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# Flippy Guerrilla Street Theater

GEORGE W. CHILCOAT

The use of drama in teaching social studies has the potential to engage students collectively and creatively in analyzing historical or contemporary issues, raising consciousness of their positions and, at times, stimulating them to take some sort of direct social action on matters that concern them. The process of collective creation, according to Jeffrey Goffin (1995), maximizes the benefits of the learning process. Collective creation refers to both a process and a product. Students collaborate to create a play that examines a specific topic or issue of importance, and they celebrate their findings in this dramatic presentation. Drama is effective when it includes group facilitation and organization, along with research methods that make the historical event meaningful to the students. By incorporating the creativity and research of the entire group, a drama project develops a strong group dynamic. Students participate and engage in critical dialogue and thus think in new ways about historical or contemporary social

problems. In its simplest form, collective creation involves a group of students working together, controlling the creative process, sharing all of the tasks of production equally according to their talents and interests, with every member participating in formulation and with all decisions being made by group consensus. All group members can make substantial contributions, and their perspectives, opinions, ideas, and work are validated and valued by their fellow students and their teacher.

The "flippy" play, the drama form described in this article, is adapted from a 1960s guerrilla street theater form that was used to address contemporary social, political, or economic problems affecting particular communities: the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the women's liberation movement, and the farm workers' movement. The play form is one that teachers can easily adapt to social studies instruction.

## Designing a Flippy Play

The flippy play, a narrative illustrating the social problems of the time, was originated by the Bread and Puppet Theater and was first called a "flip-over show." It became very popular with the

San Francisco Mime Troupe, which referred to the form as the "flippy theater." As used by many guerrilla street theater groups, the flippy consisted of eight to ten sheets of paper or cloth, approximately three feet wide and five feet tall, put together in such a way that when one page was flipped over, the page beneath it was revealed. The performance combined visual image, text, music, and narrator. Two people held the poles and flipped the pictures, and from five to seven people provided combinations of voices and music. The form was borrowed from a sixteenth century circus sideshow act called a *bankelsang*. A *bankelsang* was a single sheet of pictures, showing a number of drawings illustrating some historical or contemporary event; a narrator with a pointer told the story. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht revived the *bankelsang* in the 1930s as a theater form to deal with contemporary social problems.

A flippy play is short and to the point, simple and easy to construct. Its design and implementation involve a small group of four to six members who engage in collective discussion and decision making about a historical or contemporary event chosen by the teacher or students. The process for creating the plays is usually divided into

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four broad categories: research and documentation, play design, construction of the flippies, and presentation.

### Research and Documentation

A typical flippy skit lasts ten to twenty minutes, and the entire project lasts approximately two weeks. During the first week, the students research the topic and design and practice the play. They present the play during the second week.

The topic may be historical or contemporary or both, with the subject matter drawn from such sources as personal experiences, issues from the local neighborhood or community, and newspaper or magazine accounts. Many productions involve adaptations from well-known poems, short stories, fairy tales, classic novels or plays, Bible stories, or media commercials. Stories involve a theme dealing with a life incident, condition, or character that can be applied to a contemporary issue, and they treat an event or problem that needs to be resolved.

After students gather information about the significance of the topic, as well as the factual background material, they present their findings to the entire group. A scenario is then selected that involves a sequence of events based on the gathered information. Each event should illumine a specific point about the problem. The sequence of events usually includes the following:

1. A strong beginning—What is the situation and the problem?
2. A middle section consisting of chronological development—How did the situation and the problem come about?
3. A strong ending—How can the problem be resolved?

The sequence can either lead to a conclusion or be left open-ended. The group creates the story line by asking the following questions and improvising answers: What is the problem to be presented? Who are the characters? What are the actions of the characters in response to the problem? What is the time? What is the place? How does the play end?

To teachers and students planning such an activity, I suggest that they keep their plays simple. I advise against getting into complex subplots, which take time to communicate and distract from the story the group is trying to tell.

### Developing the Play

The students develop the play extemporaneously, determining the characters, relationships, and events, and then spontaneously improvising the dialogue. Their free exchange of ideas and responses through discussion and acting provides opportunities to combine, develop, alter, rearrange, and tighten ideas to create a concise play with direct impact. During improvisation, the participants continually shift between acting and observing, doing and watching, creating and discussing. They may improvise around central images, central ideas, or central characters. They may choose known dramatic or entertaining images—circus, auction, horse race, beauty contest, fashion show, wrestling event, boxing match, TV commercial—and place the situation and characters within that framework. That new context often enables an audience to see the situation in a new, revealing light. The group should act out, discuss, and analyze the story line until they have formed the basic structure of the play. They decide the number of scenes needed to tell the story; usually the number of incidents in the story determines the number of scenes. Scenes are brief, simple, and to the point, conveying as much action as possible. So that the audience can easily identify scene changes, a bell, a drumbeat, or an introduction placard frames each scene. When the group is satisfied with the improvised scene, one member then writes the script, noting the exact wording of lines and the actions that will accompany the words. After reviewing and revising the written material, the students use it as a basis for drawing the flippy pages.

It is vital to define the characters explicitly so that they are easily identifiable, because flippy skits are primarily visual and not verbal, making state-

ments through clear images. Simple visuals, following the written script, identify scenes, setting, and situations as well as characters. The visuals need to be action oriented and colorful.

Flippy theater is unique because live performers as the characters interact in various ways with visual portrayals. Each character develops a particular voice, stance, rhythm, gesture, and attitude, because in a flippy play a character is brought to life through the use of body movement, gestures, and sometimes a comic or serious mask. Body movement and gestures should be broad, overexaggerated, clear, and energetic so the situation being played out could be conveyed without words. The name of each character is hand-written on a cardboard sign that hangs around the actor's neck. The signs help the audience quickly grasp the situation and content of the play.

Simple masks and hats quickly define a character, making it possible for one person to portray a number of characters in a single play simply by changing masks and hats. Masks can be made of paper grocery bags by drawing and cutting out the desired face or object. They may also be made from cardboard boxes with a different face painted on each of the four sides so that the box can be rotated, representing four different characters. Papier-mâché masks are inexpensive and easy to make: (a) Cover a person's head and face with tissue paper; (b) tape the tissue paper over the eyes with a gum strip (brown paper sticky tape); (c) cut a small breathing hole over the nose; (d) build up a complete layer of gum strip on the tissue paper to form the structure of the mask; (e) keep the mask on the individual until it dries, then remove it, cutting open the eyes, nose, and mouth in desired shape; (f) complete any additional detailing and modeling needed for the mask to accurately represent the character, and (g) let the mask dry and then paint.

### Dialogue for the Play

The spoken parts of a flippy play should be simple and direct. Lines for each character can be acted out to see

how they develop. When two characters are speaking, they usually do not look at each other but address the audience. It will be clear to the audience that the characters are having a conversation. Humming, drumming, chanting, shouting, mouthing words, singing are devices that can convey dialogue. Characters can communicate with the audience and each other through song-and-dance, mime slogans, soliloquy, or rhetoric. A group of actors, like a Greek chorus, can speak or chant to central actors (and vice versa), or the group can address the audience directly, perhaps pointing at them and asking questions. Placards that contain statements that communicate ideas to the audience are often visible. A narrator with a loud voice might stand to one side and tell the story to the audience, acting as a master of ceremonies while the other members of the group act out the play in mime, only occasionally speaking lines. The narrator can enter into conversation with the characters at certain points and, in effect, speak for the audience, asking questions of the actors or talking to the characters in the flippy story. The use of a narrator lessens the need for a lot of dialogue and avoids the potential pitfall of actors not being heard by all of the audience. If the narrator is dominant, the vocal part of the play is coming from one direction, so the audience can listen without having to switch eyes from the action.

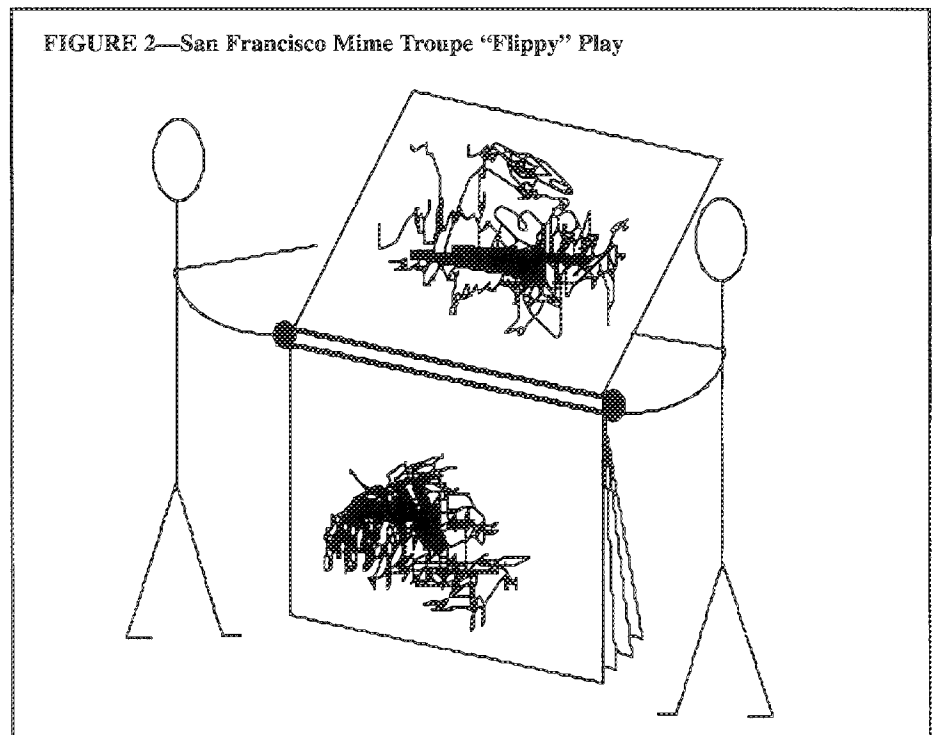
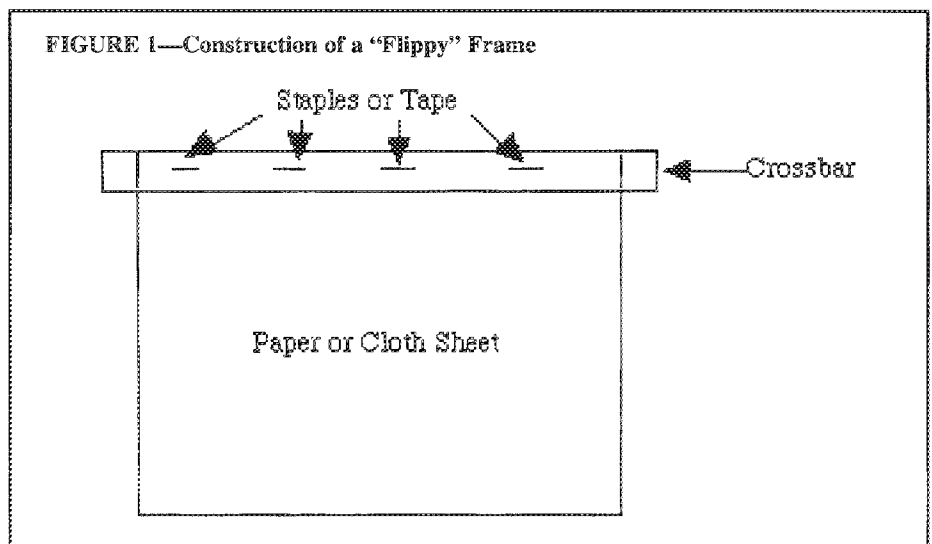
### The Construction of the Flippy Play

After each group chooses a topic, each selected topic is broken down into a story line, which in turn is broken down into a set of individual panels, usually in color, that become the specific acts or scenes of the play. The first panel or act introduces the story and establishes the problem; each subsequent panel continues the story line as Act 2, Act 3, Act 4, and so forth. The last panel, which concludes the story, offers possible solutions to the problem. A flippy play that consists of ten panels drawn on large pieces of paper is a ten-act play. The size of the flippies can vary; the San Francisco Mime Troupe

usually used three-by-four-foot flippies, and the Bread and Puppet Theater used four-by-six-foot flippies. Large pieces of cotton cloth, with drawings in tempera paint, can also be used. Performers generally include two group members who flip the pages on cue, a chorus of other members of the group to interact with the flippy, participants who sing as a group or perform mass chants, and a narrator who is the only mobile character, who leads the choruses, refers to the pictures, and addresses the audience.

### Building the Flippy Frame

The students place the panels or drawings in chronological order and staple or tape them to a small wooden pole the size of a broom handle (figure 1). The pole can either be independently held by two members of the group (as done by the San Francisco Mime Troupe in figure 2) or lashed to two side poles for additional support (as featured by the Bread and Puppet Theater) in figure 3. In the traditional bankelsang format, the

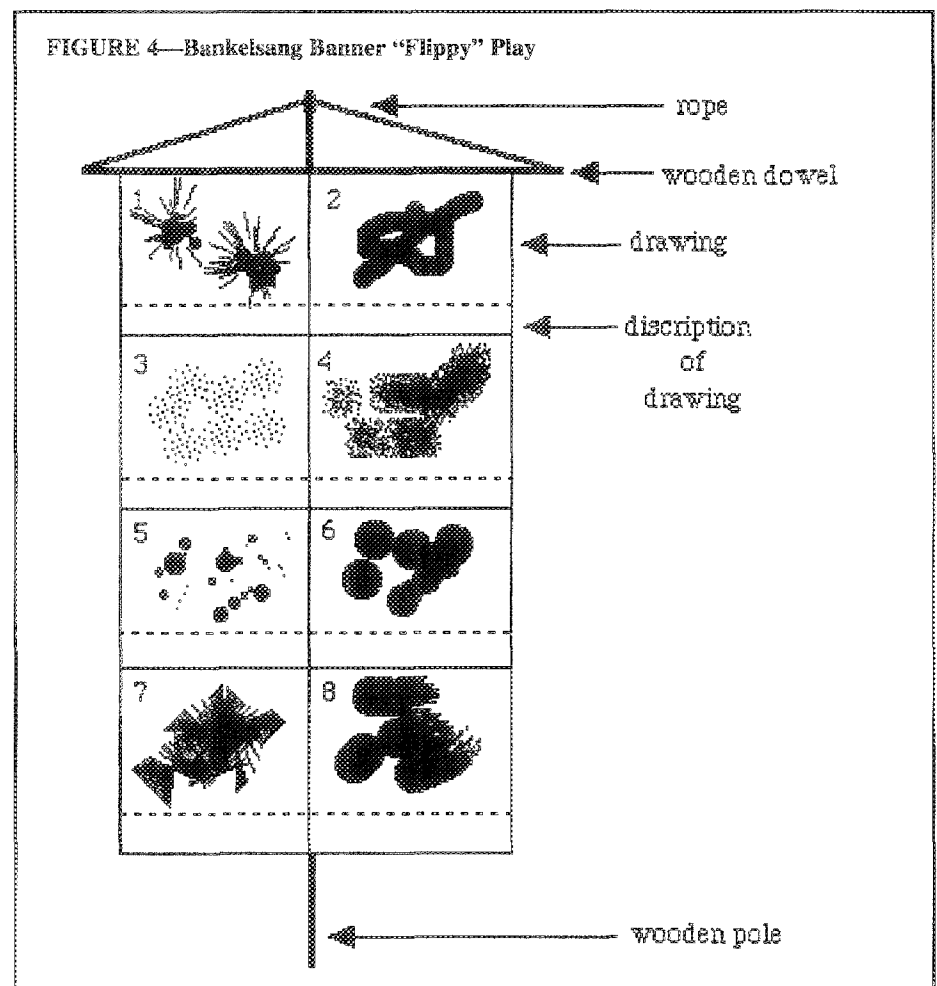
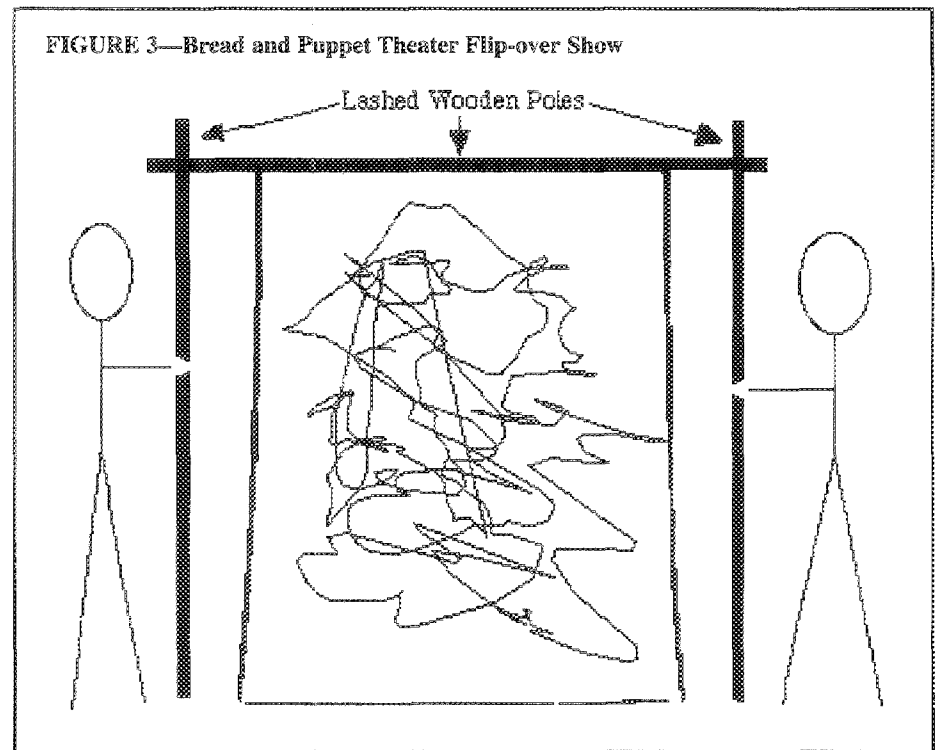


picture sheets are constructed like a banner (figure 4). Each picture sheet is split into equal individual pictures to illustrate the high points of the action, and is hung by a small rope from a tripod or tacked to a wall, while a narrator points to each of the pictures and tells the story.

### Producing and Pacing the Performance

A successful performance of a flippy play hinges on a strict economy between words and images: a minimum number of words and a maximum number of strong images that are big, bold, and clear from a distance. The pacing of the flippy is very important because the dialogue and pictures need to play off each other, complementing the narrative, contradicting the narrative, punctuating a phrase or sentence, or occasionally interrupting a phrase. A flippy performance is a theatrical event that results from a unified blend of performers, instruments, visual impact, and flipping speed. The flipping should not be taken for granted but should enhance the effect and clarity of the narrative. The sound must be coordinated with the pictures, and the performers must know when to flip and at what speed with what sound, noise, and chorus cues. More than one flippy can be used in a single drama to emphasize the theatrical style. In "The Same Boat," an outdoor traveling piece designed by the Bread and Puppet Theater about the 1988 murder of Brazilian rubber tapper and union organizer Chico Mendes, three bankelsang banners depicted, in ballad fashion, the specific details about how Mendes was killed.

Music and other noise add the dramatic effects, and background music can create an atmosphere, underscore actions, and give a sense of pacing. It can also indicate footsteps, heartbeats or the passage of time. Music effectively smoothes over transitions between scenes. A good song is always appreciated by the audience. Distributing instruments to the audience may encourage them to join in the production. Simple instruments will do, such as tambourines, bongos, harmonicas, cymbals,



bass drums, brass horns (French, cornet, trumpet), bells (cheap tin bells, brass cowbells, tiny Christmas bells in grape-like clusters). Audience members can play novelty toy instruments—kazoos, plastic horns, plastic flutes, plastic slide flutes, whistles, small clickers. Participants can use homemade instruments such as empty Coke cans filled with pebbles, wooden blocks, and pot-lid cymbals. Tape recordings of various sounds such as traffic noises can add to the sound effects.

When staging a play, the organizers may use the “breakout” technique, whereby an actor or actress drops from character and addresses the audience, either to make a direct editorial appeal or to ask the audience how to resolve a situation. The technique can cut the action of the play or leave it open ended. The audience may be encouraged to decide how the skit should end or to resolve the dilemma of the play. Members of an audience sometimes participate in the skit, with cardboard signs around their necks depicting their characters.

### Conclusion

Social studies teachers should reexamine their current assumptions about drama to forge a new kind of professional discourse and to reorient their classroom practice. Drama involves the whole student in the learning process, and that student engagement provides a potent means of applying content, exploring ideas and situations, clarifying values, acquiring knowledge, and constructing personal responses to a variety of concepts. Drama can provide students with a classroom laboratory where they can cultivate the practices of participating citizens. It enables students to experience problems, situations, and challenges in a safe environment. After participating in classroom dramas, students may extend that experience and participate in community attempts to resolve the problems and challenges.

When applied in the social studies context, drama is more educational than theatrical. The meaning of the drama experience can only be determined through students’ interactions within

dramatic situations involving historical or contemporary human problems. Although drama is not a direct means for solving problems faced by students in their society, drama in an educational context can become a tool of analysis, a method of raising issues, a process of group-building, a forum for discussion, and a way of testing out ideas and seeing the implications of various courses of action. I believe that drama, as a part of the curriculum and a teaching method, should receive more time, energy, and resources. Drama in the social studies classroom can educate students at all grade levels in the processes relevant to studying public problems in the context of real life.

### APPENDIX

#### AN EXAMPLE OF A “FLIPPY” PLAY

Four students chose as their topic the Fort Hood Three. They held an initial planning meeting to decide on individual responsibilities for collecting the needed information. One looked through back issues of the *New York Times*, one consulted the *Periodical Guide* for magazine articles, and two investigated government documents, particularly the *Congressional Record*. Their research activity took four days.

Using the information they had collected, the group spent three days both in and out of class composing a story about the Fort Hood Three. The students then designed their flippy play, following the San Francisco Mime Troupe form and adapting their story to fit in seventeen panels.

Panel 1: Large green letters over a background of orange. “The Bodacious Bugger-illa Theatre Presents: The Story Of The Fort Hood Three”

Panel 2: Lyrics to a song. The group asks the class to join them in singing:

“Come all you brave Americans and listen to me.

If you can spare me five minutes in this Twentieth Century,

I’ll tell you a story true as you will really see.

It’s about three U.S. soldiers, they call the Ft. Hood Three.” (Song by Pete Seeger, “The Ft. Hood Three.”)

Panel 3: A drawing of an African American male reminiscent of the late 1960s. “My name is James Johnson. I’m going to tell you a story about me and a couple of Army buddies trying to oppose the war in Vietnam. We became known as the Fort Hood Three. Here is how it began.

Panel 4: A drawing of General Lewis B. Hershey, February 1966. General Hershey,

Selective Service Director, developed a program to have local draft boards induct college students who had low levels of academic achievement. (Universities were to rank male students according to grades.

Panel 5: A drawing of a soldier talking to three other soldiers. The Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) advocated antiwar activity among GIs to oppose and resist the Vietnam War. At Fort Gordon, Georgia, PFC. Carl Edelman, a cook and a member of the YSA, discusses an antiwar message with Pfc. Dennis Mora (Puerto Rican), David Samas (Lithuanian), and James Johnson (black).

Panel 6: A drawing of Mora, Samas, and Johnson at Fort Hood, Texas. Mora, Samas, and Johnson were sent to Fort Hood, Texas, preparing to go to Vietnam. Given a 30-day leave before reporting to Oakland, California, before embarking to Vietnam, the three soldiers decide to go to New York City and take a stand against going to Vietnam.

Panel 7: A drawing of Dennis Mora talking to a group of people with a poster taped to a wall with the words “Vets for Peace.” Mid-June, 1966. Mora contacted Vets for Peace and the Fifth Avenue Parade Committee, a New York City antiwar group, and asked for their support in helping the three soldiers in their refusal. The Parade Committee provided them a lawyer, held a national press conference about their decision, mobilized a massive civilian movement to support their decision, and directed them to report to Oakland on July 13 as scheduled but to refuse to embark.

Panel 8: A drawing of the three soldiers standing below a blue banner with the words “Fifth Avenue Parade Committee Press Conference.” On June 30, 1966, at the New York Community Church, members of the Parade Committee, the three GIs, and their families held a national press conference: “We have decided to take a stand against this war, which we consider immoral, illegal, and unjust.”

Panel 9: A drawing of two soldiers talking to the parents of David Samas. The army’s reaction to the press conference was to divide the three soldiers. The army contacted Samas’s parents telling them that their son was being used as a tool for the communists by the other two soldiers and the Parade Committee. Concerned, they sent Samas a telegram to call home immediately. The army then offered Samas a deal: “They had told my father that if I would retract my statement and withdraw completely from the civil action now in progress that I would receive a discharge from the army and no serious repercussions would result.” The parents decide to back their son in his commitment.

Panel 10: A drawing of a policeman harassing the three soldiers. In New York, the three GIs were followed and intimidated by various plain clothes policeman and federal officers. Parade Committee condemned

the harassment and filed an injunction in federal court against the army in its attempt to ship the three GIs to Vietnam on grounds that the war was immoral and illegal.

Panel 11: A drawing of the New York Community Church. On the evening of July 7, 1966, 800 antiwar activists gathered at the New York Community Church to hear the three GIs tell their story.

Panel 12: A drawing of the three soldiers being shoved into the back seat of a car. The three GIs, on their way to the church, were abducted by federal agents and spirited away to a stockade at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Panel 13: A drawing of people with protest signs in front of the New York Community Church. The crowd at the New York Community Church learned of the abduction of the three soldiers. The antiwar meeting proceeded at the church, and later the crowd marched to Times Square to protest the arrests.

Panel 14: A drawing of David Mora's wife with a "Free the Fort Hood Three" protest sign in front of an army military policeman on July 9, 1966. The Parade Committee took several busloads of demonstrators to Fort Dix to demonstrate on behalf of the three prisoners. Military police chased them off the base. That was the first large major demonstration at a military base.

Panel 15: A drawing of the three soldiers behind jail bars. The three GIs were court-martialed for disobeying an order, convicted, and sentenced to two years in prison.

Panel 16: A drawing of a number of anti-

war protest signs with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. The Defense Committee, an antiwar organization based in San Francisco, organized a demonstration and a widespread publicity campaign to protest the convictions. During three days in August, over 10,000 people demonstrated in San Francisco in behalf of Fort Hood Three. The Three did not falter in their convictions, and after their release from prison, they were active supporters of the antiwar movement.

Panel 17: A drawing of the faces of the three soldiers with large blue letters below them saying "PEACE."

Panel 18: The End.

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