Waging Nonviolence: Quaker Pacifism and Antiwar Activism during the Vietnam Era

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Reflection

I truly enjoyed the opportunity to conduct an oral interview with someone from the Vietnam War Era. Although I initially wasn't sure who I wanted to interview, I am honestly so glad that I ended up interviewing Mr. John Braxton, who was an excellent interviewee and whose life fascinates me. I enrolled in this course because I was interested in getting a deeper understanding of the Vietnam War, since I was unsatisfied with the high school education I had received which barely covered the intricacies of this pivotal time period and conflict. As someone who has been increasingly drawn to anti-imperialist politics and Asian studies during my undergraduate career, Mr. Braxton's experiences and interests dovetailed nicely with my own, and I was able to relate to his intellectual and political journey that he recounted in our time with him. We have in common an undergraduate experience that politicized us and drew us towards theories and practices of social justice that we apply to the pressing issues of our time. I really loved hearing from John about his life, and I thought he was extremely friendly, intelligent, and easy to talk to. This made me much more comfortable in the interview.

In hindsight, there are a few things I would change about the interview process. I would have asked more about the specific tactics of civil disobedience that A Quaker Action Group had deployed in the Vietnam War Era, and I would have taken the time to visit the Swarthmore Peace Collection Archives, since I only recently learned that they have a collection of archival resources on *The Phoenix* and anti-war campus activism. I believe I would have benefited from paying a visit to the Swarthmore library to check those out, but I didn't have the time to fit that in. I also would have conducted the interview slightly differently so that I could have asked Mr. Braxton more about his life after his sailing to Vietnam and being incarcerated for dodging the draft. I didn't want to prolong the interview for over 2 hours, so we concluded the interview without asking for a *detailed* account of post-Vietnam reflections and the effect that the war and

the draft had on his life, his family, and his community. Although we know it limited his career opportunities and left him with enduring trauma, we don't know as much about how the second voyage of *The Phoenix* impacted the popular memory of the war in the Philadelphia and Quaker communities that John belonged to, and its contribution to galvanizing anti-war movements that were already gaining traction amongst an increasingly disapproving American public. Hearing more of Mr. Braxton's impressions of his peers who did go to war and of other anti-war movements would have been helpful. In the interview, he mentions that he did have some reservations that prevented him from talking to a Swarthmore colleague who served in the war because of perceived ideological differences. If I could conduct another interview, I would have taken these things into consideration.

The most useful thing I got out of the experience was the historical context that Mr. Braxton provided me with, which helped me locate the anti-war movement in a greater awareness-raising around U.S. interventions around the world. As Mr. Braxton said, Vietnam was not so much an aberration in U.S. foreign policy, but consistent with a pattern of imperial intervention and disrespect for sovereignty. Challenges that I had to overcome included a fear of interviews (which I managed with stress-relieving practices and a desire to do the best I could) and the time constraints that cannot be avoided during the senior year challenge to balance classes, thesis writing, graduate school and job applications, the GRE, work, and extracurricular interests all at once. Additionally, I ended up having to take on a leadership role in this project. I made significant contributions to the interview guide and presentation, and I took the initiative to coordinate all of the communication between my partner and I and our interviewee. Ultimately, this was a unique and memorable experience that I am sincerely grateful to have been a part of.

Analysis

Introduction

A young man, whose thick sweater obscures a tall, lanky frame, with medium—length hair that grazes the top of his glasses, smiles at the camera with an almost devious look in his eyes. Two hands, both making the peace sign, are held up by the man, creating symmetry in the center of the photo, while also revealing the centrality of handcuffs, the restraints that limit movement and inhibit the gesture of peace.

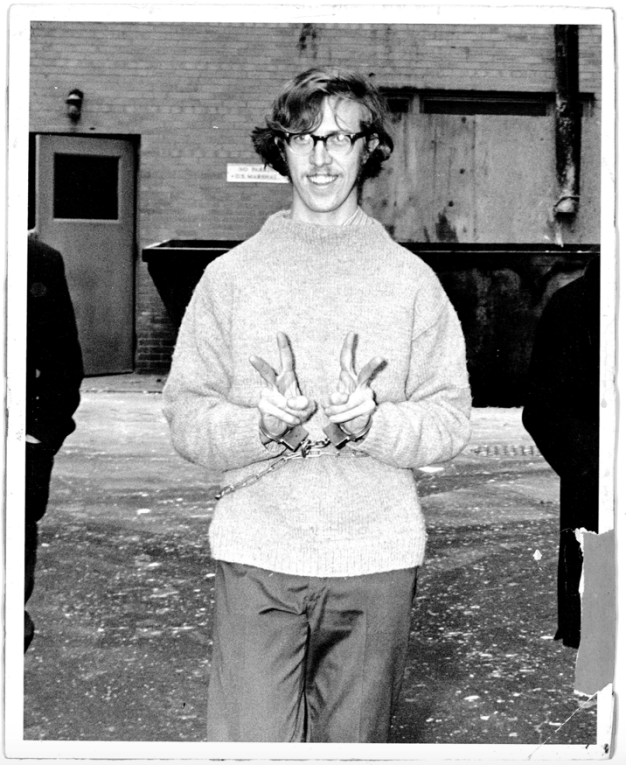

Photo Credit: John Braxton

This image is a snapshot of John Braxton's experience as an antiwar protestor during the Vietnam War Era. The photograph of his arrest for noncompliance with the draft captures a striking mix of vitality in his smile, the metallic traces of state power in the handcuffs, and a strong spirit that is willing to endure punishment in the quest for peace. This image of a young man, a college student, Quaker, and peace activist lingers as a symbol of the Vietnam War's impact onto a generation of men whose lives were at risk of becoming cannon fodder in an increasingly unpopular and unwinnable war.

Such an image challenges the viewer to reckon with the limits of American exceptionalism and the betrayal of its professed commitments to freedom and justice at home and abroad, which galvanized a widespread antiwar movement during the Vietnam War Era. John Braxton, a Philadelphia local and civilian whose formative teenage years were spent grappling with the ugly reality of the United States' intervention in Vietnam, dedicated his life to

social change as a result of his involvement with the antiwar movement in the 1960's. In an interview I conducted with a partner, John Braxton sat down and recounted the details of the events that would shape a lifetime in the service of peace. Based on this interview, two of the most important narratives that emerged from John's stories are: one, the Quaker call to social justice; and two, the emergence of a strategy of noncompliance with the U.S.'s imperial tactics. In this essay, I endeavor to analyze these two themes in the context of John's experiences and the greater historical processes that were developing during this time period.

The Roots of the Antiwar Movement

The Vietnam War inspired an antiwar movement in the United States for many reasons. Varying and contradictory understandings of what the war was all about lead observers to different conclusions about its legitimacy. The government painted a picture of the war as a noble effort to contain communism, while others saw it as an intervention in a Vietnamese civil war, and some believed it was an imperialist counterrevolution to crush a national liberation movement. [1] The growing mass of Americans who did not believe in the legitimacy of the war was key to the formation of the antiwar movement, which itself was made up of a diverse group of people who opposed the war for a multitude of reasons. Some people opposed it on moral grounds, while some believed that the U.S. should not be intervening in what they saw as a Vietnamese civil struggle for unity.

The Vietnam War undermined public faith in U.S. exceptionalism—meaning the country's moral superiority, its professed commitments to freedom, its status as a defender of democracy and protector of individual liberties, its reputation as a unique force for universal good—in a way that was unprecedented in American history. It revealed the corporate interests of America that overshadowed any outward commitment to values of liberty and justice, and the

[1] Appy, Christian G. "What Was the Vietnam War About?" *New York Times*, March 26, 2018.

violent means the United States employed to secure access to markets, cheap labor, and resources as well as ideological hegemony, even at the expense of the life at home and abroad. A journalist for the New York Times wrote that the American public "realized over the years that the government was ill-informed and even wrong about issues of life and death," which was a disappointing and upsetting revelation for many who were personally affected by the war and lost faith in their government's ability to do the right thing.[2]

The losses incurred by the violence of a protracted war also inspired an antiwar sentiment. Millions of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian lives, as well as thousands of American lives, were lost in the fighting. Social issues were exacerbated in both Vietnam and the United States as a result of the war efforts. The Vietnam War, especially in the draft lottery that disproportionately recruited African-American and low-income men to involuntary service, made existing racial and class inequalities starkly apparent to white, middle-class Americans like John, who eventually decided to refuse the conscientious objector status he was granted to oppose the inequality perpetuated by the draft system. In 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara initiated Project 100,000, which was an effort to "salvage" men who were previously ineligible for service and "rescue" poor, minority men from the "poverty-encrusted environments" they were from.[3] This program stood in sharp contrast to the deferment and exemption system that offered preferential treatment to privileged—i.e., white, educated, middle- to upper-class Americans—and allowed them to serve in "alternative service" capacities that did not require them to risk their lives fighting abroad.[4]

Although there were numerous reasons for the American public's disillusionment during the Vietnam War Era, this essay highlights two in particular: namely, the revelation of many

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[2] Pearson, Andrew. "How Vietnam Changed Journalism." *New York Times*, March 29, 2018.
[3] Rutenberg, Amy J. "How the Draft Reshaped America." *New York Times*, October 6, 2017.
[4] Braxton, John. Interview by the author. Audio recording. Philadelphia, November 18th, 2018.

Americans that their country's priorities were far less noble than they were lead to believe, and the social inequalities that the war exacerbated and made visible. John Braxton was particularly moved by the realizations that the United States' foreign policy was motivated by empire rather than goodwill and that the draft system was structured to benefit the privileged. These crucial observations later influenced his decision to sail to Vietnam with AQAG and his choice to be noncompliant with the draft.

The Vietnam War challenged Americans' midcentury faith in the U.S.'s national superiority by laying bare its corporate and imperial interests, revealing to the public the human cost of a protracted war against a tactically superior enemy, and aggravating social inequalities at home. Historians of the antiwar movement trace its beginning to 1964, when left-wing groups organized against U.S. interventions and college students demanded greater accountability from the U.S. government for the injustices in American society.[5] John, who sailed to Vietnam in 1967, was influenced by the leadership of antiwar activists before him, who laid the grounds for John's later contributions to the antiwar movement and demonstrations of against the Vietnam War. Although there is no universal consensus amongst the antiwar activists of the Vietnam Era on *why* or *how* the war should be protested, these activists normalized American opposition to their own government (which was an unusual sentiment at the time) and drew many collaborators into their movement.

Quaker values

The seeds of John's activism were planted early in his life. As a child of Quaker parents, he was brought up attending Quaker meetings and was educated on the longstanding history of resistance to injustice in Quaker communities. Stories of Quakers helping liberate slaves on the

[5] Zimmerman, Bill. "The Four Stages of the Antiwar Movement." *New York Times*, October 24, 2017.

Underground Railroad were influential to John's understanding of the applications of Quaker beliefs in an unjust world, and it was his Quaker upbringing that got him thinking about civil disobedience as a tactic of resistance and would years later introduce him to the group of people who organized a trip to North and South Vietnam as a demonstration of nonviolent civil disobedience to protest the war that the U.S. was waging in Vietnam. This trip would change John's life forever, but he had already been initiated into a life dedicated to social justice, a life in which "fighting for non-violent social change was going to be a central part" due to his Quaker membership and participation in meetings that predated the maritime voyage.[6]

John first came into contact with the man named George Lakey during a Quaker gathering that Lakey was present at. Lakey was involved with a group called A Quaker Action Group (AQAG) that had been sending medical supplies to war-torn regions of North Vietnam through Canada, since those supplies could not have been shipped from the United States due to the Trading with the Enemy Act that prohibited it. However, the U.S. government froze AQAG's bank account in a move that essentially suggested they stop trying to facilitate a humanitarian outreach to these Vietnamese, otherwise they will risk persecution for illegal trade with the enemy. Although this was a setback, AQAG did not back down from their mission and instead decided to pursue other, more direct forms of civil disobedience, in order to really make a statement that the government would pay attention to, mindful that the ultimate goal of all this work was to persuade the government and the American public to leave Vietnam. At a gathering, Lakey put forth the idea for the second trip of *The Phoenix*, a 50-foot wooden sailboat, from Hiroshima to North and South Vietnam to deliver medical supplies and demonstrate to anyone watching that they were willing to break U.S. laws in order to do so. John was immediately intrigued and asked to be a part of the crew if it ever took off.

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[6] Braxton, John. Interview by the author.

A few months later, during the summer of 1967, John received the call to action, and he followed through. When asked whether or not his Quaker parents approved, John said:

> "I was living out their values, you know. They're the ones who said, 'War is wrong,' and that, you know, Quakers–during the Underground Railroad, Quakers took risks to hide enslaved people and get them to freedom. And so it was part of this Quaker tradition of *being willing to risk your life to do the right thing*. So they totally supported me in that way, and on the other hand, they were parents, and they were really worried that bad things could happen. I could be—I could be killed, I could end up in prison, which ultimately I did. [Laughs] So they were very, both proud of me and at the same time very very worried about it."[7]

John's Quakerism was instrumental to his involvement with the antiwar movement and set the terms of the acts of disobedience that he pursued. It was because of and with the support of AQAG that John was able to go to Vietnam, and it was the influence of the Quaker tradition as well as the example other Quakers set that lead him to the conclusion that he would not comply with the draft in any form.

Noncompliance with the Draft

John's Quaker background was also a way for him to examine the privilege he enjoyed but that other Americans were denied when it was time for him to apply for conscientious objector status. John's voyage to Vietnam interfered with his fall semester of sophomore year, and as a result, he became eligible for the draft because he was not a student during that time period (being a current student allowed men of draft age to defer being drafted). Thus, to avoid being drafted to fight and possibly die in a war that he had just risked his life to protest, John applied for conscientious objector (CO) status, which entailed a process that required that applicants demonstrate their membership in a long tradition of pacifism and articulate their total opposition to war in any form. Not every applicant had the background to provide an answer to such a probing, philosophically deep question that the draft board would find satisfactory. John's

[7] Braxton, John. Interview by the author, emphasis my own.

application for CO was stronger because of his Quaker upbringing and strong credentials within the community that prepared him to articulate a coherent philosophy of opposition to war in any form, and he was granted CO status accordingly. However, in the process of filling out the application, it became apparent to John that CO status was much easier for him to obtain because of his middle-class education and background. Other men who did not have those privileges had a much harder time meeting the draft board's high expectations, and were also susceptible to racist and classist discrimination that John was not a victim of. Coming to this conclusion lead John to decide he could not in good conscience cooperate with the draft board in any way:

> "Part of that had to do with my realization that I was really lucky that I could get this conscientious objector status. Had I been a working-class or poor person in some other part of the country, who wasn't a Quaker and who didn't have all these Quaker credentials, most of those people were turned down for conscientious objector status because…most draft boards would not believe that if you weren't raised in one of those peace churches that you were *really* against war in any form, and that you were really just trying to get out of the draft… 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."[8]

His refusal to cooperate with the draft lead to his arrest, the moment captured in the photo included in this essay. A decision with such grave consequences was a remarkable sacrifice for anyone to to make in order to show solidarity with more vulnerable members of society, and especially so for someone as young as John, who was just 19 at the time. However, John had known others who had made the same decision before him from a Quaker youth group and through the Swarthmore community. Therefore, the decision was not made in isolation, but rather a part of a larger strategy employed by other antiwar activists who were willing to make a sacrifice as great for a cause they care so deeply about.

The time that John spent incarcerated was a deeply traumatic period in his life, where he was subjected to assault, physical threats, and intense isolation. It put great stress on his personal

[8] Braxton, John. Interview by the author.

relationships, and to this day, the tensions that resulted from his time in prison still weigh on his closest relationships. Yet even though prison was a mind-numbing and personally devastating experience, it also revealed to John the kind of strength he had and allowed him to prove to himself that he could endure the consequences of the risks he took—that because he could survive this, he could survive more. The tenacity that he found in himself while in prison gave him the strength to continue on with his social justice work after the Vietnam Era in labor organizations.

The Rise of the Mass Antiwar Movement and its Politics

Although an antiwar perspective was unpopular in the early 1960s, as the death toll rose and the brutality of the war—the inhumanity of its chemical weapons and the sheer scale of death and destruction that American firepower brought to Vietnam—opposition to the war intensified. American antiwar sentiment, forged in the crucible of college campuses and in niche left-wing groups across the country, gone mainstream in a matter of a few years. This turn in the course of the war was crucial to the eventual loss of credibility the U.S. government suffered and permanently affected the American public's assessment of the legitimacy of the Vietnam War. One journalist recalls having to cope with the shock of understanding that the Americans were fighting a futile and costly war:

"We could sense something was turning — though not in the way the generals hoped. Instead of the arc of the war changing and showing progress, American deaths leapt to 5,373 in 1967, a jump of 2,000 more than the previous year. The war continued unabated, as if an odd inertia had set in without anyone realizing the end would ever come. It was a grind year, and raw in the way that only war can be without letup. There was no glory. The war wore everyone down with hard-fought territory passed from enemy to enemy and no conclusion to the fighting, but which I believe prepared everyone for the Tet offensive at the end of January 1968. As a journalist, and for the American forces, everything in 1967 proved its value in how to cover a very mobile, increasingly ugly and increasingly unwinnable war."

Because the war was broadcast on television, the American public was able to see en masse what kinds of wartime atrocities were being committed, and it facilitated a popular feeling

of disapproval of Vietnam and how the U.S. government was waging war. It is important to acknowledge that the antiwar movement was composed of many different actors with varying reasons for opposing the Vietnam War. However, in this essay, a combination of the Quaker emphasis on peace, a particular conception of solidarity through noncompliance, and anti-imperialist politics that shaped John's antiwar activism. The anti-imperial slant that influenced John was controversial in the 1960s, and is still quite possibly a controversial claim today. However, the antiwar movement ultimately helped fuel an American anti-imperial consciousness that persists today and functions as a rich site for critique of current U.S. foreign policy.

The essence of the anti-imperialist argument is based on an analysis of U.S. foreign policy and its capitalist objectives that necessitate imperialist dominance over non-allied countries that chose a path alternative to the capitalist, liberal democratic order the United States presided over. John's interest in the Vietnamese case lead him to study the history of U.S. involvement in South and Central America and in Iran. John's research led him to conclude that:

> "A big piece of the reason that we have the foreign policy that we have had until now, to a large extent still has to do with capitalism, that has to do with large corporations wanting to have access to cheap labor and markets, raw materials around the world. The reason we were in Vietnam, was the same reason that we overthrew the government in Iran, was the same reason we overthrew governments in South and Central America, because they were trying to curtail the power of big corporations and we weren't going to let that happen."[9]

While in North Vietnam, John realized that the Vietnamese he interacted with were explicitly opposed to the U.S. government's policies, not the Americans, and were actually able to find common ground with the American antiwar movement. When *The Phoenix* reached the shore of North Vietnam, John was able to interact with North Vietnamese civilians and children, who initially did not even recognize John as an American, because they did not expect to find allyship in an American. Instead, they assumed he was Cuban. In North Vietnam, John found it

[9] Braxton, John. Interview by the author.

striking that the children and civilians welcomed him warmly and accepted him readily, at one point happily declaring ""John Braxton *muôn năm*!" meaning "Long live John Braxton!" It was enlightening to discover that the North Vietnamese had a nuanced enough comprehension of the war to differentiate between American civilians and the U.S. government and its foreign policy. In fact, John observed that there were a substantial number of North Vietnamese who put their faith in the antiwar activists, who "were hoping that the peace movement on our side of the ocean would stop the war while they were trying to militarily stop the United States."[10] This focus on the policies of the government is a part of the anti-imperialist protest of the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, connecting the Vietnamese situation to other instances of U.S. intervention abroad strengthened the anti-imperialist consciousness amongst American activists who were concerned with the violence of military intervention and the disrespect of sovereignty of other countries. The struggle that John witnessed in Vietnam was recognizable in other cases of U.S. intervention that toppled democratically-elected leaders at the head of left-wing or left-leaning governments. Thus, John came to the conclusion that U.S. foreign policy was formulated to preserve a corporate capitalist system that values private profit, devalues human life, and threatens environmental sustainability. The extension of the anti-imperialist critique to the captures the way the antiwar activism of John's teenage years developed into labor organizing and union work in adulthood. In doing so, he has maintained an unwavering commitment to the Quaker principle of nonviolent social change and adhered to his own politic of subverting the U.S. government's policies.

Conclusion

[10] Ibid.

The antiwar movement did not succeed in ending U.S. imperialism or the American government's ability to impose the will of capitalism on the world, but it put unprecedented constraints on U.S. militarism and demonstrated the power of a mass movement to achieve a certain outcome. The coordinated, aggressive lobbying efforts of the antiwar activists put enough pressure on Congress to whittle down the U.S. support for the Saigon regime, which eventually had to fall without U.S. aid.[11] Although it did not end American military intervention, it did mark a turning point for the American public's ability to leverage its will against the government. The influence of the mass movement inspired Graham Martin, the last American ambassador in Saigon, called the antiwar movement's lobbying campaign "one of the best propaganda and pressure organizations the world has ever seen," a testament to the anti-war movement's determination and strength.[12]

Reflecting on the meaning of the war, John Braxton suggested that its biggest impact was curtailing what the U.S. could do:

> "We kept on sending more and more military personnel over there and more and more were coming back wounded and dead and more and more questions were being asked of, "Why is this happening? Is this really valuable?" And a lot of veterans started coming back and saying, "You know I had to shoot at unarmed people, it was terrible. This is not freedom and democracy that we were protecting over there." So, I think that our trip was one little piece of just adding more and more consciousness to this, to the American people, that the war was terribly wrong."[13]

While the U.S.'s imperial footprint is not getting smaller, the mass movement against the draft, the endless bombing of the Vietnamese, and the war brought America to the point where the Vietnam War could no longer be convincingly justified as a fight for freedom and democracy. It is this accomplishment that resulted in a victory for John and his generation of the antiwar activists.

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[11] Zimmerman, Bill.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Braxton, John. Interview by the author.

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