

## PART TWO

### Chapter V

#### “MANY DEEDS OF WAR”: HOPE AND ANGUISH IN THE 1960s

John F. Kennedy had “vigor,” as his friends and supporters would say. The youngest man elected to the White House, JFK became president in January 1961 proclaiming that the “torch had been passed” to a new generation of leaders, vowing to get the country moving again, and memorably exhorting Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.” The aging poet Robert Frost added to that theme, reading “The Gift Outright,” essentially a tribute to America’s manifest destiny: “The land was ours before we were the land’s,” he began. “She was our land more than a hundred years before we were her people . . . Such as we were we gave ourselves outright. The deed of gift was many deeds of war.”<sup>1</sup>

Kennedy, with his famous background, Harvard degree, heroism in World War II, and beautiful family, symbolized both the limitless opportunities that the new decade could bring and the aggression and violence that Frost’s poem invoked. Moved by his inaugural address, young people joined the military, Peace Corps, and other service organizations. As he reached out to Martin Luther King during the 1960 campaign, Americans raised their hopes for racial harmony. The country’s best days, most believed, lay ahead. While it would be a stretch to cast JFK as an American version of Ho Chi Minh or other Vietnamese nationalists, he embodied many of the same characteristics--the martial spirit, eloquence, and empathy, national pride, virility. Ironically, or maybe inevitably, those traits led the United States into the Vietnam War and

spilled over into all other aspects of American life, transforming the nation in the process.

During the 1960s, the war in Indochina time and again intersected with the major political and social movements of the day--Civil Rights, the New Left, the war on poverty, Women's Liberation, and many others, and helped shape them accordingly. This was, in every sense, the Vietnam generation.

*The Promise of Liberalism . . .*

Just as the vision of creating global liberalism drove American leaders after the Second World War to intervene abroad, as in Vietnam, their hope for a liberal domestic order characterized 1960s America. There existed a liberal consensus on “the rhetoric of egalitarianism; a positive role for government, particularly against business excesses; [and] the achievement of civil rights through federal action,” as well as activism in foreign affairs.<sup>2</sup> With this vision in mind, U.S. leaders, at first haltingly and then more forcefully, would put the weight of government behind the African-American Civil Rights movement, recognize the need to address gender, racial, and ethnic inequality, and conduct a “war on poverty” to confront the economic gap between haves and have nots. Pressure for such actions, however, usually came from below. The “modern” Civil Rights movement emerged in the mid-1950s in various areas throughout the south. Movements for Women's Liberation, Chicano rights, and Gay rights began at the grassroots level, in the streets and fields. And even the war on poverty, though centrally directed, was in good measure a response to community concerns voiced by labor representatives, liberal intellectuals, and the poor themselves.

By the early 1960s, then, activists on several fronts were calling for change, for national action to address discrimination, inequality, and poverty. As liberalism demanded, the

government responded, both symbolically and in practice. Because the U.S. economy was strong and still growing, American leaders had a unique opportunity to pursue reform without asking for undue sacrifice from particular groups, particularly working-class whites. So, within a few years, the president and congress were cutting taxes, trying to resolve major civil rights issues, admitting to the scope of American poverty, opening a discussion on gender discrimination, and trying to create a “great society.” But at the same time, events far away were threatening reform at home.

*. . . The Peril of Vietnam*

By mid-1965, Lyndon Johnson had already recognized that “two great streams in our national life converged--the dream of a Great Society at home and the inescapable demands of our obligations halfway around the world.” Domestic reform and Vietnam would hence “run in confluence until the end of my administration.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as the president noticed, the spectre of Vietnam would haunt America from the mid-1960s forward, and transform the nation’s political and social fabric along the way. The war, by becoming the dominant national concern, took up resources and energies that might have been devoted to domestic programs. At the same time, millions of Americans of differing backgrounds joined the movement against the war, likewise shifting their attention onto Vietnam instead of civil rights or the Great Society, and in the process creating new movements and organizations. Because of the war, then, the United States, both internationally and at home, would become a dramatically different place than it had been in 1960.

The centrality and impact of one major event or movement, in this case the Vietnam War and the resistance against it, on other organizations or issues is common in U.S. history.

Sometimes a traumatic national event, such as a war, transforms existing movements, possibly giving them life, coopting them, creating more militancy, or crushing them. Progressive Era reform, for instance, stalled and died during World War I as American leaders portrayed criticism of American social policies as unpatriotic. In World War II, however, African-Americans were able to gain some political rights by comparing their own struggle to the fight for freedom against Nazi Germany or, after the war, the Soviet Union. At Yalta, so the story goes, Joseph Stalin had responded to a lecture from Franklin Roosevelt about human rights in Poland with a long draw on his pipe and the rhetorical question “What about Mississippi?” Though the dialogue may be apocryphal, Americans did recognize that it would be easier to criticize communism if its own house, including Ole’ Miss, was in order. Again, during the Korean conflict, war and domestic politics intersected as the struggle against nationalism and communism in North Korea was linked to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s crusade against alleged subversion and communism at home.

Major crises can also bring other movements to life. Reform issues like temperance, penal reform, and, most importantly, abolitionism emerged in good measure from the Great Awakenings of the 18th- and 19th-centuries. The first significant Women’s movement in the 1840s in turn grew from the abolitionist movement. Many labor activists in the latter 19th-century then cut their teeth on the abolitionist movement--seeing themselves as “wage slaves”--or from fundamentalist religion--calling for a “christian commonwealth.” Out of the Populist and Progressive eras of the late 19th- and early 20th-century came mobilizations and organizations dedicated to political reform and accountability, women’s suffrage, birth control, minimum wage and child labor laws, and cultural toleration, among others. National movements, such as

abolitionism or unionism, often created open spaces and communities of support in which other issues could develop. Anti-slavery action, for instance, had flowed logically from existing reform movements. Sometimes, the limits of reform groups forced others to splinter off; Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, began to focus on Women's rights after being denied seats at an anti-Slavery conference. Males in the abolitionist movement, they discovered, could be as paternal and discriminatory as pro-slavery men.

Events and movements already in existence, then, had great consequence on what was to follow. National issues such as slavery or war engendered national discussions and movements, for and against. In turn, those movements created analyses, language, and tactics that other groups would adopt and adapt to other issues. This most assuredly happened in the Vietnam era, as blacks, women, the poor and so many others developed a new critique of liberalism and the government because of the war, and various reform groups grew out of or in opposition to other movements. Vietnam created a climate in which the inherent limits of liberal reform became visible, making some existing groups more militant and giving rise to new movements. In the end, few could fail to notice and respond to the increasing and traumatic American role in the war in Indochina.

### *The Upheavals of the 1960s: Origins and Transformation*

The Vietnam War by no means created the political and social movements of the 1960s. Civil rights for African-Americans had been a mainstream political issue since the *Brown v. Board* decision and Montgomery bus boycott of the mid-1950s. Critics of American inequality and aggression abroad had been emerging before the major commitment to Indochina of 1965. The roots of Women's Liberation--the establishment of a President's Commission on the Status

of Women, the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act--likewise preceded the major build-up in Vietnam. And culturally the "Beats," birth control, and Rock and Roll, for instance, were well known by the early 1960s. All these movements, however, would begin to change markedly in mid-decade, in principal measure because of intervention in and escalation of the war in Vietnam. As Todd Gitlin, a leading activist of the decade, bluntly observed, "the war was driving us nuts."<sup>4</sup>

Millions of others no doubt felt the same. By the latter 1960s, the hope and promise of a new era had for the most part disappeared. Political, media, and community leaders were now using words like "turmoil," "ordeal," "tragedy," "anguish," and "rage" to describe American society. Liberalism was on the run as Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968. The optimism of the Civil Rights movement was waning even before Martin Luther King's assassination. The Women's Liberation movement was emerging from the antiwar movement and criticizing America's gender policies and the political structure which was creating them. Mexican-Americans, Indians, environmentalists, Gays, and others were expanding their struggles for civil and political rights as the war grew as well. Even Lyndon Johnson "totally agreed" that "the war poisons everything else."<sup>5</sup>

The Vietnam War thus affected American life in innumerable ways, creating new forms of politics and culture. Sometimes, as with King's April 1967 speech, the links between the war and various other movements were direct and clear; sometimes, they were more subtle. While there are countless, and often complicated, examples of the ways in which the war transformed American society, to make these concepts more manageable, we will establish three major and interrelated characteristics of the intersection between Vietnam and the social and political

movements of the 1960s.

*Priorities, and the Limits of Liberalism.* Before the major decisions for war in 1965 and thereafter, the government's top goal seemed to be the dismantling of apartheid in the U.S. south and the creation of a Great Society, with equal opportunity and access for all. Toward that end, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had established programs to attack poverty, ensure voting rights and equal accommodations for African-Americans, and had begun to examine issues of gender and class inequity. But after 1965 the emphasis on domestic reform faded as Vietnam grew in importance. As LBJ, in his blunt Texas style, would later complain, the "whore" of a war in Vietnam had taken him away from "the lady I love," the Great Society. At the same time, the commitment to Indochina would expose the limits of and ultimately delegitimize Cold War liberalism and upend the political coalition that had put and kept liberal Democrats in power since the New Deal, while provoking a right-wing backlash against the state that still dominates political discourse in the 1990s. The Civil and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 had highlighted the possibilities of liberal reform. The nation could integrate blacks into the political and social structure without impinging on other groups' rights. The government, with popular backing, would continue to broaden political rights and economic opportunities at home, while spreading democracy abroad, or at least liberals hoped it would. But Vietnam changed that too. Because of the war, many liberals began to lose faith in the system and in the ability of the Johnson administration to ensure stability, equality, and justice, and they began to analyze the structural causes of the war and how they affected domestic needs. Blacks, working people, community activists, and intellectuals--the backbone of the liberal consensus--began to question the government's ability to ensure social harmony or its commitment to equality and justice, and

began to question the ability of the system to address such issues. Hope had given way to disillusion and, often, violence and rage. The soaring rhetoric of Kennedy's inaugural address or Lyndon Johnson's overtures to Martin Luther King would fade into memory as the angry rhetoric of young radicals or street scenes from Chicago entered the national psyche.

*Radicalization and Rebirth.* As a good many liberals, especially the young and racial and ethnic minorities, lost faith in their access to mainstream political solutions to problems of poverty, racial discrimination, or gender equality, they became increasingly militant. Movements which had been established and even gained success by working "within the system" became increasingly frustrated and began to attack the very political structures in which they had come to life. By the mid-1960s, for instance, King's "dream" of integration was hard to find in the smoke of urban riots and the increasing awareness by black leaders that civil rights had taken a back seat to Vietnam. Consequently, more militant African-American leaders emerged, linking their own situation to that of the Vietnamese. As Huey Newton, a founder of the Black Panther Party, explained, "as Vietnam should be able to determine its own destiny . . . we in the black colony in America want . . . power over our destiny."<sup>6</sup> Likewise student radicals, who had originally become politicized because of issues such as Free Speech or participatory democracy, were increasingly enraged by the war and helped form the largest mass antiwar movement in history. They too had lost faith in liberalism's ability to address their agenda and grew increasingly alienated from the system of government and society itself. Groups like the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], at first a movement of middle-class students for political renewal, became the leaders of the antiwar movement, and were driven into street battles in Chicago in 1968, while working-class students at Kent State faced National Guard bullets in 1970.

At the same time, the radicalization of various groups led to the establishment of new movements. Though issues such as women's rights, Chicano rights, gay liberation, ecology and a counterculture surely existed prior to 1965, they gained momentum from the rising movement against the war and the distrust and anger that it had produced. By the later 1960s then, these other movements were gaining strength and attention because they could link their own causes to Vietnam. A nation that was capable of waging war against the Vietnamese, they reasoned, was just as willing to contain or oppress, often violently, democratic forces at home. The war in Vietnam thus served as something of a "conveyor belt," helping create new movements and placing them within the political system.

*"Holistic" Criticism and a National Experience.* Prior to the 1960s, most criticism of America's political or social system was conducted within the safe and self-limited parameters of liberal dissent. Thus George Kennan or Walter Lippman could worry about the nature of the Cold War, or Margaret Chase Smith and others could attack McCarthyism, because America's problems were seen as aberrant or the fault of "bad people." The early Civil Rights movement had its villains such as "Bull" Connor or George Wallace as well, but the nation genuinely felt that desegregation could be achieved once bad men were removed from power. But, again, Vietnam exposed that as myth. Americans were beginning to develop a comprehensive, or holistic, analysis of American political culture and linking events abroad and at home. Vietnam was not an aberration, many believed, but rather a natural outcome of the Cold War. Likewise, Bull Connor was more than a redneck, racist southern sheriff; he in many ways represented fairly common thought about blacks in America. Indeed, many activists began to see Vietnam, civil rights, women's liberation, poverty and other problems as part of a larger structure and process.

While that transformation might have occurred even without Vietnam as the systemic and structural limits of liberalism became more clear, there is no doubt that the war crystallized and hastened the nation's awareness of the interrelated nature of Vietnam and domestic needs.

And it did so on a national level, creating an "American" experience that crossed class, race, gender, or ethnic lines. While the initial push for civil rights focused on the southern states, the Great Society aimed to help the poor, and women, Chicanos, Gays and others had their own agendas, Vietnam affected virtually everyone. By decade's end, all Americans had some knowledge of and opinions about the war. Millions of young men had been in the military and countless others had dodged service. Many more--a diverse group which included campus radicals, hippies, housewives, business people, the clergy and others--had joined the movement against the war. Albeit for unfortunate, and often tragic, reasons, Vietnam was a unifying force, for Americans of all stripes, unlike any other social movement of the period could be. And as a result, the American people would be more cynical and angry; "Camelot"--the fantastic kingdom featured the Kennedys favorite musical-- would remain a myth.

### *Two, Three, Many Vietnams*

Though the war in Vietnam dominated American life after 1965, the decade just as importantly marked by intense conflict at home. The intervention in Indochina occurred in the midst of one of the more intense and divisive, yet successful, reform periods in U.S. history. In just a half-decade, however, much of the hope and optimism of the early 1960s lay shattered. American priorities had changed from addressing needs at home to containing the NLF in Vietnam. In turn, millions of Americans were variously disillusioned, alienated, and radicalized, and developed a comprehensive critique of national politics and society in the process. In turn,

they developed a huge movement to resist the war. Building upon that, other movements emerged or became more militant in pursuit of other goals, including political and social rights for peoples of different races, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientation, and cultures, challenged the structure of the state and society along the way, and also prompted government efforts to contain such forces of democracy at home, as in Vietnam.

Che' Guevara, the revolutionary icon of the 1960s, had called on the peoples of the Third World to fight against American imperialism on every front, to create "two, three, many Vietnams." Ironically enough, Americans put Ché's words into practice at home. Politically, Vietnam led to a crisis in and ultimate deligitimation of liberalism. The war exposed liberalism, upended the Civil Rights movement, and helped give strength to an emerging Women's Liberation movement. Culturally, Vietnam led millions to question authority and reject "traditional" values and practices. The war, on so many levels, transformed national life, causing mass tragedy and unleashing forces for change, and giving birth to a new America. A generation later, however, Vietnam and the 1960s have entered the media as a tragic war in a distant place or as hippies obsessed with "sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll" trying to create a new culture. But the activists of that era were not the caricatures they are often portrayed as today. Many were trying to create something new, a society in which blacks had civil rights, where political institutions were democratically organized, where poverty and inequality would be addressed, in which a bloody and terrible war would end. As the legacy of Vietnam continues with an accused draft-dodger as president, a national attack on "reverse discrimination" against white men, and a movement for "family values," knowledge about the 1960s is essential to understanding how we have arrived at this point in our national history.

1. In Jim Heath, Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Years (Bloomington, IN., 1975), 62; Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation (New York, 1992), 499-500.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.
3. Johnson, The Vantage Point, 322-5.
4. In Edward P. Morgan, The '60s Experience (Philadelphia, 1991), 22.
5. Minutes of Meeting in Cabinet Room, 9 January 1967, Reference File, box 1, LBJ Library.
6. In Robert Mullen, Blacks and Vietnam (Washington, D.C., 1981), 13.