

**The Soundtrack of Dissent: Analyzing the Cultural Polarization of 1960s America through
Antiwar and Pro-War Protest Movements**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

The Vietnam War was a seminal event that perpetuated shifting notions of American culture in a period of significant societal transformation. Its influence extends far beyond the 1960s, providing a foundational context for the evolution of cultural and political discourse in subsequent decades. The cultural dimensions of the Vietnam War are frequently underexamined, despite the numerous cultural contributions that emerged in response to the conflict. Notably, music became a powerful tool for articulating dissent, shaping American society during the era, and mobilizing a generation of young people toward activism.

This thesis examines the cultural conflicts in the 1960s and early 1970s, focusing particularly on their relationship to the Vietnam War. It examines both the antiwar and pro-war movements, analyzing their roles in shaping the broader cultural and ideological divisions of the era – a type of phenomenon that could properly be considered a precursor to the modern culture wars of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Through an in-depth examination of music, youth social movements, and the prevailing narratives of Vietnam War dissent, this study seeks to understand the underlying causes of these cultural tensions. It argues that the intensity of the conflict was fueled by widespread misunderstandings, mutual hostilities, and the era's increasing openness to new social and political ideas. Understanding these factors is essential for comprehending the broader historical and ideological shifts of the era.

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Introduction

The impact of the Vietnam War extended well beyond the military and the political spheres deeply influencing nearly every aspect of American life. Its effects were particularly pronounced in the realm of culture, reshaping the nation's image both domestically and internationally, altering the course of presidential campaigns, influencing the military draft, and affecting countless aspects of daily life.¹ The music and cultural artifacts produced during this period, whether as direct responses to the war or as reactions to one another provide a vivid reflection of the sentiment on both sides of the culture wars of the 1960s. These cultural expressions not only conveyed emotions but also sought to capture the broader public sentiment on each side, attempting to reflect these feelings without the distorting biases that each faction projected onto the other. In other words, the music of this era can serve as a meaningful representation of the collective values of both pro-war and antiwar groups. By analyzing music, it is evident where the misinterpretations originated, and how the cultural conflict deepened.

The key issue in the Vietnam-era cultural conflict was the widespread misunderstanding, perceived ill-intent, and a lack of openness and communication between the pro-war and antiwar camps. These breakdowns in communication contributed to the deepening cultural rift. These ideas were able to emerge and thrive due to the specific historical context of the 1960s. This decade was marked by a societal climate of liberal optimism and a renewed sense of hope in the wake of the prosperous post-war era. The 1960s represented a pivotal moment in American history, as it was the first time a significant portion of the population began actively resisting deep-rooted systems and advocating for change. The 1960s was a period in which American

¹ Sarah Hill, “‘This Is My Country’: American Popular Music and Political Engagement in ‘1968.’” Chapter In *Music and Protest in 1968*, edited by Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton, (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 47.

society became increasingly receptive to new cultural influences, shifting norms, diverse people, and perhaps most significantly evolving conceptions of what it meant to be American.² The numerous social, political, and cultural conflicts of the decade, coupled with the ability to question systems, prompted profound questions around the nation's identity. As a result, emerging ideas frequently diverged or conflicted, contributing to a national culture that was becoming more fragmented and polarized than ever.³ While social conflicts had existed in American society for much longer, the combination of grassroots activism and the political support of figures like President Lyndon B. Johnson and his administration played a critical role in creating the necessary conditions for meaningful reform. Music, as a medium of expression, offers a unique lens through which the progression of this divide can be observed, with some songs directly responding to others while all reflecting the distinct sentiments of the culture wars.

It is important to define the culture wars, especially in the context of the discussion around the 1960s and the Vietnam War. The term "culture wars" was popularized by American conservative politician Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s.⁴ The "culture wars" refer to the contentious and divisive issues that emerged in America, beginning in the 1960s, encompassing debates over topics such as art, censorship, abortion, affirmative action, religion, generational conflict, among others.⁵ These issues, which were deeply divisive, permeated various spheres of American life including political, social, and cultural. Historian Andrew Hartman has explored the origins and evolution of the culture wars asserting that "the history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America."⁶ This observation highlights the

² Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2.

³ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 2.

⁴ For more on the culture wars, refer to James Davison Hunter *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America* (1991).

⁵ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 1.

⁶ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 2.

fundamental force driving the culture wars; the struggle to define a cohesive national identity, which, rather than uniting the country, led to increased fragmentation and ideological differences. For the purpose of this thesis, the term “culture wars” will be used refer to the home front conflicts exacerbated by the Vietnam War. While the term is often applied retrospectively to encompass a broader range of cultural and political debates, it is used here to illustrate the multifaceted nature of pro-war and antiwar tensions during this period. Though employed sparingly, the term conveys the scope and intensity of the divisions that characterized American life during the 1960s and 1970s.

The broader transformations of the 1960s and early 1970s had a profound impact on American society with the Vietnam War being just one facet of this larger change. The Vietnam War highlighted the broader cultural conflict that was permeating everyday American life. During this period, fundamental questions about the nation's identity, values, and future emerged, alongside the rise of new social movements, ideas, and cultural norms that redefined the American experience.⁷ Aside from the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, Women's rights activism, and escalating nuclear tensions were all contributors to the broader cultural rift. The Vietnam War, and more specifically the domestic conflict that it perpetuated, offers a compelling case study to analyze of the ways in which the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s evolved and intensified.

Historiography

There is a significant amount of literature that focuses on the Vietnam War or its antiwar opponents and pro-war supporters. Much of the literature written on the topic has come in

⁷ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 2.

chronological waves, affecting the outlook that they have on the war, some emerging early after the war, and some in more recent years bringing in a wider understanding of the conflict. Many insightful works on the war came in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many of the participant-observer memoirs of the era focus on personal accounts of domestic activists, such as the writings of Tom Hayden or Todd Gitlin, which examine the successes and failures of the antiwar movement.⁸ Although these sources are undoubtedly important, they leave a gap in the cultural discussion of the war. There are a multitude of works on the antiwar movement, some that address the pro-war movement, or the intersection of the two,⁹ but often fall into exploring one subset of them such as the student movements, rather than focusing on a broader understanding of how and why the cultural conflict emerged. Cultural history, while rich, is more challenging to use as a foundation for scholarly work, as it often challenging to contextualize cultural pieces against the backdrop of their time, and it is even harder to assess the impact of culture on society. It is frequently overlooked or dismissed due to its speculative nature. Despite this, the goal of this thesis is to use cultural history in a meaningful way and move it to the forefront of the conversation around the Vietnam War. Many cultural artifacts, such as music, lack direct historical documentation and are instead subject to interpretation and analysis. As a result, cultural history is often sidelined in favor of more conventional accounts focused on military policy or politics. This trend is particularly evident in recent discussions surrounding the Vietnam War.

⁸ Books like Tom Hayden's *Hell No: The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement*, Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Robert S. McNamara's *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, or Ron Steinmann's *The Soldiers' Story: Vietnam in Their Own Words* are all personal accounts or include first hand stories on the war or home front. There are also a variety of oral history sources in the form of projects, museums, and libraries.

⁹ Some notable works include Adam Garfinkle's *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, Melvin Small's *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*, Tom Wells' *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam*, John Andrew III's *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics*, Seth Offenbach's *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam*, and Sandra Scanlon's *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*.

The most important source used in the formation of this thesis is music. Music forms a basis for understanding the progression of cultural conflicts during the Vietnam War, and also provides concrete lyrical examples of the intertwined nature of politics and culture. While the collection of songs relating to Vietnam, the 1960s, the Counterculture, and the changing political narratives of the period is extremely broad and diverse, a select few songs were chosen to inform this study. Bob Dylan was an extremely potent example of an artist who used his position to spread a political message, and thus his music was important for this study. Music from artists like Buffalo Springfield, Phil Ochs, Barry McGuire, Country Joe McDonald and Merle Haggard were all crucial in understanding the cultural zeitgeist of the 1960s. “The Ballad of the Green Berets” was a particularly important example of cultural expression for both antiwar and prowar activists. The film and the song, varying in their reception, both informed an understanding of home front war perceptions. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young were particularly important in the height of the counterculture and antiwar movements, representing a visible shift in American perception of the war and its movements, and a focus on the emerging counterculture. While many of these songs served as a soundtrack to the broader argument of this thesis, understanding them through a historical lens is important. Music is incorporated into many written accounts of the 1960s, which were useful, but Doug Bradley and Craig Werner’s *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*, which explores the importance of music to soldiers and those in Vietnam, was a crucial work in forming this thesis.¹⁰ The book functioned as a source of inspiration for the structure of this thesis, and also an important work on the historical impact and resonance of many songs. Sarah C. King’s dissertation “Celebrity Activism in the Vietnam War Era: How Cultural Icons Brought Antiwar Politics to Popular Mediums and

¹⁰ Doug Bradley and Craig Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015).

Transformed U.S. Political Culture" also provided a guideline and inspiration for the creation of this work.¹¹ Her dissertation uses a multitude of cultural examples and highlights the importance of cultural history and its impact on politics.

Some films, especially those that were created after the war and highlighted the legacy of Vietnam serve as examples of the power the cultural conflict had over American society.¹² They highlight the dividing views that occurred as a result of the war, and how those views shaped the public's understanding of the war. Newspapers and media sources, especially television news from the 1960s, were extremely important in comprehending the differing narratives on the movements that emerged. Television and written media were interesting outlets as journalists and television producers formed their own narrative or understanding of a movement, and thus could sway the public's perception of an event. *The New York Times* was useful in this study with headlines on protest demonstrations, especially those by antiwar activists.

While the literature on the war itself and the military history that surrounds it is broad, it was not incredibly useful in this study. Much of the work that formed this thesis were studies of youth student movements, cultural studies on the 1960s, or antiwar and pro-war movement accounts and reflections. There is a broad conversation of these movements, but Thomas Powers' *Vietnam: The War at Home*, Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield's *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*, and Simon Hall's *Rethinking the American Antiwar Movement* are particularly important works of literature. Though these three works differ in perspective, they are all in depth accounts of the antiwar movements trajectory and

¹¹ Sarah C King, "Celebrity Activism in the Vietnam War Era: How Cultural Icons Brought Antiwar Politics to Popular Mediums and Transformed U.S. Political Culture." State University of New York at Binghamton, 2019.

¹² This includes films such as *Platoon*, *The Ballad of the Green Berets*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Taxi Driver*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*.

important events that constituted its rise and fall. Both *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans' Against the War* and *David Dellinger: The Life and Times of a Nonviolent Revolutionary* by Andrew Hunt were important for bringing in other accounts of the antiwar movement, those separate from student movements. Rebecca E. Klatch's *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* was particularly useful in understanding the relations between Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and the ways they connected or differed throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. Her work also provided an understanding of the rise and fall of both the movements as they relate to the Vietnam War.

Understanding the 1960s was an important part of creating an argument as to why the cultural conflict emerged. *The Liberal Hour* by G Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot and *America Divided* by Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin both provide an in-depth understanding of the period.¹³ The books take different approaches to the period, one from a grassroots perspective while the other is a top-down understanding of the changes that occurred. The differing perspectives were extremely helpful in creating a more well-rounded narrative of the period. Along with these, Peniel E. Joseph's *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* was crucial to understanding the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁴ There is certainly much more literature that paved the way for this thesis to exist. The historians who have spent years writing on this topic have created an understanding and importance around it, and made this research possible. While many of these sources were helpful in understanding

¹³ More works on the 1960s like Bruce Miroff's *The Liberal's Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party*, Kevin Boyle's *The Shattering: America in the 1960s*, Thomas Franks *The Conquest of Cool* and David Farber's *The Sixties: From Memory to History* all provide accounts of the period.

¹⁴ Simon Hall's *Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements in the 1960s* offers a more integrated analysis of the two movements.

both culture and politics of the 1960s, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and our National Identity* by Christian G. Appy and *A War for the Soul of America* by Andrew Hartman are the reason why this thesis exists. Appy focuses on the Vietnam War and national identity, using both politics and culture to create a narrative that is based around American exceptionalism and legacies of the war. Hartman's book is arguably the most important work on the culture wars; it creates an understanding of what they are and how they emerged, while creating a narrative that flows eloquently and gives an extensive amount of proof for his claim. These two books informed and created the idea for the argument of this thesis.

Both antiwar and pro-war protestors have been examined in previous research, but a notable gap exists in the literature concerning the culture wars, particularly in terms of understanding their emergence through music. By the 1960s, music had become intrinsically political, with the growing ideological divide over the Vietnam War extending beyond political spheres into the cultural domain. This thesis seeks to explore the role of music in shaping these movements, offering insights into the development of both the pro-war and antiwar activists, especially as they evolved into political and cultural forces. Key organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) played pivotal roles in the widening cultural divide, initially emerging as student political movements before extending their influence into broader cultural realms, particularly in relation to the Vietnam War. Together with these groups, Black American organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other Civil Rights Movement groups, contributed to the broader political and cultural context of the 1960s. Understanding the interplay between these political movements provides a foundation for comprehending the political landscape of the era. As the Vietnam War became increasingly unpopular, both pro-war and antiwar factions,

motivated by a sense of optimism, and sometimes patriotism, and a desire to take to the streets, became key agents in cultural transformations brimming with war-related themes. The political landscape during this period, particularly in the context of President Richard Nixon's election and subsequent policies, further influenced this cultural shift. Politics and culture became increasingly intertwined during this time, with music serving as a powerful lens through which to understand the changing narratives of the period, and the diverse perspectives of both antiwar and pro-war activists. Music is a tool of cultural revolution, and by examining it as such, this thesis will make sense of the cultural conflict that emerged.

This thesis will contribute to the broader scholarly discourse on the cultural significance of the antiwar and pro-war movements. By analyzing the role of music in shaping this period, and examining the activities of both protest groups, it will demonstrate how a widespread cultural conflict emerged in the 1960s, a conflict that persisted well beyond the decade. This thesis will argue that the 1960s fostered a climate of cultural upheaval, contributing to perceptions of ill intent, and the rise of a so-called anti-American sentiment, thereby exacerbating the divide between both sides. A nuanced understanding of the emergence of both these movements, their political intersections, and the use of music as a tool for cultural revolution is essential for addressing the underlying cultural conflict.

Chapter 1: Early Stirrings and Musical Expression

The culture wars that emerged during the 1960s were rooted in ideological divisions and social issues that permeated American daily life. During the Vietnam War, the culture wars emerged between pro-war supporters and antiwar protesters, with both sides engaging in mutual criticism. Over time, this led to an increasing divide between the two groups. The pro-war movement emerged primarily in reaction to the antiwar movement, responding to rhetoric with which they largely disagreed with. Disputes about the war, the home front, and culture itself all influenced each side's view of the other. There was often a lack of communication, and a high level of misunderstanding between opponents and supporters of the war. Both movements were born out of similar sentiments as they felt mutual animosity – the difference lied in where their energies were directed. Both the New Left and a new conservative movement grew out of factions from the 1950s, and both struggled to find their place in politics. The so-called New Right – a term applied to the newly emerging conservative activism of the era – was an outgrowth on new conservative ideas in the 1960s. Some found inspiration in Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, while others aligned with President Richard Nixon's politics. Both the New Left and the New Right reshaped the meanings of liberalism and conservatism during this time. The New Right advocated for political engagement, a stance that was also strongly emphasized by the New Left.¹⁵ The New Left was defined by similar principles as the New Right, creating their platform from emerging ideas and a rejection of earlier manifestations of leftist politics. It should be noted that the escalating conflict in Vietnam in the early 1960s, though not prominent in public discourse before 1965, loomed in the background. Barry Goldwater, a Republican politician, made Vietnam a central topic of discussion,

¹⁵ John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (Rutgers University Press, 1997), 11.

particularly during his 1964 presidential campaign.¹⁶ The war itself, which was just beginning to enter American political discourse, created many questions for those on either side, particularly those relating to American exceptionalism and the nation's superiority.¹⁷ The war also became a domestic concern, and became a key topic of policy debates in Washington, D.C. The debate over the escalating conflict in Vietnam during these early years was less about American survival or success, primarily due to the belief that the America was helping Vietnam avoid the spread of communism, and more about the historical, social, and moral symbols within American society.¹⁸ It challenged individuals on both sides, and the resulting reactions became so polarizing that they created a significant divide between the two camps.

Early Antiwar Sentiment and New Left Inspirations

The antiwar movement began as an outgrowth of the New Left, an emerging youth movement primarily based on college campuses, aimed at critiquing an array of social ills, including the Cold War, consumerism, racism, and conventional partisan politics. The New Left itself and the groups that were tied to it, especially the newly emerging Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), were infused with a spirit of optimism in the early 1960s, emphasizing room for reform and improvement, but also opportunity for change. Initially aligned more closely with Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the New Left, at least early on, was optimistic by the liberal policies that emerged. Despite the rapport between the New Left and the liberal political groundswell of the early 1960s, President Johnson – a towering

¹⁶ Thomas Powers, *The War at Home: Vietnam and the American People 1964-1968* (G.K. Hall & Co, 1984), 2.

¹⁷ Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and our National Identity* (Penguin Books, 2016), xii.

¹⁸ Charles DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition." In *The Johnson Years, Volume Two: Vietnam, the Environment, and Science*, edited by Robert A. Divine, (University Press of Kansas, 1987), 23.

champion of modern Democratic Party liberalism – also dramatically escalated American intervention in the Vietnam War. He did so despite his promise in an early speech to attempt to contain the war and avoid “send[ing] the flower of our youth, our finest young men, into battle.”¹⁹ This early promise, particularly in Johnson's initial days, contributed to the frustration many Americans felt when the war escalated. A key difference between the Right and the Left at the time was their contrasting visions for America’s future. While many conservatives on the Right were hoping to promote a sense of American exceptionalism and thus focus on their ideals of anticommunism and free market economics, the New Left, and often radicals in general, tended to be more pessimistic with the passage of time. Despite the 1960s being a period of liberal presidencies and progressive experimentation, New Leftists themselves did not focus on abstract notions of the “American dream,” but rather they were preoccupied with what Malcolm X described as “an American nightmare.”²⁰ The focus was on creating change because social ills seemed both acute and plentiful, and the way ideas were expressed on both Left and Right were very different in rhetoric and tone. The frustration that came from the New Left and war opponents evolved into intense antiwar fervor.

New Left organizations and antiwar groups that emerged in the early to mid-1960s were inspired by their activist predecessors in the Civil Rights Movement who paved the way for new forms of protest in the United States. Young Americans that were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and later the growing resistance against the Vietnam War, embraced left-wing activism during this period.²¹ Partly because of the activism from groups resisting racism and segregation, and partly because of the post-war prosperity and liberal governments and

¹⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Why We Are in Vietnam.” Transcript of speech of the President’s News Conference, July 28, 1965.

²⁰ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 10.

²¹ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 11.

programs, a political climate developed in the 1960s where moral considerations about such weighty issues as war, racism, and other social ills took centre stage, resulting in more Americans than ever becoming active in politics, even those who were typically indifferent to politics.²² Racial tensions of the late 1950s and 1960s were a precursor to the wider cultural conflict of the era. The divisiveness that came from Civil Rights struggles for racial equality in the United States was extremely prominent and shaped the politics of the newly emerging antiwar movement. The fight for Civil Rights and especially the push for the Civil Rights Act that Kennedy proposed in the summer of 1963, impacted the entire American public, resulting in widespread awareness about such pressing issues as racial inequality in the American South.²³ The idea that routine violence was occurring daily to African Americans was not something many Americans had considered prior to 1963 because of their distance from it.²⁴ The ability of Civil Rights struggles, and subsequently, the Black Power Movement to bring these issues of racial equality and justice to the forefront of American society was extremely powerful. The campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement and the actions of Black Power activists by mid-decade, opened a new set of moral values for the American public and inspired and guided the antiwar groups' way when their time came.

Civil Rights activists were also active in high schools and college campuses, with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960, becoming one of the first and most influential youth-led movement organizations to emerge.²⁵ SNCC organized sit ins, freedom rides, and protests of many kinds,²⁶ and were an important example and sometimes

²² Powers, *The War at Home*, 20.

²³ Powers, *The War at Home*, 20.

²⁴ Powers, *The War at Home*, 21.

²⁵ Powers, *The War at Home*, 22.

²⁶ Powers, *The War at Home*, 22.

ally, of newly created antiwar student groups in the mid 1960s. When it came to the issue of Vietnam, members of SNCC, and Civil Rights activists, Bob Moses and Charles Cobb denounced Vietnam stating that “favouring the one [Civil Rights] necessarily involved opposing the other [Vietnam].”²⁷ Another key figure in the movement, who was also in SNCC, was Stokley Carmichael. He opposed American intervention in Vietnam publicly, and in an interview with columnist Rowland Evans, proclaimed that in his view, the war was immoral.²⁸ The consistent opposition against the war from SNCC united them with other groups, and contributed to the diverse array of characters that were a part of the antiwar movement.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was founded in 1962 in Port Huron, Michigan, and emphasized the concept of participatory democracy and social and political action.²⁹ The most important influence on SDS and other leftist student activists were the Black student movements in the south, and groups like SNCC.³⁰ The influence of Civil Rights activists and actors cannot be overstated; their efforts played a pivotal role in inspiring not only those protesting the war, but also broader societal movements of dissent within the United States during this period. The organization, communication, and goals that many university-based leftist activists student groups had were often based on examples from Civil Rights activists, especially Black students within the movement. They were able to analyze which tactics and strategies proved effective and which were less successful, a process that significantly contributed to the development of their own movements.

²⁷ Powers, *The War at Home*, 63.

²⁸ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 157-8.

²⁹ Powers, *The War at Home*, 24.

³⁰ Powers, *The War at Home*, 24.

SDS became one of the most important student activist groups in America during the 1960s. Using many principles from SNCC and other Black student groups, SDS created a powerful liberal-left student movement that eventually played an instrumental role in the antiwar movement. Their founding manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, released in 1962, emphasized the goals of the group, much of which focused on activism aimed at building an alternative American society.³¹ The statement's author, Tom Hayden, pointed out the various reasons why there was a decline in hope among university students:

...the dreams of the older left were perverted by Stalinism and never recreated; the congressional stalemate makes men narrow their view of the possible; the specialization of human activity leaves little room for sweeping thought; the horrors of the twentieth century, symbolized in the gas-ovens and concentration camps and atom bombs, have blasted hopefulness. To be idealistic is to be considered apocalyptic, deluded. To have no serious aspirations, on the contrary, is to be "tough-minded."³²

Hayden poignantly captured the sentiment experienced by many during the postwar era, at the height of the Cold War. The emphasis on the lack of hopefulness in American society is important; members of the New Left involved in student movements and antiwar groups, which emerged in the mid-1960s, challenged the prevailing optimistic narrative of the decade. While emphasizing the centrality of the Cold War, they criticized both American and Soviet societies, critiquing America's use of Soviet expansionism as justification for the U.S. government's growing number of intervention overseas.³³ This is especially important because by contrast, conservatives of the 1960s refrained from criticizing America for its more interventionist role on

³¹ Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), "The Port Huron Statement," June 15, 1962.

³² Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), "The Port Huron Statement."

³³ Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (University of California Press, 1999), 27.

the world stage; rather, they advocated for stronger defense in response to what they regarded as the Soviet threat. This position deepened the divide between conservatives and opponents of the Vietnam War. The Port Huron statement, while laying out the goals of SDS and its future, was a call to arms; they wanted young people to advocate positive change and move away from complacency.³⁴ SDS especially laid the groundwork for the pushback against the United States government by creating a way to gather, brainstorm, and advocate for a better America while still recognizing that there was opportunity for change and lobbying liberal officials in Washington D.C. to engage in meaningful reform.

The focus of SDS through the early 1960s was on Civil Rights and the nuclear arms race, while highlighting the potential of American society to live up to its highest democratic ideals. They wanted to lead their country in a more humanistic direction while “finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.”³⁵ At times, their advocacy of grassroots activism resulted in nonviolent action, which sometimes included civil disobedience, against government institutions at the state and federal levels. When President Lyndon Johnson escalated the war in the spring of 1965 with the introduction of combat troops and a devastating air war, SDS began to mobilize to stop the war and the growing number of deaths of Americans and Vietnamese that went with it.³⁶ SDS became a nationwide movement, which helped spread antiwar sentiment on university campuses. Before 1965 and the escalation of the war, the war had generated newspaper headlines and television stories, especially during the presidential campaign in 1964.³⁷ The general feeling though was a rejection of the war and violent action. Grassroots opposition to the Vietnam War began, in earnest, in the mid- 1960s and continued with the escalation of the war into the

³⁴ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 27.

³⁵ Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), “The Port Huron Statement.”

³⁶ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 12.

³⁷ Powers, *The War at Home*, 1.

1970s.³⁸ The movement took action by protesting in the streets, writing letters, attending meetings and rallies, signing petitions, and engaging in general antiwar activity.³⁹ Although other antiwar groups would emerge later in the conflict, their collaboration in antiwar activities helped forge a more unified movement.

When antiwar groups began to emerge, they often did so in cohorts composed of various types of protesters, representing a wide range of individuals with differing aims and tactics, yet all united by a common opposition to the war. It began with those who dissented against major government policies, especially the level of involvement in the war, and other elites and political figures who advocated sharp American escalation in Vietnam.⁴⁰ Early supporters included pacifists, liberals, and internationalists from all different backgrounds. Some were religious, some Democrats who supported Democratic Party politicians, and some were long-time advocates for other peace movements such as the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and various nuclear disarmament groups.⁴¹ Another cluster consisted of general war resisters, a small group who promoted social justice and rejected warfare.⁴² An important bloc within the antiwar coalition was the radical left, which included those in student groups, southern Civil Rights activists, and others concerned with the impact of war at home and abroad.⁴³ The movement's more radical elements focused on local organizing, mass protest, and social change to push their message forward.

In the public consciousness, the dominant image of an antiwar protestor from the 1960s is often associated with the radical leftists in the movement. But the antiwar movement included

³⁸ Simon Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement* (Routledge, 2012), 1.

³⁹ Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement*, 1.

⁴⁰ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition," 25.

⁴¹ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition," 25.

⁴² DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition," 26.

⁴³ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition," 26.

many different groups who supported antiwar protests for many different reasons. The growing movement reflected deepening antiwar sentiment spreading within the broader general public.⁴⁴ However, although antiwar sentiment was becoming increasingly popular among the public, the protests and demonstrations were not. The war, though not yet having reached its peak of opposition, was steadily growing in unpopularity, but according to historian Charles DeBenedetti, “if anything was more unpopular than the war, it was antiwar protestors.”⁴⁵ Understanding the diverse nature of the movement provides greater clarity into the era’s cultural conflict and the widening divide that took shape in America.

Peace Activism and Group Diversity

Both the antiwar and pro-war movements attracted a diverse array of characters within their ranks. Antiwar sentiments and those who resisted such ideas found traction on university campuses and thus the communities that surrounded them. The war’s critics were comprised of many different people ranging from young to old, students to politicians, and came from a wide array of political and social backgrounds. Americans who opposed the war did so for a variety of reasons. Some on the right, though in limited numbers, advocated for ending the draft and expressed antiwar sentiment, while certain liberals, in contrast, supported the war. A good example of an activist falling outside of the more conventional political boundaries was David Dellinger. An influential, long-time American pacifist, Dellinger connected to youthful American radicals on the issue of Vietnam.⁴⁶ Pacifism was a subset of the antiwar protestors,

⁴⁴ DeBenedetti, “Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition,” 26.

⁴⁵ DeBenedetti, “Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition,” 27.

⁴⁶ Andrew Hunt, *David Dellinger: The Life and Times of a Nonviolent Revolutionary* (New York University Press, 2006), 135.

those who rejected organized violence and subsequently all involvement in war.⁴⁷ This subset differed in its ideas and its roots, as the beliefs they embraced went far back in American history to earlier wars in which the nation was involved. Radical pacifism refers to those who resisted the war effort through non-violent action, including civil disobedience,⁴⁸ something Dellinger certainly did before the Vietnam War. He carried these traditions into the antiwar protests in which he participated. Because he was once a young radical in the 1930s, he identified with the twenty-somethings advocating for an end to military involvement and believed that bridging the generation gap was the key to uniting Americans over the issue of Vietnam.⁴⁹ Dellinger, born to a wealthy Massachusetts family at the outset of World War I, came from a different background and generation than many antiwar activists, which highlighted the diversity within the antiwar coalition that helped transform it into an effective mass movement.

Dellinger's idea of bridging generation gaps seemed like an optimistic approach, given the significance of generational divides among younger activists and the general public alike. The culture wars grew partly out of this generation gap, a notion that began to find traction in the 1950s with the emergence of things like rock 'n' roll, growing fears of juvenile delinquency and teenage rebellion, and increasingly youth-oriented consumerism.⁵⁰ The divide between Americans began before the Vietnam War and continued beyond it. The deepening rift was exacerbated by not only protest movements, but the cultural reactions to those upheavals in music, film, television, and other forms of mass media. The responses of artists, singers, filmmakers, and other cultural figures shaped the public view of each side and created individual

⁴⁷ Charles Chatfield, "At the Hands of Historians: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era." *Peace & Change* 29, no. 3-4 (July 1, 2004), 486.

⁴⁸ Chatfield, "At the Hands of Historians: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era." 486.

⁴⁹ Hunt, *David Dellinger*, 135.

⁵⁰ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America*. (Oxford University Press, 2004), 124.

artistic visions. Peace activism made its way into popular media, something that had not been widely popular before.

In the United States, there was a long history of peace activism before the Vietnam War, which made the widespread public acceptance of the war more difficult.⁵¹ Even with a longstanding history of peace activism, the scale of protest during the Vietnam War surpassed previous peace attempts.⁵² During the 1920s and the 1930s there was a growing disillusionment with the Great War, leading to antiwar sentiments, including pacifism, becoming popular and assuming a more central place in American society. Although these protests took place, they were often small and lacked significant impact, failing to shift major public sentiments during World War II. Nevertheless, they remain an important part of the history of American peace activism. The anti-Vietnam War movement was based in the long history of peace activism but was primarily formed by new ideas of peace that emerged with the Cold War and the 1950s. The fear of nuclear war – especially the widespread destruction that came with it – was arguably the biggest factor in the revitalization of the peace movement in this period.⁵³ Groups were created in the 1950s such as SANE and the Committee for Non-Violent Action (CNVA) that both advocated for nuclear disarmament during this height of atomic related anxieties.⁵⁴ Such organizations also inspired groups like SDS and helped them form their own ideas. Thus, the early anti-Vietnam War movement included both liberals that advocated for peace, some that were very young and new to the political world, and pacifists, like David Dellinger, who had a longer history of political involvement.⁵⁵ These varied constituencies came together to help

⁵¹ Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement*, 1.

⁵² Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement*, 1.

⁵³ Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement*, 3.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement*, 4.

⁵⁵ Hall, *Rethinking the American Anti-War Movement*, 2-3.

create the antiwar movement, and sought to articulate new goals and ways of protesting that were specific to the escalating conflict in Vietnam.

The history of peace activism is especially important in understanding not only the antiwar movement but the reactions to it. While peace activism emerged during various periods of American tension, protesting the government in this manner and rejecting much of American society was particularly unpopular during this time. The Vietnam War protestors, and Vietnam War supporters, brought in new ways to reject American society which subsequently brought American exceptionalism and patriotism into question. The unprecedented changes beginning in the 1960s and lasting into the 1970s can also explain the beginnings of the cultural divide, and each movement's disillusionment with each other. Both sides believed they were championing the right causes and that their efforts would ultimately benefit American society. This further deepened the divide between the two sides and continued to hinder effective communication between them.

Early Pro-war Sentiment, New Right Origins, and Conservative Erasure

The pro-war movement is commonly viewed as a response to the rise of the antiwar movement, though it was not formed in a vacuum. Rather, it emerged from a combination of patriotism and vehement anti-communist sentiment. Those on the right often struggled with a sense of erasure during this period. Because the 1960s are regarded in memory as a time for freedom, change, and hope, the ideas of the New Left and the heyday of Democratic Party liberalism and the counterculture often emerge in the popular imagination. The Right then is often left outcast, and their side forgotten. It is important to understand the Right in its historical context before comparing the sides, to try to develop a sense of historical perspective in

analyzing the culture wars.⁵⁶ The views of those on the Right in the 1960s varied as dramatically as those on the Left. Conservatives, noted historian John Andrew III, viewed this as the decade “not of John F. Kennedy but Barry M. Goldwater, not Students for a Democratic Society, but Young Americans for Freedom,” and most importantly, “not a ‘meaningless’ civil war in Vietnam but an important battle in the protracted conflict against Communism.”⁵⁷ Reframing the period to incorporate a history that includes these ideas and mindsets will help clarify how the culture wars emerged and escalated so dramatically.

To understand the pro-war movement and its goals, the general conservative movement of this period must be understood. The issue for the Right was the perceived decline in culture, as they felt the 1960s were undermining America's societal structure.⁵⁸ New conservative ideas emerged in the early 1970s as a reaction to the New Left, and fiercely opposed many of its ideas, especially when it came to foreign policy.⁵⁹ An interesting facet of the right-wing movement was their anti-statist views and the idea of political non-interventionism. Where the liberals relied on the state to help solve problems, and this idea helped form the core of both the Kennedy and Johnson domestic policies through the 1960s, conservatives emphasized the need for less government involvement in American life.⁶⁰ They strived for general freedoms, which they believed consisted of minimal government involvement, and “economic freedom” in the form of minimal regulation.⁶¹ This line of thought found a number of adherents in the 1960s, and one of their core beliefs – which constituted a departure from more limited government powers – consisted of supporting American escalation in the Vietnam War. The pro-war movement’s goal

⁵⁶ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 2.

⁵⁷ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 5.

⁵⁸ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 38.

⁵⁹ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 39.

⁶⁰ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 16.

⁶¹ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 16.

of a stronger military presence in Vietnam relied on extensive government intervention. The juxtaposition between those in America advocating for less government involvement in economic matters while promoting military involvement in Vietnam was noteworthy.

The goals of pro-war demonstrators were vastly different from those of the antiwar movement, but they were rooted in the general sense that the war was productive in stopping the spread of communism. Despite this, they advocated for increased military involvement in Vietnam, as their primary objective was to secure a victory in the war. The Right often urged the president to push for more bombing, more troops, a blockade of North Vietnam, and a possible war against China and Russia.⁶² The pro-war movement gained more significant support following the escalation of the war in 1965.⁶³ Pro-Vietnam activists were rallying since the 1950s, and the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) were committed to this “experiment in nation building.”⁶⁴ The 1950s was also a “normative” period for America, where conservatives and their ideas thrived.⁶⁵ The 1960s saw developments that challenged these ideas, and therefore challenged conservatives, which led them to actively seek ways to justify their support for the Vietnam War. This period, especially the early- to mid- 1960s was important for the conservative movement as it gave them time to look for short-term gains in the Republican Party and advance the conservative ideology while being a minority, and therefore keeping a low profile.⁶⁶ This period provided them the opportunity to clarify their goals and the time to organize and establish the necessary structures, which ultimately evolved into the pro-war movement.

⁶² DeBenedetti, “Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition.” 24.

⁶³ Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 55.

⁶⁴ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 54.

⁶⁵ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 5.

⁶⁶ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 7.

The rationale for this war, that Americans were defending themselves against a global threat supported by the Soviet Union and China, fighting communism, and helping the Vietnamese citizens, garnered a following among many pro-war protestors.⁶⁷ The Postwar Era was filled with fear of communist aggression, an idea that emerged after World War II.⁶⁸ Such beliefs animated many conservatives who supported an escalation of U.S. military intervention in the early stages of the war. It is important to note that these sentiments, though popular, did cause division. Similar to fissures within the Old and New Left, there were divisions within the conservative movement on what and who to support.

The John Birch Society (JBS), a conservative group founded in 1958 with a staunch anti-communist stance, had decidedly conspiratorial beliefs and promoted widespread grassroots support in communities across the United States.⁶⁹ Consequently, a publication in *American Opinion* stated that the JBS was opposed to the ongoing involvement of the United States in Vietnam.⁷⁰ While the JBS found a following in communities across the United States, the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) was a political campus group that emerged in the early 1960s, and eventually shifted its focus to the Vietnam War. The main aims of YAF were mobilizing support from young conservatives for political candidates, and voicing their conservative opinions on key issues that affected them.⁷¹ This, they claimed, would ““affect the course of political events and help Americans attain the free society envisioned by its founders.””⁷² Their origins resembled those of the SDS in their aim to build a new political base, but in their case, this base was on the right. Their goal in educating the public about their justification for war was

⁶⁷ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 57.

⁶⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 40.

⁶⁹ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 55.

⁷⁰ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 55.

⁷¹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 23.

⁷² Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 23.

relatively successful, emphasizing support for the troops and American government.⁷³ YAF was certainly influential in their own circles, but their popularity never reached the heights that SDS or SNCC did. Despite the ideological differences, YAF, SDS, and SNCC were linked by their goal of challenging those in power, and changing the norms of the period, both of which believed lied in grassroots efforts and organization.⁷⁴

YAF emerged as a group of young conservatives, and not a pro-war group. Their sentiments shifted as the war escalated, but like SDS, they began with roots in politics and in this case, newly emerging conservative beliefs that came to be known as the “New Right” rather than in pro-war politics. YAF had a few main goals with the creation of their organization, all of which lied in creating a nationwide conservative grassroots coalition, and in the early days, did not focus on the Vietnam War. They wanted to form an organization for and by young conservatives, counter the actions of student liberals, and promote Barry Goldwater’s race for the presidency in 1964 by attempting to gain a foothold in the Republican Party.⁷⁵ They did this through training conservative leaders, and working together through political ideas and personal relationships that would advance their causes.⁷⁶ One member of YAF, William F. Buckley, created the Sharon Statement, a manifesto outlining the organizations goals.⁷⁷ It was written in September 1960, before SDS’s Port Huron Statement, but both accounts were written with similar purpose. While the Port Huron Statement was much longer, and included general fears, attitudes, and goals of the organization, the Sharon Statement was direct and communicated only the main issues of the utmost importance to the YAF. The Sharon Statement highlighted a

⁷³ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 57.

⁷⁴ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties* 5.

⁷⁵ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties* 7.

⁷⁶ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties* 7.

⁷⁷ Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), “The Sharon Statement: A Timeless Declaration of conservative Principles,” September 11, 1960.

multitude of ideas and concerns shared by YAF members, and a general idea of what direction America should follow:

...we will be free only so long as the national sovereignty of the United States is secure; that history shows periods of freedom are rare and can only exist when free citizens concertedly defend their rights against all enemies; that the forces of international communism are, at present, the greatest single threat to these liberties; that the United States should stress victory over, rather than coexistence with, this menace; and that American foreign policy must be judged by this criterion: does it serve the just interests of the United States?⁷⁸

The Sharon Statement outlined the many objectives of YAF and laid the groundwork for their future goals. The incisive wording, spelling out their idea of freedom, and the omnipresent fear of communism, are evident and expressed in a way that the reader understands their desire for change. YAF members built networks across the United States, striving to meet their goals, but struggled with pushback from activists on the left, and internal divisions later plagued their organization. This was a common challenge for both sides of the cultural conflict; many of the disagreements and issues that drove the movements apart stemmed from internal divisions.

By the mid-1960s, a newly emerging pro-war movement called for greater military involvement in Vietnam, as their primary objective was to secure a victory in the war. A key component in the pro-war movement throughout the Vietnam War was patriotism. They were a powerful group of critics that urged the government to deepen America's military involvement, more powerful than those that were a part of the antiwar movement, especially in its

⁷⁸ Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), "The Sharon Statement: A Timeless Declaration of conservative Principles."

beginnings.⁷⁹ Many YAFers supported hawkish Senator Barry Goldwater's ill-fated run for presidency, in part because of Goldwater's commitment to escalating the war. Following Goldwater's defeat, Nixon found support on the right as his election approached in 1968. His presidency became very important for pro-war protestors as it was a chance to push for policies they championed at a federal level, despite his claims of having a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam. Meanwhile, on the other side of the debate, opposition to the government was gaining traction within the antiwar movement, even under the more liberal presidency of Lyndon Johnson. This sentiment was also evident among pro-war protestors in the early stages of the conflict, though they tended to align more with Nixon than antiwar protestors did with Johnson. Their support for law and order, as well as for government authority, played a key role in this shift, particularly their hope that Nixon's policies would bring about the changes they sought.

The Widening Gap and Divisions in Culture

The Vietnam War was no doubt a dividing issue, but its divisiveness moved through many spheres from political, cultural, social, and more. There seemed to be a common denominator on both sides, which was the animosity felt towards the government. This differed quite drastically between groups and between presidents that were in power during the war, but early protest from both sides was focused on accomplishing important changes in the government's Vietnam policies. Activists on both sides of the divide were suspicious of the government in individual ways, but the sentiment was similar.⁸⁰ Both sides were shaped by the same image of America – one that was just, virtuous, and founded on principles of freedom and

⁷⁹ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition." 24.

⁸⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 33.

equality.⁸¹ Events of the 1960s provoked citizens to question this image, and therefore question most of American society and culture.

The culture that was created from this war, in this case especially music, was a direct reaction and expression of American citizens. Both pro-war and antiwar groups garnered support from a wide array of Americans, and both attracted some sort of celebrity support. For the antiwar groups, folk music and protest music became particularly important. Folk music and the history of protest in America was present long before the beginning of the Vietnam War, but the war gave many artists an outlet to express these specific concerns. There were certainly pro-war celebrity activists like John Wayne,⁸² and some very popular pro-war songs in this period. But the antiwar sentiments carried through the charts for much of the war's duration.

Early cultural expressions from both opponents and critics of the war marked the beginning of the cultural conflict between them, with each side contributing to the widening gap. The ideas held by each side were typically rejected by their ideological opponents. A lack of communication between both camps would often contribute to the rising tensions and cultural conflicts. Both these groups were finding public support on either side of the political spectrum, and because of the deep-seated divide in American politics that already existed, neither side welcomed the other. The initial rejection stemmed from a lack of consideration and engagement, which intensified the political divide and, in turn, had significant repercussions on the cultural divide. For those on the Right, these divisions eventually evolved into a perceived anti-American sentiment, which many conservatives attributed to antiwar protesters. In contrast, the New Left's portrayal of war supporters endorsing violence and destruction shaped the way the war's proponents were perceived.

⁸¹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 31.

⁸² Appy, *American Reckoning*, 143.

The culture and media that emerged from both the pro-war and antiwar groups began in the early 1960s. Much of the media exploded throughout the decade and into the decades after while citizens reflected on the war and narratives surrounding it, but early folk music and protest sentiment was the basis for what was to come. Media and culture were a reflection and an outlet to represent what was going on in society, and the artifacts produced in this period are extremely important in understanding the larger narrative. And those that were involved with media, such as celebrity singers, actors, journalists, etc., all played a role in shaping the period with their public reactions to the war. Without cultural artifacts, meaning and expression is lost. An important facet of media, especially in this period, is its subjectivity. Many protestors on either side of the conflict embraced both songs such as the more hawkish “The Ballad of the Green Berets” and politicized artists like Bob Dylan or Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR).⁸³ Though this was not always the case, and according to historian Christian Appy “the war divided Americans over just about everything, including music,” leading to overlap between opposing segments of society.⁸⁴ Certain songs clearly resonated more with one group than the other, but, as with politics, there was potential for a middle ground. The cultural divide, however, undermined more nuanced perspectives and steered Americans toward more binary, black-and-white outlooks.

Folk music and the emergence of protest music during this era were complex and multifaceted. Music evolved into a political tool and a form of resistance, offering people a way to connect with and express their views in everyday life. The folk revival in the 1960s, reactions to the war, and leftist politics, were all intertwined.⁸⁵ There is an important distinction to make

⁸³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 124.

⁸⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 124.

⁸⁵ Hill, “‘This Is My Country’: American Popular Music and Political Engagement in ‘1968.’” 51.

between folk music and protest music in this period. Folk was based in a long history that spanned decades, dating back to the early 1900s and beyond; early folk expressed collective unity and power of the generation.⁸⁶ The later folk-protest movement that was created in the 1960s certainly had roots in earlier types of folk, but it remained centered more on contemporary politics and issues specific to the era such as race, the war, nuclear weapons, labour, and much more.⁸⁷ Many artists fit into the folk music category in this period, or had some songs that commented on political issues. Earlier trailblazers like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger influenced rising folk stars Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul and Mary, all of whom addressed the Vietnam War in their song lyrics and their actions.

Despite the themes of protest that permeated folk music at the time, some folk performers took issue with the label “protest singer.” Bob Dylan, a prominent artist who often commented on social and political realities, rejected the protest song label, claiming his music emerged as a reaction to what was going on around him.⁸⁸ Despite this rejection, the word “protest” directly related to many ideas evident in his song lyrics and can be used broadly to describe music and songs by similar artists. Dylan also dropped into an SDS meeting in December 1963, showing his support for the group, taking interest in one of the organization’s projects, and most importantly aligning himself with their cause.⁸⁹ So even with his rejection of this label, he promoted his political stance through action as well as music. The nature of the period meant that celebrities sometimes performed roles akin to activists, and media coverage of their work strongly reflected the cultural norms of the 1960s, and with the emergence of television, in new

⁸⁶ James Dunlap, “Through the Eyes of Tom Joad: Patterns of American Idealism, Bob Dylan, and the Folk Protest Movement.” *Popular Music and Society* 29, no. 5 (2006), 550.

⁸⁷ Dunlap, “Through the Eyes of Tom Joad: Patterns of American Idealism, Bob Dylan, and the Folk Protest Movement.” 550.

⁸⁸ Damian A. Carpenter, “Theatre.” In *The World of Bob Dylan*, edited by Sean Latham. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 185.

⁸⁹ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Bantam, 1993), 193.

ways that were not seen before. As the Vietnam War began to move into the national sphere in the mid-1960s, musical artists began to reject the war and its systems. Many songs from the broader 1960s certainly capture the essence of the antiwar and pro-war sentiments and feelings, in popular media, there was a wider variety of music that rejected the war, and that both those on the home front and the battlefield resonated with, though in the later 1960s, some pro-war music would emerge.

Hello Culture Wars: Protest Music of the First Movements

Bob Dylan (1941-) was an artist in the early protest period, making his political stance heard in the early 1960s, and later moving away from it while other artists began to embrace it. Two of his early albums, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are A-Changin'* were both filled with songs that rejected the political landscape of the 1960s and questioned a multitude of issues. Dylan wrote and recorded all these songs with Columbia Records, a big-name record label, while still tackling topics of anti-establishment, racism, cold war ideology, and class issues.⁹⁰ This was important for the time because other folk artists enjoyed some popularity with these themes, but Dylan found success on a larger scale. His song "Masters of War," released in 1963, told the story of those in charge: he focused on the systems responsible for the war, criticizing them directly rather than commenting on the soldiers and others who were visibly involved in the conflict.⁹¹ The song addressed warmakers in a broad sense, not explicitly mentioning Vietnam but rather criticizing elites that were instrumental to the war making process. The song can certainly be attributed to the Vietnam War, even as it was released before

⁹⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 193.

⁹¹ Bob Dylan, "Masters of War," Recorded 1963. Track 3 on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Columbia Records, 1963.

the height of the antiwar movement, on the eve of the escalation of the war. In this song, Dylan criticizes wealthy warmakers, and especially those who attempted to justify war or convince the public that war is good and necessary.⁹² He addresses the hypocrisy of the “masters” sending troops abroad and engaging in war while hiding behind their wealth as innocent citizens die. He rejects the idea of capitalism, and that money can buy peace singing, “Is your money that good? / Will it buy you forgiveness / Do you think that it could? / I think you will find / When your death takes its toll / All the money you made / Will never buy back your soul.”⁹³ Through this song, he rejects and criticizes the government, while also invoking emotion in the listener and directing a sense of guilt toward those in power. He highlights the harsh realities of war, warning the audience about the dangerous intentions and deceit that often accompany conflict. The song undeniably pushed a political statement and was continually used in the antiwar period.

“Masters of War” included important themes that would later become emblematic of cultural conflicts and divides across America. Some pro-war protestors believed that by protesting the war, antiwar activists were dismissing the sacrifices of soldiers or veterans that served in Vietnam. Dylan’s song, and other war-themed songs from this period, rejected higher-level government bureaucrats and war-making systems rather than Americans who fought in the war. He makes it strikingly obvious that those sent to war often have no control over the decision and are instead fed false narratives by war-makers, claiming that they “put a gun in my hand / And [they] hide from my eyes / And [they] turn and run farther / When the fast bullets fly.”⁹⁴ Dylan did not criticize those that went to war, and the antiwar movement, which began to coalesce a year and half after the song’s release, mostly held the same view, that the government

⁹² Dylan, “Masters of War.”

⁹³ Dylan, “Masters of War.”

⁹⁴ Dylan, “Masters of War.”

was the problem, not the soldiers who fought, a belief seldom acknowledged by pro-war protestors.

Phil Ochs (1940-1976) was another newly emerging folk singer, initially based in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s like Bob Dylan, with an impressive folk repertoire as it relates to the Vietnam War. Phil Ochs believed in protest music and activism in popular media, arguing that it can express political messages to some who were indifferent to the cause.⁹⁵ He essentially believed that protest music could “bring a point more deeply to more people than a thousand rallies.”⁹⁶ Ochs released an impressive number of songs throughout the 1960s,⁹⁷ and planted the seeds for early antiwar sentiment with his searing lyrics. Though the peak of his career was not until the late 1960s, his landmark 1963 song “What Are You Fighting For” captures the antiwar feeling in the early 1960s. While similar to Dylan’s “Masters of War” in its general rejection of war, and containing no specific mention of Vietnam, the song questions the intention of wars and why they were being fought. Ochs continually repeats, “Yes I know you’re set on fighting / but what are you fighting for?” at the end of each verse, bringing into to question the reason for war.⁹⁸ This idea that there is no reason to be fighting aligns with the ideas of the antiwar movement. Each verse addresses a different issue such as war weapons, mass destruction, oppression of ordinary people, unemployment, and misinformation, all of which were facets of the antiwar movement’s arguments.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ King, “Celebrity Activism in the Vietnam War Era: How Cultural Icons Brought Antiwar Politics to Popular Mediums and Transformed U.S. Political Culture.” 123.

⁹⁶ Phil Ochs, “*The Need for Topical Music*,” Broadside 22, March 1963.

⁹⁷ Joshua Sanchez, “Phil Ochs: the doomed folk singer who woke up from the American dream” *The Guardian* (New York City, New York), March 26, 2020.

⁹⁸ Phil Ochs, “What Are You Fighting For,” Recorded 1964. Track 2 on *The Early Years*. Vanguard Records, 1964.

⁹⁹ Ochs, “What Are You Fighting For.”

Ochs addresses the listener as an individual in this song, using the term “you” but referring to a bigger system, as Dylan did.¹⁰⁰ In doing so, he encourages individuals to question their own support for the war, while simultaneously challenging the larger systems that drive conflict. He uses the individual as a representation of America, ending the song by concluding that if you “take your children by their hands and look into their eyes / And there you’ll see the answer you should have seen before / if you’ll win the wars at home there’ll be no fighting anymore.”¹⁰¹ Here, he questions America and its domestic systems, urging the country to focus on self-improvement rather than intervening in foreign conflicts that do little to advance American societal progress. This section of the song can also be related to the culture wars themselves and the divisions that were emerging at this time. Ochs refers to the “wars at home,” which in this case *were* the culture wars and political divisions simmering across the country.¹⁰² The powerful, overarching systems of war that the government was perpetuating in Vietnam were fueling domestic unrest, and by failing to address these internal issues, the homegrown conflicts within the United States only deepened.

Both Dylan’s and Ochs’ early songs were instrumental to voicing the concerns of those opposed to the Vietnam War at a moment when the conflict was just entering the public consciousness. These songs expressed the feelings that resonated with listeners in the United States, especially those that associated themselves with movements against the war. This early dissent against the war would become more common after President Johnson sent American troops and activated the air war in the mid-1960s, resulting in an avalanche of media coverage. These songs were representations of antiwar sentiments that both the media and the organizers of

¹⁰⁰ Ochs, “What Are You Fighting For.”

¹⁰¹ Ochs, “What Are You Fighting For.”

¹⁰² Ochs, “What Are You Fighting For.”

each group could use to display their feelings and make a political statement. The popularity of media – in print, on radios and television – in this period made it especially important for Americans from different walks of life to voice opinions, but simultaneously made it easier for opinions to get misinterpreted and misrepresented. Songs and cultural responses are crucial for understanding both sides of the issue, as well as the reasons behind their respective reactions.

Though the early 1960s did not include any particularly popular pro-war songs, “Hello Vietnam,” a country song written by Tom T. Hall and performed by Johnnie Wright, was a chart-topping hit in 1965.¹⁰³ This song encapsulates much of the early support of the Vietnam War. Wright sings about leaving his love and going to war, addressing the goal of fighting communism to maintain American freedom. The end of the song includes a monologue that addressed both the interest in war and criticizes those who reject it. Wright sings, “I hope and pray someday the world will learn / that fires we don’t put out will bigger burn / we must save freedom now at any cost / or someday our own freedom will be lost.”¹⁰⁴ This monologue assumes that the war is driving the spread of communism and that it is America’s responsibility to halt it. A common facet of support for Vietnam, as discovered through YAF and New Right rhetoric, was protecting American freedoms and rejecting communism. Wright effectively captures the fear of communism during this period, highlighting the perceived consequences of ignoring its spread. He explicitly takes a pro-war stance and justifies the war for its supporters. While both antiwar and pro-war protestors can agree that the escalation of the war in 1965 left the old America behind, it certainly said hello Vietnam.

¹⁰³ Johnnie Wright, “Hello Vietnam,” Recorded 1965. Decca, 1965.

¹⁰⁴ Wright, “Hello Vietnam.”

Conclusions on Emerging Antiwar and Pro-War Dissent

The emergence of YAF and SDS were pivotal in shaping the broader political and social narratives of the 1960s. Both organizations, which evolved largely in response to the political climate of the era – marked by liberal optimism and the pervasive tensions of the Cold War – played significant roles in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Their inception can be traced to the ideological currents of the time, which included a growing disillusionment with liberal governance, as well as heightened anxieties surrounding the Cold War, anti-communism, and the escalating threat of nuclear conflict. While SDS, as part of the New Left, initially emerged in opposition to the perceived inadequacies of a liberal government and the prevailing sense of optimism, they quickly embraced and fought against socio-political issues in the United States. The Cold War, characterized by vehement fear of communism, and rising nuclear tensions, was instrumental in shaping the political consciousness of student movements like SDS, which viewed the conflict in Vietnam as a symptom of a larger system of issues within America. In the early 1960s, the scale of student protests and organized resistance was relatively modest, but these activities laid the groundwork for future political mobilization. Notably, the Civil Rights Movement served as a significant influence on student activists, with organizations like the SNCC offering a model of grassroots organizing, direct action, and strategic advocacy. The successes and limitations of these earlier movements provided valuable lessons in how to mobilize for political change. The Vietnam War, however, would serve as both a catalyst for the growth of the SDS and a key factor in its eventual decline. As the war escalated, it mobilized a broad array of student and anti-establishment groups, yet it also exposed ideological rifts within the New Left, contributing to internal conflicts and a fragmentation of the movement by the late 1960s.

For conservatives, the 1960s represented a crucial period for the consolidation of a political platform that would become significantly more prominent and influential in the 1980s and beyond. YAF's emergence as a student conservative group brought young people together in ways similar to SDS but had fundamentally different political objectives. YAF's early focus on supporting the 1964 Barry Goldwater presidential campaign marked the beginnings of its efforts to establish a distinct conservative voice within American politics; Goldwater's defeat as the Republican candidate led to initial frustration among its members. Despite this setback, YAF continued to prioritize mobilizing their movement and cultivating a space for young conservative voices within the broader political landscape. During this early period, YAF's platform did not engage directly with the Vietnam War, nor did it position itself in relation to the broader pro-war movement. However, as the antiwar movement gained momentum and became increasingly influential among students and the wider public, YAF members began to respond. Some within the organization began to adopt pro-war stances, viewing the Vietnam War as a critical issue that warranted support for U.S. military involvement. These pro-war activists, emerging in the later years of the 1960s and early 1970s, were often aligned with conservative movements but were also largely a reactionary response to the growing tide of antiwar protests. YAF's stance on the Vietnam War evolved as a direct response to the antiwar sentiment that characterized much of the student activism of the era.

The cultural conflict would intensify and come to dominate American society, particularly in the later 1960s. Early media, especially music, played a significant role in fostering a sense of growing unrest and dissatisfaction with American society. Folk artists addressed a wide range of issues, from nuclear fears to Civil Rights, helping to articulate and amplify the sense of discontent. Artists such as Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs expressed a yearning

for a widespread peace movement and a broader rejection of American government policies and military intervention. As the Vietnam War escalated, these sentiments deepened and gained momentum. While some voices in the media and public sphere continued to praise American military efforts and the fight against the spread of communism, the protest movements became increasingly vocal and influential. Discontent with the war and broader societal issues grew, signaling that America was on the brink of significant disruption. As frustrations mounted, Americans became more outspoken, challenging established norms and expressing their dissent more forcefully in both public and private spheres.

Chapter 2: The Rise of Vietnam War Activism

As the war progressed and escalated in the mid-1960s, the protest movements grew. This period saw the emergence of a small yet thriving anti-Vietnam War movement on university campuses and big cities alike, and, correspondingly, an equally robust pro-war movement that arose largely in response to it. The antiwar movement expanded its reach by spreading its message throughout the nation. During this period, numerous pro-war protests emerged in response to the widespread antiwar demonstrations across the United States, with the pro-war sentiment among participants progressively intensifying. Johnson's escalation of the war in 1965 created early stirrings on both sides. The escalation had repercussions in his own administrative offices as one member, George Ball, rejected the war and its expansion. Once President Johnson decided to push forward with escalation in the summer of 1965, he rejected any internal expressions of doubt or dissent.¹⁰⁵ This development prompted President Johnson and other members of his administration to openly criticize antiwar opponents, although Johnson himself harboured complex and ambivalent views toward the early dissenters.¹⁰⁶

In the early weeks of the war, President Johnson did not anticipate the mass antiwar street protests and grassroots movements that emerged. He was unprepared to deal with the widespread dissent on the home front, though he became tolerant of the youthful protestors, and attributed much of the discontent or disagreement to generational differences.¹⁰⁷ He ultimately accepted the protest "as an inexplicable fact of his presidential life."¹⁰⁸ Although Johnson's objective was to "Americanize" the war effort by escalating U.S. involvement, both supporters and opponents of

¹⁰⁵ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition." 33.

¹⁰⁶ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition." 33.

¹⁰⁷ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition." 34.

¹⁰⁸ DeBenedetti, "Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition." 35.

the war expressed significant concerns about this approach.¹⁰⁹ His focus on American aid in Vietnam and continual involvement was not tolerated by the antiwar movement, and his liberal politics were not tolerated by conservative hawks within the pro-war groups. Although the escalation of the war may have aligned with the goals of some pro-war activists, the manner in which Johnson managed it proved insufficient. This issue, however, reflected a broader dilemma within American politics and the emerging culture wars. As a liberal administration, Johnson's government was inevitably subject to criticism from the political Right, which would have found grounds for opposition regardless of the specifics of the war policy. This sentiment was certainly present on the left as well, but it was more pronounced among conservatives. Analyzing reactions from the mid-1960s—through demonstrations, protests, and media coverage—reveals that the culture wars not only existed but also intensified, with the underlying causes becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted.

Uniting Americans: Television and Demonstrations

The emergence of television as an important new innovation in the Postwar United States brought the medium into millions of American living rooms and integrated major events to the daily lives of Americans. The period itself was filled with change and unprecedented events that unfolded as the decade went on, and the television presented the events to people in a new way. It created a way for local news to become national, enabling the graphic broadcast of events such as the Vietnam War to reach a wider audience.¹¹⁰ Television contributed to a shared sense of identity that began to form after World War II,¹¹¹ yet it also would eventually fuel growing

¹⁰⁹ G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s*. (Penguin Books, 2009), 307.

¹¹⁰ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 35.

¹¹¹ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 35.

divisions in the country, redefining what it meant to be an American. By broadcasting events across the country, there was a national community that naturally formed from all Americans viewing the same issues. However, consensus around these matters remained elusive. While television undoubtedly contributed to the formation of a national identity, the definition of what that identity was became increasingly disjointed.

While issues of cultural conflicts were arising, television continued to be a major, if not the most important, source of information for Americans. By 1967, sixty four percent of Americans claimed that they got most of their news from television.¹¹² This was particularly significant for those on both sides of the war debate. The role of television in shaping public perceptions of the war—by conveying political views, portraying the realities of the conflict, and broadcasting its impact—had a profound effect on the general public. It influenced not only how people viewed the home front but also how they formed opinions about the future of the war itself. Television could also broadcast protest and demonstrations, spreading the word of the grassroots activists from both sides, and creating a “new path to power for the powerless.”¹¹³ While the media could be manipulated to convey a specific message, thereby contributing to a division in understanding between opposing sides of the protest, it also provided a platform for expression. This allowed protestors to broadcast their views on a national scale, amplifying their message and reaching a broader audience. The antiwar movement was able to use television to its advantage, manipulating the media and using effective tactics to get their message across, becoming, in the words of historians Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot, “one of the longest-running television shows of the 1960s.”¹¹⁴ They would do things like burn their draft

¹¹² Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 49.

¹¹³ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 50.

¹¹⁴ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 340.

cards and pour red liquids on local draft board records to represent blood. These strategies were employed as a means of promoting the antiwar movement, using graphic imagery and direct communication to convey their message to tens of thousands of young people. This approach aimed to engage and mobilize a large, often youthful, audience, fostering greater awareness and support for the movement.¹¹⁵ Many antiwar protestors and sympathizers believed that this truly had an impact on the outcome of the war.

The antiwar movement began to take shape and gain support in the late 1960s. Despite this, the mid-1960s were tumultuous years; while the era was marked by widespread dissent and increasing unrest, it was during this time that many Americans began to acknowledge the need for change. The antiwar movement organized many activities that contributed to creating a community within the movement, and the early days consisted of teach-ins, peaceful protest, and general dissent. These types of actions escalated throughout the period and as the movement grew, eventually resulting in mass protest and demonstrations across America later in the decade. Protests began as small, yet carefully coordinated events: there was a nationwide demonstration for non-violent action in late 1964 where almost two thousand people took to two the streets in nine separate cities.¹¹⁶ Following this, on December 30th 1964, SDS leaders came together to debate the issue of Vietnam, meeting for over seven hours to discuss strategies to resist the deepening conflict.¹¹⁷ The goals for many early peace activists were an immediate cease-fire in Vietnam and the earliest possible withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam.¹¹⁸ Though the goals would shift, these early ideas would form the basis of the movement. Early efforts to resist the

¹¹⁵ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 340.

¹¹⁶ Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse University Press, 1990), 100.

¹¹⁷ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 100.

¹¹⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 100.

conflict in Vietnam would serve as gathering points for SDS protestors and other radicals and pacifists to gather over. Those who attended SDS's historic December 1964 rally, which included religious pacifists and non-violent radicals, would participate in an antiwar demonstration the following April in Washington, D.C. with SDS.

The first antiwar demonstration in Washington, D.C., called the March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam, organized by SDS leaders, occurred on April 17, 1965, with close to 20,000 protestors attending the event.¹¹⁹ The event's organizers expected 10,000 protestors to show up, so this turnout was quite impressive. It was the largest single antiwar demonstration organized in America up to that point.¹²⁰ The media was impressed by the event, and its size and seriousness, and the demonstration received national coverage.¹²¹ The media coverage played a crucial role in disseminating the movement's message nationwide and provided SDS with an opportunity to become the primary organization of the antiwar movement. However, SDS declined this opportunity, instead concentrating on their broader objectives of radical and social reform.¹²² This was an important point in the movement because SDS was a key player in organizing and pushing for reform, but their involvement with resistance against the Vietnam War stayed just one facet of the organization. They were important figures in the movement's beginnings, but contributed to broader New Left reform, and the eventual internal strife would contribute to some in the organization veering towards antiwar protest while others avoided it in favour of grassroots community organizing and other forms of resistance.

¹¹⁹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 112.

¹²⁰ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 112.

¹²¹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 112.

¹²² DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 112.

Folk singers Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, and Judy Collins all gave speeches and took part in this demonstration, marching across Washington.¹²³ The presence of these celebrities was important to the notoriety of the event, and also to Americans; they identified with the message of these artists, thereby associating themselves with their music. Celebrity activism became common and important throughout this period, mostly due to the emerging cultural conflict and divide. Celebrities increasingly recognized a new sense of responsibility in shaping political discourse, and the intersection between celebrity culture and politics continued to deepen.

Despite the success of the April 17, 1965 antiwar demonstration, and the boost it enjoyed from cultural luminaries like Baez and Collins, the more far-left nature of SDS's goals caused internal strife in the burgeoning movement between radicals and liberals.¹²⁴ Because of the media's focus on SDS, the organization was launched into the national sphere, and many Americans joined local campus chapters across the country.¹²⁵ This fundamentally changed SDS and transformed it into a large-scale organization. Yet SDS's meteoric growth also created tensions as the 1960s progressed, with conflicts deepening between local and national levels of the organization.¹²⁶ SDSers also struggled with the unpopularity of the movement in the early days. Though the April 17, 1965, March on Washington protest was successful, they felt as though there was rejection and indifference towards them, and that "their problem truly was in America."¹²⁷ Despite this, once Johnson moved forward with escalation and sent more troops to Vietnam, the public began to think more about the war as it was becoming visibly present in their everyday lives. Internal and external divisions began to arise as protestors began to create their

¹²³ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 112.

¹²⁴ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 111.

¹²⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 138.

¹²⁶ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 138.

¹²⁷ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 122.

own set of ideals and goals for the outcome of the war. Some, like Paul Booth and Todd Gitlin of SDS, wanted only to advocate for U.S withdrawal of Vietnam, while others pushed for wider peace movements, or focused not only on the war itself, but the draft and other issues at home.¹²⁸ SDS also accepted a wide variety of protestors in these events, including communists and Vietcong sympathizers, something that was not popular with the more liberal elements of peace activists that rejected the war.¹²⁹ SDS originally emerged as a broad New Left organization, but its prominent role in the antiwar movement eventually led to a shift in its membership. Over time, the organization attracted individuals who opposed the war and saw SDS as a platform for actively addressing their concerns.¹³⁰ These early protests and divisions were simply a taste of what was to come. Internal strife was ultimately the downfall of both SDS and YAF, and the general divide over ideas and solutions caused a number of disagreements in American society through this period. It seemed as though while the antiwar groups were beginning to emerge, they were also contributing to their own downfall.

An early groundswell of antiwar dissent began to draw a wide variety of people to the cause, leading to new organizations emerging at this time. Because SDS was a student led organization, and not all of its members prioritized anti-Vietnam War resistance, other radicals and pacifists created a wide array of antiwar organizations. There were religious pacifists, non-violent citizens part of peace movements, and some who originally did not align with a specific leftist group but took part in the cause. Peace activists founded the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam (NCCWVN or NCC), as an umbrella antiwar coalition group to bring together a number of constituencies to resist the Vietnam War.¹³¹ The idea for this

¹²⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 111.

¹²⁹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 111.

¹³⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 138.

¹³¹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 121.

committee was born out of an earlier assembly in August 1965 where leftists came together to discuss future resistance actions against the war. Those who would eventually join NCC tended to be more radical than SDS members, and wanted to create a united front on the left through antiwar actions and workshops on related social issues.¹³² There was also the Vietnam Day Committee (VDC), who sponsored some protests that would be held both at home and abroad.¹³³ These groups were more specifically committed to the antiwar cause, but often worked together to plan protests or mass demonstrations against the war, and helped form a nucleus for the larger antiwar movement.

Laying the Groundwork for Change and Antiwar Critiques

As the war progressed, the objectives of both SDS and their ideological foes in the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) evolved in complex ways. Some common activities from SDS students were Civil Rights activism, the Economic and Research Action Project (ERAP), community organizing, issues of free speech, and campus workers' rights.¹³⁴ As for anti-Vietnam War protest, resistance began with teach-ins, local and national demonstrations, draft resistance, putting on conferences and organizing study groups, and protesting the military-industrial complex, which many universities were tied to.¹³⁵ These efforts were crucial to the bigger antiwar movement as SDS continued to grow, and young people in their late teens and early twenties always made up a large portion of the antiwar movement. Moreover, the Vietnam War became the catalyst for radicalization and crossover of people into a more radical, militant

¹³² DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 121.

¹³³ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 121.

¹³⁴ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 98.

¹³⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 98.

stance.¹³⁶ In November 1965, at an antiwar demonstration, SDS president Carl Oglesby critiqued American involvement in Vietnam, telling antiwar marchers about U.S. arms buildup on six thousand bases overseas, CIA involvement in overseas' coups, and U.S. support for right wing leaders.¹³⁷ Disseminating information about the more troubling aspects of U.S. foreign policy at this event resulted in crucial turning points for antiwar activists, and helped to convert those who may have otherwise been indifferent to the cause. Such revelations brought into question American morals, something that had not been an issue in the past. How could America perpetuate and hide these horrible actions that were occurring overseas? These discoveries, combined with SDS's broader goals of community engagement, would help the organization gain traction and keep their momentum, at least for the time being.

Although activists in SDS and YAF were concerned with broader ideological objectives, the pivotal early months of the Vietnam War underscored the profound impact the conflict had on both movements. The war became a defining issue, shaping the direction and priorities of each organization. On the other side of the divide, YAFers were actively establishing a foundation for their organization, grounded in their commitment to conservative principles, which prominently included support for the war. They advocated for anti-communist action, boycotts of products that were sent to Eastern European countries, and campus activities such as demonstrations and rallies, shipping medical supplies to allies overseas, and disseminating readings and education regarding the war.¹³⁸ They were also heavily involved in Senator Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign, while simultaneously engaging in local politics that fit their objectives. Both SDS and YAF were using their time and resources to organize a collective cause

¹³⁶ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 113.

¹³⁷ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 285.

¹³⁸ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 101.

against the war in their own unique ways, and the commitment of activists in both camps continued to deepen after 1965.

Activists on both sides of the divide developed misunderstandings of the positions, points of view, and overall goals on the opposite end of protest politics, which would only deepen with the passage of time. One eventual antiwar activist, Dave Schumacher, struggled with both YAF and SDS.¹³⁹ He began his path to “radicalization” in YAF, but by 1964, he disagreed with both the war and the draft, a belief that his YAF comrades did not share. He looked to SDS, and agreed with their broad antiwar sentiment, but did not agree with their support of the North Vietnamese. He distanced himself from YAF and went to antiwar protests, yet he felt frustrated with both sides.¹⁴⁰ His experience with both groups is representative of many in this period, which coincided with a widening chasm between adherents of the right and left. Disillusionment with both sides was widespread, and for many, this frustration resulted in a form of willful ignorance within each group, with individuals sometimes becoming less receptive to opposing viewpoints. For many activists, the objectives and goals of their ideological foes became murky and distorted as the decade progressed.

The antiwar movement of the mid-1960s seemed to be more disorganized and drew from a more diverse range of constituencies than pro-war activists. The antiwar coalition lacked a cohesive organization that represented all members fully, but rather contained groups that had singular ideas about the rejection of the war.¹⁴¹ The contradictory statements about politics and goals that circulated within the antiwar movement were certainly a contributing factor to the challenges it faced and exacerbated the growing cultural divide in America. Externally, pro-war

¹³⁹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 120.

¹⁴⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 120.

¹⁴¹ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 341.

protestors seized on the challenges posed by the antiwar movement, particularly their failure to make a concrete statement on the Vietnam War. With many statements about the war, and a lack of a cohesive strategies, pro-war activists easily critiqued the sentiments of their opponents, claiming that there was no one true antiwar goal. Some antiwar constituents hoped for not only an end to the Vietnam War, but an end to the capitalist state that created it, while others simply wanted an end to the draft, or a slow withdrawal from Vietnam.¹⁴² The inconsistencies within the antiwar movement led to a broader division, one that provided ample opportunity for critique and undermined the cohesion of the movement.

Separate from the Right, antiwar activism exposed a growing political divide among American liberals and began to pull apart liberalism and anticommunism. These two ideologies had been connected in the period after World War II and especially with John F. Kennedy's presidency.¹⁴³ President Kennedy confronted Soviet power through a series of high-stakes initiatives, including the space race, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and escalating tensions in Berlin's divided East and West zones. Kennedy was a vehement anti-communist, and he committed to this cause throughout his presidency, linking liberalism and democratic candidates to an explicit anti-communist stance.¹⁴⁴ The separation between the two began with the Vietnam War's antiwar constituents, but also with those on the pro-war side pushing hard against the expansion of communism, embracing the anti-communist label, and taking it away from liberals. When President Lyndon Johnson had to address this issue, liberalism was in crisis; was he to stand with the fight against communism in Vietnam or with a growing number of American citizens who were opposed to this costly, deadly, and expanding war?¹⁴⁵ This question split the liberals into

¹⁴² Appy, *American Reckoning*, 184.

¹⁴³ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 341.

¹⁴⁴ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 341.

¹⁴⁵ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 342.

different camps, with some embracing anti-communist beliefs, while others turned against violence and the escalation of the war.

The growing division between liberalism and anti-communism was another point of contention for the pro-war protestors to seize on. Because many of the antiwar protestors pushed against staunch anti-communism and separated the longstanding connection between liberalism and anti-communist beliefs, those on the right began to more actively exploit longstanding perceptions that liberal Democrats were soft on communism, an accusation that had originated in the late 1940s. Ideological fault lines within the anti-Vietnam War movement tended to exacerbate the situation for liberals. Within the broad antiwar coalition, some members of SDS would not criticize the communist regimes in Vietnam, while certain radical activists would publicly demonstrate their support for communists such as Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh with signs and chants. Early news reports of the antiwar groups even pointed out that the demonstrations were “initiated by Students for a Democratic Society, a left-leaning, but non-communist group.”¹⁴⁶ The emphasis on non-communism in framing the group as left-leaning underscores the negative connotations traditionally associated with leftist movements, while simultaneously enabling the antiwar movement to distance itself from allegations of communist sympathies. The pro-war protestors also began to believe in a perceived growing anti-American sentiment coming from the left. They connected ideas of communism to the left in what they would deem to be anti-American. This notion of anti-Americanism became a foundational argument for their rejection of both the antiwar activists and their cause. All the ideas arising from antiwar protest, instead of being analyzed thoughtfully on an individual basis, would be collectively villainized and labelled as anti-American.

¹⁴⁶ “Students Picket at White House,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 1965.

The autumn months of 1965 brought important developments that reflected the growth of dissent but also early signs of polarization. Many organizations, not just SDS, engaged in various forms of antiwar resistance across the country.¹⁴⁷ Pro-war protestors and other supporters of the war believed that the antiwar movement unjustly criticized and demeaned soldiers and veterans, a sentiment they viewed as fundamentally anti-American. This would change in later years with the growth of the GI protest movement and the founding of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in 1967, but the early days of dissent triggered counter protests that would, in the words of historian Charles DeBenedetti “pledge the nation’s faith to GIs in Vietnam,” and support the president in the war.¹⁴⁸ While it should be acknowledged that some subsets of people in the antiwar movement may have criticized soldiers and veterans that served in Vietnam, the antiwar movement as a whole did not broadly support this view. Despite this, early pro-war reactions to antiwar protestors would shape the way the public viewed antiwar dissenters for the entirety of their movement; the opposing side, by expressing "patriotic" support for U.S. policies and the military, effectively portrayed antiwar dissenters as harboring animosity toward those who served in the conflict. In reality, both the antiwar movement and the cultural rebels that embraced it criticized the government – or the “masters of war” – rather than those who served in Vietnam in the American Armed Forces.

Another crucial aspect of the left was its opposition to the draft. The anti-draft movement played a significant role in the expansion of the anti-Vietnam War movement during the late 1960s. Generally, there was a moral commitment to oppose the draft from those on the left, but the draft was also unpopular with some on the right and was expressed by a small number of YAF members. From the beginnings of YAF, some libertarian YAFers were against the draft,

¹⁴⁷ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 126.

¹⁴⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 127.

and grew increasingly opposed to it as Vietnam continued to escalate.¹⁴⁹ This would later create an internal divide between the small group of libertarians and more traditional conservatives, contributing to deepening divides within the organization. Despite this, the YAF's support for the war was key to its platform and though some members may have rejected the draft, they embraced the war itself and the fight of communism abroad.¹⁵⁰ Because of their support for the war, their rejection of the draft was less concerning to the public; they must have supported the troops if they supported the war. On the left, it was not as simple. True to their principles of opposing the draft, they took more drastic measures than YAF to make their stance on the subject known, like public draft resistance and antidraft rallies.¹⁵¹ Their radical measures, like public draft card burnings that would become increasingly popular,¹⁵² would further alienate them into a so-called anti-American group.

A major issue that arose with the antiwar groups strong stance against the draft was their position of privilege within it. Much of the antiwar effort was centered on college campuses and ironically, college students were protected from the draft, as there was a longstanding policy of deferments for enrolled college or university students.¹⁵³ It is important to note that the policy of draft deferments was under threat of being reduced, which led to widespread anxiety among college students. Despite this, college students took a stance, "chanting 'Hell no, we won't go'" though they "were in no danger of going anywhere."¹⁵⁴ Their staunch opposition to the draft and resistance to being deployed to war were met with considerable disapproval by many Americans.

¹⁴⁹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 81.

¹⁵⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 81.

¹⁵¹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 128.

¹⁵² DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 128.

¹⁵³ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 340.

¹⁵⁴ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 340.

While many Americans may have rejected the protests, students represented a significant portion of the antiwar movement and played a crucial role in driving the change that many sought.

Though the antidraft stance from the left caused upheaval and a perceived anti-American sentiment, it was somewhat successful in its goals. Activists were able to expose the system for the ways it was designed to manipulate citizens and an entire generation of potential draftees.¹⁵⁵ As part of these efforts, SDS exposed a Selective Service memo that promoted the draft as a way to “‘channel’ young people into careers that served the ‘national interest.’”¹⁵⁶ This memo seemed to limit the freedoms of non-college students or Americans not pursuing specific career paths, particularly those engaged in activities considered non-essential by the Selective Service.¹⁵⁷ Evidence like this was helpful to the antiwar cause, and attracted protestors that were separate from radicals on the left, but still embraced antidraft principles, whether or not they supported the war. In the meantime, support for the war was more divided. Divisions were becoming very apparent with the continuation of issues like the draft, especially by 1966 and 1967, and conflicting views among conservatives about the draft often left conservative activists more splintered.

Antiwar activists felt that the draft was not only unnecessary but unfair. Along with students that could not get drafted, the rich often found loopholes, and the very poor and unskilled were often rejected. From its beginnings, the draft was “a ready-made issue for radicals eager to stress ‘the way in which the war touches people personally and unjustly.’”¹⁵⁸ This left a disproportionate group of Americans that were eligible for the draft, mostly comprised of lower-

¹⁵⁵ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 135.

¹⁵⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 135.

¹⁵⁷ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 135.

¹⁵⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 128.

middle and working classes.¹⁵⁹ Although the draft quota increased in 1965, leading to lower military admission standards, the recruits still tended to come from lower-class backgrounds.¹⁶⁰ Project 100,000, begun by Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense in 1966, was designed to admit 100,000 poorly educated men into the military every year, promoted with the goal of social justice.¹⁶¹ This problematic program did not result in social uplift but rather with the help of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Assistant Secretary to Labour in the 1960s, recruited many poorly educated Black men who died at higher rates than any other group in the American forces.¹⁶² Moynihan believed that this program and the military would provide “a surrogate black family” but instead the program was a failure, as shown by the deaths in the battlefield.¹⁶³ This program and its goals highlighted the issues with the draft and also the racism that was ingrained in American society and highlighted that the Vietnam War and its protestors would often find their roots in Civil Rights struggles.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., along with members of SNCC and other Civil Rights activists, began to publicly turn against the war between 1965 and 1967. Stokely Carmichael was vocal about his opposition to American involvement in Vietnam and was especially impassioned about Black Americans serving in the war.¹⁶⁴ Carmichael would often raise these issues to try and steer the attention to what he perceived to be injustices committed to the White House and Congress.¹⁶⁵ His focus on Vietnam displayed the complexities of the relationship between Civil Rights and antiwar movements, which overlapped. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. experienced more difficulty in disclosing his stance on the matter. Civil Rights issues were still paramount in

¹⁵⁹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 128.

¹⁶⁰ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 132.

¹⁶¹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 132.

¹⁶² Appy, *American Reckoning*, 133.

¹⁶³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 134.

¹⁶⁴ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 179.

¹⁶⁵ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 179.

King's mind, and he was wary that vocal criticism of the Vietnam War could detract from his efforts in that arena, potentially tarnishing his relationship with President Johnson and his supporters in Congress. By 1967, events in Vietnam had swayed King to take a stance and criticize the war, linking the issues happening abroad with issues on the home front.¹⁶⁶ He essentially argued that “[America] w[as] taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”¹⁶⁷ He states that the issues home should be addressed, like racism, poverty, class issues, before America funds a foreign war. This stance, and his later involvement in the April 17, 1967 Spring Mobilization – a massive anti-Vietnam War march held in Manhattan and San Francisco – brought together “remnants of the Civil Rights coalition into an alliance with peace groups who realized that their combined interests had the makings of a powerful movement.”¹⁶⁸

The cooperation and collaboration of many different groups at the Spring Mobilization was an important moment for antiwar activists, and more broadly peace activism. It had an immense turnout, somewhere between one hundred and four hundred thousand protestors on both coasts.¹⁶⁹ There was a small, but vocal group of prowar activists counter-demonstrating at the mobilization, but the sheer number of people on the antiwar side overshadowed them.¹⁷⁰ The mobilization – a product of the interconnected nature of the Civil Rights movement and antiwar activism – was a milestone that helped thrust the anti-Vietnam War movement into the mainstream of American life.

¹⁶⁶ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 179.

¹⁶⁷ Martin Luther King Jr. “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” Transcript of speech delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967.

¹⁶⁸ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 180.

¹⁶⁹ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 180.

¹⁷⁰ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 180.

For Civil Rights and Black Power leaders, the Vietnam War was seen as emblematic of the broader injustices plaguing America, deeply intertwined with the struggle for African American rights and equality. The disproportionate number of Black Americans in the draft and Project 100,000 both highlight that. But their main focus was on Black issues in America. Antiwar activists welcomed their engagement and energy, and their interests aligned, but the main goal of antiwar activists was directly focused on ending the war and not always on social conditions at home that intersected with it. These individual objectives fuelled internal conflicts, which ultimately contributed to the fragmentation of the movement. Externally, Americans were confronted with a range of divisive issues that exacerbated the widening cultural rift. While all factions within the broader movement believed their cause was justified, they struggled to reconcile their differences, allowing these tensions to further divide them.

YAF and the Right

On the right, YAF was struggling with their stance on the Vietnam War and related issues. The internal divides between libertarians, with their emphasis on limited government and economic freedom, and traditionalists, who favoured a strong military to counter global communism and embraced socially conservative values at home, caused internal struggle. Libertarians in YAF became the majority in some chapters by 1968, like at Penn State in University Park, Pennsylvania, which had the largest chapter in the country.¹⁷¹ Adding to the frustrations of YAFers was the fact that SDS was enjoying popularity from media coverage and was gaining momentum membership-wise while YAF was struggling to find a cohesive voice and greater public support. They focused on opposing SDS while also insisting the 1964

¹⁷¹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 123.

landslide election in which President Johnson soundly trounced Barry Goldwater, represented, in the words of historian John Andrew III, a “‘humiliating defeat’ for the Republican Party but a ‘national political beachhead for conservatism.’”¹⁷² The 1964 election had been a terrible detriment to their cause, showing them that Americans put more emphasis on liberal policies of Johnson and his “Great Society” than on policies championed by conservatives. The deepening conflict in Vietnam was certainly an issue in the 1964 election, with Goldwater advocating more military involvement and action. His conservative views, though not winning the election, were relatively popular among grassroots conservatives and energized them to take a stance.¹⁷³

By 1964, their power in campus conservatism was beginning to fade, but they provided leadership that people could follow who were committed to conservatism rather than just the Republican Party.¹⁷⁴ While YAF did not cease to exist, they shifted their perspective during this period, similarly to SDS shifting their goals. By the end of the decade though, many of the YAF libertarians did not support the war. The key difference between them and SDSers was their rejection of the war while still believing that North and South Vietnam were both corrupt.¹⁷⁵ They continued to be suspicious of communism, or rejected it completely, a value that was key to their original organization, and was a constant whether they be traditionalists or libertarians. This was a significant distinction, as those within the organization who supported the war called for a decisive victory in Vietnam, insisting that the United States should not negotiate with communists to bring an end to the conflict.¹⁷⁶ Thus, even though a growing number of libertarians were embracing the antiwar movement, they stood firm in their anti-communist

¹⁷² Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 215.

¹⁷³ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 109.

¹⁷⁴ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 215.

¹⁷⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 122.

¹⁷⁶ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 192.

beliefs. The position taken by some libertarian members of YAF clearly contributed to the unrest within the organization. Some of these libertarians even attended antiwar events, either occasionally or regularly, eventually becoming active participants in the antiwar movement.¹⁷⁷ The progression of YAF was certainly very disjointed due to these divides, but their original embrace of conservative ideas surrounding the war led the way for later prowar activists. Although the American political establishment up to 1968 was largely driven by liberal ideas, conservative values and organized citizen groups were steadily preparing for the eventual rightward shift of the nation's political institutions.

Despite internal challenges within the YAF, conservatives, and especially pro-war activists, felt their reach broadening, and their message resonated in popular culture and the media more than ever before. In the cultural arena, pro-war messages reached large audiences, and helped solidify support for the war. In 1966, the Green Berets, a special army force created under President Harry Truman to be elite commandos, began to enjoy a heyday of popular support, with stories about them appearing in magazines, newspapers, and on television and radio. One Green Beret released a song, contributing to the growing pushback against antiwar activists. Special Forces Sargeant Barry Sadler of the Green Berets sang "The Ballad of the Green Berets," a song about American soldiers fighting overseas and their continued, important efforts. Sadler, an active-duty Green Beret medic, performed this song on the Ed Sullivan Show, a popular variety television program on CBS that starred a wide variety of celebrities and was one of the most successful shows in history.¹⁷⁸ The song itself had reached number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 music chart, eventually becoming the top song of 1966. "The Ballad of the Green Berets" does not explicitly mention Vietnam but rather celebrates military training and

¹⁷⁷ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 123.

¹⁷⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 123.

dying for the oppressed.¹⁷⁹ The success of this song stands in contrast to the broader cultural trends of the 1960s, which were largely defined by leftist ideals, including the prominence of protest songs. The embrace of a pro-war military song was inherently ironic, yet its widespread resonance was evident in its ability to cross boundaries, gaining popularity not only among supporters of the war but across various segments of society. Many young people liked the song and its ability, with all the other mixed media and culture of the 1960s, to encourage “young people to think about their relationship to the world and to history – to have grand aspirations and commitments.”¹⁸⁰ The song was adopted by pro-war protestors as they would often blast it during campus rallies or in response to antiwar actions. Some antiwar protestors also believed it to be propaganda for the military and regarded it as dangerously nationalistic.¹⁸¹ With all its controversy, “The Ballad of the Green Berets” stands out in a period of rejection against military systems, and highlights the complexities of the 1960s, breaking intercultural boundaries.

While Sergeant Sadler’s “The Ballad of the Green Beret’s” reached the top spot on the charts of 1966, the movie *The Green Berets*, starring John Wayne, did not quite enjoy the same reception. The 1968 film, based on a novel by Robin Moore, was directed by and starred John Wayne.¹⁸² The film, about a liberal journalist (played by David Janssen) who covers a unit of Green Berets in the jungles of Vietnam commanded by Col. Mike Kirby (John Wayne), was meant to justify American involvement in Vietnam. Even John Wayne, with his popularity and outspoken pro-war beliefs, could not help lead *The Green Berets* to commercial and critical success. The film concludes with the main character, the liberal journalist, returning home to

¹⁷⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 124.

¹⁸⁰ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 124.

¹⁸¹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 124.

¹⁸² John Wayne and Ray Kellogg, directors. *The Green Berets*. Warner Brothers, 1968. 142 minutes.

reveal to America what he believes is the truth of the war—that it was both necessary and just.¹⁸³ This trope proved to be the opposite of the experiences of many pro-war journalists who would travel to Vietnam and upon seeing the horrors unleashed by the conflict, would change their view on the war once they returned.¹⁸⁴ The film was received negatively by critics, movie audiences, and even many American troops in Vietnam, who found it funny and laughed at its “pro-war piety and all the flagrantly unrealistic scenes.”¹⁸⁵ The reception at home was quite similar. Reviews of the film were negative, and its initial reception was poor. Upon its release, journalist Renata Adler for the New York Times pointed out that “if the left-wing extremist’s nightmare of what we already are has become the right-wing extremist’s ideal of what we are ought to be we are in steeper trouble than anyone could have imagined.”¹⁸⁶ Adler’s sentiment perfectly encapsulated the emerging cultural conflict and its escalation through the film. Her observations about *The Green Berets* underscored the troubles of misunderstanding and division through film, and consequently through media more generally. The film’s attempts to garner widespread support for the war were clearly not successful, but more importantly its goal to bring up the pro-war sentiment, as it was already beginning to fade in this period, was more divisive than unifying.

Folk Music, Crossover, and Critiques on Cultural Divisions

Folk music and protest movements became deeply intertwined, and by 1965, music had evolved into a powerful tool for a revolution. The folk craze began to die down in the late 1960s,

¹⁸³ John Wayne and Ray Kellogg, directors. *The Green Berets*.

¹⁸⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 143.

¹⁸⁵ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 143.

¹⁸⁶ Adler, Renata. “Screen: ‘Green Berets’ as viewed by John Wayne” *The New York Times* (New York), June 20, 1968.

with elements of it morphing into louder, harder sounds of folk rock, but it helped to create context for later songs as well as an outlet for political struggle.¹⁸⁷ Folk songs were adopted by protestors in both Civil Rights and Vietnam War contexts and served as anthems for a generation of dissenters. Many of these singers like Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, and Peter, Paul and Mary, all participated in the activism that they so heavily preached in their songs by performing at rallies and trying to get their message on network television.¹⁸⁸ They even continued to oppose the war, like some antiwar grassroots organizations did, through the early 1970s. The celebrity involvement in these protests and in promoting their message contributed to laying the foundations for anti-Vietnam War activism.¹⁸⁹ In the late 1960s, rock music thrived as the most popular music genre of the period. With an overlap between rock music and the newly emerging counterculture becoming increasingly evident, many folk artists began to cross over into rock.¹⁹⁰ With this, a market for youth culture emerged, and mass media and industries began to appeal to them. Mass media “promote[d] and disseminate[d] youth culture further [to] accelerate this generation’s collective identity.”¹⁹¹ The dominant culture in these years was increasingly influenced by the efforts of corporations and the media to appeal to the segment of American youth that had embraced the counterculture. This contributed to the polarized images constructed by the media, which often manipulated events and narratives to fit predefined frameworks that they had created.

An important facet of music, and particularly the music of the 1960s, was the interpretation of it. While many of the songs released in this period were explicit in their words

¹⁸⁷ King, “Celebrity Activism in the Vietnam War Era” 168.

¹⁸⁸ King, “Celebrity Activism in the Vietnam War Era” 168.

¹⁸⁹ King, “Celebrity Activism in the Vietnam War Era” 168.

¹⁹⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 135.

¹⁹¹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 136.

and sentiments, some had a more general appeal in which both the antiwar and pro-war activists could find meaning. Dana Rohrabacher of YAF found value in music by Bob Dylan, identifying with his experiences and social commentary. His interpretation of Dylan's music was that it was a revolt against institutions and a call for freedom.¹⁹² While it was true that Dylan protested against various elements of modern American life, it is interesting that this music would resonate with YAFers. Dylan and other folk artists were outwardly antiwar or supported many characteristics of the counterculture, which the Right did not necessarily align themselves with. Other YAF members mention artists like the Grateful Dead, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, and Jefferson Airplane as groups with a political foundation whose lyrics were important.¹⁹³ The crossover in the musical sphere exists in other parts of culture from this period which is an important element of the culture wars. The reach of culture across the political spectrum suggests an open mindedness among its consumers to the other side, and a perceived common ground between the ideologically opposing groups. Culture served as a framework for interpretation, leading to divisions in how it was embraced and understood by different segments of society. As evidenced by the internal divisions within groups such as SDS and YAF, aligning with the opposing political faction was often perceived as an act of betrayal, or at the very least, a fundamental error in judgment. This tendency reflects a broader reluctance to engage with, or even attempt to understand, the motivations and perspectives that might attract individuals to alternative political positions. This contributed to the divide in culture, even with the small amount of crossover that did exist.

The embrace of culture and crossover was evident in the widespread popularity of certain songs during the late 1960s. This period especially saw an influx in critiques on American

¹⁹² Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 149.

¹⁹³ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 150.

government, or more pointed, direct attempts at addressing the war in Vietnam. While some songs were more direct responses to the war abroad, like “We Gotta Get Out of this Place” by the Animals, many were overtly critical of the war, making their way into radical left-wing spheres. “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” by the psychedelic country rock band Country Joe & The Fish, based in Berkeley, California, was solely focused on criticizing the war in Vietnam, painting it as an immoral and destructive endeavor. While other songs were humbler in their criticisms, Country Joe & The Fish did not hold back. Part of the reason for this was that Joe McDonald, the lead singer, had served in the Navy and had a deeply negative experience during his time there.¹⁹⁴ While originally hoping it would be a way to see the world, he found that he was “at the absolute mercy of the military machine,” and could not find a way out.¹⁹⁵ McDonald sees the song from the point of view of a soldier, appealing to a group that many other songs of the period, especially ones that were products of the counterculture, could not do. The song ridicules the stated objectives of the government for this war including the anti-communist rhetoric of the period, American exceptionalism and responsibility, and capitalism.¹⁹⁶ It also criticizes parents that sent their children to war, and American leaders, holding them accountable for the world’s problems.¹⁹⁷

While many listeners found the song catchy, the wording of the lyrics was quite graphic. While the band wanted to criticize the war, their imagery of “pack[ing] your boys off to Vietnam” to “be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box” was striking to say the least.¹⁹⁸ Despite the graphic nature of the lyrics, the song reflected the rhetoric of

¹⁹⁴ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 96.

¹⁹⁵ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 96.

¹⁹⁶ Country Joe McDonald, “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag,” Recorded 1967. Track 1 on *I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die*. Vanguard Records, 1967.

¹⁹⁷ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 97.

¹⁹⁸ McDonald, “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag.”

antiwar radicals, and general countercultural feelings. “I Feel Like I’m Fixin to Die Rag” found a larger audience as a result of its memorable performance at Woodstock in 1969, and its absurdist lyrics reflected the political turmoil of the period.¹⁹⁹ Many listeners were not aware of McDonald’s military service and saw the song as an insult to the military, though the troops in Vietnam who heard the song mostly understood the dark humour of its lyrics.²⁰⁰ But the controversy stirred by the song at home, which triggered angry reactions from certain circles, is a concrete example of the misunderstandings that perpetuated cross cultural conflicts, and displays the reactionary responses that were becoming conventional, creating a lack of communication.

Though folk music and protest in culture was still relatively limited to certain circles, and in some cases, like Joe McDonald’s, did not reach mainstream audiences, more artists began to see commercial success when they dared to include sharper political rhetoric.²⁰¹ In 1965, singer songwriter Barry McGuire – a rising figure in the American folk scene – released “Eve of Destruction,” a song brimming with potent protest themes. “Eve of Destruction” topped the *Billboard* charts in September of 1965,²⁰² finding its way into the cultural zeitgeist. Regardless of its success, it was banned from a number of radio stations in the United States due to its direct reference to Vietnam, which some critics called “anti-American.”²⁰³ The Christian Anti-Communist Crusade expressed concern towards the song, deeming it dangerous for teenagers and claiming that it instilled them with a sense of hopelessness.²⁰⁴ The song was successful upon its release, but preceded “The Ballad of the Green Berets” which would out do McGuire with all

¹⁹⁹ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 98.

²⁰⁰ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 98.

²⁰¹ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 37.

²⁰² Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 37.

²⁰³ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 38.

²⁰⁴ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 191.

audiences and surpass “Eve’s” success.²⁰⁵ Regardless of its success or failure, it validated the growth of a new mass movement of young Americans.²⁰⁶

“Eve of Destruction” did not simply address the Vietnam War, it addressed the dissent and disillusionment of American citizens, mainly directed towards the American government.²⁰⁷ McGuire’s view that “marches alone can’t bring integration / when human respect is disintegratin’” confronts the cultural conflict and protest with a pessimistic view.²⁰⁸ He believed that the views of Americans, the lack of respect and acceptance towards integration, and the broader issues with foreign affairs left America on the “eve of destruction.”²⁰⁹ Through his lyrics, McGuire declares that American society is not fully aware of the destruction in which they participated. “Eve of Destruction” not only captured McGuire’s sharp critique of American society at the time, but its dark tone also foreshadowed the intense polarization that would soon grip the nation. By decade’s end, this division would split Americans along ideological lines, leaving most people unable to bridge the deep rifts that divided them.

The Spokesman, a short-lived band formed Pennsylvania by songwriters John Medora and David White in response to “Eve of Destruction” and other protest songs, released a song called “The Dawn of Correction,” a direct reaction to “Eve of Destruction,” taking the same musical form, but changing the lyrics to counteract what McGuire sang, emphasizing instead an optimistic outlook for America’s future.²¹⁰ Their version focused on what they believed to be the positives of American life, such as resisting communists, celebrating voter registration expansion, and freedom of speech. The Spokesman also listed aspects of modern life “that

²⁰⁵ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 192.

²⁰⁶ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 192.

²⁰⁷ Barry McGuire, “Eve of Destruction,” Recorded 1965. Track 1 on *Eve of Destruction*. Dunhill, 1965.

²⁰⁸ McGuire, “Eve of Destruction.”

²⁰⁹ McGuire, “Eve of Destruction.”

²¹⁰ The Spokesman, “Dawn of Correction,” Recorded 1965. Track 7 on *The Dawn of Correction*, 1965.

deserve commendation” like the introduction of vaccines, the Peace Corps, and the United Nations.²¹¹ The song’s lyrics ignored much of McGuire’s explicit lyricism on Vietnam, but instead focused on what the songwriters believed to be the nobler parts of the nation, while ignoring the reasons why injustices were occurring. America, the Spokesman insisted, is in a “better situation,” but the songwriters did not mention Civil Rights struggles, nuclear fears, or the horrors of war.²¹² The song did not do well,²¹³ certainly not reaching the success of “Eve of Destruction” but instead remains what was later deemed a cultural artifact of the period, a largely forgotten novelty song that serves as an example of Americans who rejected protest movements.

There are many songs from the late 1960s that contain an explicit antiwar stance, serve as military propaganda, or feed into some other type of social movement. But “For What it’s Worth” by Buffalo Springfield focuses on the cultural conflict and the issues at home rather than a specific event.²¹⁴ If “Eve of Destruction” was a backdrop to protest, “For What it’s Worth” was the singular anthem for the emerging culture wars. “For What it’s Worth” was released in 1967 by Buffalo Springfield and was written by singer-songwriter Stephen Stills.²¹⁵ Rather than explicitly taking a liberal or conservative approach, the song addresses general fears and worries of young people on both sides. More importantly, Stills writes about the cultural conflict and burgeoning culture wars by critiquing the backlash on both sides and the harm that comes with ignorance. While commenting on the “thousand people in the street,” the issue of them “mostly say[ing] ‘hooray for our side’” criticizes the close-minded nature of many radicals.²¹⁶ The solution is that “its time we stop / hey, what’s that sound? / Everybody look, what’s going

²¹¹ The Spokesman, “Dawn of Correction.”

²¹² The Spokesman, “Dawn of Correction.”

²¹³ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 192.

²¹⁴ Buffalo Springfield, “For What its Worth,” Recorded 1966. Track 1 on *Buffalo Springfield*. Atco. Records, 1966.

²¹⁵ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 212.

²¹⁶ Buffalo Springfield, “For What its Worth.”

down?” referring to the need for greater listening and communication, and emphasizing the importance of fostering a more cohesive America, rather than allowing politics to continually drive division and conflict.²¹⁷ The song highlights paranoia as a key driver of misunderstanding and focuses on the idea that “Nobody’s right if everybody’s wrong.”²¹⁸ This line is crucial to understanding the cultural divide: a failure to communicate and consider differing perspectives would only harm America, deepening existing divisions. The song was interpreted in various ways by individuals, as the power of music and media lies in their ability to resonate with a wide range of people. Interpretation is inherently subjective, and because the song did not explicitly take sides, it could be embraced by listeners from diverse backgrounds.

1968: The Beginning of the End

The end of the 1960s marked the culmination of the entire decade, as both the liberal leadership and governance that had defined the era were drawing to a close. Nineteen sixty-eight in particular was characterized by substantial change, but it also saw notable progress. The year can be identified as a turning point in both the Vietnam War and the cultural conflict at home, contributing to an intensified focus on the war and engendering a “public crisis in which the war simply could not be ignored”²¹⁹ By 1968, antiwar protesters had united a diverse array of groups and gained unprecedented recognition, bringing greater attention to the issues facing the home front. National debates about the war in the United States had been taking place before 1968, but this was the year when the deepening divisions and dramatic upheavals came to a head in the streets of America. Political turmoil and presidential elections, assassinations of important

²¹⁷ Buffalo Springfield, “For What its Worth.”

²¹⁸ Buffalo Springfield, “For What its Worth.”

²¹⁹ Powers, *The War at Home*, 258.

political figures, and the end of the “Great Society” and the optimism that came with it, were all pivotal moments of the year. The election of President Richard Nixon in 1968 was also extremely important to the future of both antiwar and pro-war movements. For antiwar protestors, the turbulent Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August of 1968 proved to be a defining moment. The prominence of the Right and Republican values began to skyrocket in the 1980s and into the 1990s, whereas the 1970s and end of the 1960s marked the end of the so called “liberal hour.” For SDS and YAF, this period marked a shift as, in sociologist Rebecca Klatch’s words, “YAF’s stamp is as indelibly marked on the 1980s and 1990s as SDS’s signature is on the 1960s.”²²⁰ The events of 1968 became significant contributors to the deepening divisions that characterized the end of the decade.

The Tet Offensive in South Vietnam set precedent for the horrors to come in 1968, and contributed heavily to the tumultuous events in the United States that followed it. The Tet Offensive, a military battle fought in January of 1968, seemingly a surprise attack on U.S. forces, resulted in mass destruction of both troops and morale, especially on the Vietnamese communist side. The offensive shattered President Johnson’s credibility, who had for the previous two months, convinced Americans that the war was winding down and the enemy was not able to perform an attack of this size.²²¹ Weeks of bloody American counter offensives across South Vietnam made sure that Vietnamese enemies saw major defeat, but even with General Westmoreland, one of the generals in Vietnam, saying that ““North Vietnam is crying for peace because of battle wounds,”” Johnson grew despairing about the war’s future prospects. Tet was a major turning point in the war, but also a symbol for the war at home. Following Tet, more Americans than ever began to oppose the war. Before the battle, 28 percent of Americans

²²⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 133.

²²¹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 210.

opposed the war, but following it, more than 40 percent of Americans opposed it. Prior to Tet, 56 percent of Americans supported it, but this shifted to 40 percent following the offensive.²²² This battle started 1968, and the long-lasting effects of it would ring throughout the year.

On the home front, racial tensions in America's cities had been escalating since the mid-1960s. Black urban uprisings and large-scale police confrontations in many Black communities were increasing, and anger in these communities was rising.²²³ Demonstrations continued, and Martin Luther King Jr, the leader of many Civil Rights events, used his influence to call for peace. He was not only a leader, but an inspiration and guide for others that were part of Civil Rights struggles. By 1968, King was also a key figure in American society more broadly, especially to liberals and radicals advocating for peace. Since April 1967, he had been increasingly involved with antiwar movements and struggles against inner-city poverty in the Northern U.S., and his presence was important to many as he was a beacon of hope and change. His assassination on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, sent shockwaves across the country.²²⁴ His death prompted violence and disorder, as many struggled to grasp the enormity of the news. His assassination was seen as a metaphorical blow to the Civil Rights Movement itself, symbolizing a devastating setback for the cause. King had been an architect of peace and justice for many, including antiwar protestors who often looked to African American resisters for guidance. King's assassination was both shocking and devastating, marking one of several events that would erode the optimism and progress of the preceding years.

Following the Tet Offensive and the assassination of MLK, the question of morality began to re-emerge in the mainstream. These thoughts existed throughout the entire decade, but

²²² Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (Da Capo Press, 2001), 7.

²²³ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 217.

²²⁴ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 218.

as the war got bloodier and more brutal with no end in sight, and the war at home became more violent, and was simultaneously being broadcasted to the nation, morals became more widely questioned.²²⁵ Tet brought the war far from just the battlefield, to “the living rooms of America.”²²⁶ The war shifted from being a military problem to a political and cultural one more so than it ever had been before. Liberals, and some radicals, looked to new candidates with the 1968 election looming, and Johnson announcing he would not seek re-election in March.²²⁷

Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York, a former United States Attorney General in his brother’s presidential administration, became a popular candidate among liberal Americans, with his staunch criticisms of Johnson’s war policies and his championing of progressive reform. Antiwar liberals trusted him and his vision for America's future, and he began to perform strongly in the primaries.²²⁸ Alongside Kennedy was Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, another liberal Democratic candidate who some antiwar activists believed would pose an effective challenge to President Johnson in the primaries. Against this backdrop of shifting Democratic Party politics, some antiwar activists began to move their focus to electoral politics as a means of bringing about change,²²⁹ believing that a top-down approach could reignite the movement. Despite the robust support that McCarthy received from mostly energetic young university students, Kennedy emerged in the primaries in the winter and spring months of 1968 as the more popular candidate as he was young and relatable, much like his brother JFK. On June 5, Kennedy delivered a victory speech in Los Angeles, California, to an enthusiastic crowd, thanking them for his success in the primaries. But the promising candidate was assassinated at

²²⁵ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 210.

²²⁶ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 7.

²²⁷ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 212.

²²⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 220.

²²⁹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 219.

this event, just weeks after Rev. Dr. King's assassination.²³⁰ Unlike the assassination of Dr. King, there were no riots or demonstrations in the aftermath of Kennedy's killing, but instead a loss of hope; as 1968 progressed, public optimism in the nation's future had markedly declined.

With many young antiwar protestors looking for more radical solutions to the war, and the political opportunities favouring establishment candidates in both parties, armies of mainly young activists took to the streets of Chicago for the Democratic National Convention in August of 1968. Democratic leaders and the Chicago Police were aware of the plans from protestors, and attempted to make the convention secure for the influx of people that would arrive, but the sheer number of protestors and the diversity of the group was simply too much.²³¹ As demonstrators began to file in, the city dispatched 6,000 state national guardsman, and the confrontation between them and the demonstrators begun shortly after their arrival. From August 20 until August 29 police broke up demonstrations, used tear gas, chemical mace, and other tools to disperse the protestors.²³² The confusion of the different leaders that were present at this protest – SDS radicals such as Tom Hayden, militant Black Panther members like Bobby Seale, colourful Yippie insurgents like Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, serious antiwar activists with the National Mobilization committee to End the War in Vietnam (the Mobe) including David Dellinger – created many individual groups initiating nonviolent marches, small groups carrying the American flag, people breaking through encirclements, and more chaos.²³³ These confrontations would become known as the Battle of Chicago with some leaders of this demonstration like Tom Hayden, David Dellinger, and Abbie Hoffman, as well as others, being

²³⁰ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 220.

²³¹ Michael Isserman and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 244-45.

²³² DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 227.

²³³ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 227.

arrested and sent to trial.²³⁴ The DNC and the brutality from both police and protestors marked a confusing point for the future of radicals and liberals. The demonstration had not gone as planned, and the “aesthetically displeasing violence” disrupted the organizational tactics of the antiwar movements.²³⁵ This demonstration represents the direction that the antiwar movement was going in with confusion and disorganization being the main driving factors.

As a result of the year’s traumatic upheavals, the major theme of 1968 became polarization. The antiwar movement was experiencing internal divisions, as some members became increasingly radical, shifting away from the emotional tactics of the early 1960s and focusing instead on strategies aimed at pressuring the “heartless, cost-calculating decision-makers” to end the war.²³⁶ However, this does not imply that all antiwar activists adopted radicalism; the movement continued to be significantly shaped by moderates, who remained a central force within the movement until its decline in the 1970s. As antiwar sentiment gained popularity and increasingly aligned with liberal ideals, radicals began to distance themselves, creating further divisions within the movement instead of uniting as a cohesive force of dissent. By this point, SDS was unravelling due to internal conflicts pulling them apart, and leadership divides emerging between the original New Left and the new subset of officers.²³⁷ Despite their internal conflicts, and their issues with organization, young college students began to join SDS in record numbers following the DNC in Chicago.²³⁸ In September, when classes returned, SDS membership reached 100,000 people over the 500 chapters that existed. The issue though was that even though “radicalism remained to some extent in vogue, it had lost its capacity to

²³⁴ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 227.

²³⁵ Farber, David. *The Sixties: From Memory to History*. (UNC Press, 1994), 230.

²³⁶ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 276.

²³⁷ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 223.

²³⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 230.

organize.”²³⁹ These divides continued and made their way into political platforms as the year went on and politics changed.

Hubert Humphrey was elected in 1968 as candidate for the Democrats, but none of the major liberal candidates had a clear position on the war.²⁴⁰ Nixon’s platform, one that was becoming increasingly popular with a wide array of Americans, promised a restoration of “law and order” and a “secret plan” to end the war in Vietnam. Nixon began to gain support for his campaign in 1966 with his active efforts to support the conservative side of Republican politics.²⁴¹ He advocated for a harder line policy in Vietnam and increased military presence, though this is not to say Nixon was inherently pro-war; he later committed to negotiated settlement and his so-called “Vietnamization” plan, hoping that South Vietnam would take over more of the fighting.²⁴² This platform was popular for many Americans with his law-and-order promises being another driving factor towards his eventual victory, which he used to attack antiwar critics and other dissenters. Especially after the DNC in Chicago, and with Vietnam being associated with unrest at home, law and order appealed to those who were frustrated with the antiwar and Civil Rights movements.²⁴³ He promoted the Republican platform, promising to fix the protest that was turbulent and uncontrollable.²⁴⁴ His rejection of many social movements and frustration with public demonstrations made him widely popular.

Despite his conservative following, he never promised to end the war, but pointed his campaign in a direction that would wind down American involvement while stopping communist expansion.²⁴⁵ Despite not taking an explicit position on the war, his pro-war base relied on him to

²³⁹ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 230.

²⁴⁰ Benedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 235.

²⁴¹ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 74.

²⁴² Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 77.

²⁴³ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 87.

²⁴⁴ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 236.

²⁴⁵ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 78.

achieve their aims.²⁴⁶ They understood that his objectives would lead to victory in Vietnam, which became more important to them than continuing to bomb the country or take more intense military measures; American victory would, in their mind, stop the spread of communism and prove American exceptionalism. YAF and the American Conservative Union (ACU) both promoted Nixon for presidential candidate, and he won the Republican nomination.²⁴⁷ On the other side, Humphrey's stance against the war, and public rejection of support for it pushed more support towards Nixon. Nixon gained popularity not only due to his own strategic campaigning but also because of Humphrey's failure to appeal to a broad spectrum of Americans and his inability to embrace those with differing views on the war. Nixon narrowly beat Humphrey that November. The breakdown of antiwar movements, disagreements on the future of the war, and internal splits coupled with Nixon's popularity all contributed to the fall of the liberals. Nineteen sixty-eight was when "the country was convulsed in spasms of political violence and unrest," where "the Democratic National Convention erupted in violence, and peace in Vietnam came to depend on a Republican president who had built a reputation as a fighting anticommunist."²⁴⁸ Unprecedented events were unfolding in America, and 1968 marked a pivotal shift, steering the nation in a new direction.

²⁴⁶ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 80.

²⁴⁷ Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 86.

²⁴⁸ DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 236.

Chapter 3: The Last Hurrah: Solidifying Cultural Conflict in the 1970s

By 1970, a significant shift had occurred; youth protest movements began to explore new routes, pro-war sentiment had largely dissipated, and the Republican administration was actively re-shaping societal and cultural norms. Although the conflict in Vietnam remained a contentious issue, it had become increasingly unpopular among many Americans. Both SDS and YAF – whose members played a vital role in the early years of antiwar and prowar activities – faced significant challenges, particularly in 1969, a year which both organizations held their national conventions. The reactions towards the antiwar movement became increasingly complex, as many of the groups who took place in counter protests did not necessarily support the war itself, but rather vehemently disliked the antiwar movement. Despite some responsive tendencies, 1969 and 1970 were exceptionally important to the antiwar cause. In the late 1960s, antiwar demonstrators participated in a wide array of protests, several of which became the largest ever organized by antiwar activists.²⁴⁹ The movement became more respected with a diverse assembly of characters joining the cause, from students, to veterans, to politicians. While the antiwar movement was demonstrating largely across the country, the New Left was fizzling out after the previous year's trouble in Chicago.²⁵⁰ This period also saw the rise of the GI Movement, as dissenting groups of military personnel came together, as well as the organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), as more veterans began to outwardly proclaim their attitudes toward the war and came together over a united cause. The counterculture was becoming increasingly popular, which appealed to many radicals and New Leftists at the end of the decade. The shift towards the counterculture was common for radicals as the lines between the New Left movements of the early 1960s and the emerging counterculture movement were

²⁴⁹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 13.

²⁵⁰ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 13.

blurred.²⁵¹ Woodstock, held in 1969, was the culmination of the 1960s and the left-wing ideas that permeated the decade. However, it was also an example of the disorganization and disorder that began to ensue. Woodstock highlighted the counterculture, youth, rock music, and free flowing ideas that were all paramount to the 1960s, while simultaneously showcasing the problems that plagued America's future.

The 1970 Kent State Shootings marked a pivotal moment in the escalation of cultural and political tensions in the United States, resulting in the culmination of a broader societal conflict. It highlighted the deep-seated divisions and emphasized the existence of significant unresolved issues within the nation. Although the Vietnam War and the associated social movements extended well beyond 1970, the repercussions of the war and reflection of it reverberated for decades. Nineteen Seventy marked a critical turning point in a broader historical context. The media of this period undoubtedly reflected the shift in culture and the ongoing conflicts that were central to American society. Many artists engaged with these issues through their music as well as through their public actions, offering both artistic and personal commentary on the social and political landscape of the time. The tumultuous year 1968 saw the traumatic events that led to a cultural shift, but by 1970, American society had already spiralled towards trouble; the cultural divides seeped into every sphere of American life.

The Counterculture and Shaping of Public Opinion

Along with extensive changes in American daily life, both antiwar and pro-war demonstrators, and both YAF and SDS – whose members were often at the epicenter of these struggles – experienced significant cultural shifts. By 1969, a leader of SDS classified one third

²⁵¹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 15.

of their membership as “hippies” and claimed that their goals had shifted to reflect a cultural revolution.²⁵² The radical ideas that had been intensifying in the mid-1960s became the established framework for many young people, including some former liberals. This shift also reflected the embrace of the culture that was deeply intertwined with the political transformation of the period. The focus on a cultural revolution indicated a change and highlighted the disillusionment many Americans had with previous social systems and earlier forms of mainstream culture. Many Americans who had not previously aligned themselves with political protest began to do so, in significantly higher numbers than those that participated in movements following the escalation of the war. The counterculture, for young liberals and radicals, became the most important and unifying aspect of society. They believed that changing culture and attempting to resist it would eradicate the “phoniness and hierarchy, the profit and power, the processed food and three-piece suits, the evening news and the suburban ranch house.”²⁵³ Even as the radicals departed from earlier peace sentiments, the counterculture proved to be a natural stepping stone for them. This is not to say that change was only occurring on the left; many young conservatives were also experiencing a sense of discontent with American society and culture but approached it in markedly different ways.

The counterculture movement represented an important shift for many young liberals, particularly those involved with peace movements such as the antiwar protests. Understanding the role of youth culture is essential to comprehending the broader cultural conflict of the era. Young people were the core of several antiwar movements, gathering on college campuses and in urban centres to demand social and political change. While youth have historically played a significant role in societal and cultural transformation, their influence during this period was

²⁵² Schulman, *The Seventies*, 15.

²⁵³ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 16.

especially prominent. The Baby Boomer generation, which came of age during the Vietnam War, exerted a profound impact on popular culture, not only because of their sheer numbers but also due to their active engagement in social and political causes. Throughout this time, teenagers increasingly separated themselves from older generations, contributing to a pronounced generational divide and fueling a broader cultural conflict.²⁵⁴

The counterculture of the 1960s was not solely focused on generational conflict; it emerged within a unique socio-political context that offered young people a sense of freedom and optimism. This period saw a broad array of movements, including the Civil Rights and antiwar protests challenging mainstream societal narratives. At its core, the counterculture sought to reject conventional norms and create alternative ideas and lifestyles. Among the stereotypes commonly associated with the counterculture were the use of drugs, the embrace of non-western religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, the rise of rock 'n' roll music – later simply rock music – and a marked rejection of mainstream clothes and hairstyles.²⁵⁵ While the slogan “sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll,” is often used to summarize the ethos of the counterculture, its ideological ambitions extended far beyond these three elements. The counterculture frequently aligned with the ideals of the New Left's, making the two movements closely intertwined.

The intersection of ideas emphasized a broader social and political critique, contributing to the ideological divides that would continue to intensify through the 1970s. Ironically, the counterculture, which began as a rebellious youth movement, became widely popular, but in doing so, deepened divisions within American society. Notably, the generation gap, often cited in discussions relating to the counterculture, perpetuated ideas of conflict between youth and

²⁵⁴ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 99.

²⁵⁵ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 155.

their elders. The gap was often more “stylistic than ideological,”²⁵⁶ as studies of the period often suggest that young people were often in greater alignment with their parents than popular narratives suggest.²⁵⁷ These perceptions of the generation gap, while frequently based in fiction, contributed to a cultural rift that shaped American society’s understanding of itself in this tumultuous era.

“Almost Cut My Hair” by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young was a potent example of counterculture stereotypes prevalent during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Released in 1970, “Almost Cut My Hair” not only explores lyrical themes associated with the counterculture, but also reflects the musical style of the emerging psychedelic rock genre, which was integral to many young American’s identities.²⁵⁸ Although the song is not overtly political, it functions as a social critique, capturing the cultural transformations occurring within American society at the time. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young aligned themselves with the counterculture, both politically and aesthetically. Politically, they later became active supporters of antiwar protests, and culturally, they embraced the counterculture’s broader rejection of mainstream societal norms, a stance evident in their musical and visual stylistic choices. The song’s emotional and symbolic resonance is particularly significant for those involved in the countercultural movement, including the band members themselves who use the metaphor of hair to symbolize their resistance to conformity and their desire for freedom.²⁵⁹ As prominent figures within the counterculture, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young were pivotal not only in expressing the ideals of antiwar activism, but also in amplifying the voices of those who sought to challenge

²⁵⁶ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 154.

²⁵⁷ Farber, *The Sixties*, 157.

²⁵⁸ Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, “Almost Cut my Hair,” Recorded 1970. Track 3 on *Deja Vu*. Atlantic Recording, 1970.

²⁵⁹ Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, “Almost Cut my Hair.”

conventional American values. They were openly critical of American society and highlighted the widespread influence of the countercultural movement and its impact during a period of profound social and political upheaval.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as many artists, particularly within the rock genre, increasingly aligned themselves with the counterculture, a number of conservative, patriotic musicians began to offer a counter-narrative, contributing to the growing cultural divide of the era. Among these artists was Merle Haggard (1937-2016), a prominent figure in American country music, who notably resisted the countercultural movement, and the radical ideals often associated with it. Haggard's songs "Okie from Muskogee" and "The Fightin' Side of Me" epitomize his opposition to the counterculture, with the former in particular serving as a vocal critique of the antiwar protests and social upheavals of the time. Released in 1969, "Okie from Muskogee," is a harsh critique of the counterculture, framing it through the perspective of a conservative, patriotic American. An important part of this song, and its resonance with a wider conservative public is the shift that it takes from defending the war to attacking the counterculture. Haggard uses the term "Okie" here refer to the common, working-class citizen, who often aligned themselves with the values of the Silent Majority, a term popularized by President Nixon to describe those who opposed the social and political movements of the 1960s.²⁶⁰ In the song, Haggard critiques various elements of the counterculture, including drug use, draft card burning, the distinct visual aesthetics of countercultural participants, and the perceived disrespect of college students towards traditional American values. Through these lyrics, Haggard positions himself as an advocate for conservative ideals such as patriotism, law

²⁶⁰ Haggard, Merle, "Okie From Muskogee," Recorded 1969. Track 1 on *Okie From Muskogee*. Capitol Records, 1969.

and order, and freedom, thus aligning himself with the political and social values that were in direct opposition to the more radical elements of the period's cultural transformation.²⁶¹

Merle Haggard's 1970 hit, "The Fightin' Side of Me," focused more explicitly on the Vietnam War and the broader concept of national patriotism.²⁶² In the song, Haggard champions the valor of American soldiers, emphasizing that they had fought and died for the country's freedom. The lyrics criticize those who oppose the war, condemning them for "running down [the] country," and implying that an antiwar stance was equivalent to disrespect for the sacrifices made by military men. In contrast to the countercultural messages of protest, Haggard's song upholds a view that celebrated pride and duty of the American military effort. "The Fightin' Side of Me" achieved commercial success, and on the Fourth of July, 1970, was performed by Jeannie C. Riley at Honor America Day, a televised event at the White House, designed in an attempt to bolster support for Nixon's war policies.²⁶³ The event which featured a series of "patriotic anthems" sought to appeal to a wide array of the American public by invoking a sense of national pride and "rallying around the flag."²⁶⁴ Haggard's song, with its overtly conservative message, fit squarely within the broader political context of Nixon's administration, which aimed to galvanize support for the war in Vietnam amid growing domestic dissent.

The popularity of Haggard's music, particularly among Nixon's supporters and those advocating for the war, offers a striking contrast to the ideals promoted by the counterculture. While the latter increasingly championed peace and anti-establishment sentiments, Haggard's patriotic sentiment played a crucial role in strengthening the conservative movement of the era.

²⁶¹ For a deeper analysis of Haggard and his songs from the period, see Richard P. Wheeler, "A Place to Fall Apart: Merle Haggard's Music." *American Imago* 75, no. 3 (2018): 415–439.

²⁶² Haggard, Merle, "The Fightin' Side of Me," Recorded 1969. Track 1 on *The Fightin' Side of Me*. Capitol Records, 1970.

²⁶³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 207.

²⁶⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 207.

In a time when opposition to the Vietnam War was intensifying, Haggard's music—and his association with pro-war rhetoric—helped to mobilize a significant portion of the American public in support of the Nixon administration's policies, reinforcing the cultural divide that marked this tumultuous period in American history.

YAF and SDS Conventions

For SDS and YAF, 1969 was a year that characterized internal destruction and fragmentation. Both organizations held national conventions that proved to be explosive and fraught with significant challenges.²⁶⁵ For SDS, the internal divisions stemmed from disagreement over organizational structure and leadership. Their platform had mostly been rooted in forms of resistance and civil disobedience, not engaging in violent action. But tensions were escalating in America with the assassinations of 1968, and the killing of Fred Hampton, in 1969, the leader of the Black Panther Party, by Chicago police.²⁶⁶ Some members of SDS felt that further radicalization and a commitment to political action was necessary. They wanted to shift toward a more militant position.²⁶⁷ This idea was also exacerbated by the paranoia that was intensifying, and the FBI surveillance of them through the COINTELPRO FBI counterintelligence program.²⁶⁸ COINTELPRO was an FBI program, created to monitor Americans that aligned themselves with the New Left. The program included surveillance, harassment, and even infiltrators into organizations like SDS.²⁶⁹ While a militant position was mostly agreed on by most members of SDS, they were unable to reach a consensus on

²⁶⁵ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 276.

²⁶⁶ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 187.

²⁶⁷ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 188.

²⁶⁸ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 188.

²⁶⁹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 188.

organizational structure or leadership. Because of this, many individual subsets of SDS members, who believed they could effectively organize and lead these causes, began to emerge. These factions represented positions that members would take in affiliated SDS groups, one being Progressive Labour (PL), a Maoist "anti-imperialist organization aimed at organizing the working class."²⁷⁰ The other group to emerge were the Weathermen, a subset of members who believed in a more violent, militant stance, with the goal of overthrowing the American empire.²⁷¹ Their ideological platform and actions did not substantively contribute to the end of the conflict in Vietnam. Both sides of the spectrum held radicalized ideas that did not align with the other, which led to many SDS members remaining unaffiliated.²⁷² These members adopted a more moderate position, not aligning themselves with either PL or the Weathermen. Some expressed disagreement with both, believing that these positions contradicted the fundamental principles of SDS. Some sympathized with both positions, but could not decide on one, and thus remained unaffiliated.²⁷³ Due to heightening tensions, a sector of unaffiliated members simply left the organization or disassociated themselves with SDS. The explosiveness of the national convention in June 1969 further accelerated those departures.

The SDS national convention of 1969 was held in Chicago and was the group's final organizational event.²⁷⁴ The internal divisions led the convention to be marked by disorganization, disagreement, and a loss of hope. The convention ultimately resulted in two individual SDS factions, the Weathermen and PL who each believed they were the legitimate version of SDS.²⁷⁵ They held their own meetings, and had their own leadership, solidifying the

²⁷⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 190-91.

²⁷¹ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 277.

²⁷² Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 194.

²⁷³ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 195.

²⁷⁴ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 207.

²⁷⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 208.

assumption that SDS had come to an end. The unaffiliated members, in some cases, continued to meet on their local campus chapters, but many chapters dissolved or disassociated themselves with both “new” SDS groups.²⁷⁶ The split of the organization was a key limiting factor for SDS’s future, which led to their demise. Similarly to the broader cultural conflict, fragmentation often resulted in individualistic mindsets and prevented individuals from engaging in community organization.

YAF was experiencing similar difficulties in 1969, mostly due to the schism between traditionalists and libertarians. Libertarians increasingly believed that the war was misguided and immoral while traditionalists found themselves opposing this sentiment.²⁷⁷ Some libertarians in YAF equally felt the draft was a problem, growing more hostile toward the state. Traditionalists continued to believe in the American war effort, especially with President Nixon and his administration leading the charge. Furthermore, libertarians and traditionalists were divided over issues of government repression, the counterculture, and police brutality.²⁷⁸ Opposition to government was a dominant element of this divide; police brutality and government repression were both issues with heavy relation to government opposition. Libertarians challenged their original values in YAF, believing these emerging issues were divisive enough to move towards a common cause with leftists.²⁷⁹ As campus attitudes increasingly shifted, becoming more radical in their opposition to war, libertarians in YAF began to participate in antiwar demonstrations. In the fall of 1969, a Gallup poll showed that 60 percent of students associated themselves with

²⁷⁶ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 210.

²⁷⁷ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 211.

²⁷⁸ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 212.

²⁷⁹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 212.

antiwar ideas. This was twice as many as in the Spring of 1967.²⁸⁰ This shift caused internal discord within YAF and resulted in significant disillusionment among traditionalist members.

Traditionalists strongly disagreed with libertarians on most issues through 1969, and the national convention would highlight the divide. The counterculture, another factor that contributed to the disintegration of the organization, was abhorred by traditionalists.²⁸¹

Libertarians tended to embrace it, often ideologically and in daily life. Libertarians' adoption of traditionally liberal values led to many traditionalists deeming them "flag-burning, dope-smoking leftist sympathizers," while libertarians saw traditionalists as "law-and-order, drug suppressing authoritarians who were obsessed with communism at the expense of civil liberties."²⁸² The disillusionment on both sides facilitated a growing distrust between libertarians and traditionalists, ultimately culminating in YAF becoming irrelevant in the prowar sphere.

While the fragmentation of YAF continued to grow prior to the 1969 convention, libertarians and some left-wing elements began to unite. Both the left and libertarian YAF members found common ground through disapproval of the government, fearing it was becoming uncontrollable. The state became the enemy, and anxieties surrounding governmental power started to surface.²⁸³ It is vital to acknowledge that not all libertarians converged with the left. Varying beliefs and individual goals sometimes aligned, but not always. Internally, the conflicts between traditionalists and libertarians reached new heights before the August 1969 convention, and Pennsylvania and California went through large-scale reorganizations.²⁸⁴ Libertarians vied for a pro-freedom YAF, believing their leadership would best serve the

²⁸⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 396.

²⁸¹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 212.

²⁸² Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 213.

²⁸³ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 213.

²⁸⁴ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 222.

organization. This led traditionalist members of both Pennsylvania and California's chapters of YAF that explicitly disagreed with these beliefs to push out libertarians, or at the very least, remove them from positions of power.²⁸⁵ While both chapters were heavily libertarian, the traditional conservative leaders of the organization restructured the chapter to represent a more conservative movement. Traditionalists, in their rejection of libertarians were worried about their public view. YAF had been built on a fundamentally conservative support base, and the libertarians that took part in flag burnings and antiwar demonstrations were inherently undermining YAF's foundation.

By the time the YAF national convention took place in August 1969, an estimated 20 to 40 percent of attendees were libertarians.²⁸⁶ The convention sparked significant upheaval and unrest, with traditionalists emphasizing the importance of traditional conservatism, while libertarians engaged in peaceful protest by abstaining from participation in both prayer and pledge to the flag.²⁸⁷ Libertarians at the convention promoted the idea of joining the New Left, escalating the conflict further. At the close of the convention, many libertarian ideas were voted down, while traditionalists were successful in pushing forward their resolutions. These included support for apartheid regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia, backing continued efforts in Vietnam, which they hoped would result in victory, and opposition to radical leftists, law-and-order practices, and an end to East-West trade.²⁸⁸ Libertarians had hoped for immediate withdrawal for Vietnam and they condemned what they regarded to be domestic fascism, among other more radical beliefs.²⁸⁹ Despite the challenges they faced, traditionalist leader David Keene

²⁸⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 224.

²⁸⁶ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 225.

²⁸⁷ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 228.

²⁸⁸ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 228.

²⁸⁹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 228.

confidently stated that libertarians still had a place in YAF, but the previous expulsion of libertarians from state chapters spoke volumes. And as the convention progressed, the issue of draft resolutions surfaced, ultimately becoming the point of division that fragmented the organization into two distinct groups. Traditionalists proposed the Goldwater plan, a volunteer army that would slowly diminish the draft.²⁹⁰ Libertarians, rather than discussing the matter, engaged in public protest with one member, Dave Schumacher, burning his draft card in front of the entire convention.²⁹¹ This demonstration sparked reactions on both sides, causing upheaval and protest inside the convention. There was no civil, meaningful conversation left to be heard but rather disillusionment over internal issues. As YAF continued to purge their organization, and shift towards a more conservative, traditionalist movement, they turned to President Nixon for leadership and guidance.

Nixon and His Supporters

Through this period of transition from one decade to the next, conservatives attempted to embrace Richard Nixon's presidency focusing on his advocacy of law and order, his promises of "peace with honor," and a renewed sense of American exceptionalism. Early in Nixon's presidency, many supporters hoped that he would shift America in a conservative direction, but in reality, many of his policies were simply transitional. Key goals of his presidency, like negotiating an end to the war, were more politically moderate, in an effort to appeal to a broader base of American voters. By 1969, President Nixon announced a phased withdrawal from the conflict, focusing on "Vietnamization" of the war, a plan that put more emphasis on training the

²⁹⁰ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 230.

²⁹¹ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 230.

Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).²⁹² This objective would hopefully lead to a war between Vietnamese soldiers, with the goal of the ARVN fighting communism rather than America. Despite this goal, his primary focus was on securing American victory above all else. He was determined to avoid defeat and was prepared to employ any means necessary to achieve this.²⁹³ Nixon focused on the so-called Silent Majority, a term used by a committee member and speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, to classify his amorphous and diverse supporters in 1968.²⁹⁴ Through his policies, he did embrace and appeal in part to conservatives; however, he did not fulfill the expectations of hope that some citizens had placed on him. As his presidency ended due to the Watergate scandal and his eventual resignation in 1974, conservatives rallied behind new political leaders, that eventually led to the conservative ascendancy in the 1980s.²⁹⁵

Nixon's presidency redirected the focus in United States, moving away from liberal optimism towards a more complex, culturally divided nation. His vehement rejection of the antiwar movement was a key factor that led to his election. He supported the war and therefore believed the wider American population should as well. However, he also recognized that in the current trajectory of the war at the time, victory was untenable, and pathways for disengagement had to be sought. President Nixon thus focused on tearing down the credibility of the antiwar movement by deeming them "privileged elitists" who disrespected and looked down on "hardworking, law-abiding Middle Americans."²⁹⁶ He essentially linked the antiwar movement with the counterculture and its associated stereotypes, with the intention of making it distasteful to middle and working-class Americans. By constructing this negative image, he further fueled

²⁹² Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 274.

²⁹³ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 274.

²⁹⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 196.

²⁹⁵ For example, see Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (2014).

²⁹⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 196.

the growing public discontent with the antiwar movement and sought to galvanize support for the pro-war cause, even as movement itself was waning. President Nixon found that garnering support for the war was more effective when framed around the American flag and patriotism, rather than the actual war in Southeast Asia.²⁹⁷ Nixon's ideas would be reflected by the remaining proponents of the pro-war movement who, despite its decline, sought any means to sustain its momentum. His support of their cause was both a strategic and pragmatic move, benefitting both him and his supporters.

With YAF focused on campus conservative politics, and Nixon prioritizing a strategic withdrawal from the Vietnam War, the pro-war protests and sentiments diminished in the public sphere. The primary reason for this was the increasing antiwar sentiment as the war raged on, even among people who had previously defended the war, resulting in efforts to advocate for victory in Vietnam rather than continuation of the war. Some organizations were successful in garnering support by associating pro-war sentiment with mainstream patriotism.²⁹⁸ Pro-war activists organized an Honor America rally on July 4, 1970, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The event focused on supporting Nixon's agenda rather than advocating for continued involvement in the war, and leaders did not focus on "lengthy analyses of the meaning of the war or the importance of securing military victory."²⁹⁹ The theme of national unity dominated the event, placing a focus on national goals and Nixon's future for America rather than explicit opposition to war. Many of the final pro-war rallies took place before the mid 1970s, with a significant number occurring in 1969 and 1970. The values of pro-war activists had largely shifted from attempts for national security and fighting communism to honouring the troops and

²⁹⁷ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 201.

²⁹⁸ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 197.

²⁹⁹ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 197.

the value associated with fighting in Vietnam.³⁰⁰ Many supporters of the war sought to sustain the movement's momentum but ultimately failed. By this time, the Vietnam War had become so widely unpopular among Americans that support for the conflict was no longer widespread.

Campus Upheavals, Kent State, and Emergence of VVAW

In the Autumn of 1969, the antiwar movement gained in both momentum and members. The demonstrations were becoming more frequent more widespread, occurring across the nation in record numbers. A large and effective nationwide antiwar movement, calling itself the Moratorium, had emerged, gaining traction across the nation.³⁰¹ In mid-November, half a million protestors, in record breaking numbers, took to the streets of Washington, D.C. to protest.³⁰² Along with this, protest among American soldiers who formed the nucleus of the thriving GI Movement became increasingly prominent, with the eventual emergence a veteran's movement resulting from their efforts. Despite President Nixon's goal of Vietnamization, he escalated the war, announcing on April 30, 1970, that he would send U.S. forces into Cambodia.³⁰³ Nixon argued that "to protect our men who are in Vietnam and to guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and Vietnamization programs," he has "concluded that the time has come for action."³⁰⁴ However, this justification was met with significant opposition, especially in light of his prior commitment to a gradual withdrawal from the war. His decision sparked unrest throughout the nation, with antiwar constituents protesting on campuses, in communities, and at larger demonstrations.

³⁰⁰ Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 187.

³⁰¹ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam*. (University of California Press, 1994), 334.

³⁰² Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 278.

³⁰³ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 279.

³⁰⁴ Nixon, Richard. "President Nixon's Speech on Cambodia." Transcript of speech, April 30, 1970.

Campus activities on universities across the United States were especially exacerbated by Nixon's words and deeds, with many campus protests turning violent in light of this decision.³⁰⁵ To make matters worse, Nixon denounced students that were participating in campus activities. Students engaged in various forms of protests, including demonstrations, marches, and vigils while also adopting more radical means to oppose the U.S. military expansion into Cambodia. These more extreme actions included destruction of property, including burning or bombing Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) buildings on campus as well as the occupation of campus buildings.³⁰⁶ The adoption of such radical strategies not only contributed to significant unrest of college campuses, but also provoked strong backlash from the wider American public, largely condemning the actions of radical student protestors.

The nationwide conflict reached a deadly pinnacle at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, on May 4, 1970. Ohio governor, James Rhodes, deployed the state's national guard to Kent State University following the campus opposition.³⁰⁷ The National Guard was deployed on May 2, following a previous night's disturbance in the town of Kent, where students reportedly gathered in local bars, broke windows of storefronts and banks, and engaged in various acts of resistance against police. The local police used tear gas in an attempt to disperse the crowd, but the situation prompted concern from Ohio governor Rhodes. Fearing further unrest, Governor Rhodes made the decision to send the National Guard to the campus the following evening.³⁰⁸ Governor Rhodes, having lost patience with the student protests, adopted a particular hardline stance, expressing his intention to use the guardsmen to "eradicate the problem."³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 280.

³⁰⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 186.

³⁰⁷ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 187.

³⁰⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 187.

³⁰⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 187.

On May 4, 1970, students gathered to protest the invasion of Cambodia in the campus commons. Throughout the previous night, the presence of the National Guard on campus had provoked widespread anger and apprehension, as they had effectively militarized the University campus. Armed with M-1 rifles, driving military trucks and tanks, and wearing gas masks, the Guardsmen's visible preparedness was mostly in response to ongoing protest, yet their measures seemed disproportionately severe.³¹⁰ Kent State University was not a university of significant privilege; many of the students hailed from working class backgrounds, aligning with President Nixon's so-called Silent Majority.³¹¹ The students and guardsmen were "not divided by class so much as circumstance and politics," noted historian Christian Appy, with many students having close ties to the military, with family members or friends having served in the Vietnam War.³¹² Of the 21,000 students enrolled at Kent State, approximately 1,000 of them were veterans.³¹³ The protest itself was exacerbated by escalating tensions between students and guardsmen, including mutual provocations, taunting, throwing of rocks, and the deployment of tear gas being. In response to these confrontations, twenty-eight guardsmen fired their rifles, resulting in the death of four students and nine others wounded.³¹⁴ The shootings at Kent State were the tragic outcome of a broader climate of frustration, which stemmed from widespread discontent with the Vietnam War and, more specifically, widespread discontent with the growing antiwar movement.³¹⁵

³¹⁰ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 187.

³¹¹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 395.

³¹² Appy, *American Reckoning*, 187.

³¹³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 187.

³¹⁴ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 395.

³¹⁵ Books on the discussion of Kent State include Brian VanDeMark's *Kent State: An American Tragedy* (2024), Derf Backderf's *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* (2020), Robert Giles' *When Truth Mattered: The Kent State Shootings 50 Years Later* (2020), and Thomas M. Grace's *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties* (2016).

While the shootings were considered unjustified, a majority of Americans – 58 percent – blamed the shootings on the student protestors, perceiving their actions as provocative.³¹⁶ President Nixon shared this perspective, viewing the deaths as a tragic consequence of student violence, believing the students actions had instigated the response, and in his view, had “deserved” the outcome.³¹⁷ However, this interpretation was sharply criticized by many young Americans, who held the authorities accountable for the violence. In the months following the incident, the Presidential Commission on Campus Unrest conducted an investigation, concluding that the shootings were unwarranted and that the guardsmen were at fault.³¹⁸ Following the shootings, folk-rock group Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young released the song “Ohio” in June 1970, a mere month after the incident. Written by band member Neil Young, the song specifically addresses the tragedy at Kent State, with its lyrics condemning the actions of the National Guard soldiers who killed the students. More significantly, Young's lyrics also critique President Nixon's response to the event, holding him equally accountable for the violence, alongside the National Guard.³¹⁹ The song repeats the line “Four dead in Ohio” over twenty times, emphasizing the tragic loss of life and highlighting the victims of the Kent State shooting.³²⁰ Its direct and forceful tone played a key role in shaping how the public viewed the song. Though its strong anti-presidential and anti-military stance, the song resonated with those critical of the government's actions but also provoked backlash. Russ Armstrong, a Vietnam War veteran, reflected on the song's portrayal of the event, describing it as “one-sided” and offering a “distorted view” of the confrontation.³²¹ Armstrong argued that the song conveyed a tone of

³¹⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 189.

³¹⁷ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 189.

³¹⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 190.

³¹⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 190.

³²⁰ Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, “Ohio,” Recorded 1970. Track 5 on *So Far*. Atlantic Recording, 1970.

³²¹ Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, 115.

hostility toward America and undermined the nation's image.³²² The song adopts a distinctly pessimistic perspective on the Kent State tragedy, serving as a stark expression of the broader disillusionment and discontent among antiwar protestors towards the U.S. government and its policies.

Despite the violence at Kent State, and a few other incidences of protest-related violence in this period, the majority of antiwar protest remained peaceful at this time.³²³ However, the tragic killings at Kent State, as well as the killing of two African American students at Jackson State university in Mississippi on May 15, fueled an expansion of protest at this volatile moment. Many campuses were already mobilizing in response to the expansion of the war into Cambodia, but the events at Kent State led to a “tidal wave of rebellion” with widespread student strikes and protests erupting across the nation. Some colleges and universities were forced to close for the remainder of the academic year due to the disruption.³²⁴ Many of the emerging protest movements at the time were directed against Nixon and the National Guard. However, President Nixon did find support among certain groups, notably the so-called “Hard Hats.” This group, composed of approximately 200 construction workers, violently clashed with antiwar protestors on May 8, 1970, in New York City, just four days after the Kent State University shootings.³²⁵ While police initially positioned themselves between the protestors and the Hard Hats, they ultimately moved aside, allowing the Hard Hats to plant the American flag at Federal Hall,³²⁶ and to physically assault the antiwar protestors with fists, boots, and hammers. The primary objective of this protest was to raise the flag at City Hall from half-mast to full mast, effectively

³²² Bradley and Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, 115.

³²³ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 280.

³²⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 190.

³²⁵ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 280.

³²⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 193.

disregarding the four Kent State students and signaling solidarity with the actions of the U.S. government.³²⁷

A few weeks after the initial confrontation, tens of thousands of trade workers joined the Hard Hats, creating a large delegation of American workers marching through the streets of New York City in support of the Vietnam War.³²⁸ The march was organized by Nixon's close friend Peter Brennan, head of the Building and Construction Trades Council, New York's largest construction union.³²⁹ Participants carried signs that expressed their support for President Nixon and the United States, as well as large American flags to demonstrate their patriotism. The demonstrations were popular with President Nixon, with some of the leaders of the building trades being invited to the White House to receive personal thanks from the President.³³⁰ While the protests were successful in reinforcing Nixon's political narrative, they also contributed to the perpetuation of a potent stereotype, that of "white working-class men as beefy, aggressive, superpatriotic, anti-intellectual hawks."³³¹ This stereotype, which framed the working class as staunch supporters of the war and positioned antiwar protestors as elitist and privileged, became engrained in American popular culture and media.³³² The Kent State shootings and the subsequent response from the Hard Hats marked a critical moment in the broader cultural conflict of the time, accentuating the ideological divide between those who supported the war and those who opposed it. This division highlighted the deepening sense of animosity and ill-perceived intent between different segments of American society, especially the rising anti-American sentiment among certain protest groups. In the aftermath of the shootings, there was

³²⁷ Joshua B. Freeman, "Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations." *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 4 (1993).

³²⁸ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 280.

³²⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 195.

³³⁰ Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*, 280.

³³¹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 195.

³³² Appy, *American Reckoning*, 196.

considerable debate among historians about the long-term impact of Kent State on the future of the antiwar movement. Some suggest that Kent State marked a turning point, signaling a decline of the antiwar movements influence. The protests that continued in the years that followed were seen by some as less organized and increasingly ineffective, reflecting a shift in the broader public's attitude toward the war and the protestors themselves. While the antiwar movement was experiencing a decline in the wake of Kent State and other events, a renewed sense of hope for peace activism emerged through the efforts of Vietnam veterans. These veterans, many of whom had served in the conflict, would go on to form what has been described as the “most formidable antiwar movement of ex-soldiers in U.S. history.”³³³ The veterans’ movement significantly expanded the scope of the antiwar movement, extending beyond college campuses into the broader American public. VVAW provided elements of creativity and inspiration, playing a pivotal role in reinvigorating the broader antiwar movement, contributing to its continuation even as other sources of protest began to wane.

As more individuals mobilized against the Vietnam War, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), a new peace activism movement comprised of war veterans, began to grow in size and passion. After the Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam on April 17, 1967, which began as an antiwar gathering of hundreds of thousands of protestors in New York’s Central Park that marches to the UN building to head Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak, a cohort of Vietnam veterans who had participated in the march came together to form VVAW.³³⁴ The Spring Mobilization marked the first instance of veterans gathering together to protest the Vietnam War.³³⁵ It also signified the beginning of the veterans’ integration into the broader

³³³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 190.

³³⁴ Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (University Press, 1999), 5

³³⁵ Hunt, *The Turning*, 7.

antiwar movement, a decision they had previously been hesitant to make due to caution in questioning government actions and policies. Their actions were reinforced by a flowering of anti-Vietnam War dissent among GIs and active-duty military personnel serving both in the United States and overseas, including Vietnam.³³⁶

In the months following their formation, VVAW began to establish its objectives, which included ending the war, and crucially, recruiting other veterans to join their cause.³³⁷ Given their shared experiences in Vietnam, their efforts carried particular significance in reaching out to other veterans, fostering a sense of solidarity rooted in common history, and rallying them for a collective future. VVAW continued to expand their activities in 1968, working to strengthen their organization. However, the group deliberately distanced itself from the more radical factions of the antiwar movement, rejecting both their political ideologies and their countercultural tendencies.³³⁸ VVAW emerged as a critical and influential force during this period of cultural and political upheaval, contributing to the growing body of the antiwar sentiment.

VVAW originated in the late 1960s but emerged as a formidable force in the 1970s, playing a crucial role in reinvigorating the anti-Vietnam War movement. This period marked a time when many students and youth organizations opposing the war was beginning to lose momentum. VVAW, however, helped to transform the protest landscape by bringing veterans to the forefront of the antiwar demonstrations, offering a unique and powerful perspective on the war. Although the organizational structure of VVAW shared similarities with that of SDS – a larger movement comprised of like-minded individuals – the veterans involved in VVAW came

³³⁶ Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1996.

³³⁷ Hunt, *The Turning*, 18.

³³⁸ Hunt, *The Turning*, 21.

from distinctly different backgrounds. Many VVAW members were from working class communities and became radicalized through their direct, often traumatic, experiences in Vietnam.³³⁹ The firsthand experience of war significantly influenced the political outlook of many veterans, leading them to embrace more left-leaning ideologies. As the antiwar movement faced mounting criticisms and began to lose steam, particularly in the face of increased American military involvement, especially in the air war over Vietnam, VVAW sought to reinvigorate and refocus the movement's efforts. Their leadership helped to ensure the continued relevance of antiwar activism during this later stage of the conflict. In many respects, VVAW was more progressive than SDS. The organization challenged the legitimacy of President Nixon's conservatism and the paranoia that surrounded his administration, and it was vocal in its condemnation of sexism, eventually taking steps to recruit women to serve in positions of power within the organization.³⁴⁰ VVAW represented a significant development in the antiwar movement, illustrating the diverse array of voices and backgrounds that made up the broader protest movement. It also demonstrated the lasting impact of the war on those who fought in it, showing how their experiences shaped their ongoing commitment to peace and social justice, even as other antiwar groups began to lose momentum in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the movement also reinforced the increasing fragmentation of American society at the time. Despite their significance, the protests and demonstrations organized by VVAW and similar groups deepened existing rifts within the broader movement and contributed to divisions over ultimate objectives or methods for ending the war. VVAW played a role in exacerbating the cultural and ideological divides of the era that was further intensified by the wider cultural conflict that was unfolding.

³³⁹ See also Richard Stacewicz *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (1997) and Gerry Nicolsia *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Movement* (2001).

³⁴⁰ Hunt, *The Turning*, 2.

The Soundtrack of the War at Home

The political messages conveyed through music during the Vietnam War era were deeply influenced by the social and cultural climate of the time, creating a society ripe for discourse. Numerous songs from this period, as illustrated by the examples previously discussed, played a significant role in shaping public understanding of the war. These songs reflected a range of perspectives, from early expressions of patriotism and support for the war effort to later critiques of both the war and the counterculture. Collectively, they offered political commentary, contributing to the widening cultural divide and offering insight into rising societal tensions. Certain songs, such as “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival and “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” by The Animals resonated deeply with soldiers and veterans, directly addressing themes related to the personal experiences of those involved in the war. Other songs like Joan Baez’s “Saigon Bride” focused more specifically on Vietnam, often portraying the horrors of combat and the devastation that war brought upon the country. Baez’s lyrics, for example, painted a grim picture of Vietnam’s future, highlighting the destructive impact of the conflict.³⁴¹

As the war progressed and public sentiment shifted, many songs began to emphasize peace. These songs, while still politically charged, often moved beyond specific events to comment on the larger social and political issues of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists such as Johnny Cash, with “Man in Black” and Don Mclean’s “American Pie” provided reflections on the changing cultural landscape, often characterized by a sense of pessimism or loss, particularly as the 1970s unfolded. This period produced a wide array of musical expression, some that

³⁴¹ Baez, Joan, “Saigon Bride,” Recorded 1967. Track 12 on *Joan*. Vanguard Studios, 1967.

intimately connected to the experiences of soldiers,³⁴² and others more reflective of the broader societal mood. These songs not only captured the ideas of the counterculture but also embodied the shifting political spectrum of Americans as the war raged on and the culture of the nation was transformed.

Music promoting peace activism was highly influential and played a key role in the culture wars, challenging dominant ideologies and contributing to the ideological conflict between conservative and progressive values. While the antiwar movement was reaching its peak at the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, American culture began to drastically shift. Many activists, initially engaged in anti-Vietnam War movements, began to broaden their focus to encompass wider peace narratives. As opposition to the conflict intensified and the counterculture flourished, there was a corresponding surge in interest and engagement with peace activism. George Harrison's (1943-2001) "Give Me Love (Give Me Peace on Earth)" was a particularly important song as it related to peace activism. Released in 1973, the song by the former Beatle explores the concept of peace across various dimensions of life. Its mellow, soothing tone reflects the tranquil nature of peace and envisions its broader societal impact.³⁴³ Although Harrison was not American, the influence of the Beatles on American society was profoundly significant, with their music achieving immense popularity across the United States.³⁴⁴ This song, while lacking in-depth commentary on specific issues, presents a general call for peace, a sentiment that was gaining traction both in America and globally. The 1960s fostered the perception that America was grappling with numerous societal challenges, many of

³⁴² See Doug Bradley and Craig Werner's *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* for a deeper exploration of music as the backdrop to war.

³⁴³ Harrison, George, "Give Me Love (Give Me Peace on Earth)," Recorded 1973. Track 1 on *Living in the Material World*. Apple, 1973.

³⁴⁴ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 181.

which were linked to violence and social upheaval, making appeals for peace increasingly resonant during this period. Other songs like “Give Peace a Chance” by the Plastic Ono Band, “Imagine” by John Lennon, “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye, and “Big Yellow Taxi” by Joni Mitchell were all riddled with themes of peace.

By the 1970s, American rhetoric had undergone a significant shift. While early responses to the Vietnam War had permeated cultural and social aspects of American life, by the 1970s, culture itself had become a central force. What began as isolated protests against the war and the Civil Rights Movement had evolved into mass movements, such as the counterculture, challenging broader systems that perpetuated violence and inequality. Music, now deeply intertwined with political discourse, reflected this transformation, as the cultural conflict that once simmered beneath the surface had emerged as a defining feature of American life. The themes addressed by artists shifted in response to changing political and social landscapes: student movements evolved, political narratives shifted, and a new vision of America began to take shape. In contrast to the liberal optimism of the 1960s, President Nixon’s policies signaled a turn toward conservatism, influencing both political and cultural developments. Politics and culture had become inextricably linked, fueling divides that would continue to intensify in the years to come.

Conclusion: Legacies of Vietnam and Cultural Upheaval

Although the Vietnam War officially ended in the 1970s, its rhetoric and subsequent analysis persisted long after, leaving a profound impact on various facets of American life. The war fostered a period of intense social and cultural transformation in the United States, a climate that many Americans leveraged to challenge established norms and drive significant change. Music played a significant role in enabling Americans to articulate their perspectives on pressing societal issues, offering a powerful medium for individuals to express political opinions and transmit messages to wide audiences. Analyzing the music of the 1960s and 1970s provides valuable insights into the evolving cultural conflicts of the era, shedding light on the ways in which these tensions shaped broader social and political dynamics. Examining both the songs themselves and their historical contexts, as well as the backgrounds of the artists, displays deeper understanding of the cultural transformations occurring during this period.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, various social groups, despite their differing overarching goals, converged around shared causes, particularly in response to issues such as the Vietnam War. The antiwar and pro-war factions, although ideologically opposed, were composed of a diverse array of Americans, creating both a sense of community and division within the broader population. The formation of organizations like SDS and YAF reflected a widespread belief that American society was capable of change and reform. The rise and eventual decline of these groups are crucial to understanding the profound impact of the Vietnam War on American life, as they highlight how the war influenced political activism, social movements, and cultural change, ultimately contributing to significant social and political reform.

1960s Optimism and Solidifying Cultural Conflicts

The Vietnam War, which persisted until 1975, spanned nearly two decades and resulted in significant political and social divide within the United States.³⁴⁵ The controversy surrounding the war reached its peak during the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly with the rise of organizations such as VVAW, alongside a growing public sentiment that the conflict was no longer justifiable. However, the cultural divides that characterized this period had been developing since early the 1960s, and by 1970, had permeated various aspects of American society. Several factors contributed to these divisions, including widespread dissatisfaction with political leadership, the escalation of the Cold War, the perceived erosion of traditional American values, and perhaps most significantly, an increasing public questioning of the nation's social and political structures. While the anti-Vietnam War protests were a prominent expression of this discontent, earlier movements—such as the Civil Rights Movement, protests against nuclear weapons, and other social justice and peace movements—played foundational roles in challenging the social order and shaping the cultural landscape. These grassroots efforts were instrumental in changing American society, which, in turn, contributed to a profound rift in the cultural zeitgeist. Despite the tension and upheaval, this period was also marked by a sense of optimism and freedom.

The 1960s marked a transformative period in American cultural and political life, with the emergence of a new sense of openness that played a pivotal role in both fostering cultural divisions and driving social change. Throughout the period, many Americans experienced the optimism and national unity that had been initiated by President Kennedy and further advanced

³⁴⁵ Even though the phase of the war involving extensive use of American combat troops was over by January 1973, the conflict within South Vietnam between the beleaguered pro-U.S. Saigon government and its communist adversaries persisted until April 1975.

by President Johnson. While this newfound freedom was crucial in enabling social and political change, it also contributed to the growth of cultural conflicts and the rise of what would come to be known as the culture wars. The increased freedom of expression that characterized the 1960s allowed individuals to speak openly, advocate for change, and challenge traditional norms. This climate of openness created a prime setting for a diverse array of voices, each vying for attention and influence in shaping the nation's direction. While the ability to protest and demonstrate became an important way to express dissent, it also became a source of division. Protests, which were intended to unify and galvanize support for reform, often had the opposite effect, deepening ideological rifts and giving rise to opposing ideologies. In this sense, while protest was essential to driving social change, it also highlighted the deep cultural polarization that characterized the era. As demonstrated through the exploration of SDS and similar organizations, even individuals with shared ideological goals often found themselves divided over the specific motivations or objectives of their causes. The extensive cultural changes sought by these groups gave rise to many disagreements over whose voice should be the loudest. The polarization surrounding the Vietnam War, exemplified by both antiwar protesters and war supporters, illustrates this fragmentation; within each camp, there were notable internal divisions, particularly concerning the reasons for their opposition or support. The complexity and ambiguity of the Vietnam War mirrored the divisive nature of the protests it sparked. The ability of different groups to coexist while pursuing different objectives further intensified these cultural and ideological divides.

The challenges that emerged during the Vietnam War were undeniably new, but they were not the first instances of national strife in American history. Previous conflicts, such as the World Wars and various internal national disputes, had not escalated to the same level as the Vietnam War. The 1960s, however, fostered a favourable political climate for advocating

change, bolstered by the liberal leadership of President Johnson and his vision for “The Great Society.” This era proved to be crucial for Americans seeking substantial social and political reform. Historians G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot argue that the 1960s, or what they call the “The Liberal Hour” symbolized a period of hope and transformation, largely due to the receptiveness of government officials to effect change.³⁴⁶ They emphasize a top-down approach to the liberal politics of the time, attributing the era’s reforms to the policy changes initiated by the federal government. While it is essential to acknowledge the role of the government in enacting legislative and societal change, it is equally important to recognize that the protest movements and grassroots initiatives were instrumental in making government action possible. Mackenzie and Weisbrot focus on highlighting that the 1960s represented “revolution from the top down, with the strongest charge of reform energy coming from the highest levels of government.”³⁴⁷ This argument certainly holds merit and contributes meaningfully to the broader understanding of the cultural rifts of the period. However, the unique condition that America was in during the 1960s, alongside the willingness of government officials to listen and implement change created an environment where grassroots protest movements could thrive. The receptiveness of political leaders, in the context of the time, served as a motivator for movements to persist and continue pushing for reform.

The 1960s was the decade characterized by widespread protest and dissent, as discussed in this thesis, representing the origins of the culture wars, which would continue well beyond the period. The era fostered an environment in which ideas had the power to both unite and fragment society. The newfound freedom to think critically and question established norms, coupled with the rise of media – especially television – intensified societal divisions. Although the television

³⁴⁶ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*.

³⁴⁷ Mackenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour*, 219.

contributed to the creation of a more unified national community, it also exposed and exacerbated internal conflicts, leading to the fragmentation of that same community. This period also marked the intersection of political discourse with popular culture, as individuals increasingly turned to music and film as platforms for expression. However, these forms of media, while offering a venue for political voices, also contributed to the fragmentation of the nation. Music and protest movements, once largely confined to folk music or niche sectors of popular culture became increasingly divisive. The political messages conveyed through these media outlets were often tailored to particular cultural groups, further exacerbating cultural divides. The intertwining of political issues with cultural expression made it seem nearly impossible to reach consensus on key issues like war, peace, nuclear threats, and racial inequality.

While the progress achieved by various social movements during this period undeniably laid the foundation for future activism, it simultaneously deepened divisions within society. These divisions became inextricably linked to cultural identity, with the Vietnam War serving as a particularly vivid example. The conflict, emerging at a time of profound cultural and political uncertainty, became a focal point for wider ideological battles. The war not only raised questions about military intervention but also provoked moral, ethical, and nationalistic debates about justice and American exceptionalism. The Vietnam War's role in the culture wars cannot be overstated, as it acted as both a catalyst and a symbol of the wider cultural and political rifts that defined the era. The intertwining of the war with the Civil Rights Movement and various peace movements exemplified the deepening connection between cultural identity and political activism, further entrenching the ideological divides that would persist for decades.

Legacy and Continuing Conflict

The Vietnam War and the complex reactions to it continued to exert a profound influence on American society long after the conflict officially ended. The public perception of the war and its aftermath evolved over time, shaped by new revelations about the atrocities committed during the war, shifting societal attitudes, and ongoing political debates. In the years following the war, a wealth of music, films, and other media emerged, offering diverse perspectives on the war and its consequences, each focusing on different aspects of the experience. One of the most prominent cultural shifts was the emergence of a narrative centered on American victimhood. The war, and its failure, created the idea that “an innocent America and its people had become the victims of outrageous, inexplicable foreign assaults.”³⁴⁸ This portrayal of victimhood was further amplified by the evolving myth of the "Prisoner of War" (POW) and "Missing in Action" (MIA) soldiers, which became deeply ingrained in the American consciousness. Despite a lack of credible evidence to support claims that large numbers of U.S. soldiers remained alive in Southeast Asia, the myth persisted, widely accepted in both the media and public imagination.³⁴⁹ The idea that American soldiers were still being held captive as POWs became one of the most enduring myths of the postwar period.³⁵⁰ By the early 1990s, this idea had expanded into a broader cultural narrative, with many Americans coming to view the Vietnam War as an "American tragedy."³⁵¹

In the years following the Vietnam War, a wide range of perspectives on the conflict emerged, particularly as new revelations regarding its scale and destruction came to light. These discoveries, along with the profound psychological and emotional toll the war took on both

³⁴⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 227.

³⁴⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 243.

³⁵⁰ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 243.

³⁵¹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 242.

soldiers and civilians, contributed to a growing disillusionment with the war. Cultural films such as *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), both released after the war, depicted the Vietnam War as a dehumanizing experience that inflicted lasting psychological damage on those who fought. These films presented a starkly pessimistic view of the war, portraying it as morally corrupt and ethically unjustifiable. *Apocalypse Now* (1979), an even more harrowing portrayal of the war's effects, delved deeply into the psychological trauma inflicted on soldiers, depicting the conflict as a descent into madness. The film, with its disturbing imagery invoked the idea of "Masters of War" and underscored the internal and external battles faced by soldiers in the Vietnam War, illustrating the broader cultural and moral consequences of the conflict.³⁵²

These films, alongside other cultural works from the post-Vietnam era, reflect the shifting attitudes of American society in the wake of the war. The 1980s marked a shift towards a pervasive sense of fear and reluctance to become embroiled in another Vietnam-like conflict. Despite the conservative political turn of the 1980s, the legacy of Vietnam continued to reverberate throughout American society, shaping cultural and political discourse even as the nation moved in a more ideologically conservative direction..³⁵³ The Vietnam War fundamentally changed the American narrative of war: it challenged the idea that "America was an exceptional force for good in the world."³⁵⁴ The war's failure forced Americans to confront uncomfortable truths about their nation's role in global affairs, leading to widespread questioning of national identity and values. These narratives reflected the deep divisions in American society during the post-Vietnam period, where different groups sought to reconcile their national identity with the trauma and disillusionment the war had left in its wake.

³⁵² Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (Omni Zoetrope, 1979). 147 minutes.

³⁵³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 283.

³⁵⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 228.

The Vietnam War was a defining conflict that catalyzed shifting notions of American morality and culture during a period marked by profound societal change. While the cultural conflict perpetuated by the war was undoubtedly a product of the specific historical context of the 1960s, its influence has extended far beyond that era, leaving a lasting imprint on American history from the 1960s to the present. The Baby Boomer generation, coming of age during the Vietnam War, was the first to openly challenge prevailing cultural norms, sparking a broader cultural shift that would resonate through the following generations. This generational challenge not only fostered a greater willingness among young Americans to publicly articulate their beliefs but also set the stage for sustained cultural and political discourse that would shape the trajectory of American society in the decades that followed. The Vietnam War, situated in the context of the 1960s, was an early manifestation of the cultural divides that would continue to shape American society in the years to come. The war not only highlighted these divides but also exposed their underlying origins, which remain relevant today. The political divide in the United States has ebbed and flowed over time, with periods of relative stability disrupted by moments of intense polarization. Despite these fluctuations, patterns of division have consistently reemerged, often exacerbated by shifting political dynamics. If the liberal movements of the 1960s contributed to the initial emergence of the cultural conflict, it was the conservative ascendancy of the 1980s that further entrenched them, amplifying the cultural and political discord.

This cyclical pattern of division continues into the present, with each new era shaped by its own unique set of conditions, often echoing the conflicts and tensions of the past. The inextricable link between politics and culture means that military and political conflicts often trigger shifts in societal norms, typically fostering division rather than unity. The culture wars that began in the wake of the Vietnam War continue to be a defining feature of American life,

and while the intensity of these divides may fluctuate, their presence remains constant. The gap between opposing cultural and political ideologies may widen or narrow over time, but the underlying tensions are unlikely to dissipate, as they are deeply embedded in the fabric of American society.

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