

Social Conflicts of the 1960's

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Honors 201

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Burnham Hall

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In 1965, just as the American catastrophe in Viet Nam was reaching full ignition, I was arrested along with 38 others disrupting the normal operations of the Ann Arbor draft board, part of the bureaucratic machinery for sorting soldiers from civilians, the living from the dead, issuing, we thought, warrants to kill and to die. We borrowed energy and tactics from the Civil Rights Movement, of course, and we intended, as well, to awaken our fellow citizens to a moral crisis of massive proportions. It was a large civil disobedience, but it was not exactly a popular action. Only about 15% of Americans opposed the war then, and even in Ann Arbor we were pretty much on our own, surrounded by thousands of students who supported the war and wanted to see us expelled or worse. So much for the myth of popular resistance.

But by early 1968 a majority of citizens *had* come to oppose the war, and a sitting US president in effect relinquished his office because of it. Several developments in those three short years had dramatically shifted the scene.

For one thing US political leaders—blind and arrogant and cocksure as they took over the failed French colonial mission—were certain that they would triumph easily over a poor, peasant nation, welcomed in fact, as liberators, that tired, delusional conceit. But the Vietnamese refused their assigned role in Washington's script, and the National Liberation Front wouldn't quit—they retreated when necessary, holed up underground as required, and reemerged suddenly to beat back the invaders. The Vietnamese refused to lose.

Further, those of us who opposed the war set out early to organize and to educate our fellow citizens. We marched and picketed and resisted, it's true, but we also drew up fact sheets, created teach-ins, circulated petitions. The most difficult and exhilarating project for me was Viet Nam Summer, a concerted effort to knock on every door in working class neighborhoods—I was assigned to Detroit—and meet people face to face, listen to their concerns, and engage them in dialogue about war and peace. The more we tried to teach others, the more we ourselves learned—about Viet Nam, about America, about politics and possibility, about ourselves. We became better teachers, deeper, more thoughtful and more effective organizers. We became radicalized, and eventually we thought of ourselves as revolutionaries, committed to overturning the system.

The Civil Rights Movement also came out early and unequivocally against the war. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) issued a statement saying that "No Black man should go 10,000 miles away to fight for a so-called freedom he doesn't enjoy in Mississippi," and Muhammed Ali said, "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger... I won't fight in the white man's army." Martin Luther King, Jr., with his great prestige and base of liberal support on the line, denounced the war as illegal and immoral, and with some palpable anguish, he condemned his own government as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."

All of this shook the country to its core, and perhaps the last straw was large numbers of vets returning from Viet Nam, some disoriented, many angry and bitter about what they had seen and done there, and telling the plain truth. With the anti-war movement at its height and hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating in the streets, they joined the peace movement in droves, bringing a renewed urgency and purpose, even creating their own anti-war organizations which brought a new level of militancy into our ranks. The movement, which had been organizing GI's from the start, embraced

the vets as a strategic priority and a practical politics, and many vets found a natural ally in the movement, and in any case found more in common with young activists than with the old bastards in power. When they lined up, with and without beards, stated name, rank, and length of service, and then tore their medals and war decorations from their throats and threw them down on the Capitol steps, sometimes with a curse at those who'd sent them to kill and die for a lie—when they did all that, they initiated a new level of crisis.

So when the president relented, those of us who had worked to end the war felt vindicated and triumphant. In Ann Arbor we swirled out of our apartments and snaked through the streets in a spontaneous victory dance, rallying finally on the steps of the home of the president of the University of Michigan. He greeted us with words of encouragement: "Congratulations," he said. "You've won an important victory. Now the war will end." I think he believed it that night; I know that I did.

Five days later Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated and the cities erupted, fire in the streets, martial law, tanks and troops patrolling downtown. Three months after that Robert Kennedy was killed and the sense of chickens coming home to roost was palpable. Henry Kissinger emerged with a "secret plan to end the war," Richard Nixon was elected president, and by the winter it was clear that the war would not end. Rather the murderous occupation would escalate and expand in spite of the wishes of almost everyone. The war was deadlier and deadlier—every single day that the war dragged on, 2,000 innocent people were murdered by the US government. Not every week or every month—*every day*. And there was no end in sight. What to do?

Living through that time, the aggression, the assassinations, the terrorist war raging on and on in our names, it seemed as if we were experiencing terminally cataclysmic events and permanent war, the war of all wars, war without end. Looking back, of course, we can see that even if it felt that way, it wasn't so—that while it was monstrous and bloody, the war lasted only a decade, and then it was done. Three million people were needlessly killed, not thirty million, not three hundred million. But in those days, with the outcome far from certain, we had to choose our actions within a shifting, complex, and speculative world. Should I oppose the war? On what basis? Should I risk anything on behalf of that opposition? Could I be part of mobilizing a more wide-spread resistance? Could we perhaps go beyond ending this war, and end the system that led so inevitably to war after war? Could we have an impact?

Some of us burned out, then, and others fled to Europe or Canada or Africa to get away. Some ran for office, while others ran for the communes of California or Vermont. Some dug in, others dropped out. Some created what they thought would become vanguard political parties and went into the factories to organize the industrial working class, while others joined the Democratic Party with the hope of building a peace wing. Some made a religion out of making love, others made a mess of making revolution. No choice was the obvious best choice, none in retrospect was up to the challenge.

Note: Because this is a seminar, your presence is required each session. You will not receive credit if you are not here. If you are sick, I'll arrange for you to sleep in my office or at an infirmary nearby. If you want to bring a child because your childcare failed, fine. Is this clear? Is there any room for misinterpretation or ambiguity? Show up or be doomed.