



Understanding the Vietnam War

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The Vietnam War was originally caused by the influence of the Cold War, during which the U.S administration and the Soviet Union both competed to spread their own political ideologies (US fostered for capitalism/democracy while the Soviet Union wanted communism). Eventually Vietnam itself was split into two parts where the South received help from the Americans and the North advocated for communist ideals. However, many Vietnamese individuals started to favor the Soviet Union when a Southern politician Ngo Dinh Diem's factions were found to be involved in multiple scandals where they took in various sources of bribes and was exposed as a corrupt party (Britannica.com, French rule ended Vietnam Divided) (Randolph Stephen, Foreign policy and complexities of corruption). The tension escalated when the Southern soldiers were attacked by the North armies in the Gulf of Tonkin which resulted in the deaths of many American soldiers (History.com, Vietnam War). President Lyndon B Johnson used this incident as a justification to declare war on Vietnam and ordered more military actions. The war brought a wave of protests from the American citizens, particularly because the U.S government went into a war that was not quite relevant to their nation because most of them were fighting for the benefits and control of Vietnamese society. It sparked controversies when experts discovered that the majority of the soldiers dispatched to battlefields were African Americans (approximately 300,000 African American soldiers which was 25% of the U.S troops in Vietnam) (African American Veteran Monument, Vietnam War). The tension got worse when America lost the Vietnam war as the majority of their soldiers were defeated by the Viet Cong where they had more geographical benefits. Many U.S soldiers succumbed to Guerrilla Warfare where countless numbers of them were killed because of frequent ambushes and raids. Overall, the excessive U.S. interference in Vietnamese politics has resulted in the sacrifice of 58,220 American lives (National Archive, Vietnam War U.S Military Fatal Casualty Statistics).

Many protesters emphasized on the sacrifices caused by the decisions made by the U.S government. They mainly focused on the young lives that were lost due to unnecessary warfare. For instance, Dan Bullek who was enlisted into the army at the age of 14 was killed just a month after he arrived in Vietnam (Vietnam Veteran Memorial Fund, Stories of Dan Bullek). Like this example, many protesters wanted their country to stay out of foreign affairs and conflicts. Some individuals, especially anti-war protesters, also criticized the soldiers who fought in the war arguing for inflicting such cruel and inhumane violence. The major incident was the My Lai Massacre that took place on March 16 1968 when U.S. soldiers killed about 504 innocent Vietnam civilians including 173 Vietnamese children and 17 pregnant women (Britannica, My Lai Massacre) The U.S media did not have information about this until a reporter Seymour Hersh exposed this in his journal revealing how the U.S. government was deeply involved in this matter by trying to cover-up the situation (his action relates to the 1st amendment of constitution: freedom of press and speech). The protesters argued how this action could not be



justified and should be seen as a type of war crime. The tremendous growth of the public support for the anti-war movement became somewhat successful when Lieutenant William Calley was convicted (surprisingly he was the only one accused) of premeditated murder for what he did to innocent Vietnamese civilians. However, it was later found out that his sentence was drastically reduced from life imprisonment to 10 years in prison (Military.com War criminal or Scape Goat: William Calley). Like these cases, individuals' right to peacefully assemble and their freedom to express their own perspectives often helps the citizens to shape the government and urge politicians to take further action (even though Lieutenant Calley was not fully punished, it still shows how people affect what their government does). Another example of this concept could be seen by the activities organized by the Students for Democratic Society (SDS). This group initially originated from the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) and emphasized on civil rights of individuals (later shifted their focus to anti-war activism). They often organized large-scale marches and protests across campuses to warn people about the dangers and brutality of war. They burned their draft cards to show their voice against military dominance and dictatorship which was prominent in American society during the 1900s. The activists from this movement focused on anti-interventionism, arguing how the USA should stay out of foreign business and pay more attention to its domestic issues. One of their biggest protests happened in Washington D.C in 1965, March where 15,000 to 25,000 people showed up to voice opposition against the Vietnam war (VietnamWar50th.com SDS stage anti-war protest). The majority of their picket included slogans like "Hell, no, we won't go!" and "Make love-not war" condemning the forced draft procedures conducted by the administration. The group organized another big march in April 1969 on Harvard Campus. A group of activists took over the University Hall to criticize Harvard's close relationship and support for the U.S military such as the ROTC program (Massmoments.org, Harvard Student Occupies University Hall). The Harvard administration called law enforcement for help and about 250-300 students were arrested with some minor injuries (Declan J.Knieriem, "Haunted by the War": Remembering the University Hall Takeover of 1969). Overall, SDS acted as a catalyst for the uprising of the anti-war movement. Their effort was successful in convincing people to recognize that the American government is sacrificing their people by getting involved in unnecessary conflicts. What SDS fostered was the division across U.S. society as the public began to lose its trust in their government and start voicing for peace. Consequently, the SDS protest played a successful role in making people pay more attention to what their government was doing, further influencing the public's voice for change in major policies and to end their interference in Vietnamese societies.

The majority of the SDS organization tried to attract more members by going out on the streets and contacting widely different groups of people, mostly students, to gain greater support. They have also conducted a community project named as Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) to address social issues such as unemployment and housing among people with poor financial status (University of Massachusetts Amherst, ERAP records). Eventually, their efforts



to ameliorate communities' life and environment was successful as more people began to promote and join their group to voice against what their government was doing. As the SDS organization grew popular they began to raise many fundraisers through which they received money from the wealthy liberals to aid their protests and other anti-war activities. Another group that was prominent in protesting against the Vietnam War was the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). This organization was founded by the group of Quakers who voiced opposition to the war for religious and moral ideals. They printed educational materials and established strong alliances to show their opposition to draft procedures and the U.S government's involvement in the Vietnam War. The majority of these groups tried to gain greater support by providing free counseling sessions for many young men who were about to be enlisted in the army. They often advised them to apply to military positions such as the National or the Coast Guards to avoid being dispatched to the war or to apply for military positions that are unlikely to get sent out to the frontline (AFSC, *Courage to Resist* 50 years since Vietnam). As a result, their overall attempt to reduce the sacrifices of youths was recognized as people started to show support for AFSC by donating, and volunteering to be part of their projects and marches. One of their notable campaigns, through the help of others, was the National Action/Research on the Military-Industrial Complex (NARMIC) where they published reports to expose companies such as Honeywell and General Electric that were making and selling weapons to profit from the Vietnam War. These efforts soon stirred the crowd to confront many selfish industries that advocated for war just for their own financial benefits (AFSC, *Resisting the Vietnam War*). The legacy of NARMIC still goes on to this day through Action Center For Corporate Accountability (ACCA) where they still fight for peace and less production of lethal weapons (AFSC, *Publishers of Truth*).

As many anti-war movements started to prevail the U.S government began to utilize law enforcement to disperse the crowd from protesting. For instance, the government used pepper spray to stop the protests and to arrest those who were involved. One of the notable examples of this was the anti-war protest that took place in Chicago where many individuals clashed with Chicago police officers near the convention center. The law enforcement violently used tear gas and batons to break up the crowd causing tremendous chaos that resulted in the injury of 119 police officers and 100 protesters. This event was later known as the Battle of Michigan Avenue or Democratic National Convention Protest which shows the controversy surrounding individuals' constitutional rights. Before the police intervention, the crowd gathered for peaceful intentions just to voice out their opposition against the Vietnam War (U-high midway, 1968 Milestone). However, Mayor Richard J. Dalley wanted to prevent unnecessary disruptions near the convention center as the police officers under his control were sent out to stop the protest. Some argued the mayor's action was a violation of the First Amendment: freedom of peaceful assembly. However, the administration argued that his decision was to maintain law and order and that protesters were there with the intention to cause disruptions which could be considered as harm to public safety (they were also protesting on a wrong place because locations like



convention centers are spaces that the government controls the most as they don't want trouble to happen on particular spots). Overall, the Battle of Michigan Avenue questions the extent of individuals' rights versus the government's authority when it comes to time, place and manner restrictions. Another notorious tactic was the strategy used by the FBI agents. Many government officials covertly used the COINTELPRO programs to wiretap phones to listen to conversations between the anti-war activists, they have secretly followed where the protesters are going to stop the march beforehand and looked through the mails that were sent to their homes. The public did not know about this until 1971 when a group of activists broke into the FBI office and revealed the documents to the reporters (Office of Justice Program, The FBI and the Sixties AntiWar Movement). It became a serious issue as people began to criticize their government for violating their 1st and 4th amendment rights. However, almost no agents were convicted but stricter rules were established to constrain the power of the FBI such as complete shutdown of the COINTELPRO program and the creation of FISA court to make sure that no agents are illegally looking through the private information. This case is almost similar to the events of the Red Scare where government officials had forcefully searched people's private property without probable cause or a valid warrant. It ties back to the constitutional issues that America encountered every time when they were engaging in war as the administration wanted more control of the people so they could focus more on the ongoing foreign conflicts. One of the most common "loopholes" that they use, as mentioned above, is the time, place and manner restrictions where the law enforcement can limit an individual's rights based on certain circumstances. However, this is a very ambiguous and vague system as the law itself is very subjective. For example, while some think it is okay to do certain things in particular spaces, others might think differently. Consequently, the outbreak of the Vietnam war gave the U.S government an opportunity to control and seize foreign politics but it also gave them an opportunity to limit the rights of their own citizens to reduce interference with what they were doing.

Even with the strict government regulation many anti-war activists still used various methods to express their beliefs. For instance, people often gathered in large numbers to make it difficult for the law enforcement to suppress them. One recognizable event was a nationwide program called the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam. Some colleges like North Carolina University created discussion sessions so their students could freely talk and teach others about things that were currently going on in the Vietnam War. This approach gave students knowledge about the situation their nation was in and how they should respond to both national and foreign issues. It also led to many students criticizing their university for their support of companies like Dow Chemical who mainly produced napalm. This weapon was frequently used in warfare to cause massive fires that burned large areas including the homes of civilians (mainly because Vietnam had many forests) (Time.com, Behind the Anti-war program that swept America in 1968). The program developed itself into a huge influence when 500,000 to 750,000 people gathered in Washington DC to protest against their government actions. Consequently, it



strongly shows how the Vietnam War was not just opposed by a small faction of civil rights groups but by the majority of American citizens. The protest for the war was not just done physically but it was also conducted and expressed through music and literature. For instance, the famous song “Give Peace a Chance” by John Lennon highlights the importance of non-violence and understanding between people and nations itself. Many books were also written during that time to point out the killings and sacrifices on the battlefield. The Vietnam Logic of Withdrawal by Howard Zinn emphasizes on how the war should end as fast as possible and that the conflict in Vietnam started in the first place because of the constant military occupation and interference from America. Like these examples, many forms of protests played a crucial role in shaping people’s opinion about the Vietnam War and further encouraging them to join peaceful marches and to let the government hear what they were trying to support.

The continued support of anti-war movements finally met with major accomplishments when President Johnson decided to withdraw the American troops from the Vietnamese territory. The forced draft procedures were stopped as people are no longer required to be enlisted in the army. However, many young people who returned from the war were still not old enough to vote. This issue led to some debates as it meant that individuals were sent to war by decisions of politicians whom they did not even vote for which emphasizes on the controversy of lack of representation. Consequently, the 26th amendment was established that ultimately lowered the voting age to 18 fostering greater inclusion among younger generations. The large organized peaceful demonstrations are often more effective as people have a better chance to deliver their opinion to the government administration. If it was just a non-controlled riot then the law enforcements would only be interested in suppressing them instead of seriously considering what they are trying to communicate. Large gatherings in non-violent protest often urge further action as it tells the government what their people are trying to show support of. At the end of the line, many politicians' careers heavily depend on the votes from the citizens. If they realize what their people want then they will put more effort into solving the issues as they need the support from the stakeholders. Peaceful marches are also protected by the government which give the government less opportunity to prevent it from happening. In conclusion, the protest and activism conducted by organizations like SDS, AFSC have fostered the growth of people’s support of world peace that gave social pressure for the federal government to end the war.



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