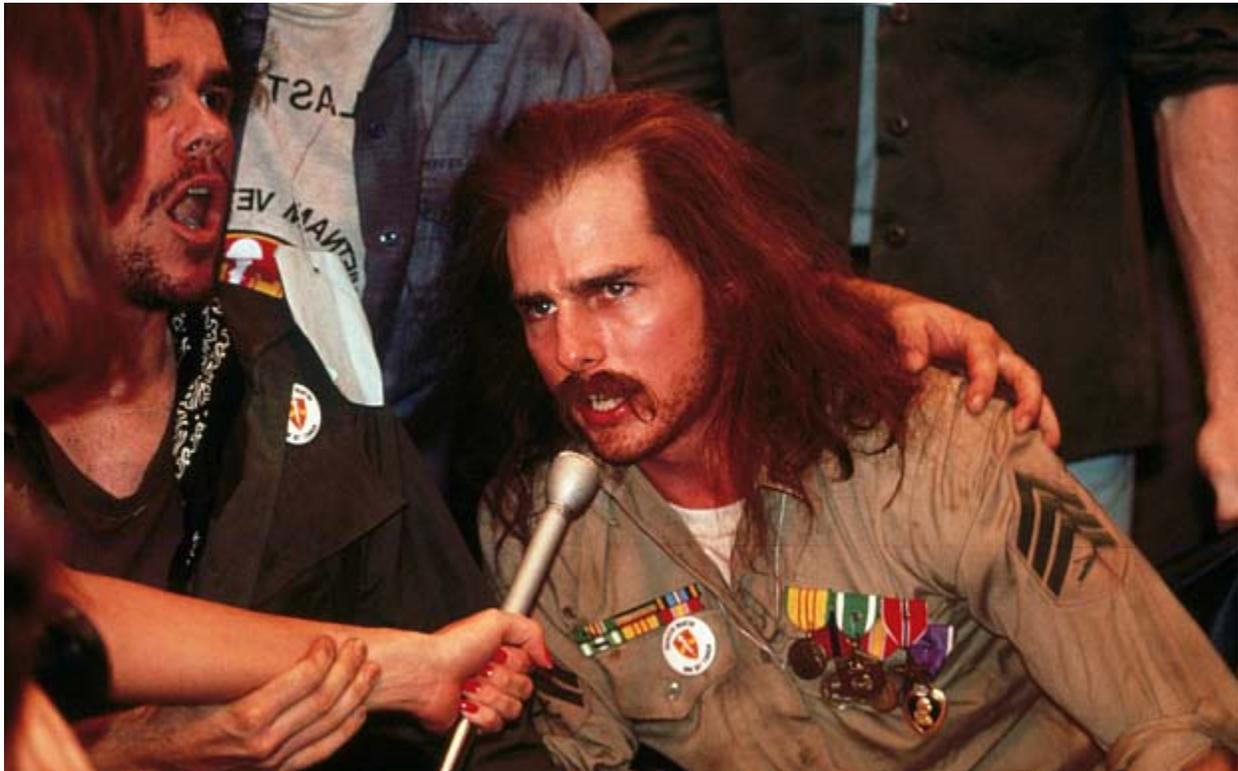


## The Great Con of American Patriotism

A joint interview with a Vietnam-war Marine sergeant and a West Point-educated Army Major of the Iraq & Afghanistan wars. Not what you might expect! ~ Don Chapin

Scheer Intelligence, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-great-con-of-american-patriotism/>



Tom Cruise as Ron Kovic in "Born on the Fourth of July" (1989).  
(Universal Pictures)

American soldiers born decades apart in the state of New York, [Ron Kovic](#) and [Maj. Danny Sjursen](#) are two crucial dissenting voices that have experienced firsthand the futility and brutality of America's interventionist wars. Kovic, a Marine veteran who was paralyzed in the Vietnam War, has spent the rest of his life fighting against the U.S. war machine. The film "Born on the Fourth of July," starring Tom Cruise, was based on his book, a work he hoped would combine with his activism to dissuade young people from buying into the toxic patriotism that leads Americans to fight destructive, ultimately pointless wars.

In the latest installment of “Scheer Intelligence,” Kovic tells Truthdig Editor in Chief Robert Scheer, “I couldn’t stop speaking against that war. I was arrested a dozen times. I—every single day was life and death. Every single day, I know that there could be another young man like Ron Kovic being paralyzed, another young man from a town or a farm somewhere in this country, being killed in that war that had to stop.”

Sadly, Sjursen, who says he watched the film based on Kovic’s life before he was even of age to join the military, explains that he wasn’t able to hear past what he calls the “faux patriotism” that pushed him to attend the U.S. Military Academy, as well as do tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I think the fact that I didn’t learn the lessons from Ron Kovic’s story,” Sjursen laments, “[is] proof of the power of the masculinity that is associated with military service, and this notion of nationalism and patriotism. It’s so prevalent that it’s, in some ways, if it’s not fought every day ... it will continue despite the lessons before us.”

Sjursen also reflects on the shame he feels for having led soldiers to their deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan long after he “no longer had any faith in the wars.”

“What I really saw [in Iraq],” Sjursen recalls, “was the results of American messianism in the world, of American exceptionalism, the notion that we could remake societies in our own image. What it really meant was a whole lot of dead children, a whole lot of car bombs, a whole lot of teenagers shooting each other in the night. And then, of course, a whole lot of Americans getting killed as well, although less of us than the Iraqis.”

Listen to their brutally honest discussion about the vital need to reframe patriotism in the age of the “forever wars” and the current state of the military-industrial complex. You can also read a transcript of the interview below the media player.

**Robert Scheer:** Hi, this is Robert Scheer with another edition of “Scheer Intelligence,” where the intelligence comes from my guests.

And in this case, more than the intelligence, though there'll be plenty of that; experience, of a kind that most people don't have. America has been in lots of wars in the last 70 years or so. But the difference, though, in World War II, a significant number of people were conscripted and brought into it; in Vietnam it started that way. And then we figured out how to do war on the cheap—not for civilian casualties, not for people who died in those wars, but to exempt most of the people in the country who didn't want or need to go there. And we have two people who have had experience with this trajectory in a fascinating way and have emerged quite critical of it. One is Ron Kovic. The movie "Born on the Fourth of July" was made about him, Tom Cruise immortalized him in that film; he also, it was based on his own book. And he wrote the script with Oliver Stone, that was nominated for the Academy Award. And probably the best war movie that we've ever had; maybe "All Quiet on the Western Front" in an earlier period, but certainly the best. And Ron has, of course, remained active. And he wrote a book about veterans protesting against medical cuts and everything, and the sit-in at then-Sen. Alan Cranston's office, called "Hurricane Street," that is out now. And the other guest I'm bringing in—so Ron was the sergeant; the sergeant now is going to meet the major. And the major is Danny Sjursen. Readers of Truthdig know him well, because he's writing a history; for a lot of publications he's also writing a lot of columns. And, amazingly enough, he's been writing these columns about the military, about Iraq and Afghanistan, where he has been in combat, leading troops for 10 years. And he is a graduate of West Point; he's, as I said before, a major, active-duty major. And we can talk a little bit about how he purchased the freedom to be able to write so critically. But as we do this recording, we're on the 29th of January; in three days, Major Danny Sjursen is going to be out of the military. And what is that, for the first time in 18-and-a-half years.

**Danny Sjursen:** That is right.

**RS:** So why don't I start with you, Major? And tell me—first of all, the reason I wanted to get you two guys together, you tell me you had a lot of respect for the book that Ron wrote and the movie that was based on it, "Born on the Fourth of July." So why don't you

take us through that trajectory, how we go from Ron Kovic and the issues he raised in his book, to what you've seen leading troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, where people have actually died under your command?

**DS:** I saw the movie *Born on the Fourth of July*. My uncles forced me to watch it before I was even old enough to understand it. And I've known who Ron Kovic has been since then, and I'm honored to even be on the same podcast. You asked right before we started, what have we learned. And I would submit that between Vietnam and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in one sense we, the collective we, this society has learned very little, and made some of the same mistakes. But then in another sense, the foreign policy elites have learned something rather profound. So I just want to dig into both of those really quickly. First of all, the Vietnam War—you know, not to step on Mr. Kovic's heels; he's going to tell us a lot about that—but it was an absolute disaster, an absolute foreign policy disaster. And the military, instead of learning that lesson, instead of thinking that we should be very careful about which wars we fight, the military decided instead to learn its own lessons from Vietnam. And there were two schools of thought. The revisionists believe that if only we had done counterinsurgency more effectively, we could have won in Vietnam. And another group, the go-big group or the conventional war group, says if only we would have bombed North Vietnam more, if only we would have invaded North Vietnam, if only we would have fought the Chinese and the Russians, then we would have won in Vietnam. So those, I think, are both flawed views of the Vietnam War, but they kind of led into the very same attitudes about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But here's the point I want to make: the foreign policy elite, the militarists who run this government, learned a different lesson. And the lesson they learned is that if you conscript people, if you draft people, if you bring the American people along into a war, then there might be protests. There might be people who turn against that war when the time comes. But if you send a small group of volunteers over, and over, and over again, even to fruitless wars that are not in our national security interests—like Iraq, like Afghanistan, like Syria—you can maintain a war endlessly. So it is that Ron fought in the longest war in American history, and I've had the infamy of having served in

what broke that record for the longest war in American history, that of course being Afghanistan.

**RS:** In Ron's case, he was not conscripted. I mean, he probably foresaw that he might be. But early on, in 1965, you went into the Marines, and you—

**Ron Kovic:** I actually joined the Marine Corps in September 1964. But I want to thank you, Major, for your 18 years of service. I want to thank you right away for that. And everything you've just talked about, I completely agree with you. From the very first thing you said about Vietnam being a disaster, to the reasons why. You know, I felt that when the war ended, that we would learn a lesson from the war. But I realized that they—and I've written about it—the leaders of this government had their own idea what their lessons should be. And that we were needlessly sacrificing thousands upon thousands of young men—and in this case, now, young men and women—needlessly. So I just want you to know that I completely agree with everything you said. And I joined out of high school in 1964. I was born on the Fourth of July, that's my real birthday. I grew up very patriotic, both my mother and father had served in the Navy. That's how my family began, my parents met and were later married during the war years. And I was given the Marine Corps *Guidebook* when I was nine years old. I remember standing in front of the mirror in my house in Massapequa in New York, practicing the salute at nine years old. My father worked in a supermarket, and there were not a lot of—I was not a great student, there were not a lot of opportunities for me to go off to college. But actually, I wanted to play for the New York Yankees [Laughs], I wanted to be a major league baseball player.

**RS:** And you were a wrestler, too.

**RK:** Yeah, I was a varsity wrestler, and quite athletic. I couldn't wait to join the Marines. And that seemed like—my friends were going off to college, and I felt a bit insecure, and I felt that I wanted my life to stand for something. And I decided to join the Marine Corps. And also, I felt a subtle pressure from my father to do something with my life. To either get a job, or to make something of my life. I wanted my father and my mother and my family and all my friends

to be proud of me. And that pretty much led me to join the Marines. But it was nothing, boot camp was nothing like I thought it was going to be—nothing like the Marine Corps recruiters at the recruit station in Levittown, Long Island, had depicted when my father and I went down for me to join the Marines. I had no idea what going into the military service was really going to be like that first day, the shock of that first day at boot camp, yeah.

**RS:** So let me, let me address a question that you've raised, that I was trying to get at: the subversion of a decent sense of patriotism. You, and I'm bringing Major in here in a minute, I can't speak for him. But he grew up actually, what, maybe five subway stops, or I don't know how far away, but he grew up in Staten Island. So you guys have that in common. Yes, there was the draft and so forth. But you know, you joined out of a sense of patriotism. You did two tours in Vietnam, so you went back for the second tour; you reenlisted.

**RK:** You know, actually, before I went back I was, at the time, after my first tour of duty, came back and I was stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina. I was in the Marine Corps air wing. I remember seeing a newspaper, a photograph in the Sunday paper when I was on the base, of a protest against the war. And I remember it was Sheep Meadow park in New York, and they were burning the American flag. And I was, I was very upset. And it was not long after that I began to volunteer to go back to Vietnam a second time. And I volunteered 12 times; I was turned down every single time, trying to go back to Vietnam. And I would write these letters, and I remember receiving a response on one of the letters that I wrote saying that my letter was too flowery, too patriotic—I was too patriotic. And they thought I was crazy for wanting to go back a second time, but I felt that I wanted to set my own example of patriotism. My father had served in World War II, and the fathers who came home to the neighborhood after World War II, they came home from what I perceived to be a great victory of World War II. And I really, in my heart, I wanted to believe that we were going to win in Vietnam. And I thought, I'm going to set my own example. We are going to win in Vietnam. I'm going to go back. And you talk about when you began to question your patriotism—on the ground,

in Vietnam, during those traumatic experiences. You know, what I witnessed, what I saw, what I went through emotionally, psychologically, physically, myself, and the people around me. That's when you began to question, and wonder if there was going to be a country to go back to. Because you were reading Time and Newsweek magazine, and there was rioting in the different cities, the national guardsmen. And I remember wondering, is there going to be an America for me to go back to?

**RS:** Yeah, but also the Vietnamese people, who were being bombed and killed at an even larger rate there, were wondering about whether they would have a country to continue to live in. So let me bring the Major in here, because you also, as I understand your story—and I should say both of these folks have written for Truthdig, and so I have sort of an editorial connection. I've known Ron for 48 years; we actually met at an antiwar demonstration. But I want to bring the Major in, because you were somebody who volunteered; you went to West Point. And your background wasn't all that different than Ron's. So why don't you bring that in, what happened 18 and a half years ago when you decided you could get into West Point and wanted to, and where you ended up?

**DS:** In some ways I come from a similar family to Mr. Kovic. I'm from Staten Island, a relatively conservative neighborhood; my father voted for Trump. You know, just to give you an idea. I'm not from a military family, though. But I had the same sense of wanting to get out of my neighborhood and do something interesting that would make the family and everyone else proud. You know, not a lot of people in my family had gone to college. I originally wanted to enlist, but then my father sort of convinced me to at least try for an ROTC scholarship, or take the long shot and get into West Point. Now I, of course, being a kid from the east shore of Staten Island, thought that to go to West Point you had to be, like, the son of a congressman. Or, you know, some sort of rich blueblood. Of course, the opposite is the case these days; the sons of congressmen don't really go to the military academy anymore. And it's actually fairly egalitarian. So I got in, and once I got in and came home from my job at the hardware store, and heard my mom and her friends, you know, crying because they had broken the law and opened my mail

[Laughs], I knew I had to go. I mean, it was just, I was only 17; my mother had to sign me in, I was not yet 18 until towards the end of basic training. So I joined just before 9/11, though, and I think that's important. Because a lot of my soldiers joined after 9/11, but I actually went to West Point on July 2nd of 2001. So what I thought I was getting into versus what I got into were two very different things, which I think Ron has alluded to during the Vietnam era of joining the Marine Corps. I had grown up in the nineties under the Bush, the father, and Clinton administrations, where I truly believed—or I was led to believe—that the United States was a force for humanitarian good in the world. Somalia, Bosnia, these sort of interventions. I never expected a real war; I thought at most I would go to Kosovo and try to help some people. The 9/11 attacks, of course, shook that. I was very patriotic after 9/11. I mean, my father was across the street and barely got out; my uncles were firefighters and survived, and close family friends were dead. My mother went to funerals every day for months, it seemed, because so many firemen from the neighborhood had been killed. Iraq and Afghanistan—I went to Iraq first and then Afghanistan—really shattered those illusions that America was a humanitarian force for good. Instead, in Iraq, I saw us shatter a society that went into a civil war, in addition to attacking us. And watched how we had just completely destroyed that country through our ill-advised invasion. And then in Afghanistan, I found an unwinnable war that was probably more similar to Vietnam than the Iraq War was, in the sense that it turned out that all the Afghans were not Americans secretly waiting to jump out of their skins. They didn't want the American version of government, and they did not see us as legitimate. And of course I fought a long-term insurgency there. So that was really just the start, those two deployments, to my dissent and my reframing—getting back to your original question—of patriotism as being possible to dissent and still be patriotic.

**RS:** I'm going to take a break now for a few minutes, and then we'll be back to continue this fascinating discussion with people who didn't just talk about war the way many of our politicians and even intellectuals do, but actually experienced this last half-century of war. [omission for station break] We're back, and I'm with Major

Danny Sjursen. And we'll have to call you a retired major; three days after we're doing this interview, you're leaving after 18 and a half years in the military. And you're joining Ron Kovic here, who can never forget the war in any sense; he's sitting here in his wheelchair. So let me ask you, Major, you're—you had men under your command, like Ron. Ron was a sergeant when he was wounded, you're the major. There's obviously, rank matters; some people even have the idea, majors don't get shot at. And so why don't you give us your perspective of what happens to the Ron Kovics now? Also, tell us—we left you with West Point, and tell us what happened, and you know, how you ended up being in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**DS:** I got to Iraq in October of 2006. By that point, anyone with any sense already realized that there was no WMD, there was no Al-Qaeda connection to Saddam, and that the invasion had turned into an absolute mess, a quagmire in an intersectional civil war. I, on the other hand, had spent most of that time at West Point, trying to survive, being told that what I was about to do was relatively heroic, and that it didn't really matter what kind of war we were fighting, it only mattered how we led our soldiers, and whether we did that with dignity and spirit. So while I had a few doubts come 2006, I was far too busy to worry myself with whether or not we should be in Iraq. Which is ridiculous looking back, because this was my life. I ended up spending 15 months there. I was there at the height of the civil war, the height of the surge. I took 19 soldiers there, three were killed, one later killed himself, and the other half were wounded. What I really saw was the results of American messianism in the world, of American exceptionalism, the notion that we could remake societies in our own image. What it really meant was a whole lot of dead children, a whole lot of car bombs, a whole lot of teenagers shooting each other in the night. And then of course, a whole lot of Americans getting killed as well, although less of us than the Iraqis. When I went to Afghanistan three years later, I no longer had any faith in the wars; I was just a professional. I mean, I'm almost embarrassed to say, I was now a company commander or a troop commander of a cavalry reconnaissance troop. We were on foot, on our feet, no vehicles, in southern Afghanistan, Kandahar province, the heart of the Taliban. By that

point, I was phoning it in. Not in terms of tactics, not in terms of how hard I worked; I didn't believe in what we were doing anymore. Iraq had shattered that for me. But I had let people convince me that good officers had to stay, and I liked to fancy myself, back then, as a good officer. So now I led 120 cavalry scouts in the heart of Taliban country, and what I found there was slightly different from Iraq. It wasn't so much a civil war as it was a mass insurgency that we were never going to break. And it turns out, we only held the ground we stood on, which probably sounds very familiar to Mr. Kovic. And I got through a year there and lost twice as many soldiers, of course, because I was in charge of three times as many. And I left there and went to teach at West Point, and I know that's a strange place to have a midlife crisis, or a mid-career crisis. That's a strange place to do an about-face and become viciously anti-war, but that's actually, that's what happened to me. While I was at grad school, and then teaching at West Point.

**RS:** So let me ask you about that. Because you know, in the case of Vietnam, they won, we lost, and no dominoes fell. Quite the opposite—Vietnam went to war with communist China. Communist Vietnam went to war with communist China over their border; they're still fighting over some islands. And most Americans now know Vietnam because the clothes they buy, you know, at Wal-Mart or at Costco, a lot of it is, if it's not made in China, it's made in Vietnam. And it seems to be a happy place, becoming increasingly capitalist. So the whole assumption of the war was a lie, you're a historian, you know it was built on lies to begin with. Well today as we're doing this interview, amazingly enough it was Donald Trump, who some people think is the wild man and so forth—this administration is actually negotiating with the Taliban. I don't know if it'll be promising. But right now the Taliban, who we—you know, after all, held responsible for all this terrible stuff—they're now resigning to the idea the Taliban may be the government, or certainly an important part of the government. So aren't there parallels there? How do smart—the best and the brightest that David Halberstam talked about, talking about the people who got us into Vietnam. It wasn't the dummies, it wasn't the yahoos, it wasn't the—no! It was the best and the brightest, and that's what got us into Iraq and Afghanistan, the neoconservatives. And there's

a similarity, in that here and now, and in Afghanistan, in the area that your troops died in—oh! Hey, maybe we can do business with the enemy. And maybe they'll be making shirts and everything that we can buy at Walmart and Costco.

**DS:** Perhaps. The people who got us into Iraq and Afghanistan, I might argue a lot of them were actually C+ students at best. [Laughs] Like George W. Bush. But you're right, they were from elite families, and they were from the foreign policy establishment. The areas that I patrolled are already under Taliban control, and they have been since about 2014. That's one of the dirty little secrets, is we control far less of the country than we did during the Obama era surge. And it was always futile; we could never hold that ground unless we kept 150,000 soldiers there indefinitely, or maybe more. The Russians tried it, and it didn't work. And in fact, the Russians never made it as far south toward the Arghandab River as I did. We were very proud of that, that we made it further south in our control than the Soviets had. Dealing with the Taliban, negotiating with the Taliban, is the only way out. They are going to be part of the solution, even if we don't like it. They are deeply intertwined into Pashtun society in the south and east of the country. But the tragedy of it all, to me, is that smart people—the best and the brightest—would have already known that back in 2011, when I was there. The fact that we fought the notion of negotiating with the Taliban, negotiating a solution, negotiating a division of the country, whatever it turns out to be—and it'll be a mess—but it's going to happen whether we stay or leave. It's a question of when. The fact that we're doing it now is sad to me, because we could have been doing this long ago. And I'll throw a date on the map. Osama bin Laden is killed—in Pakistan, mind you, near the west point of Pakistan, in 2011 while I was there—and that would have been a great mark on the wall to say, well, now it's time to negotiate with the Taliban remnants, and realize that there is no military solution to this. But we didn't do it, right? So how many more Americans died, how many more Afghans died after that? So I'm not upset that we're negotiating with the Taliban. But I do find it sad that it took this long, because of how many Americans and how many innocent Afghans died in the process. And again, if people were really bright, if people were truly realists, and understood foreign policy and

understood history, they would have realized that years and years ago, the Taliban was never going to be fully defeated militarily.

**RS:** So let's end with this word that we began with: *patriotism*. There is a patriotism that you two guys share. First of all, you care. You care, really, about the consequence. You care about what happens in other countries, you care about what happens to the people we send to wars, and you care about the impact on our own country. That's genuine patriotism of an enlightened variety. But the fact is, the people who at least are the best and the brightest by virtue of their status—how come there are few guys like you? You know, Ron Kovic, right? Danny Sjrursen. Why don't they speak up? Is it careerism? Is it opportunism? How these guys of rank and experience and education, can continue with this stupidity for 50 years?

**DS:** Well, I think in the case of the senior generals and the senior Pentagon civilians, that's definitely the case. These aren't stupid people; Gen. Petraeus, Gen. H.R. McMaster, these are guys with PhDs, historians who have written books, some of which sold very well. They know. I mean, they're aware of the limitations of military power. But their entire careers were built in the military-industrial complex. I mean, these officers—the officers who are leading the army now, the four stars at the top—they have spent their entire careers, from the rank of captain or major at the latest, fighting these wars. And it does require a sort of cognitive dissonance to separate the politics and the reasons for fighting from the tactics, and how we fight. And I would argue that there's an intellectual dishonesty among the senior officer corps. And here I go, I'm going to get myself in trouble again. But there's an intellectual dishonesty among these folks who are able to divide or to find a schism between why we fight and how we fight. And so instead of giving their best advice to civilian bosses, in this case the president, they're willing to muddle along and make careers, and really convince themselves that they had no choice but to continue these sort of wars. Because it's all they've ever known. I mean, these are entire careers built on counterinsurgency, or the theme or snake oil, as I would call it, of counterinsurgency theory. So, yeah, I

do think they know better, and that's why I'm highly disappointed in an entire generation of general officers and admirals.

**RS:** So we're going to have to wrap this up, but I want to end on how patriotism registers today in our daily life. And so I go to the Lakers games, I go to Oakland Raiders games, you know, we're going to have the Super Bowl. And there's this obligatory support of the troops. And often, wounded troops. And honoring the troops, and the flag is rolled out, and a lot of it is paid for by the Pentagon; it's official government, pro-war propaganda. But they always tell us, if you honor the troops, you have to go along with this patriotic circus.

**RK:** I love my country, but my best way of showing my patriotism today is to tell the truth, and to continue to write, and to continue to tell what really happened, and what it really means to be wounded. What it really means physically and psychologically. You know, we have 20, what do we have, 22 Iraq and Afghan veterans a day committing suicide, and the suicide rate among Vietnam veterans still to this day is very high. So to tell the truth, continue to write the truth, that's what patriotism is.

**RS:** But let me ask you. You, in Long Beach in the spinal—

**RK:** The outpatient spinal cord clinic, yeah.

**RS:** I went down to see you there—

**RK:** Yeah, on Memorial Day.

**RS:** Yeah, it was Memorial Day. And the place was empty of visitors. And there were people, they were listening to their iPhone with earphones on—

**RK:** Disabled veterans, yeah.

**RS:** Yeah. And it was depressing as hell. This was—

**RK:** To you it was.

**RS:** But it was exciting for you?

**RK:** Not exciting, no. I mean, I was in that environment for 11 months at the Bronx VA in New York. I mean, I was literally institutionalized in a hospital with severely injured paraplegics and quadriplegics. And this was the beginning of my life. This was, I was 21 years old.

**RS:** And you've spent a lot of time warning about these wars. And you're in that hospital, when I visited you, with people, young people, who were coming back from Afghanistan, coming back from Iraq.

**RK:** Absolutely. No, it's—I remember my [doctor] said you know, we have a recently wounded paraplegic Iraq veteran in the hospital right now, he's very depressed, would you be willing to go up to him and talk to him? And I said, absolutely. So before I left the outpatient clinic that day, I went over to the hospital wing, and I went into his room. It was so ironic, because I could not help but see myself decades ago in that same hospital bed, with my whole life ahead of me, having been devastated physically with a catastrophic wound. And wondering how I was going to make it not only through that week, but to the next month, the next year. And I can't believe, now as I look back upon it 51 years later, that I've been able to survive all of these years. I'm very grateful to still be alive. I remember talking to him, and I could have talked about politics; I could have talked about—I had strongly opposed the war. I had given many interviews against the war, even before it began, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. I could have brought that up; I could have brought my strong opposition to the war that had paralyzed him. But instead I remember finding myself simply asking him, is there anything I can do for you, brother? Is there anything I can get for you? Can I help you in any way? That was my response to him. Because I can think back to 1968, on the paraplegic ward in New York, when Korean and World War II paraplegics would come into our room, you know. And they would come up to my bed, and they would come up and they would say, you know, how are you doing? What can we do for you? They were very compassionate. They could have made comments about Vietnam, but they didn't. So I found myself, when I went up to him, can I go down to the PX, what can I get for you, what do you need? And I just wanted him to survive. I

wanted him to hang in there, somehow find a way through this depression, and have a life for himself.

**RS:** Yeah. And but your response to your own injury was to try to prevent other people from being subject to this—

**RK:** I couldn't stop speaking against that war. I was arrested a dozen times. I—every single day was life and death. Every single day I know that there could be another young man like Ron Kovic being paralyzed, another young man from a town or a farm somewhere in this country, being killed in that war that had to stop. I and other veterans who opposed that war during that time, in the late sixties and early seventies, we knew that every day was important in trying to save lives. We were here back at home, we had come back from the war, but we knew how important it was that we protest that war, do everything possible to speak out until our voices were raw, against that war. And I remember, you know, sitting behind bars; I hated it, I didn't like—I was already in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, and here I was inside of a jail cell. It wasn't fun. But all I could think of was, whatever it takes, you know, to stop this war. I had been inspired while in the hospital by Martin Luther King and others. And I knew that that war that I had fought in and sacrificed in was wrong, and we had to do everything possible, and it was hurting my country deeply as well.

**RS:** So, Major, I want to give you the last word here. You have seen the movie, and yet despite that anti-war movement and so forth, you went off to West Point. You ended up leading troops, and so forth. What happened? Did they convince you that the Iraq War, or the war in Afghanistan, was somehow more necessary, would make more sense than Vietnam? What drives this war machine? Why don't we close on that? Why didn't people heed the message of Ron Kovic when he came out against the Iraq War, when he came out against sending people to Afghanistan? Why didn't they listen to him?

**DS:** You're correct, I saw the movie "Born on the Fourth of July" before I was even of age to serve. I think the fact that I didn't learn the lessons from Ron Kovic's story is proof of the power of faux patriotism. Proof of the power of the masculinity that is associated

with military service, and this notion of nationalism and patriotism. It's so prevalent that it's, in some ways, if it's not fought every day—like Mr. Kovic said—if it's not fought every day, then it will continue despite the lessons before us. Because I fell for it. And I'm embarrassed. The way I felt about the Iraq War in 2003, and the way I didn't even really pay attention to it, because it wasn't—it wasn't really important where we fought; I was fighting for America, I was a West Pointer, of course. But now, 18 years later, after losing—several of my soldiers killed, and Sergeant Ty DeJane paralyzed, also from a gunshot wound, in Iraq on December 14th, 2006. You know, I find myself in a similar place, psychologically at least, to Ron Kovic. And here I am, and you know, I didn't learn the lesson fast enough, just like a lot of us didn't. But I decided, sometime in those two wars and sometime after those wars, teaching a new crop of cadets at West Point—new kids that wanted to be just like me, who wanted to be just like David Petraeus, who wanted to be just like, you know, a World War II general. When I was put in front of those cadets and asked to teach American history in the normal patriotic lens, I couldn't do it. And I think that was the breaking point. And at that point, I decided to do what Ron Kovic decided to do, which is to speak out every day to try to minimize the number of Americans that die in these wars. And that's where I'm at now, and I wish it would have happened sooner for me, but I can't go back and change that. All I can do now is bring a new version of patriotism, and that is dissent against meaningless, harmful wars.

**RS:** Well, and Ron is nodding in agreement. And I'm going to have to end it here. But let me just say, I wanted to get you guys together because I think the great thing about adversity, the saving thing about adversity is it produces exceptional people. And my only sad thing is that there are so few people like the two of you. But hopefully, people listening to this will reexamine some of these concepts. So that's it for this edition of "Scheer Intelligence." My guests have been Major Danny Sjursen, who is going to leave an active duty career; he's been writing, which I think takes great courage, critically about our wars, and evaluating our history. And he's about to end his tour, and I think he'll be a major figure, a historian and writer, and we'll hear more from him. And Ron Kovic,

who just never quits. As a writer, as a thinker, as a speaker. And we've been going back and forth for 48 years now, and a very close friendship. And I can't think of teaching a class without bringing Ron Kovic in, because he's my touchstone for integrity and valor and true patriotism.

On that note, let's end this edition of "Scheer Intelligence." Our engineers at KCRW are Kat Yore and Mario Diaz. Our producers are Joshua Scheer and Isabel Carreon. Sebastian Grubaugh here at USC has once again made the show possible, heroically. And see you next week with another edition of Scheer Intelligence.