THE POLITICS OF PRIDE: CONSERVATIVE VISIONS OF AMERICAN
NATIONALISM IN THE VIETNAM WAR ERA

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Abstract

The Vietnam War resulted in a military loss that forced Americans to reassess their notions of nationalism. The pacifist anti-war movement evoked deep emotional responses from both the political right and political left. These responses, compounded by the tense economic and social pressures of the 1960s and 1970s, motivated the left to reject nationalism. In contrast, the right embraced American pride and villainized the anti-war movement. Using documents, news and popular media, and literature from 1962 to 1986, this thesis argues that nationalism was essential in binding together three disparate groups of American conservatives in order to create a political coalition. These groups—the white working class, intellectuals, and far-right extremists—coalesced despite their varying social and economic needs and different visions of nationhood. The result was increased success for Republican politicians and a legitimization of conservatism in the public eye.

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Introduction

In May 1970, New York City witnessed the "Hardhat Riot." Over 150,000 construction workers stormed the streets to wave flags and oppose the growing student-led protest movement against the Vietnam War. The workers were one of several conservative groups tired of seeing persistent dissent to the government's actions in Vietnam. One protestor, Joe Catalano, expressed his motivation: "This is our country and we ain't gonna let anyone tear it down. I fought for that flag and when people start tearing it down, I'm going to speak up. I'm for this country all the way. I'm for Nixon all the way."[1] Catalano's patriotism captured the widespread conservative response to the Vietnam War and the social battles it inspired on the home front.

This thesis argues that distinct groups of conservatives harnessed nationalism in order to recover from the humiliation of defeat in Vietnam and to oppose the leftist anti-Americanism that dominated the domestic response to the war. From 1962 to 1986, nationalism united disparate factions of the conservative movement, facilitating right-wing political success.

Catalano and the hardhats joined a chorus of conservatives who rejected the anti-Vietnam War movement. Conservative intellectuals rolled their eyes at the left's claim to moral superiority on the war issue. William F. Buckley Jr., conservative author and television personality, called student protestors effeminate "young slobs."[2] A Vietnam veteran and member of the far-right John Birch Society claimed that the protestors "were

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[1] Richard Harwood, "Flag Defenders: Hard Hats March For a Way of Life," *The Washington Post, Times Herald,* May 31, 1970.

[2] Edward C. Burks, "Buckley Assails Vietnam Protest: Condemns Marchers Here as 'Young Slobs' Strutting 'Epicene Resentment,'" *New York Times*, October 22, 1965.

far more dangerous" than the communist sympathizers he fought in the South Asian jungles.[3] Individuals with vastly different economic and political objectives found agreement on the danger of the anti-war movement.

These individuals belonged to three distinct conservative groups that relied on American pride to shape their identities in the Vietnam War era: the white working-class, conservative intellectuals, and far-right extremist groups. This thesis brings together these three factions, typically examined individually in scholarship, as related components of a political movement in order to illustrate how their efforts were complementary. Exploring the groups' shared animosities reveals a cross-class, cross-ethnic conservative movement aimed at reviving American nationalism.

Working-class white conservatives exuded patriotism in the face of the anti-war left. Many of these blue-collar workers aligned with President Richard Nixon on strident anti-communism and a conviction that the American dream was rooted in the ability to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Accordingly, the Republican Party eagerly claimed this group as a voter base. Next, intellectual conservatives used the Vietnam War as a key conflict in debating the dominant left-wing voice in scholarly American circles. Declarations of American strength from these public intellectuals received a welcome reception from those who were frustrated by liberal intellectuals' guilt and embarrassment over the war. Finally, rejections of the Vietnam War and the left took extreme forms in far-right and white nationalist circles. Many fringe white power groups capitalized on the social discord caused by the Vietnam War to recruit like-minded individuals in order to advance racist conspiracies and violent goals. Investigating these

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[3] Lewis Millett, "Praise From the Past!" *The New American* (Appleton: The New American, October 8, 2018).

three groups in relation to the Vietnam War illuminates themes of white victimhood, definitions of white masculinity, the threat of communism, opposition to big government, and nationalism – essential threads in the fabric of modern conservatism.

The shocking United States military loss in the Vietnam War forced Americans to re-examine notions of nationhood. Nationalism was crucial for conservative unity because the political right lacked a cohesive foreign policy stance on the Vietnam War. Beginning in the early 1960s, some conservatives supported the war effort and claimed it a noble cause, while others detested the violence but saw no viable alternative. As the decade progressed and the 1970s began, many advocated a gradual withdrawal from the conflict in order to mitigate American humiliation. Some had no personal opinion on the war throughout the era but celebrated the government's initiative as a matter of patriotic principle. These differing opinions were never fully reconciled, but by the early 1970s they were harmonized in an emerging conservative coalition.

Republican politicians and conservative thought leaders needed to foster a movement that rivalled the passionate anti-war left. Thus, rather than attacking leftist ideas, conservative leaders rebuked leftists themselves: specifically, the anti-war protest movement led by the young, liberal left. Conservative groups aligned ideologically over what they were against rather than what they stood for. The establishment of a common enemy permitted members of this rightist coalition to hold vastly different economic goals, bridging the gap between white-collar social conservatives and wealthy free-market elites.[4] Nationalism generated feelings of strength, masculinity, and supremacy that were key to soothing the anger of the actors examined in this thesis, most of whom

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[4] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton Press, 2001), xvi.

are white males. The norm-shattering result of the Vietnam War brought together an unlikely coalition of these seemingly disparate factions, providing the conservative movement with a surge in momentum. A complete examination of conservatism in the Vietnam War era necessitates an inspection of both the differences and converging similarities among conservative American groups.

The anti-war activist was a useful political enemy for conservatives for reasons that extend beyond Vietnam. The period from the 1960s to early 1980s was rife with social discontent from the political right. The movements that advocated for social change based on race, gender, and sexuality were called the New Left or the "counterculture." The civil rights movement advocated for racial equality, threatening the social legitimacy claimed by whites on account of race alone. White working-class and ethnic pride was deemed distasteful amid calls for racial justice. The movements for women's and gay liberation sought to dismantle patriarchal structures in the workplace and home. The nuclear family unit was deemed oppressive and outdated. Evolving social structures threatened the position of white males at the top of the American hierarchy. To the right, anti-war protestors were synonymous with protestors of these other menacing movements.

The 1970s were also riddled with economic struggle. Stagflation, a combination of rampant inflation, high unemployment, and economic stagnation, dissolved hard-earned savings and threatened the stability of the middle class. Deindustrialization swept across the country as other nations inundated the global market with cheap labor. As a result, American factories closed and wrecked the economies of manufacturing towns. White male workers' wages had increased by an astounding 42 percent during the 1960s

but started steadily falling in 1972.[5] An oil crisis struck in 1973 and the guarantee of American access to resources suddenly disappeared.[6] The tough times led more women to join the workforce, displacing men from certain jobs and challenging the vision of white, suburban women as full-time wives and mothers.[7] The American dream, anchored in the idea that hard work begets achievement, was attacked as a farce. The New Deal promise of jobs and the post-World War II economic boom had ended. Opposing the left's response to the Vietnam War became a vehicle for a largely white male group to express their patriotism in the face of these numerous social and economic threats.

The anti-war student protest movement was only one small faction inside a broader political left. Young activists' hardline goals, protest tactics, and performative nature led to disproportionate media coverage and public awareness. The student New Left formed an identity around pacifism, social justice, and rejecting claims of American superiority. Urban leftists found community at anti-war protests while decrying their government for using violence to impose Western values on the Vietnamese. College students at elite northeast institutions took pride in defiling the flag. With regards to the war, this group had an unequivocal demand: the United States must get out of Vietnam. Cultural pacifists, often identifying with hippies, became an emblematic stereotype of the anti-war left employed in the media and popular culture. The Woodstock music festival, for example, embodied this group in public perception and wed the movement's political goals with countercultural symbols like open drug use and long-hair styles for men.

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[5] Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010)*, 12.
[6] Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 9.
[7] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 9.

Underneath the hippie stereotype lay the crumbling New Deal coalition and a political left in crisis. From the 1930s to the early 1960s, the Democratic Party housed the New Deal coalition, formed under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt. American liberalism embraced Keynesian economics and the active role of government in protecting citizen rights and pursuing a degree of economic re-distribution, moving past the traditional liberal beliefs emphasizing individual freedoms and laissez-faire governance.[8] Post-war liberals sought to protect their values and imagined charting a middle path between fascism and socialism. At the peak of the Cold War, liberals were among the most ardent anti-communists.[9] The pillars of mid-twentieth-century liberalism thus became first, bolstering the social safety net at home and second, Cold War diplomacy abroad.

The social and political upheavals of the 1960s caused many Americans to become disenchanted with New Deal liberal values. The first pillar of these values, social welfare, became strongly associated with the secular, progressive, and sometimes radical values of protest movements. New Deal liberals struggled to reconcile their own politics with the urban riots, Black power, and women's and gay liberation movements that became synonymous with the left. Moreover, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society projects were overly ambitious and economically irresponsible to many liberals.[10] In the diplomatic realm, Cold War diplomacy as the second pillar of post-war liberalism dissolved under the failures of the Vietnam War. The American image was tarnished by the prevailing strength of the Northern Viet Cong forces, shaking American claims to

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[8] Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 6.
[9] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 6.
[10] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 6.

moral superiority and global hegemonic power. The post-World War II strand of nationalism owned by the left, notably touted by President John F. Kennedy, died in the 1960s alongside the New Deal coalition. Voters who rejected the cultural shifts of Democrats abandoned the party in large numbers. Conservatives claimed a monopoly on nationalism.

Ultimately, the New Left countercultural movement delivered the final blow to the New Deal coalition by exposing irreconcilable differences between two groups: Black and middle-class white advocates of social welfare, racial and sexual equality, and progressive modernism; and working-class whites who espoused patriotism, heterosexuality and masculinity, law and order, and a "bootstraps" path to success through hard work and no handouts.[11] The latter group felt snubbed by efforts to boost Black employment and living standards. Blue-collar white workers labelled quotas for Black workers in the construction industry and other court-ordered affirmative action initiatives as "reverse discrimination."[12] Additionally, white city dwellers were increasingly concerned with rising crime levels and riots in Black communities. As a result, law and order politics emerged and solidified the racist connotations of Blackness, crime, drugs, and immorality. Black nationalist ideology and forceful demands for equality panicked and offended white workers.[13] Critiques of the civil rights movement, welfare, and the decline of national safety deepened racial fractures.

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[11] Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), xxi.
[12] Jonathan Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority,'" in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order,* eds. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 255.
[13] Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority,'" 257.

Against the backdrop of the faltering New Deal coalition, Vietnam signaled the end of the "Rooseveltian program of nation building" core to the old liberal political order.[14] The overseas military loss had a deep psychological impact on Americans: "if that fight was flawed, then, so too was the nation that stood behind it."[15] The loss created an urgency for Americans to reinstate their international dominance. Conservatives had to emerge victorious in defining the historical meaning of Vietnam in order to return the American reputation to its perceived previous glory.[16]

In the incipient conservative mind, anti-war activists thus stood for more than just public opinion on the Vietnam War. The flag-burner, in conservative rhetoric, loathed both American foreign policy and America itself. Denouncing a Black civil rights activist suggested racism, but knocking an anti-war protestor was defensible under the guise of protecting civil law and order. Condemning the anti-war movement was an ostensible attack on communism, despite the fact that most underlying grievances had nothing to do with armed conflict on the shores of Vietnam. War was used as a framework for celebrating nationalism because conservatives could no longer celebrate the traditional social hierarchies slipping from their grasp. Opposing an external communist enemy was more convenient than facing a series of internal enemies for conservatives, though all these adversaries were interconnected.

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[14] Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 345.
[15] Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 317.
[16] Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 254.

Historiography of American Conservatism

Historians widely agree that the central beliefs of conservatism in the late twentieth century were anti-communism, laissez-faire economics, resistance to the civil rights movement, and defense of traditional family values and sexual customs.[17] 1960s conservatives disdained liberal egalitarianism, or the desire to increase public welfare and social good through state intervention. Libertarians, who rejected economic liberalism, and normative conservatives, who rejected social liberalism, shared a belief that liberal elites were disturbing the natural American order.[18] This thesis builds on definitions of conservatism by illustrating the commonalities between various self-identified conservatives and illustrating how the Vietnam War provided an opportunity for unity.

Distinguishing conservatism from the Republican Party is important, as the overlap between these two ideas is contested in historiography. Conservatism traditionally aspires to limited government, making the election of true conservatives something of a project in self-annihilation.[19] Conservatives typically tout nationalistic defense strategies and small budget deficits, among other governing ideals, whereas the Republican Party has housed a wide range of objectives, populists, and right-leaning ideologies that do not always conform to conservatism. This thesis is primarily concerned with conservatism and the personal politics of individual Americans, rather than organized, top-down Republican Party politics.

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[17] Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (2011), 727.

[18] McGirr, *Suburban Warriors,* 10.

[19] Julian E. Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 2 (2010): 375.

Nationalism became a central unifying concept in the Vietnam War era conservative movement. Pride of country permitted a shared conservative celebration of American greatness without requiring the disparate conservative factions to settle differences within the Republican Party on economic policy, the size of government, or the importance of tradition. Nonetheless, the intersection of conservatism and the Republican Party is significant. Each chapter of this thesis discusses how the Republican Party both motivated and capitalized on shifting notions of conservativism.

In 1994, political historian Alan Brinkley wrote a now-famous state of the field essay, "The Problem of American Conservatism," in which he deemed conservatism the "orphan" of United States historical scholarship.[20] Brinkley's definition of conservatism provides a useful starting point:

> Conservatism as an intellectually serious and politically effective movement is, in short, a relatively new phenomenon—born of the frustrations of political exile in the 1930s and 1940s, the passions of the anticommunist crusades of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and perhaps above all the political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s.[21]

Brinkley posited that scholars' consensus underappreciated the potent force of conservatism earlier in the twentieth century, and so underestimated the lasting success of conservatism in the Nixon and Reagan eras and beyond. These "consensus" scholars in the post-World War II era widely attributed conservatism to elites protecting their wealth, failing to illuminate the growing popular right beyond elite circles. The most overt example of popular conservatism emerged in 1950s McCarthyism.[22] Consensus historians wrote off McCarthyites and the New Right as "pseudo-conservatives" or radicals unlikely

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[20] Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 409–29, https://doi.org/10.2307/2167281, 411.
[21] Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," 415.
[22] Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," 411.

to make a lasting mark on political history. These scholars lumped the McCarthy and Goldwater strands of conservatism together and labelled them as forms of paranoia, not coherent politics. This underestimation concealed the true long-standing nature of the extremist popular tradition. Failing to take seriously the pre-World War I and post-World War II strands of popular conservative thought permitted scholars of the later twentieth century to describe the radical right, such as the John Birch Society, as historical anomalies. In fact, these ideologues were not an aberration but a reformation of earlier political modes.[23]

In recent decades, scholarship on conservatism has flourished. In succession to Brinkley's account, historian Julian E. Zelizer emphasized in his essay "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism" that recent historians of conservatism acknowledge the deep roots of the movement in twentieth-century mainstream circles, not only on the fringe. In turn, conservatism has become not only defined by reaction to the left, but also by established positions on issues ranging from race to national security.[24] Furthermore, these issue stances have rarely been uniformly accepted across the conservative spectrum. Conservatism has always been fragmented. Right-wing electoral success has occurred when politicians used rhetoric to bridge the divide between groups, most often temporarily.[25] For example, historians emphasize the importance of anti-communism in holding social and economic conservatives together. This essay leverages the Vietnam War as another example of a binding element of conservative coalition.

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[23] Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 371.
[24] Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 374.
[25] Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 374.

Historian Kim Phillips-Fein wrote that recent historians have taken a longer view of conservatism, highlighting origins in the early decades of the twentieth century.[26] Despite this long history, however, there was a sharp shift in the 1960s that turned conservatism into a dominant ideology after it had previously been deemed too radical and not modern enough to succeed. This conservative success was caused by the splintering of the New Deal coalition, internal Democratic Party strife over race, and a reaction to radical social movements.[27] In the 1980s, conservatives could no longer be described as a small opposition force: they became the "dominant political force."[28]

The backlash theory of American conservatism posits that a reaction against the liberalism of the New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society facilitated a unification of conservative activists that had been slowly forming over the course of the Cold War.[29] The social radicalism of the 1960s movements motivated a sharp disdain from the right. Historians caution that the backlash theory is not the only explanation for conservatism's rise. Backlash explains an added momentum that complemented an existing base of conservatives. Historian Lisa McGirr challenges backlash theory by illustrating the strong conservative tradition in Orange County, Southern California. Her account of suburban Reagan supporters emphasizes the political strength, creativity, and ambition of conservatism as a long-standing ideological institution rather than an emergent reaction.[30]

Zelizer urged historians of conservatism to grapple with the "divisions, opposition, struggles and compromises" of the post-war period.[31] The conservative

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[26] Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," 726.
[27] Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," 726.
[28] Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 370.
[29] Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 370.
[30] McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*.
[31] Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 387.

coalition was fragile, comprised of many distinct groups. This thesis contributes to the historiography of American conservatism by wrestling with the idea of a fragmented political movement finding unity and centering on nationalism as a lever for conservative momentum. While backlash theory cannot alone explain the success of conservatism in the 1970s and beyond, backlash was paramount in the evolution of conservatism during and after the Vietnam War. This thesis will demonstrate that reactions to the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement reinvigorated disparate factions of conservatism in order to build a coalition that strengthened the conservative tradition.

Nationalism is underrecognized in scholarship as a source of power that bound together the Vietnam-era cross-class conservative coalition. The social strife caused by the Vietnam War was deeply emotional, reflecting a struggle to hold on to masculinity, white superiority, and American pride. This thesis focuses on nationalism in order to explore the politics of affect and mood, a rarely examined aspect of recent literature on conservatism. Historian Kathleen Belew highlights the importance of politics of affect in her book on the rise of the white power movement amid the post-Vietnam War "remasculinization of America."[32] This work expands on her contributions and fills a gap in the existing literature by examining the emotional patriotism of a wider selection of conservative groups during a decade of social and economic turbulence.

Few scholars have explored the role played by war, nationalism, and patriotism in the right's political ascension.[33] Instead, historians of political conservatism in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s often link the right's rise to disruptions in the social order caused by social movements. Undoubtedly, the women's rights, gay rights, and the civil rights

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[32] Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 7.
[33] Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," 735.

movements all presented serious threats to right-wing nationalism that inspired

conservative action. Vietnam, however, presented an opportunity to tie the backlash from

each movement together in a conservative coalition of the white working-class,

intellectual, and extremist right-wings. By portraying Vietnam as an obligatory,

patriarchal, and macho war effort, conservative actors were able to channel the anger

generated by the gender and sexual revolutions into a belief in America's duty to win. By

touting conspiracy theories that connected the communist Viet Cong abroad with racial

integration at home, and by portraying the Viet Cong as dangerous racial "others," right-

wing agents conflated the racial anger of whites with the battlefront in Vietnam.

Historians have often overlooked the coalition of actors explored in this thesis

while studying different social movements as siloed causes; rather, these social

movements cohered through the lens of Vietnam. The Vietnam War must be studied as a

locus for reverberations of social, political, and economic rage that coalesced as a strident

defense of American nationalism.

Making Sense of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was one of many factors that splintered the New Deal coalition

and highlighted the conservative effort to construct identity. Race was another crucial

factor. The actors to be examined in the following three chapters all interacted with racial

consciousness in important ways. The civil rights movement was the most defining social

and political event of the 1960s, upending the racial order and forcing both Black and

white Americans to redefine their identities in the national narrative. Across class lines,

conservatives fought against this changing social hierarchy and clung to the social

legitimacy they had been afforded for decades on account of their whiteness. Discussions

of nationalism and race are inextricable. Republicans in the 1970s and 1980s used

colorblind rhetoric to champion white Americans, particularly the white working-class. In

doing so, they created a political divide that is still stark today: themes of nationalism and

race provide the backbone of Donald Trump's pulpit. The flourishing Trump brand of

politics has strong roots in the Vietnam War era, as the following three chapters will

exhibit.

Chapter one investigates the white working-class by focusing on two groups,

hardhats and white ethnics. Hardhats, who were union workers and New Deal supporters,

grew apart from the social values of the Democratic Party in the 1960s. In addition, white

ethnic communities were eager to assert their American identity through pride in their

whiteness and a rejection of race-based affirmative action, both elements that the

Democratic Party deemed socially inappropriate amid changing politics of race in the

1960s. Using symbolic solidarity and policy promises that were, in fact, empty, Nixon

and other Republicans nurtured the white working-class as an important conservative

voter base. In the broader scheme of the era, blue-collar workers were also suffering

financial hardship and feeling economically betrayed by the Democratic Party. Hard

economic times paired with social backlash in the aftermath of the Vietnam War sent

white blue-collar workers rightward.

The intellectual conservatives of chapter two were similarly dismayed by the

direction of liberalism in the Vietnam War era. Neoconservatives, several of whom were

dedicated socialists before Vietnam, decided that the best way to address the worrying

trend of social Democratic politics was to abandon the party altogether. They parted ways

with liberals chiefly on social and racial lines, while also resenting the economic welfare

projects of Johnson as over-bearing. Neoconservatives used the Vietnam War as an

intellectual battleground, admonishing leftist anti-war sentiment as naïve, self-righteous,

and morally unsound. Meanwhile, the more traditional conservative personality William

Buckley and his followers remained unflappable in the face of liberal criticism,

professing the strength of the United States throughout the Vietnamese conflict and the

social turmoil of the era. These public intellectuals and idea brokers paved the way for a

school of conservative thought that ruptured the leftist dominance in mainstream

intellectualism and media. Chapter two charts the pathways of these two conservative

intellectual traditions emanating from Vietnam, suggesting key stylistic, conceptual, and

nationalistic convergences with the hardhats and ethnics of chapter one.

Finally, the relevance of fringe and extremist thinkers is integral to the

discussion of conservatism in the Vietnam War era. Whereas the first two chapters are

geographically focused in New York City and other urban northern regions, chapter three

expands the scope of this project to suburban locales across the nation, most notably in

Southern California and Texas. Chapter three highlights the John Birch Society and Ku

Klux Klan (KKK) leader Louis Beam amid a discussion of Vietnam's significance to

extremist groups and the white power movement. These individuals were referred to as

"pseudo-conservatives" by midcentury historians struggling to take them seriously as

ideological contenders.[34] Yet this perception is a key flaw of consensus scholars and

other schools of thought in twentieth-century historiography. The strong presence of the

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[34] Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," 725.

KKK persisted for most of the twentieth century despite many liberals dismissing them as fringe.

The Vietnam War elicited strong reactions from far-right extremist groups that broadened notions of conservatism. The anti-government strand of nationalism peddled by the KKK and other radical groups was more intense and threatening than the nationalism of the white working-class and conservative intellectual elites. Nonetheless, all of these actors existed on a spectrum of conservatism, and nationalism was strong enough to tie them together in important ways. By introducing a far-right perspective to the American political spectrum, extremist thinkers expanded the sense of what "moderate" means; the mainstream right was pulled rightward. In investigating extremist groups, chapter three emphasizes their resilience across decades of conservatism, rather than treating radical actors as anomalies of the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter three highlights extremist groups' shared values with mainstream conservatives, chiefly nationalism, while also realizing how drastically different their politics were from the groups examined in the first two chapters.

Analysis of these three groups of American conservatives reveals that the battle to explain and exploit the meaning of the Vietnam War reinvigorated American conservatism and propelled right-wing thought toward greater success in the late twentieth century. The unlikely coalition of conservative groups in the context of Vietnam is a microcosm for greater questions about conservative unity over the course of American history. While liberals have always claimed to champion the working-class and the poor, these groups do not unanimously support the political left. A reductionist

approach to explaining patterns of partisanship based on economic status neglects the crucial role played by identity politics and social values in the American political process.

Furthermore, the Vietnam War era right-wing advanced the strategy of antagonizing political enemies rather than political ideologies. Villainizing anti-war advocates resonated with more people than did poking holes in liberal ideas. This personal-level attack reveals a dangerous tactic that risks missing the true impact of politics in favor of revenge-seeking. The legacy of this strategy lives on in the polarized nature of contemporary American politics; ideological opposites in today's system are eager to dismiss each other and reluctant to acknowledge the utility in unity.

CHAPTER ONE
The Silent Majority Speaks Up

Marchers in the Hardhat Riot | New York City, 1970.
Associated Press, accessed from Smithsonian Magazine.

Eastern-European American white ethnics greet Richard Nixon | Cleveland, 1968.
Photographer Richard Ader, accessed from Cleveland.com.

In 1969, *Time* Magazine did not choose a hero, changemaker, or national leader as their Person of the Year. Instead, editors and publishers chose "Middle Americans." *Time* characterized Middle Americans as a mindset more than a social group: "a morality, a construct of values and prejudices and a complex of fears."[35] Middle Americans, *Time* said, felt the American dream slipping away amid crumbling social values. They lamented the dissolving of long-standing institutions such as the nuclear family unit. Middle Americans shook their heads from their living rooms at the social dissenters who picketed nightly on broadcast television news. Middle Americans comprised Nixon's Silent Majority: they "physically and ideologically inhabit[ed] the battleground of change" and felt "most threatened by it."[36]

Even though some Middle Americans cast votes for Democrats, many were coming to abhor a range of social and political dynamics associated with liberalism. Middle Americans were fiercely nationalistic: "This is the greatest country in the world." They asked: "Why are people trying to tear it down?"[37] *Time* chose Middle Americans in 1969 because they were finally asserting themselves against a culture deemed unfavorable. Middle Americans "were discovered first by politicians and the press, and then they started to discover themselves."[38] This chapter examines their self-discovery in relation to the politics of the Vietnam War on American soil.

The terms 'Middle Americans' and 'Silent Majority' refer to both white middle-class suburbanites and the white, predominantly urban, working class. *Time*'s Middle Americans numbered 100 million in 1970, half of the American population. 40 million of

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[35] "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans," *TIME Magazine* 95, no. 1 (January 5, 1970): 11.
[36] "Man and Woman of the Year," 10.
[37] "Man and Woman of the Year," 10.
[38] "Man and Woman of the Year," 10.

these individuals were blue-collar workers, service employees or farm workers.[39] This

chapter examines the urban, white working class of the northeastern United States, with a

specific emphasis on New York City. Nearly 30 percent of New Yorkers worked as

craftsmen, laborers, or foremen by 1970.[40] These blue-collar individuals were young and

middle-aged adults, ranging from twenty to fifty years old, and almost exclusively male.

For most of these Americans, it was not conservative economic values that

attracted them toward the right but rather their nationalism, driven by a deep repudiation

of the New Left and the counterculture. The Vietnam War lies at the nexus of evolving

norms in the social, economic, political, and diplomatic realms, providing an ideal

backdrop for examining working-class malaise and political discontent.

Working-class whites were united over a deep commitment to nationalism and

traditionalism. Even though working-class whites often supported American withdrawal

from Vietnam, their intense rejection of the values and tactics of the anti-war movement

positioned them to be wooed by Republican politicians. They feared the impact of

communism, the United States' declining position in the world order, and the anti-war

movement's potential to undermine American soldiers' morale. Their commitment to

Americanism was irreconcilable with the anti-war movement.

Moreover, working-class whites felt threatened by the social aspirations of the

anti-war activists. The various liberation movements of the 1960s took aim at the

supremacy of the Christian church, patriarchy, and the heterosexual two-parent family

structure. The Vietnam War weakened their nation's image abroad and the anti-war

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[39] "Man and Woman of the Year," 11.
[40] David Paul Kuhn, *The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 105.

protestors were emasculating their society at home. Their loss of identity struck an intense emotional chord. The principle factor that divided the New Deal coalition, however, was race. Democratic programs aligned the left with the demands of civil rights protestors.[41] As *New Yorker* writer Richard Goodwin described it, the white working-class was "trapped in a no man's land" between urban Black poverty and middle-class affluence. Goodwin described this isolation: the white worker "fears the blacks" and is angered, because "their problems, and not his, seem to be the focus of national concern."[42] White, male New Deal Democrats saw their personal struggle absent from the interests of the left. They found sympathy among conservatives instead. Republicans courted these working-class whites through class-oriented, non-economic, nationalistic appeals.

The Vietnam War was vital to the white-working class embrace of conservatism. First, this chapter will highlight the disproportionate impact of Vietnam and the draft on working-class white Americans. The burden of fighting fell disproportionately on uneducated and low-income groups, yet still they rejected the mainstream anti-war movement. Ultimately, nationalism drove working-class whites away from pacifism and the anti-war mentality despite being overrepresented in war deaths. Second, this chapter will examine two social groups, hardhats and ethnics, that illuminate the right-wing shift experienced by pockets of white working-class America. Importantly, these groups shared 'old-fashioned' American values: uncritical patriotism, anti-communism, patriarchy at home and in the workplace, respect for tradition and religion, and achieving upward mobility by pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

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[41] Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New York: Arlington House, 1969).
[42] Richard Goodwin, "Sources of Public Unhappiness," *The New Yorker*, January 4, 1969, 38.

The term "hardhats" references the helmets worn by construction workers and other physical laborers. "Hardhats" is a shorthand that encompasses a wide swath of white working-class New Deal Democrats who became disillusioned with the social politics of the Democratic Party in the 1960s. The Hardhat Riot of 1970 provides a key example of the intense emotions that propelled northeastern American blue-collar workers toward an embrace of conservative ideology. The term "ethnics" refers to ethnically Slovak, Polish, Italian, Greek, and Slavic Americans. It is borrowed from the lexicon of cultural critic and author Michael Novak who wrote about his own ethnic consciousness as a Slovak in the United States in his 1972 book, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. Novak explained how the ethnic community adopted an anti-intellectual and anti-left mentality that colored their conservatism and defined key aspects of their interpretation of the American dream. In turn, the ethnics abandoned the Democratic Party alongside the hardhats. There was a considerable overlap between hardhats and ethnics. These groups were mutually reinforcing, similarly seeking a retention of American status quo and social, economic, and political recognition. They are separated in this chapter for analytical purposes rather than historical purposes, as some of the motivations and tactics the two groups differed.

The working-class white hardhats and ethnics of New York City suffered economic hardship and experienced massive social disillusionment in the late 1960s and 1970s. Their struggle was not met with compassion from the left. The leftist sympathy for Black causes did not match the working-class white resentment of racial initiatives and affirmative action, inspiring many to abandon their identities as New Deal Democrats. The anti-Vietnam War movement and other liberation movements pushed for social

changes that working-class whites dreaded. Rejecting the anti-war movement permitted the white working-class to showcase their nationalistic pride for the America they grew up in. Embracing conservatism was their rebellion.

The Working Class and the War

The draft disproportionately recruited Americans who earned low incomes and lacked a college education. Approximately 2,700,000 Americans served in the Vietnam War.[43] 80 percent of the enlisted ranks in Vietnam were from poor or working-class backgrounds.[44] The conflict resulted in 58,220 causalities.[45] The high proportion of working-class Americans in combat was not coincidence. Rather, the government targeted these groups, along with Black Americans, as part of an overt strategy to fill the barracks. A litany of institutional factors ushered middle-class and wealthy boys away from military: coveted spots in the National Guard obtained through familial and professional connections; stable economic foundations permitting university enrolment and thus deferments; and access to doctors and the social leverage required to request fabricated medical exemptions. In contrast, working-class boys were either unable or unmotivated to avoid serving in the military.

The government set up a program that institutionalized their reliance on the working-class to fight the Vietnam War. The program was Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara's "Project 100,000." In August of 1966, MacNamara announced that the

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[43] "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," National Archives, January 2018, https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.
[44] Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993)*,* 6.
[45] "Military Health History Pocket Card," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, https://www.va.gov/oaa/pocketcard/vietnam.asp.

military would induct 100,000 men who were previously deemed ineligible for the draft

due to their failure to pass the mental standards examination. These men were dubbed

"New Standards Men," or, more pejoratively, "MacNamara's Morons." Democratic-

Senator-turned-Nixon-aide Daniel Patrick Moynihan commended the program's potential

to "uplift" the impoverished:

> They have grown up in an atmosphere of drift and discouragement. It is not simply the sometimes squalid ghettos of their external environment that has debilitated them – but an internal and more destructive or personal disillusionment and despair: a ghetto of the human spirit.[46]

Moynihan's repeated use of "ghetto" was heavily racialized, pointing toward the

program's exploitation of disadvantaged Black communities. Project 100,000 sent

mentally ill-equipped, poor Black Americans to Vietnam in droves.

Working-class whites were also victims of Project 100,000. The initiative was

portrayed as a liberal-minded Great Society program to combat poverty. In reality, the

initiative filled the ranks with unqualified and ill-prepared boys who were likely to suffer

in the strictly regimented, dangerous conditions of war. The stated intentions of Project

100,000 did not match the initiative's impact. Historian Christian Appy analogizes the

government's portrayal of Project 100,000 to their portrayal of the Vietnam War itself:

"It was not, [the government] claimed, a unilateral military intervention to bolster a weak,

corrupt, and unpopular government in South Vietnam against revolutionary nationalism,

but a generous effort to help the people of South Vietnam determine their own fate."[47]

Similarly, Project 100,000 was poised as a charitable method of helping disadvantaged

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[46] Lisa Hsaio, "Project 100,000: The Great Society's Answer to Military Manpower Needs in Vietnam," *Vietnam Generation* 1, no. 2, article 4 (1989), http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss2/4, 14.
[47] Appy, *Working-Class War,* 32.

boys, when in reality the enterprise exploited those deemed expendable by the government.[48]

Anti-war protestors objected to the American military's stark class divide. Protestors often took aim at the disproportionately high deaths of working-class soldiers and Black soldiers. One common picket-sign slogan read "Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight," highlighting the unfair class dynamics.[49] Class, however, was not the most prominent complaint of the protestors. Moreover, some of the activities at anti-war events were offensive to soldiers who risked their lives for the cause. Some protestors waved flags of the American enemy, the National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam, referred to as the Viet Cong, to illustrate their opposition. Setting fire to draft cards was common at rallies. Many anti-war events lamented the other potential uses for the military budget, including combatting poverty in majority-Black communities. Most protests were peaceful, though some ended in violence from civilians, the state, or both. One of the most infamous anti-war rallies, held at Kent State University in 1970, sparked national turmoil after the Ohio National Guard shot four students dead and wounded nine others.[50] The class-based divide in the military was an issue that did not stand out amid the multitude of demands made by protestors.

By burning draft cards or otherwise evading service, many anti-war protestors inadvertently forced working-class soldiers to take their place. Writer and journalist James Fallows referred to Vietnam as a "class war" because of the stark socioeconomic divide between those who fought and those who evaded serving. Fallows was a Harvard

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[48] Hsaio, "Project 100,000," 16.
[49] "Dick Gregory Leads Atlanta Antiwar March: 400 Whites, Negroes Mingle in South's Largest Peace Demonstration to Date," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995); Los Angeles, Calif.*, August 7, 1967.
[50] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 346.

student from a comfortably wealthy family. When his birthday was chosen in the draft lottery, Fallows received counseling on skirting the military. He lost enough weight before his draft physical to be deemed unsuitable. At the Boston Navy Yard on the morning of his appointment, Fallows' relief was matched only by guilt: he watched boys from Chelsea fill the spots that he and his Harvard peers dodged. The Chelsea boys were the "white proles of Boston" who had not considered starvation, lying, or fake doctor's notes.[51] These boys from working-class families "walked through the examination lines like so many cattle off to slaughter."[52] Many impassioned college students like Fallows rejected, but still perpetuated, the draft's reliance on the working-class.

Despite the reality of over-representation in combat, many working-class whites viewed the war patriotically. A working-class mother in Brooklyn said of her draft-age son, "I wouldn't want him to run into college and hide. I don't want him to think he can live off this land and not have to give something back."[53] This mother saw military service as a patriotic sacrifice. Her deference to the draft illustrates a respect for collective action and national duty. Edward Looney, a Brooklyn bus driver, was one of the hapless working-class parents who lost a son in Vietnam. Looney's loss did not influence his view of the war: "We may find out some day that what we're doing is wrong, but until then, it's my country right or wrong."[54] Looney, too, exhibited unyielding nationalism. Both of these parents showcase the strength of patriotism, even during times of immense loss and suffering.

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[51] James Fallows, "What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?" *The Washington Monthly*, October 1, 1975, 215.
[52] Fallows, "What did you do in the class war, daddy?" 215.
[53] Kuhn, *The Hardhat Riot*, 230.
[54] "Man and Woman of the Year," 15.

Pride and a strong belief in hard-work as the only pathway to prosperity underpin these sentiments. These two Brooklyn parents saw the Vietnam War as an American war, not a "poor man's war." Neither of these parents expressed sympathy for the war ideologically, but nonetheless offered unwavering support for the American military. Additionally, the high value many families placed on military service often intersected with traditional interpretations of masculinity. Service was a respected sign of strength. Working-class white men were suffering declining wages and the depletion of savings caused by stagflation, yet their struggles fell on deaf ears. They felt invisible amid the calls to uplift Black Americans and women. In the military, they were rewarded for their strength and American identity.[55]

Militaristic nationalism made young men and their families yield to the draft and sometimes celebrate it. Furthermore, many Vietnam soldiers had relatives who fought in World War II or the Korean War, contributing to the notion of military service as a badge of honor. Historically, white working-class families reaped significant rewards from the G.I. bill, strengthening their positive view of military service. Although the G.I. bill was more restrictive for the Vietnam War compared to World War II and Korea, 41 percent of Vietnam veterans used education or training provisions and 57 percent received higher education made possible by the G.I. bill.[56] Military service was often seen as both a personal benefit and a display of patriotism.

In contrast, the anti-war movement wholeheartedly rejected the American cause in Vietnam. Nationalism was antithetical to the anti-war movement. A firefighter who

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[55] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 9.
[56] Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 169.

lost a son in the Vietnam War exclaimed, "what bothers me about the peace crowd is that

you can tell from their attitude, the way they look and what they say, that they don't

really love this country. Some of them almost seem *glad* to have a chance to criticize

us…To hell with them!" He added: "My son didn't die so they can look filthy and talk

filthy and insult everything we believe in and everyone in the country."[57] This parent

believed that the anti-war movement was criticizing his working-class community. He

saw the protestors as condescending and unamerican, and thus they became his enemy.

Protestors had the luxury of complaining about a war they were not fighting in while

working-class sons perished on the front lines. Nationalism became essential to

rationalize the war deaths and cope with sorrow and frustration.

 Working-class patriots detested the politics of the anti-war movement. Irishman

Peter Brennan served as head of the Greater New York Building and Construction

Council, an organization with 200,000 members. When discussing his nationalism with a

Washington Post reporter, Brennan referred to the anti-war protestors as "the spoiled

ones" who were,

> so confused they join the mob…if they don't like the government let them attack
> the government. But how can they attack the flag? It's the symbol of democracy
> and freedom and what brought our parents to this country…we're against the war
> for what it does to families and human lives. Who likes to look at a boy with his
> arms or legs shot off? But you've got to fight for your country.[58]

Brennan acknowledged the atrocities of war, yet his unbridled patriotism motivated him

to overlook them. Brennan was one of many working-class whites who deemed the anti-

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[57] Robert Coles, *The Middle Americans: Proud and Uncertain* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971).
[58] Harwood, "Flag's Defenders."

war protestors disloyal. Above all, working-class attitudes on the war prioritized honor: if America was to leave Vietnam, mitigating humiliation ought to be the top priority.

While most working-class whites despised the anti-war movement, opinion on the Vietnam War itself was as mixed in this social group as it was in the general public. In fact, public opinion surveys from the Vietnam era found few discrepancies in levels of support for the war among classes.[59] One survey from 1970 found that 48 percent of working-class whites in the north supported immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, compared to only 40 percent of middle-class whites.[60] Though many from both classes opposed the Vietnam War, the working-class did not believe it was their place to question America's motives or disparage the president and his foreign policy. Peter Brennan, the aforementioned head of the Greater New York Building and Construction Council, gave voice to this notion:

> You people in the newspapers say we are bums and hoodlums. You beat our brains out. But our people are decent people. They work in the church and the synagogue and the Little League and the Boy Scouts. They would tear up their union cards before they would do anything to hurt this country. We build this country. We build these beautiful buildings and churches and highways and bridges and schools. We love this country. We were afraid it was going down the drain and nobody was doing anything about it. That's why we marched.[61]

Brennan's "people" were working-class white hardhats and ethnics, those from families who fought to immigrate to the United States and fulfil their dreams. He referred to the mischaracterization of working-class whites in the media and by upper classes. Many middle- and upper-class Americans wrongfully conflated the working-class antagonism for the anti-war movement with working class support for the war itself. There was no

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[59] Appy, *Working-Class War,* 41.
[60] Appy, *Working-Class War,* 41.
[61] Harwood, "Flag Defenders."

singular demand from the working-class with regards to the Vietnam War: some rejected it, and some supported it. Conversely, resentment toward the unpatriotic anti-war movement was nearly unanimous. The white working-class stood for nationalism and respect for country above all else.

Hardhats: "ready for the battle"

The animosity between anti-war protestors and the working-class was perhaps best exhibited in the Hardhat Riot. Gus Tyler, a prominent labor leader, once asserted, "in the 1970s, fury comes easily to the white worker. He is ready for the battle. But he does not quite know against whom to declare war."[62] A target was located during the Hardhat Riot: the anti-war movement. On May 8, 1970, a group of 150,000 construction workers decided to vocalize their resentment.

One participant was thirty-one-year-old Joe Kelly, who had avoided political activism of any sort before the riot. Kelly was an elevator construction worker at the Twin Towers site in Manhattan. Kelly's father was born in New York and his mother in Ireland. Staten Island was Kelly's lifelong home, where he was born and where he settled down with his wife and three children on a wide street lined with green lawns and red brick houses. He was "almost mystically proud of his flag, his country, [and] the establishment." He despised communism and the anti-war protestors whom he saw as crude and unamerican. Kelly was upset by the American soldiers who perished in Vietnam and was "eager to end the […] war by striking more aggressively." The Hardhat

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[62] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 3.

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Riot, Kelly said, was an explosion of pent-up fury ignited by a specific spark: an anti-war protestor spat on an American flag.[63]

The action began at noon, as construction workers set down their tools for their lunch break. The workers descended upon lower Manhattan by the hundreds, clad in helmets and steel-toed boots. They charged toward the corner of Broad and Wall Streets, where college students and anti-war protestors were holding a vigil for the four students shot at Kent State. As the morning progressed, more than one thousand anti-Vietnam protestors amassed and the group eventually moved to the Federal Hall National Memorial. Protest leaders were positioned in front of the George Washington statue.[64]

The hardhats lashed out against the protestors. Each peacenik that dared chant "PEACE NOW!" was either brutalized or met with an impassioned reply of "AMERICA, LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT!" As the chaos mounted, more workers accumulated. The men climbed lamp posts and foisted flags on the protestors. Chief Inspector Arthur Morgan estimated that 20,000 people had gathered in the few blocks surrounding the memorial, either participating in the chaos or watching tensions rise between the anti-war protestors and the workers.[65] Police lined up to block the hardhats from the protestors, but the hardhats continued to encroach. As an anti-war protestor hoisted a Viet Cong flag into the air, many hardhats reached a boiling point. The men lunged toward the flag and trampled the protestors in their way, driving apart the crowd and sending timid protestors running. Police stood by. When leftist protestors implored officers to make arrests, few obliged. More hardhats continued to flood the scene from surrounding neighborhoods. Once they

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[63] Richard Rogin, "Why the Construction Workers Holler USA All the Way! Joe Kelly Has Reached His Boiling Point," *New York Times*, June 28, 1970, sec. New York Times Magazine, 16.
[64] Kuhn, *The Hardhat Riot*, 143.
[65] Kuhn, *The Hardhat Riot*, 143.

pushed through the final line of students, hardhats mounted an American flag on the Washington monument and cried out in victory. Joe Kelly said, "the whole group started singing 'God Bless America' and it damn near put a lump in your throat."[66] The riot was both an outlet for pent up frustration and a celebration of nationalism, a "workers' Woodstock."[67]

The violence continued. As protestors scattered, hardhats followed them to Trinity Church, City Hall Park, Pace University and surrounding areas. City Hall's flag was flying at half-mast to honor the Kent State victims. Hardhats demanded that the flag be raised. Joe Kelly believed that Mayor Lindsay was wrong to lower the flag: "That flag represents this country, so the leading representative of the country, who is President Nixon to me, is the only one that has the power or the right to raise or lower a flag."[68] At the steps of City Hall, Deputy Mayor Aurelio refused to appease hardhats by raising the flag despite pleas from the police chief. A policeman took notes as hardhats vocalized their frustrations. Thomas Owens, a Twin Towers construction site steamfitter, articulated the hardhat mentality: "This is the Silent Majority, but they are not silent anymore. They can't take these hippies anymore, because they don't speak our language. We built this city. The steamfitters. The elevator construction workers. All of us. We build every building that they want to burn down."[69] The protestors were fiercely proud: of their hard work, their city, and most of all, their nation.

Hardhats continued to march for nationalism in events after the riot. On May 20, 1970, 100,000 workers marched from City Hall to Battery Park to show their patriotism

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[66] Rogin, "Joe Kelly Has Reached His Boiling Point," 13.
[67] "Workers' Woodstock," *TIME Magazine* 95, no. 22 (June 1970): 12.
[68] Rogin, "Joe Kelly Has Reached His Boiling Point," 20.
[69] Kuhn, *The Hardhat Riot*, 181.

and reject anti-war sentiment.[70] Many New Yorkers decried the jingoistic hardhats. *The Village Voice,* a left-leaning, alterative weekly newspaper in New York City, gave a condescending summary of the event:

> the most tragic placard in sight at these demonstrations was one proclaiming, 'God Bless the Establishment.' It's pathetic to think that the workers really believe they're a part of the power structure, the same structure that indiscriminately uses their sons as cannon fodder in a war they don't really understand…But understanding their exploitation goes only so far. They still are men with singular minds and souls who consciously are selling both for acceptance to a dismal dream of "respectability."[71]

This description of hardhats is one-dimensional and perpetuates the class divide between anti-war protestors and hardhats. The writer assumed that the marchers were mere pawns in the government's plan. While institutional factors like Project 100,000 would bolster this view, many hardhats were fully capable of comprehending the war and enlisted voluntarily because of their pride and sense of duty.

For those who were drafted, nationalism and familial histories of military service often prevented them from feeling exploited by the government. Their core values, rooted in masculinity and American supremacy, fit well with military service. They felt increasingly frustrated in the broader social landscape of the 1960s, in which white men received no pity. Vietnam veterans, in contrast, were celebrated by their families and communities. The true irony of the *Village Voice* passage is that it insulted and patronized hardhats while purporting to sympathize with them as an exploited group. This dichotomy exemplifies why hardhats despised liberal intellectuals. While claiming to stand up for the working-class, the anti-war movement drove them away.

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[70] Rogin, "Joe Kelly Has Reached His Boiling Point," 13.
[71] Harwood, "Flag Defenders."

The press deemed the Hardhat Riot a pro-government, pro-Vietnam rally. Indeed, there were Nixon supporters and Vietnam War advocates present. These stances however, were not the driving forces behind the event. The rioters were more anti-counterculture than anti-Vietnam War. The news stations blurred this key distinction. Furthermore, it was convenient for Republicans to conflate the pro-war and anti-counterculture factions in order to strengthen their political bloc.

Nixon capitalized on the Hardhat Riot by cementing the divide between hardhats and the anti-war left. Nixon's advisers and aides encouraged this strategy. In a 1972 memo to Nixon, special consultant Pat Buchanan urged the President to focus on winning hardhat support. Buchanan wrote: "the hard hats, if you will, should be reminded of McGovern's ultra-leftism, his general incompetence, the radical character of his supporters, etc. Again, there is no inconsistency in hitting McGovern both as a Far Leftist and an Opportunist."[72] Buchanan recommended that Nixon associate McGovern with leftism and radicals in order to facilitate hardhats' own sense of alienation from the Democratic Party.

A few months later, Buchanan wrote a memo to Nixon advising how he should frame Vietnam: "While President Nixon sought courageously to extricate America from the conflict–with his two objectives, American honor intact, and our commitment not defaulted–McGovern badgered and sabotaged this courageous effort every step of the

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[72] Patrick J. Buchanan, "Political Memorandum," in *Richard Nixon Presidential Library: Contested Materials Collection: Box 21, Folder 5,* September 6, 1972, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/contested/contested_box_21/Contested-21-05.pdf, 18.

way."[73] Buchanan advised Nixon to embody honor. He was tapping into the nationalism of the working-class.

Nixon's Assistant Secretary of Labor Jerome M. Rosow prepared a brief on the working-class strategy in 1970 called "The Problem of the Blue-Collar Worker," commonly referred to as the "Rosow Report." Rosow called working-class whites "overripe for a political response" and particularly bothered by liberal sympathy for Black plight.[74] Upon obtaining the document, the *Wall Street Journal* portrayed it as a part of Nixon's vote-hungry strategy to win broader white support by abandoning Black causes. The article was headlined: "Blue Collar Blueprint: Secret Report Tells Nixon How to Help White Workingmen and Win Their Votes," perhaps portraying the document as clandestine to emphasize that Nixon sought the working-class for their votes and not because he believed in their cause.[75] The Rosow Report was a manifesto for the working-class, packed with policy suggestions, that Nixon ultimately did not adopt. His rhetorical appeal won him the votes of the white working-class and subsequently supplanted concrete policies to actually improve their lives.

Nixon solidified his alliance with white blue-collars by seeking a camaraderie with influential labor leader George Meany. Meany founded and served as the first president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) from 1955 to 1979. As indicated in Haldeman's diary, Nixon played golf

[73] Patrick J. Buchanan, "Memorandum to the President," in *Richard Nixon Presidential Library: Contested Materials Collection: Box 21, Folder 5,* July 12, 1972, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/contested/contested_box_21/Contested-21-05.pdf, 61.
[74] Monroe W. Karmin, "Blue Collar Blueprint: Secret Report Tells Nixon How to Help White Workingmen and Win Their Votes," *Wall Street Journal,* June 30, 1970.
[75] Karmin, "Blue Collar Blueprint."

with Meany.[76] On Labor Day in 1970, Nixon invited Meany and sixty other labor leaders to dine at the White House. Nixon and Meany disagreed vehemently on most political issues, with the crucial exception of the Vietnam War.[77] Meany despised the anti-war left, feared the communist threat, and supported Nixon's Vietnam policy.

Nixon's courtship of Meany had only partial success. Meany did not endorse Nixon, nor did he particularly like the President, but he despised McGovern even more. Charles Colson, who served as counsel on Nixon's Key Issues Committee, wrote, "We have succeeded in splitting large parts of the labor movement away from the Democratic Party. We have not won them over to the Republican Party; but the reservoir of goodwill and support for the President, both as an individual and a President, is the basis for a permanent alliance."[78] Nixon needed only for Meany and other labor leaders to reject McGovern, perhaps vouching instead for a more centrist candidate such as Edmund Muskie. Hatred of McGovern, however, paired with support for the Republican stance on Vietnam resulted in many laborers supporting Nixon: "Without Vietnam, the 'common man' strategy might not have survived the trial stage."[79] Nixon's Vietnam policy helped him court enough working-class votes for victory in 1972. The nationalism of the working-class drew enough center-left voters rightward.

Ethnics for Nixon

A second tenet of Nixon's working-class strategy was winning over white ethnic Americans. These were immigrant families who believed in the promise of America.

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[76] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 113.
[77] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 141.
[78] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 143.
[79] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 147.

They worked hard for economic success, exemplifying the "bootstraps" mentality and subsequently leading them to reject affirmative action for Black Americans and other demands of the civil rights movement. Scholars Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny describe these ethnic characteristics: "These second- and third-generation descendants of European immigrants became the embodiment of Nixon's 'Silent Majority,' a group alienated by the civil rights movement, betrayed by liberals and simmering with 'middle class rage.'"[80] Sugrue and Skrentny define ethnics as middle class rather than working class, as both are widely used labels for the group. Liberal policies helped fuse these two statuses: union jobs and mortgage subsidies effectively made working class positions mainstays in the middle class, although the comfort afforded by blue-collar jobs began to disintegrate as the economy faltered in the 1970s.

The rage of white ethnics was used to the advantage of conservatives. Nixon told his advisors to build their "own new coalition based on Silent Majority, blue-collar Catholics, Poles, Italians, Irish."[81] Working-class ethnics clung to traditional values and resented progressive social politics, making them prime targets for Nixon. Ethnic families were fiercely nationalistic. Moreover, they were sympathetic to Nixon's Vietnam War policy because of strident anti-communism. Many ethnics came to America to escape Soviet communism in Eastern Europe. By 1972, there were 40 million white ethnics across the country.[82]

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[80] Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny, "The White Ethnic Strategy," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s,* ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 172.
[81] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 126.
[82] Colman McCarthy, "'Wretched Refuse: White Ethnics Natural Allies for U.S. Blacks," *Los Angeles Times,* June 4, 1972.

The late 1960s and early 1970s bore witness to a reclamation of ethnic pride. This revival emerged as a reaction to the societal push toward integration of races and the "melting pot" narrative of American assimilation. Rigid racial categories of the Jim Crow era were weakened by the civil rights movement, inspiring an ethnic counterattack aimed at preserving cultural heritage. The ethnic revival was a backlash to rising social discourse supporting Black and white integration, as ethnics felt left behind by a culture prioritizing one struggling social group over another. Furthermore, ethnic whites united around feeling slighted by Anglo-Saxon American dominance in professional and economic realms. They were not reaching the same levels of success as non-ethnic white Americans, yet did not receive the same societal empathy as Blacks and other minority groups. The ethnic revival took form in neighborhood festivals, ethnic restaurants, and portrayals in popular culture, including the blockbuster hit *The Godfather*.[83] Politically, the cultural revival allowed ethnics to preserve racial pride "at a moment when it grew increasingly illegitimate to make claims on the state on the basis of whiteness."[84]

The ethnics were key to Nixon's electoral strategy. A Columbia PhD student and White House Fellow named Jim Connor provided a series of recommendations for the Nixon reelection campaign following the Republican losses in the 1970 midterm elections. Donald Rumsfeld, at the time a counselor to Nixon, sent Connor's paper to Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman. Connor discussed the ethnic revival:

> After a long period of decline, white ethnicity has enjoyed something of a resurgence. This resurgence is attributed, in part at least, to a down-grading in the media of the working class and its values. A return to the more obvious forms of ethnic allegiance has been an outlet for these frustrations.[85]

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[83] Sugrue and Skrentny, *Rightward Bound,* 172.
[84] Sugrue and Skrentny, *Rightward Bound,* 174.
[85] Jim Connor, "Report," in *Richard Nixon Presidential Library: Contested Materials Collection: Box 20, Folder 17,*

In referencing "a down-grading in the media," Connor alluded to the Archie Bunker stereotype in which working-class white ethnics were portrayed as bigots.[86] The caricature created a self-fulfilling prophecy: the anger it generated in white ethnics contributed to their self-inflicted alienation from other ethnicities and their animosity toward Blacks and Black sympathy.

In *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,* Michael Novak aired his grievances as a Catholic Slovak-American. He wrote on behalf of ethnically European immigrants who were infuriated by an American culture that sought to impose values on them. "Ethnic" referred to Slovaks, Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs. Novak took sharp aim at White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture for dissolving ethnic traditions and ways of life. He also attacked intellectual elites for deserting white ethnics and asserting moral self-righteousness. Novak's book exposed the contradiction between the ethnics' shared economic aims with the left but simultaneous social disillusionment with leftist values. Furthermore, Novak exhibited the nationalism that ultimately convinced many ethnics to embrace the politics of the right.[87]

Novak described how the Democratic Party lost working-class ethnics. Novak attributed this alienation to several factors. Primarily, he referenced "the social issue," a term intended to encompass law and order, Black militancy, sexual promiscuity and other

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https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/contested/contested_box_20/Contested-20-17.pdf, 47.

[86] The working-class was vastly over-generalized in national media and popular culture. The caricature of a flag-bearing, beer-drinking, bigoted patriot dominated the public eye. *All in the Family*, a popular sitcom of the 1970s, solidified and perpetuated this stereotype through its main character Archie Bunker. Archie resented the Black family that moved in on his street, thought that all disadvantaged people needed only to work harder to achieve success, and despised peace-loving hippies almost as much as he hated communism. He was the archetypal ethnic, blue-collar, traditional conservative.

[87] Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 6.

political value realignment that occurred in the 1960s. Wrapped up in "the social issue" lay Vietnam – Novak wrote that the anti-war movement became synonymous with the shifting values and behaviors that frightened ethnics: "Jeering, hooting, mockery, and violence came to be associated with the Vietnam war protestors."[88] This negative association mirrored the hardhat's contempt for hippies and the unpatriotic counterculture.

Furthermore, Novak illustrated that resentment toward Blacks pushed white ethnics to embrace conservatism. Democrats were thought to have abandoned ethnic needs in order to advocate for Black causes. Novak asked,

> Why do the educated classes find it so difficult to want to understand the man who drives a beer truck, or the fellow with a helmet working on a site across the street with plumbers and electricians, while their sensitivities race easily to Mississippi or even Bedford-Stuyvesant?[89]

The inability of ethnics to relate their own disadvantages to the Black American struggle stemmed from their "bootstraps" mentality. White ethnics prided themselves on overcoming economic adversity: "their upward mobility was recent, hard-won, but still precarious."[90] Achieving success without government assistance or affirmative action was viewed by ethnics as a fundamentally American trait, one which fueled their nationalistic pride. When civil rights activists demanded systemic change to overcome institutional racism leftover from slavery, many white ethnics felt left behind. In turn, many white ethnic communities became insular and saw hard work the only path to success. They lost faith in the ability and will of government to intervene positively in their lives.

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[88] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,* 6.
[89] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 58.
[90] Sugrue and Skrentny, *Rightward Bound,* 179.

In reality, white ethnics had benefited for decades from social structures implemented by Roosevelt's New Deal and Truman's Fair Deal.[91] Blacks were the citizens historically excluded from reaping government benefits. The civil rights movement sought to dismantle these barriers. White ethnics did not see Black activism as an effort to level the playing field but rather a push for unearned handouts. There was an increasing "feeling among white ethnic working people that they have been dealt out of the government spending game: ignored by an officialdom more interested in the problems of blacks or Puerto Ricans."[92] The demands of the left thus became antithetical to white ethnics, despite the fact that the economic needs of Blacks and minorities were akin to their own.

Conservatives jumped at the opportunity to capture the ethnic vote. Interestingly, however, Novak did not like Nixon. He claimed that "Mr. Nixon exudes a tired WASP morality."[93] Instead, Novak identified strongly with Vice President Spiro Agnew. He associated Agnew with George Wallace, writing that both men's language "awakens childhood memories" and resonated with ethnic Americans.[94] Agnew was himself a white ethnic, born to a Greek-immigrant father. This political affiliation, derived from a sense of belonging, reflects the importance of group mentality to white ethnics.

Agnew was a frequent advocate for working-class whites. He was vehemently anti-intellectual and pro-Vietnam. Agnew called the organizers of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam, a national demonstration with widespread participation, an "effete

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[91] Ira Katznelson, "When Affirmative Action Was White," *Poverty and Race Research Action Council Journal* 15, no. 2 (April 2006).
[92] Margaret Gentry, "White Ethnic Groups Seek U.S. Equality," *Los Angeles Times,* November 26, 1971.
[93] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,"* 56.
[94] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,"* 56.

corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals."[95] In the same

speech, Agnew disparaged young Americans for getting involved with drugs and going to

"college to proclaim rather than to learn."[96] Agnew aligned himself closely with the anti-

intellectual working class and regularly embodied the old-fashioned values that ethnics

celebrated. His crass and unapologetic rhetoric appealed to working-class whites,

providing an edge to Nixon's smoother dialogue. Buchanan called Agnew "the

acknowledged spokesman of the Middle American, the Robespierre of the Great Silent

Majority."[97] Agnew succeeded in belittling liberals. His colorful language was both

attention-grabbing and powerful, appeasing white ethnics who detested liberal protestors.

White ethnics cheered Agnew on for refusing to cave to the brass demands and loud

protests of the left. Agnew was stubborn, patriotic, and a European immigrant family

success story: the perfect hero for white ethnics.

Novak saw New York City ethnics as victims of prejudice from the political left:

"An alliance with ethnics was rejected by [Mayor] John Lindsay in New York—it was

his major mistake—not out of political acumen but out of thoughtless prejudice. The

ethnics […] were prematurely written off as backward."[98] This sentiment exemplifies the

animosity of working-class whites toward intellectuals and liberal elites. Novak derided

liberal, elite urban politicians and intellectuals who sought major social upheaval and

reversal of old-fashioned American values while deeming ethnics archaic for pursuing

the American dream. The ethnics "learned to wave the flag and to send their sons to war"

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[95] Marjorie Hunter, "Agnew Says 'Effete Snobs' Incited War Moratorium," *New York Times*, October 20, 1969, 1.
[96] Hunter, "'Effete Snobs,'" 12.
[97] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 129.
[98] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 7.

in an attempt to assimilate, but instead received only criticism from the elite left.[99] Working-class white ethnics were made to feel morally inferior.

A *Los-Angeles Times* article explored this white ethnic plight. Journalist Colman McCarthy wrote, "The stereotype of the white ethnic is that he is a racist, a Negro-hater intent on keeping the blacks out of the neighborhood and out of mind."[100] McCarthy associated the white ethnics with the subject of the famous poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty, which calls immigrants the "wretched refuse." McCarthy explained, "that is exactly how much of the established white Anglo-Saxon America saw the swarthy ethnics—wretched refuse."[101] The article pointed out that the anti-war protestors who lamented American deaths in Vietnam failed to consider that the death rate at American industrial sites, the workplace of the white ethnic, was far worse.[102] Finally, McCarthy regretted that white ethnics and Blacks were not allies. Despite their shared economic interests, these groups belonged to opposing ideological camps.

McCarthy's article explains the discontent of the white ethnics. Their fierce cultural pride was not welcome in liberal circles, deemed instead as racism. Their economic struggles were similarly written off. Their families had achieved their ultimate dream by making it to America, yet their nationalistic pride was judged as bigoted and ignorant by liberals. Instead of partnering with disadvantaged Blacks, the white ethnics were alienated from the left and, in turn, grew hostile toward Black interests. This had a deeply emotional effect. White ethnics, natural allies to the New Deal coalition, learned

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[99] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 59.
[100] McCarthy, "Wretched Refuse."
[101] McCarthy, "Wretched Refuse."
[102] McCarthy, "Wretched Refuse."

that their respect for tradition and the values they associated with America were more hospitable in conservative circles.

Novak suggested that working-class ethnics were more likely to hate communism than the general public and thus more likely to sympathize with the war in Vietnam. Novak wrote, "It is not surprising that the lower-middle-class believes in being tough with the Communists. They believe in being tough with their own children."[103] He suggested that the "brutal realism of European peasants" resulted in anger and corporal discipline in ethnic families, dulling them to the atrocity of war.[104] To Novak, willingness to sacrifice for a greater cause was an ethnic trait. Many white ethnics saw the Vietnam War as a suitable solution for the malicious threat of communism.

Patriotism was paramount to ethnics. They were fiercely proud of both their European heritage and American status. Immigrating was a sign of success and a parent's gift of a better life to their children. Novak highlighted this key characteristic:

> The nativist American is complacent about the flag; he and his culture come first, the flag exalts his self-image. The ethnic American is grateful for the flag; it transcends WASP interests. He is *part* of what it represents. It is a symbol of what has been given him, and what he must willingly die for.[105]

The white ethnic working-class attitude prioritized the collective over the individual, desensitizing ethnics to moral ambiguities in Vietnam. Novak asserted that white ethnics embodied the American spirit more than non-immigrant Americans, a provocative claim that highlights the emotional nature of white ethnic patriotism. Americanism was a gift for ethnics, not a birthright. Their citizenship was a product of family histories of struggle and success. The white ethnic dedication to country was unflappable, leading them to

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[103] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 206.
[104] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 206-207.
[105] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 261.

reject the anti-Americanism of the left despite shared economic interests. Nixon used this nationalism to make white ethnics a voter base, prying them away from Democrats.

Sugrue and Skrentny argue that white ethnic grievances were exploited for the purpose of gaining votes and never actually addressed by policy, achieving only "token, discursive political attention."[106] The Nixon administration used ethnic reclamation to their advantage, diversifying the Republican image of a WASP supporter base by absorbing a wider range of white Americans who clung to tradition and old-fashioned family values. Moreover, this new strategy contributed to dissolving the New Deal coalition of Democrats. The ethnic strategy in the north was similar to Nixon's "Southern Strategy," which sought to pull white working-class Southern Democrats toward conservatism by nursing the group's segregationist tendencies while suppressing the reality that they shared economic struggles with Black Americans.

In the aforementioned memo from White House Fellow Jim Connor, ethnics were deemed an invaluable group for Nixon's reelection. Connor's analysis was as follows:

> White ethnic groups, descendants of 19th and 20th century immigrants, have long been the bulwark of the Democratic Party in the cities and inner suburbs. Persons in this category, largely working and middle class Catholics and Jews, have become increasingly restless as they watched the loss of their political strength in the urban areas. […] The Civic Morality policy, for instance, should have considerable impact, as it stresses the individual's contributions as citizen, their essential allegiance to the Republic, their legitimate concern for safety and tranquility, and the validity of their family, ethnic, and religious institutions.[107]

Connor mentioned the "Civic Morality policy," a program devised by Connor himself that advised Nixon to focus on civic pride and values. These elements appealed to the ethnic appreciation of citizenship-entitled freedoms and democracy. Connor's analysis

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[106] Sugrue and Skrentny, *Rightward Bound,* 174.
[107] Jim Connor, "Report," 47.

highlighted the importance of traditional values to the Republican white ethnic strategy. Ultimately, white ethnics were an ideal social group for conservatives to claim: they had deep nationalism, a respect for old-fashioned American values, and a repudiation of the social goals of the left. They were eager to part ways with liberals despite their previous stronghold in the New Deal coalition.

Conclusion

Pete Hamill, New York journalist and son of proud Irish working-class immigrants, gave a voice to the working-class in his 1969 essay "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class." He urged politicians "to begin to deal with the growing alienation and paranoia of the working-class white man."[108] Hamill professed the importance of patriotism to the working class. Vietnam, he explained, "was an American war, with Americans dying in action, and it could not be questioned." He emphasized that the working-class white man always fought American wars. Hamill distilled working-class animosity toward the leftist counterculture in one phrase: "he sees any form of anti-war protest as a denial of his own young manhood, and a form of spitting on the graves of the people he served with who died in his war."[109]

As Hamill illustrated, the Vietnam War was the perfect microcosm for the working-class' growing discontent with the left. Blue-collar men were sent to die in the Vietnamese jungle, some out of patriotic duty and anti-communism and others because they had not thought to, or been able to, question authority. Patriotism resonated through

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[108] Pete Hamill, "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class," *New York Magazine,* April 14, 1969, https://nymag.com/news/features/46801/
[109] Hamill, "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class."

working-class households while elite liberal youths chided their country for a war in which they were not suffering. Though countercultural protestors comprised a small segment of the left, their demands rang loudly and received much media attention. Members of the white working-class could not identify with the new face of the Democratic Party: the civil rights activist seeking affirmative action for Black Americans and burning a draft card.

Nixon's reelection team knew how to channel this anger to their advantage. Nixon dined with unionists and held rallies at ethnic pride parades. He commiserated with the working-class on the loss of national pride and respect, promising to restore their desired social values, yet ignored their economic needs which were in fact the true cause of their decreasing quality of life. The discontent of hardhats and ethnics was exploited for political gain. The grievances and governmental critiques of the hardhats and ethnics harmonized in the 1970s and refracted through the backlash to the Vietnam War.

Hardhats and ethnics were central to Nixon's 1972 reelection strategy. While the majority of Nixon voters were not from the working class, his strategy required peeling enough supporters from the margins to gain a majority. Nixon took advantage of the splintering New Deal coalition, leaving a class-based rift that remains strong in American politics. Historian Jefferson Cowie describes the strategy as "an explicit pitch for white, male, working-class votes by appealing to their cultural values over their material needs."[110] Nixon used campaign rhetoric that lauded old-fashioned values and patriotism without ever implementing a concrete platform to benefit his blue-collar audience.

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[110] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 7.

The strategy was a tremendous success. Nixon received the majority of white

working-class votes against George McGovern, ironically "the most pro-labor candidate

ever produced by the American two-party system."[111] On the night Nixon won reelection

in 1972, reeling from the elation of success, he praised one of the advisors who gave him

the working-class strategy. Nixon raised his glass of scotch and soda to Charles Colson:

"Here's to you, Chuck. Those are your votes that are pouring in, the Catholics, the union

members, the blue-collars, your votes, boy. It was your strategy and it's a landslide!"[112]

Indeed, in 1972 Nixon won with 57 percent of the manual worker vote and 54 percent of

the union vote.[113] An average of 20 percent more working-class whites voted for

Republicans in 1968 and 1972 compared to the elections of 1960 and 1964.[114] Nixon's

working-class strategy had an impactful legacy; white working-class communities were

key to Donald Trump's 2016 election.[115]

The Vietnam War era bore witness to a stark, lasting political division in the

working class. Democrats attracted leftists seeking to dismantle social hierarchies based

on race, gender, and sexuality. Leftist leaders relied on a class-based economic appeal to

cement their support, promising to tackle poverty by reforming welfare and legislating

equal rights for all. Republicans, in contrast constructed their own class-based coalition

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[111] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 7.
[112] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 161.
[113] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 161.
[114] Alan Abramowitz and Ruy Teixeira, "The Decline of the White Working Class and the Rise of a Mass Upper-Middle Class" (The Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institution, September 2009), http://doi.wiley.com/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2009.tb00653.x.
[115] The white working class has not, however, been steadily Republican since the 1968 election. Donald Trump's election was a surprise to pollsters who expected swing states such as Michigan to vote Democrat. Moreover, the working-class is not a political monolith. Author and *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist Thomas Edsall emphasizes that "marginal shifts in partisan balloting by the white working class have been a crucial determinant in the outcome of elections since 1968." See more: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/opinion/pelosi-white-working-class.html.

through non-economic, nationalistic appeals that focused on conserving social structures of white, male dominance and asserting American global superiority. Conservatives courted New Deal Democrats, the prior bedrock of the left, by portraying cold-war liberalism as a vestige of an emerging elitist left intent on restructuring American culture, tax policy, and race relations at the expense of the white worker.[116]

The working-class move toward conservatism exposes a litany of ironies. Working-class men perished disproportionately in the war, yet they refused to oppose the war and join forces with the anti-war left. The hardhats and ethnics shared more economic interests with impoverished Blacks than with most Republican voters, yet they could not sympathize with the civil rights movement. In the absence of the New Deal coalition, the left was no longer hospitable to nationalism. The white working class thus relocated, despite the contradictions.
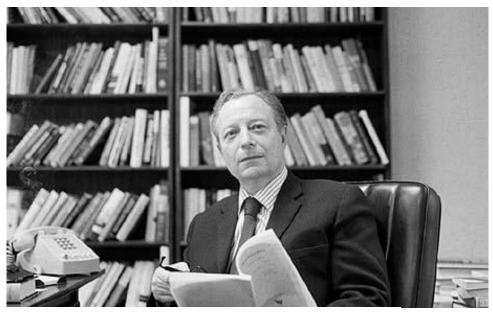
Even Michael Novak, a chief spokesman for the working-class, was an ironic choice; Novak's Harvard master's degree and multiple literary awards are typical monikers of the elite left that he decried. Novak insisted, "like an iron pipe on the back of the neck, ethnics feel the authority of the educated. Insistently, they are made to feel unenlightened, stupid, immoral, and backward."[117] Novak used his familial roots to recognize the gripes of ethnic communities. He sympathized with their social struggles without suffering economically alongside them. Novak, like Nixon, championed the working-class from a distance. The plight of the working-class in the 1970s was well detailed by intellectuals like Novak, exploited by Nixon, but never solved.

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[116] Thomas Byrne Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 4.
[117] Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,*" 228.

Conservative Intellectuals Join the Debate

Irving Kristol at his desk | New York City, 1976.
Photograph © Bettmann/Corbis, accessed from The Guardian.

William Buckley takes on an adversary | Chicago, 1968.
ABC Photo Archives, accessed from Vox.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, conservative intellectuals challenged the dominant liberal voice in media and political literature and began voicing their American pride. The Vietnam War became a crucial arena for these political debates. Disillusioned public intellectuals embarked on a similar political journey as working-class whites, disavowing New Deal Democratic ideals and elevating the importance of nationalism. Despite drastically different economic interests from white workers, public intellectuals shared the blue-collar vision for America as a protector of anti-communism abroad.

Conservative intellectuals portrayed themselves as brave "others" daring to dissent. Embodying this outsider status, liberals Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz joined forces with other disillusioned New Deal Democrats to establish a new ideology called neoconservatism. In the mainstream conservative world, conservative cultural icon William F. Buckley Jr. portrayed himself as an outsider in saying, "I feel I qualify spiritually and philosophically [as a conservative]; but temperamentally I am not of the breed."[118] These intellectual pioneers brought a newfound popularity and legitimacy to conservatism. For the first time, union workers and other conservative converts began to identify with the arguments of polished intellectuals on television and in newspapers. Nationalism bound these compatriots together in an unlikely coalition.

As the Vietnam War became increasingly salient in scholarly debate in the late 1960s, conservative intellectuals capitalized on mounting social discord by attacking the left.[119] The intellectual critique of liberalism was twofold: the left was chastised both for

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[118] William F. Buckley Jr., "Notes Toward an Empirical Definition of Conservatism," in "Introduction" in *American Conservatism: Reclaiming an Intellectual Tradition,* ed. Andrew Bacevich (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2020), 13.
[119] Andrew Bacevich, ed. "Introduction" in *American Conservatism: Reclaiming an Intellectual Tradition* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2020), xvii.

starting the war in Vietnam and for the irresponsible push to desert the conflict a decade later. Harry Truman's military support of the French colonial forces in 1950s and John F. Kennedy's 'best and brightest' elite cabinet embroiled Americans in the unwinnable conflict. After years of entrenchment, liberal intellectuals sympathized with and encouraged the counterculture's pacifist, anti-American crusade.

The right challenged liberals by embracing nationalism, portraying American global hegemony as a moral obligation, and criticizing liberalism as condescending and ethically bankrupt. This chapter will examine the conservatives who embarked on a mission to redefine conservatism, focusing on various right-wing figures' usage of the Vietnam War as a pivotal event in their ideological journey toward conservative legitimacy.

The most prominent public intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s tended to be political leftists. Canonical leftwing intellectuals of the 1960s included historical sociologist Christopher Lasch, literary critic Irving Howe, writer Susan Sontag, and writer, linguist and activist, Noam Chomsky. The dominant leftist view on the Vietnam War changed over time: Vietnam was labelled an irresponsible lapse in judgment in the early 1960s; a reflection of immorality in the mid 1960s; and an exhibition of unearned American political domination by the late 1960s and into the 1970s.[120] Many liberal public intellectuals legitimized the anti-war protests by deeming civil disobedience a moral obligation in the face of injustice.[121]

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[120] Sandra L. Vogelgesang, *The Long Dark Night of the Soul: The American Intellectual Left and the Vietnam War* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 5.
[121] "A Baker's Dozen of Writers Comment: On Civil Disobedience," *New York Times*, 1967, sec. The New York Times Magazine.

Conservative author Andrew Bacevich alleges that during these decades, a dismissal of conservative thinkers was a verdict that

> seemed incontrovertible—at least it did until Vietnam rolled around and the hegemony of postwar liberalism crumbled with astonishing suddenness. A New Left rose up to deflate Cold War liberalism's pretensions to inevitability and presented conservative intellectuals an unforeseen opportunity to be heard.[122]

Vietnam was a key event that catalyzed a legitimization of conservative intellectuals. The domination that liberal intellectuals held in scholarly discourse was dismantled by both New Leftists and conservative thinkers in the wake of the war. Vietnam provided an arena for shifting values and norms that ushered in new viewpoints and caused a disillusionment with liberal-minded politics. While conservative intellectuals were not new during the Vietnam era, they received an unprecedented level of attention and legitimacy unseen during the post-World War II intellectual reign of liberalism. These conservative intellectuals shared the working-class contempt for the liberal-dominated scholarly realm.

Nationalism played an essential role in the reclamation of conservatism. Some conservative intellectuals supported the war effort in Vietnam, while others did not. Their ideology united in a common disdain for the New Left counterculture and anti-war movement. Public intellectuals argued that the left was decadent and smug. These right-wing intellectuals perpetuated American exceptionalism, the view that the United States has the unique ability and obligation to steer the world in the right social and political direction. By reinforcing America's duty to serve as the policeman of the world, they returned honor to the notion of fighting communism abroad. Conservatives countered the

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[122] Bacevich, *American Conservatism,* xvii.

liberal arguments on American imperial overreach in Vietnam by promoting American duties abroad and the imperative of finishing what the government started.

Neoconservatism was essential to the intellectual ideological shift. Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz pioneered neoconservatism, a reactionary ideology that emerged in opposition to the shifting meaning of American liberalism amid increased government-led social programs and the free-spirited values of the countercultural and anti-war movements. In addition, mainstream American conservatives, under the leadership of William F. Buckley Jr, facilitated the intellectual conservative advancement. Buckley dedicated his career to the popularization of conservative ideals and targeted the anti-war movement as naïve and immoral in order to rouse his base of young conservative upstarts. Kristol, Podhoretz, and Buckley were all New Yorkers, making New York City a key location for the debates explored in this chapter.

While both neoconservatism and traditional conservatism were fundamentally nationalistic, they were in fact quite distinct tracts. Historian of neoconservatism Justin Vaïsse writes, "Inspired more by Alex de Tocqueville than by Edmund Burke or Friedrich Hayek, these [neoconservative] intellectuals had almost nothing in common with the "real" conservative movement that had taken shape around William F. Buckley Jr. and the *National Review* from 1955 on."[123] Supporting this claim, Bacevich suggests that neoconservatives were in fact "never genuinely conservative."[124]

The ambiguity on neoconservatism's role in the greater conservative movement was partially based on the unusual identities of its founders. Kristol, Podhoretz, and other founders including sociologist Daniel Bell, were socialists in their youths and liberal

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[123] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 7.
[124] Bacevich, *American Conservatism,* xx.

hawks as older adults. Upon finding the 1960s culture of the left disagreeable, they founded their own political movement. Furthermore, the founders' intellectual pursuits were influenced by their dedicated Judaism. They migrated to the Republican Party at a time when Jews were considered fundamental Democrats.[125] This transition occurred while intellectuals like Buckley, a staunch Catholic and member of an establishment conservative family, were dominating the conservative public image. In fact, Buckley defined conservatism in religious terms, as "uncompromised support of Christianity."[126] As Jews and defected leftists, the neoconservatives blazed a trail in the conservative movement and brought along with them other former conservative outsiders.

This chapter will examine the differences between these two intellectual conservatisms and how both were distinctly influenced by the Vietnam War. In neoconservative and mainstream conservative intellectual circles alike, thought leaders sought to win over the meaning of the Vietnam War, lest its legacy be dominated by leftists claiming morally superiority. This viewpoint harmonized with the political and social values of working class whites.

The Birth of Neoconservatism

Scholars today use the term neoconservative to describe hawkish right-wing advocates of aggressive foreign intervention, perhaps most notable for their fervent support of the Iraqi invasion of 2003.[127] This version of neoconservatism is not consistent with its Vietnam-era ideological origins, prompting scholar Justin Vaïsse to describe

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[125] Irving Kristol, "Forty Good Years," *Public Interest* (The National Affairs, Inc., March 22, 2005).
[126] Elizabeth Grace Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 141.
[127] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 1.

neoconservatism in three distinct stages. The third stage, which begat the Iraqi war, began

in the 1980s and remains today. In its earlier stages, neoconservatism emerged as a

reaction to shifts in the Democratic left. Across the various stages of neoconservatism,

themes of muscular Americanism, nationalism, and exceptionalism remained

strongholds.

In the 1960s, the New Deal coalition was collapsing beyond repair. Democrats

who had associated with anti-communism and social welfare became disillusioned with

the New Left. Johnson's Great Society platform was seen as too ambitious and unlikely

to succeed, while the Vietnam War was inflicting global shame on America.

Furthermore, conservatives insisted that the anti-war countercultural movement was

becoming the new face of the Democratic Party, despite that they represented only one

small segment of the shifting left. During this turmoil, a group of intellectuals made a

decisive split from liberalism. Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell lay the

foundations of neoconservatism in New York in the 1960s.[128]

This initial stage of neoconservatism was rooted in an objection to unintended

consequences of the social safety net. The perceived 'risks' of expanded welfare were

becoming more serious to neoconservative thinkers. Kristol sought to eradicate the

paternalistic welfare of leftist politicians, who thought they knew how everyone ought to

live, and ensure minimal intrusion of government in individual liberties.[129] Moreover,

neoconservatives criticized the broader "culture—in their view individualistic, hedonistic,

and relativistic—that had taken hold of the baby-boom generation on college

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[128] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 7.
[129] Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), xii.

campuses."[130] Old-fashioned American values were crucial to the founders of

neoconservatism. These public intellectuals sought to protect the heteronormative family,

appreciation for religion, the importance of community, sexual modesty, respect for

authority, and above all else, patriotism. These values established the link between the

conservative intellectuals and the newly conservative working-class. The ideology was

born out of a rejection of new leftist values.[131]

Whereas the first age of neoconservatism was defined by intellectual

disagreement and ideological splintering, the second stage was more decisively political;

the movement spread from New York to Washington in the 1970s. The elites who

disavowed liberalism recognized that the Silent Majority Americans might similarly feel

left behind by the changing values of the Democratic Party.[132] In the second stage,

neoconservatives derided presidential nominee George McGovern for embracing

isolationism. They implored Democrats to return to Cold War containment. While

neoconservatives largely saw Vietnam as a humiliation, they fostered a deep resentment

of the anti-war movement.

To neoconservatives, the left was over-inflating the importance of Vietnam and

their reaction was more dangerous than the war itself.[133] Neoconservative disdain for the

anti-war left relied on proud Americanism. Kristol emphasized this: "Neoconservatism is

not merely patriotic—that goes without saying—but also nationalist. Patriotism springs

from love of the nation's past; nationalism arises out of hope for the nation's future,

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[130] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 7.
[131] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 7.
[132] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 8.
[133] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 9.

distinctive greatness."[134] This nationalism was applauded by intellectual and working-class conservatives alike. Neoconservative thinkers labelled liberal intellectualism as snobbish, condescending, and morally unsound. The neoconservative intellectual tradition was adopted by hawkish, liberal New Deal Democratic politicians including Henry "Scoop" Jackson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan.[135]

The founders of neoconservatism were originally far-left socialists. Their ideological transformation was key to their ability to amass a following, as they proved themselves to be true dissidents who felt betrayed by the left. Moreover, their journey exemplified the identity crisis faced by the Democratic Party and convinced other leftists that an ideological switch was possible. These founders disseminated conservative ideas as magazine editors, Kristol for *The Public Interest* and Podhoretz for *Commentary.*

Kristol was born in Brooklyn in 1920, the son of Jewish-Eastern European immigrants. He began his political ideological journey as an anti-Soviet Trotskyist, meaning that he subscribed to Marxism and the necessity of liberating the oppressed working class. While studying at City College in New York City, Kristol admired the sharp Trotskyites and accredited his peers with giving him a political education. There were only two dominant political camps at City College: the Trotskyites and the Stalinists. Kristol joined the Trotskyites because he opposed the Stalinists, seen as extremists. At age twenty-two, he outgrew Trotskyism as he graduated college.[136] Eventually, Kristol evolved to become the "godfather" of neoconservatism.[137]

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[134] Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative,* xiii.
[135] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 146.
[136] Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism,* 13.
[137] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 4.

Podhoretz, another Brooklynite and son of leftist Jewish-Eastern European immigrants, was a second neoconservative figure who helped establish conservative intellectual legitimacy. From 1960 to 1995, Podhoretz served as the Editor-in-Chief of *Commentary* magazine. Podhoretz used *Commentary* to deride liberals by publishing right-wing analyses of various social, economic, and political topics.

The ideological shifts of the neoconservative founders were unique and key to their success. Both Kristol and Podhoretz started as socialist sympathizers after intellectual nurturing from peers and professors. Upon growing up and confronting realpolitik, or circumstantial rather than philosophical politics, these thinkers deemed leftists and their former selves as beholden to ideological blind spots. They professed that the United States had the solemn obligation to patrol global democracy, and that their nation was imperfect yet still culturally and politically superior to others. This view of America's role helps explain the neoconservatives' sharp abilities to criticize young idealists, including anti-war activists. It contextualizes the strength of neoconservatism in convincing other Americans, working-class and intellectuals alike, that conservatism was the responsible, realistic path forward out of Vietnam and the social turbulence of the era.

Kristol described himself and his 1960s compatriots as "dissident liberals," skeptics of the Great Society agenda of Lyndon Johnson and the accompanying liberal vision for social and economic policy. To Kristol, neoconservatism described "the erosion of liberal faith among a relatively small but talented and articulate group of scholars and intellectuals, and the movement of this group […] toward a more conservative point of view."[138] This dissidence was intensified by disdain for the

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[138] Kristol, *Neoconservatism*, x.

counterculture in the mid-to-late 1960s. Kristol rejected the left's "blind commitment to egalitarian politics across the board."[139] He thus pioneered an ideology that was skeptical of the value of government social programs and supply-side economics. Neoconservatism celebrated liberal values that the New Left discarded.

Kristol strengthened the association between liberal intellectuals and the leftist, youth-led countercultural movement. While some intellectuals, like Chomsky, celebrated the anti-war movement, these two factions were mostly distinct. Kristol successfully blurred the lines between liberal intellectuals and leftist anti-Vietnam protestors in his writing. This strengthened his argument that the left was anti-American and committed to social values that he characterized as deplorable such as sexual liberation and secularism. By snubbing leftists, Kristol attracted other disillusioned liberals.

Kristol was a prolific contributor to newspapers and journals in the 1960s and 1970s. His political affiliations shifted considerably during this period, and his neoconservative ideology was solidified in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His articles expose three main strategies employed to take down the left: he branded liberals as hypocritical, self-righteous, and naïve, using the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement as key pieces of evidence. Each of these accusations relied heavily on Kristol's appeal to nationalism. He asserted that his somber, experienced American outlook was wiser than the baseless demands of the impatient young left. The values behind Kristol's writing were the same core beliefs that led many working-class whites to embrace conservatism: the left was socially reprehensible and sanctimonious. These

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[139] Kristol, *Neoconservatism,* x.

values were strong enough to coalesce intellectuals, hardhats, and ethnics under the conservative umbrella despite their vastly different economic visions for the nation.

Kristol undermined leftists by calling them hypocritical. For example, he wrote that radical students, "find it possible to be genuinely heartsick at the injustices and brutalities of American society, while blandly approving of injustice and brutality committed [in China and Cuba] in the name of 'the revolution.'"[140] By portraying leftists as inconsistent, he attacked the left's credibility. He reframed the Vietnam War narrative, insisting that the anti-war left, with assistance from intellectual allies, was using the war as a vehicle for destroying American pride.

Furthermore, Kristol challenged liberals' claims to moral authority. He chided leftist intellectuals for having the audacity to define the "moral quality of our society" while having "no professional competence."[141] Leftist anti-war arguments rested on a moral foundation of fighting for the underdogs; in the context of war, this meant the Vietnamese people brutalized by senseless violence, whereas in the American context this entailed fighting for racial minorities and the impoverished. By attacking the morality of the left, Kristol forced a reckoning on the left's authenticity and true motives.

Kristol scolded leftists for being disrespectful. He alleged that the left called politicians "war criminals" and "mass murderers" for their commendable efforts to fulfil "overseas commitments."[142] Kristol conceded that Vietnam was a flawed endeavor yet nonetheless believed that foreign policy should be left for politicians to debate:

> The intellectual critics of American foreign policy obviously and sincerely believe that their arguments are right. But it is clear they believe, even more obviously, that

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[140] Irving Kristol, "What's Bugging the Students," *Atlantic*, November 1, 1965, 122.
[141] Irving Kristol, "The Troublesome Intellectuals," *The Public Interest*, Winter 1966, 6.
[142] Irving Kristol, "American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, 1967, 595.

> *they* are right—and that the totality of this rightness amounts to much more than the sum of the individual arguments.[143]

Here, Kristol attacked liberals for relying on sanctimony rather than the content of their arguments. He called out public intellectuals for refusing to engage in productive debate on the Vietnam War for fear of legitimizing the subject. Kristol derided leftists for failing to offer solid arguments while claiming superiority. This impactfully painted liberals as snobs peddling baseless claims.

Next, Kristol called leftists naïve. He argued that the countercultural movement did not truly care about Vietnam, they were just bored. Students, he claimed, wanted only to rebel against their parents' "bourgeois utopia."[144] Kristol called the student anti-war movement "a radical mood in search of a radical program."[145] Kristol's own prior socialist identity gave lent credence to his arguments on the naïveté of young idealogues; he understood them, and professed that they too would soon see the light. Moreover, by conflating the entire leftist coalition with the anti-war protestors, Kristol convinced conservatives of leftist immaturity. He leveraged his patriotism, portraying conservatism as a strong foil to confused morality and superficiality on the left.

The sarcastic, condescending tone employed by Kristol portrayed the anti-war left as an amusing spectacle. For readers who feared the left's attempt to overthrow the American social order, Kristol's work was a welcome source of entertainment and catharsis. He made the left appear less threatening, attacking it as "an essentially irrational movement, reveling in ideological nonsense, and aiming to fill the 'existential'

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[143] Kristol, "American Intellectuals," 594.
[144] Irving Kristol, "Teaching In, Speaking Out," *Encounter*, August 1965, 68.
[145] Kristol, "What's Bugging the Students," 118.

need of its followers through violent action and frenetic exhibitionism."[146] These sharp

rebukes conveyed a reductive political movement that was not only wrong, but

furthermore incoherent. Kristol's distinguished academic career and middle-aged wisdom

provided an antidote for the left's immaturity. He used the words of a Columbia student

protestor from 1968 to distill his eye-rolling disdain: the young man exclaimed, "You

don't know what Hell is like unless you were raised in Scarsdale."[147] This dramatic,

spoiled protestor perfectly encapsulated Kristol's contempt for the ungrateful left. He

pointed out that living in a version of Scarsdale, a New York City suburb, was the very

embodiment of the American dream.[148] According to Kristol, conservatism was an escape

from the entitled naïveté of the leftist movement.[149] This appealed to working-class

whites and other defecting leftists who rejected leftist snobbery and social values.

Not all of Kristol's criticisms were playful. In a more somber tone, Kristol

criticized the left for neglecting the duties of America as the keepers of democracy and

global stability. This perspective was characteristic of his late 1960s and early 1970s

writing, as he cemented his critique of liberalism and became a conservative. He

defended the Vietnam War by appealing to nationalism and a sense of American

exceptionalism. Even if the tactics were flawed, the ideology behind the war was solid.

Kristol explained,

> The United States is therefore in South Vietnam for exactly the same reason that it
> was involved in South Korea: To reaffirm the principle of coexistence and the fact
> that military belligerency, whether direct or indirect, is not an acceptable procedure
> to achieve political goals in a nuclear-armed world.[150]

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[146] Irving Kristol, "Why It's Hard to Be Nice to the Old Left," *Fortune*, August 1968, 187.
[147] Irving Kristol, "Convalescing From the Frantic '60s," *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 1973.
[148] Kristol, "Convalescing From the Frantic '60s."
[149] Irving Kristol, "New Right, New Left," *Public Interest*, Summer 1966, 6.
[150] "A Talk-In on Vietnam: A Band of New York Intellectuals Meets With Prof. Schlesinger For Talk-In on
Vietnam," *New York Times*, 1966, sec. The New York Times Magazine.

Kristol established Vietnam's legitimacy by equating it to Korea, a less controversial war. He reminded readers of the fearsome reality of a "nuclear-armed world" in which communist superpowers, the Soviet Union and China, supported communist North Vietnam. The pacifism of the left was irresponsible to Kristol. This grave sense of duty impressed upon Kristol's readers the need for conservative, American leadership both at home and abroad.

Kristol further developed this perspective in an article titled "We Can't Resign as 'Policemen of the World,'" written in 1968 for the *New York Times*. Kristol insisted that "power breeds responsibilities" and that dodging these responsibilities constituted an abuse of power. The consequences of pulling out of Vietnam were laid out starkly: a world without American policing would "almost certainly blow itself to bits" and "erupt in in national delinquency and international disorder."[151] These claims were deeply patriotic. Kristol described the United States as the undisputed global custodian. Kristol's nationalism attracted conservatives and disenchanted liberals who were sick of hearing the left constantly attack the United States. Reclaiming the motives for the Vietnam War as noble helped strengthen the American identity during a time of duress.

Kristol's attacks were diverse: he portrayed liberals as hypocritical, sanctimonious, immature, ridiculous, and dangerous. His carefully crafted arguments criticized the left both for starting the Vietnam War and for wanting to abandon it, attacking them from two vastly different angles. Kristol's identity as a conservative outsider, a Jew and former socialist, strengthened his case, as his political transformation provided a model for other frustrated leftists. Kristol assured readers that defecting from

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[151] Irving Kristol, "We Can't Resign As 'Policeman of the World': What Would Happen If Yankee Did Go Home -and Stayed There?" *New York Times*, 1968, sec. New York Times Magazine.

the left was necessary and justified. His unabashed nationalism was a welcome change from the left's anti-American crusade.

Podhoretz, like Kristol, opposed the anti-war movement. Podhoretz was critical of American involvement of Vietnam but refused to tolerate the anti-American sentiment of the New Left.[152] In 1982, Podhoretz published a book titled *Why We Were in Vietnam.* Released at the tail-end of the Vietnam period, this work provides Podhoretz's justification for leaving the left after his transition to the Republican Party was solidified. Podhoretz denounced the left for their claims to moral superiority. He celebrated the United States for entering the Vietnamese conflict for "the sake of an ideal" – democracy. To Podhoretz, this impulse may perhaps have been naïve or self-interested but it was certainly not immoral.[153] Podhoretz sought to recharacterize the left's anti-war movement as irresponsible and self-righteous. Though Vietnam may have been "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time" it was "not wrong in the purposes for which it was fought."[154] This logic provided a crucial path for other disillusioned liberals to separate themselves from the anti-war movement and move toward neoconservatism and eventually toward the Republican Party.

Podhoretz shamed the anti-war movement from multiple intellectual angles. In a direct attack, he claimed that the anti-war movement was responsible for certain horrors experienced by the Vietnamese people post-withdrawal of American troops. He cited various reports from Vietnamese refugees recounting inhumane treatment and civilian

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[152] Nathan Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 94.
[153] Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* first touchstone edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 197.
[154] Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* 217.

captivity in re-education camps reminiscent of Soviet Gulags. He then criticized

intellectuals, using Chomsky as his example, for unfairly deeming these refugee reports

unreliable.[155] By blaming the anti-war movement for the violence inflicted on millions of

innocent Vietnamese, Podhoretz villainized the movement. He attacked leftist claims to

morality by bashing the ethic character of anti-war proponents.

Moreover, Podhoretz scorned anti-war intellectuals who claimed to be both

against American intervention and the communist Northern Viet Cong. He wrote "This is

not moral choice; this is moral evasion—irresponsible utopianism disguised as moral

realism."[156] Like Kristol, Podhoretz emphasized inconsistencies in anti-war arguments,

painting leftists as irresponsible and naïve. He rejected the leftist notion that anti-war

sentiment was morally correct by reverting their moral assumptions.

Podhoretz contributed to conflating the anti-war movement and the intellectual

left establishment. He slammed Harvard professor Stanley Hoffman and English

journalist William Shawcross for professing that individuals could both protest the war

and protest injustices that occurred after American withdrawal. Hoffman supported the

communist cause and denounced those who resisted it. Shawcross attested that Nixon's

Vietnam policy was responsible for the violence of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia after

the war. Podhoretz challenged them, arguing that those who advocated to end the

Vietnam War were responsible for the adverse effects of withdrawal. He called their

reasoning an "illustration of the perverse moral and intellectual uses to which brilliance

can be put."[157] Podhoretz shifted immorality onto anti-war intellectuals and therefore

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[155] Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* 203-205.
[156] Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* 206.
[157] Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* 207.

removed agency from the leftist claims of moral correctness on Vietnam. He used this writing to strategically entice liberals to join his rightward political migration.

Why We Were in Vietnam concluded with a comparison of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan's summations of the Vietnamese conflict; Carter spoke of "the intellectual and moral poverty" of the war whereas Reagan deemed it "a noble cause."[158] Podhoretz sided with Reagan. He acknowledged that the American effort was "indeed beyond our intellectual and moral capabilities" and an example of "imprudent idealism," yet ultimately resolved that the dire consequences of American withdrawal from Vietnam vindicated Reagan's assessment.[159] In his book's postscript, Podhoretz encouraged readers to follow his lead in reassessing liberal orthodoxies and refusing to let leftists dominate intellectual spaces. Podhoretz's work exemplifies the utility of the Vietnam War in shifting conversations on political morality.

Neoconservative critiques worked to delegitimize the holistic liberal outlook. Kristol and Podhoretz relied on nationalism and morality, signaling that they sought to halt the countercultural revolt against American values. These two public intellectuals created a community that fulfilled a need for Americans who shared contempt for leftism and who believed in American exceptionalism even as they recognized limits to American power. Establishing the left as morally bankrupt and weak permitted a broader disavowal of liberal goals, including the social liberation of repressed groups and upheaval of the traditional social hierarchy. Though the neoconservatives employed different tactics than working-class white conservatives, their ultimate goal was the same.

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[158] Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* 210.
[159] Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam,* 210.

William Buckley's Conservative Wit

William F. Buckley Jr. helped revitalize the conservative political tradition. Mainstream conservatism of the 1960s and 1970s was influenced by three major factors: first, libertarianism and Milton Friedman's rejection of Keynesian economics and public spending; second, traditionalist conservatism and the lament of worsening human-wellbeing as a result of technological progress; and third, staunch anti-communism.[160] These tenets are reflected in the core beliefs of American conservatism, which include individual liberty, limited government, reluctance to social change, deference to the free market, skepticism toward utopia, and reverence for cultural inheritance from communities, ancestors, and religion.[161] The American conservative tradition was criticized, and often ridiculed, by the New Left and the anti-war movement. Young leftists in particular sought to abandon the old-fashioned values associated with conservatism, rejecting the conformity and unquestioned patriotism of their parents' generation. Many liberals painted conservatives as their reprehensible ideological opposites: out of touch, angry, and bigoted.

Buckley was essential in fighting back against this image. He was a self-styled public intellectual who sought to undermine the stereotype of the unenlightened conservative crafted by liberals. Buckley brought a youthful wit to the conservative movement, attracting young supporters. He was instrumental in the growth of conservatism in the Vietnam era, when individuals were looking for symbols of strength and machismo to remedy American humiliation and weakness in the global eye.

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[160] Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism,* 38.
[161] Bacevich, *American Conservatism,* xix.

Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale suggests that Buckley portrayed himself as an outsider and romanticized his conservative identity. Fighting against the liberal status quo permitted conservatives to feel like rebels, a title that leftists typically claimed for themselves.[162] Buckley helped pave the way for many Americans to become conservative, bringing a new strength to the ideology. In particular, Buckley's vivacious character and mischievous spirit brought a new style to conservatism. He had a distinctive, jeering tone that was both entertaining and dominating. His debates with liberals became spectacles celebrated by his conservative following.

Buckley's first foray into the media world was his book G*od and Man at Yale.* This work claimed that Yale University professors exerted leftist bias in their classrooms, refusing to teach free market economics and the history and values of Christianity.[163] The book was an instant success, eliciting strong responses from both supporters and adversaries.[164] In 1955, Buckley founded the conservative journal *National Review* in an effort to attack "liberal orthodoxy."[165] Buckley objected to a growing consensus in the media that the New Deal values of government expansion and regulation were essential American values. He sought to disrupt 1950s political journalism by legitimizing alternatives to these liberal beliefs.[166]

Although other right-wing journals existed, Buckley was unimpressed by them. His goal with *National Review* was to preside over "the manly presentation of deeply felt conviction."*[167]* Machoism was particularly important to Buckley: he sought to assert

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162 Hale, *Nation of Outsiders,* 135.
163 Hale, *Nation of Outsiders,* 132.
164 Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 40.
165 Hale, *Nation of Outsiders,* 132.
166 Hemmer, *Messengers of the Righ*t," 43.
167 Hemmer, *Messengers of the Righ*t," 41-43.

dominance and create a cultural contrast to the growing feminist movement, embodying the right's broader resistance to equal rights for all. *National Review* thus became a haven for anti-communism, patriotism, and patriarchy. While Buckley had a pronounced reputation in the 1950s, his media presence was strengthened in the 1960s as he used the controversy over the Vietnam War and the increasing social strife to boost his provocations of the left. In 1960, Buckley also founded Young Americans for Freedom, a right-wing political group intended to motivate young conservatives to form political alliances and engage in activism on college campuses and beyond.

In 1966, Buckley started a hit television talk show called *Firing Line.* Buckley's television sensation was particularly notable because it deviated from the dominant left-leaning voices in media. Television, especially the news channels, were publicly viewed as sympathetic to the left. This belief was solidified in 1968 by *TV Guide* writer Edith Efron. In order to prove the news media's liberal bias, Efron conducted a study on the positive and negative coverage of Nixon and Humphrey in the 1968 news election coverage. The study showed more positive claims on Humphrey than on Nixon.[168] Buckley dared to voice the conservative opinions that defied the media's status quo.

Buckley's quest to fight the left's moral stance on Vietnam was evident through various articles he published as editor of *National Review.* The magazine became a hub of conservative thought that gathered like-minded enemies of the counterculture and nurtured right-wing intellectualism. Readers reclaimed the Vietnam War as an event that was noble, at best, or miscalculated, at worst. Moreover, Buckley and his team of writers and editors cultivated American nationalism in *National Review.* Buckley encouraged

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[168] Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*," 222.

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writers to be daring, directly calling out their adversaries and provoking debate. Buckley's vision of a strong, unyielding conservatism came alive in the pages of his magazine.

In the editorial section of a 1969 edition, Buckley and the *National Review* staff clarified their position on the war: they were in full support of Vietnam but often disagreed with the war's methods.[169] The editorial claimed that the majority of Americans were confused about how to think of Vietnam and sought to help sway readers toward conservatism. The article condemned the liberal framing of Vietnam: "two generations of the ascendancy of the liberal ideology, with its scorn of tradition and patriotism, its nihilistic permissiveness and its masochistic sense of social guilt, have corroded the nation's sense of community and its will."[170] Buckley blamed the left for using Vietnam to instigate political fracture and social weakness. His reliance on masculinity, nationalism, and community resonated with his base. He characterized these values as quintessentially American and worth protecting at all costs from liberal social change.

Contributing *National Review* writers built on Buckley's stance on Vietnam. In an article dripping with sarcasm and disdain, writer James Fletcher tore apart leftist pacifism. Fletcher claimed that the anti-war movement deplored American soldiers and protested the war without offering a plausible alternative, contributing to "a politics of emptiness" where protesting was simply unproductive noise. Fletcher questioned why liberal intellectuals claimed to have superior moral insight. Furthermore, he mocked leftists as "the flower people" and portrayed them as lacking substance and

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[169] National Review Editorial, "What Now in Vietnam?" *National Review* 21, no. 17 (May 6, 1969), 418.
[170] National Review Editorial, "What Now in Vietnam?" 421.

intelligence.[171] Fletcher used the same strategies as Buckley: criticizing the tactics and claims of the anti-war movement and mocking its proponents.

These strategies were repeated throughout many editions of *National Review.* Writer Ernest Van Den Haag painted the anti-war protests as futile by suggesting that they failed to confront the present issues and instead debated that intervention was wrong in the first place, a moot point. He wrote that foreign policy was "not a popularity contest" and that abandoning Vietnam would be breaking a promise.[172] By stressing the American obligation in Vietnam, this author portrayed the war as a noble cause.

Writer Bernard J. Burnham extended this notion by emphasizing America's role as a global policeman. His article "What Liberals Don't Understand About Vietnam" heavily criticized the left. Burnham argued that the United States did not get to opt out of foreign interventions because of their dominant position in world diplomacy. He quoted Lyndon Johnson: "We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else."[173] By linking involvement in Vietnam to the global power of the United States, Burnham created a positive narrative of American duty in Vietnam; the war was an obligation, not a miscalculation or humiliation. Burnham claimed that Vietnam was a result of "the forces which have made us a Pacific power" while also criticizing the "intelligentsia" for failing to produce a coherent rationale for the conflict.[174] Burnham thus disassociated American citizens from the failure in Vietnam, lifting feelings of collective social guilt. Burnham's article suggested that liberal intellectuals failed to fulfil

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[171] James Fletcher, "The Politics of Emptiness," *National Review* 20, no. 6 (February 13, 1968) 133.
[172] Ernest Van Den Haag, "Vietnam: After All is Said and Done," *National Review* 18, no. 48 (November 29, 1966), 1211.
[173] Burnham, "What Liberals Don't Understand about Vietnam," *National Review* 23, no. 3 (January 26, 1971), 79.
[174] Burnham, "What Liberals Don't Understand about Vietnam," 80.

their role in keeping American foreign policy in check, establishing the need for an increased conservative scholarly presence.

These authors exemplify the community Buckley built and curated in *National Review.* He and his fellow authors bolstered American exceptionalism and ridiculed liberals for diplomatic incompetence and unrealistic, irresponsible visions of pacifism. Buckley's magazine was characterized by derisive arguments and a domineering, authorial tone. Reveling in white, male dominance, *National Review* contributors legitimized conservative public intellectualism.

In 1966, Buckley began taping his television show *Firing Line*. As the title suggests, *Firing Line* became notorious for Buckley's sharp jabs at intellectual adversaries and housed often-hostile debates during a contentious era of partisan change and war. Buckley was a natural for television. His bold style and provocative sarcasm left no guest unscathed. Buckley's high energy and propensity to ask difficult questions attracted wide viewership and secured the program a coveted Emmy Award in 1969. In each episode, Buckley challenged a different guest through intellectual debate, mockery, and sneers. *Firing Line* became a spectacle of spirited discussion that promoted conservative ideals. Buckley championed conservatism and breathed new life into it. Whereas Kristol and Podhoretz increased the intellectual legitimacy of conservatism, Buckley made conservatism popular and culturally acceptable.[175] Neoconservatism appealed to avid readers who thrived off of skilled argumentative takedowns of the left; *Firing Line* thrilled those looking to grab liberals by the throat.

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[175] Hale, *Nation of Outsiders,* 146.

In 1969, Buckley interviewed Chomsky in an episode of *Firing Line* called "Vietnam and the Intellectuals." Chomsky was a particularly influential leftist who suggested that the Vietnam War was an egregious injustice that all Americans ought to feel guilty for. He called the war "simply an obscenity, a depraved act by weak and miserable men, including all of us."[176] Chomsky deemed draft resisters heroes and castigated the presidential administrations of the 1960s for perpetuating the conflict.

Chomsky believed that intellectuals played a role in enlarging the conflict in Vietnam: "by accepting the presumption of legitimacy of debate on [the Vietnam War], one has already lost one's humanity."[177] Conservatives viewed this suggestion as Chomsky's cheap method of dodging debate. While Chomsky and other leftists detested conservatives, they also criticized liberals. In particular, they took aim at the liberal political establishment for starting the Vietnam War in the first place. Chomsky's many fierce stances made him emblematic of the broader intellectual left and a target for conservative thinkers. Kristol, Buckley, and others took Chomsky head-on in televised debate and biting, adversarial articles.

In the *Firing Line* episode, Chomsky made clear his repudiation of the United States for involvement in an imperialistic war. Chomsky not only chided the government, but all Americans, including himself: "I think the terror of our age is the sane, responsible, serious, quiet man, who watches these things unfold and doesn't react to them. I include myself in that."[178] Chomsky sought to implicate each viewer in the Vietnam conflict. He wanted each American to feel blood on their hands, as he believed

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[176] Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 9.
[177] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins,* 9.
[178] Garth Dietrick, "Vietnam and the Intellectuals," *Firing Line* (WOR-TV, April 3, 1969), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DvmLMUfGss, 13:20.

this was the only way to ensure accountability and to stop the atrocity from escalating. Chomsky implored Americans to protest.

Buckley shrugged off the suggestion of collective guilt and mocked Chomsky's claim to moral superiority. He sneered at Chomsky's reasoning, saying that "at a certain point, if everyone's guilty of everything then nobody's guilty of anything."[179] This comment from Buckley prompted laughter from the audience. For individuals who felt uncomfortable shouldering the burden of Vietnam, Buckley's guiltless nonchalance allowed them to push away culpability and leftists like Chomsky.

Later in the episode, Buckley exaggerated and villainized Chomsky's anti-Americanism. Buckley boldly compared the Viet Cong to Nazis in order to elicit an audience reaction: "You refer to the heroic, *heroic,* Vietnamese resistance to American power. […] Now, suppose I were to write about the heroic resistance of Nazis to the liberation army, for instance their use of torture, their use of mass reprisals."[180] In response, an exasperated Chomsky disagreed and attempted to explain why the Nazis were different and indefensible. Buckley widened his eyes and listened inquisitively, appearing to take pleasure in Chomsky's irritation.

Buckley's interpretation of the Vietnam War focused on American duty and nobility. He used the Vietnam War to create a source of pride for his audience. In another effort to discredit Chomsky, Buckley said: "We became an imperial power, Mr. Chomsky, in the sense that we inherited primary responsibility for any chain of action that might involve us in a third world war, and something that might involve the entire

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[179] Dietrick, "Vietnam and the Intellectuals," 9:46.
[180] Dietrick, "Vietnam and the Intellectuals," 16:05.

world in holocaust."[181] Buckley asserted America's global importance, again driving the

argument of nationalism and obligation. Amid a mainstream liberal environment where

nationalism was taboo, Buckley's pride was daring. His vision of American greatness

was celebrated by his conservative viewers who sought to protect the American image.

While Buckley's social and economic status differed from the white working class, he

had the exact same desire for nationalism and vision for America's role as a global

policeman.

Furthermore, Buckley employed reductive, persuasive, and simple language

compared to Chomsky's long sentences and complex moral imperatives. As a result,

Buckley's speech was sharper than Chomsky's. This helped Buckley's message resonate

with viewers. His curt speaking style was complemented by his strong body language and

aggression toward Chomsky. One interaction revealed Buckley's assertive demeanor:

> BUCKLEY: I rejoice in your disposition to argue the Vietnam question,
> especially when I recognize what an act of self-control this must involve.
> CHOMSKY: It does, it really does.
> BUCKLEY: Sure, you're doing really well.
> CHOMSKY [smiling]: Sometimes I lose my temper, maybe not—
> BUCKLEY [interrupting]: Maybe not tonight. Because if you would I'd smash
> you in the goddamn face.[182]

In this exchange, Buckley patronized Chomsky. His willingness to show blatant disregard

for Chomsky, to mock and humiliate him, enraptured his viewers who erupted in

laughter. His threat of physical violence pandered to angry conservatives who were sick

of leftists claiming intellectual and social superiority, like the hardhat rioters who lunged

for student protestors in the streets of New York. Though there were many differences

between the economic interests and argumentative tactics of intellectuals and the white

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[181] Dietrick, "Vietnam and the Intellectuals," 31:02.
[182] Dietrick, "Vietnam and the Intellectuals," 9:02.

working class, these groups shared a core bitterness for the left. Their commonalities were strong enough to overcome the differences and forge a political coalition.

This *Firing Line* episode shows public intellectuals from opposite political camps go head to head. It showcases the dominance that Buckley employed to revitalize conservatism and court Americans toward rightwing politics. Furthermore, the role of Vietnam as an intellectual battleground in the episode evidences the fervor with which both the left and right sought to win the meaning and significance of the war. Buckley altered the social discourse on Vietnam by ridiculing a renowned anti-war activist. He injected strength into the conservative movement by exuding masculine brawn and intellectual prowess.

Throughout his tenure on *Firing Line,* Buckley mastered a dominant medium of his age: the television talk show. He rode the 1960s and 1970s wave of television success and, coupled with the prominence of *National Review,* kept followers interested by asking provocative questions and providing sharp punchlines. Buckley was a conservative who reveled in sparring with the left. His provocations were entertaining for people across the political spectrum. He effectively disrupted the liberal commandeering of print and television media, bringing conservatism newfound popularity. Buckley's muscular nationalism gave conservatives both a vocabulary and confidence with which to take down the left. He emboldened intellectuals and working-class conservatives, luring patriots in search of a strong community away from the Democratic party. Buckley was able to connect with the white working class through machoism and American pride.

Conclusion

Irving, Podhoretz, and Buckley were all important contributors to the rise of conservative intellectualism. Neoconservatism provided a stepping-stone for many disillusioned liberals who were politically in-between the Democratic and Republican parties, facilitating a political shift toward Republicanism over the course of the late 1960s and 1970s. Neoconservative leaders were able to pinpoint values of increasing salience in the Democratic Party which many Democrats saw as objectionable: sexual liberation, secularism, and pacifism, among others. By creating a new ideology and providing intellectual spaces for these Democratic dissidents to write and discuss their thoughts, neoconservatism generated a new conservative base. Furthermore, mainstream conservatism saw a reinvigoration in the 1960s and 1970s under Buckley. He used his energetic and provocative style to captivate his audience. He successfully infiltrated the liberal media and became the spokesman for conservativism in the public eye.

The Vietnam War became a metaphor for the nation at large in the conservative intellectual tradition. Conversations about America's moral standing and role in the world stood for a broader narrative about the country's desired direction. These intellectuals, along with the white working class, refused to let the left define the American interpretation of Vietnam as an evil, immoral war. Beyond simply criticizing and deconstructing leftist arguments on Vietnam, conservatives playfully mocked and belittled the left. This resonated with those who sought out strength amid the intense national weakness felt post-failure in Vietnam.

Debate was essential to the rise in conservative intellectualism. Conservatives boldly took their ideological opposites head on. In 1967, the *New York Times* celebrated

debate by bringing together intellectuals of varying backgrounds to comment on civil

disobedience in the context of the Vietnam War. Chomsky, Buckley, and Kristol were all

chosen to contribute. Their responses were indicative of their unique styles: Chomsky

defended dissenters in a section called "Intolerable Evils Justify Civil Disobedience;"

Buckley's section, titled "For Some Deportment – Deportation," argued that dissenters

should be exiled; Kristol, in his stately conservative fashion, called his piece "Civil

Disobedience is Not Justified by Vietnam."[183] In this article, and in their respective

intellectual contributions over decades, Kristol and Buckley offered different styles of

similar arguments. They shared the duty of widening the conservative base and

portraying the left as naïve and self-righteous, attracting support from white workers.

Incorporating conservatism into the intellectual mainstream was essential in building an

enduring conservative coalition.

     The Vietnam War and anti-war movement were organizing themes for a greater

collection of issues that constituted the intellectual conservative critique of liberals.

Vietnam was an essential issue, because it blended foreign policy decisions, military

failure, and contentious social strife on the home front. The ideological struggle between

the left and right to define the meaning of Vietnam evidences its importance to American

political history. The war provided intellectual conservatism with useful content to paint

the left in a negative light. Armed with taunting arguments and elevated vocabularies,

these intellectuals went to war with the liberal affront to nationalism.

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[183] "A Baker's Dozen of Writers."

CHAPTER THREE
Vietnam and the Far Right

A John Birch Society member at a Patriot Day Parade | New York City, 1967.
Photographer Jill Freedman, accessed from Getty Images.

Louis Beam lights fire to boat labeled "USS Viet Cong" at a KKK rally supporting white shrimpers
Sante Fe, Texas, 1981.
Photographer Ed Kolenovsky (AP), accessed from Medium.

President Gerald Ford declared the Vietnam War over on April 23, 1975. Rather than drawing inspirational lessons from the decades-long conflict, Ford's message encouraged Americans to forget the war and move on: "Today, Americans can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam."[184] The end of World War I and World War II resulted in elation on the home front. Parades and parties erupted in the streets of American cities, where strangers hugged, kissed, and rejoiced in victory. The culmination of war in Vietnam was somber. This was in part because of the lengthy nature of American withdrawal, modeled after Nixon's "Vietnamization" plan for gradual transferal of power from American generals to South Vietnamese state actors. More importantly, however, the national mood after Vietnam was inhospitable to celebration because the United States had failed its mission. A veteran of the war expressed his view of the national post-war sentiment: "If there was any relief in the unilateral declaration from Ford, we did not see it expressed in America. There was a sense of grief about Vietnam which faded to numbness. America wants to forget the nightmare in Indochina."[185] Ford's wish for the restoration of pre-Vietnam American pride was unfulfilled. Rather, the negative legacy of Vietnam lived well into the remaining twentieth century.

The blow to American nationalism, both during and after the Vietnam War, reverberated across the country. The white working-class and intellectual conservatives of the northeast clung to patriotic principles by villainizing the anti-war movement. These groups benefited from making the left their common enemy, establishing a coalition

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[184] Richard L. Madden, "Ford Says Indochina War Is Finished for America," *New York Times*, April 24, 1975, sec. The Week In Review.
[185] "The Vietnam War Ended 43 Years Ago Today," Vietnam Veterans of America, https://vva.org/news/the-vietnam-war-ended-43-years-ago-today/.

based on shared disdain rather than common interests. On the far right, extremist groups

channeled the fear and violent fury generated by the war into a political mobilization to

effect change. Members of the ultraconservative John Birch Society used the war to

galvanize their members into rebelling against their enemy targets: the Democratic

Johnson administration; the liberal call for racial integration; and a greater conspiratorial

communist plot, centered around the United Nations (UN), that allegedly sought to take

over the United States and eventually the world. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was similarly

motivated by anti-Black racism and anti-communism, but weaponized these views by

encouraging racial violence and white supremacy.

The leaders of these extremist groups did not see themselves as Republicans or

even conservatives. They were against all forms of government: Democratic

administrations, Republican administrations, and global governance in the UN. The anti-

statist missions of the John Birch Society, KKK, and other radical groups mirrored the

general increasing propensity of conservatives to recognize patriotism as different from

government support.[186] This distinction was especially crucial to the beliefs of the far

right, but also acknowledged in intellectual and working-class circles. The 1980 election

of Ronald Reagan, who bemoaned big government, solidified this ideological separation.

In reference to the worsening national economy, for example, Reagan said, "government

is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."[187]

The goal of these far-right movements was to unite North-American and

European whites under American structures of patriotism, Christianity, and patriarchy.

The core ideology of the far right went beyond American nationalism, but the members

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[186] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 106.
[187] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 106.

of these groups expressed their frustration the same way as other conservatives, by flag-waving and digging their heels into the earth as the nation propelled itself toward leftist values. Furthermore, their identity as "far-right" created an enlarged perception of the political spectrum and subsequently drove mainstream conservatism further rightward.

Although these extremist groups were intensely patriotic, they worshipped a different America than the working-class and intellectual protagonists of the prior two chapters. The far-right American vision excluded communists, feminists, gays, and most crucially, non-whites. Their radical ideology transcended nationalism and focused on white-globalist ambitions. With a "purified" United States as their goal, these groups tapped into the intense emotional despair of white, male Americans who were slipping through the cracks of an increasingly liberal 1960s and 1970s mass culture. Furthermore, the 1970s economy was failing most working- and middle-class Americans, compounding their frustration and desperation. Inflation was rampant and goods, such as gasoline, were exorbitantly expensive. Deindustrialization caused devastating unemployment, shutting down entire towns that revolved around factory economies.[188]

This chapter illuminates the politics of affect and mood that were central to the far-right mobilization of the Vietnam War. Studying their appeals to racial fear, veteran trauma, white victimhood, threats to masculinity, and the devastation of military loss reveals the crux of the desperate right-wing pilgrimage toward reclaiming American greatness. The far-right calls for civilian militancy relied on a psychological manipulation of opinion on Vietnam. First, this chapter will look at the John Birch Society, and second, at the KKK and other white nationalist groups. These groups built themselves up by

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[188] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive,* 12.

exploiting racial hatred so that they could bolster their attack on Black Americans and other social groups they deemed threatening. Importantly, the racial politics of these extremists emboldened less-radical conservatives to emphasize their alleged moderation. Conservatives used extremists as a point of reference, suggesting that maintaining the status quo of racial separation was a relatively reasonable position. The aggrieved emotions of these extremist groups dovetailed with and provided greater room for the tamer grievances of the white working-class and intellectual conservatives.

The concept of war entails a built-in assumption of impermanence. Wartime is an assumed blip on regular state function, an unfortunate temporary break from peacetime. Legal theorist and historian Mary L. Dudziak challenges this assumption by framing war as persistent rather than temporary. She argues that the long history of American military conflict reveals that there are, in fact, few years of peacetime: war is "an enduring condition."[189] Dudziak's interpretation focuses on the influence of wartime law on peacetime law. This chapter extends her theory to the realm of civilian relations. Dudziak's framework of war as a mental state illuminates the intense psychic impact of combat and trauma. Even beyond the cessation of formal hostilities, war lives on inside individuals through the legitimization of violence, the paralyzing fear of enemies, and a desire for domination. This chapter argues that war became a "condition" for Americans during the Vietnam War era. The long duration, intense distress, and national sense of humiliation wrought by Vietnam lived on in Americans and lingered in dark clouds of far-right extremism and violence. Veterans who joined white power groups replicated violence at home: "They drew upon their wartime experiences for tactical guidance,

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[189] Mary L. Dudziak, *Wartime: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

weapons expertise, and rhetorical framing of their white power and mercenary activities."[190]

The John Birch Society: "victory, then peace"

The John Birch Society, which still exists today, began in 1958 as a social and political community for the far-right. The Society was founded by Robert W. Welch Jr., a wealthy retired businessman from North Carolina. The namesake of the Society, John Birch, was an American military intelligence officer and Baptist missionary. Welch sought to immortalize Birch after he was killed by communist forces in China in August 1945. The John Birch Society reached its peak of 100,000 members in 1965.[191] By 1967, there were an estimated four thousand Society chapters around the United States.[192] The eccentric theories, conspiracies, and extremist posturing of the Society facilitated their disproportionately large media presence; a Gallup opinion poll in January 1965 demonstrated that 79 percent of voting-age Americans were aware of the John Birch Society, about as high as the 80 percent awareness of the American Communist Party and the 82 percent awareness of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).[193] The John Birch Society was associated with McCarthyism in the 1940s and 1950s, the New Right of the 1970s and 1980s, and the Republican Tea Party of

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[190] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 24.
[191] D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 2-3.
[192] Benjamin R. Epstein and Arnold Forster, *The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and its Allies* (New York: Random House, 1967)*,* https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015005911675&view=1up&seq=24, 4.
[193] Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society,* 3.

the past decade. These ideologies all share a deep distrust of big government and a strident nationalism.[194]

The hub of Bircherism in the 1960s was suburban Southern California. Historian Lisa McGirr coined the phrase "suburban warriors" in describing the Californians who often populated John Birch Society chapters and worked with the Republican Party to protect their vision of American freedom and tradition. McGirr contends that these suburban rightists facilitated a conservative revival as they "transformed conservatism from a marginal force preoccupied with communism in the early 1960s into a viable electoral contender by the decade's end."[195]

Birchers were not true political conservatives. Rather, they infiltrated the Republican Party to capitalize on the ideology of extreme politicians such as Barry Goldwater and Strom Thurmond in an effort to recruit members to their organization. The political goals of the organization were mixed. Some members sought to capture the Republican Party and move it further toward the right while others advocated for a new third-party to advance the far right's political vision.[196] The John Birch Society threw support behind Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election, lauding his commitment to segregation and anti-communism. Yet, Goldwater and most other Republican politicians dismissed Robert Welch as a fringe extremist. Nevertheless, while these politicians rejected the Society's leader, they courted members of the John Birch Society and viewed them as a well-positioned political base.

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[194] Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society,* 11.
[195] McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 4.
[196] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 42.

In 1967, two members of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, national director Benjamin R. Epstein and general counsel and director of civil rights division Arnold Forster, wrote a book reporting on the growing conservative fringe, titled *The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and its Allies.* Epstein and Forster explained the ideology of the radical right as "the 'anti-' complex," a litany of opposition stances against social, economic, and political elements ranging from the civil rights movement to communism, the UN, and even the fluoridation of water.[197] Epstein and Forster explained that the "anti-" positions were justified by one strong "pro" stance on the United States Constitution, though only a narrow, literal, fundamentalist interpretation of the document.[198] Epstein and Forster described the John Birch Society's target as "the American mind." Birchers' primary objective was to garner enough influence to change and control American political thinking to amass political power.[199] Conspiracy theories and fear-mongering became central tactics in this pursuit.

Anti-communism formed a foundation for virtually all stances and activities of the John Birch Society. Leadership of the John Birch Society leveraged the Vietnam War for two primary purposes: first, they sought to increase fear of communism by emphasizing the power of North Vietnam and its communist allies; and second, they equated communists and the civil rights movement in order to villainize racial integration. Both of these objectives sought to rouse their following's emotional connections to nationalism, white dominance, and patriarchy. Society leaders used dramatic language and emphatic calls to action to energize their followers. These themes

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[197] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 21.
[198] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 21-22.
[199] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 90.

resonated with both Buckley's impassioned rhetoric and the emotional cries of hardhats

and ethnics. For all actors, nationalism and dominance at home and abroad were supreme.

In 1965, Welch accused President Lyndon Johnson of purposefully prolonging the

war to distract the American public, meanwhile installing police state control on the

home front.[200] The goal of the John Birch Society was quick victory and subsequent

withdrawal from the war: "victory then peace." Welch's distorted logic exhibits his

conspiratorial nature:

> The objective [of the American government] is not simply to distract the attention of gullible minds from the steady advance of state socialism and government regimentation at home, although this it certainly does, but the more sinister, though parallel, purpose is to use the very fact of our being at war as an excuse and a means of speeding up that advance, of gradually completing the transition into state socialism, and of converting the increasing and tightening regimentation into the framework of a totalitarian police state.[201]

Welch's insistence that communism had infiltrated the American government was

heavily aimed toward Lyndon Johnson but did not exclude Republican leaders. In fact,

one of his most controversial claims was that President Dwight Eisenhower was an agent

of communism.[202] Above all else, Welch used Vietnam as a recruitment tool and rallying

cry: "The American people are more deeply concerned about the growing mess in

Vietnam—and hence more ready to pay attention to our cries of alarm—than they have

been about anything else the Communist conspiracy has done to them so far." Despite the

fact that the John Birch Society was most notoriously associated with white supremacy

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[200] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 122.
[201] "Robert Welch Explains Purpose of Vietnam War" *YouTube,* uploaded by Capousa on June 25, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=co73TDl_F7E.
[202] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 188.

and segregation, Welch claimed that the stakes of Vietnam were "even higher than the 'civil rights' fraud." [203]

In 1967, Welch released an essay called "The Truth About Vietnam." Here, he emphasized that "regardless of how we got there, or who put us there, we are too deeply involved today to have any honorable way out except through victory."[204] Furthermore, Welch asserted that both the American government and the UN had secret diabolical plans to use Vietnam as a distraction to advance their own communist agendas. Welch wrote that,

> The two greatest aids to the worldwide Communist advance since 1945 have been the American foreign aid program, and the United Nations. Yet both were sold to us as means of opposing Communism. And these tremendous drains on our national resources and national sovereignty were accepted for that reason.

Welch purported that communists—in Hanoi and in Washington—were controlling both sides of the conflict.[205] Furthermore, he repeatedly linked the Vietnam War to the UN, which he insisted was a socialist apparatus striving for global control. In May 1967, the *Baltimore Sun* reported on Welch's concern about global governance: "[Welch] said that 'insiders' both in Russia and America were prolonging the [Vietnam] war as part of a monstrous plot to keep America in the United Nations as a step toward complete socialist control of the world."[206] The deep distrust of global governance was imperative to Welch's aims. He sought complete American dominance and rejected the legitimacy of all non-white nations. Welch successfully convinced his followers that the

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[203] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 220-221.
[204] "The John Birch Society on Vietnam. (Worth Repeating)." *The New American 18, no. 6*, March 25, 2002, *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A84313098/OVIC?u=upenn_main&sid=OVIC&xid=78b18d6c.
[205] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 121.
[206] "John Birch Society Founder Reveals 'Plot' Behind War," *The Sun; Baltimore, Md.*, May 12, 1967.

UN was "a hoax and a menace."[207] Welch advocated for limited government involvement in individuals' lives. In pursuit of this goal, he detested the UN as the very largest form of government.

In order to stoke nationalist flames and create an increased sense of urgency, Birchers equated Vietnam with treason. Members wrote that the brave soldiers were "not being allowed to win" and were "dying in action against the forces of the International Communist Conspiracy."[208] Johnson was believed to be betraying his nation by enabling communist Soviet Union and China to supply North Vietnam with weapons.[209] This allegation generated anti-government sentiment while soothing humiliation generated by the Vietnam War by providing an explanation for American failure outside of sheer military fiasco.

Military ineptitude was not an option for these fierce patriots: "How can a small, weak nation like North Vietnam continue to hold at bay the strongest nation on earth?"[210] Their answer was that the government had no intention of winning. The John Birch Society reported to collect over 1 million signatures on a petition that attacked the United States' "no-win policy" in Vietnam and the government's alleged goal of escalating Vietnam to a third world war.[211] Birchers were enraged by the government's inability to win Vietnam: "Treason and murder is what Vietnam—a war our best military minds say they could win in six weeks—is all about. Treason. And Murder."[212] Welch and other leaders developed an insular community by frightening their followers. The government

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[207] Robert B. Dresser, "What a Mess We Are In!" September 19, 1967.
[208] Wallis Wood, "Where Brave Men Die," *American Opinion,* June 1967, 6.
[209] Wood, "Where Brave Men Die," 15.
[210] Robert B. Dresser, "The Suicide of the USA," *Providence Journal*, January 27, 1967.
[211] Annette Ran, ed. "John Birch Society - Vietnam Petition Campaign," *Insight* 3, no. 1, September 1968, Published by the Research Committee, Michigan office of Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.
[212] Wallis Wood, "It's Treason! Aid and Comfort to the Vietcong," *American Opinion,* May 1968, 13.

and the UN could not be trusted, they claimed, and only the Bircher leaders held the answers to halting the world domination of communism.

After instilling fear in their followers, the John Birch Society leaders mobilized them. Articles in Bircher publications spoke directly to their readers, imploring them to be incensed: "What will you do to help stop it? Will you even try?"[213] One writer named Wallis Wood insisted that individuals could make a difference:

> What can you do? You can help protect the lives of your fellow Americans–the 500,000 super-patriots fighting Communism in Vietnam. You can get to work […] to help stop this treasonous aid and trade with the enemy—and insist on the removal of the restrictions on our military. If not? Well, if not mister, go back to sleep. But don't call yourself an American.[214]

Wood labelled the soldiers in Vietnam "super-patriots," emphasizing his nationalism rooted in military force. The soldiers fighting communism abroad became the gold standard for all Americans. Wood's forceful appeal to patriotism sought to inspire Birchers to combat domestic communism which the Society insisted appeared in the form of racial integration, feminization, and secularization. To ignore these existential threats was deemed un-American, and those who refused to join in the fight might as well have been asleep. Patriotism was a tool that evoked emotional responses for Birchers. Followers were relieved to have a method of fighting back against the sweeping social change that seemed inevitable in the 1960s and 1970s. This desire to regain social control matches the aims of the white working class and conservative intellectuals. By harnessing nationalism and insisting upon America's role as the custodian of democracy, all three of these groups found ways to reject the politics of the left and exude American pride.

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[213] Wood, "Where Brave Men Die," 16.
[214] Wood, "It's Treason!" 14.

A vital social goal for the John Birch Society was halting the civil rights movement. To this end, Birchers sought to harness "white backlash and to whip it with a greater intensity, using the specter of Communism."[215] For example, the anti-civil rights handbook of the John Birch Society, a published manuscript titled *It's Very Simple,* villainized Martin Luther King Jr. as "one of the country's most influential workers for Communism."[216] By creating an association between King and communism, the roots of all evil for Birchers, racial segregation became synonymous with patriotism and Americanism. This tactic was not unique to Birchers; even the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) suggested King's link with communism.

Uniting race and Vietnam was the chief goal of Alan Stang, a Texas Bircher and close friend of Welch. Stang abhorred Black liberation. He relied on racism and fear-mongering to mobilize his audience. The Vietnam War, Stang claimed, mirrored a "War on Police" waged by Black urban-dwellers: "More and more, it is becoming clear that what is happening in city after city across the United States is exactly the same war we are fighting against the Communists in Vietnam."[217] The characterization in Stang's writing was transparent: police officers were heroes and the Black Panthers made "Adolf Hitler look like an amateur."[218] The conflation of civil rights and communism fused the domestic and international concerns of the John Birch Society into one cohesive ideological narrative.

Stang targeted both Black activists and their white counterparts. He built on Welch's conspiracy theory that the American government was plotting to turn the world

[215] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 36.
[216] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 37.
[217] Alan Stang, "The War On Police," *The Review of the News,* September 4, 1968.
[218] Stang, "The War On Police."

communist. In a different article, Stang suggested that atrocities in Vietnam were similar to forced busing:

> The problem is not just that black criminals are terrorizing their fellow blacks – but that their white colleagues in the government are encouraging and protecting them. Just as these white conspirators have arranged privileged sanctuaries used by the Communists killing our boys in Vietnam, so they are beginning to do the same thing here.[219]

The notion of lost control bridged Vietnam and racial segregation. Stang's baseless conspiracies struck a chord with other whites who detested the liberal politics of their era. These individuals gladly overlooked convoluted theories in order to validate their hatred toward Black Americans. While most white workers and conservative intellectuals did not share this racial hatred, they similarly loathed the social agenda of the New Left and the push for total equality based on gender, race, and sexuality. All three groups sought control over American social hierarchies and the maintenance of the status quo. By projecting nationalism, each group rejected the left's vision for the future.

Stang embodied Dudziak's notion of war as a permanent "condition." His flagrant racism taught readers to trust only the tight-knit Bircher community and obliterate enemies at all costs, a lesson from Vietnam applied at home. War is a rare instance where violence is legitimate. By broadening the scope of the Vietnam War to include the race-related issues of police brutality and busing, Stang and other racist Birchers authorized violence. Birchers who felt powerless against the sexual, racial, and gender-based liberation movements were eager to bring the violence of Vietnam back to American shores.

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[219] Alan Stang, "Forced Bussing: Government Control Of Our Children," *American Opinion*, November 1971.

The John Birch Society eagerly exploited American anxiety on Vietnam. Their fear-mongering, conspiratorial tactics provided a small group of anguished Americans with an explanation for the inconceivable military failure and humiliation in Southeast Asia. Birchers believed in Welch's far-fetched claims that the government was fighting a supposed anti-communist war for communist ideals, perhaps because the theory was convoluted enough to match the botched conflict itself. The John Birch Society employed an action-based approach that delivered specific instructions to Americans who felt like they were losing control. The Society's monthly *Bulletin* detailed specific actions that members could engage in, such as taking over their local parent-teacher associations or writing to Senators, providing a sense of purpose.[220] Faced with individual powerlessness in preventing defeat in Vietnam and racial integration, tangible actions and a sense of community appealed to Birchers.

John Birch Society members united around their fears of communism. Colonel Lewis Millett was a combat veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and a Congressional Medal of honor recipient. Millett explained his motives for becoming a Bircher:

> When I came home from Vietnam, I found that the communists and their sympathizers and fellow travelers in our government, the universities, the media, and Hollywood were far more dangerous than the ones I was fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. I was also especially alarmed by the efforts to disarm the American people and to compromise our sovereignty through UN treaties. I saw that this was my new battlefield and I wasn't about to stop fighting. I joined The John Birch Society.[221]

Millet's fear of disarmament conveyed his societal distrust and desire for access to violent means of protection. Millett referred to the strong sense of community provided

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[220] Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society,* 12, 20.
[221] Lewis Millett, "Praise From the Past!"

by the Society. This insular, tight-knit support system was largely motivated by the hysteria and skepticism that the Society generated toward major mainstream American institutions, which they viewed as overtaken by insurgent communists.

Millet's disdain for "communist sympathizers" was shared with other Birchers who were particularly angered by the student protestors of the New Left. In *American Opinion,* a John Birch Society affiliated magazine founded by Welch, reporter Bill Richardson and photographer Ken Granger lambasted student protestors at a University of California, Berkley protest. The two Birchers reported that the protest was a "snake pit" where "treason was the norm." The men angrily claimed that "Fifteen thousand Communist-led demonstrators marched to support a Communist enemy which, as their marching feet pounded the California pavement, was killing American soldiers in the stinking jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam."[222] Moreover, the men complained that the mainstream media was failing to report on the true nature of these disreputable protests and their communist attempts to undermine American morale.[223] Anger toward liberal media was a key thread between various groups of conservatives. Blue-collars, intellectuals, and Birchers alike resented the media's sympathy with the anti-war movement, as well as the anti-war movement itself.

For the John Birch Society, the utility of the Vietnam War was two-fold: first, the dramatic psychological impact of the conflict brought like-minded individuals together and fostered a community; second, Welch's rage over the military loss encouraged him to

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[222] Bill Richardson and Ken Granger, "The Press and the Vietniks," *American Opinion,* January 1966, 1-13, quoted in Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society,* 162.
[223] Richardson and Granger, "The Press and the Vietniks," 162.

continue pushing his anti-government, anti-Black, anti-communist narrative in an effort to gain social control.

The John Birch Society flirted with mainstream politics despite their anti-government rhetoric. Members frequently supported segregationist Republicans. The Society's support for Barry Goldwater, for example, brought the fringe political group into the mainstream fold in 1964.[224] The true political impact of the John Birch Society, however, lay in its impact on right-wing ideology. Republican politicians picked up cues from the Society and villainized communism and the left, two political lightning rods that resonated with conservatives from across the political spectrum. Most of all, patriotism bridged the gap between far-right and mainstream conservatives. The thematic similarity between Bircher ideology and conservatism expanded many individuals' notions of acceptable political stances and inspired extreme thinking in moderate conservative circles. Furthermore, mainstream conservatives who disagreed with Bircherism were able to claim moderation relative to extremists, legitimizing their own perspectives. Despite different stances between the far and center right, pride in nation and opposition to the anti-war left led working class whites, intellectuals, and extremists all to claim conservatism as their own.

KKK and White Power Militancy

The extremism of the John Birch Society was eclipsed by exceedingly violent factions of the white power movement such as the KKK. Within the dark shadows of white supremacist circles, the Vietnam War became a powerful symbol and tool used to

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[224] Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society,* 15.

convince disillusioned Americans to take up arms and fight for their radical beliefs. Historian Kathleen Belew argues that the origins of the white power movement of the late twentieth century and today are deeply connected to the Vietnam War. The war, she writes, created anger that could be appropriated by explosive figures and channeled into racial violence: war "comes home in ways bloody and unexpected."[225] Belew's commentary on KKK leader Louis Beam and his followers highlights how militant veterans persuaded their veteran networks to join white power groups. Their military training and experience translated to violence on the home front, providing them with a new shared purpose and community. As the nation tried to forget about Vietnam in the post-war years, white power groups refused to move on and pursued violence with urgency in the 1980s.

White power Vietnam veterans constructed a narrative of betrayal that justified their violent outlook. While at war, they said, the weak American government failed to equip them properly and barred them from using the tactics necessary to vanquish the evil Viet Cong. Those lucky enough to return alive to the United States were humiliated and called "baby-killers" by the anti-war movement. Their sacrifice went unappreciated. They were abandoned, left to deal with cumbersome mental and physical wounds. Using communists as their scapegoats, they sought revenge.[226] When soldiers started returning from Vietnam, the white power movement gained members.

As with the Birchers, the key overlap between mainstream conservatism and the white power movement was patriotism. White nationalist groups applied an even narrower definition to patriotism, however, accepting only a white nation achieved

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[225] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 16.
[226] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 23-24.

through violence. They sought to unite with white citizens of other Western nations, creating a global white nation-state. Their vision romanticized Antebellum-era America where white men reigned supreme. The white power movement was even less electorally-minded than the John Birch Society, yet still recognized as far-right. For some segregationist candidates, members were willing to vote in mainstream elections. The movement's existence in the public eye extended the right end of the political spectrum, making some former liberals such as white workers or intellectuals more comfortable crossing party lines to the familiar shores of mainstream conservatism.

Louis Beam was a Texas Klansman who became a key leader in the white power movement upon his return from the Vietnam War. Beam served in Vietnam for eighteen months as a helicopter machine-gun operator, providing him with violent experiences that would later fuel his vicious rhetoric and actions. Reflecting on his army service, Beam said that he reveled in "the joys of killing your enemy."[227] When he returned to American shores, he brought with him a crazed fury against both communists and the American government. The KKK provided him with an outlet and audience for this anger. He taught other Klansmen guerilla warfare tactics at paramilitary camps and concentrated energy into recruiting other army men from the active-duty site at Ford Hood, Texas, as well as other veterans across the nation searching for camaraderie.[228]

While the KKK had its strongest national presence in the early twentieth century, it maintained steady membership numbers throughout the 1900s. The peak of KKK membership was 4 million in 1924. By the 1980s, there were an estimated 25,000 "hard-

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[227] "Louis Beam," *Southern Poverty Law Center, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/louis-beam.*
[228] "Louis Beam," *Southern Poverty Law Center.*

core members," though an additional 175,000 informal members purchased white power

texts, attended rallies, and donated money. Another 450,000 individuals read KKK

literature.[229] In contrast, the John Birch Society peaked at 100,000 members.[230]

Beam's militant vision for America was enabled by his experiences in war. Years

after his return from Vietnam, Beam expressed his anger toward the American public and

anti-war movement for mistreating Vietnam veterans, demanding retaliation:

> America's political leaders, bankers, church ministers, newsmen, sports stars and
> hippies called us 'baby killers,' and threw chicken blood on some of us when we
> returned home. You're damn right I'm mad! I've had enough! I want these same
> traitors to face their enemy now, the American fighting man they betrayed, all three
> million of us.[231]

Beam encouraged veteran anger. He called Americans "traitors," enforcing the idea that

militant veterans had to stick together amid a sea of enemies. While his desired

vengeance was more violent and intensely racialized compared to the anger of the

working class and intellectuals, the ungrateful anti-war movement was a powerful

mobilizing rival for each group. American failure in Vietnam generated intense feelings

of weakness and emasculation. After the humiliating defeat, "masculinity provided an

ideological frame for the New Right, challenged antiwar sentiment, and idealized bygone

and invented familial and gender orders throughout the American society."[232] In order to

both reverse the Vietnam narrative of weakness and to channel militancy as a masculine

symbol, Vietnam became a frame for the white power movement. This was evidenced in

the "uniforms, languages, strategies, and matériel" borrowed directly from the war.[233]

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[229] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 4.
[230] Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society,* 2-3.
[231] Louis Beam, *Essays of a Klansmen* (1983), 29 quoted in Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 31.
[232] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 7-8.
[233] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 11.

Beyond using war and violence as a mindset, Beam also rehashed his experiences in Southeast Asia more literally by harassing Vietnamese refugees in the United States. In 1981, Beam antagonized a group of Vietnamese refugee shrimpers in the Gulf of Mexico who were competing with white fishermen for shrimp. Beam and his KKK cronies burned crosses in the yards of Vietnamese shrimpers, along with destroying some of their boats and antagonizing them at sea by sailing past them displaying arms, cannons, and a hanging human effigy.[234] The "Klanwatch" project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit legal advocacy group in Alabama focused on civil rights, won a restraining order against the Klan for these intimidation tactics.[235] During this episode, Beam coined a catchphrase: "Where ballots fail, bullets will prevail."[236]

Beam's disturbing transferal of the horrors of war from Vietnam back to the United States demonstrates the intense impact the war had on him and his violent philosophy. Furthermore, in the shrimper incident Beam targeted non-whites who were economically successful, pointing to his greater anger for the social and economic plight of working-class whites. Beam exerted his frustration over the economic struggles of white shrimpers, and whites more broadly, by intimidating foreigners who were dominating the market. This exasperated mindset extended to conservatives across the spectrum who lamented the struggle of whites, such as white workers who saw affirmative action for Blacks as a threat to their livelihoods.

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[234] "Louis Beam," *Southern Poverty Law Center.*
[235] Robert M. Press, "Klan Activity on Increase; so Is Effort to Counter It: Vietnam Refugees Join Blacks and Jews on List of Those Targeted by KKK," *The Christian Science Monitor; Boston, Mass.*, June 10, 1981.
[236] "Louis Beam," *Southern Poverty Law Center.*

The influence of Vietnam on white power groups went beyond the KKK. Tom Posey founded the Civilian Military Assistance (CMA) in 1983 after serving in the Marines in Vietnam and later in the Alabama National Guard. His organization supplied and assisted Central American groups seeking to combat communism in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Posey founded the CMA in order to establish a community that professed values he could not find elsewhere: "In my younger days I did know Klansmen. I've even been to a couple of Klan meetings. But I got tired of them. I was even a John Bircher," he said, "but their way of stopping Communism and mine were different."[237]

The *New York Times* reported that the CMA comprised 75 percent military veterans, and that "the organization appears to be made up of frustrated men seeking a purpose somewhere between armed vigil and the peaceful supply of material to distant civilian and armed forces."[238] When interviewed by the *New York Times,* Posey insisted that the ultimate goal of his organization was to overthrow the United States. *United Press International* reported that the CMA had five thousand members in all fifty states, including many Vietnam veterans.[239] In the same article, the group was described as "trailed by hints of shadowy connections" including ties to the CIA, the KKK, and charges of gun running, drug smuggling, and assassination plots.[240]

Small, militant white power groups like the CMA emerged across the nation in the 1980s. On March 20, 1981, a group of twelve camouflage-clad, heavily armed paramilitary men engaged in "training" in a wooded Florida area, resulting in arrest on

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[237] Dudley Clendinen, "Anti-Communism Called The Thread Binding Group That Captured Aliens," *New York Times*, July 11, 1986.
[238] Clendinen, "Anti-Communism."
[239] Dana Beyerle and Bill Lohmann, "Paramilitary Group Has Controversial History," *United Press International*, July 13, 1986, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1986/07/13/Paramilitary-group-has-controversial-history/1771521611200/.
[240] Beyerle and Lohmann, "Paramilitary Group Has Controversial History."

charges of trespassing. The *Christian Science Monitor* released a three-part series on the

incident and the rise of paramilitary groups. The men were part of the Christian Patriots

Defense League which urged the public to "take up arms to prepare" for the "impending

doom of the United States" brought on by communism.[241] Members of the League

expressed deeply discriminatory and violent views against Black and Jewish Americans.

The group was part of an increasing presence of paramilitary groups who thrived "on a

blend of sincere patriotism, machoism, racism, religious fervor, and a high degree of fear

and uncertainty about the future."[242] One of the twelve members, Joseph Franklin

Camper, led the training session that resulted in arrest using the skills he gained in

combat in Vietnam. Camper claimed to be a veteran of "deep penetration" missions in

Vietnam and had risen to be a corporal.[243] Not only did Vietnam arm veterans with

military training, but it armed many of them with cold-blooded survival instincts, trauma-

inspired alienation from society, and a deep-rooted feeling of lost control and purpose.

These war-time legacies impacted the United States in violent, damaging ways.

Another example of white power militancy among Vietnam veterans is Glenn

Miller, founder of the White Patriot Party. Miller was previously a member of the Army

Special Forces, otherwise known as the Green Berets. *United Press International*

reported on Miller and his party in 1986, interviewing a special operations police officer

who claimed that participation from military personnel in paramilitary activities "lends

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[241] Madden, "Ford Says Indochina War Is Finished."

[242] Robert M. Press, "They Play War Games in US Countryside: 'Paramilitary' Groups Preparing for—What? 'Paramilitary' Groups Play War Games—Preparing for What?" *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File); Boston, Mass.,* March 23, 1981.

[243] Press, "They Play War Games in US Countryside."

credibility to the organizations."[244] Miller served in the army for twenty years, including

two tours in Vietnam, but was discharged for distributing racist reading material.[245]

For the individuals who resorted to paramilitary violence on the home front after

the Vietnam War, "a shared story about Vietnam outweighed the historical reality of the

war itself."[246] The disillusioned veteran trope displayed in many Vietnam movies, such as

Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, and *Platoon* was undoubtedly inspired by men like

Beam, Posey, and Miller. Yet these men reciprocally capitalized on the image of

brooding, broken Vietnam veterans portrayed in these films to recruit followers to their

organizations.

Veterans and non-veterans alike were devastated by the result of the Vietnam

War. Distraught individuals sought a way to reclaim the conflict's meaning in history and

take matters of anti-communism into their own hands. The proliferation of white power

groups during and after Vietnam evolved into the alt-right and white power movements

of the twenty-first century. The discriminatory brand of patriotism employed by the

radical right was more extreme but not irreconcilable with mainstream conservative

nationalism. The white power movement claimed to be working toward a "better"

America and scorned those who dishonored the flag. They widened the already existing

fissure between patriotism and government support. Mainstream conservatives defined

themselves against the far-right, claiming their own moderation in contrast. In turn, they

benefitted by attracting liberals who desired a more centrist political ideology.

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[244] Mike McLaughlin, "White Supremacist Rallies Drawing Military Personnel," *United Press International*, April 16, 1986, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1986/04/16/White-supremacist-rallies-drawing-military-personnel/8397514011600/.

[245] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 24.

[246] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 25.

The Conservative Movement Reacts

The individuals examined in this chapter belonged to fringe groups who most often lay outside the bounds of the mainstream political system. Far-right and white power groups were disavowed by the Republican Party. Moreover, many members of these groups excluded themselves from the political process, advocating for either a new, more radical third party or for an overhaul of the political system altogether.[247] Prominent conservative politicians and public figures were quick to condemn the far-right in order to assure moderate Americans that voting Republican was not an endorsement of extremism.

William Buckley, for example, rejected the John Birch Society on multiple occasions in order to ensure that their extremist, conspiracy-driven ideology did not cloud his vision for American conservatism. Buckley dismissed Welch's conspiracy of communist infiltration in American politics as "paranoid and unpatriotic drivel."[248] On the subject of Welch's convoluted explanation for government objectives in Vietnam, Buckley highlighted the irony that Welch's theory applied the same type of pressure on the American government that the anti-war left did. In a *National Review* editorial, Buckley explained, "Such reasoning, depriving us as it does of the benefits of public support by conservatives for anti-Communist action when it does occur, needs to be analyzed and resisted."[249] The theories of the John Birch Society were easy targets for caricature by liberals. Buckley's mission to establish intellectual conservative respectability required Bircherism to subside. This strategy was echoed by Russell Kirk, a

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[247] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right,* 42.
[248] Epstein and Forster, *The Radical Right*, 61.
[249] "The John Birch Society and The Conservative Movement," *National Review* 17, no. 42 (October 19, 1965): 915.

prominent political theorist who helped shape American conservatism in the twentieth century. Kirk wrote that "an excess of zeal, intemperance, and imprudence" expressed by Welch contributed to an unwelcome divide in the conservative movement.[250]

Despite his ardent disdain for Welch, Buckley made a point not to alienate John Birch Society members from the conservative movement. One *National Review* editorial called Society members "men and women of high character and purpose."[251] A different editorial legitimized members by commending their efforts to "contain Mr. Welch's utterances" or "remove his as their leader."[252] Buckley derided Welch's theories while still recognizing the membership of the John Birch Society as an important conservative base. His careful separation of Welch from his followers indicated his strategic rejection of far-fetched ideology and deft attempt to strengthen Republican electoral odds.

The KKK was ostracized to a greater extent than the John Birch Society, deemed a pariah of the mainstream right. Belew posits that the racist, violent rhetoric of Louis Beam did not have an electoral bent and was purposefully anti-government. She writes that "the movement was not dedicated to political conservatism" and rather to a radical future achieved through revolution.[253] This holds true in Beam's own words: "It is time for the voice of the radical to be heard…out with the conservatives and in with the radicals! Out with plans for compromise and in with plans for the sword!"[254] His radical vision entailed a complete overthrow of the American political mainstream.

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[250] "The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement," 915.
[251] "The Question of Robert Welch," *National Review* 12, no. 6 (February 13, 1962): 83–88.
[252] The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement," 915.
[253] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 5.
[254] Louis Beam, *Essays of a Klansmen* (1983), 10 quoted in Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 31.

While Beam did not advocate for any politician or party explicitly, his leadership in the KKK and his implicit support for established right-wing viewpoints fostered in his followers an undeniable push toward ideological overlap with conservatism. Many of the viewpoints of white power and KKK members were shared by right-wing political minds, including rejection of abortion, immigration, welfare, equal rights for women, minorities, gays, and lesbians.[255] Some KKK stances were extreme versions of right-wing attitudes, thus Beam and his peers introduced many previous non-voters to right-wing issue stances that resonated with them. Beam himself may not have been an active participant in electoral politics, but his contribution to enlarging membership of the far right translated to a greater perception in the American public that the right-wing was gaining momentum. Furthermore, it created a wider latitude in terms of the definition of "moderate" conservatism. Many right-wing politicians catered to this clientele by embracing stances that were somewhat sympathetic to extremist wishes.

Conclusion

Vietnam was exploited by extremist groups because of its power as a symbol of waning American dominance. In an effort to assert masculinity, white supremacy, and authority, white power and radical right groups sought to redefine the meaning of the war. Welch of the John Birch Society used the war as a vehicle to promote his fervent anti-communism. Stang, another Bircher, linked the Vietnam War to race in order to incentivize followers to support segregation. General members of the John Birch Society

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[255] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 5.

united around their shared disdain for both American failure in the war and the anti-war movement's anti-patriotism.

In contrast, Louis Beam employed a direct transfer of the violence he experienced in combat back to America in order to attain his vision. The KKK sought a revolution that would create a state of white North-Americans and Europeans under an American model. Other veterans started and joined paramilitary organizations such as the Civilian Military Assistance, Christian Patriots Defense League, and White Patriot Party as outlets for their remnant paranoia and anger after Vietnam.

These extremist groups contributed in a small way to electing Republican candidates, as they introduced people to conservative policy issues that inspired electoral participation.[256] More significantly, these groups focused on patriotism to soothe the ire of economic suffering, white male victimhood, and the general feeling of lost control. In addition, their extension of the active political spectrum incentivized a broader focus for the available white electorate. Working class white and intellectual conservatives may not have been directly mobilized by extremist violence and conspiracy, but all three factions shared a vision of American supremacy and obligation to uphold democracy abroad, bolstered the importance of patriotism to the conservative movement, and rejected the racial and social politics of the American left. By bringing the Vietnam War home, the far right enlarged the scope of American conservatism.

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[256] Belew, *Bring the War Home,* 5.

Conclusion

During the Vietnam War era, nationalism bound together a conservative coalition of unique groups. The meaning of nation differed greatly across the coalition. For working-class white groups, America stood for a willingness to obey authority and sacrifice for the nation in return for the promise of white worker prosperity, both native and immigrant. Intellectual conservatives believed in America as a shining example of capitalist freedoms and democracy, and the obligation to protect those values abroad. For far-right extremists, America embodied ardent anti-communism, the right to bear arms, and a rigid social hierarchy topped by white men. For each group, nationalism elicited deeply emotional reactions to the social, technological and economic changes occurring in American life. The different but overlapping patriotisms of each of these conservative groups was motivated by a common desire to halt and reverse leftist social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the different economic interests and social goals of each group, they collectively harnessed nationalism to build and protect their respective visions of American greatness.

This right-wing claim to a monopoly on nationalism was novel. Patriotism had previously existed across party lines as a unifying American quality. It was, in fact, only a small group of leftists who thoroughly rejected American nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s; however, this group became the new face of the political left that was struggling to navigate the dissolution of the New Deal Democratic coalition. The country faced stagflation, deindustrialization, and resource scarcity on the economic front as well as social demands for equality among races, genders, and sexualities. Domestic tumult was coupled with foreign instability when an effort to contain the spread of communism

in Vietnam turned into a protracted military struggle. Ultimately the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement were essential catalysts for the conservative coalition's focus on nationalism and the villainizing of the left. These elements held the coalition together and led to political success.

The upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s fractured both the left and the right. The identity crisis of the Democratic Party was matched by fragmentation on the right, as the conservative coalition was based more on disdain for the left and the veneration of American nationalism than on shared economic interests or social values. This tenuous coalition, however, was effectively manipulated and exploited by politicians. Nixon peeled enough Democrats away from the center-left to secure his presidency, and later, Reagan decried big government and lauded America all the way to the White House. Even Democrats recognized the strength of conservatism in the late twentieth century. Bill Clinton, for example, echoed the conservative demands for law and order and limited government.

The contemporary American political right has deep roots in this conservative coalition. The right-wing rejection of the anti-Vietnam movement is similar to the conservative rejection of certain left-liberal social values today, including feminism, political-correctness, affirmative action for minorities, and Medicare for all. As in the Vietnam era, the right-wing of today comprises pockets of the white working class, business types, and authoritarian-leaning ideologues, three groups who share few objective economic interests, and display a wide variation of wealth, education, and geographic locations.

Although former President Donald J. Trump is not a traditional conservative, he is the current *de facto* head of the Republican Party and has crucial influence on the trajectory of American conservatism. Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan glorifies a past where American hegemony was unthreatened and the United States was "great" for whites and males at the expense of women and non-white racial groups. The Vietnam War was one of the events that shattered the "great" America and set conservatism on a continuing journey to reinstate the lost domestic and global order. The Vietnam War began with bipartisan support but ended in bitter division and debate over its justification and significance. Conservatives bonded over the emotional and psychological impact of military loss and the desire to maintain national pride.

To win the presidency, Trump enticed mainstream conservatives with tax benefits and economic rewards while winning over segments of the white working class through appeals to crude economic and foreign policy nationalism. Trump disregarded political etiquette, unleashing unconventional presidential rhetoric with racist and sexist undertones, mean-spirited insults, and attacks on free press and American democracy. Racism and xenophobia, particularly against Mexicans and Muslims, were utilized by Trump to connect with his base and promote American supremacy.

Trump played the champion of the working class despite his own exorbitant wealth. Trump promised to reinvigorate American manufacturing and conquer unemployment but left office without addressing the economic, educational, and healthcare disadvantages of the working class and rural America. Like Nixon, Trump exploited working-class contempt for the left but failed to enact policies that addressed the plight of the working poor. Thus, low-income Americans bear not only the brunt of

the COVID-19 health pandemic but also the bulk of its economic fallout. While these failures may have contributed to Trump's loss in the 2020 election, it remains clear that his flag-waving and rejection of political correctness have secured his spot as an icon for many working-class and rural white communities.

The response to Trump from conservative intellectuals has been mixed. Some embraced his novelty and lauded his propensity for speaking his mind. Many intellectual conservatives of today identify as "never-Trumpers" who abhor the forty-fourth president's unruly political style and reactive economic interventions. Others have remained quiet on the subject or support him begrudgingly based on economic interests.

Far-right extremist movements have taken on new forms today but are deeply rooted in the Vietnam War era. The John Birch Society, for example, still exists and has strong ties to highly influential conservatives: Fred Koch, father of major conservative donors Charles and David Koch, was one of the original eleven members of the John Birch Society and a major funding source for the organization. Though the KKK is far less prevalent today than it was in the twentieth century, other white power groups are emboldened by the contemporary political climate. Trump has elicited staunch support from far-right militias and extremist groups. After the Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally in 2017, one of the most malicious demonstrations of white supremacism and neo-Nazism in recent American history, Trump said that "very fine people" existed on both sides. Toxic ideologues who rarely mesh with mainstream electoral politics embraced Trump as a presidential candidate, including former grand wizard of the KKK David Duke. It is clear that the momentum gained by far-right extremist groups in the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras remains strong and was bolstered by Trump.

On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters rioted and stormed the United States

Capitol, attempting to disrupt the process of formalizing the election of President Joseph

R. Biden. These insurrectionists chanted in favor of hanging former Vice President Mike

Pence and hunting down Speaker Nancy Pelosi. They desecrated the chambers of the

Capitol and forced Congressmembers to take cover, fearing for their lives. These events

were direct consequences of Trump's incessant lies and incendiary political rhetoric

insisting that the Democrats committed fraud in the 2020 election.

Trump, with alliterative nicknames and tweets shouting in all-capitals, attacked

his political rivals with personal slights and deceptions, rather than grapple with their

ideas. He turned adversaries into enemies. His ad-hominem attacks were reminiscent of

the conservative strategy to villainize leftist individuals in the Vietnam War era. These

conservatives' reactions to Vietnam and opposition to the anti-war movement provided a

blueprint for today's right on how to channel loss, struggle, and anger into political

benefit. It will be important to see whether this blueprint is used in the inevitable quest

for conservative dominance during America's next chapter, the Biden presidency.

Trump's populist right-wing appeals reveal similarities to the Vietnam era

conservative efforts to win over the actors explored in this thesis. Of course, vast

differences in today's environment dictate that the contemporary strain of politics is

genetically similar but evolutionarily different from the Vietnam context. Military

interventions abroad since Vietnam, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, have proven

unsuccessful and unpopular and contributed to increasing isolationist sentiment in

America. Today's Republican Party has authorized the weakening of the social safety net

in favor of lower taxes, which has also added to the economic burden on the working

class. Sturdy blue-collar employment and union jobs have continued to leave the United States and most that remain no longer provide economic stability.

The types of public intellectuals explored in chapter two were ostracized by the Trump movement and deemed part of the hated Republican establishment. Today's Kristols and Buckleys no longer exert any intellectual influence on the right-wing movement. Establishment conservatives such as Liz Cheney and Mitt Romney are being attacked and sidelined by powerful Republican Party members after rebuking Trump, clearly evidencing that the scope of Republicanism is narrowing. Neoconservatives and anti-Trumpers are increasingly scarce and irrelevant on the right.

The history of Vietnam era conservatism suggests that the estrangement of intellectual, establishment conservatives from right-wing politics is not likely to be permanent. Nationalism may again prove able to merge working class, intellectual, and extremist right-wing groups as three distinct but overlapping elements of the American conservative coalition.

While American conservatism regroups after the 2020 Republican electoral loss, it will be crucial to monitor whether dog-whistle appeals to racism, sexism, and the lament for American "greatness" remain mainstays of the right's platform. This examination of conservatism exhibits the deep emotional quality of American nationalism. Biden's calls for bipartisan unity indicate his interest in ending the gridlock in Congress and intense animosity between the political parties. Perhaps appealing to shared values and ending the conservative claims to monopoly on national pride will be keys to his success.

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