

# “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die” Protest Songs and Antiwar Demonstrations during the Vietnam War

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## Abstract

From 1955 to 1975, the United States engaged in the Vietnam War in an effort to contain the spread of communism. As the US military presence gradually increased, public support of the war declined, and people grew wary of the military draft and a seemingly never-ending war. The protest music of the 1970s articulated people’s feelings of disempowerment and helplessness. Its rise was intricately connected with the growing antiwar sentiment and demonstrations across the nation. Musicians such as Bob Dylan, Country Joe and the Fish, and John Lennon emerged as protest leaders who used music to demand an end to the unjust war. This paper examines how protest music reflected the evolving perspective of the American public during the 1970s. By employing the oral history methodology, this paper endeavored to highlight the distinct individual experiences of the Vietnam War that cannot be captured by statistics and government records.

## Keywords

Vietnam War, Antiwar Demonstrations, Protest Music, Oral History, 1970s United States, Bob Dylan, Veterans, College Activism

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## 1. Introduction: The Significance of Protest Music in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States

Protest music captures people’s dissatisfaction with the present and repackages it in a politically potent form. From 1947 to 1991, the United States engaged in the Cold War with the Soviet Union in an effort to contain the spread of communism. The Vietnam War, lasting from 1955 to 1975, marked the height of US involvement in Asian proxy wars between the two superpowers. Starting as early

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as the Eisenhower Administration, the US sent military advisors to aid South Vietnam against the communist forces in North Vietnam. After initial efforts made little headway, the US drastically increased its military presence in Vietnam and directly deployed troops to suppress the expansion of the North Vietnamese Army. Due to a military draft that haunted millions of draft-age young men and their families and government concealment of information, the war was widely condemned domestically. The music of the era directly reflected this anti-authoritarian sentiment. Rock and roll music embodied people's confusion, anger, and cynicism, and articulated these emotions in songs that resonated with millions of Americans (Bindas & Houston, 1989).

The widespread antiwar movement originated from the precarious political situation in the 1960s United States. The Kennedy's administration endeavored to save the nation from a looming nuclear crisis and eliminate racial segregation. John F. Kennedy's leadership was largely approved by US citizens, evident in his agreement with the Soviet administration that prevented a full-scale nuclear war. His untimely death in 1963, nevertheless, left the country in political turmoil. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the Presidency, leaving Democrats and Republicans alike vying for his seat in the next Presidential election. The 1964 campaign witnessed "deeply entrenched sense of rivalry and antagonism, which had not been seen since the 19th Century" (Dilley, 2022). The two parties became increasingly divided on salient national topics such as racial equality and the role of government in the country's economy. For instance, the Republican party candidate Barry Goldwater notoriously opposed to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, representing the fundamental differences between the Democrats and Republicans on equality and human rights. This tension in addressing racial inequalities was further escalated with the assassinations of civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. The 1960s was marked by national grieving of popular leaders who made significant progress in global security, international relations, and racial equality. In the meantime, the Johnson administration suffered from a declining popular support for his entanglement in the Vietnam War, resulting in a "35% approval rate" in 1968. It was in this volatile political context that a widely contested Vietnam War gradually unfolded. The prevailing sense of pessimism, triggered by the loss of prominent political leaders and the escalation of Vietnam War, intensified people's dissatisfaction of the US government.

Artists in the 1970s were protest leaders who amplified public outcry against the war. Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Graham Nash, of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (CSN), opined in an interview in 1987: "Every artist has a responsibility to reflect the time he lives in and the problem he faces" (CBC West, 2011). In this spirit, John Lennon, a member of the legendary pop band The Beatles, used his songs to disseminate a message of love and peace in response to the Vietnam War: "Count me out if it is for violence. Don't expect me to be on the barricades unless it is with flowers" (Sheff, 1980). Musicians in the 1970s were also historians in the sense that their songs crystalized a common understanding of the

historic events that were unfolding. However, not all artists were as transparent and outspoken as Lennon and CSN, as some avoided referencing Vietnam and left their works open for interpretation. Bob Dylan, whose songs from that era are regarded as being among the most influential protest songs in all of American history, never identified as a protest artist. He repeatedly claimed that “I sing all love songs” and commented that “not every singer with long hair is a protest singer” (Dylan, 2021).

Regardless of whether artists associated their songs with protest movements, the music of the 1960s and 1970s unified millions of Americans. For example, the song “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die” by Country Joe and the Fish portrays the prevailing pessimism at the prospect of the Vietnam War. With dark humor, the lyrics describe the ominous future of millions of soldiers (Country Joe and the Fish, 1967):

Come on Fathers don’t hesitate,  
Send your sons off before it’s too late.  
Be the first on your block.  
To have your boy come home in a box.

Using satirical words to convey the public’s discontent and feeling of helplessness, participation in an unjust war is portrayed as an inevitability that will likely lead to death.

Songs in the 1960s and 1970s also reflected how the war underscored class differences. “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR) illustrates how class privilege dictated people’s fates during the war. The chorus states (Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1969):

It ain’t me, I ain’t me,  
I ain’t no senator’s son.  
It ain’t me, it ain’t me  
I ain’t no fortunate one, no.

While a small proportion of people were able to avoid the draft, a larger number of American youths had their lives put in jeopardy. Nepotism and patronage, common forms of corruption in the political system, were scorned in the above CCR lyrics. As such, the music exposed the gaping holes in terms of what citizens were or were not subjected to based on their socioeconomic status during the Vietnam War.

Protest music was the voice of the 1970s. If history could be documented in sounds, then the history of that era would likely be a rock and roll song with trenchant lyrics, an ominous drumbeat, and a resounding chorus. The protest music of the 1970s served as a literal rallying cry—both on campuses and in the streets—for the antiwar protests that instigated political change. It was the satire that exposed the inhumanity of hawkish politicians, the poetic vision of a future world with peace and harmony, and the great unifier of protestors from various backgrounds who stood in firm opposition to bellicose government policies. Using

secondary sources, music lyrics, and oral history methodology, this paper explores the interconnections among anti-war sentiment, the rise in influence of protest music, and anti-war demonstrations.

## 2. “I Ain’t No Fortunate One”—The Use of Oral History

The paper examines the civil unrest of the Vietnam War era through the lens of oral history to reflect popular sentiment in an era of widespread mistrust. The Vietnam War fundamentally shattered the public’s faith in the American government. Claims of America’s moral superiority were overshadowed by mass atrocities and political scandals. Public polls showed that “77% of the American people” trusted the American government in 1964 and the number dropped to 36% within a decade (Pew Research Center, 2015). By the end of the 1970s, only “a quarter of American people” had faith in the US government. In an era characterized by public outcry for government accountability, oral history adeptly captures and amplifies people’s voices. In the midst of ideological warfare among world powers, it emphasizes the unique individual experience of a war that cannot be summarized in numbers. Through detailed individual narratives, oral history democratizes the public memory of the Vietnam War by empowering individuals to voice and record their experiences.

An important component of the unique individual experience in the Vietnam War was socioeconomic status. The lyrics of “Fortunate Son” highlight how class differences dictated individuals’ lives more than ever (Plastic Ono Band, 1969):

Some folks are born silver spoon in hand.  
Lord, don’t they help themselves, Lord?  
But when the taxman come to the door,  
Lord, the house lookin’ like a rummage sale, yeah.

These lyrics underline the friction between those who were forced to partake in an unjust war and those who had the privilege of avoiding the war. The interviewee in this paper, John Heavey, was among the “fortunate” ones who did not directly witness the brutality of war on the front line. Turning 18 in 1970, Mr. Heavey was able to avoid the military draft due to college deferment (Heavey, 2023):

They had a draft number for every year of the birthday. So it’s 365 different numbers and they would pick from this huge bin... they would pick out as many numbers as they would draft up to. That number, at the height of it, was quite high because they deployed hundreds of thousands of men as the war went on and they were pulling out troops. My number came up to number two, and I was sure I was going to go.

Mr. Heavey was in a position that enabled him to pursue higher education, which saved him from being on the frontline. He graduated from Johns Hopkins University and witnessed the brutality of the war at a distance through news media, protests, and accounts from his friends. Nevertheless, the Vietnam War

profoundly shook his belief in the innate benevolence of America's global leadership. From first-hand experience, he witnessed the powerful role of protest music as a political weapon in antiwar efforts. While Mr. Heavey's experience may not be representative of the general American public, he provided valuable insights into how public sentiment about the war evolved over time and eventually became synonymous with the language of protest music. Now a senior English teacher at Tabor Academy, a private boarding school in Marion, Massachusetts, Mr. Heavey reflects on his experience in classrooms and theater that serve to extend the public memory of the Vietnam War. Together, this paper and the interview aim to answer the following question: in what ways did protest music reflect the changing American public perspective during the 1970s?

### **3. "Eve of Destruction"—The Growth of Protest Music via Anti-War Sentiment**

Prior to the 1970s, the majority of the American public was supportive of America's foreign policy, making protest music a marginal affair. Born in a family with a strong military background, Mr. Heavey's patriotic spirit was ingrained through his family traditions: "My parents were part of the 'Greatest Generation'... my dad served in World War Two. His brother, my uncle, served in World War Two at the Naval Academy. My grandfather was a brigadier general in World War Two. So they were part of the 'good war.'" Mr. Heavey's endorsement of government policies was consonant with the majority of the American public. Most Americans were convinced of the virtues of the American government in safeguarding world peace and democracy. In 1965, "46% of Americans" supported the escalation of military deployment in Vietnam, while only 13% favored the withdrawal of the US army (Lunch & Sperlich, 1979). Immersed in a family devoted to military service, Mr. Heavey was supportive of America's initiative to contain communism and spread democracy in Vietnam in the early phase of the war:

Well, at first, I probably felt I picked a page from my father and grandfather. I felt that the American government was acting with honorable intent and that they were really trying to help an impoverished people, the South Vietnamese, be able to stand on their own and have a democracy, and that's a pretty powerful call.

At the height of the war's nationalistic appeal, protest music had limited influence. In 1965, less than 1.5% of Billboard's Yearly Top 100 chart was comprised of antiwar rock songs (Bindas & Houston, 1989).

Domestic support for the Vietnam War diminished. In 1968, public support for the government collapsed and set the stage for a burgeoning crop of protest songs. In January, the Viet Cong, supported by the North Vietnamese army to fight against South Vietnam and the US, launched a series of surprise attacks and temporarily shifted the momentum in favor of the Communists. This event, known as the Tet Offensive, contradicted the US government's claim that the

war was coming to an end and stimulated public outcry. Mr. Heavey recounted that his family, in particular, doubted the reasons behind US involvement in Vietnam and grew cynical of the political rhetoric of containing communism (Heavey, 2023):

We weren't there to win a military objective, to conquer an enemy, and restore Vietnam to peace. You were there [for] just body count, maintain control, and so on to stop the spread of communism. But they were never, as far as I can recall, in favor of the war because they felt it was wrong from the start. And then when it came out that the government had lied to the American people, they were very discouraged and upset.

Although Mr. Heavey's family seemed to have sensed the innate injustice of the war from the beginning, their disappointment in government military objectives mirrored the general feeling of the American public. By October 1968, "63% of the population" believed that US involvement in Vietnam was a mistake (Lunch & Sperlich, 1979). As a result, the popular demand for antiwar music grew in an unprecedented fashion. By 1971, rock music comprised 54% of the sales in the category of popular music. Antiwar songs occupied 9% of the Billboard Yearly Top 100 chart in 1965, growing nearly six-fold in a six-year period. Protest music seemed to feed off the public discontent about government accountability. The trajectory of its growth was intricately connected to changing public sentiment regarding US involvement in the Vietnam War: American people needed protest music as a venue to voice their demand for change.

#### **4. "You Put a Gun in My Hand"—Protest Music's Role in Opposing the Military Draft**

Public opposition to involvement in Vietnam was exacerbated by the military draft. From 1964 to 1965, the number of troops deployed in Vietnam increased from 23,000 to 184,000, and a military draft soon became inevitable for hundreds of thousands of draft-age Americans (Thayer & Daddis, 2020). In July 1965, President Johnson announced that the draft inductions would "increase from 17,000 to 35,000 per month" ("The Military Draft during the Vietnam War," n.d.) despite claiming just a year earlier that, "We are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles from home." ("The President's News Conference: Why Are We in Vietnam?", 1965) The notoriety of the military draft further undermined the government's credibility, and the public grew skeptical of involvement in Vietnam. Mr. Heavey backed this perspective, stating that (Heavey, 2023):

Some of us felt that they wanted to get mixed up in Vietnam because they wanted to show what they could really do in Vietnam and because they messed up in Korea. So we took that cynical view: the American military machine wanted to flex its muscles again. And show to Russia, because the Cold War was still very active, that we are the big dog here, don't mess with

us, and watch what we do to North Vietnam.

People felt that they were pawns of the government: helpless, voiceless, and defenseless. While people's lives and the lives of their loved ones were put in danger, they were excluded from the discussions that decided their fates. It was in this context that protest music arose, as it gave shape and energy to the voiceless masses.

Protest music became a major cultural vehicle in an era of distrust and cynicism. Mr. Heavey noted that the impact of contemporary artists went beyond entertainment—they became emblems of protest: “One artist comes to mind is probably Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan always knew he was a spokesperson for a whole generation who really wanted civil rights and were very much against the war. Many of the songs in 1963 to '64 were then picked up by other artists, particularly Crosby, Stills, and Nash and The Birds as well.” Indeed, Dylan's music, although highly symbolic and impressionist at times, accurately reflected popular sentiment regarding the military draft and government misinformation. In the song “Masters of War,” he writes (Dylan, 1967):

You put a gun in my hand,  
And you hide from my eyes.  
And you turn and run farther,  
When the fast bullets fly.

This line exposes the unethical nature of the draft during the Vietnam War, which forced citizens into acts of brutality that went against their conscience. The song reveals the danger of the military-industrial complex, directly pointing to the opportunists who profited from weapons manufacturing at the cost of human suffering. Taking a different tack from the poignant criticism of “Masters of War,” the all-time classic “Blowin' in the Wind” envisions a future of harmony and peace. The song masterfully deploys symbolism, touching creatively on a wide range of topics: war and peace, environment, and civil rights. Written from an omnipotent perspective, Dylan asks a series of exigent questions regarding the fate of humanity (Dylan, 1963):

And how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows,  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind.  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Dylan acknowledges that in the midst of ideological conflicts among world powers, individuals' wishes are often neglected. Yet, the lyrics convey a sense of optimism and reassurance in a precarious time. Facing a world of death and destruction, Dylan believes that time will eventually recompense the present suffering, and that collective will can move mountains.

## 5. “The Answer Is Blowin’ in the Wind”—How Protest Music Led Antiwar Demonstrations

A maestro of symbolism, Dylan never directly referenced Vietnam in his lyrics or publicly acknowledged his role as a protest leader. In a 1965 press conference, Dylan was asked about his role in guiding the antiwar sentiment, to which he responded in a playful manner that he could only label himself as “well under thirty” (Dylan, 2021). However, as Mr. Heavey pointed out, his role as a larger-than-life protest symbol was bestowed by the American public (Heavey, 2023):

I think he knew very well that’s how he was seen. People very much looked to him as a leader of protest songs and a voice for many people of that generation for sure. You could never really say, “Oh, Bob, you mentioned things about Vietnam,” he never did. So he had it both ways. They were symbolic and therefore couldn’t directly be pinned on the Vietnam War. They can be applied to any kind of bigger cause or social injustice, which is why his music is so powerful.

Dylan’s stardom stems from his empathetic engagement with the audience. His candid lyrics in “Masters of War” debunked the lies of politicians, allowing Dylan’s melodic truth-telling to fill the vacuum of integrity seemingly left by an administration hell-bent on more and more woefully unjustified violence.

Aside from producing cultural icons such as Bob Dylan, protest music played a quintessential role in the public memory of antiwar demonstrations. Rock music and folk music, in particular, became weapons of social revolution. John Sinclair, an American poet and political activist, comments that “rock supplied the form of and the means of social transformation” (Sinclair, 1972). Concerts became venues for antiwar gatherings and emerged as a center of public consciousness. The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, held from August 15 to 18, 1969, was the culminating event among antiwar concerts. Over the course of four days, nearly “500,000 people were present” and a total of “163 musicians” performed at the festival (“The Woodstock Music and Arts Fair”, 2023). Country Joe and the Fish brought the audience to a crescendo with the protest anthem “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die-Rag” (Country Joe and the Fish, 1967):

And it’s one, two, three,  
 What are we fighting for?  
 Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn,  
 Next stop is Vietnam;  
 And it’s five, six, seven,  
 Open up the pearly gates,  
 Well there ain’t no time to wonder why,  
 Whoopee! We’re all gonna die.

Over 300,000 audience members in the arena sang the chorus in unison, and despite the satirical lyrics, the collective voice of the crowd was full of conviction about their message to policymakers to put an end to the war. Similar events not

only attracted national attention but also mobilized antiwar efforts at local levels. Mr. Heavey recounted (Heavey, 2023):

When I was living in Atlanta, Georgia in 1969, there were bands that would come to a park. Some of these bands would actually play a number of songs by Creedence Clearwater Revival or Bob Dylan. They were not bands of that caliber but were really good semiprofessional bands and a lot of people would gather in the park. People had banners and chanted “hell no, we won’t go.”

Antiwar demonstrations and music, together, reached a wide American audience and amplified the true voice of the American people, proving the success of protest music as a medium for channeling and disseminating the mood and message of the American public. However, as protests gradually grew violent, the public response to antiwar demonstrations and the larger counterculture movement changed once again.

## 6. “Tin Soldiers and Nixon Coming”—Antiwar Activism in Colleges

The violent nature of antiwar protests polarized public opinion. In 1968, despite the majority of Americans believing Vietnam was a mistake, the public generally viewed the protestors unfavorably, rating them “28.4 out of 100” (Schreiber, 1976). Historians believe that the protestors were unpopular not because of the ideals they stood for, but because of the “behaviors in which they were engaged; they were dissenters, deviates and were evaluated accordingly.” Mr. Heavey’s experience reflects this statement to an extent, as he recounted his parents’ reaction to local antiwar demonstrations in 1969 (Heavey, 2023):

My parents definitely did not want me to go down to this park. And I remember we gathered around the fringe of the park. I remember at the entrance; you can see the Atlanta police. Dozens and dozens of them were just watching and they were there with helmets and nightsticks and so on. And I began to think all they wanted was for us to make a false move or to really get too rowdy... and I think they would have come in and it would have been a bad scene.

The presence of the police force deterred Mr. Heavey and his family from directly participating in the protests. He stated that his parents did not “disapprove of the marches,” but were clearly concerned about the potential violence. They were observers who aligned with the protestors’ values but were reluctant to take part in actions that could potentially result in violent confrontations with the police. The concerns from Mr. Heavey’s family were not unfounded. Colleges, in particular, were centers of radical activism, and campuses became the frontlines of confrontations with police forces. Antiwar initiatives mobilized in huge numbers and to great effect among colleges across the US: “Over 4 million students at nearly 1350 campuses demonstrated,” causing “900 colleges to shut

down” (Broadhurst, 2010).

However, not all observers supported student involvement in protests. F. O. Smetana, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), characterized antiwar demonstrations as “temper tantrums and products of the undisciplined minds of the mentally arrested.” Her commentary shows that the antiwar sentiment was not representative of all Americans. Indeed, in the 1970s, supporters of the Republican Party and Nixon were often referred to as the “silent majority,” and they were convinced that the military presence in Asia was a necessary measure to contain communism. A 1970 poll showed that “58% of Americans supported the Cambodian invasion” while only “27% of the population” believed it was wrong (Katz, 1997). Despite the appearance of the antiwar demonstrations achieving massive public agreement, the considerable amount of support that existed for escalating the war in Vietnam must not be overlooked.

Opposition from the war hawks emboldened the magnitude of student protests, a dynamic directly reflected by contemporary protest music. Among the confrontations between students and police forces, the Kent State Shooting in particular appalled the nation with its violence and inhumanity. The incident happened on the Kent State University campus on May 4, 1970, during a student protest against the US invasion of Cambodia. The National Guard opened fire and killed four unarmed students. This event outraged colleges across the nation and further escalated the anti-establishment sentiment among American youth. A college student at the time, Mr. Heavey recounted his reaction to this horrific scene (Heavey, 2023):

I remember seeing the coverage of that on TV and reading about it. We, as freshmen college students who just finished high school, were just so shocked. We just couldn't believe that. And we realized that the National Guard, the men who actually shot them, were of the same age. They were college kids. And it just became panic and just showed us how wrong the whole world was.

College campuses shared a sense of fear and anger at the government's response. Student protestors retaliated against government suppression by organizing antiwar demonstrations in the following days. Craig Wilson, a student at North Carolina State University, commented in the school's newspaper: “The greatest threat to our basic freedoms comes not from Hanoi, or Peking, or Moscow, but from Washington” (Broadhurst, 2010). The song “Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, written in the aftermath of the Kent State Shooting, echoes Wilson's sentiment, blatantly pointing to the Nixon administration for suppressing students' voices (Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, 1970):

Tin soldiers and Nixon coming.  
We're finally on our own.  
This summer, I hear the drumming.  
Four dead in Ohio.

The words “tin soldiers” are a direct reference to the National Guardsmen, who are described as heartless and soulless machines manipulated by the Nixon administration for political ends. The song resonated with the sense of despair and anger among college students, and served as a symbolic counterattack against government suppression and the continuation of an unjust war.

The antagonism between the antiwar activists and the government escalated despite the US army’s initial withdrawal from Vietnam. Mr. Heavey observed that the public discontent with government policy was not dispelled (Heavey, 2023):

This is 1970 to 71 when troops are already being withdrawn, but it wasn’t happening fast enough because I think Nixon was trying to get some political advantage. And then in Washington DC, I remember seeing some [protests]. I wasn’t involved in those. I watched those on TV. They got bigger and bigger and bigger, for sure. And then I transferred to Johns Hopkins, where I graduated, in 1973. So at that point, the war was just about over. And even then there were still some marches, but they were getting smaller.

The public perception of Nixon’s manipulation of the US intervention in Vietnam for political gains was an essential detail, as it accounted for the anger toward the government, even when the war in Vietnam was approaching an end. People were concerned about the lack of government responsiveness as well as the deprivation of their voices for change. The Kent State Shooting exposed the hypocrisy of the American government in that it demonized communism while brutally silencing the voice of democratic opposition on the home front.

## **7. “What Are You Fighting for?” the Transformation of Veterans’ Views**

Public distaste towards the Vietnam War extended to veterans who returned from the frontline. News of the My Lai Massacre in 1968 shocked the nation, as American soldiers murdered more than “500 unarmed women, children, and old men” (Cookman, 2007). This military operation demonstrated that American troops were capable of committing atrocities, dealing a mortal blow to the notion of America’s moral superiority. Mr. Heavey recounted that from this event onward, Vietnam veterans carried the stigma of massacring the innocent:

Everybody who went to the war came back scarred. One thing is that men who did come back and saw some action didn’t intend to talk about it. They knew that Americans were sick and tired of Vietnam, and didn’t want to hear anything about it. When they were being flown back from Vietnam to the States, they would change out of their dress uniforms into civilians because too many men going through the airport just having come back to the States had been spit on and had things thrown at them. They were all labeled as baby killers after My Lai.

Just as the Tet Offensive turned the public against military escalation in Viet-

nam, the My Lai Massacre transformed the public's perspective on American soldiers. When the photographs of the atrocities were published in *Life* and *Time* magazines in 1969, some readers drew parallels to Nazi war crimes. One commented: "If the principles of the Nuremberg War trials mean anything at all, then these men who killed women, children, and old men should never be allowed to hide behind the excuse that 'I was just following orders'" (Cookman, 2007).

The general antiwar sentiment evolved from opposing the military draft to blaming soldiers for being complicit in government crimes. Phil Ochs' "What Are You Fighting For" transmitted this shifting perspective (Ochs, 1964):

Oh, I know you're set for fighting, but what are you fighting for?  
 Before you pack your rifle and sail across the sea,  
 Just think upon the southern part of the land that you call free.  
 Oh, there's many kinds of slavery and we've found many more.

Ochs called out soldiers for fighting a war without justification. He claimed that their minds were enslaved by government propaganda and military orders, and that they were making choices that perpetuated the suppression and suffering of the innocent. It is also worth noting that the nation was so appalled by the war crimes committed by American troops that many refused to believe the event was true. A survey in Minnesota showed that "49% of the residents believed the story was fake."

A large number of veterans who returned from the front line did change their tune, joining the opposition against continued US involvement in Vietnam. Mr. Heavey pointed out that the traumatizing experience of war was largely responsible for shaping returning soldiers' view of the American government. He recounted the experiences of his friends (Heavey, 2023):

One had volunteered because his dad was a hardcore Marine. So he actually volunteered in the early parts of the year, when it was very patriotic and gung-ho. People had idealistic hopes for America's involvement in really helping the South Vietnamese and stopping the spread of communism. He went over and he got hit because he was fairly close to explosive devices. He got cut and shredded with shrapnel. And he showed me all these shrapnel scars, all these scars, all over his torso. And once he got hit by that he got sent home and then he was done. But he became very active against the war. He became very bitter. He was a real clean-cut kid and he became much more of a hippie with long hair and [took part in] the antiwar movement. The transformation of Mr. Heavey's friend was not unique among those who participated in the war. A study found that those who felt morally obligated to serve the country and voluntarily signed up for the war were most likely to join the antiwar cause (Flores, 2014). The subjects of the study grew up immersed in the glory of WWII and popular culture that portrayed veterans as homeland protectors and heroes, and the experience in Vietnam

completely shattered that narrative. They faced an alien terrain and guerilla warfare rather than conventional combatants; they had to constantly battle against their conscience for killing civilians; and when they came back from the war, the public condemned them for the atrocities, rather than embracing them as heroes. The pain inflicted upon the veterans was as much psychological as it was physical. The study points out that many veterans openly opposed the war because “healing their emotional scars meant opening the mental file cabinet and throwing their experience of war into the public eye.”

In the midst of public condemnation of the Vietnam War, protest music allowed the American public to empathize with the returning soldiers’ traumas. The Charlie Daniels song “Still in Saigon” describes the emotional scars of Vietnam veterans (Daniels, 1982):

The ground at home was covered with snow. And I was covered in sweat.  
My younger brother calls me a killer and My daddy calls me a vet.  
Everybody says that I’m someone else.  
That I’m sick and there’s no cure.  
Damned if I know who I am.  
There was only one place I was sure  
When I was  
Still in Saigon  
Still in Saigon.  
I am still in Saigon in my mind!

As the lyrics point out, many returning soldiers were stuck in mental trauma while facing an unfamiliar world that condemned their actions and neglected their voices. In contrast to antiwar songs that expressed cynicism about the military, “Still in Saigon” was written from a veteran’s perspective, allowing the audience to empathize with this experience. Mr. Heavey shared his perspective about returning soldiers (Heavey, 2023):

I was of two minds. I have really honored the men who came back and fought because they were soldiers and I learned that very much from my grandfather, who was a decorated Brigadier General and fought in the Philippines with MacArthur. But the whole thing just really disgusted me, particularly after the atrocity in My Lai, when the men went in and murdered 300 women and children in the village of My Lai in Vietnam. And I thought this is wrong, and it really made me very cynical about war.

Mr. Heavey’s divided opinion stemmed from his patriotic upbringing. On one hand, his respect for family members prompted him to honor the soldiers who had risked their lives to serve the country. On the other hand, his own conscience would not condone the fact that American troops killed innocent civilians indiscriminately. The song “Still in Saigon” shed new light on the role of protest music, exposing the cruelty of the war not simply for the obvious carnage

of combat, but due to the residual effects that exacerbated mental trauma. The transformation of veterans' views illustrates that the Vietnam War was not only a battle against enemies, but also a battle against one's own conscience and emotions. In many cases, the loss of the latter would haunt veterans for the rest of their lives.

## 8. Conclusion: "Give Peace a Chance"

The rise of protest music was a direct reflection of the American public's changing perspective on the Vietnam War. Initially, the American government was trusted, and its foreign policy agenda had popular support. American people believed military involvement in Vietnam was necessary to contain the spread of Communism, and they anticipated a quick victory. In a country under the sway of a strong sense of nationalism, the antiwar cause had little support, leaving protest music little fertile land to grow. However, the escalation in military deployment and implementation of a draft stirred public discontent. The Tet Offensive in 1968 exposed the government's false promises regarding the progress of the war, causing the public to oppose US intervention in Vietnam, and rising public discontent planted the seed for the growth of protest music. Music icons, such as Bob Dylan, Country Joe and the Fish, and Creedence Water Revival, emerged as protest leaders who mobilized unprecedented support for antiwar demonstrations. The Kent State Shooting exacerbated the antagonism between antiwar activists and the government, and the song "Ohio" became a historic protest anthem forever tied to college activism. The nation's trust in government hit an all-time low when the My Lai Massacre in 1968 scandalized the public. The American people realized that their troops were capable of committing mass atrocities, and they accused veterans of being accomplices to the government's war crimes and labeled them "baby killers." The response of the American public and the trauma of the war caused many returning soldiers to join the antiwar cause. Veterans sought to open up about their experiences to heal the emotional trauma they sustained during the war and realign themselves with what their conscience told them was the right thing.

From left-wing activists to college students to veterans, protest music unified American voices opposed to the war. Jacques Attali, a French social theorist and political adviser, commented that rock music was an instrument to initiate social change due to its unifying quality: "It has developed among all social classes, but in particular among those most oppressed" (James, 1989). This perspective was embraced by John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance," which underscores that the shared desire for peace cannot be contained by political ideology, religion, or race (Plastic Ono Band, 1969):

Ev'rybody's talking 'bout,  
 Bagism, Shagism, Dragism, Madism, Ragism, Tagism.  
 This-ism, that-ism, is-m, is-m, is-m.  
 All we are saying is give peace a chance.

Lennon enumerated a plethora of made-up ideologies to demonstrate the magnitude of division among people. The absurdity in the number of “-isms” he sings shows that politics had overcomplicated and clouded people’s true desire for peace. From “Blowin’ in the Wind” to “Give Peace a Chance,” protest songs shored up the better angels of humanity in a world of death and destruction. It seems counterintuitive to view the voice of dissent as a driving force for greater unity. However, the sounds of opposition were written into the founding values of the United States. It was the collective protests against the British Crown that united the thirteen colonies and mobilized the American Revolution. It was Thomas Jefferson’s line “all men are created equal” that inspired generations of Americans to strive for universal equality. A rock song may just be a variety of instruments that produce different sounds, but they resonate, complement, and balance each other in a harmonious fashion. Similarly, protest music is more than the sound of dissonance that challenges norms. It is also the voice of democracy, peace, and humanity, which provides a powerful check to policymaking and government accountability.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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