

Protests Across the Decades: Vietnam and Gaza

Knowing that writing this will classify me as a “living history” person, one of those who visit grammar school classrooms sharing their stories from past years that the children consider “history,” I am still going to say that reading about the recent campus unrest, encampments, and facility takeovers sparked memories of the Vietnam War era with the same sorts of college student protests and anti-war actions beyond university campuses.

Protesting the Vietnam War and the Israeli/Hamas War are only comparable in a few ways. Both conflicts defy understanding. The United States’ involvement in Vietnam dated back to the 1950’s and the Eisenhower administration. Scattered people were protesting the role the USA was playing even then, but the number and intensity of protests grew in proportion to the increasing number of Americans who were being drafted and sent to fight that war. At one point, up to 600,000 U.S. soldiers were fighting in Vietnam and men of a certain age were all subject to the draft and the possibility of fighting in a war that few could explain. John Prine’s lyric in the song “Hello in There” that referenced the Korean War – “We lost Davey in the Korean War. We still don’t know what for.” – is easily applicable to the Vietnam War. The reasons for our joining forces with the South Vietnamese were never clear. The official rationale was the “Domino Theory” that saw Vietnam as the first in a line of nation dominoes that would fall to Communism unless we took a stand in South Vietnam. Not everyone bought that explanation. Some understood it as a civil war at least or, perhaps, Communist China maintaining a buffer zone of countries in their control. I went to one lecture at the time that attributed our willingness to go to battle in that region to oil off the coast of Vietnam.

“You want me to risk my life for what?” was the common question. I remember my father, who dropped in the night behind enemy lines on D-Day with the 101st Airborne and who was wounded somewhere in Belgium in the Battle of the Bulge, telling me and my older brother that if we were drafted, he would drive us to Canada to avoid the draft. Many did not believe in the war because no one could answer the question, “why?”

There is also a murkiness surrounding the Israel/Hamas War, but not around the actual conflict, because that does have an explanation. The murkiness, rather, is around the jumbled history of the Middle East, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the status of Palestinians. If one were to ask 100 people about the history of this region and the tensions that have existed for a very long time, 98 of them would know very little.

Lack of awareness and clarity invites debate, whether it is 1968 or 2024, and it invites people, especially young idealistic people, to take public stands and actions that are extreme, misdirected, polarizing, and, in the end, without positive effect. I participated in several anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam conflict. The United States did, ultimately, withdraw from South Vietnam in 1973, but do I believe that the demonstrations in which I took part or the thousands of demonstrations across the country in those years quickened the end of US involvement in Vietnam? No, I do not. Do I believe that the protests and encampments against Israel’s conduct of their retaliation against Hamas will bring about any measure that will lead to an end to the suffering on both sides and an eventual resolution to the conflict? No, I do not.

The protests of today and of my high school and college days held during the Vietnam War share something else besides murkiness that is worthy of notice. The anti-Vietnam war events did not arise in a vacuum or come about spontaneously or only in relation to the war but were imbedded in a general unrest in the 1960's that bled into the 1970's, an unrest that was generated by a cultural disintegration that took place in those years. Through those years of the '60's and '70's, customs, worldviews, social organization, shared principles, and long-held beliefs and values were swept away. One generation could not speak to or even understand the other. Individuals, families, communities, political parties were polarized, unable and unwilling to find common ground. What was once considered true and good was no longer thought of that way.

That time period was painful for American society. There was disruption, upheaval, even violence as American society underwent a convulsive transformation. The United States of 1973 was vastly different from the United States of 1963. However, for all the negative that American society experienced, there were also gains. This was the era that saw the blossoming of civil rights, women's rights, gay rights. These movements were made possible by the breakdown of the old ways, a sort of societal instance of what the psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski termed "positive disintegration" in the realm of personal growth.

For our society this was a dangerous time because shared values, shared ethical vocabulary, shared goals. and shared identity disappeared. That era was a cultural high-wire act, and we waited to see if we would make it to the other side, from one America to a "new generation of Americans." I'm not sure we made it all the way across, that is, successfully transitioning from one set of shared values and identity to new bonds and commonalities.

Part of the failure to establish a new American village green that provided common ground to all Americans was that the cohesiveness of American culture and civic life was more of a veneer than substance. Just consider the very groups mentioned above who were not meaningfully woven into the fabric of the life of the country. The divisions and fractures that existed well before 1963 were finally exposed. The throwing off of oppressions that existed for many years fueled the intensity of the wrenching changes of the 1960's.

The dissolution of social cohesiveness and organization that characterized the 1960's has progressed through all the years leading up to 2024. We find ourselves in a gravely fragmented society that is divided along many lines: age, gender, region, race, class, ideology, etc. The bonds upon which society depends for survival are in tatters and commonalities are few. This societal condition is precisely the link between the protests against the Vietnam conflict and the protests against the hostilities in Gaza. The hateful and violent nature of the pro-Hamas/anti-Israel demonstrations grows out of a national malaise that is characterized by the loss of shared values, shared ethical vocabulary, shared goals. and shared identity. This lack of societal integrity is what should most alarm us at this time.

Social cohesion is the trait of various units of society that enables them to function in ways that allow the groups to achieve a minimum of health and safety and to maintain a state of well-being. Cohesion is to society what integrity is to the individual. It implies a sense of identity, of self-possession and self-direction, of supporting norms of behavior that benefit the group and allow it to advance. In a fragmented society, such as our own American society, societal progress

can no longer rest on debate, dialogue, compromise, and respect for others' interests because there is too much polarization, too much of us-and-them thinking, and very little common cause. Once this breakdown happens, social transactions are based not on principle, virtue, or reason but on power. Controversies are settled in favor of whoever exerts the most power. Differences are resolved by domination not reconciliation. We have seen it on college campuses. We see it in the local school board and city council meetings. We see it in the halls of Congress. We see it in undignified presidential debates.

The turmoil we have witnessed in reaction to events over these past several months in Israel and Gaza should be a wake-up call to the country, a wake-up call not so much about that conflict but more about how American society addresses the major concerns that affect us all.