

INTRODUCTION

CALIFORNIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR: MICROCOSM AND MAGNIFICATION

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"The Vietnam war stands as the sort of watershed event for American politics, foreign policy, culture, values, and economy in the 1960s that the Civil War was in the 1860s and the Great Depression was in the 1930s."

--Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time For War: The United States and Vietnam*, 1997.

In the mid-1960s, Cherrie Olson had recently graduated from the University of Oregon and was living with three young women friends in San Francisco. "We had more freedom than any women in the U.S. ever had," she remembers. "We had mobility, looks and the pill." Olson was working as a flight attendant ("stewardesses," as they called them then) for World Airways, flying military charters between California and Vietnam. She spent weekends listening to rock groups like the Jefferson Airplane in Golden Gate Park and Crosby, Stills and Nash at the Fillmore Auditorium. She and her friends "passed joints back and forth. The air was blue with smoke. Then Monday, we left for Vietnam, putting people off on the tarmac at Ton Son Nhut air base."

She was in a San Francisco park one day, hearing Timothy Leary and Ram Dass say, "tune in, turn on and drop out," and the next day she was back in Vietnam. "It was instant. We were there, we were back, and then the next night we would watch the war on TV...San Francisco-Berkeley-Vietnam. You lived for the moment...Not many people have a front row seat watching the world change." For Cherrie Olson in the sixties, "the Vietnam War was the fulcrum," and so it was for many, perhaps most of her generation.¹

Wallace Stegner believed that California is an exaggerated version of the American experience – "like the rest of the United States, only more so." This was certainly true during the Vietnam War. Because of the state's location on America's Pacific shore, its concentration of military installations and industrial capacity, and its role in the development of protest politics, counter-cultural activities, and grass roots conservatism, California was especially affected by the war. And events in California, transmitted nightly on the evening news, profoundly affected the rest of the nation. The state's experience was both a microcosm and a magnification of the national experience. Contemporary California, with its diverse population and social complexity, is also an ideal location for an examination of the profound effects of the Vietnam years on American life and culture.

American involvement in Vietnam stretches back to World War II, when the U.S. assisted Ho Chi Minh's guerrilla forces in their struggle against the Japanese occupation. After the war, however, America supported France's attempt to restore colonial authority rather than allow Ho's communist political movement to gain control of the country. When the French were defeated in 1954, the U.S. provided military and economic assistance to the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) as it resisted what was then the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and its allied National Liberation Front (Vietcong). President Kennedy substantially increased American support in the early 1960s, sending in large numbers of military advisors. In 1964 Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing President Johnson to take direct military action. After U.S. aerial bombing failed to strengthen the South Vietnamese position, Johnson ordered regular American ground troops into Vietnam in the spring of 1965. For most Americans, this act marked the beginning of "the Vietnam War."

By 1965 California was the heartland of America's military/industrial complex, leading the nation in defense contracts and supporting an impressive array of military bases across the

state. During World War II, southern California's aircraft industry expanded dramatically, and in the 1950s, buoyed by Cold War defense spending, it evolved into a modern aerospace-manufacturing complex. The industry expanded beyond its southern California base, building new facilities in places like Santa Clara County, where it served as an important foundation for what was to become Silicon Valley. The state's heavy economic dependence on defense spending was supported by a strong public commitment to military readiness, patriotism, and anti-communist politics. After 1965 this easily translated into popular support for military involvement in Vietnam. California's most successful politicians during the Vietnam era, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, cut their political eyeteeth on the passionate anti-communism of the post-World War II era.

Anti-communist politics were also an important part of a new grass-roots conservative movement that emerged in California, particularly Orange County, in the post-war years. By the early sixties, thousands of middle-class men and women were gathering in suburban living rooms and kitchens, planning to overturn the dominant liberalism of Governor Pat Brown and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. The new conservatives were passionately committed to an agenda that included a drastic reduction of government influence in economic and personal matters, an end to "social engineering," and a return to traditional American values. Some activists joined the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade. In 1964 California conservatives strongly supported Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign and the effort to pass Proposition 13, which overturned the state's fair housing law.

Another legacy of World War II was an important collection of military bases that played major roles in the Vietnam conflict. Many of the soldiers serving in Vietnam received their basic training at Fort Ord near Monterey. Marines were trained at Camp Pendleton in southern California, naval personnel at the Navy's large installation in San Diego. Much of the air power used in Vietnam came from the Alameda Naval Air Station on San Francisco Bay and Castle and Beale Air Force bases in the Central Valley. Military supplies and ordinance flowed from the Oakland Naval Supply Center and the Concord Naval Weapons Depot. Many of the ground troops bound for Vietnam shipped out of Travis Air Field in Fairfield or the Oakland Army Base. And most personnel returned to these facilities when their tours of duty ended. For many service men and women from all over the U.S., California was the last mainland stop on the way to Vietnam and the first mainland point of entry on the way home.

At the same time, California was a center of anti-war and counter-cultural activity. This was particularly true for the San Francisco Bay Area, which had a tradition of social activism that preceded the Vietnam War by many decades. In 1960 students from University of California's Berkeley campus protested against a meeting of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) held at San Francisco City Hall. Also in the early sixties, young activists demonstrated against the discriminatory hiring practices of prominent San Francisco businesses, and local Women For Peace chapters campaigned vocally against nuclear weapons. In 1964 the Free Speech Movement exploded on the Berkeley campus. Although the protest initially concentrated on local university issues, by early 1965 Berkeley demonstrators had begun to articulate the broad critique of American society that came to be associated with the student-based New Left. The Berkeley uprising proved to be the first of a series of upheavals affecting campuses all over the U.S. during the late sixties. Opposition to the war was at or near the heart of most of these student movements.

One of the first large-scale protests against the war anywhere in the United States was the Vietnam Day demonstration on the Berkeley campus in May of 1965. For the next five years, periodic anti-war actions occurred in Berkeley, culminating in 1970 in large and often

violent protests against the invasion of Cambodia and the deaths of student demonstrators at Kent State and Jackson State universities. Many other California campuses also experienced large demonstrations during the period, including the University of California Santa Barbara, San Francisco State, Stanford, and University of California Los Angeles. Off-campus protests were common as well. In 1965 East Bay activists attempted to disrupt operations at the Oakland Induction Center and block troop trains by staging sit-ins on the Santa Fe railroad tracks. Anti-war marches clogged California city streets and filled public parks. One of the largest off-campus anti-war demonstrations was the Chicano Moratorium held in Los Angeles in 1970.

The Chicano Moratorium is an example of the interaction between anti-war activity and the evolving ethnic consciousness of the sixties. In the summer of 1965, just a few months after President Johnson sent the first combat troops to Vietnam, the Watts riots swept through south central Los Angeles. It was the first in a series of great race and ethnic uprisings in American cities during the last half of the 1960s and an indication that the focus of the black protest movement was shifting from the rural south to the urban north and west. It also indicated a shift away from the movement's former commitment to non-violence. Finally Watts helped launch an era when assertions of ethnic identity and power became more important to many black leaders than integration into the American mainstream. In 1966 the Black Panther Party was organized in Oakland and the East Bay. Panther leaders spoke out against the war and proclaimed solidarity with "revolutionary movements" around the world. During the early years of the war the Panthers were among the first black leaders to claim that African Americans were serving in disproportionately high number as combat troops and sustaining casualties in Vietnam.

Nineteen sixty-five was also the year of the Delano Strike in the San Joaquin Valley. The strike made César Chávez a national figure and became a rallying point for the new Chicano political movement that came of age in the sixties. Chávez's pacifism and the growing anti-war activism of young Chicano leaders were at odds with traditional Mexican American attitudes toward military service. Like many working class youth, young Mexican Americans accepted membership in the armed forces as a right of passage. As with blacks, Chicanos argued they were over-represented on the combat and casualty rolls. By the time of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium, however, anti-war sentiment had become an important part of *barrio* politics in California. Opposition to the war was also part of the new Native American movement that sparked the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969. The war was a particularly sensitive issue for politically active Asian American youths. One Chinese American veteran remembers being ordered to stand in front of his platoon during basic training at Fort Ord. The drill sergeant told the men, "This is a gook. This is what the enemy looks like."

The anti-war effort also influenced the emerging women's liberation movement of the 1960s. While women activists enthusiastically participated in the mass protests, they sometimes criticized the gratuitous violence of their male colleagues. Women also resented being denied real power within the anti-war movement---too often their proscribed role was to prepare meals and take minutes. Women sometimes reacted by forming separate all-female structures within the larger New Left coalition. By 1969 anti-war demonstrations in San Francisco and Berkeley included significant all-female contingents.

Anti-war activity was closely related to the "counter-culture" movement that blossomed in California in the late sixties. By 1965 alternative lifestyles in the Haight Ashbury were attracting national media attention and influencing people in communities from Greenwich Village to Venice, California. San Francisco bands like the Jefferson Airplane produced an "acid rock" sound that affected much of the music of the era. Southern California's vast entertainment industry communicated "sex, drugs and rock and roll" to a broad audience and

helped integrate at least a crude form of the counter-culture into mainstream culture. The music of the sixties, with its often anti-establishment message and values, was a common experience shared by young troops in Vietnam and young anti-war activists at home.

The counter culture and political protests produced a powerful backlash. In 1968 native son Richard Nixon won California's electoral votes by appealing to the patriotism of what was later called America's "silent majority." Even more important was the emergence of Ronald Reagan as the new conservative movement's most effective national advocate. When he ran for governor in 1966, Reagan won the election by defending patriotism, anti-communism and the military, while condemning hippies and longhaired protesters. He promised, "to clean up the mess in Berkeley," and during his first gubernatorial term, he twice ordered national guardsmen to occupy the U.C. campus and put down mass demonstrations. As a political figure, Reagan was as much a product of California in the sixties as Ron Dellums or Mario Savio. Ultimately Reaganism, rather than New Left radicalism, turned out to be the political wave of the future for California and the nation at large.

For the first three years of the war, conservative politics helped to maintain support for the war effort, but by 1968 the broad public mood was changing. The Tet Offensive of that year was a public relations disaster for American military involvement. Although the North Vietnamese/Vietcong campaign was defeated, it signaled to the American people that the war was unlikely to end in the foreseeable future. Public opinion turned increasingly against the war, and President Johnson shocked and surprised the nation by choosing not to seek reelection. Liberal Democrats affiliated with the California Democratic Council had long since broken with the Johnson administration. Robert Kennedy, campaigning on an anti-war platform, won the state's 1968 Democratic presidential primary, only to be gunned down in Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel by Sirhan Sirhan.

After taking office in 1969, President Richard Nixon sought a negotiated settlement while simultaneously widening the war. However, in 1971, facing an imminent reelection campaign, Nixon changed course, eventually supporting an end to the draft and adhering to a policy of "Vietnamization." Henceforth, the ground war would be fought by the South Vietnamese, with the U.S. supplying logistical and air support and continuing the heavy bombing of the north. Safely reelected but facing inquiries about Watergate, in 1973 Nixon negotiated the final cessation of American military activity and the withdrawal of remaining combat forces. Two years later, the fall of Saigon marked the end of the Republic of Vietnam and American involvement in Vietnamese affairs. The 20-year American effort to prop up a non-communist South Vietnam had come to an ignominious end.

With implementation of "Vietnamization" in 1971, the numbers of American service men and women returning to California began to greatly exceed those leaving for Vietnam. But there were few welcoming parades for the returning troops. Then and now, the country has remained decidedly ambivalent about the war, and veterans have borne a disproportionately heavy share of the nation's burden of frustration and doubt. A small but important minority of veterans has found the burden too heavy to bear and suffer deep psychological and spiritual wounds that have festered rather than healed during the past quarter century. In California, some Vietnam veterans began what became a national movement, protesting against policies of both the federal government and traditional veterans organizations. The protests led to recognition of health problems associated with Agent Orange and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Some of the former anti-war activists have also had difficulty coming back to the American mainstream. This is especially true for those who served prison terms or went into temporary exile abroad. Both veterans and former activists often share a common skepticism of authority and distrust of government. Vietnam produced a "credibility gap" that has never been completely repaired.

The country has also been ambivalent about the arrival of large numbers of Southeast Asian refugees. After the fall of Saigon, the U.S. allowed thousands of former South Vietnamese government officials and military leaders to settle in the United States. Over the next decade, they were followed by even larger numbers of “boat people”, Vietnamese of ethnic Chinese background, and Amerasian children of U.S. servicemen. America also accepted refugees from Laos and the “killing fields” of Cambodia. Although the government attempted to scatter the new refugee populations throughout the country in all 50 states, by the 1990s about half of the estimated one million people of Indo Chinese ancestry in the U.S. were living in California. Today the largest concentrations of Vietnamese outside Southeast Asia are in Orange County and Silicon Valley. The largest populations of Hmong outside the highlands of Laos and Thailand are in the central San Joaquin Valley. In the impact of refugee immigration as in so many other aspects of the Vietnam War, California was again like the rest of the nation, only very much more so.

Much of what Americans remember about the Vietnam era is based on the influence of media images. No war before or since has been so thoroughly documented by visual media—photography, cinematography and, above all, television. TV brought images of the war’s blood and guts into American living rooms and extensively covered the anti-war demonstrations, ethnic activism and counter-culture activity. Television also served as an effective platform for a new generation of media-savvy politicians, most notably Ronald Reagan. Popular movies have also provided dramatic images of the period. Hollywood’s contradictory interpretations of the war—from the flag-waving patriotism of *The Green Berets*, to the anti-war populism of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, to the melodramatic fantasies of *Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*—mirror the public’s confusion about the meaning and purpose of the Vietnam conflict. And of course like so much else about the Vietnam era in America, most these movies were produced in California.

In 1975 Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said that Americans needed “to put Vietnam behind us and concentrate on the problems of the future.” That has proved far easier said than done. Former World Airways flight attendant Cherrie Olson is among the millions of Americans who were profoundly affected by a visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. Standing in front of the memorial and remembering the young men she had accompanied back and forth across the Pacific, Olson realized that “I had stuffed my feelings inside. There were tears like you wouldn’t believe. I’m still digesting it.” Like Cherrie Olson, the nation still needs to digest the Vietnam War, not to reopen old wounds or argue old positions, but to come to terms with an important era in American history and understand its impact on contemporary American society and culture.

This can only occur through a process of sustained public inquiry, education and discussion. And there is no better place to start this process than in California, where the history and legacy of the Vietnam War remain larger than life, still another example of the state’s exaggerated version of the American national experience.

1. San Francisco Chronicle, May 23, 1999.