Vietnam War Protests

The movement against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War began small—among peace activists and leftist intellectuals on college campuses—but gained national prominence in 1965, after the United States began bombing North Vietnam in earnest. Anti-war marches and other protests, such as the ones organized by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), attracted a widening base of support over the next three years, peaking in early 1968 after the successful Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese troops proved that war’s end was nowhere in sight.

Vietnam War Protests: The Beginnings of a Movement

In August 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, and President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. And by the time U.S. planes began regular bombings of North Vietnam in February 1965, some critics had begun to question the government's assertion that it was fighting a democratic war to liberate the South Vietnamese people from Communist aggression.

The anti-war movement began mostly on college campuses, as members of the leftist organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began organizing “teach-ins” to express their opposition to the way in which it was being conducted. Though the vast majority of the American population still supported the administration policy in Vietnam, a small but outspoken liberal minority was making its voice heard by the end of 1965. This minority included many students as well as prominent artists and intellectuals and members of the hippie movement, a growing number of young people who rejected authority and embraced the drug culture.

Boxer Muhammad Ali was one prominent American who resisted being drafted into service during the Vietnam War. Ali, then heavyweight champion of the world, declared himself a "conscientious objector," earning a prison sentence (later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court) and a three-year ban from boxing.

Widespread Disillusionment

By November 1967, American troop strength in Vietnam was approaching 500,000 and U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded. The Vietnam War was costing the U.S. some $25 billion per year, and disillusionment was beginning to reach greater sections of the taxpaying public. More casualties were reported in Vietnam every day, even as U.S. commanders demanded more troops. Under the draft system, as many as 40,000 young men were called into service each month, adding fuel to the fire of the anti-war movement.

On October 21, 1967, one of the most prominent anti-war demonstrations took place, as some 100,000 protesters gathered at the Lincoln Memorial; around 30,000 of them continued in a march on the Pentagon later that night. After a brutal confrontation with the soldiers and U.S. Marshals protecting the building, hundreds of demonstrators were arrested. One of them was the author Norman Mailer, who chronicled the events in his book “The Armies of the Night,” published the following year to widespread acclaim. Also in
1967, the anti-war movement got a big boost when the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. went public with his opposition to the war on moral grounds, condemning the war’s diversion of federal funds from domestic programs as well as the disproportionate number of African-American casualties in relation to the total number of soldiers killed in the war.

**Political Consequences of Vietnam War Protests**

The launch of the Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese communist troops in January 1968, and its success against U.S. and South Vietnamese troops, sent waves of shock and discontent across the home front and sparked the most intense period of anti-war protests to date. By early February 1968, a Gallup poll showed only 35 percent of the population approved of Johnson’s handling of the war and a full 50 percent disapproved (the rest had no opinion). Joining the anti-war demonstrations by this time were members of the organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War, many of whom were in wheelchairs and on crutches. The sight of these men on television throwing away the medals they had won during the war did much to win people over to the anti-war cause.

After many New Hampshire primary voters rallied behind the anti-war Democrat Eugene McCarthy, Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection. Vice President Hubert Humphrey accepted the Democratic nomination in August in Chicago, and 10,000 anti-war demonstrators showed up outside the convention building, clashing with security forces assembled by Mayor Richard Daley. Humphrey lost the 1968 presidential election to Richard M. Nixon, who promised in his campaign to restore “law and order”—a reference to conflict over anti-war protests as well as the rioting that followed King’s assassination in 1968—more effectively than Johnson had.

The following year, Nixon claimed in a famous speech that anti-war protesters constituted a small—albeit vocal—minority that should not be allowed to drown out the “silent majority” of Americans. Nixon’s war policies divided the nation still further, however: In December 1969, the government instituted the first U.S. draft lottery since World War II, inciting a vast amount of controversy and causing many young men to flee to Canada to avoid conscription. Tensions ran higher than ever, spurred on by mass demonstrations and incidents of official violence such as those at Kent State in May 1970, when National Guard troops shot into a group of protesters demonstrating against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, killing four students.

In mid-1971, the publication of the first Pentagon Papers—which revealed previously confidential details about the war’s conduct—caused more and more Americans to question the accountability of the U.S. government and military establishments. In response to a strong anti-war mandate, Nixon announced the effective end to U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia in January 1973.