

## Anti-War Movements, From Vietnam to Today



*2007 protest against the Iraq War*

### Reading One: The Legacy of the Vietnam Anti-War Movement

2018 marked the 50th anniversary of the fiercest and most deadly year of the Vietnam War. 1968 was also the height of the anti-war movement in the United States. That year, protests erupted nationwide and anti-war sentiment spilled over into the country's broader culture. The 1960s are often remembered as a time of social and political upheaval. But despite this general awareness of the protests of that era, few people know very much about how the anti-war movement mobilized large numbers of people and changed the trajectory of U.S. politics.

The Vietnam anti-war movement of the 1960s and 70s unfolded in several distinct stages. Stephen Zunes, a Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, and Jess Laird, a conflict resolution educator, [summarized](#) the movement in a 2010 article for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict:

The first major protests began in 1964 and quickly gained strength as the war escalated. Starting at the University of Michigan, “teach-ins” on the Vietnam War modeled after seminars

raising consciousness in support of the Civil Rights Movement, brought in thousands of participants. In addition to national protests, which attracted tens of thousands to Washington, DC, there were acts of civil disobedience that became more widespread over time, including sit-ins on the steps of the Pentagon, draft induction centers, and railroad tracks transporting troops, as well as the public burning of draft cards.

Opposition increased in tandem with the escalation of the war, as body counts escalated, reports of atrocities against civilians circulated, draft calls increased, and prospects of a U.S. victory dissipated....

The news media began to become more skeptical in its war coverage and mainstream churches and unions began to speak out more boldly. Blockades of thoroughfares and other forms of nonviolent direct action became increasingly common. These pressures forced the Johnson administration to begin peace talks with the North Vietnamese and NLF and to suspend the bombing of North Vietnam....

The anti-war movement did force the United States to sign a peace treaty, withdraw its remaining forces, and end the draft in early 1973.

[\[https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/the-us-anti-vietnam-war-movement-1964-1973/\]](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/the-us-anti-vietnam-war-movement-1964-1973/)

Throughout a decade of organizing, anti-war activists used a variety of tactics to shift public opinion and ultimately alter the actions of political leaders. By August 1968, a Gallup poll found that 53 percent of Americans believed it was a mistake to send troops to Vietnam.

Nevertheless, the war continued for many years after this shift in public opinion. Both President Johnson and President Nixon were convinced they could continue to wage war if they downplayed the impact of the movement by ignoring political protest. In one famous incident in November 1969, President Nixon publicly announced that he was watching college football on TV while marchers fought with police outside the White House. Maneuvers such as these led some people to believe that protest was ineffective.

Yet organizing continued. In a February 12, 2017, article for the *Guardian*, journalist Clara Bingham describes the increased anti-war agitation, some of which turned violent:

The numbers are staggering: 29 student protesters were killed by police, guardsmen, and vigilantes; eight Americans took their lives by self-immolation; 84 anti-war bombings and arson attacks occurred in the first six months of 1969; the largest ever protest (at that time) in American history saw 500,000 march in Washington in November 1969.

Four million high school and college students went on strike in May 1970, shutting down more than 800 educational institutions in response to the invasion of Cambodia; 12,614 people were

arrested in a peace demonstration in Washington in 1971; 400,000 enlisted military personnel deserted; the U.S. government imprisoned 3,250 draft resisters.

[\[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/12/hell-no-review-tom-hayden-vietnam-protests-trump-resistance\]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/12/hell-no-review-tom-hayden-vietnam-protests-trump-resistance)

Although some observers faulted the movement for failing to bring a quick end to the war, Bingham notes that anti-war organizing led to other important changes in public policy. She writes: “Though the war dragged on, the movement opposing it unseated two presidents, ended the draft, dropped the voting age from 21 to 18 and convinced Congress both to pass the War Powers Act in 1973 and to halt funding for the war in 1974.”

In an October 24, 2017 article for *The New York Times*, Bill Zimmerman, a leader in the movement, [notes](#) that a massive lobbying campaign finally convinced Congress to stop funding the war in 1974:

As each of several congressional appropriations for South Vietnam came up, the coalition successfully whittled it down. Over the next two years, the South Vietnamese military ran out of fuel and ammunition and was forced to retreat. The Saigon regime, never supported by more than a small minority of its own people, finally collapsed on April 30, 1975.

Graham Martin, the last American ambassador in Saigon, called our lobbying campaign “one of the best propaganda and pressure organizations the world has ever seen.” No doubt this was self-serving hyperbole to cover his own failure to counter us, but he was right in a way: The... antiwar movement had mobilized enough people to force Congress to finally end the war.

Across a decade of activism, we were often a tactical mess, but our leadership was strategically coherent and relentlessly determined. On the other hand, the war was always a much bigger mess, and it never benefited from strategic coherence. In the end, it was the war that was lost and the peace that was won.

[\[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/opinion/vietnam-antiwar-movement.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=opinion\]](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/opinion/vietnam-antiwar-movement.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=opinion)

The anti-war movement also gave rise to other kinds of organizing that continue today. Together with the Black power, women’s rights, and environmental movements that burgeoned at the same time, the anti-war movement activated a generation of young people, many of whom went on to build lasting organizations aimed at achieving progressive social change. Many of these organizations continue today to work for racial and economic justice, women’s rights, workers’ power, quality education and healthcare for all, a healthy and sustainable environment, and an end to war.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what factors helped grow the Vietnam anti-war movement?
3. Although the majority believed that the Vietnam War was a mistake as early as August 1968, the war dragged on well into the 1970s. How did the movement respond to this development?
4. In what ways can it be argued that the Vietnam anti-war movement was successful? In what ways was it unsuccessful? What do you think are some factors that contributed to its accomplishments and limitations?
5. One factor that fueled the unpopularity of the war in Vietnam was the draft, through which young men were involuntarily forced to serve in the military. In large part because of anti-war opposition, Congress discontinued the draft in 1973. How do you think the end of the draft might have affected anti-war movements in subsequent decades?

## Reading Two: Anti-War Movements Today

In the years since the 1960s, new waves of anti-war activism have periodically arisen to protest U.S. military intervention abroad. However, anti-war protest today seems less dramatic and visible than in past decades. Among other places where U.S. forces are currently active, our country is engaged in a war in Afghanistan that has been ongoing since 2001. Yet despite continued military involvements, there has been little prominent anti-war activity in the U.S. over the past ten years.

This raises the question: “What has happened to the anti-war movement?”

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, on U.S. soil, American military forces invaded Afghanistan. President George W. Bush argued that the Taliban, the government of Afghanistan at the time, was harboring terrorists responsible for the September 11 attacks, and that it should therefore be overthrown. However, anti-war activists argued that the invasion would be counterproductive and would only increase the prestige of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Crowds of thousands marched in Washington, DC, New York, and other cities opposing the invasion.

Anti-war organizing escalated considerably in late 2002 and early 2003, when the Bush administration mobilized to invade Iraq. The administration claimed that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction” and that he should be unseated as part of the larger “War on Terror.” Anti-war activists contended that not only did Hussein have no connection to the 9/11 attacks, but that an invasion would spread chaos in the region, embolden religious extremists, and ultimately fail to make us safer.

As the administration nonetheless continued its push for an invasion, a multinational movement intensified its efforts to stop the war before it started. This organizing culminated in mass marches on February 15, 2003, which became the largest day of coordinated international protest in world history. In a 2017 article for the progressive Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) Phyllis Bennis, director of the Internationalism Project at IPS, [described](#) the protests that took place:

In almost 800 cities across the globe, protesters filled the streets of capital cities and tiny villages, following the sun from Australia and New Zealand and the small Pacific islands, through the snowy steppes of North Asia and down across the South Asian peninsula, across Europe and down to the southern edge of Africa, then jumping the pond first to Latin America and then finally, last of all, to the United States.

And across the globe, the call came in scores of languages, “the world says no to war!” The cry “Not in Our Name” echoed from millions of voices. The Guinness Book of World Records said between 12 and 14 million people came out that day, the largest protest in the history of the world. It was, as the great British labor and peace activist and former MP Tony Benn described it to the million Londoners in the streets that day, “the first global demonstration, and its first cause is to prevent a war against Iraq.” What a concept — a global protest against a war that had not yet begun — the goal, to try to stop it.

[\[https://ips-dc.org/february\\_15\\_2003\\_the\\_day\\_the\\_world\\_said\\_no\\_to\\_war/\]](https://ips-dc.org/february_15_2003_the_day_the_world_said_no_to_war/)

Yet, despite broad opposition to the invasion, on March 23, 2003, the U.S. invaded Iraq. In the wake of the invasion, anti-war organizing continued, with further mass marches taking place on the anniversaries of the invasion and in the runup to the 2004 election. As Iraq spiraled into civil war that same year, the U.S. occupation became more unpopular and more Americans began to see the war as a failure. A 2005 analysis of public opinion polls during the Vietnam and Iraq Wars by Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll at Gallup News Service [concluded](#) that,

“Although public support for both the Vietnam and the Iraq wars was strong as each conflict began... opposition to the latter has escalated much more quickly. Within a year and three months of the Iraq war's inception, a majority of Americans said it was a mistake. It wasn't until over three years after the inception of the Vietnam War that a majority called it a mistake.”

[\[https://news.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx\]](https://news.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx)

By 2004, protest increasingly shifted into the electoral arena. In that year's election cycle, a number of Democratic politicians ran on anti-war platforms, including presidential candidate John Kerry, who had initially supported the war. Kerry came within a very narrow margin of defeating incumbent President George W. Bush. Two years later, in 2006, 57 percent of voters [opposed](#) the war and their opposition helped enable Democrats to take control of the House of Representatives away from Republicans. Then, in 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama made his consistent opposition to the Iraq War an important part of his successful campaign for the White House.

Although the Iraq war once enjoyed strong bipartisan support, today prominent figures in both major parties—including President Trump—have characterized the invasion as a disastrous mistake.

As president, Obama steadily decreased U.S. troop levels in Iraq and on December 11, 2011, withdrew U.S. troops involved in combat missions, declaring the war to be over. At the same time, the president temporarily increased troop levels in Afghanistan and maintained U.S. involvement in the conflict there throughout his time in office. The Obama administration also [deployed](#) U.S. military force in Syria, Libya, and other conflict zones around the world.

Perhaps because Obama was perceived to be an anti-war leader, few large protests coalesced against his military policies, and anti-war activism in general lacked public visibility. However, the conflicts continued.

Today, while the death tolls for U.S. troops are lower than they were in the early days of the Iraq War, and dramatically lower than they were in the Vietnam War, the U.S. military is still active in conflicts around the globe. On July 24, 2017, Medea Benjamin, an organizer with the anti-militarism group Code Pink, [wrote](#) a piece for HuffPost discussing how the Obama administration's use of drones to carry out its military policies helped to decrease the amount of public attention given to U.S. interventions abroad:

President Obama did achieve a few critical wins for diplomacy, but he invaded Libya, and he also championed a dangerous, new kind of remote controlled killing: drone warfare.

Drones were designed as a way to kill enemies with great precision without putting American troops at risk. But they kill many innocent people—and they stir up anti-American sentiment that fuels an endless cycle of violence.

Drones allowed the U.S. military and CIA to intervene militarily with ease, even in places where we were not at war. These institutions operated secretly, without Congressional approval, and they lied to the public about the accuracy and effectiveness of drone strikes. We were appalled when a 2012 poll revealed that a whopping 83% of Americans supported the killing of “terrorist suspects” with drones.

[\[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-global-movement-to-confront-drone-warfare\\_us\\_59761e4b0545a5c310217\]](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-global-movement-to-confront-drone-warfare_us_59761e4b0545a5c310217)

In addition to drones, other factors have dampened efforts to create a more visible anti-war movement. In a April 15, 2011 article, Linton Weeks, a history reporter with National Public Radio, [quoted](#) a professor of conflict resolution who explained some of these factors:

"I think a couple of things happened to the anti-war movement in the U.S.," says Celia Cook-Huffman, professor of conflict resolution at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa. "First, we did see it, alive and well, prior to the Iraq war. It had become an international movement that pulled together people from all over the world to try to stop the U.S."

But in recent years, she says, organizing a war protest has become more difficult. "The lack of a draft means that fewer people feel coerced into fighting," Cook-Huffman says, and "there is less a sense generally that people are being coerced to participate — even though in economic terms this may not be true. But I think it changes how people feel about soldiers and war."....

And, she adds, many Americans no longer feel the impact of the wars being fought. News from the frontlines is more tightly controlled by military officials than in the past. "The army has gotten much smarter about how it frames the story and filters information," she says, "so that the stories that outrage and require a moral response are harder to find."

[\[https://www.npr.org/2011/04/15/135391188/whatever-happened-to-the-anti-war-movement\]](https://www.npr.org/2011/04/15/135391188/whatever-happened-to-the-anti-war-movement)

Yet the harm caused by U.S.-led wars around the world is enormous, and not just for U.S. soldiers. Hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alone. These conflicts are also extremely costly. A study by Brown University's [Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs](#) estimated that the U.S. has spent [\\$5.6 trillion](#) on its "war on terror" — a number that includes not just U.S. spending on its operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, but also counterterrorism on American soil, and future obligations to care for wounded or traumatized post-9/11 military veterans.

According to the [National Priorities Project](#), military spending made up 54 percent of the federal discretionary budget in 2018. In an article for the [Nation](#), Watson Institute co-director Stephanie Savell argues that "the rise in war-related military expenditures entails losses for other areas of federal funding. Pick your issue: crumbling bridges, racial justice, housing, health care, education, climate change—and it's all being affected by how much this country spends on war."



**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Some observers have argued that the movement against the Iraq War failed because it did not stop the war from happening, while others believe the movement could nevertheless claim some important later successes. What do you think? What are some arguments for its success or failure?
3. Why do you think anti-war activism might be less visible now than in the past?
4. Why do you think there is so little discussion about the human and economic cost of war? What impact do you think the U.S.'s enormous war budget has on your community and your family, if any?
5. Do you believe large anti-war movements might reappear in the future? What do you think it would take for public sentiment against military intervention to reach levels seen during the height of the Vietnam or Iraq War?