Reverberations of Resistance:

The Impact of Vietnam War Protests on Government-Civil Society Relations

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The Western presence in Asia and the Middle East has been a major motor in history. In Asia, French colonialism (among the precedence of other Imperial powers) led Southeast Asia to be the theatre of Western Imperial and (later on) superpower competition. Arguably, Western involvement in Asia became most controversial during the USA's entry into the Vietnam War (1964-1975), leading to widespread university protests echoing from the United States to Europe. By analysing the impact of Vietnam War protests on policing techniques and broader government-civil society relations, this paper seeks to provide the groundwork for future analyses. Specifically, this paper will help discern historical patterns that future research could test on the current Israel-Palestine protests.

This paper asks the research question: How were the governments' responses and policy changes shaped by the escalation in the intensity of protests during the Vietnam War? In answering the research question, this paper will first analyse and explore the historical background of the Vietnam War while accounting for the influence the conflict had on the greater political scale. Then, the paper will dive deeper into the topic by looking into the protests sparked by these events analysing their impact on government action and law enforcement tactics. Lastly, the paper concludes with a discussion section acknowledging the limitations and interpretations of the findings. This paper finds that Vietnam War protests had an impact on their respective governments' military and foreign policies in the case of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, this paper finds that the Vietnam War protests were integrated into larger social justice movements.

1. The Vietnam War and its Implications

The Vietnam War, widely regarded as a protracted conflict, took place between 1954 and 1975 (Flowers, 2005). It highlighted the fight between communism and capitalism but also deeply influenced global politics. The war's roots can be traced back to post-French colonialism. However, it was also heavily influenced by global Cold War dynamics. The Geneva Agreement of 1954 was intended to bring peace by dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel but appeared to have failed. The reason behind this can be considered controversial. On one hand, some argue that it was due to the increasing commitment of the United States to a non-communist South Vietnam, whereas some argue it was due to multiple North Vietnamese insurgency operations conducted in South Vietnam. Tensions were further fueled by the strategic interests of major contemporary powers, such as China and the Soviet Union (Logevall, 2021). The United States' commitment, shaped by its containment policy, further aimed to prevent the spread of communism in Asia, an opposing political ideology that rivalled Western capitalism.

The precursors to the start of the US engagement in the Vietnam War can be pinned down to June 1st, 1954, when the United States launched the Saigon Military Mission, a clandestine project meant to carry out psychological warfare and paramilitary actions in South Vietnam (Wirtz, 1968). This was followed by the aforementioned Geneva Agreement of 1954, resulting in the creation of a demilitarised zone, publicly known as the "17th parallel".
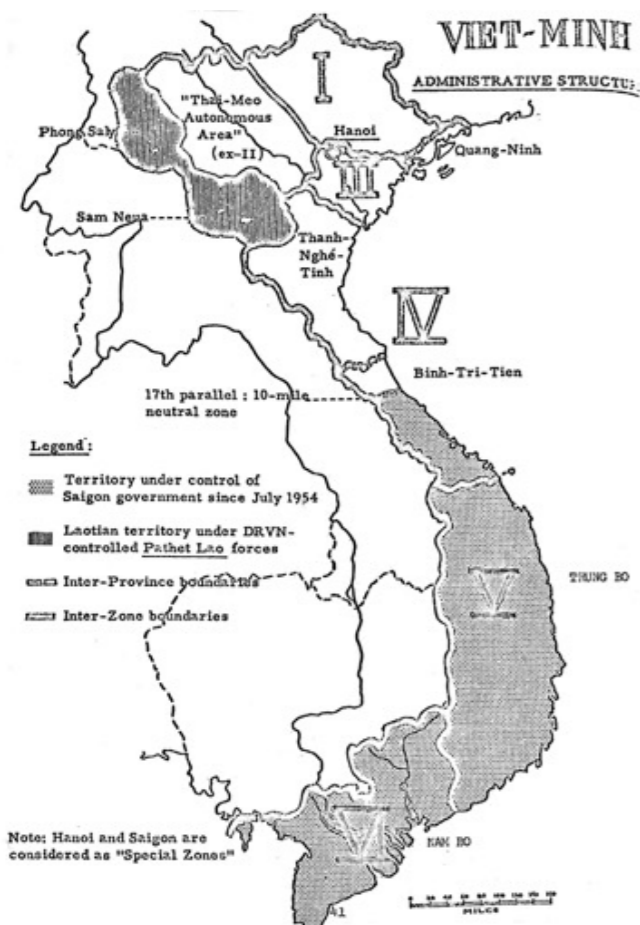
Figure 1. An administrative structure map of Vietnam showcasing the 17th parallel (Pentagon Papers-Part IV, 1954).

However, the major escalations of the war took place during the period of 1964-1968. The escalation entailed the United States officiating their participation in the War following the Gulf of Tonkin incident. This resulted in increased U.S. military involvement, which allowed for extensive military operations without a formal declaration of war (Hunt, 2010). The significant U.S. troop deployment, which involved more than 550,000 soldiers from 1960 to 1972, led to considerable military engagement, such as the Tet Offensive (Spector, 2024). This offensive was a significant turning point in the Vietnam War. It consisted of a series of coordinated attacks by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces on more than 100 cities and outposts in South Vietnam (Walton, 2004). Its purpose was to force the United States to signifi-

cantly scale back its involvement in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive had a significant impact on U.S. public opinion due to the high number of casualties and the brutality of the fighting (Hunt, 2010).

The next relevant part of the War can be summed up under the Vietnamization and Withdrawal phase of the war, during the 1967-1973 period. Under President Nixon's administration, the United States pursued a policy of "Vietnamization", which aimed to reduce U.S. troops' involvement and shift combat roles to South Vietnamese Forces (Office of the Historian, 2023). The "Vietnamization" involved "the consolidation of the emerging politico-military system in South Vietnam to the degree necessary to absorb future inputs of American resources without direct American management but with enough efficiency to maintain a favourable balance of forces against the Communists" (White, 1972, p. 2). However, despite attempts at negotiations and military de-escalation, events like the Cambodian Campaign and the continued North Vietnamese offensives highlighted just how complicated withdrawing while seeking a stable region entailed (Office of the Historian, 2023).

Lastly, the war officially ended with the fall of Saigon in 1975. The Paris Peace Accords of 1973 had previously led to a cease-fire, which entailed U.S. troops' withdrawal. However, this left many political issues unaddressed and unresolved, which then contributed to the eventual North Vietnamese victory (Lawrence, 2014). The end of the war was a watershed moment in US military and foreign policy, demonstrating the limitations of military force and ushering in a time of political introspection and policy reconsideration.

The end of the War had a great influence on global geopolitics, especially on the dynamics between superpowers. The Vietnam War highlighted different limitations of military power, which further facilitated a shift towards detente between superpowers at the time: the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. However, the realignment was part of a larger attempt to stabilise international relations and decrease the direct conflicts that marked the Cold War period (Dumbrell, 1994; Hess, 2009). This shift was essential in moving away from the brinkmanship policies established in earlier decades. This meant a more balanced approach to international relations.

2. Vietnam War Protests

Besides the aforementioned impact on international relations, the Vietnam War had a decisive influence on government-civil society relations in Western democracies. The profound changes that the conclusion of the Vietnam War brought on the United States can be represented by reforms, such as the War Powers Act, which sought to rein in presidential powers and restore checks and balances in regard to rules and policies on direct military engagement. Another notable phenomenon is the widespread protesting against the war. They catalysed changes in public attitudes towards government authority. This marked a significant shift towards scepticism and highlighted the need and demand for transparency (The Collector, 2021). These changes were a direct response to the war's contentious administration and the dishonest techniques exposed by the Pentagon Papers, which undermined public faith in the federal government.

Figure 2. Large crowd at a National Mobilisation to End the War in Vietnam (Library of Congress, 1967)

Moreover, the Vietnam War had a significant impact on social movements, especially the U.S. Civil rights movements, which were notably the ones that were mainly influenced by the anti-war movement. One factor contributing to this is the involvement of influential civil rights leaders. Most notably, Martin Luther King Jr. began to openly criticise the war and link the struggle against racial injustice in the United States to the fight against what he considered imperialism beyond United States borders. King's political and ideological stance on the war was that it diverted attention and possible resources away from domestic social programs (Walton, 2004). This later helped exacerbate racial inequalities, which helped merge the antiwar sentiment with the civil rights movement at that time.

The anti-war demonstrations in the United States had a synergetic effect on other contemporary social movements, such as the ones happening in Western European countries in the same decade. Many critics highlighted how the effects of the Vietnam War shifted attention and resources away from critical domestic issues, such as social welfare and civil rights. The intertwining of anti-war and civil rights activism put the spotlight on broader societal issues. This mainly involved the allocation of government resources and social justice (JSTOR, 2021). The merging of these forces increased the cultural effect of the demonstrations, producing a larger counterculture that challenged established norms and advocated for social reform.

2.a. Anti-Vietnam War Protests and Their Political Impact

The following section analyses the political impact of Anti-War Demonstrations in the United States. Schreiber (1976) provides a thorough analysis that highlights the widespread visibility of the demonstrations. However, they did not have a significant impact on public opinion. Rather, public opinion and the resulting impact on governmental politics stemmed from major war events. The limited impact of demonstrations on public opinion suggests that, while they were important in expressing dissent, other factors, such as media coverage of the war and the release of information such as the Pentagon Papers, had a greater impact on shaping public attitudes and, as a result, influencing government action.

Perhaps one factor that further impacted the shaping of public attitudes is the discrepancy between official United States reports on the situation in Vietnam and the harsh realities of the war. The Tet Offensive and its aftermath are a prime example of that. Despite the military victory achieved by the United States and South Vietnamese forces, the extensive media coverage fueled widespread public scepticism regarding the United State's ability to win the war (Walton, 2004). This scepticism, among other factors such as the decline in public trust, led to influence political decisions. Some argue that it was one of the main factors that led President Lyndon B. Johnson to limit bombing in North Vietnam and initiated a broader policy shift towards Vietnamization (Walton, 2004).

2.b. The Media's Role in Protests in the United States

Moreover, another relevant aspect of the analysis is the role of media, as it played a crucial role as a mediator between public perception and the reality of the war, even more so than the demonstrations themselves. According to Schreiber (1976), the American public's opinion was considerably more influenced by media portrayal and reports on the war than by the protests. This suggests that the media played shaped the narrative surrounding events and public opinion. The reliance on media underlines the relevance of timely and credible information in forming and shaping public opinion. This is particularly relevant in contexts where direct observations and experiences are not only limited but rather difficult to come by.

Furthermore, public opinion towards demonstrators was generally negative. This may constitute one of the factors that affected the overall impact and efficiency of the protests. Schreiber's analysis indicated that the public's general dislike for Vietnam War protestors made it unlikely that demonstrations served as effective mediators (Schreiber, 1976). However, this does not mean that the protests were not widespread. Nor does this mean that protests were not popular amongst some demographic groups. In another article, Schreiber highlights an increase in protest popularity between 1964-1965 and 1967-1968 in correlation with the involvement of American Troops and their commitment to Southeast Asia. However, only 22% of American colleges and universities reported Vietnam Protests (Schreiber, 1973, p. 289).

Overall, while demonstrations were vital for expressing opposition, they may have been less effective in directly influencing larger public opinion and government action due to their unfavourable reception by the general public. One factor contributing to this was the fear of being drafted.

2.c. Protests in the United States. Long-Term Effects and The Reaction of The US Government

Additionally, the long-term effects of demonstrations have to be taken into account as well. The protests' immediate effects on public opinion were minimal. However, they may have had subtle long-term effects on both American politics and civil engagement. The widespread visibility and persistence of the anti-war demonstrations built the foundations for a culture of political activism. This may have created subtle shifts in political attitudes, which led to more scepticism in regard to government actions in foreign policy (Schreiber, 1976). This contributes to the democratic mechanism by further increasing scrutiny of government decisions and (later) influencing how future conflicts are handled in terms of foreign policy and public perception.

Vietnamization:
During the Vietnam War, the United States developed a policy known as Vietnamization, which attempted to terminate American participation. This programme, launched by President Richard Nixon, attempted to shift combat tasks and responsibilities from US forces to South Vietnamese troops, allowing them to lead the defence of their own nation. The objective was to progressively reduce the number of American soldiers in Vietnam while continuing to support the South Vietnamese government and preventing a North Vietnamese takeover.

The following section considers the US government's reaction to the protests. Government responses to the Vietnam War and the related protests were influenced by multiple factors. Declining public support, strategic failures, and international pressures played a key role. The combination of these factors influenced responses and policy adjustments rather than the protests by themselves. The intricate and multifaceted nature of these influences shows that protests may not singularly lead to policy changes. Rather, they were part of a broader context of declining support and strategic reassessment. This ultimately guided the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

Already in the 1960s, mass demonstrations by students occurred in the United States and Western European countries, having a significant impact on political structures. Ibrahim (2010) argues that student protests were vectors for political and social change in most Western European countries. Often, the genesis of the problem occurred out of educational and local issues, given that a significant number of the protests started at a local university level, either in university-related buildings

or at the local level, by students. However, soon, they turned out to be matters of national interest. In some instances, the situation resulted in political change. Such issues were noted in France, where the student-protest wave played a leading role in setting off political upheavals. The legacy of student protests extends into long-term political engagement and the formation of new political networks. Ibrahim (2010) showcases how, despite the transient nature of student populations, methodological approaches such as social network analysis reveal sustained political engagement across entire student generations. The networks formed during these protests remained active beyond the initial protests. Moreover, many individuals remained politically active after their university education.

2.d. The Vietnam War and the Protests in Western Europe

Western European governments differed in their responses to Vietnam War protests, reflecting national policies on public order and civil liberties. It might be true that Western European countries experienced the world's largest protests and repression of them (in the amount of police that were mobilised, that is). In West Germany, there was a reciprocal influence between protests against the Vietnam War and broader opposition movements against governmental policies. The interaction between student activism, local condi-

tions and international influences promoted a robust protest culture. This, in turn, challenged national policies and global political dynamics.

The protests sometimes resulted in the police breaking up protests with force, subsequently being perceived as an act of state overreach by protestors. (Sedlmaier 2022). Hence, these police reactions incited public protest in response to perceived government authoritarianism and caused some governments to question their strategy when dealing with civil unrest. This involved arguing with an emphasis on public order and civil liberties with the government, whose debates sometimes led to nuanced changes in policy with regard to less forceful forms of policing. The local police enforcement units initially adopted a harsh response to the protests (Sedlmaier, 2022). Given the popularity and political nature of the demonstrations, law enforcement agents used more heavy-handed tactics, which ended up being counterproductive, as it paved the way for escalation (Sedlmaier, 2022).

During a protest in Western Berlin in October of 1967, the local law enforcement faced the demonstrators with aggressive tactics that included the use of crowd-disbursement facilities, such as water cannons and the use of batons, in an attempt to disperse the crowds

(Klimke, 2010). Such heavy-handed police response to the antiwar protests can be considered part of a broader strategy of maintaining public order. Moreover, it can also be seen as an attempt to suppress disapproval against the Cold War alignment of Western European governments with the United States. However, it must also be stated that the police at the protest acted according to protocols, which do not appear to be swayed by greater political dynamics. In such situations, it is important to separate the people from the problem and analyse the situation as it is while taking greater circumstances into account.

The West German student movement's strong opposition to the American war in Vietnam makes it easy to overlook how much the United States meant to young West Germans in the 1960s (Guittett, 2016). Furthermore, it must be noted that this was not the only protest happening in West Berlin at the time, but it was rather part of a larger series of protests. This may have been one of the influential factors behind the demonstrator's passion in expressing their disapproval, which can act as a catalyst for possibly more aggressive behaviour during the demonstrations, which could have been part of the reason behind the police's more aggressive response. However, the harsh police intervention could also be seen as the state's willingness to enforce and accentuate its stance on the Vietnam War through rather coercive means.

Additionally, the evolution in policing tactics paralleled a broader shift towards greater respect for both civil rights and the implementation of measures, which aimed to ensure a decent safety level for the protesters. It further reflected a considerable re-evaluation of the role and purpose of public demonstrations in democratic societies. This helped shape more modern crowd control tactics that em-

phasised more on de-escalation. Moreover, the protests also aided in fostering a transnational network of dissent. This, in combination with more contributing factors, led to governmental pressures in Western Europe, perhaps leading to political reconsiderations and a closer alignment with global movements against the War.

3. Discussion

This article investigates the dynamics of police responses and the effects of the protests sparked by the Vietnam War in the United States and Western Europe. The interaction between the protesters and the police showed an evolution in terms of policing and law enforcement tactics for dealing with demonstrations. In the case of anti-Vietnam-War protests in the United States, demonstrations showed to have an impact on the government and local police units' reactions to these protests. This implies the protest's influence ranged from public security to civil rights policies. However, it must be stated that the protests were not the only contributing factors that influenced public security and civil rights policies. The involvement of influential figures, such as Martin Luther King Jr., in alignment with the student movement against the War also played a great role, as it not only helped promote the movement but also raised awareness of other social injustices, such as racial prejudice during the War.

Similarly, Western European countries experienced similar outcomes from these protests. With respect to the Vietnam War, the protests showed to have had a crucial role in influencing political structures and changes in policing tactics. From an initially aggressive response, the police reaction and involvement evolved into a more community-oriented engagement. This entails using less-harsher

> These protests were part of larger social justice movements and significantly affected U.S. military and foreign policies, leading to a reconsideration of how military engagements are handled.

policing tactics, such as the law enforcement units not using riot gear, as an example. Despite the different reasons behind the protests on each continent and time period, they share a key similarity, and that is the dissatisfaction with America's and the West's involvement in the Vietnam War. The mutual and trans-generational influence of the protests from the United States and Western Europe showed the interconnectedness of social movements of solidarity in democratic environments despite the catalysts of these protests being different. The trans-generational influence refers to the continued wave of protests that echoes throughout Western Europe in alignment with events that changed the course of history, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the protests in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain as well.

In addition, the intercontinental alignment and social movement that resembled the protests against the Vietnam War also brought social and political activists together. This, in turn, helped them reflect on the United State's foreign policy and encouraged students and youngsters from that era to align and unite themselves against something they did not believe in, nor support.

One notable aspect between the protests in the 60s in both the United States and Western Europe is the catalyst, which in both cases was public dissent with governmental and military actions across national borders. The escalation of the 1960s movement led to a re-assessment of governmental and political actions, especially in France and West Germany, with a great emphasis on the need for balance and proportionality in police responses. In conclusion, for what concerns present-day protests regarding the Israel-Palestine, their efforts are yet to be matched with

outcomes, and potential further developments or policy changes are yet to be seen.

4. Limitations

However, this paper has several limitations as well. On the one hand, the content of this article is historically contextualised to specific political climates, more precisely, the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, there are geographical, political, and ideological limitations. Only protests in the United States of America and Western European Countries, such as West Germany and France, have been analysed and discussed. Future research can aim to take into consideration protests in countries that had a rival political ideology at that time, such as Eastern European countries like Yugoslavia or Hungary.

Additionally, the contemporary applicability of the results might prove to be difficult yet necessary. Further research into the topic could entail a comparison of protest evolution across different eras and regions. Subsequently, analysing the level of violence employed by law enforcement agents is difficult. This can be traced back to the multiplicity of factors involved. Protests, especially of a political nature, can create tense situations. In addition, factors such as racial profiling and personal circumstances of the deployed police officers must also be taken into account, alongside a multitude of biases involved, such as shared-information bias and confirmation bias.

Moreover, the aforementioned elements also need to be aligned with the political views, ideology and context of the era in which they took place. This alignment with the contemporary situation and circumstances might lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the evolution of policing in response to civil

movements. Lastly, another aspect for further research can be the influence of the media on these protests. In the previous sections, we have seen how the media can act as an amplifier for such demonstrations and maybe have an even greater impact and influence on the political scene than the protests themselves.

Lastly, another aspect that must be mentioned is the police response to the demonstrations in Western Europe. When analysing such social phenomena, it is easy to get lost in perspectives and lose sight of the greater picture. At the time of the demonstrations, there were multiple geopolitical events and phenomena happening, such as political assassinations, civil rights and even countercultural movements. Each government had its own methods and procedures for handling large protests. This helps to put into perspective the different reactions by the law enforcement agents to the demonstrations and behaviour towards demonstrators. This can also be applied to the protests in the United States. There are multiple factors involved in this rather ambiguous equation, and the dissent towards the Vietnam War is only one of them.

5. Conclusion

This article discusses how Western involvement in Asia and the Middle East, stemming from imperialist policies and post-World War II power dynamics, has influenced current political activism and government policies in

the West. We explored the effects of the Vietnam War on student protests and how governments responded. We looked at the main question: How were the governments' responses towards the protestors and Vietnam War policies shaped by the escalation in the intensity of protests during the Vietnam War? The findings show how governmental actions and political activism are connected in a relationship of reciprocal influence.

Additionally, they show how student-led demonstrations influenced governmental policies in terms of national policy, public safety and, in some instances, policing. For example, the French and other Western interventions led to the Vietnam War, which reshaped politics in the region and sparked anti-war protests in the U.S. and Europe. These protests were part of larger social justice movements and significantly affected U.S. military and foreign policies, leading to a reconsideration of how military engagements are handled.

Lastly, this article shows how deep and long-lasting the impact of Western actions abroad is on the Western countries' own domestic political scenes. It highlights how historical events shape today's responses to global conflicts. Understanding these dynamics is key to addressing future international relations and policy challenges. This article suggests that more research into how protest movements evolve and their effect on political systems would help us better understand and respond to these ongoing challenges.

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