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Vietnam and the Rise of the New Left

By the fall of 1965, as College Republican chairman, I was speaking and debating on campuses all over the country. More and more, the war in Vietnam became the paramount issue of concern to college audiences. By then, the American troop buildup had begun in earnest, and U.S. combat units were now fighting in Vietnam. Most conservatives were still committed to a policy of defeating Communism in South Vietnam, but the war had dragged on longer than most Americans were willing to accept, and there seemed to be no quick end in sight. The "protracted war" in Vietnam finally gave the New Left the opportunity to gain a major foothold on our college campuses.

Their previous efforts to rally students around the so-called free speech movement which erupted at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in the early sixties and to take over control and direction of the popular civil rights movement, had ended in failure. But Vietnam was "made to order" for the New Left. On college campuses throughout the country, young males

were at risk of being drafted and sent off to Vietnam where other young Americans were dying in steadily increasing numbers.

So the New Left provided political ammunition through speeches, writings, campus teach-ins, and organized protests against the war—helping draft-aged young men justify their personal desire to avoid military service in general and Vietnam in particular. New Left leaders correctly sensed that this single issue had the potential to radicalize a significant number of young Americans from the sixties generation. This new breed of student radicals wasn't just against the war in Vietnam. They were on the other side.

My first major exposure to the national dimensions of this new political phenomenon came in 1965 when I observed a major demonstration against the war in Washington organized by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The chants "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" and "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh," the flurry of Viet Cong flags being carried by the demonstrators, the signs referring to American soldiers in Vietnam as "baby killers," and the speech-making by a variety of radical activists, all added up to a clear message: America is supporting the wrong side in that war. We will do what we can to see that America and our South Vietnamese allies go down to defeat in Vietnam.

Walking away from the crowd that afternoon, I couldn't help but be impressed by the formidable political movement SDS had mobilized in the three years since the Port Huron Statement. This was a movement to be reckoned with. What also took me by surprise that hot, summer day in Washington was the degree of contempt the New Leftists had for the old Liberal Establishment.

Clark Kissinger, the executive secretary of SDS, denounced liberals as "guardians of the corporate state." His comments were wildly applauded. Thus, another group was attacking Establishment liberalism just as forcefully from the Left as the young conservatives were attacking it from the Right. The lines were being drawn on both sides of the political aisle for a later confrontation between conservative populism and Leftist populism, although at the time the Liberal Establishment seemed to be the principal target of both sides.

But, at the time, most American students still supported the goal of defeating the Communist attempt to take over South

Vietnam. Even with protest rallies that were drawing bigger and bigger crowds, leftist support among the young had yet to match, either in terms of number of followers or impact on the campuses, that of our movement. When I was national chairman of the College Republicans, we had approximately eight hundred chapters on college campuses and over 110,000 members. We were the largest student political organization in America at the time.

But the political momentum was beginning to turn against us. SDS and other anti-Vietnam organizations were gaining in influence on the campuses, aided to no small degree by the support of university professors and journalists sympathetic to their cause.

While the political momentum was beginning to shift on the war issue, there was still a lot of support on the campuses for our soldiers in Vietnam. As a way of proving that point, in the fall of 1965 I organized a bipartisan National Student Committee for the Defense of Vietnam.

Our initial press conference was on the campus of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. A throng of reporters turned out for the event where we announced a national petition drive on campuses across the country in support of our troops in Vietnam. After the three of us on the stage made our opening statements, we turned it over to the press for questions.

The only question I still remember was the one raised by a young journalist from *U.S. News & World Report* who wanted to know what our current draft status was and what our own plans were regarding military service. I assumed he was trying to make the point that none of us on the stage seemed to be in a hurry to sign up for Vietnam. I was prepared for that particular question although my colleagues on the podium appeared taken aback. I had been wrestling with what I was going to do about military service for some time. Being of draft age myself, would I join the military or rely indefinitely on a student deferment in order to avoid military service? It was a fair question, even though I thought the young reporter in his bow tie and seersucker suit was a wise ass trying to embarrass us.

I knew in my mind that I would be nothing but a hypocrite if I ducked my own obligation to serve. So the reporter's question gave me the opportunity to declare publicly what I had already

made up my mind to do—I would enlist in the military once my term as College Republican chairman was completed.

I was tempted to ask the young reporter what his own military status was, but decided that it was better to keep my mouth shut and play it straight.

A few of us worked long hours over the next few months to coordinate this national petition campaign. Our goal was to produce hard evidence that the New Left's views on Vietnam were unrepresentative of the opinions of the student population at large. We were more successful than we had anticipated.

By January, 1966, we had identified and collected signatures from more than half a million students on more than three hundred campuses across the country. This was accomplished on a budget of practically zero, with the only substantial contributions received being the use of long distance WATS lines that enabled us to contact student leaders all over America who were working on the project with us.

Next came my first, direct exposure to the Washington policy makers who were directing the war effort in Vietnam. I wanted to set up a meeting with the president, to present the petition, figuring that the Johnson administration would be eager to meet with any student group supporting American policy in Vietnam, particularly in light of the large number of student signatures we had collected.

I met first with an official on McGeorge Bundy's staff at the National Security Council, whose job included encouraging domestic support for administration policy in Vietnam. He was vague about setting up a meeting with Lyndon Johnson. I had the feeling that he didn't quite know what to do with our group. I could only guess that he was afraid, since I was a campus leader of the Republican party, my views on Vietnam were probably closer to Barry Goldwater's than to the current Johnson-McNamara-Bundy policy of prosecuting the war. He was, of course, correct. But I tried to convince him that all we wanted to do was to counteract the growing impression from the New Left that most college students were opposed to our being in Vietnam. Finally, he decided to solve a potential problem by having us make our presentation to Vice President Humphrey instead.

We met in the vice president's office with what seemed like most of the White House press corps in attendance. Hubert Humphrey couldn't have been nicer to us although he seemed to talk on endlessly, living up to his loquacious reputation. After we finished our presentation, we were peppered with questions. What took me aback was the hostility from many of the journalists in the room. A few reporters tried to poke holes in the results of our petition campaign, while the *New York Times* reporter implied that we had made up our figures. These weren't members of the "alternative" press, but representatives of the most prestigious newspapers in America, including the *Washington Post*.

We had done our homework, however, and provided the reporters with whatever back-up data they requested. A few made it very clear that they just didn't believe that half a million American college students still supported our soldiers in Vietnam.

I left that day proud of what we had accomplished in a matter of just a few months. By this point in the war, conservatives were providing the only real leadership on the campuses for the proposition that we should defend South Vietnam against Communist aggression. Most Young Democratic organizations held views on Vietnam closer to those of the New Left than their own Democratic administration. Additionally, my initial exposure to leading members of the Washington press corps led me to conclude that the mainstream press had turned against the war.

What I didn't realize at the time was that the Liberal Establishment policy makers like Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Roger Hilsman, and others, who were directing our strategy in Vietnam, were in the process of changing their minds about the efficacy of defeating Communism in South Vietnam.

In January, 1966, I still believed that our side would prevail. However, the mood was growing ugly on the campuses. Debates over the war became more acrimonious, with leftist activists using obscenities to shout down speakers like me who sought to defend American objectives in Vietnam. Emotion displaced reason and student radicals correctly sensed that their ability to effectively shut down real debate on the issue at various universities across the country worked to their advantage in their efforts to mobilize political support. I had more than a few unpleasant experiences

trying to articulate a dissenting view to the leftist line on Vietnam. One time when I was speaking at a campus teach-in, a radical type came running down the aisle shouting obscenities in an obvious attempt to disrupt my presentation.

The media's attitude toward the New Left was frustrating to those of us on the other side of the Vietnam debate who saw the student radicals up close. So many of the leftist "celebrities" struck me as little more than ego-tripping media hounds whose influence on the campuses was vastly overestimated. I never was particularly concerned that well-publicized radicals such as Jerry Rubin or Abbie Hoffman would be able to usher in dramatic changes in the American political system. We viewed Rubin and Hoffman as leftist clowns trying to draw attention to themselves by acting out a series of outrageous stunts designed to shock middle-class America.

Yet the New Left had its share of serious-minded leaders who knew exactly what they were doing in their attempts to advance the "revolutionary agenda."

Tom Hayden was one such leader as I discovered for myself one evening at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey at an all-night teach-in on the Vietnam issue. All shades of opinion were represented by the speakers who addressed the students during the course of the evening. I participated, along with Democratic Senator Birch Bayh from Indiana, conservative newsman Fulton Lewis III, Hayden, and others.

One of the spokesmen for the Left was a self-proclaimed Marxist who took what I viewed as the Stalinist position on the war: Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese Communists were a progressive group of nationalists fighting against the American "imperialists" and their South Vietnamese "puppet" regime.

Tom Hayden offered a more sophisticated rationale as to why the United States and our South Vietnamese allies should lose the war. He argued that the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese arm of the Communist forces in Indochina, truly represented the sentiments of the South Vietnamese people and would establish a more equitable regime if allowed to come to power.

Listening to Hayden speak that evening, it didn't take me long to figure out that this guy was no Abbie Hoffman or Jerry Rubin.

He came across as an intensely brilliant firebrand, who had a look in his eyes which suggested that he would not hesitate to trample anyone who got in the way of the "revolution." A later, favorable article in the *Village Voice* said that Hayden saw himself as the Ho Chi Minh of America. I didn't doubt it after watching him in action that evening. This guy was serious about making a political revolution in America, and he had a strategic sense of how the Left could accomplish that goal. As a political issue, Vietnam was the perfect ideological weapon for Hayden to use as he sought to mobilize large masses of young people against the American political system.

As was the case with most of the Vietnam teach-ins being held on college campuses in those days, those of us on the conservative side of the debate were underrepresented that evening. (In some teach-ins, those who supported the principle of defeating Communism in South Vietnam weren't even allowed to participate.)

Fulton Lewis III, the son of the famous radio commentator for Mutual Radio, Fulton Lewis, Jr., and I were the two principal speakers for the conservatives. I tried to make the point in my remarks that the Viet Cong were effectively under the control of Ho Chi Minh's regime. Many Vietnamese already had declared their position on living under a Communist regime in the North by voting with their feet and fleeing to South Vietnam in the mid-fifties when they were given the opportunity. Clearly, I argued, the people of South Vietnam did not want to live under Communism. The battle for South Vietnam was not a choice between an indigent, progressive group of guerrillas vs. a right-wing dictatorship but was a struggle between a hardened Communist regime in North Vietnam and a society in the South that wanted to maintain independence from Communist rule.

As so often happened when I debated the Vietnam issue on college campuses, New Left types in the audience attempted to shout me down while I was speaking. But I was used to the drill by then, and resumed my remarks once the shouting had died down. Student radicals were not known for their willingness to listen to anyone who disagreed with them. I left the event that evening pleased with the overall reception I had received. At least I had offered the students a different perspective on the war than they

were accustomed to hearing from their liberal professors and resident campus radicals.

When it came to the question of American policy toward Vietnam, about the only effective opposition to the New Left was coming from the conservatives. New Deal and New Frontier liberals didn't know how to deal with this new breed of leftists except to cave in to their demands. And political pragmatists were unable to come to grips with, and effectively respond to, the so-called idealism of the student radicals. We conservatives were not intimidated by the New Left.

There was little in common between the new conservatives and the student radicals other than a mutual disenchantment with the policies of the Liberal Establishment. Neither movement had any use for Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, whom both sides viewed as the principal architect of our Vietnam policy. To the Left, McNamara was a "war criminal" while the Right saw him as a "corporate technocrat" whose policy of gradual escalation of the war in order to bring the North Vietnamese government to the negotiating table was a "no-win" strategy.

Not only were young conservatives and New Leftists political opposites, we were temperamentally dissimilar. Traditionally-oriented families tended to produce conservative activists, whereas, when it came to the Left, the trend was *Liberal Parents, Radical Children*, to use the title of a book by Midge Decter.

While the conservative movement was middle class to the core, New Left leaders tended to be products of upper-middle class, liberal households. Whereas the young conservatives by and large were religious believers, the Left was heavily populated with ex-Catholics, secularized Jews, and humanistic Protestants, who either no longer believed in God or favored a watered-down, World Council of Churches kind of religion which emphasized "social justice" issues rather than salvation. For example, SDS leader Tom Hayden was an ex-Catholic and a religious nonbeliever.

By and large, the student radicals viewed religion as useful only insofar as the churches helped further the goal of building a heaven on earth (a humane Marxism, if you will) under New Left auspices.

Educationally, their ranks included a high percentage of graduate students and teaching assistants, particularly in such fields as political science, history, English, economics, and philosophy. They were apt to be found in the most prestigious universities with more liberal reputations, such as the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Michigan, Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin, and the Ivy League schools. (Interestingly enough, the New Left seemed to have only a minimum impact on colleges in the Sunbelt—excluding some California schools—at Catholic universities, and at fundamentalist Christian colleges like Wheaton in Illinois).

In *Roots of Radicalism*, Professors Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter have described the backgrounds and value systems of the families who produced many of the SDS leaders:

Their fathers were mostly wealthy, well-educated, upper middle-class professionals, such as college faculty, doctors, and lawyers. Their parents were politically liberal and also shared the socially liberal values of intellectualism, estheticism, secularism and self-expression.

By late 1966 and early 1967, the tide was clearly shifting in favor of the New Left as it began to displace the College Republicans as the most influential political force on the campuses. In fact, by 1968 SDS claimed some eighty to a hundred thousand recruits on several hundred campuses.

My own university was becoming virtually unrecognizable. Contemporaneous with the growing influence at Georgetown of the so-called progressive faction of Jesuits, a number of students were clamoring for change. While I was still an undergraduate, a group of us got into a heated discussion one day about what kind of university Georgetown ought to be. Two of my classmates (Bob Shrum and Phil Vasta), both of whom later would go on to Harvard for graduate studies, argued that Georgetown should try to become more like the Ivy League schools.

How was this to be accomplished? By not being so "parochial," which meant in their parlance that Georgetown should be less Catholic in its values, and by deemphasizing traditional philosophy and theology along with an approach that values education for

its own sake. Instead, make Georgetown more "relevant" by adding new departments of sociology and psychology while stressing a behaviorist approach to human knowledge.

Simply put, my classmates' objective was to turn Georgetown University into a secular institution modeled after schools such as Harvard and Yale.

In our debate over the future direction of Georgetown, I argued that the university should maintain its unique character—one clearly distinct from that of the Ivy League schools or state universities. My two opponents, both of whom were highly intelligent and very articulate, told me that their position ultimately would prevail and that Georgetown would join the ranks one day of the elite Ivy League institutions in our country. I sensed at the time that they were probably right. I just didn't think the changes would come so quickly.

Bill Clinton's freshman year in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service was 1965. We became acquainted as a result of our mutual interest in politics. Within a short time after his arrival, he was elected president of his freshman class and was being spoken of even then as a young man with a bright political future. At the time, Clinton didn't appear to be caught up in the New Left movement. He styled himself a Kennedy Democrat and struck me as the "corporate liberal" type of young politico—intent on moving up the political ladder as rapidly as possible and willing to adjust his views accordingly in order to succeed.

Georgetown University in 1965 was not yet a hotbed of leftist politics. There were few, if any, students from our school who participated that summer in the SDS demonstration against the war in Washington, D.C. Thus, it was surprising when I later learned that Clinton had turned to the left politically in the late sixties and joined the anti-Vietnam protest movement.

In retrospect, however, that political shift of Bill Clinton to the left in the latter part of that decade becomes more explainable. By the mid-sixties, the mood on college campuses was changing. As the war heated up and an increasing number of young men were dying in Vietnam, draft-aged students were more susceptible to the New Left's position that America was the villain in Vietnam. Apparently, Bill Clinton bought the student

radical line concerning the war and became a full-fledged member of the anti-Vietnam protest movement while at Georgetown and continued his active participation thereafter as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford in 1969.

The "new Georgetown" fell into step with the conventional wisdom of the leftist academics that America was engaged in an immoral war. Professor George Carey was one of the few professors at Georgetown who dared to dissent publicly from the leftist line. But Bill Clinton never had the benefit of studying American government under George Carey while at Georgetown. Instead, as Clinton acknowledged in his acceptance speech at the 1992 Democratic convention, the professor who most shaped his views was Carroll Quigley, a committed liberal who taught history in the School of Foreign Service. I never took any courses from Dr. Quigley, but I understand that he had a great influence on the thinking of many of his students. Most of my activities as chairman of the College Republicans from 1965 to 1967 had to do with battling the New Left over Vietnam and related issues. By this time, many influential university institutions had fallen under the ideological control of the student radicals.

One of the most important organizations controlled by the Left was the National Student Association (NSA), an umbrella association of student governments on major college campuses across the country. It was extremely well-funded by major American foundations, including the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, and represented U.S. student opinion at major international youth conferences. The leadership of NSA was strongly opposed to American policy in Vietnam, branding the United States as the "aggressor." As a result of NSA's consistent leftist stances on major foreign and domestic policy issues, young conservatives led a fight to encourage colleges and universities to drop their affiliation with it. The efforts resulted in more than 150 colleges and universities tossing NSA off campus and almost as many voted to disaffiliate soon after they had joined.

As an opponent of NSA, I debated on many occasions the issue of whether its views were so extreme that student governments should withdraw from the organization. I couldn't understand how NSA was able to persuade prominent organizations to give

them so much money. So, I took the opportunity to ask NSA president Phil Sherbourne directly about their finances. We flew down on the same plane from D.C. to a college in Virginia to debate the merits of membership in the NSA. He told me there was a "kindly" businessman in Boston who was very interested in encouraging student involvement in public affairs and that he was a big financial supporter of theirs. Phil was suitably vague when I pressed for more specifics. So I didn't pursue the point, although I didn't understand why some American businessman would give large chunks of money to a far left student organization. We went on with our debate, and I didn't give the matter much thought until shortly before I was to enter military service. The story broke in February 1967 that the "kindly" businessman the NSA president had referred to was apparently a CIA case officer. In addition to receiving funds from the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, NSA was getting substantial sums of money through CIA fronts. Altogether, CIA-provided tax dollars amounting to more than \$3 million went into NSA's coffers.

It was quite a shock to me and to so many other young conservatives to discover that our own government through the CIA was providing left-wing student leaders with a significant percentage of their financial support. Here we were as the National College Republicans trying to make do on a budget in the tens of thousands of dollars while NSA was getting huge sums of money from the CIA. It was disillusioning to see the stupidity of the U.S. foreign policy makers at work in an arena with which I was intimately acquainted.

The CIA's rationalization for the funding of NSA was that it helped them get information on foreign student leaders and movements as a result of NSA's leaders attending international student conferences. While the CIA may have gleaned some information of minor value as a result of these overseas contacts, the damage done domestically was immeasurable. Our own government was funding a student organization that was working closely with New Left activists whose aim was to bring down the American political system.

The public disclosure of CIA funding must have been quite a traumatic experience for NSA's leaders. Here was a leftist student

organization regularly denouncing, both at home and abroad, American foreign policy, only to have it revealed publicly that a majority of its annual budget came from the CIA covertly through the channels of various cooperative tax-exempt foundations. Apparently, NSA had become so dependent on CIA money by early 1967 that there was a vigorous debate among NSA board members (even after the public disclosure of the CIA connection) over whether to continue the CIA relationship in some other clandestine fashion. Finally, the NSA board decided to end its relationship with the agency. Its chairman, Sam Brown, issued the following statement:

The National Supervisory Board of the National Student Association unanimously favors severing all ties with the [CIA]. The Board is currently considering the extent of NSA's relations with the CIA, ways to insure that all ties are eliminated, and internal reforms to insure it will not happen again.

New Left leader Sam Brown later would head up the Anti-Vietnam Moratorium Committee which held a massive protest against the war in 1968. One of his organizers for that demonstration was Bill Clinton. In 1977 Brown was appointed by President Jimmy Carter as director of ACTION, an independent federal agency in charge of volunteer programs such as VISTA and the Peace Corps.

As the sixties neared its conclusion, those of us who called ourselves conservatives appeared to be relegated to the losing side in American politics. Our political hero Barry Goldwater had gone down in flames in the 1964 presidential election, and now the New Left had surpassed the conservatives as the most influential political movement on America's campuses.

But, for the moment, my mind was focused on other matters. I was on my way to army basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.