Essays - Vietnam Era on Kansas Campuses

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Bethel College in the Vietnam War Era

The sixties were the era of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, assassinations, conspiracy theories, and all kinds of social and educational revolutions. Students all across the world were joining the counterculture, known for its “long hair, sloppy dress, free love, and disrespect for the establishment.” Some universities had violent campus rebellions. Newspapers and television carried stories about “The Embattled Campus,” “Berkeley at War,” and “Academics at the Barricades…”

Bethel, in a small way, began participating in demonstrations and protests – in distant places. Groups of faculty and students went to Washington, DC to support the nuclear test ban in 1961, to the “March on Washington” in 1963, and to the Montgomery civil rights march, organized by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965.

The great peace issue of the 1960s was working to end the Vietnam War. In 1967 Calvin Trillin, writer for the New Yorker, came to Kansas to check out the antiwar movement on the Great Plains. He reported that the Bethel Peace Club was a hot spot of antiwar activity. Its twenty or thirty members are “the kind of young Mennonites who believe that social and peace concerns must be demonstrated.” Without reservation, “they believe the war in Vietnam to be particularly immoral.” In past years, the club programs were mostly informational, with occasional trips to the national meetings of the Intercollegiate Peace Fellowship; but as the war heated up, the Peace Club, aided by sympathetic faculty, moved into action. Four of the peace actions are particularly memorable:

1. **The Repentance Walk and Mail (1966)**
   The Peace Club announced its first big antiwar demonstration for November 11, Veterans Day. The members wrote letters to Congress and walked as a group into Newton to mail them at the post office. About ninety persons, “solemn, silent,” made the walk.

   The big event of 1969 was the nationally organized Moratorium Day to End the War, scheduled for October 15. The Peace Club planned two events:
   i. A bell-ringing ceremony during which they rang the large “Bethel Bell” at four-second intervals, each ring for an American soldier killed in Vietnam.
   ii. Bethel students and supporters marched to the outskirts of Wichita… for an antiwar rally. Why Wichita? Because it was the chief military center in Kansas, and Wichita needed to hear the message of peace.

   History professor James Juhnke moved Bethel peace activity to a wider arena by running as a peace candidate for the United States Congress.

4. **The Walk to End the Draft (1971)**
   The most arduous venture of the peace activists was an eight-day trek of 175 miles to Topeka, May 5-12, 1970. As the walkers explained: “We have to extend our efforts…” At Topeka, the goal was Senator James Pearson’s office, where they would urge him to oppose extension of the Selective Service Act. Eight persons did the entire journey on foot… Others joined for a part of the way.

*Keith L. Sprunger*

*taken from “The Turbulent Sixties: Bethel and the Academic Revolutions”*

*Bethel College of Kansas 1887-2012*

*2012, Bethel College*
Kansas State University (1955-1975)

“So I come here today, to this great University, to ask your help: not for me, but for your country and
for the people of Vietnam.”

-Senator Robert F. Kennedy
Landon Lecture, Kansas State University, 18 March 1968

During the Vietnam War, Kansas State transformed from college to university. Under the administration of the
institution’s longest-serving president, James A. McCain (1950-75), the campus expanded significantly. New
construction, student organizations, academic and international programs improved the campus and
diversified its operations. Social changes were slower to manifest. The unrest so prevalent in the nation’s
coastal and urban centers were not widespread at the Kansas land-grant university until the late 1960s, when
tradition and counterculture intersected in barns, classrooms, sports venues, city streets and public lawns.

A Morrill Act provision requiring military training and a 1931 state law specifying two years’ participation with
the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) ensured a deeply seated military tradition. Activities were often
highly visible processional affairs or formal balls. As the Vietnam War dragged on, student groups
increasingly advocated ending compulsory military training by abolishing the 1931 law. Governor William
Avery signed the bill 7 April 1965 and ROTC enrollment plummeted. By 1973, only 135 cadets remained, a
significant reduction from the 1,000 who joined in 1968.

Conflicts on campus proved remarkably civil. The McCain administration centralized authority over the
institution’s public image by developing a communications bureaucracy that sought to promote Kansas State
through non-partisan means. He implemented an open door policy to encourage dialogue with faculty and
students, participated in protest gatherings and ROTC Reviews, and answered demands for change. New
policies to prohibit discriminatory housing practices and advance desegregation efforts emerged in response
to complaints filed with the Kansas Civil Rights Commission. A sizable veterans’ population benefited from
successive congressional readjustment programs designed to enhance educational opportunities.

By the late 1960s, the Kansas State Collegian regularly reported on developments in Saigon and
Washington. After responding to multiple scares, campus police established bomb threat procedures.
Arsonists destroyed the university’s historic auditorium in 1965; Nichols Hall followed three years later. While
the university acquired decommissioned Atlas missile sites from the U.S. Air Force and Monsanto recruiters
offered interviews to math and science degree candidates, student groups mobilized to address race matters,
militarization, environmental concerns and gender equity. New student organizations emerged, developed
awareness events and printed newspapers and broadsides. Inspired by UC-Berkeley and UC-Irvine, students
created a free university to stimulate learning beyond the land-grant’s limestone walls. They participated in
public debates, the 3rd Selma Civil Rights March, and a campus-wide strike organized after Ohio National
Guardsmen shot unarmed anti-war protestors at Kent State.

Before the Vietnam War era ended, 42 Kansas State University students lost their lives serving the country.
The campus attracted visits by Mississippi Mayor Charles Evers, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Dr.
Martin Luther King, Jr., Senator Robert F. Kennedy, President Richard M. Nixon, Governor Ronald Reagan
and former Chief Justice Earl Warren. King and Kennedy were assassinated within months of their campus
appearances: for King, it was his last formal speech; for Kennedy, it was his first after declaring candidacy for
played a packed Ahearn Auditorium as American forces evacuated Saigon. President McCain announced his
retirement shortly before President Duong Van Minh declared an unconditional surrender to the Viet Cong.
Disillusioned by contemporary events, students graduating that spring looked inwards. “Who to turn to? How
about yourself?” asked the editors of the 1975 Royal Purple yearbook.

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Student Activism at the University of Kansas

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement was a dynamic motive force in America society, giving birth to other freedom struggles, such as the anti-Vietnam War movement, Black Power, the New Left, a resurgent feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. No venue was more receptive to the politics of change than America’s college and university campuses, especially as the United States escalated the Vietnam War. Campus unrest gripped literally hundreds of colleges and universities, including such leading universities as Berkeley and Harvard.

The University of Kansas, which some in the 1960s called “Berkeley on the Kaw,” was also rocked by student activism. Observers are still surprised that such tumult roiled a university in Kansas, considered by many to be a staunchly conservative state. But the University of Kansas was -- and is -- a unique institution. During these years, political dreamers and freedom fighters alike came to Lawrence to live, study, and agitate for change. As a result, both KU and Lawrence became centers of new ideas and liberal and radical sentiments; and these were vital assets to KU’s reputation as a university where students and faculty come to learn about the larger world.

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The Antiwar Movement

Several times in the last century mass movements have changed society. In the early twentieth century millions of Indians, under the inspired leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, overthrew nearly a century of oppressive rule by the British Raj. In mid-century, millions of Americans, under the inspired leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, took large strides to turn back the most egregious remnants of Jim Crow racial discrimination that had remained for nearly a century after the abolition of slavery. In the 1980s shipyard workers in Gdańsk, Poland, under the inspired leadership of Lech Wałęsa and others, managed to establish an independent labor union, Solidarity, and in so doing began dismantling the oppressive and dictatorial empire of the Soviet Union.

Fifty years ago another mass movement was taking shape in the United States. The country was moving ever deeper into a war in Vietnam that seemed to many not only unwinnable but wrong-headed, even immoral. Many in the KU community were in the antiwar movement that had started in the early 1960s and grew year by year as American involvement in Vietnam escalated. Eventually thousands were in the streets, here and elsewhere, demanding an end to the war. Several more years elapsed before America finally withdrew from Vietnam, but the united voices of masses of people ultimately could not be resisted.

In the wake of the war popular support led to the creation of memorials. Many of them honor soldiers who died, were imprisoned, or were lost in the war. Other memorials and monuments honor those who conscientiously opposed the war as well as war’s innocent victims. Those memorials remain as reminders of both the horrors of war and the witness of those who have stood against war’s grim carnage.

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The University of Kansas Vietnam Memorial

Half a century after American soldiers began dying in Vietnam in a war that troubled and divided the nation, a new generation of scholars observed the important role that war memorials played to finding a national sense of reconciliation. In his book *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, Patrick Hagopian argues the “therapeutic discourse of wounds and healing” that occurred in order to reach consensus and generate support for building Vietnam memorials, started a long-term process of coming to terms with the war without actually engaging in a final accounting. This was especially true in the case of the Vietnam Veterans memorial in Washington, D.C. In a sense, the debate on the meaning of the memorial became a surrogate for the debate on the meaning of the war.

In the years between 1979 and its construction in 1986, the University of Kansas Vietnam memorial – the first of its kind on a public university campus – went through many proposals and setbacks, many disagreements and changes, many frustrations and disappointments, and many debates about its ultimate purpose and meaning. The competition for the design of the memorial, led and supported by students, had the elusive goal of creating a simple and cohesive statement that would serve as an essential gesture of respect for the many sacrifices of their fellow students. Many design ideas were considered, including sculptural reliefs, fountains, reflecting pools, inscriptions, memorial plaques, limestone posts or stele, and engraved slabs – some in diverse locations, including the Chandler courtyard near the first Burge Union, the lawn between Dyche and Lippincott Halls, and Marvin Grove between the Spencer Art Museum and the Campanile.

Eventually, through compromise and consensus, a final design was decided by a small group of individuals representing the main stakeholders in the process: a student-veteran member of The Veterans Memorial Committee; a student representing several designers who had entered the competition; the University’s landscape architect who would be involved in preparing and maintaining the site; and the chair of the University Committee on Art in Public spaces, representing the University’s interest in preserving and maintaining the campus as a unique cultural and historical landscape.

It produced a result that perhaps no one had expected – a simple Kansas limestone retaining wall and plaza along the western edge of Memorial Drive commemorating the names of fifty-seven KU students who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. It mirrored, in miniature, the same process of design, debate, and compromise that ultimately produced the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was rededicated to fifty-nine names in 1998 when two additional student names had been added and the bodies of soldiers previously missing in action had been recovered. Engraved on the wall of the University’s Vietnam Memorial are the words “Lest we forget the courage, honor, and sacrifice of our fellow students.” It serves as a permanent reminder to future generations of students, faculty, staff, and alumni to remember and respect.

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