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AMS 310

13 December 2024

The Vietnam War Era: AIM and the New Right

Following America's rise as a global superpower, and the concurrent rise of communism and the Soviet Union, the world braced for conflict. The Korean War began a period of conflicts both foreign, against communism, and domestic, against marginalization. However, as the US entered Vietnam, the tensions in both categories seemed to only rise. The time period surrounding the Vietnam War was, without a doubt, a massive turning point in the history of the United States. It comprised an innumerable number of important events in American history, from high profile assassinations to the moon landing of Apollo 11. The Vietnam War era constituted a historical watershed through the sensational activism of minority groups, particularly the American Indian Movement, in the face of institutional violence, the anti-war activism and increased political polarization brought on by the Vietnam War, and the ensuing coalescence of the New Right.

Following the successes of Black civil rights organizations throughout the 60s, other marginalized groups joined the fight for equality, while also bringing attention to the specific struggles that they faced. The American Indian Movement (AIM) was one such example. American Indians had faced government sanctioned abuse and cultural erasure extending as far back as the early 1800s with the Trail of Tears, when they were forcibly removed from their native lands, and sent to live on reservations foreign to them. The removal of American Indians from their lands continued as late as the 1970's, when American Indian children were forcibly

removed from their homes, and sent to boarding schools where they faced violent abuse, as well as the attempted removal of their cultural identity. An identity which was also threatened by direct federal action in the form of “Indian termination policy,” where the US sought to end the sovereignty of tribes, and integrate all American Indians into urban American society. Those who were integrated often suffered from increased levels of poverty and discrimination, as they were cut off from their tribal support system. As a result of this, and other forms of continued governmental violence, AIM was formed to advocate for the rights of all American Indian peoples, both those who had been integrated and were now living in urban areas, as well as those living on reservations who sought to protect and reclaim their native lands. In the face of advancements made by other marginalized groups, and the comparative lack of support for American Indian rights, AIM took actions more extreme, and more sensational than previous civil rights groups.

Their actions were unprecedented. Unlike the Black civil rights movement, which worked on behalf of tens of millions of people, AIM, and American Indians at large, made up a comparatively small portion of the population, numbering a little over a million. Consequently, their actions had to be bolder. For example, they occupied Alcatraz Island for over a year and a half following its retirement as a prison. AIM claimed that since the land was no longer being used by the US government, that, by the Treaty of Fort Laramie, the rights would revert back to the American Indians who previously occupied it (Davis, AIM Lecture, 11/6/24). Later, they stormed the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington D.C., and occupied it for a week, at the end of a nationwide movement known as the trail of broken treaties. Most notably, they took part in a violent standoff in Wounded Knee, South Dakota. In her book, *Lakota Woman*, Mary Crow Dog recounts that the standoff began after members of AIM went to the nearby town of

Custer, for the trial of a White man accused of killing an American Indian. Historically, “the killing of an Indian was usually treated as a mere misdemeanor and went unpunished,” and AIM wanted to make sure that the killer would be brought to justice (Crow Dog 121). When they arrived, they were told that the man would be charged not with murder, but with second degree manslaughter, a charge he would later be sentenced to only one day in jail for. The angered AIM members, after a scuffle with police, decided to make a stand at Wounded Knee, the site of one of the deadliest massacres in US history, to symbolize what they saw as the US government's systemic approval of the murder of American Indians. The standoff lasted over 2 months, pitting around 200 AIM members against over a thousand police and national guards, and ended with two AIM members dead, and a US marshall paralyzed, after sporadic, yet continuous bouts of gunfire.

AIM's methods were far from the nonviolent protests and lunch counter sit-ins of the earlier civil rights movement, however their actions were intended more as symbolism than shows of force. Just as Black people were fighting for the right to be treated equally, and entered unequal spaces in protest, AIM fought for return of stolen land by occupying the property of the occupiers. In their minds they were doing on a diminutive scale what the US government had done to them for hundreds of years. According to Mary Crow Dog, in American Indian culture, “land is at the core of [their] existence,” and that “once the land is gone, then [they] are gone too” (Crow Dog 14).

The sensational activist methods of AIM occurred in the context of increasing anti-war activism surrounding the Vietnam War, which introduced many young people to activism for the first time, and further divided the US along ideological lines. The US was drawn into the conflict in Vietnam due to widespread fears about the spread of communism in Asia, known as the

domino effect. While the US had deployed soldiers during the Korean War for similar reasons, the war in Vietnam was far more polarizing due to its scale and sheer violence.

Vietnam was unlike any other war America had ever fought. For a start, it was wildly unpopular, with mass protests on both moral and practical grounds. The Vietnam War was also the first war to be widely broadcast on television, which put on display to the American public just how brutal the war was. Many young draftees were unprepared for how mentally taxing the war would be, which, for many, would come back to haunt them. It also took place in an incredibly inhospitable environment, with no trenches or well ordered fronts. The American soldiers were not ready for the guerilla tactics of the Viet Cong, and struggled to differentiate enemy soldiers from civilians.

Throughout the war, men who did not want to be drafted to fight in Vietnam, for moral reasons or otherwise, found increasingly inventive ways to “dodge” the draft. By the end of the war, draft dodgers numbered in the millions, having used tactics from faking illness or disease to get a deferment, to fleeing the country for Canada, to simply refusing to report to the draft board. In response to the difficulties in drafting enough soldiers to cope with the rising personnel demands of the war, defense secretary Robert McNamara devised and implemented Project 100,000, in which men who would not have ordinarily met the entrance requirements for the military were allowed to enter (Davis, Vietnam War Lecture, 10/28/24).

While the project did somewhat serve its purpose of dealing with the increased labor demands of the war, with around 300,000 men brought in through the program, the project was still widely seen as a failure. During the war, members of Project 100,000 suffered from higher death rates compared to other soldiers, and after the war, they earned lower salaries and experienced higher rates of homelessness compared to the average Vietnam veteran. These

higher rates of homelessness occurred in context of the already staggering number of homeless Vietnam Veterans. After the war, Vietnam veterans often returned home with PTSD, and other trauma which kept them from being able to successfully reintegrate into society.

Vietnam veterans suffered from some of the highest rates of both PTSD and homelessness out of any demographic in America. David Morrell's novel *First Blood* epitomises both of these factors in the struggle of the returning Vietnam veteran, with the main character being unable to find work because "the only trade he came out [of the war] with [was] how to kill" (Morrell 129). The main character, Rambo, suffers from PTSD, and after being arrested by Sheriff Wilfred Teasle for vagrancy, he breaks out and goes on a murderous rampage, shifting back into the mind of a soldier, intent on hunting down Teasle and his deputies. Teasle, a veteran of the Korean War, provides a powerful contrast to Rambo both physically and emotionally, with Teasle being employed and somewhat stable, compared to Rambo who is neither. This mirrors broader contrasts between Korean and Vietnam veterans, with Vietnam veterans having overall lower qualities of life compared to their Korean War counterparts.

While anti-war sentiment was dominant across the US, and despite the liberal nature of that position, many people associated the liberal Democratic party with causing the war due to the war's escalation under Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson. This spurred the fragmentation of the American electorate, and the creation of the "New Right," made up of those who supported the Vietnam War, as well as those who felt that the Democratic party, which was associated with the anti-war movement, was going too far, with Vietnam protests becoming increasingly violent and controversial. The fallout of trauma of the Vietnam War also saw the rise of religion across the US, which played into the New Right's moral messaging. The New Right was broadly populist, and focused on social and moral culture war issues like opposition to abortion, same sex rights,

and the equal rights movements. The New Right won key victories like the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the election of two term president Ronald Reagan, who stood as the defining member of their movement, and shaped the direction of America for decades to come. The “Moral Majority,” a faction of conservatives which claimed that America needed to stand for family values against the onslaught of new age liberal ideologies, and who supported Reagan, held positions nearly identical to the positions the modern Republican party takes, and exemplifying the groundwork that the New Right laid for today’s Republicans.

While looking at the current Republican Party as a product of the New Right is striking, it, and other watershed moments of the Vietnam Era would not have been possible without the actions of past groups. The anti-war movement would not have been nearly as strong or as organized without both the precedent set by the civil rights groups of the 50s and 60s, like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), as well as their direct involvement, as both of those groups shifted their focus to anti-war efforts during the conflict. AIM too would not have been nearly as impactful without the previous civil rights movements. AIM’s activities in impoverished urban areas overlapped with the activities of groups like the Black Panthers, and the monitoring of their activities by the government mirrored the actions of the FBI’s COINTELPRO program during the earlier civil rights movement.

The activities of the Beat generation also played a role in the key moments of the Vietnam era. The Beat’s emphasis of free expression and left wing ideology set the stage for the people who had grown up in that culture to outwardly express the message the Beat’s popularized. Men raised in the Beat generation made up the largest proportion of the draft pool

during the Vietnam War, making it unsurprising that so many young people at that time objected to the war's premise.

The Vietnam War era stands irrefutably as a defining moment in American history. The ever increasing resistance of marginalized groups to governmental oppression, the impact of the political polarization of the Vietnam War, and the ensuing rise of the moral majority all have ripple effects that continue to this day. The actions of AIM can be seen in the activities of the BLM movement, with their use of occupation as a protest tactic. The actions of anti-war activists continue in the modern protests against Israel's invasion of Gaza, with the SDS continuing to play a role in the fight. America's political polarization has only deepened, with the culture war issues of the New Right as relevant to today's Republican party as they were nearly 50 years ago. All of these parallels stand together in a testament to the enduring impact of the Vietnam War era.

Works Cited

Crow Dog, Mary. *Lakota woman*. HarperCollins, 1991.

Morrell, David. *First Blood*. Pan Books, 1974.