WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

“HELL NO! WE WON’T GO!”

THE RATIONALE BEHIND OPPOSITION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

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Honors Thesis
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PASS WITH DISTINCTION

BY

ROBIN K. PAYNE

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When a subject is highly controversial...one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room With a View*
"HELL NO! WE WON’T GO!"

THE RATIONALE BEHIND OPPOSITION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

The year is 1970. The Vietnam War is in its sixth long year. A young man, “Gene”, stands in his kitchen. In one trembling hand he holds a draft notice, in the other, a hatchet. It is a week before he is to be inducted into the Army. He knows that going to Vietnam is not an option for him. Never a firm supporter of war, Gene’s belief in its “enormous injustice and cruelty” had been strengthened by photographs of Vietnamese napalm victims.¹ No, he cannot go to Vietnam and fight. Resisting the draft is his only option. The only choice he has is in choosing how he will resist. He is familiar with the draft laws since he has spent time as a draft counselor to other young men who oppose the war. He realizes how class-biased the draft is and he wants to find a mode of resistance that anyone, regardless of social status, can use.

Gene knows that he can refuse induction, but that would mean jail time. He can also flee to Canada. But he does not want to be separated from the woman he loves, nor does he want to be exiled from the country he loves. It seems the only other feasible way he can avoid the draft is to acquire some sort of physical disability. With this in mind, he takes a deep breath. He holds the hatchet up high, and – THWACK! He severs the ring finger on his left hand.² He has successfully avoided the draft and simultaneously found a way to symbolically display his opposition to the war.

² Ibid., 113-116.
What was it about the Vietnam War that created such fierce opposition? Any war America has ever fought has been opposed, but only by a small, quiet minority of the public. This was not the case during the Vietnam War. Although a slight majority may have supported the war, a very vocal minority staunchly opposed it. Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Edward Albert write in the introduction to their anthology, *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade*, that “[t]he antiwar movement was extraordinary for its size, duration, and capacity to disrupt and divide American society.” This vehement protest movement came to be one of the chief characteristics associated with the Vietnam War. Bill Nack, who served in Vietnam in the Military Assistance Command prior to the Tet Offensive, said, “Nothing in our time has ever so consumed this land, so divided its people, so made of it one theater. Twisted and tragic, yes, but colossal and dramatic too.” The protest movement was essential in creating this division and it is an issue that is still controversial today.

Countless studies have been conducted concerning the effect of the protest movement on the outcome of the war, on returning soldiers, and on the role media played in the war. Yet, the rationale behind this activism is often shadowed by seemingly more pertinent issues. Perhaps rationale is not more fully explored because it covered such a broad spectrum. There was no overarching, unifying reason to oppose the war. Many believed it was immoral, while others were disturbed by the fact that the war was drawing attention away from serious domestic issues. Others protested because of ambiguous self-interest, while many dissented merely because it was the “thing to do.” Military service and the media also played important roles in determining motivations for opposition. If there was no unifying force, how then, do we make sense of the attention and strength the protest movement generated?

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In 1945, America had just emerged victorious from World War II. Historian Terry Anderson writes, “The victory...reinforced the traditional American belief that in a world of good and evil our totalitarian enemies represented evil, and we exemplified good.” This theme held as the United States entered the Cold War and people began to see the world as divided into two camps: communism and freedom. Everyone believed that “[c]ommunism was monolithic...and like a spreading blob all those ‘red’ nations aimed to conquer the world.” America’s only hope to maintain freedom, it seemed, was not only to contain communism, but to push it back as well.

While these ideologies were taking hold in American society, President Harry Truman was simultaneously deciding to give economic and military aid to the French in their struggle to maintain their colonies in Indochina. From 1950 to 1954, the United States provided $2.6 billion worth of aid to the French. Despite this aid, the French were ultimately forced to yield to the Vietnamese. In 1954, the “Declaration of Geneva Conference” issued a settlement that officially ended the war between Vietnam and France. The agreement “set up an apparatus for ‘ensuring’ the peace and reunification of the country.” This “apparatus” was established to “permit the Viet-Namese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot.” These free elections were to be held in 1956.

Studies show that if the elections had been held, Ho Chi Minh, the North Vietnamese Communist leader, would have won an overwhelming 80 percent of the vote. But the elections were not held. Fear of the spread of communism prompted the United States to withdraw from

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6 Ibid., 6-7.
previous agreements to support free elections in Vietnam. Instead, America chose to support the South Vietnamese Democratic leader, Ngo Dinh Diem. As a result, the North Vietnamese engaged in guerilla warfare against the South. In response, the United States sent 700 military advisers and one billion dollars in economic aid to train the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam and to garner support for Diem. These efforts, reported Anderson, merely resulted in turning “the little nation [into] our welfare child.”

In 1964, the North Vietnamese “attacked” the USS Maddox in the Tonkin Gulf. While it is now known that the Maddox had been aiding sabotage missions against the North, President Lyndon Johnson was able to use the incident to garner public support and pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which gave him constitutional authority to aid South Vietnam as a United States ally. Congress overwhelmingly supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, as did two-thirds of the public. The first Harris poll on the issue, conducted in 1963, revealed that by a two-to-one margin, Americans favored sending troops to Vietnam on a large scale if the situation grew worse in South Vietnam. Johnson’s initial handling of the situation pushed his approval ratings to more than 70 percent. However, this began to change after Johnson’s election to a second term. The South Vietnamese were on the threshold of falling to Ho Chi Minh. Determined not to be the first American president to lose a war, Johnson made the pivotal decision to begin bombing North Vietnam and to send in American combat troops. This violated his 1964

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9 Ibid., 121, 123.
10 Ibid., 122-123.
campaign promise not “‘to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to
do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.’”

As American involvement in Vietnam escalated, protest at home did also. Peaceful
protests in the form of teach-ins and marches became commonplace. Many young men began
seeking ways to avoid the service. The first major surge of the protest movement was sparked by
the bombing of North Vietnam and escalation of the draft. Public burning of draft cards,
something which would have “scandalized the American people during the Second World War,”
became a familiar occurrence. Some protesters demonstrated their disgust by brandishing the
North Vietnamese flag. By 1967, the approval rating for Johnson’s handling of the war had
dropped to 28 percent and most Americans began to feel that the United States had been wrong
to intervene.

While people of all ages and backgrounds opposed the war, the vast majority of
protesters were members of the baby boom generation. These were the children born after World
War II when the birth rate rose drastically. From 1948 to 1953, more babies were born than there
had been born in the past thirty years. This boom lasted well into the early 1960s. The
conditions surrounding the “boomers” early years explain much concerning the reasons they
opposed the war.

The generation of the 1930s and 1940s, the parents of the baby boomers, “transferred
what they had learned fighting fascism and tyranny to the new nemesis – Communism,” writes
Anderson, “These parents of the baby boomers saw foreign policy in black and white terms. The

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11 Joan Morrison and Robert K. Morrison, From Camelot to Kent State: The Sixties Experience in the Words of
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 98.
world was filled with good and evil forces." But Cold War mentality also created concern over stability and security. This concern was also fueled by lingering preoccupations with the Great Depression. One way to combat these fears was to accumulate wealth. Since the entire nation prospered after World War II, personal prosperity was greatly facilitated. Accumulating wealth provided a sense of security, which became an emblem of "the good life." In *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, historian Todd Gitlin writes that while "the parental generation was scourged by memories of the Depression, the children of this middle class in the late Forties and Fifties were raised to take affluence for granted."

In addition to affluence, conformity was a major characteristic of the 1950s. There was a compulsive urge to create an all-American way of life. Gitlin writes, "The melting pot was invoked sentimentally, as an ideal, with irony: differences in America were meant to be melted down...there was only one 'American way of life.'" This urge for conformity engendered patriotism, particularly in school curriculum. Children were taught to firmly believe in the greatness of their nation. This patriotism could be expressed by joining clubs, organizations, and athletic teams. Togetherness and teamwork were elevated above individualism; it was "un-American" to not be a team player.

Since affluence was so important to this conformist era, higher education became symbolic of success and security. These characteristics would markedly affect the baby boomers as they came of age. During this era, spending on public institutions of higher education increased from $742.1 million in 1945 to an astonishing $6.9 billion in 1965. By 1960, the

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16 Ibid., 15.
18 Ibid., 18.
United States was "the first society in the history of the world with more college students than farmers." By 1960, perhaps because of their educations, many in the baby boom generation were beginning to question the ideologies they had been brought up to revere.

Thus, expectations began to change when the 1960s were heralded in. The inauguration of John F. Kennedy and his call to "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" suggested optimism. However, it was not long before the new image of American perfection and progress was tarnished by the Bay of Pigs disaster, the Cuban missile crisis, and the growing brutality surrounding peaceful civil rights activism. Nevertheless, many people were still hopeful. Historian Adam Garfinkle described Kennedy as the symbolic "marriage of moral impulse and pragmatic style" because he bridged the generation gap: young people revered him for his progressive intentions, while their parents admired him for his Cold War doctrines. Then, on November 22, 1963, Kennedy's assassination brought about complete disillusion and a "sobering national self examination."

After Kennedy's death, the idealistic youth began to realize that America was not perfect after all. The Civil Rights Movement was beginning to reveal the inherent racism of American society, a revelation that appalled many in the baby boom generation. They began to seek ways to eliminate these imperfections. Edgar Friedenberg argues that, because of physical or intellectual superiority, it is natural in societies throughout the world for the youth to eventually replace their elders in positions of authority. Yet, the situation that arose in America during the

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22 Morrison and Morrison, *From Camelot to Kent State*, xviii-xix.
23 Ibid., 47-48.
1960s was unique in that the youth not only wanted to replace the older generation, but also to cast off the traditional roles their parents had assumed.\textsuperscript{24}

Because of this mentality, members of the baby boom generation sought to completely reform the American way of life. The New Left emerged "to become the voice, conscience, and goad of its generation."\textsuperscript{25} Eventually it sparked the mass student movement that dominated the 1960s. Composed primarily of members of the middle and upper classes, who had no direct experiences with poverty and exploitation, the New Left pursued social activism. Garfinkle writes, "The New Left displayed the tactical extravagance of utopianism, fantasies of invincibility born of opulence, and the boredom's of material security."\textsuperscript{26}

The New Left's most prominent faction was the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1962, this organization produced the illustrious \textit{Port Huron Statement}, in which they "called for a society based on love and community in which all members would be equally involved in formulating the political decisions that shape their private lives." This society could be achieved through forming a "participatory democracy."\textsuperscript{27} This document finally expressed what many young people had been thinking. It quickly became a unifying force for the New Left.

In the beginning, the New Left focused on the Civil Rights Movement, but they later turned their attentions to the antiwar movement. On April 17, 1965, Paul Potter, the president of the SDS, gave a speech at an antiwar rally in Washington D.C. His speech drew the antiwar movement to the attention of many Americans who had previously been unaware of it.\textsuperscript{28} Potter outlined the reasons the SDS opposed the war. He said:

\textsuperscript{25} Gitlin, \textit{The Sixties}, 26.
\textsuperscript{26} Garfinkle, \textit{Telltale Hearts}, 120-122.
\textsuperscript{27} Albert and Albert, \textit{The Sixties Papers}, 10.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 174.
Most of us grew up thinking that the United States was a strong but humble nation, that involved itself in world affairs only reluctantly, that respected the integrity of other nations and other systems, and that engaged in wars only as a last resort...But in recent years, the withdrawal from the hysteria of the Cold War era and the development of a more aggressive, activist foreign policy have done much to force many of us to rethink attitudes that were deep and basic sentiments about our country. The incredible war in Vietnam has provided the razor, the terrifying sharp cutting edge that has finally severed the last vestige of illusion that morality and democracy are the guiding principles of American foreign policy.29

The SDS opposed the war because it was a startling indication of all they saw wrong in American society. The belief that society must be reformed allowed Potter to call on students to start a social movement that would help create a society in which tragedies like Vietnam could not happen.30

While members of the SDS tended to oppose the war because they saw it as representative of all that was wrong with society, others opposed it because they saw it as immoral. They felt that what was happening in Vietnam was really not the business of the United States. John Dingethal, a draftee who opposed the Vietnam War, said that he felt the war was met with such strong opposition because, “the justification was so much slimmer...There was no provocation, there was no Pearl Harbor, there was no sinking of the Lusitania. There was none of that, that had inflamed the American opinion as it had in other wars...It just wasn’t our war.”31

The SDS agreed. In an antiwar leaflet, they called for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal from Vietnam, arguing that the problems in Vietnam were not for the United States to solve: “Only the Vietnamese have the right of nationhood to make their government

30 Ibid., 223.
democratic or not, free or not, neutral or not. It is not America's role to deny them the chance to be what they will make of themselves."^{32}

Lyle Quasim, who served as a medic in the Air Force, also believed that it was not America's place to determine what sort of government Vietnam had. Quasim had been drafted into the Army but went AWOL for over a year. Eventually he enlisted in the Air Force, "an act to evade waking up in some rice paddy in South Vietnam with people with whom [he] had no dispute, with a M-16 in [his] hand shooting at them and them with AK-47s shooting at [him] - and for what reason?" Quasim believed the war in Vietnam was of a civil nature and it was not for the United States to determine the outcome. He said: "When we fought a civil war, what if there had been another country...who came...and tried to bomb us off the planet? We are stronger, we are a better country as a result of our struggles. Allow them to be a stronger and a better country as a result of their struggles. Why should we intervene?...Allow those folks to work that out on their own."^{33}

Some Americans even believed that perhaps the Viet Cong were justified in their attack on South Vietnam. Robert Scheer's 1965 pamphlet entitled, "How the U.S. Got Involved in Vietnam," was widely distributed on college campuses. Judith and Stewart Albert, chroniclers of the sixties, argue that "[b]ecause of [the pamphlets] thorough documentation, well informed arguments, and reasonable style, many of its readers became persuaded that America's involvement in Vietnam was unjust and immoral."^{34} Scheer's account of the history of United States involvement in Vietnam gave merit to the argument that the war was of a civil nature. Furthermore, one statistic in particular made it seem as though the North Vietnamese were

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^{34} Albert and Albert, The Sixties Papers, 272.
completely justified in their pursuit. At the time free elections were to be held in Vietnam, 80 percent of the people would have supported Ho Chi Minh. The United States believed this was the case only because the Vietnamese did not have any experience with any other form of government. However, Scheer implied that if Ho Chi Minh had such a large following, he ought to have been the rightful leader.\textsuperscript{35}

A similar argument was made by the Fort Hood Three. When these three soldiers from Fort Hood, Texas, received orders for Vietnam, they issued a statement against the war. They were willing to face court martial if necessary.\textsuperscript{36} In their initial joint statement, they discussed the reactions of their fellow troops as they received orders for Vietnam. The consensus was that no one wanted to go, primarily because they saw no reason for the war. In fact, they believed that the Viet Cong "had the moral and physical support of most of the peasantry who were fighting for their independence."\textsuperscript{37} Essentially, they saw no reason to fight against people they believed were justified in defending their rights.

Others, like Gene, who mutilated his own hand to avoid fighting, believed the war was immoral because of his religious upbringing. Gene was reared a strict Catholic. As a child, he was particularly drawn to religious tales of martyrdom. This fascination created in him "a strong impulse toward martyrdom, heroism, doing the right moral thing." When confronted with the draft, he amputated his own finger as a "soldierly way" out of the war. While many saw this sort of

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 302.
of action as cowardly, Gene believed it was a “badge of honor and courage.”\footnote{MacPherson, \textit{Long Time Passing}, 115.} For him, this was the morally right choice and he had turned himself into a martyr of sorts.

Another person who opposed the war essentially because of his upbringing was Donald Simons, a graduate student in psychology at West Virginia University during the war. Throughout his childhood, emphasis had been placed on love and compassion for others; war was the complete contradiction of this. In 1967, Simons was re-classified as I-A, despite his status as a graduate student. He knew he opposed the war, but these feelings conflicted with those of patriotism. However, continuous troop escalation, increasing civilian death rates, and the fact that he saw more destruction than humanity on television distressed him. It was not until Christmas of 1968, when his draft notice came, that he decided he must resist.\footnote{Donald Simons, \textit{I Refuse: Memories of a Vietnam War Objector} (Trenton: The Broken Rifle Press, 1992), passim.}

Stephen Cohen also opposed the war on issues of morality with religious overtones. Cohen, who would later serve in President Jimmy Carter’s State Department, opposed the war for various reasons, but much of his opposition was also based on his Jewish heritage. He said, “I cared so deeply about Vietnam because I am Jewish and I cannot forget the Holocaust. I couldn’t understand the lack of protest. The lesson I derived was, ‘If your country is doing something wrong, you’ve got to try to change it.’ I remember a quotation: ‘To be silent is to lie.’ I tried to live my life by that. Vietnam, \textit{of course}, was not the equivalent of the Holocaust, but we were killing a helluva lot of people.’”\footnote{MacPherson, \textit{Long Time Passing}, 125.}

Todd Gitlin, also Jewish, expressed similar feelings about the war. Growing up as a Jewish adolescent in the shadow of the Holocaust, he believed, led many of his peers to question why the Jewish community in America had not done more to stop the Holocaust. Thus, when
Vietnam became a major issue, he was reminded of what the previous generation had endured. He writes, “to me and people I knew... American bombs...were the closest thing to an immoral equivalent of Auschwitz in our lifetimes. When the time came, we jumped at the chance to purge ourselves of the nearest thing to the original trauma.”

Another moral argument against the war was that it contradicted American values. America is a country built on democracy. Yet during the Vietnam War, many Americans believed that the country was exhibiting imperialistic tendencies. Many of the more radical protesters adopted the alternate spelling of “Amerika,” indicating they believed the United States was equal in magnitude to the evilness of Nazi Germany. Radical protesters such as these tended to favor an “Out Now!” approach, rather than the negotiations many dissenters sought.

These radical protesters were heavily influenced by recent American activities, such as the Bay of Pigs incident and CIA involvement in Guatemala and Iran. These fiascoes left many Americans disillusioned, and when Vietnam came around they viewed it as “another example of American imperialism in the Cold War arena.” The fear that America was no longer adhering to her ideals was perhaps best expressed by draft resister Tom Gardner. Gardner said, “I grew up believing in democracy and the sanctity of the individual conscience – you know, Thomas Paine, Jefferson, Adams, Thoreau, Jesus Christ, etc...and it was just too late for all those old people who taught me those things to reverse themselves and tell me: ‘Forget all that conscience stuff, don’t think, just follow orders – kill, kill, kill!!’”

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41 Gitlin, The Sixties, 25.
It was this emphasis on “kill, kill, kill!!” that led many Americans to believe that their country was not only becoming imperialistic, but was also committing genocide. The circumstances surrounding the war led to many civilian deaths. While war supporters saw this as a necessary evil in stopping Ho Chi Minh’s advances, dissenters were outraged at what they felt was unjustified slaughter. In 1967, David Dellinger, a prominent leader of the antiwar movement wrote “Unmasking Genocide” for Liberation Magazine, an article that reflected a growing belief among protesters that the United States was committing genocide in Southeast Asia.45

Dellinger had attended the International War Crimes Tribunal held in Roskild, Denmark, at the end of 1967. After hearing the stories of various presenters, he thought Americans would never be able to fully understand the “depravity” the United States was creating in Vietnam. He likened this to Germans having trouble coming to terms with their Nazi counterparts or Russians failing to see the travesties committed by Stalin. It is often hard to realize one’s country is not as magnificent and heroic as one thought.46 Tribunal attendees were informed of various actions carried out by the military, such as “psychological” targeting. This sort of targeting included bombing religious centers, villages, schools, and hospitals. The Tribunal used a U.S. Air Force Manual as evidence of these acts. The manual, Fundamentals of Aerospace Weapons, taught that such attacks would “create unrest...to cause strikes, sabotage, riots, fear, panic, hunger, and passive resistance to the government and to create a general feeling that the war should be terminated.”47 People who opposed the war because they believed it was immoral understood these tactics to be attacks on innocent civilians. To them it was nothing short of genocide.

45 Albert and Albert, The Sixties Papers, 272.
47 Ibid., 336-337.
Aside from morality, many people took issue with American policy in Vietnam because of its effects on domestic issues. Even had the Vietnam War not occurred, the sixties would have been remembered as a tumultuous decade of social activism. The Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, and Johnson’s War on Poverty were just a few of the major social reforms under discussion. As the baby boom generation came of age, the idealistic attitudes they had been conditioned to uphold were weakened by the realization that American society was not Utopia. It was shocking to many baby boomers that some Americans were denied opportunities simply because of their skin color, economic status, or gender. These Americans were already dissatisfied with the direction their country was going in when Vietnam became a major issue. However, the social legislation Johnson enacted through his War on Poverty perpetuated hope. Then United States involvement in Vietnam began to draw funding away from these programs. Historian Paul Hollander explains that in this sense the Vietnam War not only prompted opposition to the war, but it also prompted a closer examination of American society.48

Concerns regarding America’s domestic problems were expressed early in the antiwar movement. During a march on Washington in 1965, participants carried signs with phrases such as, “Get out of Saigon and into Selma” and “War on Poverty Not on People.” Marchers presented a petition to Congress which read: “The problems of America cry out for attention, and our entanglement in South Vietnam postpones the confrontation of these issues while prolonging the misery of the people of that war-torn land.”49 It was during this same march that Paul Potter of the SDS made his speech against the war. Potter argued that America should not be involved because it was not the business of the United States and also because of its effects on domestic issues. He asked, “What happens to the hopeful beginnings of expressed discontent that are

trying to shift American attention to long-neglected internal priorities of shared abundance, democracy, and decency at home when those priorities have to compete with the all-consuming priorities and psychology of a war against an enemy thousands of miles away?\textsuperscript{50}

Others used the same argument. James Harney, a former Catholic priest, was one of the noted Milwaukee Fourteen who destroyed Milwaukee draft records. Raised in a household that supported the activities of Senator Joe McCarthy, Harney was a strict anti-Communist until he took courses in school that changed his views. He began to champion activists such as Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. instead. His opposition to the war began when he realized that "the brunt of the war was being thrown on the poor."\textsuperscript{51} Harney believed that the $30 billion a year the United States was spending in Vietnam could better serve the poor living in inner cities.

Private Dennis Mora, a member of the Fort Hood Three, also displayed this attitude. Mora, a Puerto Rican, opposed the war before he was drafted. After his induction into the Army, his opposition intensified.\textsuperscript{52} While Mora was concerned with the issues of morality surrounding the war, he was also troubled by the war’s tragic impact on America. Not only were Americans dying, but the war was also quickly depleting resources that could be used on the War on Poverty. Mora clearly did not believe Johnson’s popular "Guns and Butter" theory, which held that America could financially uphold its military involvement in Vietnam as well as its social reforms at home. He believed that America’s internal problems were far more important than those in Vietnam and America’s funds would be better spent on reconstructing American ghettos and satisfying "social and educational needs."\textsuperscript{53}

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{50} Potter, "Speech to the April 17, 1965 March on Washington," 220-221.
\textsuperscript{51} MacPherson, \textit{Long Time Passing}, 383.
\textsuperscript{52} Mora, Samas, and Johnson, "The Ford Hood Three," 302, 303.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 304.
Perhaps the most famous person who opposed the Vietnam War on these grounds was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. While he is best remembered for his work in the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King was also a prominent antiwar leader. He first expressed his opposition to the war six days before American combat troops entered Vietnam when he spoke at Howard University in Washington D.C. He said that “a commitment to nonviolence could overcome the ‘towering evils of racial injustice, poverty, and war’ present in the world.”

While Dr. King’s opposition to all forms of war and his commitment to nonviolence fueled his opposition to the Vietnam War, he was also concerned with its effects on Johnson’s Great Society. Although he had previously worked closely with Johnson to institute civil rights reforms, he did not agree with Johnson’s “Guns and Butter” bravado. Instead, Dr. King believed “that either the War on Poverty or the War in Vietnam would have to be slighted to pay for the other.”

On April 4, 1967, Dr. King gave an address entitled “A Time to Break Silence” at the New York Riverside Church. King said that “whatever commitment there was said to be toward building a Great Society at home was being undermined by the fact that the government was spending $322,000 on each ‘enemy’ soldier killed at the same time it was spending only $53 on each person classified as poor” in the United States. Dr. King was also disturbed by the fact that it was becoming increasingly apparent that African American men constituted a disproportionate ratio of casualties in the war.

Dr. King thought that because African Americans faced disadvantages at home, they were sent to Vietnam in higher numbers than their white counterparts. Ironically, they were

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55 Ibid., 2.
56 Ibid., 13.
fighting to give Vietnamese rights that they were still denied at home. In fact, it was this denial of rights to African Americans that spawned some of the early protest to the war. Many antiwar protesters learned the fine points of protesting from the Civil Rights Movement. Also, "the notion of civil rights seemed to have broader applications to...needs of the Third World: oppressed people everywhere deserved to be treated with dignity and respect," explains historian Peter Rollins.58

This attitude was the initial link between the Civil Rights Movement and the antiwar movement, but the general consensus eventually began to shift. In 1966, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) published a position paper that outlined their reasons for opposing the war in Vietnam. The SNCC argued that the United States was as "deceptive in its claims of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people" as they were regarding the concern for freedom of African Americans in the United States. The SNCC believed that the Civil Rights Movement revealed that the United States government had "never guaranteed the freedom of oppressed citizens, and [was] not yet truly determined to end the rule of terror and oppression within its own [emphasis added] borders."59

As the war became more controversial, African American draftees became more militant, reflecting the Black Pride movement at home. However, many were still enlisting and a third of these volunteered for combat. This was because "[d]espite the racism and segregation of Army life, fighting in the country's wars was generally viewed by the black male as an opportunity and a chance to secure 'justice for his folk.'"60 One African American who saw military service as

57 Ibid., 14.
60 MacPherson, Long Time Passing, 554.
his opportunity was Eldson McGhee whose poor background prevented him from "pursu[ing] the American Dream through a college degree." The Army was his Harvard and he was widely respected within his community for enlisting. When he arrived in Vietnam in December of 1967, he could not wait to fight the enemy and earn a Congressional Medal of Honor.61

While McGhee never wavered in his belief that America should be fighting in Vietnam, he eventually began to question the racial implications of the war. He now attributes this to Hanoi Hannah, who "would interrupt Armed Forces Radio with Communist propaganda aimed especially at black soldiers." Her broadcasts influenced McGhee. He asked "'Why were we blacks fighting in Vietnam when we had our own war at home?...It was very effective. You'd see another black buddy wounded or friends would write about our people being attacked viciously in the streets of America, struggling for equal rights. You had to begin to question what was going on at home – and whether you would receive that chance for upward mobility that you were in Vietnam for.'"62

PFC James Johnson, a member of the Fort Hood Three, took this theme a step further when he compared the South Vietnamese fight for a voice in government to that of African Americans at home. He said, "the Negro in Vietnam is just helping to defeat what his black brother is fighting for in the United States."63 The Fort Hood Three were also troubled by the fact that "Negroes and Puerto Ricans [were] being drafted and end[ing] up in the worst of the fighting all out of proportion to their numbers in the population."64

The racial issue became a driving force behind much opposition to the war. Myra MacPherson writes, "By the mid-sixties the racial and class inequities of the Vietnam War were

61 Ibid., 553-554.
62 Ibid., 555.
63 Mora, Samas, and Johnson, "The Fort Hood Three," 309.
64 Ibid., 303.
scandalous. General S.L.A Marshall, the noted military historian, commented, “In the average rifle company, the strength was 50 percent composed of Negroes, Southwestern Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Guamanians, Nisei, and so on. But a real cross section of American youth? Almost never.” It was this sort of racial injustice that eventually led many African American troops to engage in combat refusal because they felt they were being exposed to “undue risk” by “racist commanders.”

Statistics show that African Americans were being exposed to undue risk. In 1965, 23.5 percent of the enlisted men killed in action were African American. During the entire war, African Americans constituted 12.5 percent of the deaths. Considering the fact that only 9.3 percent of the total active-duty personnel from 1965 to 1970 were African American, this number is highly disproportionate. In 1969, journalist Wallace Terry conducted a survey of 833 black and white soldiers. His results revealed that the two races harbored very different perceptions. A large majority of African American soldiers felt discrimination at home should prevent them from having to fight abroad. Sixty-four percent felt that their fight was at home, not in Vietnam. Similarly, 32 percent of the African American soldiers felt that the United States should withdraw because it had no business being in Vietnam, whereas only 11 percent of their white peers felt this way.

Many Americans, however, were not concerned with domestic issues, but rather had personal motivations for dissent. Some were self-serving, but one-third of the American populace had friends or family serving in Vietnam. Richard R. Lau, a graduate student in social psychology, Thad A. Brown, an Assistant Professor of Political Science, and David O. Sears, a

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 562-563.
professor of Social Psychology and Political Science, all at the University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a study in 1978, "to explore a variety of possible consequences of this self-interest upon American public opinion regarding the war." They hoped to determine whether having friends and family in Vietnam should create antiwar feelings, because "an issue ought to be more salient to the individual when it has tangible personal consequences for him."

Much of their research was based on a previous study that asked questions to determine who paid a "good deal" of attention to the Vietnam issue, who thought the Vietnam War was one of the top three problems facing the country, who was extremely concerned about the issue, and who listed it as most important, or very important, in determining their presidential vote. Those who had friends and family fighting in Vietnam answered "yes" to these questions in higher percentages than those who did not. Yet, the percentages never dropped lower than 50 percent for all of those polled. These results indicate that many Americans were concerned with the Vietnam issue, but it is clear that those with familial self-interest were more concerned.

Other evidence also indicates that this type of self-interest had an effect. Donald Simons, who initially opposed the war for religious and moral reasons, learned that a good childhood friend who had entered the military as a conscientious objector and had received training as a medic, was killed less than a month after he arrived in Vietnam in 1968. The death of his friend reinforced Simons decision to oppose the war. "The full evil of the war was now apparent," he wrote, "[O]f what value was that which destroyed such a young man, which denied us his friendship, love and compassion?...I doubted he had been put on earth to be destroyed, to be shot

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70 Ibid., 466.
71 Ibid., 469-473.
in the head on a battlefield while running to the aid of a fallen comrade. No, from the evil of war came only more evil.”

Self-interest may also explain the spread of opposition among blue-collar Americans. The protest movement had been born on college campuses where it was based on social activism. However, blue-collar Americans had more personal reasons for protest. These Americans watched as coffins returned to hometowns in place of the young men who had left. A Gallup poll conducted in middle America revealed that 55 percent knew someone killed or wounded in Vietnam. It can be argued that had these Americans not known so many of Vietnam’s casualties, they may very well have remained supportive of the war.

In 1984, historian John Mueller re-examined a study he previously conducted in his book entitled *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. In this study, he compared American reactions to the Korean War with reactions to the Vietnam War. His findings show that despite the idea that “television supposedly made Vietnam somehow unique, the wars actually affected public opinion quite similarly.” During the period in which the wars could adequately be compared, both were met with approximately the same amount of approval. Mueller concluded that the war in Vietnam eventually became more unpopular than the Korean War because Vietnam produced many more American casualties than Korea. In both wars, opposition increased as casualties did “according to the same mathematical relationship.”

Mueller also provided another argument for self-interest as a motivating force for opposition. Despite the prominent protest movement against the war, when Vietnam finally fell

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to Communism in 1975, Americans quietly accepted it. In fact, few Americans were concerned with the war at all after 1973, when the bombing stopped. Few American troops remained in Vietnam and American prisoners of war had also returned home. While the vast majority of veterans did not receive a traditional soldier's welcome home, “for this small group of men there was an emotional and well-publicized homecoming, and their return constituted a highly visible end to the war for the public.”

Americans stopped protesting the war at this point. Most Americans who opposed the war did so because they were concerned primarily with its affects on America, not on Vietnam. While many were clearly concerned with the immorality of the war, the fact that few Americans continued to protest once America withdrew suggests that they had been more concerned with the impact the war had on American life and traditional American values than with its effects on humanity. Certainly American withdrawal would eliminate a reason for those who opposed the war because they were concerned with domestic issues or for the lives of their loved ones.

While self-interest provided motivation for those who had loved ones fighting in the war, another type of self-interest was more selfish in origin. Many Americans, primarily draft-age young men, protested the war primarily because they were afraid. Vietnam veterans, in particular, believed that fear was one of the primary motivating forces behind the protest movement. Immediately following the war, tensions between protesters and veterans were strong. Returning veterans who had seen it as their duty to support their country were all too often greeted with hostility and contempt. They had merely done what their country asked of them. Unfortunately, many protesters failed to understand this and instead of protesting the

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75 Ibid., 156.
government, many instead took their frustrations out on veterans. Veterans were often slandered with despicable terms. In response, many began to view protesters as cowards.

One such veteran is Ron Shively who became an engineer, constructing roads and bridges in Vietnam, after completing the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program at Washington State University. Shively attributes his decision to join ROTC to his upbringing, which conditioned him to support his country. He admits that in some ways he actually admired protesters. Although he did not agree with them, he felt that if they truly thought the war was wrong, then they were right to stand up for what they believed. They were merely upholding their convictions as he upheld his own by going to Vietnam. However, he saw the majority of draft resisters as cowards. He said, “I wasn’t convinced many were [draft dodging] because they really deep down in their heart felt [the war] was wrong. I felt like they just didn’t want to take a chance at being hurt or killed.”

Today many protesters of the 1960s readily admit that veterans, such as Shively, were not unfounded in this assertion. One former protester, Cliff Gibbons, said that his opposition to the war emerged when handicapped veterans began attending his school, the University of Florida. Although he already protested the war, seeing these veterans made him want to avoid being sent to Vietnam even more. He said, “I decided, I’m not going to go through this kind of hell. I’m not going to sacrifice a part of my body to something that I don’t believe in at all.” Joel Garreau, another protester who in 1969, became the first male to receive conscientious objector status in his conservative blue-collar Rhode Island town, admits that much of his opposition was also based on self-interest. At the time he was drafted, he simply “saw no point in getting [his] ass

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76 Ron Shively, interview by author, tape recording, Olympia, Wash., 1 August 2001.
77 MacPherson, Long Time Passing, 142.
shot." It was around this time that deferments for graduate students were dropped. One Harvard student felt that the “soul-searching and sudden hard-core antiwar stance” was not the result of “our oft-praised idealism and sensitivity...It was something close to self-interest.” As the threat became real, protest on college campuses became more vehement.

Much of this self-serving opposition revolved around the draft. People in the baby boom generation felt it was absurd that they were being asked to fight. They had grown up surrounded by an aura of “specialness.” Countless studies were conducted on this generation, suggesting that they were different, better, than previous generations. As a result, many felt that they were inexpendable. This mindset was particularly prominent on elite college campuses where students were constantly reminded that only one in twenty were accepted. These baby boomers were the “best and the brightest.” Unsurprisingly, it was on these elite college campuses that protest was at its most vocal.

Although students enjoyed draft deferments, they were offended by the possibility that they may eventually be asked to risk their lives. The sharp decline in campus protest after the draft was ended lends merit to this argument. Donald Simons noticed that on his West Virginia University campus “it was not until the draft began singling out young people, that the issue became something other than an intellectual debate.” Draft calls reached an all time high in 1965 and 1966, much higher than they had been during the Korean War. On top of this, various deferments from the draft began to be eliminated, leaving many young people feeling more threatened. Included in these eliminations were graduate student deferments. Since graduate

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78 Ibid., 100.
79 Ibid., 99-100.
80 Ibid., 102-103.
82 Simons, I Refuse, 22.
school no longer provided a safe haven from the draft, the number of college graduates drafted jumped from 20,000 in 1967 to 45,000 in 1969.83

In retrospect, one member of the sixties generation questions the common misconception that protesting took courage. It seemed instead that protesting had become the “thing to do.” What took courage was to jump off the proverbial bandwagon and speak out in defense of the war.84 Myra MacPherson writes, “For the first time, it was chic and righteous in influential and power circles not to go to war. Avoiding Vietnam was more of a badge of honor than going.”85 Few protesters would admit that they were opposed to the war merely because it was what everyone else was doing, but war supporters recognized this early on. Elliott Abrams, a graduate of the Harvard class of 1969, and later a foreign policy expert for President Ronald Reagan, was a self-proclaimed hawk in the 1960s. Although he never entered the service – he had a bad back and was declined – he was very supportive of American policy in Vietnam. He believed that most people did not want to go for personal reasons. Being sent to Vietnam for a year was a major interference with one’s future. Rather, Abrams believed that protesters masked their self-interest by addressing issues of the corrupt South Vietnamese regime so they would not be labeled as cowards. He also believed that many protested simply because it was the thing to do. Having attended a very liberal high school in Greenwich Village, he had already been exposed to “marijuana, SNCC, SDS, antiwar, sandals.” Thus, when he arrived at college and saw many of his peers participating in these activities, which he saw as “faddish,” he did not think it was “an expression of individuality or dissent, but rather just another form of conformity.”86

83 MacPherson, Long Time Passing, 513.
85 MacPherson, Long Time Passing, 28.
86 Ibid., 120.
Many people in the baby boom generation saw it as their duty to resist the conformity of the 1950s, so they did not wish to be labeled as conformists themselves. However, others believed that protesters were indeed creating a new form of conformity. Ron Shively, who had been stationed in Germany, said of the protest there, “I think I linked many of the protests here in this country to a...global sense of students and young people just protesting everything...I think part of me just said, ‘Oh, well, those folks back home are just protesting because’...It was a student thing.”

Dennis Crimmins is another veteran who saw the protest movement as a form of conformity. He served in Vietnam in military intelligence. Like many veterans, he enlisted because he had been raised to believe that serving his country was a duty. When he left for Vietnam, there was not much of a protest movement in his small hometown of Tenino, Washington. But when he returned, many more protesters had emerged. Crimmins said of them, “I didn’t think much of [them], for the most part...because they were all kind of like the hippie movement – they all dressed the same...they had long hair...kind of stereotypical of those types.”

Today many former protesters acknowledge they really never had any strong beliefs about the war. One such former protester is “George,” a writer in Washington D.C. He now feels that part of his compulsion to protest resulted from the natural rebelliousness of the time: “Up until 1964, I was told to obey my parents, obey my teachers, go to college, plan my life. Then came this great change. By September 1965, it was ‘Do anything you want to do. It’s okay.’ I recall it was a time of enormous freedom.” George recalled that at his state university, students were against anything and everything. He believed that a small minority of students protested

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87 Shively, interview, 1 August 2001.
89 MacPherson, Long Time Passing, 130.
against the war because they truly believed it was wrong, but he thinks the vast majority did so because it was fun. "You ask anybody and he’ll say that one of the great times was the protest movement: staying up all night, getting high, listening to good rock, finding some girl – and acting in protest,” he recalled, "‘Just one of the college experiences – like Social Contact 101.’" A favorite saying of the times reflects this attitude: "Protesting was a great place to get laid, get high, and listen to some great rock.”

However, many protesters did have more valid reasons for opposing the war. As indicated earlier, many protested because they felt the war was morally wrong or because they thought domestic issues such as the War on Poverty and civil rights were more pertinent. Many also protested because they were concerned about their loved ones who were fighting in Vietnam. In many ways, it was an amalgamation of these various issues that led to an overwhelming sense of disillusion. It became increasingly apparent that victory was not imminent. The huge economic drain on America, as well as the many lives being lost, no longer seemed worth the outcome.

The belief that America could not win the war began to emerge as early as 1967. Despite the fact that America purportedly “had superiority on land, in air, and off shore,” two years of combat had still not brought forth victory. This feeling was perpetuated by the fact that America was fighting against a Third World country that relied on guerilla warfare. As the Fort Hood Three pointed out, victory, if at all possible, was a long way off. In their joint statement they revealed that “[their] officers just talk[ed] about five and ten more years of war with at least ½ million of our boys thrown into the grinder.”

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90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 33.
92 Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties, 162.
93 Mora, Samas, and Johnson, “The Fort Hood Three,” 303.
Many Americans no longer understood what they were fighting for in Vietnam. It all began to seem so senseless. This disillusion was perhaps felt most keenly by soldiers who had actually served time in Vietnam. Neil Sheehan, a writer for the *New York Times*, wrote in a 1969 edition of *Harper Magazine* that: ""There comes a time in some wars when the killing, or just the manner of dying, appears so senseless that even the obedient soldier who is ‘not to reason why’ begins to question the meaning of his sacrifice."" For many soldiers in Vietnam, this was the case.

One such soldier was Master Sergeant Donald Duncan, who became one of the first antiwar veterans. In 1966, his expose entitled ""The Whole Thing Was a Lie!"" appeared in *Ramparts* magazine. His ""denunciations of the Vietnam conflict at antiwar rallies helped spark a peace movement among American soldiers."" Duncan, drafted into the army in 1956, was a self-described anti-Communist, committed to stopping its spread. In 1959, he joined the Special Forces, impressed with their dedication. It was during his training that he was first subjected to the ""lie"" he later realized. At the time, however, his awe of the Special Forces and their secret missions prevented him from realizing that he was being conditioned against the enemy. After his training, Duncan was assigned to Saigon, where his real education began. When he saw American contempt for the Vietnamese he began to question America’s ""friendly"" stance in Vietnam.

Duncan began to understand why the peasants sided with the Viet Cong rather than the ARVN and American forces. He realized it was the ARVN and American forces, not the Viet Cong, who were destroying the villages, razing the crops, and raping the women. In contrast, the

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Viet Cong tended to *help* the peasants and provided them with protection.\(^{97}\) Still, Duncan did not abandon anticommunism. "In the long run," he wrote, "I don't think Vietnam will be better off under Ho's brand of Communism. But it's not for me or my government to decide. That decision is for the Vietnamese."\(^{98}\)

Another veteran who became disillusioned by the way the war was being fought is Loren Gee, a former helicopter pilot with an Aerial Rocket Artillery unit in Vietnam. After he had been in Vietnam for some time, Gee encountered a friend from college who told him that a year earlier, his infantry unit had fought over the ground Gee was currently flying over. Gee learned that during every wet season, the Viet Cong regained the ground they had lost to the United States in the previous dry season. The war was ultimately a roundabout cycle in which no progress was being made. Gee wrote a book, entitled *V for Valor*, about his experiences in Vietnam and of this particular experience, he wrote, "Suddenly [I] felt as if [I was] just a little pawn in a very large game. But this game was serious. Some of [my] friends had come out on the short end of the stick already."\(^{99}\)

Gee did not lose all faith in what his role was in Vietnam, but he did come to the realization that the United States would probably not win anything. Ultimately, though, this would have little affect on the Vietnamese peasants. Gee felt that no matter who ended up ruling in Vietnam that "as far as justice and equality ...[the average peasant] wasn't going to have that."\(^{100}\) Despite his belief that the United States could not win, he was not compelled to go so far as to protest the war or the United States government. He felt that "there were a lot of our guys

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 298-299.
\(^{98}\) Ibid., 300.
\(^{100}\) Loren Gee, interview by author, tape recording, Olympia, Wash., 31 July 2001.
that were fighting over there and [he] felt a real responsibility to provide those guys with the best support that [he] could.”

Another veteran who grew to believe that United States involvement in Vietnam was going to make little difference to the Vietnamese people is Steve Schmidt. After losing his student deferment, Schmidt enlisted in the Air Force in 1968. He was eventually stationed at a large Air Force base outside of Saigon. Schmidt, who likes to learn something new from every experience he has, made it a point to get to know some of the local Vietnamese people, and he concluded that “it didn’t matter that we were over there...because once we left, the Communists would take over and things would go right back to the way they were. And when I started hearing that from them that’s when it started hitting home: ‘Then why in the hell are we here?” Although not compelled to protest the war, Schmidt came to believe that the war was “a waste of American lives, American dollars, and everybody’s time.”

Some soldiers even came to believe that the Vietnamese peasants should support the Viet Cong rather than the United States. Jan Barry, who later became the cofounder of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, served as an army radio technician in the 18th Aviation Company. He was part of the first wave of Special Forces sent to Vietnam by Kennedy in the early 1960s. He reported that “[s]ome of the special forces people would come back from their missions and say we should be supporting the other side, because these people have legitimate grievances and the other side is the only one...really trying to do something for these people.”

Peter Mahoney was sent to Vietnam in 1968. While there, he trained South Vietnamese troops and People’s Self-Defense Forces. The latter were groups usually composed of local

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] Ibid.
\item[103] Ibid.
\item[104] Moser, The New Winter Soldiers, 43.
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citizens that the United States armed “to protect their hamlets from VC infiltration.” It was the training of one of these groups that led Mahoney to question the war. He had just finished training approximately thirty young men, when they all turned around and joined the National Liberation Front, “taking their weapons and training with them.” Mahoney was shocked. He knew that these men understood what the United States military was capable of, yet they still joined the other side. Mahoney said, “That really got me thinking. If these kids feel that way, then who am I, as an American, to tell them that they’re wrong?”

“Hugh,” from New Jersey, grew up in a Catholic working class family and in parochial school he was taught to hate Communism. He did not necessarily understand what it was, only that it was bad. Hugh was recruited by the military in 1968, before he turned eighteen. Eager to go to Vietnam and fight Communism, he signed up with the permission of his parents. Later he became one of the 93,250 soldiers to desert the military during the Vietnam War. His rationale for doing so began when he arrived in Vietnam. He grew very discouraged by the way some of his peers and superior officers treated the Vietnamese. The major turning point for Hugh was when a good friend took him to a Buddhist monastery, where his friend taught English to Vietnamese children. An old monk told Hugh that the country had always been at war and everyone was tired of it. Hugh realized at this point that the type of government in Vietnam made little difference to the people. All they wanted was peace. Hugh eventually began to realize that if he were Vietnamese, he would have supported the Viet Cong. “Say Nixon hadn’t left office when the country wanted him to,” Hugh later explained, “So he goes into another

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106 Ibid., 75.
108 Ibid., 338-339.
country and asks that government to send a million troops to support his regime. What would
you do? You’d support the people trying to get rid of him.”

Lyle Quasim, who opposed the war because he felt it was none of America’s business,
was also affected by his time spent in the military. He was opposed to the war before he served
in the Air Force, but he was even more against the war when he returned home. “I don’t know if
you’ve ever seen an abdominal evisceration,” he explained, “When you see somebody’s
intestines hanging out… you say ‘Why? Why is this person in pain?… Why has his body been
maimed? Why will he possibly die?’” He was also deeply disturbed by attempts to make the
Vietnamese seem subhuman. He said:

How globally arrogant is it for us to turn the forces of this country on those
people and dehumanize them? And… what does it say about us to send the children that
we have birthed, 50,000 of them, to die?… What manner of society and human
beings… have we fostered that would allow us to do that? People say, “Well, it’s a violent
world” – and it is. “It’s a competitive world” – and it is. “And resources are things to
struggle and fight over” – and we do. But then you say, “Can we be any better than
that?”

One of the most prominent arguments concerning the war even today is the effect the
media had on the protest movement. Many people believe that the media were responsible for
creating antiwar feelings. Others, however, believe that the media created anti-protester feelings.
In fact, the media proved to be a two-edged sword. In Unscent Revolution: Television News and
coverage] provided encouragement for prowar and antiwar partisans. The more that was pictured
on television, the more the opinions of both sides hardened.” Whether or not the media created

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 339-340.


\(^{111}\) Donovan and Scherer, Unscent Revolution, 106.
opinions about the war, they certainly were responsible for bringing the war and the antiwar movement to the public’s attention.\footnote{Melvin Small, \textit{Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement}, Perspectives on the Sixties (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 1.}

Towards the beginning of the war most reporters reflected the public sentiment that America would be victorious in Vietnam. Historian William M. Hammond who extensively researched the relationship between the military and the press during this time said reporters “criticized U.S. tactics and strategy, but never argued about the wisdom of the American presence in South Vietnam.”\footnote{William M. Hammond, quoted in Donovan and Scherer, \textit{Unsilent Revolution}, 85.} Outlooks began to change as the war dragged on. As reporters witnessed the “difficulties and inconsistencies” of the war they began to believe that “[c]osts in blood and money soon exceeded expectations.”\footnote{Donovan and Scherer, \textit{Unsilent Revolution}, 85.}

The atmosphere surrounding this war was different than the atmosphere of previous wars. Television reports were uncensored since the United States had not declared war against Vietnam and South Vietnam was a sovereign nation which had requested United States presence. The Vietnam War was the first to have continuous television coverage. There had been some television coverage of the Korean War, however, it was without color or sound and was often seen days after the fact. But modern technology had advanced so much by the time of the Vietnam War that it allowed for vivid, realistic, up-to-the-minute coverage which became a major cause of alarm for presidents and military leaders who came to see it as a hindrance to the war effort.\footnote{Ibid., 85-86.}
President Richard Nixon, for example, wrote in his memoirs that daily news coverage of the war created "a serious demoralization of the homefront, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight the enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home." General Westmoreland believed that the advent of modern technology, which allowed people to see war in a new way, caused people to lose heart and distorted what was "really" happening. He felt media coverage of the war was directly responsible for American failure in Vietnam. Those like General Westmoreland, who believed that the media prevented victory, tended to believe that the press "construct[ed] sweeping conclusions from a few scattered facts."

Frank Payne, who served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, agrees with this sentiment. Although he was never stationed in Vietnam, the time he spent on Guam and Midway Island reinforced his opinion that the United States was doing the right thing there. Payne believes that technology allowed for "instant news reports" and "heavy, heavy coverage of the combat over there." He said, "People could see very graphically what was happening. And it, I believe, profoundly affected how they felt." But Payne believes that what really fueled the protest movement was "slanted reporting." He believes that the media had an agenda against the war and as a result, they prevented the public from knowing what was actually happening in Vietnam.

Many civilians acknowledge that the media played a major role in influencing their thoughts on the war. Cliff Gibbons, who was attending prep school when things in Vietnam began to escalate, could "see those helicopters and the body counts and the blood on that color

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118 Ibid., 313.
TV set.” He began to fear being sent there. Myra MacPherson also believed that the media influenced antiwar sentiments. She writes that the media was partially responsible for the fact that “whatever idealism or belief propelled men to go were pretty well stripped away by the harsh realities of what was happening in Vietnam.” The media also “gave draft-age men an immediacy with kindred souls around the country who were protesting.” It showed them that they were not alone in their desire to not go. Had young men opposed to going to Vietnam not been aware of how many others felt the same, they may have kept their opinions to themselves.

Michael Carlebach, a student at Colgate University in the mid-sixties, also argues that the media influenced his thoughts on the war. He recalls one news program in particular that “gave us a look at a war that wasn’t really the war we’d been told it was up to that point.” The program showed a platoon of soldiers destroying a village that had been labeled as hostile. However, Carlebach recalls that the only people being attacked were women, children, and the elderly. To him, it did not seem as if these people could possibly be the enemy. Now a photojournalist, Carlebach believes that “photographs act as symbols.” He recalls some notorious photographs from the era that motivated many people to believe the war was wrong. “Those pictures made a difference,” he recalled, “Those [images], for millions of Americans, became the war. And if there was anything that turned America against the war, it was those images, because symbols are powerful things, symbols can affect reality.”

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120 MacPherson, Long Time Passing, 139.
121 Ibid., 133.
123 Ibid., 96-97.
However, despite evidence that media coverage proved detrimental to the cause, “thorough and respected historical studies” have shown this is not necessarily the case.\textsuperscript{124} It is now widely believed among scholars that television news did not dictate, but mirrored public opinion. In 1965, when most Americans still supported the war, television news was also supportive. The media were clearly on America’s side and North Vietnam was always “portrayed as fanatical and cruel.”\textsuperscript{125}

When the sentiment of the populace began to adopt a more antiwar stance, media coverage shifted as well. This was increasingly apparent after the Tet Offensive of 1968. Many attribute this change in opinion to the reporting of correspondents, such as Walter Cronkite. When Cronkite made his famous statement that he no longer believed that United States victory was possible, President Johnson feared it would sway the opinions of “‘middle-of-the-road folks who [had] supported the war all along.’” What Johnson did not realize though was that these people had already begun to change their minds; Cronkite was merely reflecting the shift.\textsuperscript{126} Hammond relates this transformation in public opinion to the growing number of American casualties which increased dramatically during and after the Tet Offensive. American acceptance of the war would drop 15 percent each time the number of Americans killed or wounded rose by a factor of ten. Hammond writes that “[t]his reaction occurred regardless of whether the war appeared to be going well or poorly and in spite of anything favorable or unfavorable that the press and television had to say.”\textsuperscript{127}

Media coverage was not always as graphic as some make it out to have been either. Studies, such as one done by Lawrence Lichty of Northwestern University, show that heavy

\textsuperscript{124} Donovan and Scherer, \textit{Silent Revolution}, 87.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 87, 92.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 102.
combat was rarely shown on television. Too much violence would have turned Americans away from their television sets, which would have hurt ratings.\textsuperscript{128} Also, contrary to popular opinion, television news did \textit{not} initially show continuous violence. In fact, from 1965 to 1970 less than 5 percent of the coverage showed "heavy battle." "The networks tried to shield dinnertime audiences from horror by rejecting shots of wounded American soldiers and suffering Vietnamese civilians," Donovan and Scherer write.\textsuperscript{129} In fact, it seems that it did not even matter \textit{what} the networks showed. Polls indicate that over half of the public did not even \textit{remember} what was shown on the news.\textsuperscript{130}

Some also claim that inexperienced reporters did not report accurately during the war. However, evidence shows that many of the reporters were seasoned veterans themselves who had covered wars before. They would have been much less susceptible to manipulation, than inexperienced reporters, by military leaders who may have tried to influence what was reported.\textsuperscript{131} Even if inexperienced or liberal reporters had tried to promote antiwar sentiment, they could not always determine what would be aired. The "gatekeepers" of the media, who controlled what was shown, tended to be more conservative than the reporters.

These chiefs of the television networks prohibited antiwar sentiment from appearing on television early in the war. They tended to rely on the government for information. Thus, the government had the ability to pressure them into showing pro-war propaganda. The gatekeepers also tended to have a pro-capitalist bias. They were, after all, in the business to make money. To increase ratings it was necessary to air what the public wanted to see. Given the prominent Cold

\textsuperscript{129} Donovan and Scherer, \textit{Unsilent Revolution}, 90.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 313.
War mentality at the beginning of the war, they automatically adopted an anti-Communist mindset. Until public opinion began to shift towards opposition, it was in the best interest of the networks to portray the war in a positive light.

Evidence also shows that the media created opposition to the protest movement in many ways. Melvin Small writes that, “Oppositional mass movements have a difficult time obtaining fair, much less favorable, coverage from establishment media... For a variety of economic, political, and institutional reasons, journalists and their employers tend to denigrate those out of the mainstream.” It was for this reason that during the Vietnam War, the press seemed to concentrate only on the violent and radical aspects of the protest movement, while ignoring many of the political arguments behind opposition. Despite the fact that many people were opposed to the war, only a small minority joined the actual protest movement.

The protest movement tended to produce negative opinions about protesters, not about the war. In 1968, the University of Michigan asked people to rate different groups of people on a scale of zero to one hundred. A third of those polled gave protesters a score of zero, while only 16 percent gave them anything higher than fifty. “Opposition to the war came to be associated with violent disruption, stink bombs, desecration of the flag, profanity, and contempt for American values,” explains John Mueller. This attitude can be attributed primarily to the media’s portrayal of protesters since the media were the only source of information about protesters for most people.

In this sense, the protest movement was counter-productive. Had it not created such negative feelings about protesters, many more people may have joined the movement, and the war may have been even more unpopular with the general public. However, it is a “well-known

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132 Small, Covering Dissent, 13.
133 Ibid., 2.
public opinion phenomenon," writes Mueller, that people tend to agree with those they admire.\textsuperscript{135} Many Americans viewed "peace marchers [as] beatniks, kooks, or communists" so it is not surprising that the protest movement did not draw more followers.\textsuperscript{136} Since the media supported "those who operate within the system," they championed middle-class, community values. They did not portray the anti-establishment youth who were typically behind protest activities in a favorable light.\textsuperscript{137}

In the end, the role of the media was not that important; it was not a determining factor for most protesters. Most people who opposed the war did so for reasons of morality, their concern with domestic issues, varying degrees of self-interest, or overwhelming disillusionment. The media did influence some, but in the end, each person's reason for opposition was unique. Some were so firm in their convictions that they were willing to risk jail time, become exiled from their country, or like Gene, to maim their own bodies. It is because so many people made these types of decisions that the Vietnam War protest movement still draws attention today. It is still compelling because it was such a break from the traditional domestic behavior associated with American wars. People want to understand why this happened. The fact that there was no single, overarching motivation for protest makes it that much more compelling. Had there been one obvious reason for dissent, the movement would not still be the complex issue for historical inquiry that it is today. There were many reasons for opposition and despite its fragmented nature, the protest movement still drew much attention.

Why, some thirty years after the fact, is it important to understand the reasons Americans protested the war in Vietnam? The baby boom generation still constitutes the largest faction of

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 151-152.
\textsuperscript{136} Anderson, \textit{The Movement and the Sixties}, 126.
\textsuperscript{137} Small, \textit{Covering Dissent}, 13.
the American populace, and the ramifications from their conflict during the Vietnam War are still apparent today. Myra MacPherson writes, "For every nongoer who sometimes thinks badly of the less-than-noble way he avoided the war, there is a soldier who blames himself for having gone. For every resister who takes pride in not having gone, there is a soldier who takes pride in his service." While tensions have eased between the various factions of this celebrated generation, they still remain. By trying to understand the rationale people had for making the decisions they made, some of these tensions might finally be erased.

Perhaps most important though, is that there are always lessons to be learned from history. It would be nice to think that there will never be another Vietnam, but recent terrorist attacks on America remind us that peace is not a permanent state. America is once again on the threshold of war. While this war against terrorism is of a different nature than the Vietnam War, because in this case America was directly attacked and the enemy is elusive, it is inevitable that it will be met with protest. It is to be hoped that the protest of this new war will not create the strife within America that the Vietnam protest did. Understanding the rationale behind opposition to the Vietnam War and the effect it had on American society will allow us to apply its lessons to today. Perhaps we can avoid division and instead achieve unity in this time of peril.

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