The Vietnam Era Antiwar Movement

A merica's military escalation in Vietnam during 1965 generated a rapid and organized public opposition. As the war dragged on, this dissent grew dramatically, becoming one of the largest social movements in the nation's history. Ultimately as part of a larger period of unrest, antiwar forces contributed to a general questioning of America's direction and values (1).

The Vietnam Era antiwar movement emerged from existing peace and social justice organizations involved in civil rights or antinuclear activities. Mass demonstrations typically organized by broad coalitions of national and local groups attracted the greatest publicity, but most antiwar efforts took place at the local level. Political liberals represented the movement's largest constituency, initially through groups like the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), and Women Strike for Peace (WSP). Their motives for opposing the war varied, but liberals were generally proud of America's record in advancing human rights and retained cold war suspicions of the Soviet Union. They believed, however, that Vietnam diverted resources from more important foreign interests and objected to supporting Saigon's authoritarian regimes. They used education, electoral politics, and peaceful protest in calling for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam rather than continued fighting (2).

Pacifists, divided into moderate and radical camps, frequently questioned America's cold war policy. Their international perspective assigned equal blame to the U.S. and the Soviet Union for global instability. Pacifists often overlapped with liberals in their views and memberships, but organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Committee for Nonviolent Action were predominantly pacifist. Moderate pacifists favored electoral efforts, political lobbying, and direct action to change what they saw as a mistaken policy. Radicals perceived fundamental flaws in American society of which Vietnam was only a symptom. They viewed electoral politics as nonproductive and often used nonviolent civil disobedience to protest U.S. actions.

Leftists comprised a minority within the antiwar coalition, but played a visible role as the war continued. The small faction-ridden Old Left operated through groups such as the Communist and Socialist Workers parties. They fought each other as passionately as they attacked capitalists. Despite their radical critique of American society, they favored legal and peaceful demonstrations, and demanded immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. More influential was a growing New Left, a student oriented movement that rejected both Marxist dogma and capitalist inequalities. The New Left's main outlet, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), began as a liberal reform organization, but as the 1960s progressed its national leadership became increasingly radical and advocated violent tactics (3). The leadership went so far left that it abandoned most of its local membership, which remained predominantly reformist.

Given the broad diversity of the antiwar constituency, disputes over goals and tactics were predictable. Two issues proved particularly divisive. Liberals distrusted Communist motives and feared association with them would damage their public credibility. As a result they sought to exclude Communists from antiwar demonstrations. Pacifists, on the other hand, desired the broadest possible coalition and argued that democracies should support the rights of all political tendencies. Most mass demonstrations followed a nonexclusionary policy.

The second issue was over the preferred solution to getting out of Vietnam. Moderate pacifists favored negotiating with the North Viet-
namses over a mutually acceptable settlement. Radicals argued that only the Vietnamese had the right to determine their future and that the U.S. should withdraw immediately.

Complaints about U.S. policy in Vietnam occasionally arose in the early 1960s. The beginning of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam in the spring of 1965, however, provided a sharp focus and stimulus for a loose coalition of groups. Among the earliest actions specifically targeting the Vietnam War were a series of teach-ins held on college campuses. The first to achieve national attention occurred at the University of Michigan on March 24, 1965. Three thousand people attended a series of lectures and debates that ran all evening and into the next morning. About one hundred twenty teach-ins took place on campuses across the country by the end of the spring semester (4). A national teach-in in Washington, D.C., reached one hundred thousand students by television broadcast. At some universities, the war became entwined with other issues, including civil rights, institutional bureaucracy, and leftist politics. Though antiwar activity in 1965 represented a small minority opinion, the early defection of part of the academic community troubled some members of the Johnson administration.

From this early response, local antiwar actions continued until the war’s conclusion. Public awareness of the movement, however, came primarily through the media’s coverage of mass demonstrations (6). The initial major gathering occurred in April at an SDS-sponsored rally in Washington, D.C. By drawing over twenty thousand participants, it showed that the administration could not rely on silent acceptance of its decisions. The various antiwar tendencies created temporary coalitions to organize later events. The first was the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam (NCC), which sponsored the international days of protest in mid-October 1965. The movement’s internal tensions were evident when the NCC refused to endorse a separate antiwar rally in November because its sponsor, SANE, excluded Communists. The NCC faded over factional disputes, but local groups like New York’s Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee carried on the commitment. Among the key figures in building and maintaining these early coalitions was Christian pacifist A. J. Muste, then nearly eighty (6).

As SDS shifted focus to broader reform issues, liberals and pacifists dominated antiwar activity during 1966-1967. Hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 1966, chaired by J. William Fulbright, raised new questions from respected Americans about America’s role in Vietnam, and the war occasionally appeared as an issue in the fall elections. Spring street demonstrations complemented these efforts. Antiwar activity escalated as new organizations formed or older ones shifted their focus to ending the war. Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, for example, formed in late 1965 and eventually became the country’s largest religiously-oriented antiwar group (7). Greater numbers of people unaffiliated with organized political and social groups attended demonstrations as frustration with the war grew.

A new national coalition, the Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, sponsored rallies on April 15, 1967 that brought liberals, radicals, and pacifists together. The inclusion of Communists, however, kept some liberals away. Nevertheless, the demonstrations were among the largest yet: two hundred thousand in New York and fifty thousand in San Francisco.

While the leadership of the national coalitions fought continually over tactics and ideology, most activists were unaware or unconcerned with those debates. Their actions in local communities and attendance at national rallies were directed toward ending the war. Activists tended to be middle class and well educated, and college students made up a significant portion of the crowds. While mass rallies encouraged antiwar demonstrators and offered alternatives to existing policy, they did not by themselves change the war’s direction. Most Americans in 1967 were not willing to pull out and accept a defeat in Vietnam.

The war mixed with the drive for racial equality when Martin Luther King Jr. added his strong dissent in early 1967. His position as the nation’s most respected civil rights activist brought added weight to antiwar arguments, though some believed his stand against the war would compromise civil rights gains. Few national civil rights leaders or government officials welcomed his antiwar opinion. Boxing champion Muhammad Ali became another visible African American symbol. He was denied conscientious objector status on religious grounds and convicted of refusing military induction in June 1967. The Supreme Court overturned the decision three years later.

Liberal antiwar efforts in the summer of 1967 included Negotiation Now, which supported congressional doves through ads and petitions in major newspapers. Another project was Vietnam Summer, a door-to-door effort designed to inform citizens of the war’s impact. Vietnam Summer fell short of its hopes, however, meeting apathy or hostility in working class and poorer neighborhoods.

The military draft stimulated a great deal of antiwar activity. The Selective Service System allowed conscientious objection, though it was not easy to obtain, and a system of deferments and exemptions favored the middle- and upper-socioeconomic classes. Antiwar activists established draft counseling centers to educate men about their options. Thousands resisted the draft through both legal and illegal methods. In October 1967 an antidraft group called The Resistance collected over eleven hundred draft cards from men who refused induction, a federal crime. In Oakland, police fought 3,500 radicals attempting to close down the city’s army induction center. Thousands of men avoided the draft illegally by fleeing to Canada, Sweden, or elsewhere. Ongoing draft resistance, whether organized or conducted individually, concerned the government, which tried to punish antiwar activity by withdrawing exemptions from draftniks.

Draft resistance was part of a larger trend within the movement. Many of those who felt legal protest had proven ineffective in changing U.S. policy shifted to direct action, what they called going “from protest to resistance.” This was apparent when fall antiwar actions culminated with the October 21, 1967 March on the Pentagon. Nearly one hundred thousand people attended a Washington, D.C. rally at the Lincoln Memorial. Half of the crowd marched to the Pentagon for a two-day confrontation that brought over six hundred arrests and focused national attention on the country’s disintegrating consensus (9). Despite the presence of violent elements, the frustrated majority of the movement remained committed to peaceful change.

Although public support for the war gradually eroded, antiwar activists never achieved widespread popularity. The presence of countercultural clothing and hair styles, plus radicals’ display of North Vietnamese flags and anti-American rhetoric at antiwar protests antagonized many moderates. The government’s deliberate and misleading attacks on the movement added further to its negative image. Throughout the war, administration officials and conservatives accused antiwar forces of being controlled by communists, but the movement was clearly indigenous and too broad and loosely organized to be manipulated by any single element (10). The movement was a constantly shifting coalition that attracted or re-
Although antiwar sentiment in 1968 increasingly moved into electoral politics, violence captured many of the headlines. On several occasions authorities called out military forces to control demonstrations. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. At the Chicago Democratic national convention, fifteen thousand protesters clashed with police, leading many people to conclude that “the war in Southeast Asia... was causing a kind of civil war in the United States” (14). With the Democratic Party in disarray, Richard Nixon won the election by a slim margin.

Antiwar activists were unimpressed with Nixon’s efforts, and after a brief interval escalated their protests. The idea of a Moratorium, a suspension of normal activities, appealed to moderates by building local actions around a one-day protest, with actions expanding one additional day each month until the war ended. The first Moratorium on October 15, 1969 exceeded the most optimistic expectations. At least one million participants made it the largest, most diverse and pervasive protest of the entire war. Citizens conducted vigils, distributed literature, attended religious services or discussion groups, showed films, held public readings of the names of the casualties, or joined candlelight marches. Many of the rallies featured the repeated lines of a John Lennon song: “all we are saying is give peace a chance” (15).

Nixon struck back during a televised speech on November 3, blantly attacking antiwar forces and appealing for support from the “silent majority.” Vice-President Spiro Agnew followed up with increasingly bitter and divisive attacks on protesters and the news media. Press coverage of antiwar actions became more negative (16).

The administration’s rhetorical assaults failed to deflect protest. In fact, it drove the different ideological wings of the movement closer together. Moratorium organizers coordinated their November actions with the more radical New Mobilization Committee. Meeting in Washington from November 13-15, the Moratorium sponsored a religious “mass for peace” and a thirty-six-hour March Against Death, one of the era’s most moving actions. The Mobilization’s rally on November 15 attracted perhaps five hundred thousand people.

The fall 1969 antiwar demonstrations proved to be the high point of organized dissent. Both the Moratorium and the New Mobilization Committee faded by the following spring. Vietnamization brought U.S. troop levels down, and this combined with declining U.S. casualties helped defuse domestic protest, silence congressional critics, and strengthen Nixon’s support. They also, however, limited American military and political options, and efforts to end the war continued.

The U.S. invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 produced some of the war’s most extensive and tragic protests. Nixon underestimated the fury that this controversial decision would unleash. The antiwar movement reacted quickly to this expansion of the war, particularly on college campuses. At Ohio’s Kent State University, on May 4 National Guardsmen fired into a crowd and killed four people. Over five hundred college campuses closed down in the following days, and nearly one hundred thousand protesters converged on Washington on May 9. The next week, Mississippi police killed two more students at Jackson State University. Although polls showed that many Americans supported the Cambodian invasion, the massive public demon-

By 1969, antiwar protest marches, like this one in Washington, D.C., brought together thousands of people. (Image courtesy of Kenneth Hoffman, Department of Communication, Seton Hall University.)

peled activists depending upon events in Vietnam and at home. The vast majority of antiwar activists came from the broad political and cultural mainstream.

The 1968 Tet Offensive was a rude awakening to the realities of the war that prompted a reevaluation of the nation’s commitment. Having been repeatedly told by political and military leaders that the Communists were fading and that there was “light at the end of the tunnel,” the public was stunned to find the enemy still capable of such an effort. The new reality reinforced public discontent with the war.

In the wake of Tet, the American media took an increasingly unfavorable view of U.S. policy. Both print and television journalists questioned America’s commitment, perhaps best summarized in Walter Cronkite’s February 27 broadcast: “To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only reasonable, yet unsatisfactory conclusion” (11). When the New York Times reported that General William Westmoreland had requested 206,000 more troops, additional public protests followed. Despite criticism from Westmoreland and others that a hostile media turned the public against the war, numerous studies refute the charge (12). The press reflected rather than led public opinion.

Congress reacted as well. In March, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee conducted hearings on the war and members of the House of Representatives called for a complete review of Vietnam policy. These responses reinforced the Johnson administration’s belief that additional escalation would prove increasingly divisive.

Public opinion polls indicated a growing lack of confidence in the president’s handling of the war. This disaffection found a political outlet in Senator Eugene McCarthy’s challenge for the Democratic presidential nomination. Running largely unnoticed as the year began, his campaign received a significant boost from the Tet Offensive. His strong support in the New Hampshire primary also enticed Robert Kennedy to enter the race as an antiwar candidate (13). Largely because of his dwindling support on the war, President Johnson withdrew from his reelection campaign.
strations limited Nixon's options. The public would not tolerate any expansion of a war they believed was winding down (17).

Congress reacted to the invasion with a rare rebuke. In June, the Senate overwhelmingly voted to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The Cooper-Church amendment proposed cutting off U.S. funds for American troops in Cambodia after June 30, and the Hatfield-McGovern amendment called for withdrawing US forces from Vietnam by the end of 1971. President Nixon survived this crisis by pulling U.S. troops out of Cambodia by late June, defusing most of the congressional and antiwar pressure. The House of Representatives rejected the Cooper-Church amendment, while both the Senate and House voted down Hatfield-McGovern.

The American-supported invasion of Laos in February 1971 stimulated further protests. Coalition demonstrations in late April preceded the radicals' May Day attempt to block city streets and shut down the capital. The radicals failed, but the courts ruled illegal the massive government sweep that arrested over twelve thousand protesters.

Antiwar activism in the 1970s continued to draw from diverse constituencies. Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) conducted a few highly dramatic events, and their presence at mass protests brought increased notoriety and legitimacy to the antiwar movement. The publication of The Pentagon Papers beginning June 13, 1971, leaked by Defense Department analyst Daniel Ellsberg, damaged the government's credibility on the war, created greater public disillusionment, and decreased tolerance for an extended commitment in Vietnam. The advertising community created a campaign to "Unsell the War," which consisted of antiwar print ads and radio and television commercials in 1971 and 1972. Many of these ads were dovish candidates during the 1972 elections. The Indochina Peace Campaign, organized by Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, criticized the war with a traveling show from 1972 until the war's end (18).


By the time of the Paris Agreement, activists had been fighting for eight years to stop the war. Some continued their work until the war's conclusion in 1975, monitoring government policy to prevent any new escalation and advocating amnesty for draft resisters and military deserters. The movement's diverse composition was an extraordinary achievement as it united people of numerous occupations, ideologies, ages, and backgrounds into a sometimes uneasy and fragile coalition. That they struggled together for so long and against great odds attests to their commitment. Ultimately, they earned partial victory. The public largely accepted the movement's message even as it often rejected the activists themselves. Unable to end the war directly, the movement was strong enough to alarm the government, creating social conditions that limited policy options and made stopping the war possible.

Endnotes


3. An Old Left perspective is Fred Halstead, Out Now!: A Participant's Account.


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