

BARNARD COLLEGE
New York, N. Y. 10027

October 15, 1969

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Mr. President:

We, the undersigned members of the Barnard College community, represent a broad variety of political affiliations and convictions. Some of us are moderates, some liberals, some radicals, and some conservatives. Some of us voted for you for the presidency last November, some of us voted for your opponent, and some of us did not vote at all. Some of us approved the original decision to intervene militarily in Vietnam and supported until recently the conduct of the war, while others have been opposed to our military involvement there from the outset. Despite the variety of routes by which we have arrived at this position and the different amounts of time it has taken us to reach it, we are all now increasingly convinced that the American military involvement in Vietnam must be brought to an end even if no agreement is forthcoming from our opponents and our troops withdrawn as immediately as is consistent with their own safety and certainly not later than 1970. Our conviction rests on one or more of the following reasons:

It has become increasingly clear that any sort of military "victory" in Vietnam is unattainable. Prolongation of military involvement in Vietnam wastes lives and dollars, distracts attention on and diverts resources from the solution of pressing social problems at home, and in general keeps the country divided in a mood of growing mutual distrust, rancor, and ugliness. The moral value of these and other costs so far exceeds the strategic benefits, if any, of our remaining in Vietnam as to make their continued expenditure unacceptable. While the end of the war may not release huge sums of money for programs aimed at the elimination of poverty, racial injustice, and other urban ills immediately, it has in fact been the escalation in the cost of financing that war and the inflation that the war feeds that have all but stopped any significant increased spending on domestic programs.

Prolongation of the American military involvement in Vietnam is negating the democratic process and creating more and more widely held doubts about the value of the vote and elections as means of popular control of our government. Both election returns and opinion polls show that wide segments of the American people no longer support continuation of the war in Vietnam. Fundamental to the operation of a democracy is that elected officials respect public opinion and be committed to the premise that at least with respect to broad purpose such public opinion should prevail. This is especially so when these officials have made the most massive efforts to persuade the people of the correctness of the policies they are pursuing but have continued to lose support nonetheless. Persisting in a course of action opposed by larger and larger segments of both public and official opinion can only provide fuel for the extremists of the right and left who preach the doctrine that democracy is a sham and that the only way to make the "system" respond is through the use of violence.

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There are those who would have even orderly, non-violent expression and demonstration of opposition to the war in Vietnam cease because of its alleged weakening of the office of president and especially of our "bargaining position" at the conference table. This is not a new argument and has been used by various officials faced with widespread criticism ever since the founding of our country. The best answer is still that provided by James Madison who argued that suppressing criticism rather than changing policy to remove its cause would be a remedy "worse than the disease". "Liberty," Madison wrote, you may recall, in the Tenth Federalist Paper, is to faction and the expression of dissent what "air is to fire, an element without which it instantly expires." "But it could not be less folly," Madison continued, "to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish for the annihilation of air..... because it imports to fire its destructive agency."

It is not by the withholding of criticism, Mr. President, but only by a basic change in policy to terminate this unstrategic, costly, and unpopular war that the division of our people can be healed and opportunity afforded for a new sense of unity and commitment and for lasting achievements in advancing human betterment during the remainder of your administration.