

The US Anti-Vietnam War Movement (1964-1973)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Dates: 1964-1973

Nature of Struggle: Peace

Target: U.S. Government and the “Military/Industrial/Academic Complex”

Movement: Wide segments within American society, particularly among college students. Organizations included Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Committee for Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), War Resisters League (WRL), Committee for Nonviolent Direct Action (CNVA), the Vietnam Moratorium Committee, Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC), and Youth International Party (Yippies), and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).

Conflict Summary:

The U.S. war in Vietnam triggered the most tenacious anti-war movement in U.S. history, beginning with the start of the bombing of North Vietnam in 1964 and the introduction of combat troops the following year. Over the next decade, hundreds of thousands of young people became radicalized in a largely nonviolent, diverse and sometimes inchoate popular culture of war resistance, employing tactics ranging from comical street theatre to industrial sabotage. Students, government officials, labor unions, church groups and middle class families increasingly opposed the war as it climaxed in 1968, forcing a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces. Anti-war activities, particularly large-scale resistance to military conscription, forced an end U.S. combat operations in Vietnam and a suspension of the draft by January 1973.

Political History:

The origins of the Vietnam War are rooted in centuries of resistance by the Vietnamese from foreign control. Following periodic domination by the Chinese, the French colonized Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia in the mid-19th century. Sporadic resistance against the French colonialists continued until the Japanese invasion during World War II, resulting in a robust communist-led guerrilla insurgency known led by the Viet Minh which

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gained widespread popular support. Resistance continued when the French, with U.S. support, attempted to re-conquer the country. The 1954 Geneva Agreement, which ended the colonial war and granted independence, temporarily divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel pending unifying elections in 1956. The United States, however, fearing a communist victory, blocked the elections from taking place. An armed rebellion led by the communist-led National Liberation Front (NLF), also called the “Viet Cong”, in South Vietnam challenged the corrupt U.S.-backed dictatorship in Saigon, resulting in the Kennedy Administration sending increasing numbers of military advisors to the country. Citing North Vietnamese support for the NLF, President Johnson began a bombing campaign of the North in August 1964 and ordered American combat units into South Vietnam in 1965, which in turn led the North Vietnamese army to join the NLF fighting in the South.

Strategic Actions:

While there had been a long history in the United States of popular resistance to foreign wars, such as the Anti-Imperialist League’s campaign against the U.S. invasion of the Philippines in the early 20th century, the movement against the Vietnam War was unprecedented in scope. There already was a small peace movement prior to the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, based primarily on concerns around nuclear proliferation, particularly nuclear testing. This movement was led primarily by the Committee for Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) established in 1957, but also included the pacifist Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA), founded that same year, and Women’s Strike for Peace (WSP). The early opposition to the Vietnam War was largely restricted to pacifists and leftists empowered by the successful application of strategic nonviolent action in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) emerged in 1960, espousing a democratic socialist vision and opposition to militarism and soon became primarily focused on ending the war. The first major protests began in 1964 and quickly gained strength as the war escalated. Starting at the University of Michigan, “teach-ins” on the Vietnam War modeled after seminars raising consciousness in support of the Civil Rights Movement, brought in thousands of participants. In addition to national protests, which attracted tens of thousands to

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Washington, DC, there were acts of civil disobedience that became more widespread over time, including sit-ins on the steps of the Pentagon, draft induction centers, and railroad tracks transporting troops, as well as the public burning of draft cards.

Opposition increased in tandem with the escalation of the war, as body counts escalated, reports of atrocities against civilians circulated, draft calls increased, and prospects of a U.S. victory dissipated. In particular, military conscription began to impact a growing number of working and middle class families and helped mobilize college students, who faced the prospects of being sent to Vietnam soon after graduation. Recruiters for the military as well as companies associated with the war—such as Dow Chemical, the chief manufacturer of napalm—were increasingly met by protesters when they came to campuses. In 1967, 300,000 marched in New York City and 50,000 protesters descended on the Pentagon, with over 700 being arrested. A national organization of draft resisters is formed in 1967, calling itself the Resistance, as many thousands were jailed, fled to sanctuary in Canada, or went underground. Young people increasingly fused political opposition with cultural experimentation, defying traditional American norms. Surveillance, smear campaigns and staged support rallies were organized by government agencies to inhibit the growth of the movement and media coverage was largely unsympathetic, yet by the end of 1967, public support for the war dropped to barely one-third of the population.

U.S. troop levels in Vietnam peaked in 1968 at 540,000, with more than 300 Americans being killed every week. Despite this, an NLF/North Vietnamese offensive at the end of January underscored the unwinnability of the war. The nomination of pro-war candidates by the two major political parties despite widespread anti-war sentiments, combined with violent police actions against anti-war demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and elsewhere, served to further radicalize the anti-war movement. A countercultural group calling themselves the Yippies staged innovative actions and guerrilla theater, radical priests raided offices of draft boards destroying records, and prominent veterans of the civil rights struggle, including Martin Luther King, Jr., became increasingly outspoken against the war. The news media began to become more skeptical in its war coverage

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and mainstream churches and unions began to speak out more boldly. Blockades of thoroughfares and other forms of nonviolent direct action became increasingly common. These pressures forced the Johnson administration to begin peace talks with the North Vietnamese and NLF and to suspend the bombing of North Vietnam.

What cohesion existed in the anti-war movement declined in the coming years despite a popular wave of energy and support, as many activists embraced far left ideologies, countercultural lifestyles, or abandoned their commitment to nonviolent tactics. Still, three million people participated in demonstrations as part of the Moratorium on the War in October 1969 across the country and half a million protested in Washington, DC the following month.

President Nixon's hopes that the gradual withdrawal of troops and a concomitant decline in draft rolls would diminish the anti-war movement were shattered with the U.S. decision to invade Cambodia in the spring of 1970, which resulted in large scale protests. Tensions between the anti-war movement and the U.S. government escalated further when six college students were killed and dozens wounded in anti-war demonstrations at Kent State University and Jackson State University. Hundreds of colleges and universities shut down from student strikes and occupations of campus buildings and other disruptions forced a withdrawal of U.S. ground forces from Cambodia less than eight weeks after the initial invasion.

Desertions and mutinies within the U.S. armed forces made prosecution of the war increasingly difficult. Three quarters of a million people marched on Washington in April of 1971, followed in early May by tens of thousands of protesters attempting to shut down government operations in the nation's capital in early May by blockading bridges and thoroughfares. Further revelations of massacres of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops, systematic deceptions of the public and Congress by the administration, torture of political prisoners in South Vietnam, and domestic spying on U.S. citizens alienated the U.S. public further from U.S. government policy. However, increasingly violent protests—while still representing only a small minority of the movement—ended up alienating most Americans from the anti-war cause

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as well. Government agents would routinely infiltrate anti-war groups, encouraging them to use violence in order to marginalize the movement further.

Despite a brief upsurge in protests following and resumption of the air war against North Vietnam in the spring of 1972, the factionalization of the movement and the withdrawal of most U.S. forces led to a decline in protests. Still, the anti-war movement did force the United States to sign a peace treaty, withdraw its remaining forces, and end the draft in early 1973. Continued U.S. support for the Thieu dictatorship in Saigon and the breakdown of the cease fire led to small ongoing protests, leading Congress to finally refuse additional U.S. aid to the South Vietnamese regime as the final NLF/North Vietnamese offensive forced the regime's collapse in April of 1975. Vietnam was reunified under communist rule two years later.

By the end of the war, the U.S. anti-war movement had amassed an impressive record of nonviolent action. Over a decade of organizing, actions had included mass protests and vigils; sit-ins, occupations, and blockades; conscientious objection, draft resistance and desertion; guerrilla theater; obstruction of military recruiters, arms shipments and personnel; petitioning and letter-writing campaigns; destruction of draft files.

Ensuing Events:

The power of strategic nonviolent action to force an end to an unpopular overseas war served as a deterrent for large-scale U.S. military interventions overseas for the next three decades, a phenomenon known by detractors as "the Vietnam Syndrome." Despite troop levels well below what many military strategists believe have been optimal levels for the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, fears of massive nonviolent resistance have prevented the resumption of military conscription. As with the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, many individuals and organizations active in the anti-Vietnam War movement remained engaged during the 1980s to protest the controversial U.S. support for insurgency and counter-insurgency operations in Central America as well as the escalating nuclear arms race. Many of these anti-war groups and their

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successor organizations remain active to this day in opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The anti-Vietnam War movement, along with the Civil Rights struggle, also helped stimulate greater interest in strategic nonviolent action as an alternative to war and violence as well as a greater interest in the creation of alternative lifestyles and institutions.

For Further Reading:

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- Hixson, Walter L., ed., *The Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, New York: Garland, 2000
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