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Ethan James

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**An Examination of the Impact of Certain Factors on University Protests Against the
Vietnam War**

Ethan James

Chris Crews

International Studies

Denison University Summer Scholars

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Abstract

Within this project, I endeavored to understand how certain factors affected the Anti-Vietnam War movement on college campuses. For a majority of my research I placed my primary focus on socioeconomic factors such as religion, sexual orientation, and economic class. As I continued to parse through the literature surrounding the topic, I began to see other trends that informed the style and intensity of protests. Particularly, the relationship between the counterculture movement and the more politically minded protesters; as well as, the intersection of self interest and a person's willingness to protest. I then concluded with an examination of how these trends I observed nationally applied to Denison's history with the war. My primary research method was consulting primary and secondary sources on the topic which I used to outline trends. An understanding of how these factors affected these war protests is vital to contextualizing protests happening now and in the future. While I was able to look at several different elements, there are still more that I was unable to fully examine during my research.

Campus movements against the Vietnam War were multifaceted and informed by several different factors. The perspectives from which the anti-war protests were viewed, acted upon, and received from were all vital in understanding this movement. My goal in my research was to understand the factors that influenced how students understood the Vietnam War, what influenced their protests, and what influenced the reception of those protests. Within my research, I have explored numerous campus organizations to understand the perspectives that shaped the protests. I examined how the culture of blue collar communities informed their responses to protests. To understand the lenses through which the war was understood, I analyzed the impacts of queer politics, religion, and self interest. To conclude, I compared my findings to historical accounts from Denison.

To properly understand how the Anti-Vietnam War movement grew on college campuses, we must first understand the historical factors that led to this resurgence of the peace movement. The period of the 1950s can easily be characterized as one defined by fear. Whether that be over the fear of Communism's corrupting influence over Eastern Europe, Asia, and the US; or the terror of the atomic bomb beginning to “sink into public consciousness” (DeBenedetti 1990, 10). Through a use of “political influence, economic assistance, and covert action” the US battled the Soviet Union and China for the ideological control of other nations (12). One such country was Vietnam, a former colony of France, that was undergoing a Communist revolution led by Ho Chi Minh. It was this proxy war that would eventually grow into the Vietnam War. While this was foreign policy for the US, not all of its citizens were pleased by this. A faction known as the radical pacifists disputed this goal in favor of deconstructing “all military preparations” and the “decentralization and democratization of global power and resources” (DeBenedetti 1990, 22).

This movement eventually would lead into the student groups key to the anti-Vietnam War protests.

Large universities in particular were hotbeds of “young activists” working for the “antinuclear testing movement” (DeBenedetti 1990, 40). These students were early versions of groups that would later come to oppose the Vietnam War. These groups “disparaged the existing social order and felt intensely that these times demanded action” (40). The current political and economic system was failing these students, and soon their dissatisfaction would only grow and begin to manifest.

To really understand how certain groups interacted with campus protests, an overview of campus cultures is necessary. One of, if not the most influential campus organizations at this time was the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). This organization was characterized by its University of Nebraska chapter founder as “one contingent of a revolutionary movement” (qtd in Lieberman 2004, 44). Professor of Anthropology Jane Adams argued that the efficacy of SDS was due to its clear throughline of leftists thinking. The Vietnam “war was a product of the system, and that system is corporate liberalism” (qtd in Lieberman 2004, 75). During the beginning of the Vietnam War, SDS was not “exclusively a peace organization;” however, it was still opposed to the war as a tool of corporate imperialism (DeBenedetti 1990, 58). This intersection of self interest at promoting their overall cause and opposition to the war is something we will return to in a later section. Despite the prominence of SDS, it would not be right to categorize them as widely well liked. They were frequently very hostile to people of other political leanings like “doves and libertarians,” “the Catholic church,” and local communities, especially if they were more rural (Heineman 1993, 155). With that list of enemies it is unsurprising to learn that many demonstrations had “residents beat the protesters, after

which the police arrested SDSers” (160). With different campuses utilizing different forms of protest there was almost always a form of violent backlash whether the anti-war crowd was holding a peaceful teach-in or firebombing buildings (145).

Even on campus, the anti-war movement had many enemies. The most obvious of these were the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). YAF often took steps to counter protest the anti-war movement as they “did not believe that the concept of academic freedom extended to arbitrarily defined Communists” (Heineman 1993, 148). Additionally at Michigan State the YAF branch worked with a local fraternity to gather thousands of signatures for a “petition supporting Johnson's Vietnam policy” (133).

This is not the only time that the anti-war movement faced opposition from Greek life. Adams from earlier outlined how organizers against the draft would get “beat up at night by the jocks, by the frat rats” (qtd in Lieberman 2004, 71). Both of these groups present common threads of more conservative and institutionally entrenched organizations on campus providing organized opposition to anti-war protesters.

This conflict between SDS anti-war protesters and the YAF was not simply composed of isolated incidents, but rather it even impacted how people were socialized within their majors. Majors that fall within the social sciences or the humanities are particularly beneficial for creating a framing of the world focussed on social change. This idea will be further contextualized later, but it is pertinent to the current discussion as majors surrounding business or the sciences are “not fields that tend to contribute to activism” (Altbach and Cohen 1990, 34). This trend was particularly noticeable when we compare state schools in more rural areas to the big name schools that are seen as stand out examples of Vietnam War protesters.

A key example of this phenomenon is Penn State. Its departments on “military-related research helped the school grow” and it utilized the Cold War as an “opportunity to build its science programs” (Heineman 2018, 8). This desire to grow and expand rose from the fact that Penn was located in a fairly rural and culturally conservative area at the time this work with the military began. Even in 1967 “34 percent of entering Penn State students” classified their parents as unskilled laborers (Heineman 1993, 81). Economic conditions created an environment where these students were incentivized to enter majors that were considered to be more economically advantageous, as this was their main way of advancing themselves and their families. This caused a large portion of Penn State students to be “clustered in the less politically progressive fields of business and the sciences” (Heineman 2018, 11).

This trend of students who attend college out of economic necessity being socialized to take a more conservative position on the war can be expanded to a national scale. When we look at schools such as Michigan State, Kent, or Penn they all are culturally conservative and blue collar. This leads to a trend we saw with Penn where the students attending these universities are less likely to originate from well off families who often send their children to college as simply tradition. That forces these students to work in majors that are less conducive to social reexamination. This creates trends where the typical protest at these universities consists of “teach-ins, peace petitions...and low-key picketing” (Heineman 1993, 129). Whereas the schools more commonly associated with the anti-war movement like Berkeley, had students from “upper middle and upper class” families (130). The affluent backgrounds gave them a virtual immunity from “serious criminal prosecution and university discipline” allowing for far more militant and violent forms of protest while state school students “struggled to build a popular, nonviolent peace movement” (130). The students of Berkeley or Columbia were able to “participate in

violent protests” while their less well to do counterparts had to champion “educational forums and non violent protests,” to the detriment to their national recognition (183). This is made even clearer through the 1969 Columbia student revolt in which the students can be seen taking and holding some of the major buildings on campus. However, even with the limiting of these smaller schools' abilities to protest at a large scale, they still were rarely received well by their local communities.

There appears to be a trend within the culture of blue collar, rural communities that makes them predisposed to hostility towards anti-war protesting. Scholarly research into the conservative trends of these communities has historically found that a “negative reaction produced in response to change” in the social order is a prevalent trend (Roll 2020, 24). This cultural motif presents obvious conflict with anti-war protestors, but these disagreements go even deeper. These communities are characterized as possessing heavy traits of “anti-Communism and anti-Semitism” (293). This, again, presents another superficial reason why these communities would have so much conflict with SDS as they had a large makeup of “culturally displaced Jews” (Heineman 1993, 138). Additionally, as stated earlier, SDS and the more vocal branch of the anti-war movement as a whole had anarchist and Communist roots that were in ideological conflict with these communities.

Moving from easy ideological conflicts, there are also aspects of blue collar culture that worked in opposition to protest movements. The first of which was the importance placed on “respect for authority” (Ransford 1972, 334). The student protest movement worked against this respected authority on two different levels. The first was the disregard for school authority. Students saw their institutions as complicit in an unjust war, they acted against their wishes and rules. The second was a lack of respect for the government. This protesting against government

action, in the eyes of these blue collar communities, was an unpatriotic and anti-American movement. Additionally the culture of blue collar life tended to “emphasize attributes of individuals rather than attributes of abstract systems” (334). Due to this, these communities were primed to focus on the acts of individuals rather than looking towards societal factors and ills. Consequently, this demographic was more likely to focus on students they perceived as privileged acting out in rebellious ways than hearing the message lambasting the US system. This perception runs counter to the way former Denison philosophy professor Ronald Santoni characterizes college as a nexus of “exploration and criticism of ideas” (Santoni 1965). This propensity for defending the system would obviously put these blue collar families in conflict with protestors who, at best, want radical change or at worst a complete dismantling of the system.

This allegiance to the present structure of society did not spring up for no reason. At the time, the primary reason working class families even attempted to send their children to college was to “advance in the social structure” and attain a better economic status (Ransford 1972, 335). This endeavor often came with a hefty amount of sacrifice on the part of the parents, and this sacrifice led to one of the main reasons that blue collar communities had so much hostility toward campus protests: they hurt their chances at advancing economically. When you have more outspoken and radical protests like the Columbia student revolt, events that threaten to shut down the school, these families see it as an attack on their ability to move up in the world. It is viewed as the children of the wealthy who don’t really need to go to college ruining the system for their children. This layer of self interest will be explored as a factor in protests further in a later section, and is one of the key reasons blue collar workers opposed these protests. Despite the hostilities between SDS and the working class, they did actually have some alliances. There

were accounts of Kent State Radicals being arrested at a “Socialist Workers’ party function” (Heineman 1993, 118). SDS actually made efforts to work with labor organizations. One such instance involved SDSer Gerry Gross urging SUNY Buffalo members to speak with the local community as there was a “large antiwar sentiment among the workers in these areas” (qtd in Heineman 1993, 163). While there was this attempt at appealing to the long history of radicalism in the working class, it was almost entirely unsuccessful. This could be due to a variety of factors but is often attributed to SDS’s support for the Vietcong. There were many social constructs that these communities wanted to preserve but were deconstructed by members of the anti-war movement. In addition to capitalism, “the dominant mode of aggressive masculinity” was also beginning to be questioned by protests (Roll 2020, 25).

Historian Justin Suran has argued that “identity-based solidarities” were key to forming some of the most important action groups against the Vietnam War (qtd in Wills 2023). He argues draft forms had questions regarding the mens’ sexualities that forced some young men to understand they possessed “a homosexual identity” (qtd in Wills 2023). The recognition of this identity was key for radicalizing these young men and pushing them against the war.

Additionally, these men were forced to grapple with the potential of being placed on FBI lists if they answered yes. This manner of radicalization was especially prevalent at SUNY Buffalo’s Tolstoy College, named for the notable “anarchist and antiwar” writer (Wilson 2019, 1355). This university was a hotbed for teaching a variety of leftist courses, most notably their gay studies department. This college was primarily focussed on dissecting the commonly held ideas of masculinity in society. During the anti Vietnam War era there was a particular importance on the relationship between “masculine ideals with and the need of the armed services” to find more recruits (1360). The new lens of queer dissection was important for university student’s

understanding of the manner in which the US military utilized societal expectations of strong men to feed into the war machine. This discovery was hastened by the erosion of what historian Robert Self calls “the ideal of the American fighting hero” (qtd in Ireland 2008). As the war dragged on and the death toll for the American forces increased this image of a glorious and righteous war began to conform with reality less and less.

However, this change was not widely recognised or accepted outside of these academic spaces, particularly in the blue collar areas previously discussed. The initial reason was that these areas were less likely to support queer interpretations of the war and society as they were “more likely to have homophobic beliefs” (Bailey et al. 2022, 219). This new understanding of the war was unlikely to resonate with this audience since they didn’t even accept queer people, let alone queer societal analysis. We can still see these divides today since homophobic language in the schools of these communities is designed to break down “students’ masculinity” (219). From this information a few things can be interpreted. The first is that this trend was likely still present at the time of the Vietnam War, if not worse, since it was before queer identities were more accepted in society or the military. The second is that we can assume that these communities placed a great importance on masculinity, as the lack of it is an insult. This means that, when corroborated with the resentment towards social change mentioned earlier, these communities would be highly resistant to this opposition to the war derived from a deconstruction of masculinity. This queer interpretation was very useful at radicalizing those in college or other queer people, but it did not have the same effect in blue collar communities.

Another lens that was important for deconstructing the war was religion. Organizations such as the University Christian Movement (UCM) acted as a “religious-left alternative” to SDS (Heineman 1993, 87). Religion as a whole was extremely important in redefining the way

already religious students understood the Vietnam War. Following the new developments at Vatican II, the “role of nonreligious men and women in education” was given far more emphasis (De Angelis 2017, 3). The calling of the second Vatican Council is extremely important in Catholicism as it is the second time all Bishops were called to Vatican City to modernize the understanding of Catholic Theology. This event allowed for Catholic students to begin turning to professors in addition to clergy for advice on the Vietnam War. This allowed for student understandings of the war to grow and for them to develop a more anti-war stance. However, Vatican II led to an even greater condemnation of the war from Pope Paul VI himself. He concluded that any war that allowed for the wholesale destruction of cities was “a crime against God and man himself” (4).

The new doctrine established at Vatican II allowed for greater arguments in favor of conscientious objection. James McFaadden was a Catholic who developed anti-war sentiments at the University of San Francisco, and became further radicalized after being introduced to the “pacifist tradition” (Ciernick 2008, 39). Once he was drafted, he argued for conscientious objection based on his “moral obligation as a Catholic Christian” (43). This argumentation was unique as he was not arguing as a blanket pacifist, rather that this war specifically violated his sense of right. Additionally, it was extremely important to the development of the anti-war movement as it further provided support for a concern that was common “among his contemporaries” (50). McFadden was ultimately unsuccessful in a legal sense as he was found guilty, but he did not serve jail time or even gain a criminal record. More importantly, this development gave greater theological backing to an anti-war position, and was able to push even more American Catholics against the war. This new position of anti-war analysis allowed for greater action to be taken.

However this theological reasoning did not resonate with everyone, such as when SUNY Buffalo students utilized a Unitarian church as a “symbolic sanctuary” from the draft (Heineman 1993, 210). This event, and the backlash associated with it, illustrated the divide between “liberal Protestant leaders and more conservative churchgoers” (Mislin 2018). This dissonance added another layer of disconnect between the local communities and the college students. Despite being aligned in faith, political differences drove the groups to be further polarized. This became yet another example of the left going too far pushing some protestants to further align with the conservative politics of evangelical churches.

Another form of backlash these religious groups saw was from SDS itself. Despite both being leftist organizations, SDS was far more militant and politically minded. This caused them to carry out “purges” against people who weren’t “sufficiently committed to revolution” (Heineman 1993, 190). Religious movements were seen as politically lacking at best and counter revolutionary at worst. They saw religious movements focussed on “spiritual purity” rather than “persons and institutions in power” (Kent 2001, 151).

This was not the only facet of the anti-war movement that SDS had conflicts with, but benefited from. Another ideological enemy and ally was the counterculture movement. Despite the link between the two, these groups actually featured a great deal of conflict. Psychedelic proponent counterculture figure Timothy Leary “scorned direct political action and insisted instead on the need for a revolution of consciousness” (qtd in Kent 2001, 16). This hippie movement, in conjunction with the growing prominence of Eastern religions and psychedelic drugs, shifted focus from tackling societal issues to changing one's inner self. Changing themselves was thought to be the key towards eventually advancing society as a whole. This message and worldview did not work with SDS point of view in the slightest. They saw these

hippies as “doctrinally rigid, and millennially self-absorbed” (151). A philosophy of abstinence from the system pushed the hippies ideologically away from SDS, who were very focussed on taking action. The people immersed in new religions and psychedelics “placed their critical thinking aside” and, from the radical point of view, took the easy way out (186). Rather than attempting to change society for the better, the hippies chose to “drop out” of society.

Despite their ideological drifts, SDS and other counterculture factions were not always enemies. Early in the anti-war movement there was an attempt to “solidify public identification of antiwar activism with hippie counterculture” (DeBenedetti 1990, 161). The combination of cultural association with political thought was intended to create a much more powerful movement. A movement that would be able to alter America's culture and its political structure. However, some protestors such as Jack Newfield believed it to be “more possible to change private reality with LSD than America’s reality with SDS (qtd in DeBenedetti 1990, 189). In an attempt to further their own goals, SDS actually lost members to the allure of hippie life.

SDS’s actions are far from the first time that they acted in the anti-war movement out of self interest. The lens of self interest is actually present in many of the actions taken on and around campuses during the Vietnam War. As alluded to earlier, the backlash against protests done on campuses by blue collar communities was done partly out of self interest. They didn’t want these students harming the institutions that they saw as one of the only ways they would be able to economically advance their children. There are also numerous instances of anti-war protesters blending their protests with other issues. Student body president of Kansas University during the Vietnam Protests Bill Ebert recounted the debate over the “proper investment of time and energy” in local issues versus the war (qtd in Lieberman 2004, 148). Campuses were divided on how to spend their resources and if the war was even enough of a concern to actually delegate

part of the student government towards protesting. This can be seen happening in SDS especially when they became even more unpopular, consequently they “advocated popular actions” (Heineman 1990, 201). These included policy changes within the university to increase student rights, such as rolling back curfew hours or taking less strict stances on visiting other dorms. However, for SDS, these protests were not solely about their outcome. These protests were initially about getting other students comfortable with the “idea of protest” (154). Once more and more students were willing to protest, SDS advocating for local issues was more often used as a technique to regain some support from the student body. This can often be at universities where SDS was particularly militant such as Columbia. In their student protests, Columbia students were demanding an end to the war, but also to prevent a new gymnasium from being built.

The idea of students protesting partially out of self interest is something that can be seen many times throughout this period, especially following the Kent State shooting. But before getting into Kent there was a more broad reason that protests were able to be so prevalent at the time, and it was economics. During the Vietnam War era there was comparatively less economic insecurity than following decades which would make “the ‘cost’ of demonstrating seemed to go up” (Chen 2015). The financial risks present during Vietnam were not as great as later decades, and this allowed for people to protest more than they would’ve been able to in later decades.

Specifically with the 1970 Kent State Shootings, this incident created what a university strike organizer called “a sense of vulnerability and crisis” within students (qtd in Early 2024). This was one of the earliest times that murders done by state troops at a college was widely broadcasted. Students were able to see others in their same standing be gunned down, forcing them to wrestle with the idea that it could have easily been them. Fears such as these spurred these students into acting against the war. Importantly, they primarily took more restrained

approaches such as “petitioning, and electoral campaigning rather than further direct action” (Early 2024). It is notable that these new protesters did not take the extreme, dangerous, and direct action like SDS members before them. I believe that this is due to, for lack of a better phrase, a less intense commitment than SDS members. Rather than being spurred on by a deeply held belief these new protesters acted at least partially out of fear and self interest. That fear is reflected in the fact that they were less willing to take part in the more dangerous actions carried out by SDS.

There have been several societal and economic aspects that influenced behavior during the Vietnam War discussed, and one way to better understand these is by examining how they were present here at Denison. Looking back to a moratorium followed by students canvassing Granville, we see the same hostility mentioned earlier as a student had their hand crushed “in a door slammed by a hawkish householder” (MacGregor 1969). As this article from 1969 later notes, the homes of faculty members in Granville were really the only places where students were not met with open hostility from the local community. Additionally, organizing senior Bob Steuk advised his fellow students to wear “‘straight’ clothing” (qtd in MacGregor 1969). This was likely done to avoid further hostilities brought on by open queerness at the time.

Looking into the perspective of the citizens of Granville there was an apparent hostility towards the protesters. An article in the *Newark Advocate* by a Granville resident was supposedly “shocked at [the students’] inability to express themselves intelligently” (Jadwisiak 1970). The article continued to lambast the students Communist views and criticize their every action. An article from 1965 shares this same sentiment as the author and continuously refers to protesting students’ actions as “disgraceful” (Spencer 1965).

Local communities in Granville were not the only source of hostility faced by the protesters. On one of their marches they encountered a four legged foe. The Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity placed their dog, Charlie, in the path of the protesters with a sign jokingly condemning all other protest marches (Wheeler). This is yet another example of internal conflict that was expanded upon near the beginning with SDS. Even here, the fraternities and the anti-war protesters had a somewhat hostile relationship. However, the situation Denison leftists had with more conservative students was slightly more nuanced than other schools. An article in the *Denisonian* outlining the conservative perspective says that when the US enters a war it should “win the stupid thing” (Thompson 1972). At once, this article condemns the war but does not argue against the US going to war in general. Overall this article provides a largely libertarian perspective, which is in line with other libertarians. As mentioned earlier, SDS was very strict as to who was let into their anti-war movement and this list did not include libertarians for their political beliefs. This article provides a small example of this phenomenon as it criticizes the left but takes a similar position on Vietnam.

Continuing with the manifestation of national trends, Denison protests also drew on religious ideas. In 1965 an Easter Peace Walk was held by students backed by “religious and humanitarian principles” (Easter Peace Walk Committee 1965). This is yet another example of religious communities working in conjunction with students to promote a single cause. The walk was drawing on theological concepts of redemption and healing from past mistakes, similar to what Jesus’s resurrection did for original sin. It was no coincidence that this walk took place during Easter.

The final national trend that can be seen in the Denison community is the element of self interest. Returning to the moratorium from earlier, there was a considerable number of students

who used this event as “a good excuse to cut classes” (MacGregor 1969). While technically participating in a form of protest, these students were really using the protest as something to benefit themselves. This is a far more blatant example than students using protests to further student rights, but ultimately they come from the same place. The more interesting example comes from a Granville resident who refused to send anti-war telegrams to the president as the students urged out of fear that the government would “take [his] social security away” (MacGregor 1969). There were similar fears coming from a mother who thought if she sent a telegram her son would be drafted sooner. These examples add a new layer of analysis in the self interest lens. These residents are acting similar to the blue collar communities who opposed the protests out of fear that their children wouldn’t be able to go to college. In favor of the war or not, these families were not willing to support the students out of fear of the consequences that could befall their own families.

Within Denison’s history we have seen examples of the factors I set out to understand. Student groups on campuses such as SDS or UCM were immensely important for the organizing of protests and understanding the culture of the anti-war movement. Blue collar communities provided pushback against this movement for a variety of reasons, despite the history of radicalism in the working class. Queer studies were important for reframing how young queer people understood the war in relation to their own identities. Religion was key for strengthening moral arguments against the war. Self interest was an influential motivator for certain protesters, especially in the wake of the Kent State shooting. These influences all acted upon each other to shape the understanding, actions, and reception of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

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