

Module 09: The 1960s: Who Won? Student Protest and the Politics of Campus Dissent

Context

The Spring of 1970

The demonstrations that consumed VPI and other colleges and universities in the spring of 1970 grew out of a long history of student activism in movements for social change. The protests at VPI also testified to the expanded reach of the American peace movement, which, by 1970, had grown in less than ten years from a small group of ardent pacifists into a mass movement opposed to the U.S. war in Vietnam. In April and May of 1970, however, student protesting had turned into widespread outrage. On April 30, President Nixon announced that U.S. bombing campaigns had pushed the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia. Activist frustrations, escalating as the war continued, erupted in blatant anger when, several weeks later, National Guard troops shot and killed unarmed student protesters at Kent State University. Although VPI at the time had not experienced the same level of political conflict that other campuses had, the events of April and May 1970 drew the university into the whirlwind of national events.

Youth Rebellion and Protest in the 1960s

Students and political rebellion became seemingly synonymous in the 1960s. From the earliest months of the decade, students had successfully engineered the era's most important movements for social, cultural, and political change. The first indication of the new role that young people would play in the struggle for equality and justice came in February 1960, when four young African American men, students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, staged a dramatic sit-in at a racially segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Their demand of service equal to that given to whites sparked a student sit-in movement that spread across the South and led, that April, to the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC, known later as the most militant wing of the growing civil rights struggle, placed college and high school students at the forefront of protest against racial injustice, a move that earned them national renown for their daring and courage.

Early Campus Protests

The work of SNCC inspired both white and black students, many of whom went south to assist the black freedom struggle. Many took part in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project of 1964 and then returned to their college campuses ready to continue the fight. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, however, decreased the urgency white students felt for fighting for civil rights. Nevertheless, college students were not lacking in targets for political protest. In the fall of 1964, students at the University of California in Berkeley, many of them veterans of the Freedom Summer campaign, launched the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to protest university limits on political expression on campus. Then, in 1965, activist students and their cohorts at other colleges and universities turned their attention to Vietnam, which was just then becoming an issue of national concern.

The Vietnam War

Students neither launched the movement against the Vietnam War nor spearheaded many of its efforts, although they came to play a visible and pivotal role in its activities as the sixties progressed. In the spring of 1965, the predominately white Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organized a peace march in Washington, D.C., that attracted a record 20,000 protesters, making it the largest antiwar demonstration in the capital's history at that time. Student activists also gained publicity through the spread of campus teach-ins on the war, draft-card-burning exercises, and draft resistance movements. As the war in Vietnam escalated over the next several years, first under President Johnson and then under President Nixon, so, too, did campus protests against the war and student involvement in regional and national demonstrations. Although Americans of all ages and from all walks of life led and participated in the broad-based antiwar movement, the image of youthful militants, rebelling against the political status quo, captured much of the public's attention.

The Anti-Establishment Generation

The changing lifestyles and cultural mores of college-aged Americans likely inspired as much public fascination as did student political protest. What began, in the early 1960s, as a small Beat-inspired rebellion against the cultural constraints of 1950s America had, by the late 1960s, grown into a full-fledged countercultural movement that attracted millions of young people in pursuit of "authenticity" and "freedom." Shedding the constraints of their parents' generation, large numbers of

America's youth by the late 1960s had decided to "let it all hang out." Men grew their hair long, untucked their shirttails, and traded neatly pressed pants for a new uniform of ragged and well-worn jeans. Young women similarly eschewed makeup, raised their hemlines, and donned ragged attire similar to that of their male counterparts. Their behavior as well as their appearance generated concern among older Americans, who disapproved of young people's loose sexual standards, their use of illicit drugs, the raucous and psychedelic rock-and-roll music they listened to, and their general lack of respect for traditional authority figures. To many observers, the hippies' cultural revolt and student protests against the war became one and the same.

1970: The Sixties, Continued

The cultural and political revolts continued into 1970. In fact, characteristics of the period known as the "sixties" carried over well into the following decade. Not until the 1970s did the social and political movements generally associated with the sixties finally take hold. The contemporary feminist struggle that emerged with the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 and the 1967 decision of women's liberationists to separate themselves from male radical activists became a powerful mass movement and cultural force only in the early 1970s, when legions of women joined consciousness-raising groups, founded rape crisis centers and women's health initiatives, and spearheaded efforts to open educational, political, and professional opportunities to women. The environmental movement, long considered an outgrowth of late 1960s hippie counterculture, can likewise trace its formal birth to the first celebration of Earth Day in April 1970.

1968 and Beyond

Political struggles rightly associated with the 1960s, most notably the movement to end the war in Vietnam, also continued at full strength into the 1970s. Many scholars and historians point to 1968 — the year that saw the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy, ongoing escalation in the Indochina War, and the frightening conflict between police and antiwar demonstrators at the nationally televised Democratic National Convention in Chicago — as the pivotal year of the decade, although the antiwar movement grew in numbers and influence in the years that followed. Some of the largest national peace demonstrations occurred in 1969 and 1970; the October Moratorium, which attracted the participation of over a quarter of a million Americans across the country, took place in 1969; the November 1969 Mobilization march drew a crowd of 800,000 to the streets of Washington, D.C.; and a spontaneous wave of

nationwide protests erupted in April 1970 in response to the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. Such demonstrations continued right up to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973.

VPI : A Case in Point

As with other large state universities, the sixties as a cultural phenomenon came late to VPI, although when the revolution hit, it hit in full force. VPI's student activists of the era often bemoaned the factors that cut the growing state university off from the trends that defined national politics and student unrest during the 1960s and 1970s. Located in the Appalachian mountains of rural southwest Virginia in a region known for its cultural isolation and social and political conservatism, Blacksburg, Virginia, VPI's home, hardly attracted young people in pursuit of cultural and political revolt. Nor did VPI offer an environment particularly open to hosting the social and political movements then sweeping the nation. Predominantly male (the university did not become co-educational until the mid-1960s), VPI had a strong military tradition. Until 1964, the university required all freshman and sophomore men to join the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets (VTCC), a military service corps whose members lived in barracks-style dormitories, wore military uniforms to class, and participated in military training exercises on and off campus. The school's technical and engineering orientation, which persisted even after VPI transformed itself in the 1960s from a college to a full and modern state university, similarly limited possibilities for a serious student protest movement to take hold. VPI's vocationally minded students were less exposed to the types of cultural experimentation fostered at schools with strong liberal arts traditions.

Peaceful Protest at VPI

Nevertheless, with over 10,000 students, VPI strongly resembled many other non-elite, non-cosmopolitan state universities that attracted students from "middle American" families. Like their counterparts at universities such as Indiana, Ball State, Kent State, and SUNY Buffalo, the students at VPI were primarily concerned with getting a decent education and training for future employment. At the same time, however, they could not help but feel the political winds blowing across the nation. Indeed, hints of antiwar activity appear in VPI's student newspaper from the mid-1960s on. VPI's peaceful sit-ins, teach-ins, and campus-wide meetings resembled those taking place at many other state universities: they were few in number and sporadically attended. Nevertheless, VPI's increasingly diverse student population, which grew by approximately 1,000 students a year throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, together with its move away from the

Corps of Cadets towards an increasingly civilian student body, meant that new ideas and behaviors were bound to arise.

The Spring of 1970

The changes erupted in full force in the spring of 1970. Early that April, a student named Toby Cole caused a small uproar by wearing an American flag on the seat of his pants. Countercultural protest tactics had finally made their way onto the VPI campus. University administrators promptly reprimanded Cole for his unconventional attire, but in doing so raised the ire of the small community of campus activists who called for protests against a number of university policies and traditions, including support for the VPI Corps of Cadets. In mid-April, protesters put their words into action by disrupting the Corps' regularly scheduled drill on VPI's central grassy campus area known as the Drillfield. The administration again responded quickly, this time issuing an injunction against similar protests.

Antiwar Protests

The demonstrations quickly escalated, turning VPI into a small but vibrant microcosm of 1960s protest. The day after the Drillfield protest, students organized an impromptu "teach-in" and then marched on the university's main administration building, Burruss Hall, when they learned of the just-issued injunction. On April 30 came the news that the United States had invaded Cambodia. Student activists at VPI responded to President Nixon's announcement of the expanding war in the same way that their counterparts did at colleges and universities across the nation: by calling for the strongest protests they could muster. It was at one such protest, at Ohio's Kent State University on May 4, 1970, that National Guard troops opened fire on demonstrating students, killing four of them. Photos of the dead bodies appeared on TV news programs and in daily newspapers across the nation, arousing an even greater sense of outrage among student activists. At VPI, this translated into calls for a militant student strike and the seizing of a university building, Williams Hall. VPI's administration responded swiftly and with precision, as it had before. Administrators called in the Virginia State Police — who quickly ejected the students from the building and carted them off for arrest — and suspended the 107 students involved shortly thereafter. The campus climate, once serene, became polarizing. Students found themselves forced to take stands on both campus and national events.