

## **The War at Home** **Peter Filene**

### **Introduction:**

The American experience in the Vietnam War during 1961 to 1973 was bloody, bitter, and ultimately devastating. This was, after all, Americans' only defeat (unless you count the defeat of the Southern Confederacy).

But the war at home proved to be even more devastating than the war in Vietnam. It divided Americans against each other: dove against hawk; middle class against working class; young against old. At home Americans engaged in a civil war about Vietnam.

### **Two wars:**

This was a very different kind of war from the one that Americans had recently fought against Germany, Italy and Japan.

World War II was a total war.

Overseas, in Europe and the Pacific battlefields, seven times as many American servicemen died as in Vietnam.

At home, most young men were in uniform. Civilians underwent geographic dislocation and dealt with rationing of everything from cars to nylons.

Most important, it was a patriotic war, and a war that ended in victory.

Vietnam was a "limited war."

Overseas, 58,000 American dead (and let's not forget the several million dead Vietnamese, military and civilian).

At home, only 40 percent of draft-age men served, and only 10 percent went to Vietnam;

There was no dislocation and no rationing.

Nevertheless, it became an increasingly unpopular war, and ended in a defeat.

Let me draw the contrast in different terms. Think of each war as a story-line.

WWII involved distinct, dramatic signposts: Pearl Harbor, D-Day, V-E Day, V-J Day. Americans could think of it as a narrative that began with hardship and ended with triumph.

Vietnam had no signposts. When did it begin? When was the turning-point?

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As one historian has remarked: "What marked the era was a seeming loss of the defining moment and therefore of a well-anchored, widely shared sense of history itself."

### 1965-67

During the Kennedy years, most Americans were unaware of Vietnam.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson won a landslide victory. A few months later, in 1965, he began bombing North Vietnam and sending a hundred thousand troops. Now "Vietnam" made the news and began entering public consciousness. A large majority of the public supported the war.

At the same time, small but organized opposition began to appear.

After LBJ announced the bombing, faculty at the University of Michigan organized a "teach-in," engaging in all-night lectures and discussions. Within days, faculty and students followed suit at the University of Wisconsin, Stanford, Harvard, and elsewhere.

In April, the radical organization, Students for a Democratic Society, organized a march on Washington. Twenty thousand showed up.

But "student" and "radical" will create a false picture in your minds. Among the early opponents of the war were clergy, businessmen, housewives, and other respectable adults. For example, Richard Neuhaus, pastor of the Lutheran Church of St. John the Evangelist; Business Executives Move for a Vietnam Peace; Washington Physicians; Federation of American Scientists; Ladies Garment Workers Union.

In other words, not long-haired, wild-eyed kids, but respectable adults and concerned college students.

Still, all of them together were a tiny minority in 1965 and 1966.

As the Johnson administration escalated the war, the protests also escalated. By 1967 there were almost 500,000 troops in Vietnam. That same year 50,000 protestors staged a march on the Pentagon and 600 were arrested. Antiwar pickets shut down the Selective Service Center in Oakland, CA. Students prevented representatives of Dow Chemical (which manufactured napalm) from visiting campuses to recruit new employees.

Doves wanted publicity and they got it. But they were walking into a trap. Television news featured the young, noisy, longhair antiwar protesters in the streets. Of course. This was more colorful footage than a clergyman or college

professor explaining why the war was a mistake. So opponents of war became equated with protesters.

As the protesters became more visible, more vehement, sometimes more violent, a growing number of Americans turned against them. Picture a Chicago meatpacking worker sitting at a bar after work, watching the CBS newscast of kids shouting “Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?” To this meatpacker, these kids are not only unpatriotic. They are disorderly.

Moreover, they’re spoiled, gutless, privileged kids who don’t deserve their privileges. They have escaped the draft with college deferments. Well, why aren’t they studying? Meanwhile, the sons in his working-class neighborhood are fighting in Vietnam.

Yes, it was a working-class war. Of the 1,200 men in Harvard, class of 1970, only 56 served in the military, and only 2 in Vietnam.

The nation was divided into doves vs. hawks, which to some extent was also a division by economic class. But until 1968, the majority of Americans supported Johnson’s war. If at all, 20 percent wanted to escalate it further—bomb the hell out of Vietnam and win.

**1968**

Everything changed in 1968. On the Vietnamese New Year's Day, Tet, the Vietcong mounted attacks on virtually every significant target within South Vietnam, including five major cities and 654 district capitals. For six hours, they held part of US embassy in Saigon. It was not a victory. But after three years of steady escalation by the United States, the Tet offensive indicated that the enemy was as strong as ever. The Secretary of Defense talked about "the light at the end of the tunnel." Well, that light seemed far away—or maybe even a train coming in our direction.

Until now the media had been portraying the war in fairly optimistic terms. It was Americans against "the Communists." Newscasters quoted Pentagon briefings and body counts. Contrary to what you might believe, the evening news included minimal violence and bloodshed. News footage almost never showed heavy fighting, dead or dying Americans, civilian casualties, enemy soldiers who had been napalmed or cut in half by helicopter gunships.

As a CBS evening news producer explained: "I felt very strongly that there was a limit to how much blood and gore we could put on a broadcast that was seen at dinnertime for most American households." The television war was coherent and purposeful.

But now came the Tet Offensive. Walter Cronkite, the influential CBS anchorman, said privately, "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning the war!"

Publicly, on the Evening News, he said: "It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience in Vietnam is to end in stalemate . . . and that the only rational way out will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could."

When President Johnson heard that, he exclaimed: "If we've lost Cronkite, we've lost the country." A month later, he announced that he would not run for re-election in November.

After 1968, public opinion began to shift against the war. For the first time doves outnumbered hawks.

Republican Richard Nixon won the White House, promising he would end the war. He pursued a policy of Vietnamization: gradually withdrawing American troops, letting the South Vietnamese take over the fighting, and meanwhile intensifying the bombing in order to force the North Vietnam to call a truce.

"I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point."

During Nixon's first three years in office, 40 percent of all American deaths took place.

### 1969-73

Meanwhile, public opinion increasingly opposed the war. And antiwar protests increased, too.

In a nationwide "moratorium" on Oct. 15, 1969, c. 10 million Americans left their jobs and classes to rally in cities and towns across the nation. This was the largest public protest ever held in America.

A month later, between 250,000 and 800,000 people gathered in Washington DC to protest the war.

Nixon spent the afternoon watching the Washington Redskins on TV. Later, he spoke on national television: "To you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support. . . . North Vietnam cannot defeat the United States. Only Americans can do that."

In 1970, 250 bombings took place at draft centers, ROTC headquarters, and corporation offices.

By now, the Nixon administration was mobilizing to repress dissent. Two thousand FBI agents were assigned to infiltrate or maintain surveillance of radical groups. After Daniel Ellsberg released Pentagon Papers, which revealed the lies and deceptions about the war, Nixon ordered illegal wiretaps of thirteen govt. officials and four journalists.

But dissent was coming not only from civilians. GIs and veterans were also organizing against the war. In a full-page ad in the New York Times, more than a thousand active-duty servicemen wrote: "We are opposed to American involvement in the war in Vietnam. We resent the needless wasting of lives to save face for the politicians in Washington."

A group calling themselves Vietnam Veterans Against the War marched on the Capitol building. Veterans in uniform threw their medals into trash cans.

There were hundreds of GI antiwar underground papers. The Army desertion rate by 1971 was highest in U.S. history.

In the spring of 1970, Nixon invaded Cambodia, violating international law. This ignited yet more heated student protest.

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On the Kent State campus, National Guardsmen shot and killed four young protestors. Across the nation, college students went on strike, shutting down their campuses.

But protest also ignited anti-protest feelings—which Nixon appealed to with his slogan, “law and order.” Listen to this report from a Kent State student. "When I reported home, my mother said: 'It would have been a good thing if all those students had been shot.' I cried, 'Hey, Mom! That's me you're talking about,' and she said, 'It would have been better for the country if you had all been mowed down.'"

The nation was becoming bitterly polarized.

## **Conclusion:**

After 1970, antiwar protests declined. Why? Because of the Vietnamization policy, US combat deaths dropped from 200 per week to 35. Also, the government made changes in draft. In 1969, Congress limited draft to 19-yr-olds, to be chosen by lottery. Men above the age of 20 didn't face military duty. In 1972, Congress ended the draft altogether.

But the damage was done. The United States was a bitterly disunited nation.

- hawks vs. doves;
- working class vs. middle class;
- young vs. old.

Worse, it was a cynical nation. Respect for government and politicians plummeted.

Indeed, public confidence in all institutions declined: universities, physicians, the church.

It was also an increasingly beleaguered nation. The war overheated the economy. Unlike World War II, which pulled the country out of the Great Depression, the Vietnam War fueled large deficits, inflation and severe recession.

The Vietnam War formed a melancholy watershed. In more ways than one, it signaled a defeat for America.