

PROLOGUE

INTERSECTION: THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS OF THE 1960S

Martin Luther King, Jr. possessed greater moral authority than any American in the 1960s. He had stood up to police dogs and fire hoses; mobilized millions--black and white, northern and southern--to agitate for civil rights; managed boycotts and marches; successfully lobbied for civil rights laws; stirred untold numbers worldwide with his passionate oratory; and won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. Yet one of the more dramatic and historically significant episodes of his life has not become a central element of King's public legacy, as have Birmingham, Selma, the March on Washington and other events we celebrate in our history books and in the media during the second week of January.

Speaking at the Riverside Baptist Church in New York City on 4 April 1967--by eerie coincidence exactly a year before he was slain in Memphis--Martin Luther King publicly broke ranks with the policies of President Lyndon B. Johnson and the white establishment as he condemned American involvement in the Vietnam War--Johnson's war, the liberals' war. The war in Vietnam had already and would continue to intersect with the compelling social and political movements of that era, but King's sermon in New York perhaps more clearly and strikingly developed the ways in which the issues of Vietnam, Civil Rights, race and class at home, and the promise and shortcomings of liberalism were interconnected than other episodes in the 1960s.

To King, there was a "very obvious and almost facile connection" between the U.S. war in Vietnam and the struggle for civil rights and against poverty at home. Just as the Civil and

Voting Rights Acts of 1964-65 and Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" had begun to confront the crises of race and class at home, the United States began pouring soldiers and resources into Southeast Asia. With that military buildup, King watched the commitment to domestic justice and equality "broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war." At the same time, Vietnam was showcasing the government's hypocrisy on racial matters as African-Americans and other minorities were dying in extraordinarily high proportions in the early years of the war though they accounted for a small percentage of the population. "We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society," King charged, "and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem."

As a result, Americans faced the "cruel irony" of watching black and white American boys kill and die together in the service of a country "that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools." Because of these circumstances, King, who had developed a strong relationship with the Johnson White House and the liberal establishment, had to speak out; he "could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor." At home, as the Reverend saw it, racial division had become increasingly contentious, with urban uprisings in the north becoming as common as anti-black violence in the south had been earlier in the decade. Abroad, especially in Vietnam, U.S. actions were marked by mayhem and destruction as well, as American soldiers, weapons, and airplanes inflicted massive levels of damage on the residents of a small agrarian society. The United States, King thus concluded, was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."

Not four years earlier King dreamed of an America in which "little black boys and black

girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as brothers and sisters.” Violence in Vietnam, however, had brought them together, and Americans watched those black and white boys “in brutal solidarity burning down the huts of a poor village” though “they would never live together on the same block in Detroit.” As King saw it, the commitment to racial reconciliation and social improvement was dying on the battlefields of Vietnam, causing a rupture in the social fabric unlike any in the twentieth century. He thus called on all Americans to confront the impact of the war. “These are the times for real choices and not false ones,” he lectured. “We are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly. Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, *but we must all protest.*”¹

King’s words are an appropriate starting point for this work because they so powerfully describe the impact of the Vietnam War on other aspects of American society in the 1960s. There is, to be sure, already a significant body of literature on this period. Scholars, public officials, and the popular media have lectured on and analyzed the major events of the period-- Vietnam, Civil Rights, political upheaval, cultural conflict, Women’s Liberation, student unrest, and others--to no end, but at times in isolation from each other. The war in Indochina and the domestic crises of that generation indeed were integral and cohesive parts of the same process. Though many of the principal political and cultural movements of that decade preceded America’s large-scale commitment to Vietnam, the war ultimately shaped them in new ways, variously radicalizing, co-opting, or shattering them.

Vietnam and the domestic crises of the 1960s must be understood as unique yet connected consequences of the economic and cultural environment produced in the aftermath of

World War II. After 1945, the United States had unrivaled power, but had assumed leadership of a troubled world. The forces of *nationalism*--usually described as Communist by American leaders--were disrupting the U.S. vision of a new world order, especially in the Third World and particularly in Vietnam. Closer to home, blacks, women, workers, students, and others would eventually mobilize to seek greater democracy, often in the streets of major American cities. To face both challenges, foreign and domestic, America's leaders pursued a strategy of *containment*, preventing the political left and forces of nationalism abroad from spreading, while also containing movements for participatory democracy at home. In both cases, the United States tried to limit movements that were based upon the idea that individual citizens--be they Vietnamese peasants, poor African-Americans, or middle-class college students--should have a decisive voice in choosing the nature of their society.

That effort to contain nationalism and democracy in turn motivated many of those whom American leaders opposed--Communists and Vietnamese patriots led by Ho Chi Minh, student protestors on American campuses, African-American activists, champions of women's liberation--to more forcefully, and at times violently, press their agendas. Such tension was already evident by the later 1950s as the United States began to assume greater control over the civil war in Vietnam, while also trying to direct protests over civil rights at home along more manageable and less threatening paths. Those movements for popular democracy nonetheless achieved success or expanded in the early 1960s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in public accommodations; the Voting Rights Act a year later extended suffrage to millions of black southerners; the Free Speech Movement [FSM] motivated huge numbers of college students to rethink the role of the university; the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee [SNCC] and Students for a Democratic Society [SDS] became the most influential organizations of student activists in the 1960s; and music, film, and literature began to explore new, often previously taboo, areas.

While such movements existed in their own right, ultimately all were transformed by the growing commitment in Vietnam, which by the mid-1960s had become a major war and, ultimately, the nation's primary concern, if not obsession. Because of Vietnam, as Martin Luther King charged, other issues were downplayed, ignored, or dismissed. The growing expense of the war meant that less funding was available to address the "War on Poverty" at home. The U.S. attempt to crush Vietnamese nationalism caused millions of Americans--many, but by no means all, young--to question the morality, if not legitimacy, of the government's behavior, and they often took to the streets to express their opinions. Perhaps most importantly, Vietnam exposed the inconsistency in the world view of the liberal establishment: it was not possible--as Athens had discovered over two millennia earlier--to have a full-fledged democracy at home while extending one's empire abroad. The dreams of a great society indeed were dying on the battlefields of Vietnam. Likewise, the anger and energy of young students, blacks, women, and others was being fueled by the war. In all instances, Vietnam was a transformative event. Just as World Wars I and II fundamentally altered the nature of American society in the 1920s and 1940s, the war in Vietnam would do likewise in the 1960s.

Prior to the American military commitment to Vietnam and the domestic upheavals of the 1960s, the United States had enjoyed over a decade of economic growth and apparent stability. Despite war in Korea, occasional recession, and growing dissent from southern blacks, most Americans seemed content. Workers were relatively well paid; the GI Bill was allowing more

young men than ever to attend college; women were supposed to be relieved from housework by technological innovation; suburban tract housing was readily available; and Americans had access to more consumer goods, services, and entertainment than even thought possible just a generation earlier. The country liked Ike, and Beaver, and Lucy; the kids loved that new “rock and roll” music; and, aside from the threats posed by the Soviet Union and “Red” China, all seemed right with the world.

Below this exaggerated litany of harmony and conformity, however, lay forces that would rock the next generation. Though poverty and racial, gender and ethnic discrimination was mostly rendered invisible by the media and popular culture, democratic movements were bubbling up in a number of places. In Montgomery, Alabama, King, a young minister, achieved national recognition by successfully desegregating the public bus lines through the tactics of boycott. In Greenwich Village, “Beat” poets and folk singers were challenging the conformity of postwar American life. The seeds of the women’s movements of the 1960s were beginning to sprout as women, often through labor and civil rights activism, asserted their own political agenda, while on a more personal level began to challenge sexual double standards, especially when liberated by the development of the birth control pill. At the same time, American youth, especially on college campuses, were starting to question or rebel against the university establishment and then society at large. By the early years of the 1960s, these forces would coalesce into various politico-cultural movements of decided significance and, against the overwhelming backdrop of the Vietnam War, fundamentally alter American life.

The purpose of this book, then, is to examine the Vietnam War and the political and social movements of the 1960s. Though it is in part a narrative of the major developments of

that decade, it is more so an interpretive work with a common thread running through it--the nature of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the significance of the war on the various movements at home. The major theme is fairly straightforward: *Vietnam was a transformative event, with the war and opposition to it reshaping American life.* Vietnam generated the largest mass protest movement in U.S. history; it exposed the limits of liberal reform; the war forestalled antipoverty and Civil Rights progress and radicalized movements associated with those issues; it helped bring other movements into existence, like Women's Liberation or the Counterculture; and provoked a backlash that continues to influence American politics and society to this day.

Although the major point of this work is that Vietnam and the movements at home were interrelated, I have organized the book into two parts--Vietnam and the Movements of the 1960s--to make it easier to use. I have now taught a significant number of courses in which I cover this material and have found that the subject matter flows best when demarcated this way, rather than lumping everything together in a chronological narrative of the decade. Part One will thus cover the Vietnam War. We will examine the major issues regarding the war: political and social conditions in Vietnam; the reasons for American involvement; the development of U.S. policy; criticism of the war, both internally, as from the military, and externally, as from the Peace Movement; the experience of soldiers; and the legacy of America's quarter-century of war in Indochina. The war, we shall see, was a product of America's mission to assume world leadership after World War II, was flawed badly from the outset, and was never likely to succeed. It was, most Americans believed, not only a mistake but morally wrong.

In Part Two, we will look into some of the principal domestic issues of the 1960s, and show how they affected each other and, importantly, were connected with the war in Vietnam.

First, we will consider the impact of the war, namely on the emergence of the New Left and the shattering of the postwar liberal consensus; next, we will investigate the ways in which Vietnam helped alter, hurt, or create dominant social movements such as Civil Rights and Women's Liberation; and finally, we will look at the cultural impact of the Vietnam generation. Not only did the war and social movements affect America politically, but they also changed the ways Americans created or enjoyed films, music, sports and other cultural forms. These movements generally shared a commitment to democracy and social justice--though their own behavior could at times become extreme--and a belief that the American people--old and young, female and male, black and white, poor as well as wealthy--should have a voice in determining their lives. They often rejected traditional politics or the established culture and tried to create new organizations, institutions and cultural relationships. Sometimes, the movements succeeded: southern racial segregation was abolished, students gained a measure of independence and autonomy within the university, a new and alternative culture took root. In the end, however, the state and other authority figures contained these movements, or they were internally divided and their ultimate goals were not achieved. In any event, America was a much different place by the end of the 1960s than it had been at the outset of that decade.

Although separated into two parts, it should remain clear that the war and the social movements were part of the same, interrelated historical process. Vietnam, civil rights, politics, and culture all played off each other and helped shape, and were shaped by, each other. They are separated here mainly to make it less complex to learn about them. Though Vietnam and the movements of the 1960s may be represented by different sections in this book, they are unquestionably linked historically and part of the same process that transformed American life.

This study is important then not only as a means to provide a history of an important era but to draw a bridge to the present as well. Vietnam and the 1960s are still with us, visibly, today. To George Bush, victory in the Persian Gulf in 1991 signified the end of the “Vietnam syndrome.” Whenever the United States has contemplated military involvement abroad, the media and politicians make constant reference to Vietnam. Likewise, the political movements of the 1960s still provide crucial points of reference. The right-wing tide of the 1980s and 1990s--demonstrated by the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton presidencies--represents in no small way a backlash against the 1960s. Politicians today in both major parties rail against the Great Society and the liberalism of a previous generation as harshly as critics did during that decade. Culturally too, the 1960s live on, whether in movies like *The Big Chill*, *Rambo*, or *Forrest Gump* or in the social protest music of Billy Bragg, Public Enemy, Tracy Chapman and others or in the anti-1960s political views of Rush Limbaugh, Newt Gingrich, or Robert Bork.

As we enter a new century, our future is shaped by our past. America’s role in the world today, its social system, racial antagonisms, gender relations, and culture can be traced back to an earlier generation when the United States tried to contain a war of national liberation in Vietnam and various democratic movements at home. The triumphs and shortcomings of that era fundamentally transformed the United States and made it what it is today.

1. "A Time to Break the Silence," Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered at Riverside Baptist Church, 4 April 1967, from Catholic Worker Home Page, worldwide web, <http://www.cais.com/agf/mlkvnam.htm>; "I Have a Dream," Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered at the March on Washington, 28 August 1963, worldwide web, <http://www.students.uiuc.edu/~rosanina/King.html>.