



Notes from a trip across America at war

New York, October 1966
IN THE FIRST LIGHT near Philadelphia there was a long train carrying only Ford Mustangs east from Detroit, tiered three high. The Asian War inhibits neither our production nor our consumption.

On the glass door of a Pennsylvania cafe that morning was pasted in red, white and blue: "SUPPORT OUR BOYS IN VIETNAM." And on a Texas car on the Pennsylvania Turnpike was the first "BACK THE WAR IN VIETNAM" bumper sticker of the trip.

In a small mill town south of Pittsburg there was a boy in a filling station, London haircut and California surfer's shirt, who told me: "My girl had a fight with her old man and now she's living with me, until I get drafted anyway."

New Concord, Ohio is the home of John Glenn. At each end of town is a sign to that effect with a Mercury capsule done in cartoon. The blue and red paint is already badly faded.

In a truckers' cafe above Millersport, Ohio, a man next to me was eating salad for breakfast. He talk of how his second adopted daughter can recite whole chapters of the Bible. Then in a lucid versimilitude of reason he spoke of how he would vote for George Wallace for President if he could. "I'd vote for Eichmann if he was on the ballot."

An immense sign was pasted across the display window of a Chevrolet dealer in Columbus: "Business is good."

East of Dayton a giant bomber in its landing pattern 500 feet above the highway seemed to hang awful and frozen above me, all its gear and hanging weight reluctant to give up the air.

Next to me in a drive-in restaurant in Brazil, Indiana, in an old car sat a teenager girl and her little teenage man, a member of the US Airforce; loose clothes with 45 rpm records strewn all across the top filled the back of their car.

A hitch-hiker in a Syracuse University sweatshirt went with me all the rest of the way into St. Louis. He was just returned from the Army in Germany. He was a compulsive liar about his experiences in Berlin but crafty. He will make an American supersalesman. He said that he was against the Vietnam War but would go back into the Army if he were called.

The Harry S. Truman Museum in Independence, Missouri is full of mementoes from more reasonable wars and crowded with sober Americans wondering at the institution of the Presidency.

There did not seem to be a Vietnam in beautiful Kansas even though two Australians met on the road talked long about "stopping the Chinese right now."

Over Pike's Peak hung a great electric storm that seemed to jar the foundations of the Rockies, but just below, near Colorado Springs the doors into the famous and giant tunneled-out mountain of the Airforce war control center were clearly visible from the highway. Waiting for the rain to abate in a cafe in Falcon, a rancher told me that as it said in the Bible, it was "the bad angels" who were responsible for all the trouble in the world. And in the next breath he complained about young people refusing to go to Vietnam "because of all this LSD and other stuff."

At a carnival in the cold evening of Salida high in the mountains there swaggered a group of young Indians trying hard to act like Negroes.

In Pagoda Springs, an old cowboy with an Irish face, Navaho bracelets and dirt in the creases of his neck told me that he had never been in the military, would not have gone if "they" had called him, and certainly would not go to fight in "this silly Vietnam thing."

The latenight radio station all the way from Oklahoma City reported that the university there would soon build a "recreation centre" with seven basketball courts.

Ahead of me on the way down into New Mexico and Arizona a Government Forest Ranger's car swerved deliberately to run over a ground squirrel and was successful.

When the highway leaves the desolate Ute Indian Reservation in the far corner of Colorado, there is a lonely sign: "WE HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED OUR SCENERY."

The first wide place in the road into Arizona is Teec Nos Pos in the Navaho Reservation. The hogans are squalid like a Cape Flats squatters settlement. There is only one watertap in evidence but up on

the bluff is a brand new Indian school done in army camp modern; dusty paper was blown high all along the sheep fence around the school. Two young Navaho men, who said they had not been able to find work since early last year, told me that they had been East too, "all the way to Santa Fe."

I arrived in Kayenta simultaneously with Barry Goldwater. In the lobby of the motel-restaurant, before going off to dedicate some recently restored Indian ruins, he bantered with the local nabobs and then pulled back alone to play with a broken button on his suit jacket. He has seen headier things than Kayenta and he shows it.

To the south rim of the Grand Canyon I rode with a young hitch-hiker who "sometimes designs furniture" in Denver. He was Portuguese-Korean, born in Hawaii. He said he did not like to travel there in the South-west because "they treat me like an Indian," and not in the South because there "they can't figure me out and sometimes they treat me like a Negro."

Out in the vastness of desert Arizona a new car with Danish plates and a "MAKE LOVE NOT WAR" bumper sticker passed me in clean pursuit of Southern California.

That night in Kingman, still many miles from California, a little Negro boy entered a restaurant to alert the owner, an old Jew with a heavy Eastern European accent. They came back out together to kill the rattlesnake that was winding along across the sidewalk under the mercury vapor lights in the desert night.

Waiting for the sun to go down over the Mohave in the Needles, California public library I read Allen Ginsberg's epic anti-Vietnam War poem, "Wichita Vortex Sutra," and learned after-all that Vietnam was in Kansas too.

The Mexican owner of a sorry little garage at the edge of the Mohave talked of his dream of a Volkswagen franchise, "and then I'll put little palm trees in pots out front."

In the desert, at a cafe in Newberry, California, there is a crude bar mural of a Negro "mammy" with her backside exposed which is captioned "CLINT'S A GO GO."

In tiny Victorville, still miles from the Los Angeles basin, I saw two young Negroes wearing the black silk head covering of The Brotherhood.

Then the next day, splashing in the Pacific surf at Santa Monica, I overheard two women next to me. One said, "They ought to send all the damn niggers to Vietnam." ●