the Cold War, and after World War II and the United States' social pushback to traditional gender roles. And so, where you see they had come out of World War II, they had seen the use of the atomic weapon, they were now in an arms race with the Soviet Union, and all the sudden, we see this pushback from more traditional gender roles.

**JW:** When the world seems sort of turned upside down a little topsy turvy, there's a conservative sort of reinforcement sometimes.

**AB:** Because it's something they can control.

**JW:** To preserve and control, and gender norms and gender relations and sexual norms are often in that category of things that feel like they're controllable. So, we talked a little bit about

Playboy's stance on the Vietnam War, and soldiers' experiences and uses of it. How did the Army or the military respond to the existence of Playboy, to its sort of ubiquity?

**AB:** They sold it in the post exchange.

**JW:** So, it's sanctioned at least at some level.

**AB:** Yeah, so it's available. It was also available in the library service, through the library services, so you could...

**JW:** Check it out?

**AB:** Technically, I think, but I imagine that the first person pretty much stole everything that anybody else wanted to see.

**JW:** I wonder if there's a hand receipt.

**AB:** So, the library services had it. I found where they put it, and they had different category boxes, so it was in their A group. They had it in post exchanges, so the military for the most part allowed this to happen. And I think more so the reason, in the 60s and 70s, I feel like the military was a little more lax in terms of some of the things that are not as lax now, potentially. But I think they realized that this was a way to boost morale in a war that they were having difficulty with that. And so, kind of speaking to Meredith Lair's *Armed with Abundance*, they provided a lot of things for soldiers to have to try to help boost morale, and Playboy was just one of them.

**JW:** Just one of the ways to do that.

**AB:** And the other thing to think about in the 60s and 70s is, now Playboy is very much kind of a ha ha, read it for the articles sort of a joke, but in 1970, Playboy is at its peak circulation and it's often at least in the top three magazines in the country. Its circulation is estimated at like 26 million.

**JW:** I mean it's part of American culture at the time, and so we shouldn't expect this vast divide between American culture more broadly and military culture.

**AB:** Yeah, Playboy is often beating out Life and Time in subscription. Yes, was it – I wouldn't necessarily call it pornography, but did it have sexually explicit material to some extent? But it also was a mainstream magazine. It's not like you were looking at kind of more of a...

**JW:** It's not hard core, explicit pornography, right?

**AB:** It's mainstream.

**JW:** When we talk about this sort of mainstream injects into military culture, I think this is one of the really interesting things for the American military is the fact that as totalizing as the military wants to be, it's never fully cut off from American culture and society more broadly. So,

are there other ways that you see this crossover between American culture and American military culture or sort of identity that soldiers have?

**AB:** Yeah, so I think Playboy is a really good example of looking at how the soldier does not, just as soon as he puts on a uniform, lose his identity as he who he was or who she is now as a civilian, so that doesn't go away. And Playboy is a good kind of case study of how pop culture can impact your identity, your life, the way you live, the things you like. It was really interesting to look through because I don't just look at the soldiers writing in, I also look at how the articles, the magazine is writing about the war. I look at some of their other features in terms of talking about the latest gadgets to own and the latest clothes to wear, and you see that reflected in what soldiers are buying in Vietnam. So, there's advertisements in Playboy for—you should drink this liquor, you should smoke these cigarettes because everybody wanted to be the Marlboro Man back then. Cancer was not a thing.

**JW:** Turns out that was not a great idea.

**AB:** You should wear this cut of clothes, you should own at this brand new latest hi-fi record player or whatever, and then you can see kind of a correlation between those advertisements and what soldiers are buying in the base ex or at the PX. And so, it's influencing their consumerism, it's influencing their consumption in the same way that it influences them in their civilian life. Discussions of Playboy was also, in the 60s and 70s, publishing interviews with people like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. They'll eventually publish one by Zumwalt. They will have Jimmy Carter. They'll have all these people, and so soldiers are reading this and being exposed to these ideas.

**JW:** It's part of the broader cultural milieu of the time and it sort of links, I think like you said, links the world to Vietnam.

**AB:** In Ken Burns' documentary, Ken Burns and Novick's, they talk about, one of the soldiers that they have featured, talks about the first time he had heard about the hippie movement was in a Playboy. He didn't know that it was 'hippie', he thought it was 'hip-I' because he had never heard it, he just read it. And so, you have where they're learning about what's happening in the world in maybe a way that they wouldn't necessarily, from just armed services news, right? And so, they're getting exposed to kind of the drug culture, the sex culture, all of that in ways in Playboy that they might not in Stars and Stripes.

**JW:** And that they might not be exposed to depending on where they're from in the United States. The American experience is a pretty broad and diverse one.

**AB:** And that's kind of what I talk about a little bit. I feel like, especially you know with the average age being about 19 for Vietnam, soldiers, a lot of them came from rural communities, and so they hadn't been exposed to a lot of these ideas, so when they pick up like a 1963 issue and Martin Luther King is talking in there, that might be the first time they've ever really had a chance to hear what he has to say.

**JW:** And encounter the ideas.

**AB:** And for them, often that's juxtaposed with the first time they're experiencing relations with African Americans, and so they are getting both – now they're experiencing integration as well as hearing these ideas from these people that maybe they only heard about distantly on television.

**JW:** Last question, and I'm going to ask you a question that we didn't sort of prep at all. Do you think there is any, is there any publication or any medium that we might think of today that sort of fulfills the same function for soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines?

**AB:** No, I think it's difficult to recreate what Playboy had in the 60s and 70s because they had such a relationship with the readership and such a wide readership. And now, we don't really have that same...

**JW:** The sort of explosion and balkanization of media markets and niche publications.

**AB:** And you can sort of see maybe something similar with social media, but I feel social media is a completely different beast than print publication. And pornography now has gotten... the pornography that soldiers deal with now is very different than looking at a Playboy, right? They have terabytes worth of things to deal with, and Playboy full-frontal nudity didn't happen I think until 1971 or '72.

**JW:** So very late in the war.

**AB:** And it was not explicit in any way. Playboy doesn't ever show graphic nudity. There're never shots of just body parts, there's never heard shots of actions or anything like that, it's just kind of a model pose. So, it was more Hustler and Penthouse that had the more hardcore imagery, and so I feel like you have magazines and things like that now, but I don't think any of them sort of are recreating that moment that Playboy had.

**JW:** The community and the reach that Playboy had.

**AB:** Just sort of in the right time, yeah, at the right place, right time.

**JW:** Amber, thanks so much for joining me today. This has been a really fascinating conversation. I've learned a lot. I imagine our readers have learned a lot and maybe it there will be a renewed interest in reading Playboy for the articles from the 1960s and 1970s.

**AB:** Thank you so much for having me.