

# From city streets to congressional corridors: insights from the US anti-war movement

David Cohen

## Introduction

The story of US opposition to the Vietnam War provides insights into how protest movements can build on awareness and public opposition, and move to strategies that engage the formal political system. It demonstrates that multiple strategies are needed to create lasting change. Protest and electoral politics alone are never enough – ongoing public education, organising, and a variety of actions in the US legislature, Congress, were also key in building the force to end the war.

## Roots of Vietnam conflict: Cold War and colonialism

Following World War II, differences of ideology dominated international relations and a so-called Cold War developed between capitalist and communist countries. As colonial regimes began to fall, each power bloc tried to influence the newly emerging states. In Indochina, the French fought to maintain their colonial power against the Vietminh, a popular independence movement in Vietnam. Spurned in their overtures to the US, Vietminh leaders turned to the communist Soviet Union for support, whilst the US government backed the French against the communist-funded Vietminh. With France's defeat in 1954, an international peace conference divided Vietnam temporarily in two – North and South – and set 1956 as the date for national elections to reunify the country.

US officials believed that once one country became communist, its neighbours would also follow, falling under Soviet Union control. Fearing a Vietminh victory, this belief led the US to oppose the elections and support anti-communist groups in the South. President Eisenhower, a popular World War II hero, however, went against the recommendations of his top military commanders and refused to commit US troops.

President Kennedy, elected by the narrowest of margins in 1960, did not want to risk political capital by 'losing' Indochina, especially South Vietnam. He enlarged the US mission by sending 16,000 American military advisers, but internal politics in South Vietnam threatened to undermine the effort. Ngo Dinh Diem, the US-backed South Vietnamese leader, was losing support. A group of his own generals approached the US about launching a possible coup. Washington did nothing to prevent the

action and Diem was assassinated in November 1963, three weeks before President Kennedy was also assassinated. The South Vietnam government grew weaker as it faced pressures from an intensified North Vietnamese presence. With the government near collapse President Johnson, Kennedy's successor, began bombing North Vietnam in February 1965 and sent 6,000 combat troops in June 1965. By 1968 the US had 568,000 troops in South Vietnam.

## Polarisation, disillusionment and protest

As the war continued, political polarisation in the US increased. The so-called 'hawks' opposed gradual escalation of the war and wanted to destroy North Vietnam by using massive military operations. Usually older and often veterans of World War II, hawks rejected any form of what they considered appeasement. They drew analogies to the 1938 Munich conference where the French and British gave concessions to Hitler in an unsuccessful effort to stave off another world war.

'Doves' argued that the war was not in the national interest and questioned its morality. Usually younger, doves were concerned about the draft and the unequal burdens it placed on the poor and uneducated. Despite sharing similar concerns, a huge gap remained between dove political elites and many young dove non-elites in terms of strategy. Disillusioned with government, younger doves rejected efforts to engage the state. Instead, they organised teach-ins on university campuses, conducted mass demonstrations, engaged in civil disobedience, and used street theatre and songs to express their outrage and expand their numbers.

Broad public disillusionment grew through the mid-1960s. Student actions increased in intensity culminating in campus protests that frequently led to violence. Yet, despite hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the conduct of the war, nothing was achieved in the Congress to alter its direction.

With Nixon's presidential win in 1968 and his subsequent expansion of the war, doves grew increasingly disillusioned. Enormous public demonstrations filled city streets coast to coast. When US troops invaded Cambodia

in 1970, massive protests erupted on campuses across the country from elite private universities such as Harvard to small public colleges such as Kent State, where national guardsmen killed four students during a demonstration. Anger and cynicism escalated.

Since the start of the war, Congress had been relatively passive, especially in the lower house, the House of Representatives, whose rules, committees, and seniority system discouraged debates and votes on controversial issues. Many anti-war activists concluded that American political institutions were simply incapable of exercising the checks and balances necessary to stop the war. Other war critics believed that the very nature of American democracy was at stake and that to ensure the system's survival, national governing institutions must be made to respond to public concerns.

## Politics of engagement: strategies for education, organisation, and action

The ongoing anti-war education and protest efforts helped undermine some dominant political ideas about the war and expanded public opposition, thus opening up the possibility for direct political engagement. With no real end to the war in sight, a growing number of legislators had increasing doubts about its viability and costs. Yet they were not ready to embrace the full anti-war movement with its more radical challenges to venerable US institutions and symbols, such as the armed services and the American flag.

However, certain anti-war activists who knew their way around Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, began to serve as a bridge for legislative action. Concerned about the future of democratic institutions and respected by congressional doves, they were not viewed as flag burners or extremists. They also had links to elements in the peace movement which were not opposed to using the political system to create policy. Despite its previous impotence, these activists felt that the House made an ideal arena for anti-war work. Several reasons influenced their thinking:

- Voters had greater access to House members than to members of the Senate (the upper house), since representatives faced the voters every two years whilst Senators faced it only every four years.
- The House had not dealt with this issue in any substantial way since the war began.
- Given the growing intensity of street actions, the gravity of the Cambodia invasion, and the war's continuing escalation, House members new to the anti-war effort believed that they had to confront the issue directly.

In this context, the challenge was to create a congressional vehicle with political bite, one capable of mobilising public pressure and testing House members.

Most importantly, making Representatives vote on the war would increase opportunities for citizen education and organising, and eventually allow the public to hold members accountable between elections. Anti-war rhetoric had to be translated into specific votes that cut off money for the war. The votes provided the means to hold officials responsible in future elections. Yet the barriers to such a strategy were significant. Any realistic analysis of the congressional system showed that bringing a serious matter to the House floor through legislation could never successfully run the gauntlet of the House Committee system (a number of committees responsible for reviewing and introducing legislation). Moreover, the anti-war movement in the Congress had passionate champions, but few new converts to the cause.

To counter these barriers, activists with the support of legislators newly disenchanted with the war created a sign-on vehicle – a letter presenting three principles for House members' signatures that resonated with the concerns of a major sector of the anti-war movement. These were:

1. End the war on a specific date – 31 December, 1971.
2. Stop all funding to support the war after that date.
3. Return all Prisoners of War.

The inclusion of a specific date to end the war was crucial to peace activists since it provided a specific timeline for termination. The curtailment of funding gave the Statement of Principles political teeth. This was a statement that asked Congressional Members to put their signature on the line and set a date for cutting off funds.

The position on Prisoners of War (POW) was a politically tricky issue. President Nixon had used POWs as an emotional tool to justify the air attacks and the continued escalation of the conflict. Nixon conditioned any end of the war to their return. No elected official was against the return of the POWs, however, the anti-war movement was opposed to using the POWs as a condition for ending US involvement. The Statement fudged the issue by not answering the question of conditionality.

A common sign-on letter for both political parties (Republic and Democrat) proved too difficult to negotiate, so organisers created separate letters for each party, each affirming the same principles. This strategy allowed Republicans to show their opposition to the Republic Nixon and encouraged a new cast of Democrats to emerge and take the lead against the war. Geographically spread across the country, these Democrats were seen as serious legislators and not considered movement zealots. Organisers sought out such credible respected House members from both parties to lend their signatures to the separate sign-on letters. After attaining their sponsorship, the two letters were ready to be sent out to the rest of the House for members' consideration.

The letters, which did not contain the complexities of

legislation such as details about withdrawal or conditionalities, provided a way for voters to get their Representatives to state their beliefs about Vietnam publicly. A strategy had been found to focus anti-war energies on the House for the first time.

To promote the sign-on effort, a grassroots campaign was spearheaded by Common Cause, a new advocacy organisation less than a year old whose members had chosen ending the war as their first legislative priority. The organisation was committed to making the system and its institutions responsive to citizen concerns. Using a new inexpensive phone technology, Common Cause called people at home to get them to ask their Representative to sign on to the Statement of Principles. Together, Common Cause and the cooperating legislators succeeded in creating a sustained effort by the House to address the issue. Yet, those anti-War activists not focused on the Congress continued to ignore it and actions between the different groups were not coordinated.

The initial Statement of Principles effort led to additional congressional actions. Organisers got the Democratic caucus in the House to call a vote of its members on the issue but the resolution was rejected by a close margin. Even though the vote was supposed to be secret, anti-war legislators helped make the results public. Those who opposed the resolution were then bombarded with phone calls and letters from their constituents and asked again to sign the Statement of Principles.

As the sign-on campaign continued, organisers found a specific legislative vehicle to use in their advocacy – the military procurement law. Non-controversial, this routine law had to be approved annually. Without it, the military could not be funded. Well in advance of the annual vote, statement organisers and Common Cause asked two members of the House Armed Services Committee<sup>1</sup> to introduce an anti-war amendment that barred funds for military procurement. Since the amendment was related to the bill's content, the initiative could not be blocked by House rules. This initiative generated another public campaign to pressure legislators to support the amendment. While the vote failed, it provided crucial momentum for ongoing organising and advocacy. More Democratic legislators voted for the amendment than cast votes in the House Democratic caucus. More legislators voted for the amendment than signed the Democratic and Republican Statement of Principles.

On 1 January, 1972, President Nixon further escalated the war. Opposition was immediate and substantial. Activists felt that they now had legislative outlets that could address their concerns. The House Democratic Caucus instructed the House Foreign Affairs Committee to send legislation to the floor calling for ending the war. The legislation lost, but this was another important step in

<sup>1</sup> The committee responsible for reviewing and introducing legislation related to the military.

reasserting the accountability of legislative committees. The war continued for three more years before it came to an end. Finally troops were withdrawn in 1975 as the South Vietnamese army collapsed.

## Lessons learned

In reflecting on those dramatic days, here is what stands out:

- It is possible to challenge prevailing conventional wisdom and so called expert opinion, and turn such actions into sustained political and policy opposition. This work, however, is long and slow and requires patience, creativity, and perseverance.
- Advocacy and political action strategies need to be multi-dimensional. Protest and electoral politics are never enough. Combining them with public education, organising, and congressional actions is crucial for challenging conventional wisdom and promoting lasting change.
- Policies advocated have to be true to, and resonate with, the movements that created the political demands for change.
- Knowing the formal and informal aspects of how elected institutions work is critical for success.
- To build and strengthen public support, advocates must be prepared to argue with power holders.
- Framing issues in ways that draw public support is essential especially when the decision makers oppose what is being called for.
- Recognise and value public officials who will work closely with movements.
- Understand the culture and operations of formal political institutions and develop strategies to manoeuvre and use the system. Do so even if you do not agree with them. Elected bodies have customs and habits that are different from NGOs, public interest groups, or social movements.
- In developing creative congressional vehicles, be specific on policies that legislators have the power to act on.
- If legislation does not work, try other ways of making members state their beliefs.

**David Cohen, Co-Chair, Board and Co-Director,  
Advocacy Institute,  
1629 K Street NW, Suite 200,  
Washington, DC 20006, USA.  
Tel: +1 202 777 7546; Fax: +1 202 777 7577;  
Email: dcohen@advocacy.org.**