

# POLITICS OR TYRANNY? REACTION TO THE VIETNAM WAR IN THE UNITED STATES

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There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it.

George Bernard Shaw

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing (-)  
I can't stand my own mind.  
America when will we end the human war?  
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.  
I don't feel good don't bother me (-)  
When will you be worthy of your million Trotskites?  
(-)  
Your machinery is too much for me.

Allen Ginsberg, *America*

Within the title's paraphrase of one of the classical essays of Milton Friedman ("Politics and Tyranny") there appears a question which many Americans asked at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. The author of the after-mentioned analysis offered to present a representation of those who stood up before the dilemma expressed in title.

The problem of the reaction of Americans to the war in Vietnam has a history as long as American aid for the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Already in the middle of the 1950s there was an association called American Friends of Vietnam. During a conference in Washington on June 1, 1956, one of the senators declared that:

1. Vietnam represents a Free World in Southeast Asia, simultaneously holding back "the red tide of Communism",
2. the Vietnamese state "represents a proving ground of democracy in Asia" as an alternative in the face of communism,
3. Vietnam is a test of "American responsibility and determination in Asia" – "we are the godparents"<sup>2</sup> of the idea of democracy in free post-colonial countries,

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<sup>1</sup> Official name of South Vietnam since October 26, 1955. Later – June 6, 1969 – the name was changed into: Republic of South Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> Cit. in: F. Trager, *Why Viet Nam?*, New York: Praeger 1967, pp. 111–113.

That orator was John F. Kennedy, a man who, being a president, did not manage to realize these ideas.

But, as years went by, voices among public opinion in the USA, calling in question the range and entire substance of American activity in Southeast Asia, were beginning to be more frequent. Attacks were aimed not only at the means used in the conflict, but – and what was unprecedented event – at targets of American politics.<sup>3</sup> In an interview for *L'Express* Pierre Salinger (press assistant to President Kennedy) said: "Very often it takes place that popular policy stands up considerably less popular with a moment when its consequences become self-evident."<sup>4</sup> Although this statement refers to subsequent events in relation to those described below (the fall of Saigon and consequences connected with this), this however appears to reflect the situation prevalent in the United States in a second half of the 1960s. There developed then – on an unprecedented scale – a movement calling for an immediate ending of the war or to a changing of priorities in the direction to de-escalation. The power of this trend – and how as after that proved: also main defect – leaned firstly – on a support of many intellectual circles, causing enlargement of effect of proclaimed ideas, and secondly – on behavior to wide range of interests, what pulled oneself an impression of creation of a complex system of references in relation to practically all more essential occurrences of contemporary social life. In spite of such differentiation the anti-war movement can – for this analysis – be divided into two principle categories:

1. opposition among politicians and representatives of state institutions,
2. opposition of intellectual circles, representatives of free contest, students and youth.<sup>5</sup>

Among the first trend the majority were, of course, in the legislative. After the renewal of the air raids after Christmas, 1965, consistent opponents of the administration's policy (mostly two senators: Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening) joined also: a chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee senator William Fulbright, Eugene McCarthy (later the Democrats' candidate for the office of president) and senator Stephen M. Young. They promoted a proposal for cancellation of the Tonkin Resolution, however against this voted till 92 senators. At first, there were greater doubts about the passing – promoted so heavily once – of the Tonkin Resolution. There were organized interrogatories before Senate Foreign Relations Committee many times, having in view delivering some arguments for the opponents of leadership the active Vietnamese policy. Their main spokesman was oneself senator Fulbright, from initiatives of whom the mentioned resolution was successfully voted in August 1964. During six-days interrogatories, held in January and February 1966 and broadcast by television, George Kennan, gen. James M. Gavin and W. Fulbright stood opposite the chief of American diplomacy, Dean Rusk, and the military adviser of

<sup>3</sup> See: H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1994, p. 665.

<sup>4</sup> See: *L'Express*, April 21, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Such a – simplified because of a necessity – partition does not take into account even opposition in the face of the war among churches and religious relationships. Origin of their activity in object matter began at the beginning of 1966. More widely on this theme see for example: M.K. Hall, *Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War*, New York: Columbia University Press 1990.

the president, gen. Maxwell Taylor. A professor of the University of Illinois, Charles Osgood, ascertained that:

"Each increase in tension makes more difficult the accurate communication and understanding necessary for de-escalation. Internally, especially in a democracy, it also becomes extremely difficult politically to back down. Externally, escalations hardens, rather than softens the enemy resolve."<sup>6</sup>

Somehow this diagnosis appears to be correct, Congress did not resolve or annul the resolution, neither did it take steps to change hitherto existing policy. What is more, a month after these interrogatories Senate did not react to the \$ 4.8 billion confirmed by the House of Representatives for war purposes. As rightly summed up that an influential Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal – in comparison with decisions in internal policy – in foreign policy "generally considerably less influence exert rational premises."<sup>7</sup>

An effect of this were bitter words expressed in speech in Congress (March 1967) by Robert Kennedy: "This horror is partly our responsibility not just the nation's responsibility, but yours and mine."<sup>8</sup>

Among opponents not so much of the war policy but also of president Johnson himself, were people actively engaged in Democratic Party. The following year of presidential elections (1968) especially abounded in hot moments. Firstly, on March 31, Lyndon Johnson published, in a dramatic speech on television his own resignation from the race. Among Democrats on the battle-field remained three candidates: vice-president Hubert Humphrey, senator Eugene McCarthy and senator Robert Kennedy. The first of this 'trio' had, of course, the support of a former president, while the remaining presented themselves as anti-war candidates. The primaries in New Hampshire – decisive in the contest – were won by E. McCarthy. According to Norman Podhoretz:

"This was about many more convincing than any from these demonstrations, which one took place on the streets or in the universities towns; a demonstration of the fact that anti-war movement became more powerful than this suggested by the results of public opinion researches."<sup>9</sup>

Louis Heren noticed, that "hawks" (that is to say: advocates of ending the conflict through means of force) descended mostly from among liberals.<sup>10</sup> A personification of this trend – at the beginning of the 1960s – was senator W. Fulbright.

In spite of the comparatively strong critique of American activities in Indochina, this should not surprise the affective observer of US politics and history. The existence of opposition on Capitol Hill to the activities of the administration has, in fact, tradition as long as the country itself. This what is peculiar about events from the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s has its source outside the political institutions.

<sup>6</sup> See: L. Heren, *No Hail, No Farewell. The Johnson Years*, London: Weindelfeld & Nicolson 1970, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> See: B. Tuchman, *Szalerstwo władzy: od Troi do Wietnamu*, Katowice: Książnica/Wydawnictwo Poznańskie 1992, p. 414.

<sup>8</sup> Cit.in: T. Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy*, London: Weindelfeld & Nicolson 1970, p. 215.

<sup>9</sup> N. Podhoretz, *Dlaczego byliśmy w Wietnamie?*, Gdynia-Warszawa: Atext/Helikon 1991, pp. 137–138.

<sup>10</sup> See: L. Heren, *No Hail, No Farewell...*, op.cit., p. 46.

This is the first element which attracts the attention of the student of this part of the anti-war movement.

The origins of irregular opposition are, paradoxically enough, not connected with the war. Hardly anybody took this to heart in 1962 in Port Huron, Michigan, where persons later engaged in Students for Democratic Society (SDS) met in a convention.<sup>11</sup> Later on these university circles had the considerable support of the media, as "a fourth authority".

Problem of the war appeared however in the middle of the 1960s. Then – between April 6 and 9, 1965, in Washington – the first large (approximately 1,000 participants) demonstration took place against the Tonkin Gulf resolution.<sup>12</sup> This the protest left the walls of university campuses and hitherto existing methods of expression one's own disapproval: *teach-ins* and *seat-ins* were abandoned.<sup>13</sup> It should be stressed that students were the group with the most privileges from those among the draft, because they avoided it. Opposite them stood the "taciturn majority" – mostly Negroes and poor white who were not able to afford to pay for education.

In May 1966 the occupation of administrative buildings in the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin and the City College of New York took place. The main reason for these steps was the collaboration of academic authorities with military draft committees. Interestingly, students themselves were ambivalent to such forms of the protest.<sup>14</sup>

Quite paradoxically, persons who were actively engaged in the pacifist movement, did not find support in South Vietnam. In the middle of April 1966, six American activists were arrested in Saigon by the local police; after one week they were dismissed from the country.<sup>15</sup>

Probably the most celebrated manifestation was the two-day "March on the Pentagon", which began on October 21, 1967.<sup>16</sup> Almost 100,000 participants took part in it. But among many entries on banners, millions of Americans were able to see – thanks to the television – expressions such as: *Where is Oswald? We need him!* This was obviously a shock for people observing these events; still it contributed to the popularization of certain kind of a fashion, and attitudes towards a "counterculture",

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<sup>11</sup> As they declared: "The message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present", in: *ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> The first organization assembling anti-war movements came into being then – National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam.

<sup>13</sup> There were – having comparatively long tradition in USA – forms of panel, possibilities of not hampered articulation of opinions; their existence was perceived as realizing in life the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. Both forms were mostly limited to academic circles – they organized in colleges and on the universities seminars, meetings and discussions with influential personages of public life: politicians, research workers, diplomats or with representatives of a local authorities. Later on also *read-ins* were introduced. There were meetings with writers, who acted in or supported organization called American Writers and Artists Against the War in Vietnam.

<sup>14</sup> See: *New York Times*, May 13, 14, 17, 24 and 27, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> See: *ibid.*, April 20 and 22, 1966.

<sup>16</sup> For further details concerning above events see for example: N. Zaroulis, G. Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam, 1963–1975*, Garden City: Doubleday 1984, p. 138 and followed, Ch. DeBenedetti, Ch. Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1990, p. 185 and followed and N. Mailer, *The Armies Of The Night*, New York: New American Library 1968.

if one wanted to demonstrate one's own resistance in the face of the administration's activity. On the other hand, of course, this was not acknowledged by the sedate, puritan citizens of the United States. Then, manifestations constantly emerged as a mean of a political expression preferred by protestors. A dramatic protest was the so called "Battle of Chicago" during the Democrats' election convention in August, 1968. The protest was led by a couple of radical persons (Abbie Hoffman, Tom Hayden and Jerry Clyde Rubin<sup>17</sup>) and became a riot. Among shouts which crowds of Americans heard: *Disarm the Pigs!* (to the policemen), *One, two, three, four – in don't need this fuckin' war!*, or – in the face of largely friendly for the protesting attitude of media – *The whole world's watching!* One can also quote the words of a major work of "counterculture" – *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness," but surely the author directed them to someone else. Bob Dylan (universally recognized as one of the "popes of generation '68") also paid attention to the loss of youngsters. In *Subterranean Homesick Blues* he sings:

"Look out kid, it's something you did  
God knows what, but you're doin' it again..."

During that time Richard Nixon brought little change. What is more – this contributed to the enlargement of the activity of the anti-war movement. Lyndon B. Johnson's successor's opinion on the war-protest movement was obvious and well-known; he associated it with the increasing popularity of communist ideas in the USA and with the activity of communists on front in Asia. R. Nixon also discredited the activities of Martin Luther King in the protest movement against the war.<sup>18</sup> During the traditional parade on the day of a new president's inauguration on January 20, 1969, one could see: *Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NFL is going to win!*, while the person of the new president remained a favorite object of attacks. In autumn of this year, there took place a number of manifestations, and October 15 and November 15 were announced as Days of Moratoria. On October 15 20,000 people protested in New York, 30,000 in New Heaven, 50,000 in Washington and 100,000 in Boston. It was the culmination of the anti-war movement. During the second march on the Day Of Memory in Washington, youngsters sang for Richard („Tricky-Dicky") Nixon:

"One, two, three, four  
Tricky-Dicky stop the war.  
Two, four, six, eight  
Organize to smash the state."<sup>19</sup>

As president Nixon rightly ascertained then: "Let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."<sup>20</sup> On November 15, the most numerous independent demonstration took place. Nearby

<sup>17</sup> The last of them became probably the most famous for wearing an uniform from the times of Revolutionary War. He had to witness in April 1966 before one of the Senate committees; more widely about this event see: J. and R.K. Morrison, *From Camelot to Kent State: The Sixties Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It*, New York: Times Books 1987, p. 281 and followed.

<sup>18</sup> See: *New York Times*, April 18, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> See: D.L. Anderson (ed.), *Shadow on the White House. Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945–1975*, Kansas 1993, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Cit. in: S. Karnow, *Vietnam. A History*, New York: Penguin Books 1991, p. 615.

the Washington Monument assembled about 800,000 participants, calling for the Americans to withdraw from Vietnam. And the most dramatic event was the rioting in May 1970 at Kent University, where National Guard soldiers shot four demonstrators. As Richard Nixon later wrote, the couple days after the events at Kent State were the darkest moments of his presidency.<sup>21</sup> The effect of activity of groups, by no means pacifist, was arresting – in academic year 1969/70 – 7,500 students, 1,800 demonstration took place, there were 247 causes of arson, 462 persons wounded, and 8 died.<sup>22</sup> All these were the results of not calculation with the costs of the war – Lyndon B. Johnson, at that time of being president, was asked how long would the war last; eloquent answer sounded: “And who ever this can know, how long and how much would it costs. The important thing is whether we are right or not?”<sup>23</sup>

The protest movement of was openly (self-)defined as leftist or outright communistic<sup>24</sup>; but obviously it is not all about its accessories (DRV flags, portraits of Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro, Ernesto Che Guevarra and other revolutionists, carried during the demonstration), but about the ideas raised then, identifying with present, radical revolutionary ideas, and not avoiding terrorist methods. Professor of history at Yale University, Staughton Lynd, and the first president of the SDS, Thomas Hayden, declared:

“We refuse to be anti-Communist. We insist that the term has lost all specific content it once had. Instead it serves as the key category of abstract thought which Americans use to justify a foreign policy that is often no more sophisticated than rape.”<sup>25</sup>

The question of the morality of leading the war was often raised. One forgot about self-evident fact that war – as a way of policy – was immoral from the very beginning. From this point of view, it does not really matter, whether an extermination is taking place with atomic, chemical, biological weapon or a conventional, “more noble” fight. Anyway as Max Lerner wrote in a preface to Machiavelli’s work:

“Ideals and ethics are important in politics as norm, but they are scarcely effective as techniques (-) Religious reformers have often succeeded in bringing public morale closer to some ethical norm; they have never succeeded as statesmen.”<sup>26</sup>

The best known attempt to internationalize the anti-war movement was the creation – as an initiative of well-known English philosopher Bertrand Russell – of Peace Foundation and, later, International War Crimes Tribunal. The aim of these organi-

<sup>21</sup> R. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, New York: Warner Books 1978, p. 457.

<sup>22</sup> Data in: R. Nixon, *Nigdy więcej Wietnamu*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Heros, year unknown, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> Cit. in: B. Tuchman, *Szalenstwo władzy...*, op.cit., p. 417.

<sup>24</sup> The matter of possible mutual connections occupied also Senate Subcommittee of Internal Security which in 1965 led a number of interrogatories. In the face of a well-founded suspicions that matter was investigated by CIA. Conclusions from its work were contracted in a report “International Connections of U.S. Peace Groups”.

<sup>25</sup> See: N. Podhoretz, *Dlaczego byliśmy w...*, op.cit., p. 104. S. Lynd and T. Hayden – together with Herbert Aptheker (contemporary manager of American Institute of Marxist Studies) succeeded in December 1965 to visit Democratic Republic of Vietnam to sound the possibilities of inclusion peace by the communist side. For fuurther see: S. Lynd, *The Other Side*, New York: New American Library 1966.

<sup>26</sup> See: R. Nixon, *Leaders. Profiles and Reminiscences of Man Who Have Shaped the Modern World*, New York: Warner Books 1982, p. 330.

zations was to investigate war crimes committed by the USA.<sup>27</sup> Looking on these event from the perspective of time and place, one should ask: who was to investigate all the crimes committed by communist side? Nobody was found then who would be able, as B. Russell, to ask a question, let alone provide any answer. According to Russell and his supporters, the activities of Americans in Southeast Asia do not differ from the activities of Nazis in Eastern Europe and the Japanese in the Far – East.<sup>28</sup>

In the end it is proper to mention one more occurrence connected with events of 1968 regarding postmodernism.

Generally speaking, it is connected with the postulate of a full rejection of old categories of truth, good, nature, culture, essence, objectivism etc. It was also connected with ethics (and aesthetics) of revolution. It has founded – indirectly – an image in semantic: both the SDS and other similar organizations which called themselves as “movements”, called middle class members as “bourgeois” or outright “fascist hogs”, organs of the state as “system”.

Also postmodernism itself fell into traps – one from its main proponents, Jean Francois Lyotard, tried to prove that the only over-system value is justice; from which would result condemnation of the American intervention in Vietnam by the entire world. It appears that the only existing element which left in politics after postmodernism is its grotesque caricature, or occurrence of political correctness.

In all these events is inscribed – in some manner – a pacifist movement, surely enough universally identified with the protest against the war. Together with deep distrust of rationalism and of technocracy, pacifists tried – in their own manner – to include in life Thea Von Harbou's imperative: “The mediator between brain and muscles must be the heart.” As the future showed it was nothing but wishful thinking. Soon after, the *flower-power* generation enrolled in most of the mechanisms of the consumption society, against which it had so insistently protested before. A significant example was the end of “The Seven of Chicago,” accused after mentioned demonstration during the Democrats' pre-election convention in August 1968. Jerry Rubin became a stockbroker, Abbie Hoffman committed suicide in April 1989, David Dellinger fell in oblivion<sup>29</sup>, and Huey P. Newton – cofounder of “Black Panthers” – was shot on April 22, 1989.

The ideals of creation a certain community over states' borders has also fallen; as Tadeusz Nyczek writes:

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<sup>27</sup> See: B. Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1944–1969*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1969, p. 242 and followed.

<sup>28</sup> About activity of the Tribunal see e. g.: J. Duffett (ed.), *Against the Crimes of Silence, Proceedings of the International War Crimes Tribunal*, New York 1970.

<sup>29</sup> He was a publisher of the magazine *Liberation* and one of the first activists of the anti-war movement; see: D. Dellinger, *From Yale to Jail: The Life Story of a Moral Dissenter*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1993.

"Blue jeans, musical comedy *Hair* and will of incomparable freedom united hippies from Texas and students of Warsaw Engineering College – over iron curtains and political slogans."<sup>40</sup>

But the problem was that this was in principle all that could unite them – because of blue jeans one should be treated as an *ersatz* of freedom, *Hair* as its affirmation and "will of incomparable freedom" is probably characteristic for young men all over the world.

Thus there were insurmountable differences, among which was a different relation to communism: while Poles tried to find a way out of it, so many young people in the West tried to find a way to it. Communism appeared to them as a complex, universal and unfailing answer to all sore spots of capitalistic societies.

Events from the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s determined events unprecedented in hitherto existing history of the United States. Never before – in manner so public and so firm – did one call into question this what represented "flowers of the country." Surely the best illustration of such a state of thing is the case of Bill Clinton, who sought freedom from the war in Europe and – over twenty years later – became the 42<sup>nd</sup> president of the United States.

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<sup>40</sup> T. Nyczek ed., *Określona epoka. Nowa Fala 1968–1993*, Kraków: Oficyna Literacka 1995, p. 332.

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