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Interview: Reflections

For HIST H211 “The Viet Nam Wars” class, we had to interview people that were involved in the Vietnam war somehow. So, Creighton and I decided that we wanted to interview John Braxton, who was a peace activist during the Vietnam War and was also part of the anti-war movement in the United States of America.

I was interested in learning about his story and experiences because I am interested in learning more about the anti-war movement in the United States. Furthermore, last spring semester, I took a history class about the United States in the twentieth century. In that class, we covered the anti-war movement and the various organizations associated with it. So, getting to interview somebody who was part of that was great.

When it came to prepare for the interview, Creighton and I did some background research and had found a lot. This helped us greatly when we had to write the questions. The interview took place on Sunday, December 18th, 2018 in Philadelphia at his house.

I was nervous, because I had never interviewed somebody like this before nor about a war that is so complicated and sensitive for many people. However, the interview went really well, and Braxton was willing to answer all the questions. We had a lot of questions to ask and Braxton had a lot to say, so the interview in total was about two hours and fifteen minutes. I honestly thought that the interview was going to be much shorter, but I am glad that it wasn't.

With his interview, I have learned more about the peace movement and some of the real-life consequences of avoiding the draft that I would have not gotten in a history textbook. Furthermore, I was surprised by the warm welcome that the Phoenix crew had gotten when they were in North Vietnam. I had assumed that since North Vietnam was fighting against the American military, they would not be welcoming to Americans. However, with the interview, I had realized that I was wrong. In addition, there were things that I did not know much about before, which included Quakerism and conscientious objectors. In addition, the two major themes that came up in the interview was Quakerism and the peace movement, so I ended up writing my paper on that.

Reflecting back on the interview, it was great to interview somebody that had personal account and opinion on the Vietnam War. The interview went really well, and Braxton had a great story to tell. Before this project, I did not know that there were Americans that went to Vietnam on their own accord. If I had to do this interview again, I would probably have more questions; but overall, I would not have changed it much. There were no “stuck” moments throughout the conversation which is good. All of the questions that we have asked, I think should have been asked and fortunately Braxton was comfortable in answering all of them. I have gotten some much great information from the conversation and I am glad that I was part of this project.

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Vietnam War: Anti-War Movement

The Vietnam War was a long and complicated war that had for lasted nineteen years. It is generally agreed upon that it started from 1955 to 1975. It was a war that occurred in Vietnam, where the communist forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) fought against the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and its ally, the United States of America. The long conflict was very violent as three million people have died; majority of which were Vietnamese civilians. Furthermore, there were around 500,000 American troops on the ground and about 58,000 were killed; making it one in every ten Americans to die. It was a terrible war that brought untold suffering with the no end in sight during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Due to the horrors and tragic losses of the conflict, the anti-war movement began to spark in 1964. In 1964, the movement against the United States' involvement was small and the protestors were limited to left-wing intellectuals on college campuses. At this point in time, the majority of the American citizens believed in the war because they thought that the war was about defending South Vietnam from the evil forces of communism. However, by year 1967, the movement really started to take off across the country as more American citizens became

disillusioned with the war. Reasons for such disillusionment amongst the American citizens included the unfair conscription system, the unspeakable acts performed by the American government, the desire to be an imperial power, the escalation of money costs, and more. As more Americans realized the true costs of the war, many have created and joined organizations that protested the war. This movement soon took over the nation and there were hundreds of large protests across the nation. Within a couple of years, the majority of the American public was against the war.

There were many organizations that were formed by people from all walks of life. Many have come together to protest the war and the injustices that the American government had a crucial role in. Some of the anti-war organizations included the Students for a Democratic Society, Vietnam Veterans against the War, Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, the Weather Underground, the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, and more. All of these organization are some of the most prominent groups that have influenced hundreds of thousands of people. Furthermore, there were also famous leaders and activists that have protested the war such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jane Fonda, Muhammad Ali, Angela Davis, and more. For several years, there were hundreds and hundreds of protests that swept across the nation, especially on college campuses. Such famous protests include the Lincoln Memorial Protest on October 21, 1967 and the Kent State shooting in May 1970. Needless to say, the movement against the United States of America's involvement in Vietnam was not always peaceful and had helped plunge the country into social and political chaos.

As mentioned before, there were various organizations that were vehemently against the war. For instance, there was an organization called A Quaker Action Group (AQAG). This

organization was created by Quakers George Lakey, Lawrence Scott, and George Willoughby in Philadelphia during the summer of 1966. Their mission was to, "apply nonviolent direct action as a witness against the war in Vietnam."¹ The group was entirely made up of Quakers. Quakers during the Vietnam War played a prominent role in the protests and very much advocated for pacifism.

Quakerism or also known as The Religious Society of Friends is a Christian denomination that was founded in the seventeenth century in England. They are a group of people that believe that the presence of God exists in everybody. Furthermore, they don't have elaborate religious ceremonies nor have official clergy. In addition, one could argue that they are most famous for their pacifism. Due to their pacifism and beliefs, Quakers were especially influential in many movements throughout the United States' history, such as the suffragette, the abolition, the civil rights, and the anti-war movements.

Many of these protestors were young college students, because they did not want to fight in combat. An example of young protestor could be found in Pennsylvania, where a freshman Swarthmore student named John Braxton became involved in the anti-war protests on campus and off-campus by 1967. He remembered some of the sentiments that were on full display at protests with slogans that said, "Hell No, We Won't Go" and "Negotiations Now". However, Braxton said in his reflections that the peace movement were not always on the same page; that they have different views. "There were some people that wanted to put forward the slogan, 'Negotiations Now', that seemed like 'how can you argue against negotiations? Let's negotiate

¹ AQAG, "A Quaker Action Group Records, 1965-1973," Swarthmore College Peace Collection, October 4, 2017, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace//DG051-099/dg074AQAG.htm>.

now', but I remember other people speaking at these demonstrations that had a much more militant approach that said, 'you know, wait a minute, we are raping Vietnam when you are being raped you don't call for negotiations, you call for immediate withdrawal.' So that was, there was this tension within the peace movement".²

Not only was Braxton was involved in anti-war protests, he also became involved with an organization called A Quaker Action Group (AQAG) in 1967. In fact, with the organization, Braxton had sailed on a boat called *Phoenix of Hiroshima* with a crew to deliver medical supplies to both North and South Vietnam in the summer of 1967. Braxton explains his reasoning for wanting to go on this dangerous trip, "I was so excited about this, I thought this is something I was just so, really wanted to do whatever I could to stop the war. And I wasn't so naïve as to think this trip was going to stop the war but it was, it was as strong a statement as I knew how to make, you know, and I'm willing to risk the possibility of that."³ His decision to go on this journey, which was frowned upon the United States government was an act of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience was a key feature of the anti-war movement.

Civil disobedience was performed by different groups of people throughout the war. For instance, many Americans were unhappy with the draft, as millions were drafted and had no choice but to fight. In fact, between the years of 1964 and 1973, 2.2 million men were drafted into the war, which meant that twenty-five percent of the military forces in combat zones were

² John Braxton, "Interview with John Braxton," interview by Xenia Kibbelaar and Creighton Ward, November 18, 2018.

³ John Braxton, "Interview with John Braxton," interview by Xenia Kibbelaar and Creighton Ward, November 18, 2018.

draftees”⁴ This further meant that most Americans knew somebody who was drafted or was voluntarily fought in the conflict. Another reason of why many disagreed with the draft was because it hit the lower class much harder. Minority groups such as the African-Americans were also deeply affected by the draft. The majority of the draftees came from poorer backgrounds that did not have the means to avoid the draft by going to college or paying money. Thus, white upper class and some middle-class young men had much better chances. For instance, many went to colleges or went to the National Guard. It is also important to notice that the conscription system had a big impact on those who voluntarily enlisted into the American Army. When one is drafted into the army, they have little choice in where they are assigned to. However, if one voluntarily enlists, one has more leeway in their choices within the army. Thus, thousands have decided that instead of waiting to be drafted, they would enlist to better their chances of survival. As mentioned before, around 500,000 troops were sent overseas and 58,220 never returned home alive.⁵ The deaths of thousands of American soldiers pushed the American public into anger over the draft, as many soldiers didn’t want to go in the first place. The draft was one of the main reasons of why many young people protested against the war.

Since many of the Americans, especially of the young people disagreed with the conscription system, thousands have tried to avoid the draft. For instance, it is believed that up to forty thousand young men fled to Canada⁶ These men became known as the “draft dodgers” for

⁴ "The Military Draft During the Vietnam War," Omeka RSS, accessed December 10, 2018, http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/draft_protests/the-military-draft-during-the-

⁵ "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," National Archives and Records Administration, January 11, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>.

⁶ Giuseppe Valiante, "U.S. Vietnam War Draft Dodgers Left Their Mark on Canada," Macleans.ca, April 16, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/u-s-vietnam-war-draft-dodgers-left-their-mark-on-canada/>.

they have avoided being drafted by leaving the country. However, by leaving the country and avoiding the draft, they could not come back. If they came back, they could be arrested or forced to go to Vietnam and fight. Others didn't report for induction when they were called by the government, tried to claim disabilities, filed for conscientious objector status, went "underground", and more. Others have filed induction cases against the government. One of the most famous cases was with boxer Muhammad Ali, when his case went all the way to Supreme Court in 1971.⁷ With all of these various ways that the young generation had used, it is believed that by the end of the war, there were 209,517 men that were formerly accused of evading the draft call.⁸ In total it is believed that around 600,000 have illegally dodged the draft.⁹

Another way in which the young male generation had used to try to avoid being drafted was conscientious objection. Somebody can decide to become a conscientious objector and they don't have to fight in combat zones in a war. According to U.S. Selective, a conscientious objector is "one who is opposed to serving in the armed forces and/or bearing arms on the grounds of moral or religious principles"¹⁰ This idea of objection has been part of the United States since the colonial times. At the beginning, there had to pay a fee in order to be exempted from military service. However, by World War Two, those who were granted military exemption, instead had to take noncombatant support roles in which they serve in public service

⁷ Krishnadev Calamur, "Muhammad Ali and Vietnam," *The Atlantic*, June 04, 2016, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/muhammad-ali-vietnam/485717/>.

⁸ Jessie Kindig, "Draft Resistance in the Vietnam Era," *Antiwar and Radical History Project – Pacific Northwest*, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, http://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/vietnam_draft.shtml#_ednref4.

⁹ Anne M. Yoder, "Brief History of Conscientious Objection," *Conscientious Objection in America: Primary Resources for Research*, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace/conscientiousobjection/co_website/pages/HistoryNew.htm.

¹⁰ "Conscientious Objection and Alternative Service," *Selective Service System*, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.sss.gov/consobj>.

positions in places like hospitals for two years.¹¹ During the Vietnam War, applying for conscientious objector status was very popular, because it meant exemption from military service which was very much desired. Even though anyone can apply to become a conscientious objector, it does not necessarily mean that you will get it. Historically speaking, only religious groups that are specifically against warfare due their faith get their applications accepted. Such groups include the Quakers and the Mennonites.

Thus, the majority of the men were unable to gain that status. In fact, around 300,000 were denied this status.¹² However, there were some young people that were able to gain such status. For example, John Braxton from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, a Quaker, applied to become a conscientious objector at the age of seventeen, so he could avoid being drafted. He said that he was able to be accepted, because he was a Quaker all his life, so the government couldn't say no to him. "I had been a member of a Quaker meeting. My father taught at a Quaker school in Philadelphia. So, I went there for high school. Then I went to Swarthmore which has Quaker roots. So, my credentials were impeccable"¹³ Even though he became a conscientious objector, he was still safe from the draft for at least four years because he was a full-time student at Swarthmore college. However, after graduating from college, he might have been drafted into the war if it was not for the conscientious objector status.

¹¹ "A Closer Look: Conscientious Objection," PBS, August 24, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/334/conscientious-objection.html>.

¹² Anne M. Yoder, "Brief History of Conscientious Objection," *Conscientious Objection in America: Primary Resources for Research*, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace/conscientiousobjection/co_website/pages/HistoryNew.htm.

¹³ John Braxton, "Interview with John Braxton," interview by Xenia Kibbelaar and Creighton Ward, November 18, 2018.

Despite the various ways in which the young men have used to try to avoid the draft or protest the war, there were some serious consequences. For instance, many faced forced military service. If the “draft dodgers” were to return home from countries like Mexico and Canada where they sought refuge or came of hiding, they could be forced to go to Vietnam. Another serious consequence of resisting and evading the draft is prison. By refusing to obey the draft and fight as a soldier in Vietnam, the men are breaking the law. Since, they are breaking the law, they can be prosecuted by the United States government and be sentenced to prison. Thus, many of the men that left the country did not return home, even after the war ended, for they could still be prosecuted. Many knew that they could go to prison for resisting the draft, but they believed that they would rather go to jail than fight in Vietnam; which many did. However, in 1977, President Jimmy Carter had granted amnesties to those that have evaded the draft.

After his trip to Vietnam, John Braxton had decided that he was not going to obey any aspect of the conscription system. At this time, he was accepted as a conscientious objector by the American government and only had to fulfill a civilian duty in a hospital. However, he had decided that he was not going to comply with that too, “So part of it was I wanted to do whatever I could to stop the war, and there were people who were refusing to go into the military, and so refusing to be drafted into the military, and I wanted to show my support for them and say, I was lucky to get this CO status, this conscientious objector status, but I’m not—I refuse to accept that kind of privileged position.”¹⁴ Thus, he was prosecuted and sent to jail in 1970 for seventeen months. He was amongst thousands that were convicted and sent to prison for draft evasion.

¹⁴ John Braxton, "Interview with John Braxton," interview by Xenia Kibbelaar and Creighton Ward, November 18, 2018.

In conclusion, the sixties and the seventies marked an era of great resistance and protest against war in the United States of America. Through the peace movement, people from different backgrounds came together to protest the conflict and the losses that it brought. The young people of that time have performed civil disobedience through resisting the conscription system, knowing that they could be sent to prison or be forced to fight overseas. The anti-war movement made a mark in American history and society; which can still be felt to this day.

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