

to restore Bosch to power but were defeated by the ruling junta. Fearing the unrest would lead to “another Cuba,” Johnson dispatched 22,000 American troops. The intervention outraged many Latin Americans. But the operation’s success seemed to bolster Johnson’s determination in Vietnam.

By 1968, the number of American troops in Vietnam exceeded half a million, and the conduct of the war had become more and more brutal. The North Vietnamese mistreated American prisoners of war held in a camp known sardonically by the inmates as the Hanoi Hilton. (One prisoner of war, John McCain, who spent six years there, courageously refused to be exchanged unless his companions were freed with him. McCain later became a senator from Arizona and the Republican candidate for president in 2008.) American planes dropped more tons of bombs on the small countries of North and South Vietnam than both sides used in all of World War II. They spread chemicals that destroyed forests to deprive the Viet Cong of hiding places and dropped incendiary bombs filled with napalm, a gelatinous form of gasoline that clings to the skin of anyone exposed to it as it burns. The army pursued Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in “search and destroy” missions that often did not distinguish between combatants and civilians. Weekly reports of enemy losses or “body counts” became a fixation of the administration. But the United States could not break its opponents’ ability to fight or make the South Vietnamese government any more able to survive on its own.

The Antiwar Movement

As casualties mounted and American bombs poured down on North and South Vietnam, the Cold War foreign policy consensus began to unravel. By 1968, the war had sidetracked much of the Great Society and had torn families, universities, and the Democratic Party apart. With the entire political leadership, liberal no less than conservative, committed to the war for most of the 1960s, young activists lost all confidence in “the system.”

Opposition to the war became the organizing theme that united people with all kinds of doubts and discontents. “We recoil with horror,” said a SNCC position paper, “at the inconsistency of a supposedly ‘free’ society where responsibility to freedom is equated with the responsibility to lend oneself to military aggression.” With college students exempted from the draft, the burden of fighting fell on the working class and the poor. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. condemned the administration’s Vietnam policy as an unconscionable use of violence and for draining resources from needs at home. At this point, King was the most prominent American to speak out against the war.

As for SDS, the war seemed the opposite of participatory democracy, since American involvement had come through secret commitments and decisions