

# Anti-war movement essay



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The anti-war movement alone did not bring about the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, however, anti-war sentiment was threatening to lose the government votes and when combined with the failure of the US forces and the media coverage, then it did have a massive impact. “ The real domino in the Vietnam War was American public opinion” – Jeffrey Record – Vietnam in retrospect: could we have won? There were three main factors which brought about the Withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, alone, they would not affect a withdrawal but when you put the Success of mass protest, the influence of the silent majority and the failure of the army all together, that is what convinced the US to withdraw troops. The Vietnam War was unprecedented for the US, it posed a new, guerrilla type warfare. Guerrilla tactics are simply attack and retreat and for the US troops they had an unseen enemy which posed a great problem for the inexperienced US troops. The fact that conscription for middle-class students in college was not implemented meant that the young black men (most of whom were refused college education) were mostly conscripted, a move which Martin Luther-king called a “ cruel irony” as they were fighting for a freedom in Vietnam which they did not have back home.

And while there was a War in Vietnam, Johnson cut back on money for his poverty initiatives, which were providing welfare and help for the black community. The media also played their part in reporting the military failures to the silent majority and when it came to the Tet offensive, the media played a defining role to the withdrawal of US troops. Yet all this must be combined with the awful military atrocities in Vietnam (operation rolling thunder/ranch hand, Tet, My Lai) when looking at the effectiveness of the

Media and mass protest. As the war became more and more unpopular with the students in America there began to be campus riots all over the country and there was a threat of civil disobedience. Students who were called up for action under conscription were refusing to go and fight, and a few hundred young men burnt their draft cards, the most notable being Mohammed Ali, however at the time he received heavy criticisms for his actions. Martin Luther-King described the conscription of black men as a “cruel irony” as the black men were fighting for a freedom that they did not have back home.

King stressed the importance of this struggle in a speech on 4th April, 1967 “We are taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in south-east Asia which they had not found in south-west Georgia and East Harlem”. This was a very effective form of mass protest as the people that were fighting for rights and burning their draft cards were the people being called up to fight in Vietnam it can even be described as a mutiny. The exclusion of middle-class students who were in college did keep support from the middle-class strong although it was simply because they weren’t losing their sons and daughters in Vietnam. If all-round conscription was made compulsory, the government would have found themselves with almost no support. The anti-war protesters gained considerable criticism when some radical left-wing protesters were broadcast on television outside the American embassy chanting ‘Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh’ in support of the North Vietnamese leader and an NLF victory. These protesters were little in numbers however they did demean the effectiveness of the more widespread pacifist (anti-violent) protestors, which all together decreased the effectiveness of mass protest in

the US “ The antiwar movement became a vehicle for the emerging counterculture of the 1960s, it probably turned off many more Americans than it turned on.

“- Jeffrey Record – Vietnam in Retrospect: Could We Have Won? Washington became very worried in December 1964 as 25, 000 protestors marched against the war. The number may seem small nowadays nevertheless to the government at the time they saw it as another 25, 000 votes lost and as the war dragged on the protests got bigger and the protesters became more high profile beginning with Mohammed Ali, Martin Luther King and then the VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) was formed. The VVAW began with just 6 members as a show of solidarity against the war, and then by the late 60’s/early 70’s the membership was 30, 000. The VVAW worried the government in two ways: one aspect was that the government could possibly lose another 30, 000 votes but another more important aspect was that the VVAW gained particular attention of the media as they were actual veterans of the war, at the time it would have been hard to find someone more qualified and influential to protest against the war than the soldiers that fought it.

Another event that the media jumped on and broadcast world-wide was the protest of Buddhist monks who committed suicide in protest against the repressive Diem government in South Vietnam. Diem refused to treat Buddhists the same as other people as he was a devoted catholic and the persecuted the 70% of South Vietnam who were Catholic, he also persecuted journalists who tried to film events such as rigged elections. The suicide of Thich Quang Due on June 11th 1963 was very influential as it was captured

by photographers and cameramen world-wide. He was filmed sitting down on a road in Saigon and then some nuns poured petrol over his head and they set fire to him. It was the shock that someone could feel so strongly for a cause that greatly affected the world and in particular America as they supported Diem's rise as leader of South Vietnam. There was a massive silent majority in the US at the time of the war and as they sat down every night to watch pictures of the soldiers being killed in Vietnam there was a possibility of a mass of lost votes for the White House.

The media were so influential because the Vietnam War was the first to be broadcast as good as live in people's livingroom's. They were described as the 'armchair generals' and represented Middle America whose sons and daughters were not off fighting because of conscription exclusion. However watching the lost battles every night and knowing that it was costing them \$66 million per day, they did have the power to decline a vote for the government, a very powerful tool, even more powerful than protest some may argue. The media were accused by General Maxwell of being "unpatriotic" and of "helping the enemy", nevertheless this didn't deter them, they had the power to report every offensive and every operation the way they wanted.

But it wasn't the media that government were worried about, it was the so-called 'arm-chair generals' who could decide not to vote for the party in power at the next election. They could definitely be called a silent majority, they didn't protest, they didn't set themselves on fire but they were in the majority and they were able to hold the government accountable by voting them out. Every military victory for the US was a propaganda victory for

North Vietnam, especially the Tet offensive when 37, 000 out of 70, 000 NLF members were killed. Tet was a propaganda victory for North Vietnam because the media broadcast pictures of charred NLF members burning in the streets of Saigon, which reacted very badly with the people watching in the US.

The Tet offensive was one of the most reported events of the Vietnam War, previous to the offensive in 1967, the NLF had been attacking US garrisons to draw the troops out of the cities, then on the Tet New Year in 1968, 70, 000 NLF members attacked more than 100 towns and cities. The offensive showed that the NLF had an inexhaustible supply of men and machinery and that is how the media reported it to the US and world-wide. It showed the US that the war was now unwinnable and after positive reports from the Generals the whole event was absolutely de-moralising for the people watching at home and troops fighting in Vietnam. In 1969, Life magazine printed the pictures of 242 soldiers that lost their lives in Vietnam, which affected a large amount of people in the US calling for the withdrawal of troops. Studies at the time showed that the death of loved one/friend combined with the \$66 million it was costing the American tax-payer to uphold the war effort had much more of an impact than the anti-war movement.

This shows that anti-war sentiment was much more widespread than actual anti-war protest because there were so many people against the war at the time that didn't protest but that held anti Vietnam War views. For the first time they didn't have to rely on official government reports for facts and figures, instead the media showed you the facts and figures out on the

battlefield live on television. “ This was the first struggle fought on television in everybody’s livingroom every day...

whether ordinary people can sustain a war effort under that kind of daily hammering is a large question”. It was the anti-war sentiment of the media and the people it reached which ultimately convinced Johnson not to run for another term because of the unpopularity of the war, its cost and effects. The aggressive foreign policy that the US took toward Vietnam was a result of many different factors: Guerrilla warfare posed a new enemy that attacked and retreated, right wing hawkish generals like Curtis LeMay and Westmoreland were spurred on by a hatred of Communism brought on by McCarthyism and Truman’s domino theory and there was a great inability to understand the culture and history of a country torn by land issues. All these factors which contributed toward atrocities in Vietnam would not affect the people back home in the US if there were no media because they would have to rely on black and white reports with facts and figures which can never show the true horror of war which was broadcast every night into people’s homes. The ‘ seek & destroy’ strategy of the US won them great criticism at home because while they were trying to seek out NLF members and Guerrillas by dropping napalm bombs and agent orange/blue on land dominated by vegetation under the operation name ‘ ranch hand’, they were also destroying the peasants way of life. The napalm often dropped on innocent civilian’s burning off their skin and destroying their crops and land or years to come “ It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.

” – Unidentified U. S. Army major, on decision to bomb Bentre, Vietnam, February 7, 1968. Operation rolling thunder was the campaign, which

effectively launched the War in Vietnam. It was designed to ‘bomb the opponents into submission’ – LeMay. The entire operation was supposed to last 8 weeks but ended up lasting 3 years with a total of 1 million tonnes of bombs being dropped.

Anti-war sentiment was not as wide spread in the US at the time so there was a majority of support for the operation until the media reported other military failures like the Tet offensive, the operation at My Lai and the battle to take Hamburger hill and how long operation rolling thunder was taking. Hamburger hill was an offensive to take a mountain, which achieved its name from the US media because of the way US soldiers were slain and processed like slabs of meat. The battle lasted 10 days and began with a total of 600 men, only 124 men were there to see victory. The operation was totally de-moralising for the troops and for the people watching in the US. My Lai was the epitome of atrocities committed in Vietnam and it showed how de-sensitised some of the troops were becoming.

On the 16th of March 1968, the Charlie Company of troops were trying to find assistants and aids to the NLF, they then came to the village of My Lai and General William Calley identified the villagers as suspects. Calley ordered the troops to open fire on the civilians, 500 men women and children were killed. The incident was shattering for the US in two ways: the media reported the My Lai massacre in the US and the government decided to try Calley for war crimes and after the shooting, the villagers who survived then started to support the NLF because of the way the US troops treated them “After the shooting, all the villagers became Communist” Nguyen Bat – surviving villager. It wasn’t just the failures of the US army which lead to an



overall defeat in Vietnam, the NLF had many strengths too as they were in terrain which they knew like the back of their hands.

The Ho Chi Minh trail was the foremost way the North Vietnamese Communists sent aid, supplies and men to the Guerrillas in South Vietnam. The trail was almost impossible to infiltrate, there were booby traps laid out along the whole trail, which the NLF knew well, but the US had no idea about. The Ho Chi Minh trail demonstrated to the US how organised and efficient the NLF were and it was the Tet Offensive which demonstrated to the Media and the US how much the NLF strived for a Communist victory. The Tet offensive was a major turning point in the War, in 1968 Johnson announced that there would be a slow withdrawal of troops. Previous to the Tet New Year, NLF members had been attacking US garrisons in an attempt to draw them out of the towns and cities in order to defend the garrisons. Then in January 1967, the NLF launched a massive campaign focusing the 70, 000 NLF members on attacking the South Vietnam towns and Cities.

7, 000 NLF members were killed however this did not matter to the NLF as it showed the media and the troops that they had an inexhaustible supply of men willing to fight and die for the NLF. The whole offensive was absolutely de-moralising for the troops and worrying for the people watching the broadcasts of the offensive. During the early 70's approximately 20, 000 troops resorted to drugs like marijuana, cocaine and heroin, which were widely available in South Vietnam, this further illustrated the lowering moral of the troops.