The Civil Rights and Vietnam War Protest Movements

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter traces activism in the US centering around the civil rights and Vietnam War-protest movements from the 1950s into the 1970s. It describes the development of these activities on the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts and the turmoil and excitement they generated there.

Keywords: civil rights, Vietnam War, Amherst campus, activism, protests

Economics, as has been said, is an academic discipline whose cultivation is informed by a wide range of socially relevant questions. Its practitioners have imaginatively addressed the problems and policies that stem from concern for human betterment—both in the small, as with investigations of individual and market behaviors, and on the broader canvas of economy-wide considerations of employment, price stability, and growth. These same concerns have come to expression in the Economics Department on the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts in terms of a diversity of
analytical paradigms, each with its own emphasis and social significance, which have contributed a catholicity of scholarship to the University community.

Of course, the parentage of the diversity that is here in view can be understood only against the background of social, political, and cultural developments in the United States at large. For this reason it is necessary to delve into some aspects of U.S. history, particularly those pertaining to certain movements of protest and agitation for social, economic, and political change. These movements, it turns out, had important implications for conditions and developments at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, their influence extended in various ways to the staffing and nature of academic programs in its Economics Department. Present considerations begin with what became a most prominent instance in the long struggle against the general and extensive discriminatory practices of white America directed toward the country's black community. Efforts by various groups and individuals to end racial discrimination and secure equality in a variety of forms for American blacks go back a long way. Although black people were in principle as free and equal as whites as a consequence of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution adopted between 1865 and 1870, in actual fact that precept did not apply or was ignored in many situations. Laws were enacted and practices developed that effectively segregated blacks from white communities. Among other things, they were denied voting rights, equal access to public accommodations, equal rights in courts, and equality of opportunity in education, housing, and securing work. Over time, a few organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, were formed to address and redress such incursions on black freedom and equality. In the early years, these groups were nonconfrontational and did not openly challenge the white power structure. They devoted their attention to legal action, to boycotts against businesses that would not employ black people, and to helping the black community adjust to various living conditions in a variety of places. However, by the 1940s, the feeling became widespread that such efforts, by themselves, would not end racial discrimination and that it would be necessary to confront the white community in a more direct way. The Congress of Racial Equality, organized in 1942,
began to stage sit-ins in restaurants and stand-ins in swimming pools where blacks were not permitted to go. What is commonly referred to as the civil rights movement is the considerably more extensive and intensified activity during the 1950s and 1960s that was pointed toward breaking the chains of segregation and bringing equal voting, educational, housing, and economic opportunities to black people.

The tide began to turn in May of 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled that compulsory segregation in public schools was in violation of the equal protection to all citizens guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. In the following year it ordered that integration of those schools be carried out “with all deliberate speed.” However, given the numerous road blocks already placed in the path of desegregation, all deliberate speed turned out to be painfully slow. Integration of public schools and universities required considerable litigation, involved substantial violence, and often necessitated the use of federal marshals and occasionally federal troops.

The civil rights movement itself was galvanized in December of 1955 when, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, was arrested for not giving up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. That arrest was immediately followed by a successful boycott, under the leadership of The Reverend Martin Luther King, of the bus company on whose bus the arrest was made. The success of that boycott led to the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, also led by King, and to a mass movement in which King played a major role, to breach the barriers of segregation and racial discrimination everywhere and especially in the South.

King's tactics were to create a crisis through nonviolent civil disobedience that would directly confront the individuals and institutions who would stand in the way. His methods were similar to those of Mahatma Gandhi who had, some years earlier, been involved in the struggle for the independence of India from Great Britain. King understood that the white community respected established law and the individual rights it protected. His aim was to appeal to white citizens’ conscience and sense of justice, and to convince them of the unfairness perpetrated by racial discrimination against the black community without alienating them from his cause. In this he was quite successful. With the aid of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which he helped to
organize, young whites journeyed from northern states to the South to join in sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, pray-ins at segregated churches, wade-ins at segregated beaches, marches, demonstrations, and other forms of protest. They and their southern compatriots, black and some white, endured verbal and physical abuse without yielding to the desire to retaliate in any form. Their deportment and the publicity that came with it generated widespread sympathy and expanded their numbers. Other student groups, such as the Students for a Democratic Society formed in Chicago in 1960, entered the fray. Gradually, the American public became convinced of the moral imperative and legal legitimacy of efforts to end the racial discrimination against black persons. Large demonstrations protesting that discrimination were organized around the country. In August of 1963, more than 250,000 people from all over the United States, white and black, gathered in front of the Lincoln memorial in Washington, D.C., to hear King passionately intone, “I have a dream that . . . one day . . . [in America, individuals] will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Congress responded to the building pressure. A southern filibuster was broken and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed making racial discrimination in the use of most public facilities illegal. Shortly thereafter, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 eliminated certain voter tests and poll taxes, and empowered federal examiners to register voters in specific cases. Black America seemed to have achieved a good measure of the equality it sought.

But there was still a long way to go, and at this point, violence and disarray began to overtake the civil rights movement. Riots occurred in black sections of Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, and elsewhere. Stokely Carmichael, who had become chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, advocated retaliatory violence as a legitimate means to end racial discrimination, and a considerable number of blacks and whites responded by withdrawing from the organization. As the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other black groups assumed a more militant posture, many black communities began to turn inward, emphasizing self-determination and self-respect. Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The drive to eliminate racial discrimination continued in fragmented form, its intensity
significantly diminished by disunity. And there was now a new moral crisis that demanded the attention of many of those who had so fervently pushed for black civil rights—the Vietnam War.

The origins of the Vietnam War reside in events that took place some years earlier. At the end of World War II, the defeated Japanese left Indochina and were immediately replaced by the French who returned as colonial administrators. However, by 1946 France found itself in war against Communist insurgents who had proclaimed an independent Vietnamese government the previous year. Maintaining its control over the region, the French granted nominal sovereignty to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Nevertheless the war continued, with considerable support for France coming from the United States. But in spite of U.S. help, the French did not do well. The agreement that ended the war in 1954 after France had suffered many military defeats provided that the French would abandon the area. With respect to Vietnam, it was agreed, among other things, that the country would be temporarily divided into North and South, and that elections would be held in two years to select a government for a unified nation. After France withdrew her troops, the Communists quickly consolidated their hold on North Vietnam and the former French-controlled, anti-Communist government in South Vietnam was supported by the United States. Official U.S. policy for the region at that time was based on the so-called domino theory that held that, were South Vietnam to fall to the Communists, the remaining countries in the area would, like a collapsing sequence of standing dominos, succumb as well. Fearing that the Communists would win, the South Vietnamese government, with the backing of the United States, blocked the national election that was to be held in 1956. The possibility of reuniting the country by election had now been eliminated, and the Communist insurgents in the South who had previously fought the French became active again. Supported by the North, terrorist actions in the South were begun in 1957 and this is often said to be the start of the Vietnam War.

By 1964, regular army units from North Vietnam had joined the Communist insurgents in the South. In an attempt to build a strong South Vietnamese army, the United States had already provided money and military equipment, ammunitions, and advisers. But the result was a corrupt and generally inept fighting force and, as a result, large portions of South Vietnam
had fallen under Communist control. On two separate days in August of 1964, attacks by North Vietnam on American ships patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin prompted President Lyndon B. Johnson to order the bombing of North Vietnamese naval installations. Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin assaults to secure passage of a Congressional resolution giving him the authority to repel attacks on U.S. forces (p.53) and prevent further aggression in Vietnam. Although Johnson took this resolution as the legal basis for an undeclared war against the North, some question arose about whether the administration had misrepresented what had happened in the Gulf, and the resolution was repealed in 1970.

The American commitment of troops to the Vietnam War rose substantially after the Tonkin Gulf incidents and the Congressional resolution of 1964. Regular bombing of North Vietnam by U.S. aircraft began in 1965. The guerrilla nature of the war changed when the North and southern Communist insurgents began to challenge South Vietnamese and American troops in relatively large, open battles. Hostilities spread to Cambodia and Laos in 1970 as the United States attempted to interrupt the flow of North Vietnamese supplies of men and ammunition through those countries to operations in the South. Militarily, the war turned into a stalemate with both sides experiencing defeats and victories. In one of the more significant events, the North Vietnamese and southern insurgents' Tet offensive in January of 1968, although eventually defeated by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, was a serious psychological set-back for Americans. A peace accord was signed in Paris in January of 1973 that provided for a cease-fire, a temporary continuation of the division between North and South, the withdrawal of all U.S. military forces, and an end to the American bombing of North Vietnam. But after the departure of U.S. troops, the fighting between North and South continued until the Southern capital city, Saigon, fell to the Communists in April of 1975.

The cost of the war was immense. Almost 58,000 Americans lost their lives and over 300,000 were wounded. The South Vietnamese military casualties numbered approximately 220,000 and 500,000, respectively. The Communists' losses were estimated at 440,000 and the number of wounded is unknown. These figures do not include (p.54) the hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. The economies of both North and South were shattered, and about half of South
Vietnam’s population had become refugees in their own country. The official dollar cost of the war to the United States amounted to $165 billion.

The effect of the Vietnam War on American society was profound. Many clergy, educators, and businessmen had disapproved of the U.S. involvement early on. With the media regularly and vividly bringing the enormous devastation and carnage from the war into American homes, with the seemingly endless stream of dead soldiers returning to the country for burial, and with the psychological impact of the Tet offensive, the unpopularity of the war spread. Much of the opposition to it coalesced behind the candidacy of Senator Eugene J. McCarthy in his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. Although McCarthy was unable to secure the nomination for himself, he was so successful that President Johnson felt his leadership had been repudiated and decided not to run for a second term of office. At that time, a majority of the American public still did not favor disengagement from Vietnam; but by 1971, it did.

Of all American groups opposing U.S. involvement in Vietnam, none was more passionate than the country’s youth. Many had participated in or witnessed the struggle for black civil rights and, as a result of the strong hostility that struggle had aroused, had begun to lose faith in America’s compassion for justice and its capitalist economic system. And they were now faced with massive death and destruction that in their view could not be vindicated in any rational or moral way. In their minds, American society had to be changed. The impact on their emerging radicalization and polarization was considerable and their opposition to the war intense. The young were a major driving force in McCarthy’s presidential bid. Ten (p.55) thousand of them demonstrated their opposition to the war (and provoked a violent police response) at the Democratic presidential-nominating convention in Chicago in August of 1968 and generally dominated the war-protest movement. Groups like the Students for a Democratic Society changed their focus from the civil rights to antiwar action. They encouraged resistance to the armed forces draft that was in place at the time, and they organized numerous demonstrations. In the spring of 1970, largely in response to the widening of the Vietnam War to Cambodia, almost all college campuses experienced disruption from student antiwar activity. Four students were fatally shot and ten wounded by
the Ohio National Guard unit that had been deployed to quell a demonstration at Kent State University. Two more were killed and twelve wounded by police ten days later at Jackson State College in Mississippi. Perhaps because it was so dramatic and the violence it produced so horrifying, this sort of opposition drew the greatest attention and, in addition to the factors cited above, played a significant role in shifting American public opinion against the war. Not surprisingly, such protest activity against the war continued until the signing of the peace accord in 1973.

Although, as noted in Chapter 2, student confrontational activity at the University of Massachusetts dates to the first class that entered Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1867, collective student action on the Amherst campus as of the mid 1960s, including civil rights and Vietnam War protests, lagged well behind those at other colleges and universities, both in frequency and in intensity. By the start of 1967, restrictions on deportment that had severely limited student behavior in general had been dismantled on many campuses across the country in response to student demonstrations against them. The rioting in black inner cities and the repudiation of nonviolent action by some black civil rights leaders mentioned earlier had begun, as a matter of course, to impact the protest activities and demands of black students. Confrontational action in opposition to the Vietnam War, to campus recruitment by companies supplying materiel for the war effort, to the military draft, and to the presence of Reserve Officer Training Corps units on campuses had become commonplace. But at the University of Massachusetts, things were still relatively quiet.

The year 1967 saw the beginnings of significant collective student action on the Amherst campus. The main focus of attention was an effort to eliminate the deportment restrictions imposed on students by the administration. There were many discussions among various groups at all levels and some progress was made. But student activities in this regard did not cause any serious disruptions in the operations of the University.

The first significant student demonstration at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst during this period occurred in February, 1968. It started as a protest against Dow Chemical Company, the primary producer of napalm for use by the
United States in the Vietnam War effort, which was attempting to recruit new employees on campus. Very quickly, however, the focus of the protest shifted to the restrictions still in place on student deportment. The students wanted greater input over policies and procedures that affected them directly. They demanded a dialogue with the administration on such matters and, in particular, a more open housing policy. But there was still moderation and little militancy. The students desired change within the system. They were not yet prone to aggressive and highly confrontational tactics. After the demonstration, which succeeded in venting and publicizing their demands, student activity continued to push in three main areas: (1) dropping academic credit for taking Reserve Officer Training Corps courses, (2) freedom and autonomy in choosing housing, and (3) on various racial issues, such as the admission of more black students, the hiring of more black professors, a greater emphasis on black culture, and a building that would be a center for black people on campus.

As black confrontational tactics and forceful opposition to the Vietnam War heated up elsewhere, militancy finally spilled over onto the Amherst branch of the University of Massachusetts. In February of 1969, thirty-three students protesting once again the presence of Dow Chemical recruiters on campus were arrested by State police for refusing to leave the Whitmore administration building. The following March, a small group of students prevented Senator Strom Thurmond, one of the main symbols of resistance to the redressing of racial discrimination, from speaking at the University. Although large numbers of people were unhappy with the use of the state police and the abrogation of free speech, these events paled in significance when compared to the violence at other colleges and universities around the country. There were still protest actions at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst that remained nonviolent and peaceful, including a large antiwar demonstration in October of that year. It is also interesting that during 1969, campus-housing policies were considerably liberalized by the board of trustees, and the faculty senate voted to discontinue academic credit for all Reserve Officer Training Corps courses that were not taught by official University personnel—thus meeting, at least in part, two of the students’ major demands.
As was true at campuses around the country, the number, size, and intensity of student protests at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst exploded during the Spring of 1970 with the expansion (p.58) of the Vietnam War into Cambodia. There was heated opposition to dormitory rent increases triggered by state cuts to the University’s budget, and demands for a greater role in certain University decision processes and for faster administrative action on the creation of a Black Studies department (which the administration had already agreed in 1968 to establish). Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey was “tried” on campus for not attempting to prevent the police brutality toward Vietnam-War protesters at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and, like Senator Thurmond before him, was prevented from speaking to a University audience. There was a demonstration against recruitment by another company, Honeywell, which had supplied materiel to the Vietnam War effort. And large numbers of students participated in the local University contribution to a massive nationwide, multicampus strike against the War. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst had caught up to the rest of the country insofar as the frequency and intensity of student protest activity were concerned. However, in all of these later protests on the Amherst campus, both faculty and administrators became deeply involved in channeling student anger into peaceful outlets and in working out compromises.4 No one, not even the students, wanted a repeat of the extreme confrontations and arrests of 1969. (p.59)

It is clear that student civil rights and Vietnam War protests on the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts up to 1970 did not achieve the level of militancy and violence at other colleges and universities across the United States. Three reasons have been given for this moderation:
First, the culture [of protest action] at . . . [the University of Massachusetts at Amherst] remained years behind other schools, and it was only in the late nineteen-sixties that the University began to experience large-scale demonstrations. Although activity at the University echoed the changes that were occurring on other college campuses, . . . [University of Massachusetts] students were never [in] the vanguard of [that] change [and were therefore less prone to militancy and violence]. Secondly, students never faced a reactionary or repressive administration of the sort that often turned many students toward radicalism [and extreme militancy] at other campuses. Lastly, the faculty were supportive of student concerns and rights, and gave student activists a guiding presence to help their movements reach constructive and positive ends.\(^5\)

At any rate, by 1970 student protest activity had come abreast with that on other campuses around the country and remained apace well into the next decade. The faculty and administration continued their efforts to keep matters under control by supporting and accommodating student demands as far as they could.

The environment on the Amherst campus between 1969 and 1973, from the perspective of a faculty member involved in the protest movement, has been described by Michael H. Best, then in the University's Economics Department, as follows:

It is hard to capture the extraordinary mood and character of the times at the University of Massachusetts. It was tumultuous and exciting. The place was hopping like never before and, I would guess, never again. It was a great place to be in those years. I do not think any other campus in the Northeast was as active and it drew the best and the brightest in the anti-war movement. It was the only place that could hold a Union of Radical Political Economy conference and fill the largest lecture hall on campus. This is what made it attractive to me, someone from the woods of Montana. It was an easy entry into the world of education in places I had never dreamed of attending or experiencing. Moreover, it was as much an intellectual movement as a political movement. There was an intellectual excitement
which cut across departments and campuses. We were reading, writing, lecturing, and seminaring in an atmosphere of intellectual vitality and openness that is not often present.\(^6\)

Of course, not everyone viewed the protest movement so positively.

Notes:

(1.) Except as otherwise noted, this chapter is dependent on “Vietnam War” from v. 23 of *Colliers Encyclopedia* (1997) and the following entries from the 1999 edition of *Encyclopedia Americana*: “Civil Disobedience” and “Civil Rights Movement” (v. 6), “Students for a Democratic Society” (v. 25), and “Vietnam War” (v. 28).

(2.) This and the next five paragraphs are heavily dependent on T. J. Martin, “Student Movements at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the Late Nineteen Sixties,” University of Massachusetts Honors Project, February, 2004.

(3.) In addition to heckling, at one point a student took the microphone from him.

(4.) For example, in response to a physical assault on black students by members of a white fraternity at the end of February in 1970, blacks took over Mills dormitory, the first floor of which had come to be known as a place for them to meet. The white students living there were forced out. Shortly thereafter, the chancellor of the University, Oswald Tippe, while asking the governor to delay state intervention and give the University time to work something out, convinced the black students that the state would not tolerate the takeover and that they had to leave. Upon their departure, the white residents were found another place to live and the administration agreed, in jumping ahead of preliminary discussions on the matter, to turn Mills dormitory into a black cultural center. See *Oswald Tippe and the Early Promise of the University of Massachusetts*, compiled and edited by I. Seidman (Amherst: Friends of the University of Massachusetts Library, 2002), pp. 70–72.

(5.) T. J. Martin, “Student Movements at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the Late Nineteen Sixties,”
University of Massachusetts Honors Project, February, 2004,
Abstract.

(6.) Edited from e-mail correspondence dated March 13, 2008.
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