**The Power of Protest: Final Stages of Opposition to the War in Vietnam**

The [Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee (VPCC)](http://www.vietnampeace.org/) is seeking university, foundation and peace movement partners to collaborate in a national public retrospective on popular opposition to the war in Vietnam and the wider American war in Indochina. We anticipate organizing initially around the 50th anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords (January 27, 1973), which ended direct U.S. military operations in Vietnam.

Our intent is to offer an examination of the foreign policy lessons and domestic legacies of the movement against the war, with an emphasis on the 1972-73 events that led to the Accords and to a vigorous citizen lobbying campaign that facilitated an end to the war two years later.

Memorable events occurred in this period. Nixon escalated the bombing of North Vietnamese cities and mined the country’s harbor at Haiphong. Protests were widespread, even on US military bases and ships at sea. Celebrities flew to Hanoi to oppose U.S. policy. Public opinion shifted against the war. Substantial medical assistance was sent to the North by Americans defying government regulations. Over Christmas, the B-52 bombing of Hanoi damaged Bach Mai Hospital. And against this background, the Watergate investigation began to unfold.

The VPCC was formed in 2014 by Tom Hayden, David Cortright and John McAuliff from the political, GI and faith streams of the Vietnam antiwar movement to preserve the history of that unprecedented decade-long effort. The organization has sponsored numerous in-person conferences and zoom seminars to mark the 50th anniversaries of important events that occurred during the early and middle years of that movement. We believe the time is ripe to bring a substantive nationwide analysis of the effort to stop the war, now widely regarded as a foreign policy catastrophe, to a broad audience of Americans, to the academic community, and to the national press.

We lack the institutional resources to mount such an effort alone, but believe we have much to contribute. We are the people who marched, demonstrated, resisted, boycotted, sat-in, went on strike, and were arrested. We also helped organize and lead many of the national and local antiwar organizations that sprang up during the war. We lived through the turmoil, helped shape the actions and strategies that defined the era, and can provide dramatic first-person testimony about the events that occurred. We hope to recruit celebrity activists to join us, like Jane Fonda, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Peter Yarrow, Daniel Ellsberg, and dozens of lesser-known leaders who together can draw the press coverage that could make this retrospective a national event.

We feel an urgent need to undertake this project. Just as the passing of members of “the greatest generation” and of Holocaust survivors has already silenced most eyewitness accounts of World War II, so too are Vietnam antiwar activists becoming a diminishing resource. Most of us are now in our 70s and 80s. We want our experiences and perspective to remain available to those who believe there are lessons to be learned from what we lived through and did.

The U.S. in the early 1970s was split in ways similar to the present. Indeed, the divisions then shaped the divisions we still live with today. Conflict over the American war in Indochina intersected with conflicts over racial justice, gendered discrepancies in power and authority, and deepening divisions in wealth. The country that emerged after the Peace Accords and Watergate was dramatically different from the Great Society that was declared a decade earlier when the U.S. war first escalated and the movement to end it was born.

The experiences of that movement, its successes and failures, contain lessons for Americans today. Teasing them out, imagining how they can be applied, and finding ways to communicate them to young activists and scholars today and in the years to come, will be done in discussion with the partners who join us in this project. The form of the project (in-person, multi-day, multi-venue conference, teach-ins or online events), its content and organization (panels, keynotes, film screenings, slide shows, interviews) will be developed collaboratively with partnering institutions and organizations.

The attached Appendix contains a preliminary list of topics and programs VPCC has the experience and expertise to help create. Our initial focus is 1972-73, with a particular emphasis on the largely ignored, pen-ultimate stage antiwar movement. All played a role in moving the US toward an end to its war. We welcome additional topics or modifying this list in consultation with potential partners.

**Each partner can choose its own level of involvement, whether developing one or two programs on suggested national topics or by emphasizing local histories. Events can range from tens to hundreds of participants. Our goal is that all programs are carried out with a coordinated calendar and a common national identity and are streamed and recorded for posting together. Partners will promote each others’ initiatives by publicizing a collaborative web page.**

*Postscript: We are painfully aware as we reach out on behalf of this project that the world once again is overwhelmed with tragic images of a powerful modern military force seeking to impose its will on another nation, with horrendous cost to innocent civilians. The US media and political leaders are embracing an outmatched resistance energized by national pride and the sentiment of Ho Chi Minh that “nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.” This may be an especially important time for Americans to recall an era when the roles of the US and Russia were reversed. The political context and power of repression are different, but the determination of peace activists in the US then and in Russia now are profoundly similar.*

**Appendix:**

**Potential Program Topics for 2022-2023 Collaboration**

* **The failure of US diplomacy.** The U.S. and North Vietnam reach a peace agreement in October 1972. Kissinger’s declaration that ‘peace is at hand’ affects the election but collapses because of South Vietnam’s rejection. The US tries to force change in Hanoi’s position with the Christmas bombing, but virtually identical provisions are signed on January 27. 1973. Recruit: Dan Ellsberg, Greg Grandin, Amb. Dang Dinh Quy
* **The Movement**. VPCC has unique ability to bolster the historical record of the antiwar movement. We can offer eye-witness accounts of:
  + **Responses to 1972 air war escalations** (bombing civilians and river dikes in North Vietnam, mining Haiphong harbor). Demonstrations, celebrity trips to North Vietnam (Ramsey Clark, Jane Fonda), public opinion shifts against the war. Recruit: Jane Fonda
  + **Republican and Democratic Conventions** Summer of 1972 Vietnam Veterans Against the War and other peace groups make their presence felt protesting Nixon’s nomination and celebrating McGovern’s. Substantial focus on danger of bombing the dike system.
  + **The Movement shifts from a focus on demonstrations** to public education and lobbying (Indochina Peace Campaign, Indochina Resource Center), medical assistance (Medical Air for Indochina), broader church opposition. Both the Indochina Peace Campaign and Medical Aid for Indochina established offices across the country in 1972, the Indochina Mobile Education Project sponsored national tours, American Friends Service Committee redoubled its nationwide peace education work.
  + **The Christmas bombing**. The Bach Mai Hospital and civilian neighborhoods are decimated when B-52s bomb Hanoi. The Pentagon attempts a cover-up, but their account is debunked by American eyewitnesses, including Joan Baez and former Nuremburg prosecutor Telford Taylor. Medical Aid for Indochina launches a US campaign to rebuild the hospital, which results in broad support (full-page ads, Leonard Bernstein concert, more). Recruit: Joan Baez.
  + **Mounting pressure on Nixon to sign the Accords**: Does heightened opposition force Nixon to sign the peace agreement to obtain a “decent interval” before defeat? Project Redress organizes more celebrity protestors, public opinion shifts further after the Christmas bombing, Bach Mai Hospital Fund raises large sums, editorial opposition to the war becomes widespread, demonstrators disrupt Nixon inaugural. Recruit: Robert Jay Lifton, Noam Chomsky, Judy Collins, other Redress participants.
  + **Unprecedented direct assistance to and communication with the “enemy”**: Journalists and antiwar leaders are in direct touch with the North Vietnamese government and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the south meeting in Canada, Europe and Vietnam. The Committee of Liaison provides direct contact with POWs. Medical Aid for Indochina, Science for Vietnam and AFSC send medical and reconstruction supplies to Hanoi. The Paris Peace Accords and digests of the Pentagon Papers are widely distributed.
  + **IPC tour fall of 1972**. Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda lead antiwar activists and entertainers to 70 cities over 70 days prior to the presidential election, delivering skits, lectures, songs, slide shows, and appearances on local radio and TV. Recruit: Jane Fonda, Holly Near, other participants.
  + **The end of the increasingly dysfunctional draft** is announced on January 27, 1973 (the same date as the Paris agreement); after growing resistance, the last draftee is inducted on June 30, 1973. What is the impact on the antiwar movement when its base is no longer at risk (and on opposition to later wars)?
  + **Self-exile in Canada and Europe** is chosen by some who oppose the war and the draft or remove themselves from military service. Some remain active and work with host country opponents of the war and GI.
* **Retrospective programs will correct the absence in the historical record of these key developments and contributions:**
  + **Military mutinies and their impact.** Vietnam Veterans Against the War, after throwing their combat medals back at the government, continue their dramatic actions. Sabotage occurs on US Navy ships, Air Force pilots refuse to bomb, G.I. coffee houses publish newspapers and organize soldiers against the war, antiwar POWs write to Nixon, fragging of combat officers undermines ground operations.
  + **The unrecognized role of women.** Women are often under-acknowledged for their contribution to stopping the war and reducing the suffering it caused: in the political movements against the war, in the military in Vietnam, in service organizations in Indochina, and in the Vietnamese government and military.
  + **Black leadership in the antiwar movement.** From individuals like Muhammad Ali to organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Black Anti-war Anti-draft union (NBAWADU), African-American activists link the call for racial justice to the call to resist the draft and oppose the U.S. war in Vietnam in the mid-1960s. Their actions profoundly influence the course of the war. How did African-American antiwar activism manifest in the 1970s? Recruit: Cleveland Sellers, Robyn Spencer
  + **Hispanic and Asian Communities and Vietnamese studying in the US** play a little known but significant partin the antiwar movement
* **The Reaction: Watergate links to fear of the antiwar movement.** Publication of the public opinion shaping Pentagon Papers leads Nixon’s advisors to create the Plumbers who break into the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, ultimately leading to dismissal of the case against Ellsberg. Key figures in the Plumbers direct the Watergate break-in, resulting in the famed hearings and resignation of Nixon and his distraction from continuing the war.
* **COINTELPRO**. Major resistance is planned (and thwarted) to undermine Nixon’s re-election, including a John Lennon concert tour. Nixon moves the convention from San Diego to Miami, resistance mounts, COINTELPRO (including plans for detention camps) is revealed, and Nixon becomes obsessed with the antiwar movement.
* **The hidden wars in Laos and Cambodia.** Illegal U.S. troop incursions and massive (often secret) bombing campaigns (which made Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history) wrought extensive and lasting physical damage in both countries, caused massive dislocation of the population and an estimated 450,000 casualties. U.S. support of the coup that ousted Prince Sihanouk set the stage for the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and for the genocide that followed.
* **Films and slide shows educate and motivate activists and a wider public** Films from Newsreel circulate by peace organization and are supplemented by sponsored media from NARMIC and the Indochina Peace Campaign. Mainstream media reach a wider public with “Born on the 4th of July”, “Hearts and Minds” and implicitly M\*A\*S\*H.

**Potential Program Topics for 2023-2025 Collaboration**

* **Post-Accords lobbying effort**. The Coalition to Stop Funding the War is founded in January 1973 to bring together the secular and religious peace movements to press Congress to end all US military activities with legislation adopted in August 1973 and to pass the War Powers Act in November.
* **End Game** Military appropriations for South Vietnam are significantly reduced three times over the next two years, leading to the end of the war in April 1975. Antiwar Members of Congress (Drinan, Dellums, Abzug, Holtzman) play a significant role. Recruit: Elizabeth Holtzman.
* **Direct engagement of US peace activists and in-country Quaker and Mennonite staff with Third Force counterparts in South Vietnam** whose participation was specified in the political provisions of the Peace Accords but brutally repressed by the Thieu government
* **Truth and reconciliation.** Failure to appoint an official commission to investigate reasons for and character of US intervention in Indochina and specific war crimes (saturation bombing targeting civilians, forced relocation, free-fire zones, assassination teams, atrocities by rogue units) in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia? Agent Orange, landmines and unexploded ordnance problems are ongoing, and the Peace Accords stipulate US aid to heal the wounds of war. How does a country’s memory of war affect its collective conscience and its proclivity to wage new wars? What might a T & R Commission look like, and what might its impact be? Recruit Robert Jay Lifton, Noam Chomsky, Charles Bailey, Susan Hammond.
* **Interpretations of the end of the war** Kerry Kennedy’s film vs. eyewitness accounts from an antiwar perspective
* **The Postwar War** I refugees and reeducation
* **The Postwar War** II frustrated efforts at early normalization, third Indochina war, failure to address Khmer Rouge extremism by peace activists and US government, Cambodian civil war and Paris Agreement
* **Planting seeds for reconciliation** Friendshipment, AFSC and MCC aid to reunified Vietnam, ten NGO conferences address post war legacies and humanitarian/development aid programs