ANTIWAR MOVEMENT

Was the Vietnam Era antiwar movement successful?

Viewpoint: Yes, the antiwar movement succeeded in inhibiting further American escalation of the Vietnam War.

Viewpoint: No, the antiwar movement received too much credit for bringing the war to an end, because other factors influenced American foreign policy.

The Vietnam War generated greater strife in American public life than any episode since the Populist uprising of the 1890s and was the most divisive force since the Civil War. The crux of the division lay between the antiwar movement and American political leaders, who had shaped policy in Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s mostly without consulting public opinion or conducting open debate. The antiwar movement made the war the most prominent public issue after 1965, the year of the first significant deployment of American troops and the first large protest against U.S. policy. In addition, the movement was a constant presence in national life through the duration of the conflict.

Because of its endurance, the fact that national leaders appeared to react toward public opposition to the war, and the many assessments of the antiwar movement that have been written by sympathetic scholars or activists, it has often been taken for granted that the antiwar movement succeeded in limiting American belligerence and eventually forcing the Nixon administration to make peace. These writers argue that the movement succeeded by maintaining constant pressure on public officials to justify the war, and because the war was unjustifiable, the movement exposed America’s deeply flawed policy. Moreover, the movement changed the hearts and minds of many thousands, even millions of Americans, who had too long accepted whatever their leaders told them as irrefutable truth.

By maintaining constant and even boisterous public pressure and gradually convincing the American public that the war was irrational and immoral, the movement changed the equation in national politics. In so doing, the movement made it impossible for a leading politician to be aggressively pro-war and greatly limited the range of American military options. Unable to prosecute a widened war, U.S. officials were left with two choices: to continue fighting in a losing cause or to negotiate a way out.

However, there are many good reasons to doubt this interpretation of the war’s history. More-skeptical scholars have pointed out that the movement itself was always quite diffuse, disorganized, and usually rent by some internal division among its various factions. A prominent part of the movement was its most vocal wing, young student activists who engaged in active resistance through draft-card burning, sit-ins, marches, and other high-profile demonstrations. Especially after a series of violent demonstrations in 1967, this wing of the movement took on an increasingly anti-American tone, which greatly put off the majority of Americans. Many people objected to the anti-patriotic attitudes of the protestors; many could not help but notice that the protestors were middle- and upper-class college students who had avoided the
draft through college deferments. To a significant part of the public, the antiwar protestors appeared to be spoiled children rejecting the nation that had given them so much.

Moreover, it is not clear that the antiwar movement itself was responsible either for creating significant opposition to American policy or for limiting the options that war planners could deploy. Long before the movement arose, there were many influential men, including military leaders, who had grave reservations over U.S. policy in the region and who took stands against the growing military involvement after 1961. It was they, more than the noisy protestors, who were responsible for raising public skepticism concerning U.S. policy. So, too, events in Vietnam were more important than what happened at home: the longer the war dragged on and the more U.S. personnel died, the stronger public opposition to the war became. Finally, those skeptical about the success of the movement argue that U.S. policymakers were self-consciously limited in their military options not by public opinion but by the realities of the Cold War, which prevented an all-out assault on North Vietnam in the form of either the bombardment of civilian targets or an outright invasion, both of which, it was feared, would trigger a formal Chinese entry into the war, as had happened in Korea in the early 1950s. Ultimately, U.S. policymakers limited themselves, for the prospect of a catastrophic World War III was never out of the question.

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Debate over the impact of domestic opposition to the Vietnam War has been raging since before the war ended. Activists-turned-academics and the first historians to take up the subject generally credited the antiwar movement with ending the war and, they implied, saving lives in the process. Other scholars, particularly those who believe the United States could have won the war, have judged the antiwar movement as ineffective. Their most damning critique, clearly articulated by Adam Garfinkle in Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement (1995), argues that the antiwar movement was counterproductive. "It did not help stop the war," Garfinkle asserts, "but rather helped prolong it," and therefore bears some responsibility for the death and destruction that continued in the war’s later years.

Both interpretations are too simplistic. In fact, the impact of the antiwar movement on the prosecution of the war was much more complicated. Many factors influenced Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon when they chose to seek peace without victory in Vietnam (most notably the tenacity of the enemy and their apparent willingness to fight indefinitely), and the organized protest of American citizens was one of them. Still, to either give credit to the antiwar movement for ending the war or to blame it for prolonging the conflict overstates its long-term significance. The most that can be said is that, at a few crucial stages, policymakers in the Johnson and Nixon administrations viewed the antiwar movement as a key factor when they decided not to escalate the war further. For movement activists, this could be viewed only as a success.

The first of these instances occurred in the fall of 1967. Since the escalation of the war by President Johnson in 1965, organized protest of the war had little impact on either the president or public opinion. Most expressions of opposition were limited to letters written to elected officials, teach-ins on college campuses, and occasional protest marches, all of which the White House easily ignored. Polls showed that most Americans supported the administration’s handling of the conflict, making it easy to dismiss protesters as a vocal minority.

By the end of the summer of 1967, however, certain segments of the antiwar movement began to take steps that guaranteed a confrontation with the government that the administration could not ignore. In a massive show of civil disobedience, an organized draft-resistance movement known as The Resistance collected more than one thousand draft cards on 16 October and four days later delivered them to the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. Draft resisters, most of whom held deferments that protected them from conscription, distinguished themselves from draft dodgers by openly defying Selective Service laws and inviting prosecution. Their protest was one of moral witness, but it also had a strategic aim: to undermine the draft and overwhelm the federal court system with draft cases in a way that would cause the administration to take steps to end the war. They also hoped that their status as sons of the middle class (most were college students) would influence public opinion and erode support for the president’s policies in Vietnam. The day after the draft cards were delivered to the Justice Department, the largest march to date con-
verged on the Pentagon, resulting in clashes with police and members of the armed forces.

Almost immediately, President Johnson reacted to the draft-card turn-in and the Pentagon march by ordering investigations into both by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and into the antiwar movement in general by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Selective Service responded by reclassifying some draft resisters and calling them for induction. By January 1968 the Justice Department indicted noted pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin, and three others for conspiracy to counsel, aid, and abet draft resisters. Most important, according to historian Melvin Small, the administration, "spurred by the increasing levels of dissent," recalled General William Westmoreland, commander of military forces in Vietnam, from the field for a public-relations campaign at home. In six different press briefings and public statements, Westmoreland assured the nation that he was "very, very encouraged" and that American forces were "making real progress." Suddenly it became clear that the antiwar movement had at last captured the administration's attention. The war, however, grinded on, and the full impact of the fall protests did not become apparent until March 1968, when the president decided to change course in Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive launched by the North Vietnamese on 31 January shocked the American public. Although the offensive did not constitute a military victory for communist forces, it effectively erased the rosy picture of progress painted by General Westmoreland and the president in previous months. The ambitious coordinated attack on dozens of targets in South Vietnam (including the American embassy in Saigon) made it clear that an end to the fighting was nowhere in sight. If Small is correct in crediting the antiwar movement for prompting the administration's campaign of reassurances in the fall, then the public shock in the wake of Tet can also be linked to such efforts. This point is important because as public opinion turned against the war, it soon began to affect policy.

The Tet Offensive occurred just as the administration considered General Westmoreland's request for 206,000 additional troops—
an increase of approximately 40 percent and a significant escalation of the administration’s commitment to winning the war. The surprise of the offensive, and the public outcry that followed, caused a reevaluation of American policies among many officials in the departments of state and defense. In particular Phil G. Goulding, undersecretary of defense for public affairs, and Townsend Hoopes, undersecretary of the air force, warned of increased draft resistance and widespread domestic dissent following the higher draft calls and reserve activations that would be needed to fill the manpower request. “Until a few weeks ago, the people were being told that we were moving toward victory,” Goulding wrote in a memo. “No one was suggesting extra troops, hardships, more spending, Reserve call-ups, high draft calls and increased casualties. Now, suddenly, the picture has changed. . . .” Hoopes argued that a further manpower commitment in the face of the public’s “growing disaffection” with the war risked provoking increased draft resistance, unrest in the cities, and ultimately “a domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions.”

Such reports moved Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford to favor a rejection of Westmoreland’s request and urged that, instead, the first steps toward a negotiated peace should be taken. He received unexpected support from a group of senior advisers to the president known as the Wise Men who were particularly concerned with the changing tide in public opinion. According to one of them, McGeorge Bundy, the majority of the Wise Men agreed that “we could no longer do the job we set out to do in the time that American opinion would permit us.” Consequently, on 31 March 1968 Johnson, citing “division in the American house tonight,” announced a bombing halt that he hoped might lead to negotiations with the North Vietnamese, and also that he would no longer seek reelection to the office of president. Here, then, was a clear victory for the antiwar movement. The draft resistance of the fall, coupled with the march on the Pentagon, affected policymakers both directly and indirectly. Now they hoped for a quick end to the war.

Of course, the war continued long after 1968. Richard M. Nixon, the new president, promised “peace with honor” during the election campaign, and by the summer of 1969 began to outline his program of Vietnamization, in which South Vietnamese ground forces would gradually assume more responsibility for the fighting as American soldiers came home. According to one confidant, public opinion was a “crucial variable” in Nixon’s decision to institute Vietnamization. At the same time, however, Nixon expanded the war by secretly bombing Cambodia for more than a year and by sending ground troops into neighboring Laos. In addition, away from the public eye, Nixon’s negotiation strategy in 1969 consisted primarily of a threat to North Vietnam that if they did not become more conciliatory at the peace table, he would unleash the full fury of American power as they had never seen it. Their deadline was 1 November 1969. Consistent with this, Nixon considered escalating the war in various ways in a proposed assault known as Operation Duck Hook. According to historian Marilyn Young, Duck Hook “explored a new range of options [intended to end the war], including a land invasion of the North, the systematic bombing of dikes so as to destroy the food supply, and the saturation bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.”

Here again, however, the antiwar movement intervened and, as historians Small and Tom Wells have described it, made it impossible for Nixon to seriously consider implementing Operation Duck Hook. On 15 October 1969 more than two million Americans participated in the largest expression of dissent in the country’s history when they skipped work and school to participate in rallies, demonstrations, church services, candlelight vigils, and organized forums as part of the first Vietnam moratorium. In the biggest demonstration of the day, more than one hundred thousand people gathered on Boston Common to hear a long list of speakers.

Inside the White House on the day of the moratorium, National Security staffer William Watts worked on a speech announcing Operation Duck Hook. According to Nixon’s secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, however, the moratorium had “a tremendous influence” on the president, and ultimately Duck Hook was shelved. Nixon himself wrote in his memoirs that after the moratorium, he felt that “American public opinion would be seriously divided by any military escalation of the war.”

Nixon actually blamed the moratorium for subverting the path to peace because he believed he could end the war with Operation Duck Hook if not with a threat to put such plans into action. This theme has become a common one for critics of the antiwar movement: by undermining public support for the two administrations, the antiwar movement gave the enemy reason to keep fighting and, more important, kept American policymakers from using overwhelming force that might have ended the war quickly.
It is a point worth considering. The United States did not, after all, withdraw from Vietnam until 1973, and the war between North and South Vietnam dragged on into 1975. Did the antiwar movement actually achieve the opposite of what it hoped to achieve? That is, instead of ending the war, did the antiwar movement prolong it and, therefore, cause more deaths on both sides? It is entirely possible and indeed probable that the successes that protesters achieved in inhibiting the escalation of the war in March 1968 and October 1969 actually prolonged the war, but only because they could not force those with the authority to simply end the war to do so. The charge that the protesters prolonged the war assumes that they were satisfied merely to have prevented escalation, that it was acceptable for Presidents Johnson and Nixon simply to forgo further escalation. It was not. If Nixon sought “peace with honor,” the antiwar movement sought only an end to the war in March 1968 and October 1969 actually prolonged the war, but only because they could not force those with the authority to simply end the war to do so. The charge that the protesters prolonged the war assumes that they were satisfied merely to have prevented escalation, that it was acceptable for Presidents Johnson and Nixon simply to forgo further escalation. It was not. If Nixon sought “peace with honor,” the antiwar movement sought only an end to the war and did not care if the United States had to lose it to end it. The supporters of the movement sought peace alone, with or without honor.

Perhaps more important is that such a question would have been regarded as academic to most opponents of the war. Protesters saw a war they regarded as obscene taking the lives of millions of people; they simply had to act in any way they could to end it. For them, protesting was a question of morality. Ultimately they succeeded in keeping the war from expanding at key points in the conflict’s history and pushing their government toward the peace table. The responsibility for a war that continued until 1975 must rest with those who were in a position to end it.

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**Viewpoint:**

No, the antiwar movement received too much credit for bringing the war to an end, because other factors influenced American foreign policy.

In judging the effectiveness of the Vietnam Era antiwar movement, it is important to distinguish between the active movement and the many other opponents of the war, between movement influence and changes in public opinion, and between policies shaped for public consumption and policies compelled by the brute facts of foreign relations. A close look at each of these distinctions strongly suggests that the antiwar movement has taken far too much credit for bringing the war to an end.

There has been an unexamined tendency among writers to give the antiwar movement credit for all of the opposition to the war, organized and otherwise. The organized antiwar groups were an extremely varied lot, and from the earliest days of protests there were tensions and profound disagreements over strategy and ideology. When Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and assorted radical pacifists such as David Dellinger and Staughton Lynd assumed the leadership of the most notable active protests after 1965, many mainstream opponents of the war felt obliged to distance themselves, both because they disagreed with the radical analysis of the war and because they saw the movement tending toward confrontation with authorities. The most notable effort to join the various organizations into a unified front, under the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE), mostly revealed the dominance of radicals in the activist part of the movement. Only the aging pacifist A. J. Muste was able to keep any sense of mutuality alive. Hence the movement itself, that wing of antiwar sentiment that engaged in active protest, was not necessarily representative of antiwar opinion as a whole.

Because of its notoriety, the activist movement is given credit for swaying national leaders to the antiwar cause. Yet, such an interpretation of events ignores just how divided the government was and how many influential men and women opposed the war from the outset, well before the movement gained any steam. We now know, for example, that while the Joint Chiefs of Staff, America’s military high command, were consistently hawkish, many highly placed military leaders were deeply skeptical over and quietly opposed to the war.

More important, the slow but steady escalation of American military involvement in Vietnam raised the active opposition of many in Congress. It is true that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the 1964 decree that gave President Johnson a free hand to take whatever actions necessary to protect U.S. personnel and ensure national interests in Southeast Asia, sailed through Congress with only two, lonely dissenting voices—from Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska) and Wayne Morse (D-Oregon). Many in Congress, most notably J. William Fulbright, chair of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee, took the president at his word when he promised to act with prudence and restraint; what they did not
The whole thing was a lie. We weren’t preserving freedom in South Vietnam. There was no freedom to preserve. To voice opposition to the government meant jail or death. Neutralism was forbidden and punished. Newspapers that didn’t say the right thing were closed down. People are not even free to leave and Vietnam is one of those rare countries that doesn’t fill its American visa quota. It’s all there to see once the Red film is removed from the eyes. We aren’t the freedom fighters. We are the Russian tanks blasting the hopes of an Asian Hungary.

It’s not democracy we brought to Vietnam—it’s anti-communism. This is the only choice the people in the village have. This is why most of them have embraced the Viet Cong and shunned the alternative. . . .

When I returned from Vietnam I was asked, “Do you resent young people who have never been in Vietnam, or in any war, protesting it?” On the contrary, I am relieved. I think they should be commended. I had to wait until I was 35 years old, after spending 10 years in the Army and 18 months personally witnessing the stupidity of the war, before I could figure it out. That these young people were able to figure it out so quickly and so accurately is not only a credit to their intelligence but a great personal triumph over a lifetime of conditioning and indoctrination. I only hope that the picture I have tried to create will help other people come to the truth without wasting 10 years. Those people protesting the war in Vietnam are not against our boys in Vietnam. On the contrary. What they are against is our boys being in Vietnam. They are not unpatriotic. Again the opposite is true. They are opposed to people, our own and others, dying for a lie, thereby corrupting the very word democracy.

and writings, and activists regularly dropped their names in an effort to exploit the ring of authority.

It is impossible to sort out who was influencing public opinion and how, but the evidence strongly suggests that the reasoned opposition of liberals and the establishment critics was far more important than the radical creeds of movement activists. Always hard to measure, public opinion regarding the Vietnam War is particularly hard to gauge because it shifted regularly in response to specific events and was, in the end, deeply ambivalent. Opinion polls regularly showed a tendency to rally around the flag; any increase in military activity in response to a specific event usually enjoyed majority support. However, that support was fleeting at best. Along with this well-known tendency there was a constant apprehension that the nation might be dragged into a war it had no business being in. As casualty tolls mounted after 1966, the two competing tendencies hardened into an almost schizophrenic opinion that the United States should either win the war at any cost or withdraw. After the Tet offensive of January 1968 the bulk of opinion shifted toward the latter view.

The antiwar movement can take credit for precious little of the war-weariness of the American public. On the whole the mainstream regarded the antiwar activists as ungrateful, unpatriotic, foul-mouthed radicals, an image that was reinforced by the media’s tendency to exaggerate the influence of hippies and Communists in the movement. Antiwar protesters usually ended up lower in the public’s estimation than President Johnson himself. The widespread contempt, even hatred, expressed for the movement only added to the ambiguity of public opinion. A good deal of anecdotal evidence, which appears in interviews and testimonies of the day, suggests that the typical attitude was that of a man who told one author that “I hate those damn protesters. I think we should win the war or get the hell out.”

It is even more doubtful that the antiwar movement affected the actual policies of either the Johnson or Nixon administrations. Johnson would not even listen to Fulbright, and he considered Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s resignation akin to treason; how much less was he inclined to heed the antiwar movement? Only Senator Robert Kennedy’s meddling in foreign policy worried him, and Kennedy can hardly be considered part of the movement. Nixon, meanwhile, exploited the ambivalence of public opinion and turned public contempt for antiwar activists to his own political ends. His famous “Silent Major-ity” speech was a cynical—and effective—attempt to justify his policies in contrast to the radicals who only wanted to tear America apart. If anything, the movement was counterproductive to the cause of ending the war during the Nixon years.

Given the significant opposition from establishment figures, in the absence of any determined public support, it is hardly a surprise that both the Johnson and Nixon administrations found themselves limited in the means they could employ in Vietnam. Yet, the limitations that they faced were imposed not by public opinion but by the hard realities of Cold War geopolitics—and it ought to be stated that within those limits the United States prosecuted a vigorous and terribly destructive campaign. U.S. policy was limited, first of all, by the threat that China might enter the conflict as it had in the Korean War in 1950. Such a development would greatly raise the stakes for the entire world. Beyond that possibility the United States had to keep its eye on the Soviet Union, perhaps not so much in Indochina as in Western Europe. The 1968 Soviet quelling of the Czechoslovakian democracy movement reminded American policymakers that Vietnam was, after all, only on the periphery of American interests and that the prosecution of the war there objectively weakened their ability to respond to communist power in Europe.

The limits on American options were reached in the objective character of international power relations. Any way it was figured, Vietnam simply was not essential to American national interests, and any full-throttle prosecution of war was not worth the serious risks to American security elsewhere. For all his bellicosity, Nixon recognized as much, and for all the violence he unleashed—the United States dropped one ton of bombs for every minute Nixon was in office—his intention was to shore up American power in relation to the Soviets and Chinese by ending the war in Vietnam. The antiwar movement can hardly take credit for the brutal reality that American policymakers had to face up to: that the war in Vietnam was a lost cause, the wrong war with the wrong foe at the wrong time.

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