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Abstract

Far too often, student protest movements and organizations of the 1960s and 1970s are treated as monolithic in their ideologies, goals, and membership. This paper dives into the many divides within groups like Students for a Democratic Society and Young Americans for Freedom during their heyday in the Vietnam War Era. Based on original primary source research on the “Radical Pamphlets Collection” in Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College, this study shows how these various student activist groups both overcame these differences and were torn apart by them. The paper concludes with a discussion about what made the Vietnam War Era the prime time for student activism and what factors have prevented mass student protest since then.

Keywords

Vietnam War, Activism, College History, protests, Youth organizations, political history

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By Jeffrey L. Lauck



Introduction

On the evening of Tuesday, May 5, 1970, roughly 125 students from Gettysburg College marched over a mile from Christ Chapel to the Eternal Peace Light Memorial as part of a memorial service for the previous day's victims of the Kent State Massacre. Their march followed a day-long demonstration on Stine Lake, where members of the Gettysburg community listened to music and heard speeches from college faculty, staff, and students denouncing the escalation of the War in Vietnam.¹ Gettysburg College students were not alone in their vocal opposition to the Vietnam War; nor was the Kent State Massacre the only event that sparked outrage among college students. Throughout the Vietnam War era, college students mobilized as part of groups and as individuals to demonstrate their views on the war. However, college activists were not a homogenous group. Often, anti-war groups were collections of loosely related sub-movements that agreed on little more than their opposition to the war. Nor did all students or student organizations universally oppose the war, either. The college activists who organized during the Vietnam War era represented a wide spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and views regarding the War and the world around them. This diversity

¹ "Senate Sanctions Strike; Faculty Cancels Classes," *The Gettysburgian*, May 8, 1970; "Strike-1," MS 036, Box 24, Folder 24-4, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

within groups and movements inevitably led to divisions that ultimately undermined the success of student activists' agendas and threatened the stability of student activist groups.

Historians tend to look at the phenomenon of college activism during the 1960s as “the movement.” Mike O’Donnell dissects “the movement” into two parts: the “New Left,” or the political groups that emerged during the era, and the “counterculture,” a radical and ‘alternative’ lifestyle adopted by many college youths.² The two developed together into the movement that we typically think of when we look at college campuses around the nation in the 1960s. However, this paper will focus mostly on the “New Left” political groups, as well as the “New Right” student groups that developed in reaction to “the movement.”

College campuses in the 1960s and early 1970s were the perfect breeding ground for the birth of widespread political activism. In 1960, there were roughly 5 million university students in the United States. This number was greater than ever before in American history and was larger than many small nations at the time. As a result, the college age demographic had great potential to effect change just as a result of its size in numbers. The higher education system also allowed well-educated students to be dispersed around the country and gather together to discuss the issues that affected them directly and issues that had broader domestic and even international repercussions. Workers before them had used factories as a natural organizing venue – students used college campuses.³

² Mike O’Donnell, “Nineteen Sixties Radicalism in the United States: Its Rise, Decline, and Legacy,” in Mike O’Donnell and Bryan Jones, *Sixties Radicalism and Social Movement Activism: Retreat or Resurgence?* (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 91.

³ *Ibid.*, 94.

Student activism was also not new in the 1960s. Students that graduated in the 1950s had already begun this tradition of activism with sit-ins to challenge racial inequality in the previous decade.⁴ Even before the 20th century, college students were engaging in counter-establishment activities. In the early 19th century, students at Harvard blew up a building on campus. At Princeton, students started a revolt by firing pistols and proceeded to take over administration buildings and terrorize villagers. At the University of North Carolina, students stoned professors and horsewhipped their president to protest school policies.⁵ College students in the 1960s were building on an already well-established legacy of activism. However, student activism in the Vietnam War Era was remarkably distinct from its predecessors in its nonviolence and global outlook. By the 1960s, students began challenging the paternalistic nature of college campuses, asserting their own political voice while demanding a normalized freedom of speech and expression that was not within social norms a decade earlier.

While not all protesters belonged to formal organizations, two prevalent groups were founded in the 1960s that served to facilitate activism. Students for a Democratic Society and Young Americans for Freedom were arguably the two most influential youth organizations to come out of the 1960s. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was founded in 1960, before the United States had even formally sent troops into Vietnam. The organization was originally part of the Student League for Industrial Democracy, but some members, led by Al Haber, believed the parent organization had a far too narrow focus and

⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁵ Penny A. Pasque and Juanita Gamez Vargas, "Performances of Student Activism: Sound, Silence, Gender, and Dis/ability," *New Directions for Higher Education* 167 (Fall 2014), 59.

broke away to focus on the broader topic of civil rights.⁶ However SDS, with Haber as its first President, would never quite fully divorce itself from its pro-worker beginnings. Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) evolved out of support for the loyalty oath included as part of President Eisenhower's National Defense Education Act. Students and university administrators across the country immediately opposed the loyalty oath that was required of student applicants for federal education loans, but students David Franke and Doug Caddy organized a conference to support the oath and answer Barry Goldwater's call for conservative youths to organize. In September of 1960, the pair met with over 100 other young conservatives at the Sharon, Connecticut estate of William F. Buckley. The meeting, which would come to be known as the Sharon Conference, resulted in the creation of Young Americans for Freedom.⁷ Though these groups occupied opposite ends of the political spectrum, neither could be considered a monolith. Indeed, internal politics affected the messages of each group and threatened their stability throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.

Students for a Democratic Society

By 1970, the Vietnam War—and certain students' opposition to it—was in full swing. A June 1970 publication by Students for a Democratic Society titled "Vietnam: No Mistake! How the U.S. Got Involved; Why the U.S. Should Get Out Now!" seems to summarize the organization's main goals and messages. These different messages can be equated to the different factions that developed within the organization. Throughout the document, appeals to each of these messages/factions are made in an attempt to rally them behind SDS and the anti-war movement. Five major

⁶ Rebecca Hatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-21.

factions become apparent: any-business, anti-military, anti-politician, anti-sexism, and anti-racism.

Anti-Business

Perhaps the strongest message embedded in the SDS document is an anti-business, pro-worker one. The writers frame the Vietnam War as an attack on U.S. workers, citing that real wages have fallen since the war began while taxes used to fund the conflict take up as much as a third of wages.⁸ The document also states that “only a movement unified against the big business rulers can succeed in fighting them and their imperialist wars.”⁹ Allies in this fight were not to be politicians or businessmen, but rather the “masses of working people in this country.”¹⁰ One effort to cement this cooperation between the SDS members and workers was the Campus Worker-Student Alliance (CWSA). This effort, underway in over 30 SDS chapters nationwide in 1970, encouraged SDS members to work at jobs on campus alongside nonstudent workers. The goal was both to “face the same exploitation and harassment they [nonstudent workers] face, and take part first-hand in the same daily struggle against the administrative bosses” as well as to evaluate their own prejudices towards the working class that “the U.S. education system has drummed into us.”¹¹ Clearly, SDS never quite lost its pro-worker roots in the Student League for Industrial Democracy.

The CWSA resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship between students and nonstudent campus workers. At Yale, students fought hard to reinstate a black female cafeteria worker who had been fired after standing up to racism and sexism in the workplace. At Wayne State University in Detroit, the janitors and

⁸ “Vietnam: No Mistake! How the U.S. Got Involved; Why the U.S. Should Get Out Now!” MS 036, Box 19, Folder 19-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

matrons union voted unanimously to prohibit military recruiters from visiting campus.¹² An April 1970 flyer from the University of Chicago chapter of SDS called on its members to oppose the layoff of 40 predominately black janitors and support the matrons union in its fight for a higher wage. The flyer went on to claim that “the University has always fought and will always fight this effort to build an alliance between workers and students.” SDS members at the University of Chicago then planned a rally in support of campus workers scheduled for April 9th outside the Administrative Building.¹³

While efforts to advocate for working class Americans through the Campus Worker-Student Alliance reveal the influence of the pro-worker, anti-business faction within SDS, they also demonstrate an effort to win over public opinion in the fight against the war. As Penny Lewis notes in *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory*, we remember the war dividing the country into groups of doves and hawks. Doves were usually seen as upper-middle class youths (the stereotypical college student), while hawks were seen as “ordinary Americans: white people from Middle America who supported God, country, and ‘our boys in the ‘Nam.’”¹⁴ Working class Americans—“hardhats”—were the stereotypical hawks. The AFL-CIO, the largest labor union at the time, was very vocal in its support for the war and its opposition to communism. However, as Lewis notes, working class opposition to the war was more significant than is often noted.¹⁵ Much of the classist rhetoric of the Vietnam Era, painting the liberal student movements as those of a privileged and naïve upper class, helped create the illusion of a

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³ “No More Attacks on Campus Workers!,” MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

¹⁴ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

schism between the movement and the working class.¹⁶ However, it appears that the pro-worker, anti-business wing of the Students for a Democratic Society was cognizant of this artificial divide and worked hard to counteract it. By working with the working class, members of SDS helped to garner their support in opposing the War in Vietnam. Perhaps more importantly, they also gained a better understanding of their own reasons for opposing the war. Ultimately, the efforts helped SDS create a coalition of pro-worker and anti-war forces.

Anti-Military

Students for a Democratic Society also featured a determinably anti-military wing that opposed many military-oriented institutions on college campuses. According to one SDS publication, “On campus after campus, anti-war students have led actions against ROTC, recruiters, and trustees with ‘defense’ interests.”¹⁷ In addition to opposing ROTC and recruiters, SDS students also opposed foreign policy institutes that contributed to the American war effort. The students saw these on-campus activities as the closest, most tangible connections they had to the war effort. Consequently, on-campus military programs were seen as the easiest and most obvious targets of their movement.

At Harvard University, thousands of students organized a “militant abolish ROTC campaign” that led to the faculty agreeing to phase out Army ROTC by the end of 1970 and Air Force and Navy ROTC by the end of 1971. Across the nation, anti-ROTC student movements were seeing results. National enrollment in ROTC programs dropped by 25% between 1969 and 1970 and dropped by 40% between 1966 and 1970. At a time when campus ROTC programs produced roughly 85% of junior officers in the military, this added up to a very significant reduction in the war

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ “Vietnam: No Mistake!,” 27-28.

effort.¹⁸ Anti-war student protests combined with a growing public uneasiness toward the war to contribute to these reductions.

Even if college campuses did not have an active ROTC program or accept classified military research grants, they were not necessarily immune to scrutiny from their students regarding institutional support for the war. Amid a student strike at the University of Chicago in 1970, the “Right On Training Center” (mockingly abbreviated ROTC) sponsored research into other ways in which the school might have been helping the United States wage war in Vietnam. The group found that the University, which claimed to be “clean” of any war involvement, had actually contributed to weapons research. Professors who had previously served in or advised the military came under fire from the group. One professor in particular, Morris Janowitz, the chair of the Sociology Department, was condemned for writing a book, *The Professional Soldier*, that was used to train U.S. officers and his ongoing work with the Pentagon.¹⁹ Professor Janowitz responded to these criticisms, saying that all research at the University of Chicago was done voluntarily by professors and students and that nobody was forced to do any war effort research against their will. He added that “I do not serve the military as a consultant because of my longstanding opposition to American military operations in Indochina.”²⁰ Opposition to the war was clearly very strong at the University of Chicago if it warranted the investigation of faculty members’ professional histories to expose subliminal connections between the college and the military.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41-42.

¹⁹ Leonard Radinsky and Jo-Ann Greenberg, “Military Research Does Exist on Campus,” *The Maroon*, June 5, 1970, MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

²⁰ Morris Janowitz, “Sociologist Responds to Charges of Military Complicity by ROTC Group,” *The Maroon*, June 5, 1970, MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

While the organization was determinably anti-military, it was not anti-soldier. In fact, SDS celebrated the efforts of GIs who fought against the military “brass,” often literally. Citing a GI prison riot against bad food and living conditions in February of 1970, the SDS magazine was not coy in its support for open revolt of the soldiers themselves against the military hierarchy.²¹ The students’ support for grunts and disdain for the brass suggests they may have identified closely with the enlisted men, who were often roughly the same age as the students themselves.

Anti-Politician

While Students for a Democratic Society clearly wished to change the policies of the American government, they were not willing to join forces with any particular politician. Much of their rhetoric reveals a very anti-establishment view of politicians, even liberal politicians. SDS criticized “scores of various liberal misleaders” who “jumped on the anti-war bandwagon.” However, liberal politicians should not have taken that as a personal affront; Republicans, too, were guilty of anti-war bandwagoning. “This is not the first movement to be misled by political opportunists. Eisenhower was elected in promises to pull out of Korea, and there are still 50,000 U.S. troops there engaged in combat,” one SDS pamphlet wrote.²² The group had a point. Many politicians were critical of the war, yet the conflict continued into the 1970s.²³ Even George McGovern, the outspoken critic of the Vietnam War and Democratic nominee for president in 1972, was not spared attacks. One flyer called him the “Thousand Percent Candidate,” ridiculing him for being “one thousand percent” for and against some of his major campaign items. “McGovern is losing the debate with

²¹ “Vietnam: No Mistake!,” 37.

²² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

²³ Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks*, 11.

himself,” the flyer proclaimed.²⁴ While part of the anti-war message, the organization’s anti-politician rhetoric shows the influence of anti-establishment members over others who might favor working with Washington insiders to end the war.

Anti-Sexism

Students for a Democratic Society even managed to draw connections between feminism and opposition to the war. While seemingly only marginally related to the Vietnam War, SDS made the case that the fight against sexism was crucial to ending the war in Vietnam. One publication from the group claimed that U.S. imperialism and male chauvinism exploited women abroad. “The only Vietnamese women you ever read about in the U.S. press are prostitutes, who are always castigated for supposedly giving VD to American GIs.”²⁵ This SDS publication points out that popular media representations of Vietnamese women were determinably sexist and mirrored the stigma surrounding women who relied on government welfare programs. By making this connection, SDS helped compare the stigmas of women in Vietnam to those of American women, which had become a major gripe of the feminist movement at the time. In addition to increasing empathy for Vietnamese women, SDS also explained how male chauvinism at home hurt the anti-war movement. Gender roles and a lack of childcare forced women to stay at home with children, which prevented them from being active anti-war protesters. SDS argued that women were the ideal activists for the fight against the exploitative nature of the war as they themselves already had deep experience with oppression.²⁶ This anti-sexist language reveals the

²⁴ “One Thousand % Candidate,” MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

²⁵ “Vietnam: No Mistake!,” 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

existence of a determinably feminist faction of Students for a Democratic Society.

Anti-Racism

Besides its anti-war activism, SDS is best remembered for its actions in combatting racism. However, SDS managed to blend these two aspects of its identity. A writer for *The Maroon*, the University of Chicago student newspaper, spoke in favor of SDS and its fight against racism and the war in response to criticisms that the organization was infringing upon the rights of other students in calling for a student strike. “When thousands of American soldiers, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and black Americans are being maimed and killed with no end in sight,” she argued, “it is perfectly proper to withdraw the ‘right to go to class’” in order to fight the university’s pro-war efforts.²⁷ SDS often referred to the war as an “imperialist” war and argued that imperialism inevitably relies on racism to exist. “Racist slurs and propaganda laid the basis for genocide like the Song My [My Lai] Massacre,” argued one SDS booklet.²⁸ A flyer from the University of Chicago chapter of SDS called for the execution of Lt. William Calley, one of the perpetrators of the My Lai Massacre, arguing that there should be “no excuse for racist murder” and that “Calley and his bosses deserve what they gave to the My Lai peasants.”²⁹ Here, SDS made an explicit link between its fight against racism and its fight against the Vietnam War.

In other cases, the link was not so explicit. In a letter to its supporters, the SDS National Office said that “Universities serve as the planning center for attacks on third-world peoples who are

²⁷ Fairinda West, “Artificial Chasm Divides Moderates, Radicals,” *The Maroon* June 5, 1970, MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

²⁸ “Vietnam: No Mistake!,” 40.

²⁹ “Calley & All Bosses: Guilty of Racist Murder!,” MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

struggling for self-determination.” The same letter exalted students at Harvard who demanded that their university “not be used as the ‘brain center’ of world imperialism,” adding that students from Harvard, San Francisco State, and Columbia Universities “will not sit idly by...while their schools train officers to lead GIs to fight against Vietnamese.”³⁰ The explicit and implicit links between racism and the war in Vietnam were also discussed at the SDS Mid-West Conference Against Racism at the University of Chicago in 1974, which served as a meeting for members of SDS all across the Midwest to discuss racial inequality and institutional racism as well as potential actions to address these issues.³¹

Most of SDS’s anti-racism efforts, however, were directed towards prejudice at home and appear at first glance to have little to do with the war. The group lauded poor housing and sanitation conditions for African Americans, as well as police brutality and low job security that affected black communities more than white ones. One publication pointed out that “per capita income for blacks is \$1000/year less than for whites.”³² At the University of Chicago, members of SDS challenged Professor Milton Friedman to a debate regarding Friedman’s contributions to the “current government policy of racist unemployment.” The group even compared their professor to Hitler in his “racist propaganda” that blamed welfare recipients for the nation’s economic woes.³³ The group’s Midwest Conference was advertised as a way to coordinate SDS chapters’ efforts across the country to fight racist

³⁰ “SDS National Office,” MS 036, Box 16, Folder 16-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

³¹ “SDS Mid-West Conference Against Racism,” MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

³² “Vietnam: No Mistake!,” 39.

³³ “Open Letter to Milton Friedman,” MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

professors, textbooks, immigration laws, and admissions policies.³⁴ While these efforts all seem to focus on domestic racism, SDS managed to tie these activities back to anti-war efforts by arguing: “If we do not fight racism, black and third world people will have no reason to trust the mainly white anti-war movement.”³⁵ SDS chapters were clearly cognizant of their racial imbalance. By linking the fight against racism to the fight to end the war, SDS leadership encouraged members who were predominately focused upon one cause to help out with the other as a way of advancing their own primary issue. The wide variety of sub-movements included under the umbrella of SDS shows the heterogeneous nature of the organization. Students in the New Left were not single-issue activists, nor did every student in SDS support every issue covered in the umbrella organization.

Conservative Students’ Rebuttal

Similarly, not all students during the era supported SDS or the New Left movement. Many even supported the war in Vietnam. Student anti-war activists organized a rally for peace in 1965 in Boston Commons. Six Harvard freshmen showed up with a “We support LBJ in Viet Nam” banner. They joined 300 other members of Young Americans for Freedom in an attempted counter-protest of the event, managing to get close enough to the stage to disrupt the event organizers from speaking to the group. The two groups of students quickly erupted in a war of chants, with anti-war activists shouting “We want peace in Vietnam! We want peace!” only to be answered by pro-war activists shouting “We want victory in Vietnam! We want victory!”³⁶

³⁴ “SDS Mid-West Conference Against Racism,” MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

³⁵ “Vietnam: No Mistake!,” 39.

³⁶ Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 28-29.

Claiming that “The New Left, in all its various hues of crimson, is determined to destroy society,” Young Americans for Freedom claimed to be an “alternative to change” from groups like SDS.³⁷ YAF, claiming to represent the “majority”—likely a reference to President Nixon’s “silent majority” message—argued that leftist organizations like SDS were affiliated with Marxists and communists and were throwing universities all across the country into chaos.³⁸ YAF aggressively attacked SDS’s anti-ROTC movement. Equating the decrease in ROTC programs to a decrease in U.S. defense capabilities, YAF argued “with both Russia and China sworn to destroy us we would go faster than Czechoslovakia if we got rid of our defenses as some nuts advocate.” YAF also protested SDS’s focus on race issues. Instead, YAF advocated a “colorblind” argument that people should not be classified by race, maintaining that because SDS focused on how different races are treated rather than how they are the same as humans, they were the ones who were the racists.³⁹

Bridging the Ideological Gap

While YAF and SDS clearly disagreed on many issues, they shared some common ground. First, both organizations promoted youth activism. Even though each organization accused the other of being toxic to campus culture, this did not stop either from continuing to mobilize students across the nation. Second, both organizations were determinably anti-establishment. YAF, like SDS, made it very clear in its own publications that it is not

³⁷ Phillip Abbott Luce, “Alternative for Change,” MS 036, Box 21, Folder 21-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

³⁸ “Student Subversion: The Majority Replies,” MS 036, Box 21, Folder 21-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

³⁹ “ROTC off???” MS 036, Box 21, Folder 21-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

part of the Washington “establishment.”⁴⁰ Most interestingly, both organizations opposed the draft. While YAF supported the war in Vietnam, it had major objections to the draft, which it saw as “selective slavery.” Forcing nonconsenting Americans to fight went against the principles of individual liberty and freedom that the group promoted. Rather than a coercive draft, YAF proposed a volunteer army, which it argued would better promote social justice, cost the taxpayers less, and fall more in line with American ideals of freedom.⁴¹ Neither SDS nor YAF would go as far as to advocate for illegal draft resistance activities, deeming these as “too radical.” The groups instead endorsed vocal draft opposition, believing that draft resistance would undermine their message as they appealed to the American public.⁴²

Challenges for Student Activists

In addition to a select few policy similarities, both YAF and SDS were also similar in that both groups served as umbrella organizations that included a wide variety of factions and movements. Consequently, both organizations were ripped apart by factional tension. Both organizations were founded in 1960 and, ironically, both erupted in civil war nine years later in 1969. SDS bureaucratically expelled the Maoist Progressive Labor Party following tension over disagreements over violence, women’s issues, and Black Nationalism.⁴³ For YAF, dissent was primarily sown by the rebellious libertarian faction. Libertarians did not universally support the war in Vietnam as most other young

⁴⁰ Phillip Abbott Luce, “Alternative for Change,” MS 036, Box 21, Folder 21-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

⁴¹ “The Draft: There is an Alternative,” MS 036, Box 21, Folder 21-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

⁴² Foley, *Confronting the War Machine*, 32

⁴³ Hatch, *A Generation Divided*, 201; “Where SDS Stands Today,” *The Militant*, May 19, 1972, MS 036, Box 19, Folder 19-2, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

conservatives did. According to an influential libertarian pamphlet distributed during the era, libertarians favored “friendship and peace with his neighbors at home and abroad.”⁴⁴ This did not jive well with YAF’s message of radical leftist enemies in the streets of Chicago and the jungles of ‘Nam. The division came to a boiling point at the 1969 YAF Convention when a libertarian member used his speaking time to burn his draft card on the floor of the convention. Chaos ensued as emotions flared. The organization then voted to purge the libertarian faction from YAF, but not before 25-33% of the convention, mostly libertarians, stormed out once and for all.⁴⁵ It appears that both organizations’ efforts to appeal to wide swaths of college students with many different interests could only last so long. Mass exoduses and internal political fights exerted each organization’s political capital that could have been used to help expand their appeal. These tensions also undercut each group’s message and allowed opponents of the groups to point out the lack of organization in the student groups.

In addition to internal threats, youth organizations were threatened by attacks from outsiders. Faculty in particular represented a hurdle to anti-war student activists. Many professors, such as those at the University of Chicago, adhered to strict concepts of institutional neutrality that bordered on political phobia.⁴⁶ At Gettysburg College, President Hanson refused to take a definitive stance on behalf of the entire school as he did not want to speak for everyone. In the end, however, the faculty voted to condemn the war due to increasing pressure from students who began protesting on and off campus.⁴⁷ Some professors compared

⁴⁴ Dean Russell, “Who is a Libertarian?,” MS 036, Box 14, Folder 14-1, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

⁴⁵ Hatch, *A Generation Divided*, 9-11.

⁴⁶ Peter Novick, “Class Interest Prejudiced Faculty,” *The Maroon*, June 5, 1970, MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

⁴⁷ “Senate Sanctions Strike; Faculty Cancels Classes.”

their students' demonstrations to those of the Nazi youth movement in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁸ In reality, most professors were likely scared that a massive student movement could upset the status quo on university campuses across the nation.

Conservative pundits relentlessly waged war on SDS and other anti-war activists. According to one, communists were active in SDS during the Student March on Washington and the Easter Vigil at President Johnson's Texas ranch.⁴⁹ The article even quoted a Communist leader as saying the party was planning on using the student organization as a proxy for their own actions.⁵⁰ The "Communists," which came to include organizations like SDS in the eyes of the right, were also accused of fomenting race riots in their pursuit for racial equality.⁵¹ By lumping all left-leaning organizations under the collective label "communists," conservative pundits played off the public's hatred and fear of communism to undermine the efforts of groups like SDS. Through

⁴⁸ Peter Novick, "Class Interest Prejudiced Faculty," *The Maroon*, June 5, 1970, MS 036, Box 22, Folder 22-3, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

⁴⁹ On April 17, 1965, SDS assembled over 20,000 protesters in the First National March Against the Vietnam War, or simply the Student March. SDS allowed communist sympathizers to participate, fueling reports that communists had "infiltrated" the group and causing a break with SDS's parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy. During Easter weekend, 1964, SDS members from the University of Texas organized a peace vigil at President Lyndon Johnson's ranch. The vigil became an annual event, and was frequently threatened by the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazis. "SDS in the 1960s: From A Student Movement to National Resistance," *The Independent*, September 21, 2006; Joseph A. Fry, *The American South and the Vietnam War: Belligerence, Protest, and Agony in Dixie* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 302.

⁵⁰ "Where Reds Are Busy on the Campuses," MS 036, Box 14, Folder 14-1, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

⁵¹ "The Communists are fomenting race riots in their attempt to control the Negro rights movement," MS 036, Box 14, Folder 14-1, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections; "Communist-Inspired Race Riots," MS 036, Box 14, Folder 14-1, *Radical Pamphlets Collection*, Musselman Library Special Collections.

their rhetoric, they created the illusion of communists infiltrating the innocent minds of students, suggesting they were being controlled rather than acting based on their own free will. This patronizing view of students and student organizations tarnished their reputations in the eyes of many older Americans.

Anti-war student activists during the Vietnam War era overcame countless hurdles in their fight to sway public opinion against the war. The most memorable of these hurdles was the attacks from pro-war outsiders. Ultimately, however, these attacks did not pose as big a threat as the divisions within the organizations themselves. From the start, student activist organizations tried to function as umbrella groups that could court the support of many different types of students, each with their own special interests. While these differences ultimately resulted in tension and divisions in groups like Students for a Democratic Society and Young Americans for Freedom, both groups weathered their respective storms to continue a legacy of student activism despite their internal divisions.

Conclusion

The 1960s and 1970s saw the greatest volume of student protests and activism in American history. Never before or since have American students organized in such great numbers all across the nation to vocalize their political beliefs. Yet students were not unified in their opinions on the Vietnam War or other policies either. Students for a Democratic Society and Young Americans for Freedom represented the two largest camps of politically active students, but even these seemingly united groups were nothing more than broad coalitions of often disparate factions. Internal divisions stemming from these inter-coalitional disagreements combined with external threats from critics to pose serious challenges to student groups. Yet despite these difficulties, student

activists prevailed in creating a politically-active generation and leaving a lasting legacy on the American political landscape.

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