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Race and War: The Impact of African-American Racial Struggle and Tension on American Opposition to the War in Vietnam

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“We cannot discuss what life was like in the sixties [in America]...without discussingrace and war.”¹ These two forces, the Vietnam War and African-American inequality, split society in the United States and resulted in a decade with a kind of revolutionary energy rarely seen. Protest was the style of the day and it took many forms, from the freedom rides of the early civil rights movement to the vast marches of the late anti-war movement. Throughout the movement, the forces of race and war were inextricably entwined. The greatest question for historians, then, is how these two forces interacted and what we can learn from their interactions. Many have studied the impact that Vietnam had on the African American rights movements (this term will be used here to collectively refer to the civil rights movement, the black liberation struggle, and general activism spurred by racial tension in America) and the lives of African-Americans. Racial tension also played a large part in the reactions of the broader public to the war. In particular, the tactics and rhetoric of the African-American struggle for racial equality influenced the way the Vietnam War was opposed. Many in both the anti-war and the African-American movements desperately wanted to see the two struggles unified in order to have the “perennially weak voices of morality ... gaining

¹ Julian Bond, “The Roots of Racism and War,” in *Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance*, ed. Clyde Taylor (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), 107.

strength from mutual reinforcement."² This "fateful merger" however, never materialized.³ Many organizations and individuals laid their opposition to the war at the feet of African-American repression, and some anti-war organizations had their roots in the civil rights movement. Racial conflict, however, encouraged actions and reactions which contributed to the marginalization of some sections of the anti-war movement. Rhetoric which tried to bring together the struggles of African-Americans and the horrors of the war attracted either little support or much venom. The tactics activists learned from and adopted to appeal to African-Americans created backlash in the riot-phobic wider society. Ultimately, both the rhetoric and tactics contributed to the radicalising of parts of the movement and helped in its fragmentation.

Before exploring the marginalizing impacts of racial conflict, however, it makes sense to examine the reasons that African-American oppression encouraged opposition to the war. These reasons are particularly clear in Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech in Riverside Church in New York City. King laid out seven reasons for opposing the war, which were echoed by those who spoke before and after him. These reasons ranged from seeing the war "as an enemy of the poor" to the hypocrisy of fighting for non-violence domestically while his "own nation [was] using massive doses of violence to solve its problems."⁴ In

² Robert S. Browne, "The Freedom Movement and the War in Vietnam," in *Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance*, ed. Clyde Taylor (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), 71.

³ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984), 89.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Martin Luther King, Jr., Declares His Opposition to the War, 1967," as reprinted in *Ramparts* (May, 1967), 33-37, in Robert J. MacMahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 404.

addition, King offered several more compelling reasons for opposing the war that were clearly based on the racial conflict going on in the United States. King opposed the war primarily because of its relation to the racial question - he would not support having "Negro and white boys kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools."⁵ Many African-Americans and African-American organizations from all sectors expressed similar ideas. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (hereafter: SNCC) issued a statement in response to the murder of Samuel Younge, one of their workers, in 1966 saying that African-Americans were being "called on to stifle the liberation of Vietnam, to preserve a democracy which does not exist for them at home."⁶ On a more strategic and radical front, the Black Panther Party offered to provide troops to the Vietnamese because Vietnam was "the 'countryside' of the world" and any revolution had to begin in the countryside, only marching into the city of America as a final act of victory. The precise reasons racial struggle inspired opposition to the Vietnam War varied, but they were clearly important to many prominent African-American organizations and individuals.

The impact of these arguments on the broader public though, was not so positive. Julian Bond, a black legislator in Georgia, was denied his seat shortly after being elected when he supported the previously mentioned statement by the SNCC against the war.⁷ Bond was eventually reinstated by Supreme

⁵ Ibid., 403.

⁶ Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, "Statement on Vietnam," in *Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance*, ed. Clyde Taylor (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), 259.

⁷ Clyde Taylor, ed., *Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), 57.

Court Decision, but the incident demonstrated the animosity the powers that be held towards arguments at the intersection of African-American rights and Vietnam. This animosity was also displayed in the reactions to Martin Luther King Jr.'s opposition to the war. Anti-war activists had hoped that bringing King into the movement would sway more moderate mainstream America to their causes.⁸ These hopes were dashed by the newspaper coverage of King's speech. The *New York Times* called the speech at Riverside "Dr. King's error" and said it would be "disastrous" to both civil rights and anti-war movements.⁹ The popular press felt that linking these two complicated issues, both of which struck at the heart of institutional American values, would lead to "deeper confusion."¹⁰

Even when rhetoric integrating the two struggles was not actively opposed, it often failed to inspire. The most direct effort to respond to both racial conflict and the Vietnam War was the National Committee Against War, Racism, and Repression (hereafter: NCAWRR). This broad-ranging coalition, despite its lofty goals, was often belittled as the "coalition against everything."¹¹ NCAWRR's first Mid-West Regional Newsletter in September 1970 listed seven separate rallies to be held before the end of November on topics ranging from supporting the Black Panthers to demonstrating for welfare rights.¹² In contrast, a similar newsletter, also outlining actions for three months, from

⁸ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 130.

⁹ Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 110.

¹⁰ Wells, *The War Within*, 130.

¹¹ Wells, *The War Within*, 461.

¹² "49. Midwest Regional Newsletter of the National Coalition Against War, Racism, and Repression", in *Mutiny Does not Happen Lightly: the Literature of American Resistance to the Vietnam War*, ed. G. Louis Heath (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), 187-189.

the National Peace Action Coalition (hereafter: NPAC), was tightly focused on five, definitively anti-war events.¹³ According to one organizer, this lack of focus “blurred [NCAWRR’s] opposition to the war to some extent.”¹⁴ Even Doug Dowd, an organizer who had previously argued for a more multi-issue campaign, compared the coalition to “a bunch of fucking vultures over a carcass” and said that it “became very, very difficult to move an inch.”¹⁵ Organizations which attempted to respond to both racial conflict and the war were either too radical or too unfocused to gather anything other than opposition.

Moreover, discourse at the intersection of race and war sometimes encouraged support of, instead of opposition to, the Vietnam conflict. This is perhaps the most direct way in which racial tension marginalized or minimized opposition to the war. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (hereafter: NAACP), a preeminent civil rights organization, supported the war for a number of reasons.¹⁶ First, the leadership of NAACP were grateful to the Johnson administration for passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and wanted to maintain his support.¹⁷ On a financial level, many organizations, including NAACP, were worried about “losing significant financial support from civil rights contributors who...[did] not favour popular opposition to American foreign policy.”¹⁸ Indeed, while civil rights organizations that advocated

¹³ “46. National Peace Action Coalition” in *Mutiny Does not Happen Lightly: the Literature of American Resistance to the Vietnam War*, ed. G. Louis Heath (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), 172-173

¹⁴ Wells, *The War Within*, 460.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Glen Ingram, “NAACP Support of the Vietnam War: 1963-1969,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 54-61, Ebscohost.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸ Browne, “The Freedom Movement and the War in Vietnam,” 68.

against the Vietnam War (SNCC, Congress for Racial Equality, and Southern Christian Leadership Coalition, hereafter: CORE and SCLC) collectively lost more than two million dollars in funding from 1964 to 1970, NAACP gained approximately the same amount over the same time span.¹⁹ On a wider level, many young African Americans supported the war effort and enlisted because "African-American involvement in Vietnam was economically beneficial."²⁰ For many African American youth, the Vietnam conflict was "their escape from the ghetto."²¹ Moreover, in the eyes of these African American soldiers, Vietnam, as the first truly integrated war, allowed "the brother[s]" to prove themselves to the rest of society.²²

Beyond encouraging some African-Americans to support the war, racial tension marginalized anti-war activism by inspiring radical rhetoric. The rhetoric of the African American rights movements was becoming increasingly radical as the anti-war movement gained speed in 1965. Major legal gains had been made by the civil rights movement up to that point but the economic and social status of African Americans proved harder to change.²³ This led many prominent black leaders, such as Stokely Carmichael, to argue for a more radical "black power" position in 1966.²⁴ This shift encouraged radicalism especially

¹⁹ Ingram, "NAACP Support of the Vietnam War: 1963-1969," 56.

²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²¹ John Gregory Dunne, "The War that Won't Go Away," (review article), *The New York Review of Books* (September 25, 1986), <http://www.nybooks.com/article/archives/1986/sep/25/the-war-that-wont-go-away/?pagination=false> (accessed 20 October 2011).

²² Ingram, "NAACP Support of the Vietnam War: 1963-1969," 57.

²³ Leon F. Litwack, "Fight the Power!' The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 1 (February 2000): 11, Ebscohost.

²⁴ Kalen M.A. Churcher, "Stokely Carmichael, 'Black Power'," *Voices of Democracy* 4 (2009): 138,

among students such as Carl Davidson, Vice-President of the prominent anti-war organization Students for a Democratic Society (hereafter: SDS) who argued that “while the blacks were doing their thing, we [white students] had to do our thing and that way the two movements could form a revolutionary alliance.”²⁵ The racial origins of radical anti-war rhetoric are also clearly evident in, for instance, Muhammad Ali’s resistance to the draft. Ali used strong, condemning rhetoric against the “racist institution” of the draft, and was “willingly coopted by the black liberation movement.”²⁶ In such radical rhetoric, racially inspired frustration with unjust institutions merged with frustration in the anti-war movement over the seeming endlessness of the Vietnam conflict.

Moreover, radical rhetoric was inspired by the “limitations of non-violence in the civil rights struggle in the South.”²⁷ This swing towards revolutionary rhetoric beginning in 1966 was, according to American historian Tom Wells, “one of the most disastrous things that happened in the movement of the sixties.”²⁸ Many historians have called “radical rhetoric...counterproductive” and argued that this revolutionary rhetoric and the tactics that accompanied it helped to marginalize sections of the anti-war movement.²⁹ While racial tension was

<http://umyvod.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/churcher-carmichael.pdf> (accessed 28 October 2011).

²⁵ Wells, *The War Within*, 95.

²⁶ Ellen W. Gorsevski and Michael L. Butterworth, “Muhammad Ali’s Fighting Words: The Paradox of Violence in Non-violent Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 1 (2011): 57-58, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0335630.2010.536563>.

²⁷ Wells, *The War Within*, 96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Tom Bates, review of *Tell Tale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Anti-War Movement*, by Adam Garfinkle. *Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997), 312, Ebscohost.

not the sole source of radical rhetoric in the 1960s, it certainly played an important role.

Radical rhetoric, in turn, promoted radical tactics, which also alienated large sections of the public. The origins of the more radical non-violent and violent tactics of the anti-war movement are clear if we examine the birth of the anti-Vietnam War movement in general. Americans opposed the Vietnam War for a variety of reasons, many of which sprang directly from the war and had no prior history. Most organizers of anti-war protest, however, were either students with civil rights history such as those in SDS or SNCC, radical pacifists who had earlier opposed nuclear proliferation like A.J. Muse and David Dillinger, or communist or socialist parties such as the Progressive Labour Party. Of these groups, it was those with a history in the civil rights movement that "added a politics of insurgent protest...to the movement."³⁰ SDS and SNCC had learned an "immediate sense of responsibility for institutional evil...[in] urban ghettos" and "rural Southern jails."³¹ Thus, racial tension played a large role in providing the energy of the early anti-war movement, but it also, unfortunately, contributed to the use of insurgent tactics.

The use of insurgent tactics throughout opposition to the war was often, though not always, inspired by the African-American movements, directly and indirectly. In 1967, the events in Oakland, California for national Stop the Draft Week (hereafter: STDW) were one of the first examples of non-violent "mobile guerilla warfare" used by anti-war demonstrators.³²

³⁰ Chalres DeBenedetti, "On the Significance of Citizen Peace Activism: America, 1961-1975," *Peace and Change* 9, no. 2/3 (Summer 1983): 11, Ebscohost.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 135.

Demonstrators attempted to shut down the induction facility in Oakland by using their bodies as physical barriers and, in doing so, were directly attempting to mirror "black street rebellion."³³ SDS organizers suggested that STDW protesters "follow the path blazed by the Black Panthers" as an attempt to "make themselves credible to the black people of Oakland."³⁴ These tactics were ultimately "far more unacceptable than the war in Vietnam" to the American public, once again moving opposition to the war farther from mainstream opinion.³⁵

A similar pattern was repeated later in the war with the May Day actions of 1971 in Washington, D.C. Protesters engaged in widespread non-violent resistance in an attempt to "stop the Government of the United States," in the words of an unnamed protestor.³⁶ The May Day actions were largely supported and organized by NCAWRR, which was itself founded explicitly to "confront the interrelated issues of war, racism...and all other ills within this society."³⁷ Further evidence that these actions were at least partly inspired by racial tensions is the support African-Americans gave to arrested protesters. Some African Americans supplied May Day protestors with food and housing, under the belief that anything that disrupted the functioning of the state was good for African Americans.³⁸ Unfortunately, the support demonstrated by African Americans was not shown by the rest of society. Seventy-one percent of

³³ Wells, *The War Within*, 173.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 174.

³⁵ Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 135.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

³⁷ "48. National Coalition Against War Racism and Repression" in *Mutiny Does not Happen Lightly: the Literature of American Resistance to the Vietnam War*, ed. G. Louis Heath (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), 181.

³⁸ Wells, *The War Within*, 504.

Americans were opposed to the May Day actions and a full seventy-six percent supported the mass arrests that were used to suppress the protests.³⁹ Similar narratives to those given here could be told about the riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968. One of the 8 people eventually charged there with inciting the riot was a member of the Black Panther party.⁴⁰ Efforts to engage with racial tension often brought mainstream opposition.

It is important to note that the support shown to radical protestors by African-Americans in Washington in 1971 was not necessarily the norm throughout the movement. At the 1967 march on the pentagon, where Abbie Hoffman announced that protestors would make the building “rise into the air,” African-Americans held their own rally, not wanting to play “Indian outside the white man’s fort.”⁴¹ Similarly, when students occupied buildings at Columbia University in 1968, African-Americans requested that white students occupy separate buildings.⁴² Moreover, when the police eventually moved in and evicted protestors, the African Americans left the buildings much more peacefully than did their white counterparts.⁴³ Racial tension and racial struggle clearly divided some African-Americans from the main force of the anti-war movement, further fragmenting a movement that was already split by ideological and practical debates.⁴⁴

Racial tension also contributed to the fragmentation of some of the main streams of the anti-war movement, as shown

³⁹ Ibid., 511.

⁴⁰ Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 249.

⁴¹ Wells, *The War Within*, 180; Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 135.

⁴² Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 166.

⁴³ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁴ DeBenedetti, “On the Significance of Citizen Peace Activism: America, 1961-1975,” 9.

by the implosion of the SDS. The 1969 convention of SDS was marked by theatrics and explosive conflict that essentially destroyed one of the leading organizations of student anti-war opposition.⁴⁵ This destruction was inspired, in no small part, by the ongoing African-American movements. An activist named Bernadine Dohrne lead the splintering under an ideology which placed alternatively "the black ghetto community, sometimes only the [Black] Panthers, sometimes the third world as a whole" in the role of vanguard for a revolution, according to a witness to her speech.⁴⁶ This splintering was, in many ways, more about power, control, and refuting alternative Marxist ideologies and less aggressive tactics as much as it was about the racial question. There is no doubt though, that the racial struggle gave Dohrne's group a tool they would not otherwise have had. Dohrne brought representatives from the Black Panthers to the convention to lecture delegates on how moderate factions had deviated from Marxist-Leninist ideology on the National Question," and extensively used the "radical chic" the Panthers possessed at the time.⁴⁷ The explosion at the convention marked the demise of the SDS as one of the leading student anti-war organizations.

And in the grave of the SDS was also laid any hope of a truly powerful multi-issue anti-war movement, killed in no small part by the racial tensions of the 1960s. This, however, was not an intentional murder, but manslaughter. Racial tension and conflict and the multi-faceted African-American movements they created encouraged frustration with the status quo system that fed into the anti-war movement in unforeseeable ways. Because of racial tension, many people had firsthand experience of

⁴⁵ Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 251.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴⁷ Wells, *The War Within*, 304; Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 253.

systematic injustice. This encouraged some influential individuals and groups to lend their support to the anti-war movement, such as SDS and King. However, whenever groups tried to unify the issues of race and war they were either attacked by mainstream opposition or found themselves bogged down in sectarianism and by too diffuse a strategy. Moreover, the systematic struggles faced by African-Americans led many of them to believe the best path to success lay in discouraging opposition to the war. Within that opposition, anti-war activists of all colours, inspired by the African-American movements, turned readily to radical rhetoric and tactics which alienated mainstream Americans. By the end of the war the largest rallies were organized by organizations which entirely avoided the issue of race. NPAC, a socialist labour-based organization which had always advocated strongly for single issuism, held a rally of 500 000 in Washington in 1971, which was perhaps the largest single rally of the war.⁴⁸ The Vietnam Moratorium, the largest protest during the war, involving millions of Americans, was “as American as the stars and stripes” and was planned by a young republican and a moderate democrat.⁴⁹ This is not the complete story of the relationship between race and the anti-war movement, but the variety within that relationship demonstrated the fragmenting effect of racial tension.

One wishes that the African-American movements and the anti-war movement could have united their voices and together helped to forge a better America. But in the end, the statement by the *New York Times* in response to Martin Luther King’s 1967 speech proved to be prophetic: these issues, too complex to solve individually, were far too complex to be solved

⁴⁸ Zaroulis and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 269; Wells, *The War Within*, 329.

together.⁵⁰ The logic joining the African American rights and anti-war movements was opaque to the general population. Attempting to address the racial question often made the anti-war movement more inclined to search for revolution instead of reform, for which mainstream America was not ready. Single issue campaigns, like the early civil rights movement and the late anti-war movement, were those with the most success in reaching the majority of Americans. This is ultimately a lesson for all those who wish to affect change: society rarely reacts well to the tactics and rhetoric of radical revolution.

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⁵⁰ Wells, *The War Within*, 130.

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