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Vietnam and the anti-war movement: did the Vietnam protestors actually achieve anything?

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The last US troops were withdrawn from Vietnam in March 1973, following the Paris peace agreements of January 1973. Soon afterwards, the war between North and South Vietnam was restarted and within 2 years the Communist North overwhelmed the US-backed South. North and South Vietnam became one country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and on 1 May 1975, Saigon, the capital of the South, was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

The defeat of South Vietnam was a political disaster for the USA, which had committed itself to the defence of the South ever since the Geneva agreements of 1954 and the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower. Since then, about 36,000 US troops had died in defence of South Vietnam and the USA had invested enormous resources and pride in the war. Historians have sometimes asked why the war lasted so long and what part was played in ending the war by the anti-war movement. The nature of the antiwar movement was examined in my article in TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW Vol. 3, No. 1. This article, therefore, looks at its influence during the Vietnam War and why it was not more successful.

President, Congress and public opinion

The most direct way of ending the war was to convince the president, as commander in-chief, to change his policy, or to help elect a new president who favoured peace. Another possibility was to gain the support of Congress, which might then force the president to negotiate for peace, for example, by cutting off funds for the war. Much would depend on public opinion. If the American people could be persuaded that the war was wrong or unwinnable, then support for it would drop and the president and members of Congress would have to end the war if they wished to be re-elected.

Thus the domestic politics of the war were vital to the success or otherwise of the anti-war movement. However, one of the main problems of the peace movement, apart from its disunity, was that it was regarded as a dangerous threat by the two presidents mainly involved in the war, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Both were highly critical of the anti-war movement and encouraged the FBI to investigate the movement's leaders, such as Martin Luther King. Both presidents believed that the peace movement had been infiltrated by radicals and Communists and was aiding the enemy.

The anti-war movement had more success in influencing members of Congress and public opinion but it never gained full acceptance by either. This was because even those who opposed the war, either in Congress or outside, were often hostile to the anti-war movement itself, which was generally regarded as militant and unpatriotic.

A brief review of the political history of the Vietnam War underlines this central problem.

The Gulf of Tonkin and the election of 1964

The first major elections in which the war was a significant factor were the presidential elections of 1964. The Democratic candidate was President Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded John F. Kennedy when he was assassinated in November 1963. Johnson claimed to be pursuing a cautious, moderate policy in Vietnam, employing about 20,000 US personnel to help defend the South while avoiding an escalation of the war that might provoke China or the USSR, as supporters of the North. In contrast, his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, argued for a more aggressive US policy to defeat the Communist North and even talked about using nuclear weapons.

Johnson's hand was strengthened by the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, when North Vietnamese ships appeared to have fired upon some US patrol vessels. This enabled Johnson to obtain from Congress the so-called Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which allowed the president to use whatever force he deemed necessary to defend US interests and personnel in the region. At a time when the antiwar movement was still small, this combination of moderation and toughness helped Johnson to be elected in

November 1964 by a huge margin over Goldwater, who was seen as an extremist by many voters.

However, during the course of 1965, Johnson increased US involvement and by the end of 1967, there were about 500,000 American troops in Vietnam. This led to the growth of the anti-war movement and to events such as the March on the Pentagon in October 1967. It also led to figures like Martin Luther King speaking out against the war, notably in his famous Riverside Church address in April 1967. There were also members of Congress--mainly liberal Democrats within Johnson's own party)--who were becoming increasingly concerned about the war, the high rate of US casualties and the way that it had taken over Johnson's presidency and diverted him from the reforms of his Great Society programme.

Robert Kennedy and the 1968 election

1968 was a presidential election year and it was clear that the war in Vietnam would be a major issue. Public opinion was beginning to turn against US involvement and opinion polls showed that Johnson's conduct of the war was unpopular, both with those who wanted an early peace and those who wanted the war to be fought more vigorously. At the end of 1967, Senator Eugene McCarthy announced that he would run for president against his own party leader, Johnson. He attracted little support at first except from students and other young activists in the anti-war movement. Then, at the end of January, North Vietnam and the Vietcong launched their Tet Offensive in South Vietnam. The offensive failed to lead to the downfall of South Vietnam but it suggested that the end of the war was further away than ever.

Largely as a result of Tet, the Democratic primary election in New Hampshire became a vote on Johnson's conduct of the war and he was able to defeat McCarthy only by a narrow margin. Senator Robert Kennedy, the younger brother of the assassinated president, then entered the Democratic election race. Unlike McCarthy, Kennedy held a wide appeal among the groups that had supported his brother. At the end of March, Johnson went on television and announced that he was actively pursuing peace in Vietnam and would not seek re-election as president. Peace talks began in Paris soon afterwards.

The anti-war movement now had two major candidates who could be supported for the presidency. McCarthy entered the race first and retained the loyalty of many peace activists. But Kennedy's charismatic style, in contrast to that of the pedestrian McCarthy, and the wide appeal of the Kennedy name, meant that he was able to defeat McCarthy in most of the primaries in the spring of 1968. The decisive primary took place in June in the key state of California, when Kennedy narrowly defeated his opponent. However, a few seconds after his victory speech, Robert Kennedy was gunned down as he made his way through the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

The Chicago Convention, 1968

The assassination of Robert Kennedy was a disaster for the anti-war movement, even greater than the killing of Martin Luther King 2 months earlier. It removed the anti-war candidate with the best chance of winning the 1968 presidential election. Instead, anti-war campaigners were left with either McCarthy--who had lost much of his appeal in comparison with Kennedy--or Hubert Humphrey, a liberal Democrat but one who was, as Johnson's vice president, closely associated with the unpopular president.

Determined to make their voices heard, many opponents of the war decided to go to Chicago, where the Democratic Convention to select the party's presidential candidate was taking place. The ensuing battle on the streets of Chicago between anti-war protestors and the police severely damaged the image of the anti-war movement as a whole and also made the Democratic Party look divided and unfit to govern. As a result, the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, won the presidential election with a clear majority. Eugene McCarthy came in fourth, far behind even the pro-war candidate, George Wallace.

Richard Nixon and the election of 1972

Nixon, as president, moved cautiously to implement his goal of 'peace with honour' and it was not until November 1969 that he announced his policy of 'Vietnamisation', whereby US troops would be withdrawn from the war gradually and replaced by US-trained South Vietnamese troops. The slow progress towards peace under Nixon revived the anti-war movement especially when, in April 1970, he widened the war by ordering US troops into neighbouring Cambodia. The shooting of four students at Kent State University added to public disquiet about the war and soon afterwards, Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution.

By 1971, Congress was becoming increasingly concerned about the war and Nixon's conduct of it. The publication of the Pentagon papers revealed the secrecy and dishonesty of presidential policy in Vietnam. In the Senate, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, William Fulbright, held public hearings about the war which included testimony by John Kerry, a leading member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). The anti-war movement was at last making an impact on Congress, where opposition to the war was growing.

It appeared that Nixon would find re-election difficult unless more progress could be made in the Paris peace negotiations. But the number of US troops in Vietnam was being steadily reduced and the policy of detente with the USSR and China seemed to be succeeding. In 1972, Nixon made state visits to both Beijing and Moscow, which put pressure on North Vietnam to reach an agreement in Paris. Shortly before the presidential election, Nixon's secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, announced that 'peace was at hand'. In November, Nixon easily defeated his Democratic opponent, the anti-war Senator George McGovern.

The end of the war, 1975

Peace accords between the USA, South Vietnam and North Vietnam were finally signed in Paris in January 1973 and the last US troops were withdrawn. Nixon had assured the South privately that the USA would intervene if the North threatened its existence. But Nixon's authority was badly undermined by the Watergate scandal, which led to his resignation in August 1974. Nixon, and his successor, Gerald Ford, were faced with a resurgent Congress determined to prevent further US involvement in the war. When South

Vietnam was overrun by the North in 1975, the US government stood by and the war came to an ignominious end.

The anti-war movement played little direct part in ending the war. The end was brought about mainly by public opinion and by Congress opposing further US involvement once the Paris peace agreements had been signed. However, individuals like Martin Luther King and groups such as the VVAW had played an important part in bringing the war into disrepute in previous years. Above all, the antiwar movement came close to achieving its aim during the 1968 presidential election but the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy undermined the peace movement and allowed the war to continue for 6 more years.

Questions

- * Did people oppose the war because they believed it was wrong or because they, did not think it could win it?
- * Why did the anti-war campaign attract so much violence?
- * How strong is the case that the war would have ended sooner if Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had lived?
- * Did the anti-war movement achieve anything worthwhile?

Chronology of the key year 1968 January Communist Tet Offensive undermines Johnson's policy in Vietnam. March New Hampshire primary. Johnson narrowly defeats Eugene McCarthy. Robert Kennedy enters election race. Johnson withdraws from race and announces peace negotiations. April Assassination of Martin Luther King. June Kennedy defeats McCarthy in California primary election but is assassinated shortly afterwards. August Democratic Party Convention in Chicago chooses Humphrey as its presidential candidate. Clashes between police and anti-war demonstrators. November Nixon wins presidential election. Pledges 'peace with honour'.

Key objective

causation

Before you read this List the reasons for the failure in Vietnam in order of importance. How high up would you place opposition at home to the war?

Key points

- * To achieve its aim, the anti-war movement had to persuade the president as commander-in-chief that the war was wrong or that it could not be won. Presidents Johnson and Nixon regarded the anti-war movement as subversive.
- * The anti-war movement had more influence on Congress and public opinion but even opponents of the war often regarded the anti-war movement as radical and unpatriotic.
- * At the time of the 1964 presidential election, the anti-war movement was quite small. Johnson seemed to be pursuing a moderate policy in Vietnam and was elected easily.
- * In 1968, the anti-war movement was at its height. Martin Luther King opposed the war and Robert Kennedy was a strong anti-war candidate for the presidency. The assassinations of King and Kennedy undermined the anti-war cause and allowed Nixon to be elected.
- * Nixon's policy towards Vietnam, especially the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, attracted widespread protests but by the 1972 presidential election, peace seemed to be near and he was re-elected by a large majority.
- * The anti-war movement had little direct influence on the end of the war in 1975. This was caused by Congress and public opinion refusing to support further US involvement in Vietnam after the Paris peace agreements. However, the movement played a part in bringing the war into disrepute in earlier years.

Paris peace agreements (1973): agreements between the USA, North and South Vietnam stating that US troops would withdraw and prisoners of war would be returned.

Geneva agreements: divided Vietnam between Communist North and pro-Western South with elections to re-unify the country in 1956. These were never held.

FBI: US Federal Bureau of Investigation responsible for enforcing federal justice and security.

March on the Pentagon: approximately 100,000 anti-war protestors marched on the Pentagon and a small group attempted to storm the building. They were repulsed by US Marshals.

Great Society programme: ambitious programme of domestic reforms such as civil rights and federal aid for education and welfare.

Vietcong: North Vietnamese guerrilla insurgents.

Tet Offensive: major Communist offensive that took the US government and South Vietnam by surprise but which was eventually defeated.

primary election: state elections held by each party to help decide who should be chosen as the party's presidential candidate.

Kent State University: National Guardsmen shot dead four students at the Kent branch of Ohio State University. The students were protesting at the US invasion of Cambodia.

Pentagon papers: confidential history of the Vietnam War produced by the Defense Department and leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, a government official, to the New York Times in 1971.

Watergate scandal: agents working for Nixon's re-election campaign broke in to the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate Building in Washington DC, June 1972. Nixon tried to cover up the involvement of his staff, which eventually brought his own downfall.

Weblink

The student protests against the Vietnam War are a popular subject for websites and you should not have difficulty finding good coverage, especially of the Kent State University killings. The protests are nicely outlined, with examples of anti-Vietnam poetry, at www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/vietnam/antiwar.html. The History Channel has video footage of the Kent State killings on its site at: www.history.com/media.do?mediaType=All&searchTerm=kent+state&action=search&showName=1&z=18&y=2, or for still pictures, visit www.vietnawar.com/politicalprotests.htm.

Finally, one of the most important and influential speeches against the Vietnam War came from Martin Luther King. You can read the text of it at: www.hartfordhwp.com/archives/45a/058.html.

Further reading

DeBeneditti, C. and Chatfield, C. (1990) *An American Ordeal: The Anti-War Movement of the Vietnam Era*, Syracuse University Press. A detailed book on the anti-war movement.

De Groot, G. J. (2000) *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War*, Longman. Includes a good chapter on the anti-war movement.

Isserman, M. and Kazin, M. (2003) *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, Oxford University Press. An interesting book on the wider context of the anti-war movement.

MacMahon, R. (ed.) (2003) *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, Houghton Mifflin. An excellent book that includes a useful chapter on the anti-war movement.

Small, M. (2005) *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War*, Ivan R. Dee. An excellent and readable book on the anti-war movement and the politics of the war.

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