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History Assignment 3
History 195

The legacy of the Vietnam War, as we have learned over the term, has been one of staying the course. Each American President carried on basically the same war policy of their predecessor, yet thought that they would have a different outcome. In the most basic terms, each President felt that they had to fight the war, but felt that they had to keep it from a public that would not fully understand the importance of the fight. Up to a certain point, each administration was able to keep a large part of the population in general support of the war. There has always been a portion of the population against every war, and Vietnam was no different. As each President escalated the war, the portion of the populace against the war grew. We have discussed the Tet Offensive's effect on the population and it had a huge effect on increasing discontent with American war policy. Despite, Johnson's peace rhetoric, however he continued the war ever more vigorously in secret. His successor, Nixon, pursued the lofty goal of "peace with honor" while ever increasing the scope of the war.

A real turning point in Vietnam came when Nixon's invasion of Cambodia caused outrage across the nation. The days immediately after Nixon announced the "incursion" into Cambodia, students demonstrated at more than 100 universities, including Kent State University in Ohio (Appy, 380). Students demonstrating against the war was nothing new, students were some of the most outspoken opponents of the war. The Kent State demonstration on May 4, 1970, however represented a huge escalation of resistance to these demonstrations by authorities. Demonstrations had increasingly turned violent over the preceding years at many places, especially at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Kent State, however resulted in the shooting and killing of four students and the wounding of nine more at the hands of the national guard (Appy, 380). This major violence of anti-demonstration activity sparked cries of oppression and an undemocratic government. Demonstrations erupted in opposition to the Kent State killings. 700 colleges and universities were paralyzed for the remainder of the semester as students and faculty protested

this shocking violence and change of American war policy. 100,000 people protested in Washington on May 8th and 150,000 more in San Francisco (generalstudiesdegree.net, pophistorydig.com).

Tom Grace was one of the students shot and wounded at Kent State. His sentiments about Nixon's announcement echoed what many felt, "We hated that war, and as much as we hated the war on April 29, we hated it more on April 30" (Appy, 386). The attack of a sovereign country that was protected by the Geneva Accords was nothing new, but invasion by American troops into Cambodia was a dramatic expansion of the war efforts. Tom's mounting discontent with the government grew as he saw authorities utilizing increasing levels of violence to silence opposition. Tom mentions the "murder" of a member of the Black Panthers by the police as an example (Appy, 387).

Tom experienced the lengths that authorities were willing to go to stop demonstrations when he was shot in the leg at Kent State. He was close friends with one of those killed and an acquaintance of another killed. The events at Kent State created many dedicated antiwar leaders. Tom, who was just another student against the war attending protests, was transformed by the violence at Kent State into an anti-war organizer and public figure (Appy, 389). Students were not the only ones affected by this event either. Millions of people around the country who had previously simply thought that the war was not the best thing we could be doing or ambivalent, hardened their views and openly spoke out against the war in the Kent State aftermath.

Members of the executive branch and legislative branch of American government carried out their own acts of protest as the Senate cut off funds for Cambodia and Congress ultimately passed a resolution barring any American invasion of Laos and Cambodia later that year(history.com). 250 State Department employees signed a letter of protest to Cambodian invasion (Appy, 380). In response to the mounting pressure, Nixon announced that he would withdraw American forces from Cambodia by June. Outrage of the government was also echoed in music, Crosby, Stills and Nash's "Ohio" which peaked at #14 on the charts and had the lyrics, "Soldiers cutting us down" (pophistorydig.com).

It is clear to me that the events at Kent State profoundly affected the nation. It is not possible for our government to maintain legitimacy as a democratic nation when it is willing to resort to this type of violence to stifle dissent. Many soldiers in Vietnam were also increasingly becoming disillusioned with the war. Soldiers in Vietnam acted out their opposition to the war in increasingly overt

and sometimes violent ways. Drug use was rampant and soldiers resorted to "sand-bagging" tactics where they would avoid contact with the enemy, smoke pot, wait for evacuation back to their base, then file a false report claiming high body counts. The loss of American soldiers' will to fight was a major signal of the end for American operation in Vietnam. Without dedicated troops, there is no war. The end of the war came when the soldiers were no longer willing to execute its objectives.

Steve Sherlock was a lieutenant in the 101st airborne. Like many, he was entirely supportive of the war when he joined and wanted to do his best in service of his country. His account in the Appy book chronicles his transition from the idea that the Vietnam war was as noble as fighting the Nazis to a position so staunchly against the war that he threw away his bronze star in protest.

Although Steve was willing to fight when needed to save his life and protect his country, he felt that, "...we didn't have any business being in Vietnam and that if it was wrong to be there, then it was wrong to be killing people there" (Appy, 425). The culture of the military was so bent on destroying communism that Steve was relieved of duty for referring to communists as, "...people like us" (Appy, 426). The mentality that people from one part of the world were less than human, simply because of where they were born, was contrary to what most American were raised to believe. Many American policies were contrary to how young soldier had romanticized warfare was conducted. This was not the war of their fathers and grandfather's, this was a war that large numbers of soldiers felt was not just. Steve felt a huge lack of motivation in taking a life.

The problem of not wanting to seek out and kill the proclaimed enemy was endemic in Vietnam. One commander worried that one day he would go to battle and turn around to find that he had no men left. After Steve's discharge, he created a group called the Veterans for Peace and joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Appy, 427). The feeling that the government was so wrong in their execution and excuses for being in Vietnam, was a motivator for a large all-veteran demonstration in Washington D.C. The veterans, including Steve waited in line, said something short and threw their medals on the steps of the Capitol. These men were so against the war that they threw away the very things they so desperately wanted when they joined the military, their war medals.

These veterans were no different than many of the soldiers still fighting a war that they did not agree with. Steve describes the huge dichotomy that each soldier faced, "I felt the contradiction

between doing your best and hating the war, between having the brotherhood of the unit in the field yet knowing that the war was wrong" (App, 429). As the war dragged on, soldiers simply could no longer serve effectively under these conditions. When a country of patriots, no longer has a military that is dedicated to its goals, victory is not possible. The joining of military with civilian antipathy toward the war marked the end of the war before Nixon had brought himself to realize its reality.

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