

## 1968 – THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In August 1964, President Johnson – who had taken office after the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963 – had used a set of events in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam, to **launch full-scale war on Vietnam**. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told the American public there had been an **attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats** on American destroyers. "While on routine patrol in international waters," McNamara said, "The U.S. destroyer *Maddox* underwent an unprovoked attack." It later turned out that the **Gulf of Tonkin episode was a fake**. In fact, the CIA had engaged in operations attacking North Vietnamese coastal installations – so if there had been an attack it would not have been "unprovoked." And it was not in international waters but **in Vietnamese territorial waters**. It turned out that **no torpedoes were fired** at the *Maddox*, as McNamara said.

In 1954, the **French**, having been unable to win Vietnamese popular support, which was overwhelmingly behind **Ho Chi Minh** and the **revolutionary movement for independence (Viet Minh)**, had to **withdraw from their former colony**. In a peace agreement between the French and the Viet Minh, it was agreed that the French would temporarily withdraw into the southern part of Vietnam and that the Viet Minh would remain in the north. The **regime in Saigon** – the capital of **South Vietnam** – became increasingly **unpopular**, it was close to the landlords, and this was a country of peasants. As a result it became increasingly dependent on financial and **military support from the U.S.** As the *Pentagon Papers* put it: "**South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States.**" The regime in Saigon was encouraged by the U.S. **not to hold the scheduled elections** for reunification fearing that Ho Chi Minh and the communists would win a landslide victory. **More and more Vietnamese** who criticized the regime in Saigon for corruption, were **imprisoned**. Around 1958 guerrilla activities began against the regime. The **Communist regime in Hanoi** – the capital of North Vietnam – gave **support to the guerrilla movement**. In 1960, the **National Liberation Front (NLF)**, also known as **Viet Cong**, was formed in the South. It **united the various strands of opposition** to the regime; its strength came from South Vietnamese peasants, who saw it as a way of changing their daily lives. A **U.S. government analyst** named Douglas Pike, in his book *Viet Cong*, tried to give a realistic assessment of what the United States faced: **In the over 2,500 villages of South Vietnam, the National Liberation Front created**



Napalm bombs contain jellied gasoline that sticks to structures as it burns.

On June 5, 1965, the *New York Times* carried this dispatch from Saigon: "**As the Communists withdrew from Quangngai last Monday, United States jet bombers pounded the hills into which they were headed. Many Vietnamese – one estimate is as high as 500 – were killed by the strikes. The American contention is that they were Vietcong soldiers. But three out of four patients seeking treatment in a Vietnamese hospital afterward for burns from napalm were village women.**"

organizations in a country where mass organizations were virtually nonexistent. Aside from the **NLF** there had never been a **truly mass-based political party** in South Vietnam. "The Communists have brought to the villages of South Vietnam significant social change and have done so largely by means of the communication process. That is, they were organizers much more than they were warriors" Pike wrote in his book.

It is estimated that the NLF membership by early 1962 stood at around 300,000. The *Pentagon Papers* said of this period: "**Only the Viet Cong had any real support and influence on a broad base in the countryside.**" This was not the language used by **President Johnson**, who explained the U.S. aim in Vietnam was **stopping Communism and promoting freedom**.

The regime in Saigon could not **suppress the National Liberation Front**. By the time of the Tonkin episode in 1964, most of the **South Vietnam countryside was controlled by local villagers** organized by the NLF. Immediately after the Tonkin affair, **American warplanes began bombarding North Vietnam and American soldiers were sent to South Vietnam**. By early 1968, there were **more than 500,000 American troops** there, and the U.S. Air Force was dropping bombs at a rate unequalled in history. **Large areas of South Vietnam were declared "free fire zones,"** which meant that all persons remaining within them – civilians, old people, children – were considered an enemy, and bombs were dropped at will. **Villages suspected of harboring Viet Cong were subject to "search and destroy" missions** – men of military age in the villages were killed, the homes were burned, the women, children, and old people were sent off to refugee camps. By the end of the war, seven million tons of **bombs had been dropped** on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia – **more than twice the amount of bombs dropped** on Europe and Asia in World War II.

Some of the **first signs of opposition** in the United States to the Vietnam war came out of the **civil rights movement** – perhaps because the experience of black people with the government led them to **distrust its claim that it was fighting for freedom**. In August 1964, when Lyndon Johnson was telling the nation about the **Gulf of Tonkin incident**, and announcing the bombing of North Vietnam, black and white activists were gathering in Mississippi, at a **memorial service for the three civil rights workers** killed there that summer. One of the speakers pointed bitterly to **Johnson's use of force in Asia, comparing it with the violence used**

against blacks in Mississippi.

In 1965, young blacks who had just learned that a classmate of theirs was killed in Vietnam distributed a leaflet: "**No Mississippi Negroes should be fighting in Vietnam for the White man's freedom, until all the Negro People are free in Mississippi.**" The **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** declared in early 1966 that "the United States is pursuing an aggressive policy in violation of international law" and **called for withdrawal from Vietnam.** Around the same time, Julian Bond, a **SNCC activist** who had just been elected to the Georgia House of Representatives, **spoke out against the war** and the draft, and the House voted that he not be seated because his statements "tend to bring discredit to the House." The **Supreme Court** restored Bond to his seat, saying he had the **right to free expression** under the First Amendment. **Students**, often spurred by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), were heavily **involved in the early protests against the war.** Student protests against the **ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Program)** resulted in the canceling of those programs **in over forty colleges and universities.** The ROTC was to supply half the officers in Vietnam. In September 1973, for the sixth straight month, the ROTC could not fulfill its quota.

**Young men** began to refuse to register for the draft, **refused to be inducted** if called. As early as May 1964 the slogan "**We Won't Go**" was widely publicized. **Some** who had registered began **publicly burning their draft cards** to protest the war. In May 1969, the Oakland induction center reported that of 4,400 men ordered to report for induction, 2,400 did not show up. One of the great sports figures of the nation, **Muhammad Ali**, the black boxer and **heavyweight champion**, **refused to serve** in what he called a "rich white man's war"; boxing authorities took away his title as champion.

The **antiwar movement**, early in its growth, found a new constituency in **priests and nuns of the Catholic Church.** Some of them had been aroused by the civil rights movement, others by their experiences in Latin America, where they saw poverty and injustice under governments supported by the United States.

In 1967, **Martin Luther King Jr.** spoke out at Riverside Church in New York in his speech "**Beyond Vietnam.**" He **connected war and poverty:** "We are spending all of this money for death and destruction, and not nearly enough money for life and constructive development." King now became a **chief target of the FBI**, which tapped his private phone conversations and blackmailed him. As a Senate report on the FBI said in 1976, the FBI tried "to destroy Dr. Martin Luther



In 1968, Daniel Berrigan, a catholic priest who had visited North Vietnam and seen the effects of U.S. bombing, joined by eight other people went into a draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland, removed records, and set them afire outside in the presence of reporters. They were convicted and sentenced to prison terms of two to six years. Daniel Berrigan wrote at the time of the incident: "*Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children [...] We could not, so help us God, do otherwise [...] The time is past when good men can remain silent, when obedience can segregate men from public risk, when the poor can die without defense.*"



US-President Lyndon Johnson had escalated the Vietnam war and failed to win it. By the year 1968 his popularity was at an all-time low; he could not appear publicly without a demonstration against him and the war. The chant "**LBJ, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?**" was heard throughout the country.



Daniel Ellsberg at the Los Angeles courthouse in 1973; Anthony Russo and Patricia Ellsberg to his right.

King." **On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968**, he went to Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike of garbage workers. There, standing on a balcony outside his hotel room, he was **shot to death** by an unseen marksman.

In the fall of 1968, **Richard Nixon**, pledging that he would get the U.S. out of Vietnam, was **elected president.** He **began to withdraw troops;** by February 1972, less than 15,000 were left. But the bombing continued. Nixon's policy was **Vietnamization** - the Saigon government, with Vietnamese ground troops, using American air power, would carry on the war. **Nixon** was not ending the war; he was **ending** the most unpopular aspect of it, the **involvement of American soldiers on the soil** of a faraway country. By 1969, the **Moratorium Day peace rallies** were drawing **500,000 people** to Washington. In 1971, twenty thousand came to Washington to commit **civil disobedience**, trying to tie up Washington traffic to express their revulsion against the killing still going on in Vietnam. Fourteen thousand of them were arrested, the **largest mass arrest in American history.**

As the war became more and more unpopular, **people close to the government** began to break out of the circle of assent. The most dramatic instance was the case of **Daniel Ellsberg** who was a Harvard-trained economist, a former marine officer, employed by the RAND Corporation, which did special, often secret research for the U.S. government. Ellsberg **helped write the Department of Defense history of the war in Vietnam** and then **decided to make the 7,000-page top-secret document public**, with the aid of his friend, Anthony Russo. In 1971 they gave **copies to the New York Times** and various congressmen. In June 1971 the *Times* began printing selections from what came to be known as the **Pentagon Papers.** It created a **national sensation.**

The **Nixon administration indicted Ellsberg and Russo for violating the Espionage Act** by releasing classified documents to unauthorized people; they faced long terms in prison if convicted. The **judge**, however, **called off the trial** during the jury deliberations, because the **Watergate events** unfolding at the time revealed **unfair practices by the prosecution.**

The publicity given to the student protests created the impression that the opposition to the war came mostly from middle-class intellectuals. But a Harvard study on public opinion found that the **people most opposed to the war were people over fifty, blacks, and women.** The most surprising data were probably in a survey made by the University of Michigan. This **survey** showed that, throughout the Vietnam war, **Americans with only a grade school education**

were much more strongly for withdrawal from the war than Americans with a college education. In 1966, of people with a college education, 27% were for immediate withdrawal from Vietnam; of people with only a grade school education, 41% were for immediate withdrawal. In 1970, both groups were more antiwar: 47% of the college educated were for withdrawal and 61% of grade school graduates.

All this was part of a general change in the entire population of the country. The capacity for independent judgment among ordinary Americans is probably best shown by the swift development of anti war feeling among American GIs – who came mostly from lower-income groups. There had been, earlier in American history, instances of soldiers' disaffection from the war. But Vietnam produced opposition by soldiers on a scale never seen before. In 1966, three army privates, one black, one Puerto Rican, one white - all poor – refused to embark for Vietnam, denouncing the war as "immoral, illegal, and unjust." They were court-martialed and imprisoned. The individual acts multiplied. A black private in Oakland refused to board a troop plane to Vietnam, although he faced eleven years at hard labor. Two black marines were given long prison sentences (six years and ten years) for talking to other black marines against the war. The GI antiwar movement became more organized. Near Fort Jackson, South Carolina, the first "GI coffeeshouse" was set up, a place where soldiers could get coffee and doughnuts, find antiwar literature, and talk freely with others. Other GI coffeeshouses sprang up in half a dozen other places across the country. Underground newspapers sprang up at military bases; by 1970 more than fifty were circulating. Mixed with feelings against the war was resentment at the dehumanization of military life.

The dissidence spread to the war front itself. When the great Moratorium Day demonstrations were taking place in 1969 in the United States, some GIs in Vietnam wore black armbands to show their support. The French newspaper *Le Monde* reported: "A common sight is the black soldier, with his left fist clenched in defiance of a war he has never considered his own." Deserters doubled from 47,000 in 1967 to 89,000 in 1971. Altogether, about 563,000 GIs received "less than honorable" discharges, indicating something less than dutiful obedience to the military.

In December 1970, hundreds of Vietnam Veterans against the War went to Detroit to what was called the "Winter Soldier" investigations, to testify publicly about atrocities they had participated in or seen in Vietnam. In April 1971 more than a thousand of the Vietnam veterans went to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate against the war. One by one, they went up to a wired fence around the Capitol, threw over the fence the medals they had won in Vietnam, and made brief statements about the war.

In the spring of 1970, Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who later was awarded the Nobel peace price, had launched an invasion of Cambodia, after a long bombardment that the government never disclosed to the public. The invasion not only led to an outcry of protest in the United States, but it was also a military failure. Kissinger



In 1975, Richard Nixon admitted in his *Memoirs* that the antiwar movement caused him to drop plans for an intensification of the war: "Although publicly I continued to ignore the raging antiwar controversy ... I knew, however, that after all the protests and the Moratorium, American public opinion would be seriously divided by any military escalation of the war." It was a rare presidential admission of the power of public protest.



Veterans back from Vietnam formed a group called *Vietnam Veterans Against the War*.

The administration tried to persuade the American people that the war was ending because of its decision to negotiate a peace – not because it was losing the war, not because of the powerful antiwar movement in the United States. But the government's own secret memoranda all through the war testify to its sensitivity at each stage about "public opinion" in the United States and abroad. The data is in the *Pentagon Papers*.

The system was working hard to contain the explosiveness of the black movement and the antiwar movement. Blacks were voting in large numbers in the South. By 1977, more than 2,000 blacks held office in eleven southern states (in 1965 the number had been 72). There were 2 Congressmen, 11 state senators, 95 state representatives, 76 mayors, 18 sheriffs or chiefs of police and 508 school board members. It was a dramatic advance. Those blacks in the South who could afford to go to downtown restaurants and hotels were no longer barred because of their race. More blacks could go to colleges and universities, to law schools and medical schools. But blacks, with 20 percent of the South's population, still held less than 3 percent of the elective offices.

Racism emerged in northern cities. Blacks, freed from slavery to take their place in a free labor market, had long been competing with whites for scarce jobs. In the summer of 1977, the Department of Labor reported that the rate of unemployment among black youths was 34.8 percent.

The federal government made concessions to poor blacks in a way that pitted them against poor whites for scarce resources. Northern cities were busing children back and forth in an attempt to create racially mixed schools. Blacks tried to move into neighborhoods where whites, themselves poor, crowded, could find in them a target for their anger. In Boston, the busing of black children to white schools, and whites to black schools, set off a wave of white neighborhood violence. The use of busing to integrate schools had the effect of pushing poor whites and poor blacks into competition for the inadequate schools that the state provided for all the poor.