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# A Politics of Empathy: Johnny Cash, the Vietnam War, and the ‘Walking Contradiction’ Myth Dismantled

Michael Stewart Foley

*In the years since Johnny Cash’s death in 2003, popular and scholarly writing has persisted in framing Cash’s politics as contradictory—thus seeming to support Kris Kristofferson’s line, often assumed to be about Cash: a “walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction.” This essay argues that, although Cash may have seemed conflicted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his political views on Native Americans, prison reform, and the Vietnam War, especially, were remarkably consistent in that they were based not on ideological views as much as on emotion, instinct, and an ability to relate to familial suffering. As a political artist, Cash practiced an uncommon public politics of empathy that appealed to a diverse audience.*

In a letter dated 2 February 1970, President Richard Nixon wrote to Johnny Cash to thank him for saying on his network television show that he and the Cash family stood with the Nixon administration in what the President described as “our pursuit of peace in Vietnam.” Cash’s “confidence and understanding,” the President wrote, “means a great deal to me, and I want you to know how much I appreciate the good will and patriotic spirit which prompted your message.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps seeing in Cash an influential show business ally, Nixon soon brought the *Johnny Cash Show* to the White House to perform for 300 guests.

On that night, 17 April 1970, however, the President, sitting in the front row, could have been forgiven for thinking that Cash signaled mixed messages on the war. Part way through the show, Cash introduced an as yet unreleased song, “*What is Truth?*,” which he said grew out of a poem he had written to the youth of America. In one verse, Cash sang (in an obvious reference to the Vietnam War) about a 3-year-old boy asking “Daddy, what is war?” and when the father replies that it’s “when people fight and die,” the “little boy of 3 says, Daddy, why?” In the next verse, Cash described a 17-year-old in Sunday school, facing the prospect of going to war in another year when “it may be his turn to lay his life down.” “Can you blame the voice of youth for asking: ‘What is truth?’”

Cash asked. We have no record of how the President reacted to this song about young people questioning their elders (it was just a few weeks before Nixon would, himself, describe the protesters who shut down college campuses all over the country in response to the Cambodian incursion as “bums”), but the audience applauded vigorously. Moments later, Cash paused to tell the guests “I’ve pledged to stand behind our President on his policies on Vietnam . . . and to those who won’t stand behind him, get out of my way so I can stand behind him.” But in a segue to the old hymn “Peace in the Valley,” Cash then looked directly at the President, sitting ten feet away, and said “We pray, Mr. President, that you can end this war in Vietnam sooner than you hope or think it can be done, and we hope and pray that our boys will be back home.” If this was “support” for Nixon, it was not unqualified.

Dating from even before the White House concert took place, fans, journalists, commentators, and scholars have argued over Johnny Cash’s relationship with Richard Nixon and what it said about Cash’s politics. Most of the press coverage leading up to the event focused on a minor controversy in which Nixon supposedly had asked in advance for Cash to perform Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” (1969) and Guy Drake’s “Welfare Cadillac” [*sic*] (1969)—two conservative favorites. Cash refused to play either song (neither of which was part of his repertoire), and some reporters gloried in making it appear that Cash had taken a principled stand against Nixon.<sup>2</sup> Earlier in the day, following a rehearsal, a reporter asked Cash if he really supported the President on Vietnam (at that moment, Nixon’s public approval ratings on Vietnam were dropping steadily, even before the Cambodia invasion). Cash responded by saying “I consider myself a dove. I don’t believe in war,” but again asked “who’s gonna get us out of Vietnam faster” than the President?<sup>3</sup>

In the course of one day at the White House, therefore, Cash had managed to declare himself both a “dove” opposed to the war and a supporter of the President who, in his second year in office, seemed no closer to ending the war than he was at his inauguration. In fact, Nixon had secretly expanded the air war into Cambodia more than a year earlier, and two weeks after Cash’s White House appearance, sent ground troops into that country. Cash apparently saw nothing inconsistent in both opposing the war and supporting the man who presided over it (and he certainly did not hesitate to accept the White House invitation to perform, a rare opportunity for a country music artist). But, as political scientist Robert Levine asserted in 1971, such inconsistencies were common among Americans at the time. “Voters and citizens are individuals, holding views that *they* believe to be consistent and changing their views along lines they believe to be consistent, even though political theorists may not agree” (571).

Still, this episode at the White House is often cited in both popular and scholarly writing as validation of Kris Kristofferson’s famous line, often assumed to be about Cash: a “walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction.”<sup>4</sup> Although scholars paid little attention to Cash prior to his death in 2003, in recent years, he has not only been the subject of several new biographies and a major motion picture, but his apparently contradictory and paradoxical personae are now the subject of serious

academic inquiry.<sup>5</sup> For Leigh Edwards, “there was no single Cash” (1–2). He “embodied paradoxical or contradictory images” and was “always multiple, changing, inconsistent.” More than that, Cash’s much vaunted image as “authentic” derived from these contradictory qualities. Although Edwards laments the way Cash is, in public memory, “obsessively” described as a contradiction and criticizes the way this description “fetishizes Cash for being a paradox,” she argues that Cash’s image and persona “illuminate key foundational contradictions in the history of American thought, particularly through his fraught constructions of a Southern white working-class masculinity.” Jonathan Silverman offers an alternative interpretation by analyzing key moments in Cash’s career when he made decisions, often primarily “on the basis of how audiences might receive them” (4). He calls Cash’s ambiguous stand on the Vietnam War a “non-choice” (31), one that would both “seem real and satisfy his multiple audiences” (132–33). In the meantime, other scholars agree with [Tony Tost](#) that “the Cash-as-contradiction theme has become so pervasive as to become nearly pointless” (29). Philosophers [Mike Lavaque-Manty](#) and [Robert Mickey](#) argue that Cash’s apparent political inconsistencies did not matter to Cash and imply that they should not matter to us. “We might need to explain away,” Cash’s political inconsistencies, “but Cash doesn’t” (70). More than that, as [Bill C. Malone](#) (211) and [George H. Lewis](#) (208–20) have suggested, political inconsistency is endemic in country music. We should not be surprised, therefore, if Cash seemed to embody contradictory political positions.

If we have to hypothesize about Cash’s mode of engaging with political questions, we would do well to borrow insights from subcultures scholar [Dick Hebdige](#) and philosopher [Judith Butler](#). In writing about those he calls “whips”—white working poor protestants—Hebdige has identified a “disposition toward revelation and strategic concealment” and a subaltern “strategy for having your say while remaining out of range” (98–99, 116). In country music, which so effectively engages “the ordinary cycles of trauma that afflict everyday life,” one articulation strategy is to hold back “from direct utterance because it is too painful or hurtful” to oneself or others.<sup>6</sup> In this way, Cash’s songs and public statements are, to varying degrees, examples of both engaging and avoiding direct pain and suffering. The result may be a perceived “indeterminacy,” but, as Butler shows in describing “unintelligibility” in the case of a man whose sex had been “reassigned” at a young age, there is value—and maybe power—in clinging to the margins of intelligibility. Cash is only unintelligible to those who set or accept the parameters of normative political categories. “If he renders himself unintelligible to those who seek to know and capture his identity,” Butler writes of transsexual David Reimer, “this means that something about him is intelligible outside of the framework of accepted intelligibility” (72–74). The difficulty in discerning Cash’s politics, then, is similar in that the framework of accepted political intelligibility has, so far, been applied to his work only in terms of partisan politics and ideological world-view.

Although the scholars who have written about Johnny Cash have done more than any others to help us understand not only the man, but his public(s), and, at their

best, something broader about American culture, their examination of the many apparent contradictions one sees across 50 years of Cash's public life misses certain patterns that emerged in particular periods and run counter to the contradiction trope. This is true even in analyzing the late 1960s and early 1970s when Cash was at the height of his popularity and critics marveled at his supposed conflicting social and political tendencies. Indeed, this article argues that Cash exhibited a remarkable consistency in his views on the Vietnam War, protest against it, and presidential authority in wartime. By extension, I see Cash not as a paradox or an entertainer concerned only (or primarily) with building his audience, but as one of the nation's most prominent political artists, if an unconventional one.<sup>7</sup> To see Cash this way, I jettison the usual political categories employed by journalists and commentators at the time—and thus received and used in our own time by most scholars looking back on the period—because Cash's political interventions were based not on ideology or partisan political views; rather, Cash practiced what I call a politics of empathy, coming to his political stands based on his own personal experience, often guided by his own emotional and visceral response to the issues at hand. Therefore, instead of analyzing Cash's songs, public statements (to the press, from the stage), and television show by looking for evidence of him as left or right, liberal, conservative, or radical, hawk or dove, I use several lenses to see the "walking contradiction" myth unravel. Although I am an historian and base some of my analysis on traditional archival research, my method is interdisciplinary, informed by the relatively recent "emotional turn" in social movement studies,<sup>8</sup> as well as studies on "feeling" and "relating" in country music, and on music as politics in political science. In taking this approach, I also build on Malone's and Edwards's work connecting country music, and Cash's image, to working-class culture and working-class masculinity.

This essay therefore lays to rest debates about Cash's politics in the Vietnam War era while also arguing that in unpacking his views on war and protest we may better understand the way most Americans experienced the home-front politics of the time. Cash's defiance of ideological categories and his insistence on weighing in on the war based on his own experience and emotional response only added to his appeal for a rapidly growing audience. For the millions of Americans buying his records and tuning in to his weekly television show, Cash's apparently conflicted stand on the war resonated with their own internal conversations about the war and what it was doing to the country. They, too, viewed the war through the keyholes of family, home, and community—familiar territory for country music artists like Johnny Cash.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cash and His Audience(s)**

It is worth returning to the White House to start because there, in his introduction to "What is Truth?," Cash gave hints of how he related to his audiences. "In order to say something to somebody that might be meaningful, you gotta kinda get 'em on your side," he mused. "So I had these words to a poem that I wrote to the youth of America . . . it's on their side, which was the way I was feeling at the time. Maybe I was

just trying to be a kid again” (Cash, *Bootleg Vol. III*). As ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox describes in his study of a working-class Texas town, “feeling” and “relating” is a two-way street between country music artist and fans that turns on story and emotion (157–58). As we will see, Cash had a feeling for the political songs he sang because he had experienced forms of familial pain and suffering that helped him relate to his listeners and helped his listeners to identify with him. He reflected in his lyrics and public statements what George H. Lewis calls “the core of suffering and care” that bound his audience together (196).<sup>10</sup>

By the time Cash graced the White House stage, that audience was immense. In 1969 alone, Cash sold 6 million records, accounting for one out of every five records sold in the United States that year (Cooper). Both of his recent prison albums, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* (1968) and *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* (1969), were still selling 60,000 copies a week at the end of 1969. In October, *The Nashville Banner* quoted a Columbia Records executive who crowed that Cash was outselling even the Beatles (Lewry 75; *Johnny Cash: The Man in Black* video). Clearly, something in Cash’s records, even as it competed with rock and roll’s massive consumer base, spoke to millions of Americans and helped position him as a social and political spokesman. *Life* guessed that young people liked him “because he has the ring of authenticity and supports social causes,” while he appealed to those over 30 because he sounded “a note of sanity in a mixed-up musical world—they can tap their feet and understand his words” (Corliss 62; “Hard Times”).

What is most important, however, is to realize that Cash’s sudden popularity came in this critical period of the war’s history—from 1968 to 1971—not because of his music so much as his public persona. For almost ten years, Cash—like his Sun Records peers Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins—produced few hit records; his popularity soared in response to the two prison records and his television show, not because of new hit songs, but primarily in response to Cash’s *live* presentation of his old repertoire. For the audience, the key difference was the exposure to the *man*—whether on record, television, or film—because, other than “A Boy Named Sue” (1969), Cash continued to give his audience roughly the same musical program he had been doing for years.<sup>11</sup>

From 1969 to 1973, the peak period of Cash’s popularity, stories of the singer’s life appeared in seemingly every medium: in newspapers (Dearmore), magazines (Wren, “Restless Ballad”), five different pulp biographies (Carpozi; Conn; Govoni; Hudson; Wren, *Winners*), and a widely viewed documentary film—*Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music* (1969)—which aired not only in theaters but on public television. In addition, and most important, his weekly network television program, *The Johnny Cash Show*, broadcast on ABC from Nashville’s Ryman Auditorium, brought the man himself, a living folk icon, into American homes over 56 episodes from 1969 to 1971. And members of Cash’s diverse audience saw in him a man who stated plainly his views on pressing social and political questions. Cash’s own claim that he did not “go for political stuff” was nonsense, and his audience knew it. Politics was part of his public persona.

## Cash's Public Politics

By the time Cash played the White House, he had for years promoted not only prison reform but Native American rights, and he repeatedly weighed in on Vietnam. In January 1969, Cash took June Carter, the Tennessee Three, and Carl Perkins to Long Binh Air Force Base outside Saigon to perform for GIs. At times, the troupe played ten shows a day to servicemen audiences large and small; at the smallest, he and Carl Perkins moved through the Quonset huts of wounded GIs, bed by bed, singing themselves into exhaustion (Linderman 154; *Bootleg Vol. III*). As he would later tell the story, both from the stage and in “Singin’ in Vietnam Talkin’ Blues” (1971), seeing the young soldiers coming into the hospital wards had a powerful effect on him. Cash returned from Vietnam angry—at both the war and those protesting against it. On the surface, his public statements often seemed inconsistent. When one writer asked him if he supported the war, Cash responded, “I support our government’s foreign policy . . . I don’t know that much about the war.” He then went on to describe the experience of seeing the wounded come in on helicopters, and, he said, that “makes you a little mad about some of these folks back home” (Hemphill 100). Although he sometimes joked that he spent 20 years in the Air Force from 1950 to 1954, he also made the point on several occasions that he thought “everybody should serve their time” in the military. “I did,” he told an interviewer. “It’s not up to every man to decide when it’s time to go defend our country. We elect men to decide that for us” (Dearmore 42). Cash’s father, Ray Cash, had served with General Pershing in 1916, as American forces chased Pancho Villa across the border, and he also served in the First World War. For Johnny, who joined the Air Force just a few weeks after the Korean War broke out, it seems likely that he did so as much to avoid being drafted into the Army as anything. He later admitted that he had his own fears about combat when he joined the service at age 20. “I didn’t want to kill,” he said. “I guess I was really a conscientious objector. But I wouldn’t have refused to go if I’d been called to” (Wren, *Winners* 77). Ultimately, fans understood that Cash men served when their country called.

Cash’s statements on military service made him appear hawkish, but he later qualified his support for the administration’s policy. “I said on TV that I felt safe in following President Nixon,” he told *Newsweek*. But, he said, he did so while seeking to “remind our leaders that we must bring the boys back home. Let’s do it faster than they said they can—if that’s at all possible” (“Johnny on the Spot” 84–85). These comments came in 1969, as Nixon had announced the first troop withdrawals and his plan to “Vietnamize” the war by gradually turning over the fighting of the ground war to South Vietnamese troops. Cash, perhaps encouraged by these signs of disengagement, based his support of the President on the assumption that Nixon would soon end America’s presence in Vietnam. In addition, as one biographer noted, Cash also “shared the workingman’s awe of elected authority” (Wren, *Winners* 14). Cash himself later said, “I think the dignity of the office of the President of the United States should be maintained no matter who is our President. He is our President, and we the people have elected him whether you or I voted for him or not” (McCabe and Killion 137–38).

From the stage of Madison Square Garden, Cash spoke in terms that some found cryptic but that clearly resonated with his vast audience. There, during a concert on 5 December 1969—one month after Nixon chastised a “vocal minority” for recent protests against the war and claimed that a “great silent majority” of Americans supported his war policies, and in the same week that *Life* published photographs of the My Lai massacre—Cash described himself, to the loudest ovation of the night, as a “dove with claws.” This line is at the center of Jonathan Silverman’s analysis of Cash’s stand on Vietnam as a “non-choice.” Silverman argues that Cash was “hyperaware of his audiences” in this period of 1969–71, and that the “dove with claws” remark showed “a man likely worried about alienating his primary country music audience but also willing to break with the rank-and-file patriotism and war support of most country musicians.”<sup>12</sup> But there is no evidence to suggest that this was somehow a calculated stand on Cash’s part, aimed at holding together his diverse audience (nor is there any evidence that the country music audience was any less conflicted about the war than the rest of the country).<sup>13</sup> If that *was* his overriding concern, it would have been easy enough to quietly go to Vietnam to play for the GIs and simply not comment on the subject from the stage or through the television show.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Leigh Edwards cautions that we “must resist the temptation to force” Cash into “an easy resolution” of “the tension between social protester and government supporter” (58). As we will see, however, for Cash, there was no tension. Only those who seek to define others as “hawk” or “dove” detect tension where there is not any. Johnny Cash experienced the war, like so many Americans, on a more deeply visceral level.

Indeed, a closer examination of Cash’s politics—on the topics of Native Americans, prison reform, and the Vietnam War—reveals that he fashioned his political interventions primarily by identifying with the pain and suffering experienced by his subjects as working-class men and families. Edwards is particularly insightful in arguing that “Cash established a heroic working-class masculinity and then explores the uncertainty in that identity” (12). Cash’s songs, she notes, “include a number of different masculinities,” including a “working-class manhood of pride, hard work, and functioning as the male head of the household supported by the ‘love of a good woman’; a residual artisan manhood; manhood defined through war and soldiering; heroic frontier masculinity; and a working-class masculinity that celebrates women as laborers alongside men” (71). But I would add to these a fatherly and brotherly masculinity, too, one that endures but also expresses the pain of poverty, hard luck, and the senseless death of the young. Relating as a father or brother to the despair and acute suffering of the poor and servicemen’s families drove Cash in conceiving a public politics of empathy.

Cash’s first and most obviously political stand came on behalf of Native Americans with the recording, in 1965, of the album *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian*. Every composition on the record chronicles the plight of Native Americans. Its best-known song, “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” tells the story of a Pima Indian who had joined the Marines during World War II, helped raise the flag on Iwo Jima, only to return to the marginalized life of the reservation where he died an alcoholic. Scholars have

generally paid little attention to *Bitter Tears*, and, where they have, they usually use it either to discuss Cash confronting country radio stations for not giving it enough airplay or Cash's appropriation of Indian identity.<sup>15</sup> But what has largely gone unnoticed is that Cash relates to Native Americans on the record from the perspective of someone who has known rural poverty, but who, unlike the Pima Indians, received government help. Indeed, Cash's identification with the New Deal and the story of his family's desperate 1935 migration from Kingsland, in southern Arkansas, to Dyess, north of Memphis, under the aegis of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration's Colonization Project Number One was well known to his public. One biographer quoted Cash's father, Ray Cash, as he described the thrill of moving into a brand new, five-room house in the middle of the Arkansas wilderness: "It gave our family a new start . . . we felt ourselves equal with everybody" (Wren, *Winners* 40).

As a result, when Johnny later described recording "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," he recalled that he "had such a feeling for Ira Hayes." Both Cash and Hayes had grown up poor, at the mercy of larger forces—the song describes hunger and the land growing only "crops of weeds"—and both had served their country. Moreover, Cash had been to reservations and seen "the poverty and had a feeling for it" (Turner 107). In *Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music*, the filmmakers captured Cash performing at the St. Francis Indian Mission in South Dakota to help raise money to build a school (he had turned down a \$10,000 appearance in Britain to be there for free). "It surprised me that they needed somebody like me to come in and help them raise money to build a school," he said to a reporter afterward. He puzzled over the lack of government attention to the reservations. "I wonder where in the hell's the federal aid, the state aid, where's the funds the people's supposed to have for things like this?" Another Peter La Farge song from *Bitter Tears*, "As Long as the Grass Shall Grow," is overtly political in its critique of the federal government for, in the 1960s, breaking a treaty signed by the Seneca and George Washington deeding land on the Pennsylvania-New York border. The Kinzua Dam flooded the land deeded to the Seneca for "as long as the grass shall grow, as long as the sun shall shine," making them victims of "progress" and "broken promises." The point is to stress how the government not only did not help the Seneca, but how it further marginalized them and drove them deeper into poverty and desolation.<sup>16</sup>

On four occasions on *The Johnny Cash Show*, Cash brought the history of Native American suffering into American homes via his "Ride This Train" segment. In one episode, Cash appealed directly to his viewers by speaking into the camera, lamenting that "our ancestors" had pushed Indians "back little by little to a state of poverty, grief, and hopelessness." This did not make Cash a radical. It simply reflected his own identification with the Indians' rotten lot and his belief that, like his family when it was down and out, they deserved some help.<sup>17</sup>

Given Cash's outspoken stand for Native American rights, some wondered why, as a Southerner interested in equality, he had not joined the struggle for black equality. Cash claimed wryly that no one had ever asked him, and that he had not written a civil rights song only because the inspiration had not yet come to him. "But I am

sympathetic to colored people and their problems,” he concluded. “And there are a lot of things about the Southern whites that I’m ashamed of” (Hudson 89). The difference, though he did not say as much, was that Cash had not experienced such discrimination or anything like the violence that accompanied Southern racism. And for reasons unknown, unlike with Native Americans, he did not seem to see in black poverty something with which he could identify. That such a question would even be asked of Cash, however, indicates the degree to which he had entered American consciousness as an artist with a social and political conscience—and the degree to which his advocacy on behalf of Native Americans was seen as consistent with fighting for civil rights.

On the other hand, Cash had performed for audiences of black and white prisoners for more than ten years, relating to them not only as a man who had been arrested and thrown in jail seven times (Edwards 20), but as a working-class Southerner. In the handwritten liner notes to the *At Folsom Prison* album, Cash draws the reader into the prison experience. “The culture of a thousand years is shattered with the clanging of the cell door behind you,” he starts before acknowledging that he spoke from experience. “I have been behind bars a few times,” he wrote to his listeners. “Each time, I felt the same feeling of kinship with my fellow prisoners.” Merle Haggard recalled the impact of Cash’s 1958 performance at San Quentin—where Haggard was then serving time—as something that made all of the prisoners, regardless of race, Cash fans. “There was a connection there, an identification,” Haggard remembered. “This was somebody singing a song about your personal life” (Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom* 41). By one estimate, 30 per cent of the prisoners in the audience for Cash’s San Quentin recording were African American (Silverman, 96). In fact, Cash had been quietly playing at prisons, mostly in the sunbelt, since 1957, and had recorded a number of songs set in prison, including “Folsom Prison Blues” (1955), “I Got Stripes” (1959), “Doin’ My Time” (1957), “Send a Picture of Mother” (1962), “The Wall” (1964), “25 Minutes to Go” (1965), “Austin Prison” (1966), and “Joe Bean” (1966). As one reviewer wrote, “Johnny Cash sings these songs with the deep baritone conviction of someone who has grown up believing he is one of the people that these songs are about.”<sup>18</sup>

In another example of trying, as he said at the White House, to get listeners on his side so he could say something meaningful to them, Cash joked to the San Quentin prisoners in 1969 that “June said she knew there’d be some people from the South here tonight—because some of you guys get out here in California, and the damn place is so crazy, you just gotta get something to eat some way, don’t you?” Later in the San Quentin performance, Cash introduced his song, “Starkville City Jail” by telling the story of his own arrest in Starkville, Mississippi, for picking flowers late one night after a show. The police kept him overnight and fined him \$36. “You can’t hardly win, can you?” he said to his prison audience. “There’s no telling what they’d do if you pulled an apple or something.” This kind of good-natured identification with the San Quentin prisoners, in turn, set up the more serious—and politically tinged—experience of Cash’s new song, “San Quentin.” “I tried to put myself in your place,” he

told the prisoners, “and I believe this is the way that I would feel about San Quentin.” It begins with the line, “San Quentin, you’ve been living hell to me/you’ve blistered me since 1963.” He then doubts, in several lines, that the institution has any positive effect, stating “I’ll walk out a wiser weaker man/Mr. Congressman, you can’t understand”; “Do you think I’ll be different when you’re through?”; and, in the clearest example of siding with the prisoners, the final verse says, “San Quentin, may you rot and burn in hell! May your walls fall and may I live to tell/ may all the world forget you ever stood/ and may all the world regret you did no good.” It was a far more brazen performance than any of the songs he had performed at Folsom, with the prisoners hollering through nearly every line. As [Daniel Geary](#) notes, in bringing the perspective of prisoners to millions of listeners, “Cash’s records cut against the politics of law and order” that we associate with Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan in this period, effectively reporting that the prisoners were the truly “forgotten Americans.” For Cash, however, that kind of political act was not born out of any interest in advancing a particular ideology or partisan position; rather, as [John Hayes](#) has shown, Cash’s politics were informed by a Southern religious culture of the poor that recognized the “dignity of the lowly” (133).

By 1969, this affinity with prisoners had reporters routinely asking Cash about prison reform. “I don’t see anything good come out of a prison,” he told *Look* magazine. “You put them in like animals and tear the souls and guts out of them, and let them out worse than they went in” (Wren, “Restless Ballad” 74). When a Georgia prison offered Cash \$5,000 to play there, he said he would play the show for free if prison officials used the \$5,000 for the prisoners. As Tom Dearmore reported in the *New York Times*, when Cash gave a televised performance at Cummins Prison Farm in his home state of Arkansas, “the scene of barbaric practices in the recent past,” the singer challenged lawmakers sitting with the inmates on the prison ball field. “There’s a lot of things that need changin’, Mr. Legislator Man,” Cash said. “You say you’re trying to rehabilitate us, then show us you are.” He then announced that he had given \$5,000 to help build a chapel at the prison, and called on the “fat, rich Arkansas farmer” (who had replaced his people on the land) to contribute to the effort. Three weeks later, the Arkansas legislature passed a bill with additional prison allocations (Dearmore 54). Maybe more important, Cash used his television show to present examinations of prison life, a topic rarely discussed on network television ([Danker](#), “Country Music” 138–39). *Christian Century* soon credited Cash with raising prison reform as a political issue, and, in 1972, a Senate subcommittee invited Cash to Washington to testify on behalf of a prison reform bill. “If we make better men out of the men in prison, then we’ve got less crime on the streets, and my family and yours is safe when they come out,” Cash told two reporters following his testimony (McCabe and Killion 138–39; [Shockley and Freeman](#) 1157).

Cash’s identification with certain political questions eventually led to sustained political engagement with the Vietnam War and the division it caused at home. Unlike some of his public statements, which, as we have seen, have often been interpreted as contradictory, Cash’s treatment of war in his songwriting consistently identified with

the soldiers and the working-class families that sent their sons in disproportionate numbers to Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> As a working-class Southerner, a veteran, and a man who had experienced the tragic loss of his older brother as a child, Cash repeatedly returned to themes of pain and suffering during wartime in his songs.

Only serious fans who had bought his records since the late 1950s would have noticed that Cash recorded an antiwar song, “The Big Battle,” in 1961. The song did not do particularly well on the charts, and therefore received relatively little attention, but it anticipated Cash’s response to the Vietnam War (and, later, after his audience grew, he re-released it in 1972). As a young soldier talks with a commanding officer in the immediate wake of a battle, and naively believes “the battle is over,” the older man tells him that the big battle—the one waged in the memories of the loved ones of the dead—“has only begun”: “For every shot fired had an echo/ And every man killed wanted life/ There lies your friend, Jim McKinney/ Can you take the news to his wife?” The coming fight would not be a conventional battle of arms, the officer says. Rather, “The battle will rage in the bosom/Of mother and sweetheart and wife/Brother and sister and daughter/Will grieve for the rest of their lives.”

The expectation of grieving described in “The Big Battle” is essential to understanding Cash’s—and many other Americans’—stand on the Vietnam War. “I had no really firm conviction about the rightness or wrongness of the war,” he wrote in his 1997 autobiography. “My mind just wouldn’t approach it at that level when my heart hurt so badly.” For Cash and many of his fellow citizens, dead and wounded American boys overshadowed all other considerations (Cash, *Cash* 216–17). The Madison Square Garden concert at which Cash described the trip to Long Binh and labeled himself a “dove with claws” came, after all, just three weeks after protesters staged the “March against Death” by carrying the names of American GIs killed in Vietnam and depositing them in caskets in front of the White House. Here Cash separated himself from certain subsets of the antiwar movement that mobilized at least as much out of concern for the suffering of Vietnamese civilians as for the loss of American GIs (Hall; Mollin; Peters; Polner and O’Grady; Swerdlow). Indeed, among the thousands of letters that pediatrician and peace activist Dr Benjamin Spock received during the war, many urged support of the troops by bringing them home alive, in one piece; some even criticized Spock and others for failing to privilege that message over the killing of Vietnamese civilians.<sup>20</sup>

Looking back now, it is easier to see that Cash’s stand on Vietnam sprang from personal experience. He wrote movingly in the years after the war, for example, of the effect that the combat death of country singer Jan Howard’s son, Jimmy, had on him. “I’ll never forget standing with our friend Jan Howard at the funeral of her son and the terrible feeling that came over me as they folded up the flag that had been draped over the coffin and handed it to her,” he wrote. “I loved that boy; I’d seen him grow from a baby. It just tore me to pieces to see him and other boys all around us, just eighteen, going off to fight those other boys in Southeast Asia” (Cash, *Cash* 216–17, *Man in Black* 172). Just weeks before Jimmy Howard died in battle, his mother had released a single, “My Son,” that both lamented how quickly he had been called to duty and

prayed for his safe return. Howard's loss of her son provided a real-life connection to Cash's own instincts first described in "The Big Battle." Just as Cash stressed the grief of family during wartime in that song, his own grief, and especially that of his friend, fueled his gut response to the Vietnam War.<sup>21</sup>

The *Cash Show's* trip to Vietnam in January 1969 took place not long after Jimmy Howard's funeral and, here again, Cash seemed to relate to the soldiers not only as a former serviceman, himself, but as a father or brother. He described seeing the wounded come in on helicopters, "torn and bloody and filthy, often reeking of napalm, sometimes burned almost beyond recognition as human beings . . . I almost couldn't stand it" (Cash, *Cash* 217). He and June Carter made a point of writing down names and addresses of some of the wounded, and, when they made it to Okinawa, Carter called the families. "The hardest thing for me in Vietnam wasn't seeing the wounded and dead," Cash stated. "It was watching the big transport jets come in, bringing loads of fresh new boys for the war" (Cash, *Cash* 218). Later, for the *Legend* box set release, he wrote, "I got sick of what was happening to our boys" (*Liner notes, Legend* 85). Surely, he could imagine Jan Howard's son among the young faces of the wounded, but one suspects that each time he mentioned seeing "our boys brought back in helicopters with their guts spilling out" (Hemphill 100) he could not help but see his own brother, Jack, too. Cash's older brother by three years, Jack worked for extra money as a teenager in the 1940s by cutting fence posts; he died after being pulled by a post onto a table saw, cutting him from sternum to groin. Cash had seen the bloody clothes his brother wore the day the table saw cut him open, and he lived with his own grief and that of his parents, the grief that only a life cut much too short can bring. Indeed, Cash remembers his whole family returning to the fields the day after Jack's funeral, to chop cotton. "I watched as my mother fell to her knees and let her head drop onto her chest. My poor daddy came up to her and took her arm, but she brushed him away" (Cash, *Cash* 27). Years later, Cash's daughter, Rosanne, called Jack Cash's death the "most significant event" of her father's life. "He can't be read or understood out of the context of losing his brother," she said. "After that, he was driven by his grief" (*Gilmore* 182–83). There is no question that Jack Cash was on Johnny's mind in these years. He dedicated a 1970 book, *Songs of Johnny Cash*, "To My Brother, Jack D. Cash: We lost you one sad day in May 1944. Though the songs we sang are gone from the cotton fields I can hear the sound of your voice as they are sung far and wide. In loving memory, Your brother, J.R." Cash himself described the need to face one's pain. "There's no way around grief and loss," he said. "Sooner or later you just have to go into it." Over the years immediately following Jimmy Howard's death, Cash went into his grief over the war not only from the stage of his concert and television performances but in his recordings.

### Cash's Vietnam War Politics on Record and on Television

There is, obviously, a significant difference between weighing in on political issues in interviews and in comments issued between songs during a performance and

committing one's views to album recordings. Putting politics into lyrics was, for Cash, a means of putting himself on the record—both vinyl and historical. Unlike a comment on stage or in an interview, which can be disavowed or qualified (e.g. Cash later described his “dove with claws” as “stupid” and asked to be forgiven for using it), a statement made in a song's lyrics, recorded and copyrighted, is more definitive, there for perpetuity. Over the next three years, 1969–71, at the height of his career, Cash recorded four songs that spoke from the perspective of a man feeling and relating to the pain caused to American families by the Vietnam War.

In the summer of 1969, just as the first episodes of *The Johnny Cash Show* aired on ABC and at the same time *At San Quentin* hit Number 1 on the pop charts, Cash recorded the first songs for his next release, *Hello, I'm Johnny Cash* (1970)—an album that went to Number 1 on the country charts and Number 6 on the pop charts. One song on that record, “Route 1, Box 144,” gets no attention from scholars or pundits yet is probably the most accurate barometer of Cash's feelings on the Vietnam War. “His dying barely made the morning paper,” the song begins, “and they summed it up in twenty words or more: ‘Killed in action. Leaves wife and baby.’” In a spoken word segment, Cash describes how the “good boy” had grown up on a farm outside town, married his high school sweetheart, and settled on their own farm out on Route 1. He did not get in trouble with “the usual crew” downtown and, in fact, “with a baby on the way,” he joined the army. Not much later, news came that he had been killed and his body returned to Route 1, Box 144. “He never did great things to be remembered,” the song concludes. “He had never been away from home before/But you'd thought he was president or somethin' at Route 1, Box 144.” The lyrics do not mention the Vietnam War, but the song's subject is almost certainly inspired by Jimmy Howard, whom Cash similarly described in his first autobiography as a “a popular boy in school, a quiet boy at home, a ‘good boy.’” An earlier draft of the lyrics implied a critique of American indifference or ignorance of the costs of the war while simultaneously speaking to the universality of wartime loss and pain. As “a family keeps a death watch” at Route 1, Box 144, the first draft said, “Downtown the folks are sitting down to supper; the evening paper lies at the door/but few will notice someone's missing at Route 1, Box 144.” It concludes by comparing the “boy” killed in action to the “important people . . . known by everyone.” The boy killed in combat deserves equal attention, Cash suggests, because “everyone means something to somebody/And out there where the wreath is on the door, the World's most important person is missing/at Route 1, Box 144” (B. Miller 54–55).

Although “Route 1, Box 144” honors the sacrifice of an American soldier—without romanticizing or valorizing him after the fashion of Barry Sadler's “Ballad of the Green Berets” (1966)—the focus of the song is on the family's pain and the need to recognize each American's death, an impossible task, given the number of men killed and missing in action by the end of 1969. Moreover, the reference to “the World's most important person,” as important as “the president or something,” surely springs from Cash's feelings about his own brother, with whom he was so close. By contrast, the irreverence of Country Joe and the Fish singing about being “the first ones on your

block to have your boy come home in a box” in “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” (1967) would not have been funny to Cash or anyone who had experienced such familial trauma.

It is worth noting that other country artists plumbed similar themes. As early as 1966, [Loretta Lynn](#) sang “Dear Uncle Sam,” about needing her man more than the military did. The tension of patriotism—she loves her country, she says—and heartache—first of him “answering the call,” and then of getting the “I’m sorry to inform you” telegram—gets close to the pain that Cash describes in “Route 1, Box 144.” And the [Wilburn Brothers’](#) “Little Johnny from Down the Street” (1970) describes a more mischievous boy than Cash’s “good boy” but one who is still missed when he gets killed in action. Finally, rockabilly queen [Wanda Jackson’s](#) “Little Boy Soldier” describes bringing her young son to the train station to meet his father’s flag-draped casket.

Cash never performed “Route 1, Box 144” on his television show, but that may be because he used the show to debut two other more popular war-themed songs: “What is Truth?” (1970) and “Man in Black” (1971), both of which have a populist quality that producers would have seen as appealing to more viewers than the heart-wrenching tale at the center of “Route 1, Box 144.” Historian Bill C. Malone sees “What is Truth?” and “Man in Black” as representing a “rather vague brand of tolerance toward dissent” (240–41), but that is not how they were received at the time. [Ralph Gleason](#), writing in *Rolling Stone*, for example, called “What is Truth?” a “country & western ‘Times They Are a-Changin’.” Indeed, since Malone and others have described most country music that commented on the Vietnam War as more anti-protester than pro-war, Cash’s songs were notable for standing up for young Americans who might question their elders—particularly given his stated displeasure with protesters in the wake of his Long Binh trip ([Willman 141](#)). “What is Truth?” begins with an older man complaining about young people and longing for the “peaceful” days when he was a child. But Cash, the narrator, retorts “Well, man, could it be that the girls and boys are trying to be heard above your noise?” The key, though, is that line about the boy of 17 who might, a year later, have “to lay his life down” like Jimmy Howard or the good working-class boy of “Route 1, Box 144.” Given such stakes, Cash asks, “Can you blame the voice of youth for asking, ‘what is truth?’” The song ends with a note of inevitable change—that these young people will soon be the nation’s leaders—and an appeal to help “that voice of youth find what is truth.” (Interestingly, on the single, Cash sings “*you* better help that voice of youth find what is truth,” but at the White House he sang “*we* better help that voice of youth find what is truth” (emphasis added).)

For some fans, all the evidence anyone needs to prove that Cash was an outspoken advocate for the underdog and the downtrodden—and, therefore, stood with liberals or on the left—can be found in “The Man in Black”: “I wear the black for the poor and beaten down/living in the hopeless, hungry side of town/I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime/but is there because he is a victim of the time.” It is a fair enough assessment, but it is important to note that in 1971, almost a year after his

White House performance and the national turmoil over the Cambodia incursion and shootings at Kent State, Cash used the song's climactic verse to repeat his primary message about the war and remind the nation of the ongoing costs of a war seemingly without end: "I wear the black in mourning for the lives that could have been/each week we lose a hundred fine young men." More than that, when the album *Man in Black* came out, it included "Singin' in Vietnam Talkin' Blues," a folk coffeehouse-sounding narration of his January 1969 trip to Long Binh. The song describes performing for the GIs, seeing the dead and wounded, and Cash's and June Carter's "scary" experience of living with enemy shelling of the base, "night after night." In the last part of the song, Cash sums up: "We did our best to let 'em know that we care/for every last one of them that's over there/whether we belong over there or not/somebody over here loves 'em and needs 'em." Here, Cash makes clear that debating the rightness or wrongness of the war is secondary to honoring the troops and being aware of the human costs of the war. Thus, from "The Big Battle" to "Route 1, Box 144" to "What is Truth?" to "Man in Black" and to "Singin' in Vietnam Talkin' Blues," the focus on American boys dying and their families suffering—with a small dose of Cash as self-styled national conscience, reminding the nation of the cost, at the family level—persists. At the very end of "Singin' in Vietnam Talkin' Blues," Cash says that if he ever goes back to Vietnam, he hopes that "there's none of our boys there for me to sing for/I hope that war's over with/and they all come back home, to stay/in peace!" In performance, he often shouted that last line, "in peace!" as if to drive the point home.

In fact, we may plausibly extend this theme to Native Americans and prisoners, too, as in "The Ballad of Ira Hayes" and "Jacob Green" (1972) Cash's objective is again to get the listener to identify with an ordinary person, placed in terrible circumstances not wholly on their own, and who suffered and died for it. As we have seen, with "Ira Hayes," Cash identified with the working-class veteran and sought to remind Americans of both his heroism and his tragic—and unjust—end. In "Jacob Green," we meet a young drug offender who hangs himself in jail while awaiting trial. Based on a true story, it turns out Green had been mistreated by guards who stripped him and shaved his head. To make sure we understand the cost, the chorus warns us that "if you turn your head away/Somewhere in some dirty hole the scene will be rerun." In fact, "It could be someone that you love gets done like Jacob Green got done." The pain experienced by Jacob Green's family—and countless families of young men killed in Vietnam—could be yours, too, particularly "if you turn your head away."<sup>22</sup>

If Cash's lyrics and recordings were consistent in their clear identification with the suffering of American families touched directly by the Vietnam War, his television show was more measured. Cash mentioned the war explicitly only once from the stage of the Ryman Auditorium. He much more frequently engaged the questions of young people, not always in the most flattering ways, but more often than not in a manner designed to promote understanding between the different generations of his viewership. Five weeks before the White House concert, Cash poked fun at those young people positioned on the furthest margins of political culture. For the opening of the 11 March 1970 episode of the *Johnny Cash Show*, the Tennessee Three and Carl

Perkins appeared on stage dressed in exaggerated hippie costumes and joined Cash in performing the 1966 novelty song, “[The One on the Right is on the Left](#),” written by his longtime producer Jack Clement. The song belittles folk groups that mix politics with music and chronicles the ideological divisions that cause the band’s break-up. “Don’t go mixing politics with the folk songs of our land,” it commands. “Just work on harmony and diction/Play your banjo well/And if you have political convictions/Keep ’em to yourself.” A week later, Cash’s main guest, Merle Haggard, performed “Okie from Muskogee,” generally interpreted as an anti-protester song. But later in the same show, Cash himself seemed to rebut Haggard with his first performance of “What is Truth?” the song he described as a “plea to ask people again to listen to the voice of youth.”<sup>23</sup> Six months later, following [Arlo Guthrie’s](#) performance of “I Could Be Singing,” a song which mocked Vice President Spiro Agnew’s attacks on the antiwar movement, Cash seemed to reassure viewers in a time of political discord: In an extended introduction to the hymn, “Peace in the Valley,” he said: “You know, there’s still a lot of good things happening in this country. You can still see the old solid American way of life in action in a lot of places you go.” He described millions of Americans going to state and county fairs, bringing “their prized heifers, their homemade pies and cakes,” and “holding onto ideals and principles that this country was founded upon.” Indeed, “even with some of the things that might be wrong in this country and might need changing, America still stands tall and proud and free” (*Johnny Cash Show* 23 September 1970). Taken in isolation, comments like that made Cash sound like a classic Nixonian “forgotten American,” weary of endless social unrest, looking to remind the country of its enduring values and greatness. They also no doubt reflected network pressures to appeal to a mass audience ([Danker](#), “Country Music” 126, 143).

Although Cash seemed at times interested in giving equal time to both understanding and poking fun at youthful protest, he made clear his identification with young people in one of the last episodes of *The Johnny Cash Show*. Instead of filming at Ryman Auditorium, Cash went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Not only did he appear on a college campus—for many Americans, synonymous with protest—but he brought a slate of rising young stars to perform: James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt, [Tony Joe White](#), and Neil Young. Most important, Cash revealed that he wrote “Man in Black” in response to a Vanderbilt student’s question the week before, and debuted the song during this episode—even reading the lyrics from cue cards because he had finished the song only that day. When he sang “each week we lose a hundred fine young men,” the students erupted in applause—the largest ovation of the night—and left viewers with the sense that the students, as much as anyone, claimed Cash as their own.

At first glance, the Vanderbilt students appeared to hold little in common with Cash’s working-class farm-boy character in “Route 1, Box 144” (*Johnny Cash Show* 17 February 1971). By 1971, however, student deferments from the draft had been eliminated, and Nixon had introduced a random selection lottery.<sup>24</sup> Despite reductions in troop levels, there remained no end in sight in Vietnam; the Vanderbilt

students, therefore, continued to face the existential threat that Cash himself had known in 1950: of being called (or, if women, to know someone called) to serve and possibly die. In this way, Cash's Vanderbilt broadcast provided a vivid picture, in living color, of those he thought were entitled to question and even protest policies that affected their lives.

Johnny Cash was an uncommon political artist, engaging the politics of the Vietnam War primarily from his own experience as a working-class veteran and as a man who had suffered the acute pain of losing a brother, as well as the heartache of a dear friend's son dying in Vietnam. At the same time, Cash indicated more than once that he supported President Nixon's handling of the war, and, although he more often than not expressed support for young people challenging those with authority over their lives, he also tried to reassure his whole audience that such challenges were hardly a threat to America's greatness. For most observers in the early 1970s and for scholars since, Cash's contradictions or internal conflict on political questions only made him more authentic.<sup>25</sup> As Leigh Edwards notes, if Cash "is 'authentic' because he embodies competing tendencies," then he "does the cultural work of putting long-running sociopolitical incongruities in U.S. culture on the table, displaying ideological problems without resolving them" (7). But, as we have seen, Cash was not in any way ideological or partisan. He engaged politics on a gut level, based not on an overarching world-view, but on experience. He was authentic—and authentically masculine—precisely because he was *not* ideological and, more to the point, because he was plainly unconcerned about being unintelligible.

While one could interpret Cash's conflicted presentation of his politics outside the recording studio as a deliberate move to appear authentic and, therefore, to appeal to as many audiences as possible, there is no evidence to support such a claim. Instead, what this analysis of Cash's interventions on Native American, prisoner, and especially Vietnam War politics shows is that, although Cash may not fit the usual hawk/dove, liberal/conservative binaries, he was a deeply absorbed political artist. And his politics of empathy—born of experience and practiced through "relating" to his subjects—widen our field of what qualifies as intelligible political engagement.

## Notes

- [1] Richard M. Nixon, letter to Johnny Cash, 2 Feb. 1970, on display at Sotheby's auction of the Johnny and June Carter Cash Estate, New York City, Aug.–Sept. 2004.
- [2] A partial recording of the White House concert was released on *Bootleg Vol. III*; Wren reports that Cash told reporters at the White House that "Welfare Cadillac" was "not the kind of song I'd like to do" (Wren, *Winners* 11). In a 1975 interview, Cash said he didn't want to sing "Okie from Muskogee" because it was Merle Haggard's song, and that he didn't want to perform "Welfare Cadillac," which he'd heard once and did not like (Linderman 154–55); finally, in Cash's 1997 autobiography, he's more vague. He claims the song request came in too late, and he just wasn't prepared to sing them, though he implies that, if they had come in on time, he might have refused them anyway (Cash, *Cash* 211–12). Haggard later sang "Okie from Muskogee" when he performed at the Nixon White House (Nixon 539).

- [3] Wren, *Winners* 11, 16; Robertson 33. In January 1970, Nixon had a 65 per cent approval rating on Vietnam; by 12 April, it was 48 per cent (Gallup 2236, 2244).
- [4] Kris Kristoffersen, "The Pilgrim, Chapter 33," (1970). Although Cash himself always seemed to think the song was written about him, Kristoffersen names ten people about whom the song was written in his introduction to the recording on the *Silver Tongued Devil and I* record: Chris Gantry, Dennis Hopper, Johnny Cash, Norman Norbert, Funky Donnie Fritts, Billy Swan, Bobby Neuwirth, Jerry Jeff Walker, Paul Siebel, and Ramblin' Jack Elliott.
- [5] To the extent that Cash had been studied before his death, the scope had been rather narrow: Danker, "Repertory and Style," "Country Music"; Ortega; Tucker. In addition, see useful segments on Cash in Hemphill 93–102, 232–38; and Dawidoff 169–99. Recent biographies include Clapp; S. Miller; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash*; Thomson; Turner.
- [6] Dick Hebdige, Lecture to UCLA Ethnomusicology Department, Apr. 1999 (my thanks to Dick Hebdige for sharing these notes).
- [7] For more on music, art, and literature as part of the public sphere in which political issues are discussed and debated, see Habermas; Fraser. For a good overview of the wider literature on music and politics, see Street, Hague, and Savigny 269–285; and Street, *Music and Politics*.
- [8] See, for example, Jasper 397–424; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, "Emotional Dimensions"; Gould.
- [9] Buckley long ago identified "Home and Family" as one of eight basic themes of country music (200).
- [10] On "feeling" and "relating," see also Part VI, "Reasons for Rhymers: Sensibility, Emotion and Country Values," in Lewis, *All that Glitters* 196–238.
- [11] Between 1959 and 1968, Cash had only two bona fide hits: "Ring of Fire" (1963) and "Jackson" (1967). Only two albums, both compilations of previously released material, went gold: *Ring of Fire* (1963) and *I Walk the Line* (1964), the latter of which took three years.
- [12] The entire performance is captured on *Johnny Cash at Madison Square Garden*; Silverman concedes that "one cannot know" whether the "dove with claws" line "was a strategy to appeal to many audiences," and that analyzing Cash's motives "requires speculation" (132–34).
- [13] I have not found a single quote, from any document or interview attributed to Cash, his managers Saul Holiff and Lou Robin, or anyone at Columbia Records indicating that Cash's alleged straddling on the question of the Vietnam War had anything to do with his concern about audience. On the country music audience and the war, a September 1970 poll showed 55 per cent support for withdrawing from Vietnam by the end of 1971; broken down by region, the country music strongholds of the Midwest and South showed 56 per cent and 49 per cent support, respectively—hardly a significant difference from national attitudes (Gallup 2266–67).
- [14] Indeed, for a performer who was allegedly so single minded about keeping his diverse audience, he had a funny way of showing it. On television, especially, Cash seemed willing to experiment—and fail publicly—in a way that few artists could match. His public declaration of his faith and, at times, privileging gospel music—moves that his producers blamed for declining ratings—were not the decisions of an artist concerned only with satisfying his audience. On the contrary, he seemed quite willing to lose some of his audience.
- [15] When radio stations did not play it enough, Cash responded with a full-page in *Billboard* magazine, criticizing programmers for their lack of guts. Cash's role in the controversy has generally been seen as evidence of his commitment to the folk music revival, its younger audience, and "of the power of music to help rouse a new social movement." See Silverman (80–85) and D'Ambrosio. On Cash appropriating Indian identity, see Edwards (107–09); on Southerners claiming Indian ancestry, see Martin (129–47) and Deloria.
- [16] *The Johnny Cash Show*, 13 May 1970, on *Best of the Johnny Cash Show*, DVD.
- [17] *The Johnny Cash Show*, 6 May 1970; see also Danker ("Country Music" 139–40).
- [18] Alfred Aronowitz, review of *At Folsom Prison* in *Life* magazine (qtd in Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, 43).
- [19] On how the Vietnam era draft made Vietnam a "working-class war," see Appy; Baskir and Strauss; Davis and Dolbear. For a longer view of the Selective Service, see Flynn.

- [20] See [Foley](#) (64–65, 141–42, 194, 241); in particular, letters 43, 105, 152, and 201 express sentiment similar to Cash. Letter 201 expresses a heart ache that sounds much like Cash’s.
- [21] Jan Howard later appeared as a guest, with Bill Anderson, on *The Johnny Cash Show*, 13 Jan. 1971.
- [22] Edwards (94) sees this song as part of his prison reform oeuvre, emphasizing the abuses that seem ingrained in the prison system. I agree, but my point here is to make the connection with the familial suffering theme present in his Native American and Vietnam-related songs.
- [23] Hudson (69); I have not viewed the 18 Mar. 1970 episode of *The Johnny Cash Show*, so it is impossible to describe Cash’s presentation of the song or the crowd’s response. That the song was performed on that show is recorded by [Lewry](#) (79); Robertson (33).
- [24] On the draft lottery, see Flynn (243).
- [25] The literature on country music and authenticity is vast and cannot be done justice in this article. See, for example, [Jensen](#); on Cash and authenticity, see Edwards (27–33, 43–45, 58–59); Silverman (236–39; and esp. 19–23).

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