



**OXFORD JOURNALS**  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 147-161

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789465>

Accessed: 08/02/2013 14:41

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## REVIEW ESSAY

### “WHEN DID THE SIXTIES HAPPEN?” SEARCHING FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

By Andrew Hunt

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“Say the report is exaggerated.”

—Mark Twain (to *Evening Sun* correspondent, London,  
April 3, 1906, regarding a report of his death).

When did “the sixties” happen? This is not a trick question. In fact, the query poses a challenge to anyone interested in contemporary U.S. history. It addresses the ways in which writers and scholars have conceptualized the rise and fall of protest movements of the past fifty years, particularly during the most turbulent decade in American history. Most importantly, the answer to the question defines the parameters of the different periods of the recent past.

For our purposes, “the sixties” does not simply describe a decade. The term calls to mind, in the words of James Miller, “an impetuous and extreme spirit—youthful and reckless, searching and headstrong, foolhardy and romantic, willing to try almost anything.”<sup>1</sup> More specifically in this case, “the sixties” has become synonymous with “the movement,” a vague yet frequently used expression used to describe a cluster of mass protests, on local and national levels, typically originating from Civil Rights or Black Power struggles, the antiwar movement, the New Left, student power groups, feminism, and other political, cultural or minority activists. According to Terry H. Anderson, the movement represented a “loose coalition,” often defined by shifting alliances, “attacking almost every institution, from the armed forces to religion, from business to government.”<sup>2</sup>

Why is it necessary to pinpoint the existence and decline of “the movement”? For years, research on sixties protests has been dominated by histories of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), perhaps because the group’s rise and fall provided such a compelling narrative. In 1960, a small group of committed student activists, influenced by the Civil Rights and peace movements, founded SDS. Fifty-nine SDSers met at Port Huron, Michigan, in June 1962 to draft the organization’s “Port Huron Statement,” a prescient critique of postwar American capitalism. SDS quickly became the key focus of New Left radicalism in the United States, attracting young Civil Rights and antiwar activists. Its ambitious Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), launched in 1963, sought to “mobilize white wage earners around the issues of job security, better housing, and racial solidarity and to provide them with some means of expressing community grievances.”<sup>3</sup> Estimates of SDS’s size vary, but by the late 1960s its own membership rolls boasted 100,000 members. The organization collapsed in the summer of 1969 as a result of a devastating political split between two ultraleft sects, Progressive Labor and the Weathermen.

The story of SDS is critical to our understanding of the period, but its significance has been inflated by sixties scholars for the purpose of establishing a consensus history of the era. This essay will survey many of the key developments in the literature on the sixties and early seventies during the past quarter of a century. It will argue that SDS provides an inadequate conceptual framework for understanding the breadth and diversity of protest activity in the 1960s and 1970s. So much dissent and grass-roots resistance occurred outside of SDS's spotlight that it would be a terrible mistake to allow the group's evolution and decline to dictate the boundaries of sixties history and research. To illustrate this point, this article will illuminate varieties of dissent that outlived SDS's 1969 collapse. In doing so, it will serve as a plea for scholars to devote further research to radical social movements that endured beyond SDS's demise.

In the past twenty years, the literature on sixties protest movements has mushroomed. The current state of sixties research owes much to SDS histories. The genre began with Kirkpatrick Sale's seminal *SDS* (1973), and quickly spread to include such titles as Irwin Unger's *The Movement: A History of the American New Left* (1974), Wini Breines' *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (1982), James Miller's *Democracy is in the Streets* (1987), and Maurice Isserman's *If I Had a Hammer* (1987). Participant-observer histories, too, factored prominently into the early literature. Useful memoirs on sixties protests came from Abe Peck (*Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*, 1985), Todd Gitlin (*The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, 1986), Tom Hayden (*Reunion*, 1987) and Mary King (*Freedom's Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*, 1984). The boundaries separating the genres have not always been so sharply defined, however. Gitlin's memoir is also, to a large degree, an SDS history. It is important to add that during the eighties, coinciding with publication of SDS and participant-observer histories, a flood of works appeared chronicling the Civil Rights movement, which provided role models for scholars studying contemporary protest movements.<sup>4</sup>

Several accounts have successfully placed the sixties in the context of earlier progenitors and events. Most notably, Isserman's *If I Had a Hammer* ably demonstrated that in various tactical and ideological ways, the fifties Left provided a thin residue of soil on the barren landscape of Cold War America for the flowering of the New Left. Other historians have done outstanding jobs of tracing the origins of sixties protest movements.<sup>5</sup> In almost all cases, these historians explore the stirrings of dissent in the fifties: the Beat writings of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, which celebrated Jazz and sexuality and the freedom of the open road; the hip-gyrating rock 'n' roll of Elvis Presley; the radical insights of independent Marxist scholars such as C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm; the literature of alienation written by Paul Goodman, J.D. Sallinger, and Arthur Miller; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s courageous leadership in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and 1956. By the early 1960s, Betty Friedan had created the foundation of a women's liberation movement with her thought-provoking best-seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, and Rachel Carson's stirring *Silent Spring* warned Americans of an impending environmental catastrophe.

Although scholars have generally excelled at locating early sources of dissent, few have attempted to explore the decline of protest activity. Because the literature on early seventies protest movements is still sparse, a definitive answer

to the question of when “the movement” ended (and thus, when it happened) remains elusive. Indeed, it is arguably this point where one finds the most discord in the scholarship.

Not surprisingly, SDS histories argue, with almost complete unanimity, that the sixties ended with the collapse of SDS in 1969–1970. Perhaps the clearest example of SDS-centric sixties history is found in Kirkpatrick Sale’s *SDS*. The era ended on March 6, 1970, Sale argued, when a faulty pipe bomb destroyed a Manhattan townhouse, killing three radical members of the Weathermen. A militant, ultraleft sect, the Weathermen represented one of the last surviving fragments of the moribund SDS. Sale wrote: “The explosion on West Eleventh Street was the ultimate symbol of SDS’s tragic and ominous demise, and of the decade which had shaped it.”<sup>6</sup> According to Sale and other SDS histories, the vigorous spirit of reform which captured so many imaginations in the early 1960s, and inspired countless youths to embrace “participatory politics” and fight for Civil Rights and an end to the Vietnam war, collapsed into a tragic paroxysm of violence and despair by 1970.

Sale’s monograph was the first, by many years, in a long line of books chronicling the history of sixties protest activity. Subsequent volumes focused heavily on SDS, pinpointing the demise of the sixties around the collapse of SDS and the killings at Kent State and Jackson State universities in May 1970. Echoing Sale’s findings, Milton Viorst explained the reasons for activism’s death knell:

The decade ended because the civil rights movement, which was responsible for its conception, no longer contributed to the seed to enrich it. It ended because antiwar protest, discredited at Chicago, never regained popular approval. It ended because a consensus was reached that the country had blundered in entering the war, and because Americans accepted the government’s assurances that only time was needed until the last soldiers came home. The 1960s ended because a society can function at a feverish emotional pitch for only so long, and Americans, after ten years of it, were tired.<sup>7</sup>

Similar conclusions are found in the work of Todd Gitlin. His memoir-history *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987) is still widely and rightfully regarded as one of the most outstanding works of the field. Nevertheless, Gitlin makes numerous assertions about the decline of social movements with few sources to substantiate his claims. He attributes the movement’s downward spiral to the protests at the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention, the collapse of SDS in 1969 into ultraleft factions, the violent beating of concertgoers (including the murders of at least four people) by Hells Angels at the Altamont rock festival in December 1969, and the killings at Kent State. However, he makes no attempt to explore or assess movement activity in the early seventies. Toward the end of *The Sixties*, Gitlin noted: “The youth culture which had swooped into antiwar action in 1965 found more placid and private ways to strut its generational stuff.” By the early seventies, the “riptide of the Revolution” went “out with the same force it surged in with.”<sup>8</sup>

A recurring theme in most of the SDS histories is that the New Left bore most of the blame for the demise of “the movement.” Poorly chosen tactics, ultra-militant rhetoric, internecine splits, an inability to coalesce with the “working class,” and careless arrogance are all cited as reasons why activists failed to effec-

tively exploit the rising tide of protest. Allen Matusow, author of the influential *The Unraveling of America*, viewed "the movement" (a term he uses interchangeably with "the New Left") as a short-lived, youthful rebellion against the failings of postwar liberalism. He contended that the New Left collapsed for a number of reasons, most importantly because it failed "to fashion an ideology for a native American radicalism."<sup>9</sup> Other authors, focusing on the pivotal year 1968, concluded that events beyond the control of youthful idealists crushed radical reform efforts. Two decades later, David Caute, whose *Year of the Barricades* promised to take readers on a "journey through 1968," explored in detail the cataclysmic events around the world that shattered political activism. Like Kirkpatrick Sale, Caute credited the March 6, 1970 townhouse explosion for the final ruin of SDS. Yet Caute ably placed the townhouse explosion in the context of a string of traumatic episodes, occurring in the span of two years, that severely undermined the New Left. By the time of the Kent State killings, Caute found, "the rioting was over and with it died the momentum of student protest. The campus insurrection that had begun at Berkeley in 1964 faded and was replaced by the reassuring contours of normality."<sup>10</sup>

Curiously, only a handful of writers and academics have acknowledged the devastating impact of the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Programs (COINTELPRO) on political activism in general and the New Left in particular. The few scholars who have studied COINTELPRO in any detail generally agree that it did incalculable harm to radical political movements in the sixties.<sup>11</sup> In *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up*, sociologists Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks emphasized the role of authorities in repressing New Left activities. The authors noted: "[The] FBI and other intelligence agencies carried out programs of harassment and surveillance of questionable legality. Such activities were widely publicized, and ultimately a paralyzing paranoia spread throughout the youth and student communities. Youths questioned whether the risk of extreme physical danger was a reasonable price to pay for confrontation with authority."<sup>12</sup>

Despite variations, nearly all of the SDS histories placed the death of "the movement" sometime between the Chicago Democratic National Convention of August 1968 and the killings at Kent State in May 1970. However, this simplistic "death of the sixties" chronology relies on faulty generalizations and ignores several realities. It is important to remember that not all activists became radicalized as a result of reading C. Wright Mills or taking part in ERAP. Tens of thousands of protesters fell outside the category of the "we" of "this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities," as outlined in the "Port Huron Statement." Even SDS was not a monolithic organization, and there have been relatively few detailed studies of individual local chapters.<sup>13</sup>

The first direct (though perhaps unintentional) challenge to SDS accounts came from a series of books on the antiwar movement, beginning with Thomas Powers' *Vietnam: The War at Home*.<sup>14</sup> Powers' history was followed by more thorough ones: Fred Halstead's *Out Now!* (1979), Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan's *Who Spoke Up?* (1984), Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield's *An American Ordeal* (1990), and Tom Wells' *The War Within* (1994). Most of these works questioned the breadth of SDS's influence. For Zaroulis and Sullivan, it was the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (SMC), not SDS, that assumed the main leadership role in the antiwar movement on

university campuses across the nation. SDS refused to participate in the founding meeting of the SMC in 1966 and never subsequently affiliated with the organization. SDS's decision not to participate in the SMC, maintained Zaroulis and Sullivan, "sounded the death knell of SDS as a leader in the student movement nationwide."<sup>15</sup> This conclusion supports veteran activist Fred Halstead's claim that instead of disappearing in 1969 and 1970, many SDS chapters nationwide either formed new local organizations or "affiliated with SMC or other national organizations."<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the negative impact of SDS's demise on the antiwar movement has been overstated. The antiwar movement enjoyed numerous successes in the early seventies. The August 1970 Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles represented "one of the largest and most significant political demonstrations in Mexican American history," observed Arturo Rosales.<sup>17</sup> Arguably the most moving and highly publicized act of resistance against the war occurred on April 23, 1971, when more than a thousand members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) converged on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., to throw their medals and ribbons in protest against American policies in Indochina. The following day, April 24, the National Peace Action Coalition and the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice sponsored marches in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., which turned out to be the largest demonstrations in the history of the antiwar movement. Some organizations, such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, Another Mother For Peace, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the War Resisters League grew steadily in 1971 and 1972.

Tom Wells' *The War Within* is the most significant work on the antiwar movement written in the past decade. Wells, one of Gitlin's disciples from Berkeley (before Gitlin moved to New York University), accurately assesses SDS' overall impact on the antiwar movement. Like Zaroulis and Chatfield, he concludes that SDS played a short-lived role in the leadership of the antiwar movement by sponsoring a significant early march in April 1965. But shortly afterward, SDS abdicated its leadership position in the antiwar movement, a decision that leader Paul Booth called "a colossal blunder."<sup>18</sup>

*The War Within* and its predecessors revealed countless protests that existed outside of SDS's orbit. By the 1990s, enclaves of scholars were becoming aware that far from being dead, protest activity thrived in the early seventies. They began to examine sixties history outside of SDS's confines. Shifting interpretations of the period owed much to three key works: Alice Echols' *Daring to Be Bad* (1987), a history of radical feminism in postwar America; David Farber's *Chicago '68* (1988), a gripping account of the 1968 Democratic National Convention upheavals; and Kenneth Heineman's *Campus Wars* (1992), a narrative about campus activism at state universities. Of the three books, only Echols' research probed movement activism in the seventies in any depth. However, Farber and Heineman must be included on the list of trailblazers for introducing new methods of analyzing the period. Farber studied the Democratic National Convention from the standpoint of three groups: the radical Yippies (led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin), the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam, and Mayor Richard J. Daley and the Chicago police. Like Gitlin, Farber placed the date of the movement's death around 1968. "At Chicago, the movement

displayed its courage and its heart even as it revealed its unworkable politics.”<sup>19</sup> But Farber successfully broke free of the limitations of SDS-centered histories by turning attention to the diverse and often sharply contrasting perspectives of the movement’s activists and critics. Heineman, too, provided a fresh contribution with *Campus Wars* by utilizing oral histories, underground papers, government and university documents to explore beyond the narrow scope of traditional sixties histories. Focusing on Kent State University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, Pennsylvania State University, and Michigan State University, Heineman found distinct patterns of activism arising at each university. Heineman discovered that “the great majority of antiwar students . . . did not formally affiliate with any organization.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the first serious attempts to synthesize the multitude of movement constituencies into one volume appeared in 1994 with the publication Terry H. Anderson’s *The Movement and the Sixties*. Rather than eschew the early seventies as a barren landscape of burnout and failed dreams, Anderson referred to period as “the movement toward a New America,” which he characterized as a “kaleidoscope of activism.”<sup>21</sup> In his evaluation the early seventies, Anderson challenged the conventional wisdom of sixties history:

The movement fractured, making social activism more difficult to describe, but it also spread as participants turned toward other concerns and confronted the establishment on almost every level and at almost every institution: the university and even high schools, the church, business, military, and all forms of government, from city hall to the White House.<sup>22</sup>

The activists who took part in the “movement toward a New America” adopted different tactics, issues, and focuses from their predecessors (or, in some cases, from those they themselves used in the sixties). Hindsight enables SDS chroniclers to stamp the movement’s time of death as May 4, 1970, but that is not necessarily how people at the time perceived events. In 1971, *The Saturday Review* predicted, “The New American Revolution has begun.”<sup>23</sup> Added the activist authors of *The Second Coming*: “The sixties have seen the dawn of a new culture. The Seventies will see its flowering.”<sup>24</sup>

The early seventies witnessed a change in the dynamics of resistance. Recent studies of the era suggest that protest movements were becoming decentralized and increasingly local. Most importantly, grass-roots resistance tapped into new constituencies during the early seventies. The women’s liberation movement, for example, continued to grow after 1970, gaining its most intense momentum between 1971 and 1973. Eventually, radical feminism and, to a lesser degree, socialist-feminism, would contribute to the emergence of a more mainstream and widely accepted “cultural feminism.” The appearance of *Ms.* magazine in 1972, the proliferation of consciousness-raising groups, the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, the rise of new forms of activism (including abortion rights protests) were but a few of the indicators of cultural feminism’s heyday. In *Daring to Be Bad* (1987), Alice Echols suggested that the proliferation of feminist “counter-institutions” were evidence of a thriving feminist movement. “By 1973,” noted Echols, “feminist health centers, credit unions, rape crisis centers, bookstores, presses, and publishing companies were beginning to form across the country.”<sup>25</sup>

Another benefactor of early seventies activism was the American Indian Movement (AIM). Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior have traced the rise of AIM, from its modest beginnings in Minneapolis in July, 1968, to its steady rise to prominence in the early seventies. Smith and Warrior note that AIM and its principles of militant Native American political activism “exploded across reservations and cities from North Carolina to the Pacific Northwest during 1972.”<sup>26</sup> Like other racial and ethnic liberation groups of the early seventies, AIM provided its members not only with a well-developed ideological foundation, but a network of like-minded activists and a sense of empowerment. AIM was also the subject of intense surveillance and harassment by the FBI’s COINTELPRO units, as Ward Churchill and Jim Vanderwall have thoroughly documented.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, increasing numbers of GIs and Vietnam veterans became politicized in the early seventies. Richard Moser’s *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (1996) recounts the emergence of soldier and veteran protest in the early seventies. He explores resistance among nurses, servicemen and veterans in Vietnam and the United States, paying careful attention to GI antiwar newspapers, collective action, and organizations such as the American Servicemen’s Union (ASU) and Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). His work expands on the research of David Cortright’s 1975 book *Soldiers in Revolt*, one of the earliest analyses of GI/veteran protest. Both authors shed light on a vibrant soldiers and veterans movement that transcended single-issue politics by bringing veterans issues, military counseling, and GI rights into mainstream debates. “The military antiwar movement,” Moser observed, “fused the ideals of the American Revolution, embodied in the citizen-soldier, with the peace and justice movements of the period.”<sup>28</sup>

Other studies have assaulted traditional “sixties” paradigms that clearly distinguish between the New Left and the counterculture. Australian scholar Julie Stephens has recently analyzed the politics of “anti-disciplinary protest,” a variant and language of protest that “rejected hierarchy and leadership, strategy and planning, bureaucratic organization and political parties. . . .” Stephens credits such anarchistic countercultural groups as the Yippies, Diggers and Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers with fashioning new and in some cases effective forms of resistance that shunned the New Left’s “grim seriousness” and the older radicals’ commitment to ideology. The predominantly youthful “anti-disciplinary” protesters relied on humorous or shock tactics, theatrical performances and outlaw manifestos, ostensibly to jolt the American public out of its complacency. Abbie Hoffman, with his unrelenting ethic of playfulness, proved to be the most memorable specimen of the “anti-disciplinary” militants. Emphasizing the fluidity between counterculture and radicalism, Stephens traces the lineage of contemporary eighties and nineties protests back to anti-disciplinary resistance of the sixties, and suggests that historians and the general public alike have placed too much emphasis on the Jerry Rubin/*Big Chill* mythology that sixties radicals inevitably “sold out.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to irrelevant anti-disciplinary militancy, other sixties issues continued to resonate into the seventies. Surveying the period, James J. Farrell has argued that the “political personalism” of the sixties—which “stressed the inviolable dignity of persons” and “focused on especially poor and marginalized

persons"—survived into the seventies in the form of "the backyard revolution" (a term coined by activist Harry Boyte to describe newly emerging local citizens rights groups and neighborhood mutual aid organizations across the United States), feminism, environmentalism, and, by the late seventies, the antinuclear movement.<sup>30</sup> One might add communes to the list, which dotted much of the country by 1971. More rural communes were established between 1965 and 1970 than in all American history. In 1971, the Associated Press found that the "movement reached massive proportions" with as many as 3000 communes and upwards of 3 million inhabitants.<sup>31</sup> While activists and cynics alike tended to dismiss communes as hedonistic "cop-outs," there was no reason to judge the experiments more harshly than their Owenite, Fourierist or Oneidan predecessors. Some communes were frivolous, short-lived gatherings, while others represented conscious and, at times, effective rejections of the dominant culture. As one New Haven hippie put it: "We are trying to create a whole new culture, with its own economics and values."<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, sixties research has broadened and become more inclusive, owing much to the infusion of new recruits into the field. But not all accounts have been sympathetic to radical protest. Rick Perlstein focused on some of the recent trends and fissures in sixties history in his perceptive heuristic "Who Owns the Sixties? The Opening of a Scholarly Generation Gap," which appeared in the May/June 1996 issue of *Lingua Franca*. The greater part of the article focused on the tensions between generations and the proclivity toward revisionism among younger scholars. Many of the fresh faces insist the sixties did not represent a sharp break from the fifties, and the impact of protest has been exaggerated. If anything, they add, the focus of sixties literature should shift to the birth of the New Right. Ultimately, Perlstein constructs a troubling paradigm: activist elders such as Todd Gitlin are mounting the last, best defense against sixties radicalism while thirtysomethings who "weren't there" are moving into the field to provide a more balanced (read conservative) interpretation of the era.<sup>33</sup> University of New Mexico historian David Farber, one of the main subjects of Perlstein's piece and author of *Chicago '68*, led the charge against sixties veterans. Farber's pathbreaking critique in the 1994 *Chronicle of Higher Education* singled out "older scholars who participated in the Sixties." "People in the academy," Farber reasoned, "are kidding themselves if they believe that a young scholar is not bucking the already long odds of finding and keeping a decent job if he or she challenges certain myths of the Sixties."<sup>34</sup>

Not all of the younger historians in Perlstein's article shared Farber's skepticism. A sizable contingent has sought to demonstrate that "the New Left was far broader-based than previously supposed."<sup>35</sup> It is still too early to tell where sixties histories will go from here, but even the youthful revisionists remain sharply divided. Considering their subject matter, this should come as no surprise.

The sixties will remain contested terrain as long as historians, participant/observers, and journalists continue to disagree about the impact of the array of political, social and cultural movements that emerged during the period. To broaden the scope of sixties literature, scholars ought to utilize the methodology of social history more systematically to explore the movement's numerous "neglected constituencies." For our purposes, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) provides a useful case study of the dynamics of a traditionally ignored protest

movement.<sup>36</sup> The ideological evolution of VVAW paralleled that of other leftist groups of the period. The organization followed the same course that one historian wrote of SDS: "The three Rs for SDS began with reform, led to resistance, and have . . . ended at revolution."<sup>37</sup> Six Vietnam veterans from New York City founded VVAW in June 1967. The organization grew slowly at first, attracting most early joiners from nearby Columbia University. Early VVAWers wore suits and ties, kept their hair short, debated on radio and television, and campaigned for dovish Democrats. They wanted nothing more than to end the war and bring Americans home. Their understanding of events in Southeast Asia was often limited to their experiences in Vietnam. These VVAWers distanced themselves from "irresponsible" militants in the antiwar movement, who tended to either ignore the veterans or revile them as "baby killers." Donald Duncan, the ex-Green Beret who became an editor for the leftist magazine *Ramparts*, echoed the sentiments of most antiwar veterans in the late 1960s when he wrote: "In the long run, I don't think Vietnam will be better off under Ho's brand of communism. But it's not for me or my government to decide. That decision is for the Vietnamese."<sup>38</sup>

The organization experienced a huge influx in the spring of 1970, triggered primarily by President Nixon's decision to send American troops into Cambodia. The thousands of VVAWers who entered the organization between the invasion of Cambodia in May 1970 and VVAW's historic medal-throwing ceremony one year later, altered the style and tactics of their predecessors, but retained a faith in American justice and institutions. This middle generation was more confrontational and spontaneous. Fatigues replaced formal attire, and the theater of action shifted into the streets. Petition drives in VA hospitals gave them their first taste of multi-issue politics. These veterans were confident that under the right circumstances, they would succeed at capturing the attention of Americans. Therefore, they were genuinely shocked when the public and much of the media chose to ignore the Winter Soldier Investigation, a series of war crimes hearings sponsored by VVAW in January and February 1971. The failure of the hearings drove the veterans to mobilize for Dewey Canyon III, the highly publicized medal-throwing ceremony in April 1971. The veterans believed that a dramatic event, held in Washington, D.C., would awaken complacent Americans and stimulate opposition to the war. Their logic worked. The national spotlight fell on VVAW for one week in April 1971.<sup>39</sup>

A third wave of veterans, enjoying greater prestige by 1972, adopted a more radical perspective on the war. The eclecticism of VVAW's early years gave way to consistent political theories. Deeper analyses of Asian and American history led to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay among racism, sexism, class and war. Radicalism in action and philosophy supplanted liberalism. Through these years VVAW remained the direct beneficiary of what Colonel Robert Heintz, in the pages of the 1971 *Armed Forces Journal*, described as "a state approaching collapse" in the "U.S. Armed Forces."<sup>40</sup> Former GIs continued joining the organization by the thousands. So alarmed was the FBI that a special unit of COINTELPRO targeted VVAW for surveillance and harassment. Like SDS, VVAW leaders maintained a national office that tenuously held together a loose-knit network of chapters in all fifty states. VVAW peaked with 30,000

members in 1972, which made it as large as conservative estimates of SDS. A *Miami Herald* headline described VVAW as a “Comet in [a] Leftist Galaxy.”<sup>41</sup>

Surprisingly, several VVAW chapters survived the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973. VVAW would in fact remain, until 1975, an active (though steadily diminishing) presence in a number of communities. The organization could boast everything that SDS claimed: tens of thousands of members (at least on mailing lists); chapters in all parts of the country; a series of social programs, such as drug counseling for poor veterans, comparable in scope to ERAP; and, by 1972, policy papers containing critiques of capitalism that surpassed “The Port Huron Statement” in detail and sophistication. But VVAWers arrived at these conclusions in different ways from SDSers. Most VVAWers came from working-class backgrounds. Almost none went to Vietnam radical. The majority of VVAWers drifted leftward as a result of their experiences in Southeast Asia and their subsequent politicization at home. A survey taken at Dewey Canyon III found that the average veteran who attended the protest was between twenty-one and twenty-five years old. Most had graduated from high school and attended college when they could afford it. They came from all parts of the country, but 54 percent arrived from the Northeast. The overwhelming majority (83 percent) were single. Half were raised in blue-collar households. Almost two-thirds had changed their “views about U.S. involvement in Vietnam” while serving in Vietnam. About 70 percent considered themselves “radical” or “extremely radical” “in relation to the current social, economic, and political thinking in the U.S.”<sup>42</sup>

In many respects, VVAWers and other activists of the early seventies confronted entirely different challenges than SDSers. While SDSers resisted the war during its early stages, VVAWers faced the more onerous task of making antiwar activism relevant amid Vietnamization and America’s increased reliance on the air war in Southeast Asia. SDSers questioned the contradictions of Cold War liberalism, while VVAWers attacked the legitimacy of Nixonian conservatism and paranoia. Women in many SDS chapters were expected to make coffee and do “shit work”; VVAW issued lengthy position papers condemning sexism and, by 1972, actively recruited women and asked them to serve in positions of power. SDS tapped into youthful idealism, VVAW resisted weary cynicism. The political and cultural icons of SDS’s age—the Black Panthers, Abbie Hoffman, Janis Joplin—were either gone or obscured during VVAW’s heyday, but the counterculture still resonated deeply in American society.

The example of VVAW illustrates that despite ebbs and flows, that nebulous and often misunderstood wave of political activism deemed “the movement” did not sputter to a halt after the Weathermen blew themselves up in March 1970, nor did it stop with the killings at Kent State and Jackson State the following May. In the case of the antiwar movement, as long as the Vietnam war dragged on, a committed core of activists, most of whom never paid dues to SDS, continued to organize marches, rallies, demonstrations, educational forums and other activities aimed at ending the war. Not all of their efforts were successful, but enough were to suggest that many activists remained committed to their ideals beyond 1970.

Other forms of protest and oppositional politics flourished after SDS crumbled. Scholars who use the collapse of SDS or the killings at Kent State as a cutoff point in their studies will continue to miss much of the Chicano liberation

movement, feminism, environmentalism, gay and lesbian rights, military dissent, "Red" (meaning Native American) power, communal experiments, veterans struggles, the impact of the Pentagon Papers, and a myriad of other protest activities.

The question thus arises: Why did so many of the early contributors to sixties research—presumably most of them at least partially sympathetic to the spirit of the era—ignore or delegitimize later examples of effective and meaningful protest? Or a more pointed question: Why, in the older literature, has the futility and violence of the Weathermen's 1969 Days of Rage eclipsed the peaceful, effective, and highly publicized Dewey Canyon III?

Most likely, the reader can anticipate the answer to the question, but it bears repeating. Scholars are already beginning to reassess SDS's impact on sixties protest activity. It is not surprising that SDS, at least on the national level, has been the subject of so many early accounts. Several of the pathbreaking preeminent sixties historians were either members of SDS or SDS sympathizers. But that explanation is not wholly sufficient. By transforming the sixties into exclusively SDS-dominated terrain, the era has been reduced to a predictable drama, confined to a specific decade. It's a story we're all familiar with: A small group of dedicated cadres mounted the rising crest of student activism, but they grew increasingly out of touch with their constituents, and then they crashed and burned while the whole world allegedly watched. Richard Nixon won in '68, the movement succumbed to cynicism or nihilism, conservatives grabbed power and held onto it for the next quarter of a century. End of history.

By overemphasizing exceptionalism and obscuring the continuity between then and now, many sixties chroniclers have perhaps inadvertently contributed to the cynicism that led to the popularity of Lawrence Kasdan's dreary 1983 film *The Big Chill*, and prompted one pundit in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* to label the period as a "prehistoric era."<sup>43</sup> It would be foolish to deny that a societal backlash against the excesses of the sixties was underway by the early seventies. Moreover, the end of the Vietnam War predictably diminished the potency and breadth of protests.

But the sixties—and early seventies—were full of surprises. Much happened outside of the cramped SDS National Office, and the myriad of layers of sixties history still beg for research. Thankfully, scholars are beginning to venture in new directions by creating more flexible and inclusive paradigms. The current trend toward revisionism among younger scholars has been beneficial inasmuch as it has sought to examine the movement's neglected constituencies, but counterproductive to the degree that it has curbed further studies of protest and disparaged those who had the courage to apply their principles to action during this troubling time. The field would benefit enormously by producing more international comparative studies. Perhaps it is fitting that the Americanists have produced most of the literature, but we still await worthwhile contributions on Prague Spring, May '68 in Paris, and the emergence of New Left activism in Europe, Latin America, and Japan. Moreover, if sixties research has a future, it must begin to transcend the narrow confines of "movement" history by placing neglected constituencies and the different types of resistance into the broader context of social history. Such a trend would undermine the excessive periodization of the era, which means, sadly, we may have to put on our thinking caps

and come up with a more descriptive term than “the sixties.” The challenges are enormous and there is still much work to be done, but given recent developments in the field there are compelling reasons to remain excited and hopeful.

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## ENDNOTES

1. James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege at Chicago* (New York, 1987), 317.
2. Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (Oxford, 1994), xvi.
3. Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959–1972* (New York, 1974), 59.
4. A few examples: Claybourne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (New York, 1981); Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford, 1988); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955–1968* (New York, 1986); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1992* (New York, 1992); Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965* (Indiana, 1993); and Taylor Branch’s sweeping *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York, 1988) and its equally sprawling sequel, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–1964* (New York, 1998).
5. To name a few: James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (New York, 1982), Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America* (New York, 1984), Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, Douglas T. Miller, *On Our Own: Americans in the Sixties* (Massachusetts, 1996), Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York, 1979), Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minnesota, 1987). Alan Adelson’s *SDS: A Profile* (New York, 1971) is a lesser-known volume.
6. Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York, 1973), 3–5.
7. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1987), 420.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in America*, 343. David Farber, of one mind with Matusow on this matter, stated the problem even more emphatically: “In a world divided between those who spoke and those who were silent, many protesters in the sixties shouted and claimed the right to speak for all. They often revealed contempt for working people and showed much ignorance about those people who still wondered if it was not what you said that counted but what you did.” David Farber, “The Silent Majority and Talk about Revolution,” from David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 309.
10. David Cate, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (New York, 1988), 442–443, 449.
11. Some examples are Frank J. Donner, *The Age of Surveillance: The Aims and Methods of America’s Political Intelligence System* (New York, 1981), Nelson Blackstock, *COIN-*

TELPRO: *The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom* (New York, 1989), Ward Churchill and Jim Vanderwall, *COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent* (Boston, 1990), and, most recently, James Kirkpatrick Davis, *Assault on the Left: The FBI and the Sixties Antiwar Movement* (New York, 1997).

12. Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks, *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up* (Philadelphia, 1989), 115.

13. For example, Douglas C. Rossinow's, *Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York, 1998) is a long awaited and highly anticipated account of the SDS chapter at Austin, Texas.

14. After the publication of Powers' book in 1973, other titles arrived sporadically. Among the entries: Fred Halstead, *Out Now! A Participants Account of the American Movement Against the Vietnam War* (New York, 1978); Nancy Zarouli and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam* (Garden City, 1984); Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, 1990); and Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1994).

15. Zarouli and Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?*, 98.

16. Halstead, *Out Now!*, 487. Charles DeBenedetti reaches essentially the same conclusion in *An American Ordeal* when he observed that "after 1971, dissatisfaction with war policy was multiplied and channeled through a labyrinth of citizen networks." DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 390.

17. F. Arturo Rosales, *Chicano: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston, 1996), 198.

18. Wells, *The War Within*, 44.

19. David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago, 1988), 245.

20. Kenneth J. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (New York, 1993).

21. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 356.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *The Saturday Review*, July 24, 1971, 32.

24. Anderson, 355–356.

25. Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 272.

26. Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York, 1996), 138.

27. Ward Churchill and Jim Vanderwall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston, 1988).

28. Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veterans Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, 1996), 5.

29. Julie Stephens, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge, 1998), viii, 25–27, 122–123.

30. James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* (New York, 1997), 233–249.
31. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 357.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Rick Perlstein, “Who Owns the Sixties? The Opening of a Scholarly Generation Gap” *Lingua Franca*, volume 6, number 4, 30–37.
34. *Ibid.*, 32
35. *Ibid.* In some ways, I hesitate to use the term New Left. The dichotomy between the Old Left and the New Left that remains so common in sixties literature is in some respects an artificial one. The transformation of tactics and rhetoric among the sixties Left is not terribly unique. Radicalism must either evolve with the times or die out. In light of the revelations of Stalin’s crimes against humanity, as well as the failure of New Deal reforms to eradicate poverty, racism and sexism in the United States, it is not surprising that young radicals in the sixties rejected their elders’ commitment to the Soviet experiment and the welfare state, and embraced a more libertarian commitment to personal freedom. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that not all “Old Left” groups withered in the sixties. The Communist Party (CPUSA) and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) enjoyed sustained growth through much of the decade, and both groups played a crucial yet rarely acknowledged role in antiwar activism. Some of the most capable theorists and organizers of the era—Peter Camejo, Bettina Aptheker, Angela Davis, and so forth—were members of either the CPUSA or SWP. Other young radicals who shunned membership in those parties would gradually come to embrace the Old Left’s commitment to theory and ideology. Moreover, many Old Left veterans who endured the McCarthy era and found themselves initially scorned by immature young radicals would go on to enjoy a lionized status by the end of the 1960s.
36. A more thorough account of VVAW will be found in Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York, 1999). Also see Richard B. Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (New Jersey, 1996); Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York, 1997).
37. Adelson, *SDS: A Profile*, 203.
38. Donald Duncan, “The Whole Thing Was a Lie!,” *Ramparts* (February 1966): 24.
39. For a moving and beautifully illustrated account of Dewey Canyon III, see John Kerry and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The New Soldier* (New York, 1971).
40. Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” from *Armed Forces Journal* (June 7, 1971): 30–37.
41. *Miami Herald*, July 9, 1972.
42. Figures from Hamid Mowlana and Paul H. Geffert, “Vietnam Veterans Against the War: A Profile Study of the Dissenters,” from Kerry, *The New Soldier*, 172–174.
43. *New York Times Book Review*, 13 July 1986, 26. Some historians should be commended for emphasizing the fluidity between then and now. In *Beyond the Barricades*, Richard Flacks and Jack Whalen have shown that a number of movement activists in the Santa Barbara area remained committed to their ideals through the Reagan eighties. “All of our former activists,” Flacks and Whalen reported, “even those most politically disengaged, continue to see themselves as standing outside society’s established structures

of authority; all continue to resist conventional frameworks for livelihood and everyday life." Flacks and Whalen, *Beyond the Barricades*, 203–245. Similarly, Doug McAdam, in his study of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, discovered that “to an extraordinary extent, the Mississippi veterans still bear quiet allegiance to the politics they espoused twenty-five years ago.” McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford and New York, 1988), 238.