

Section 11 – Turning the Tide

The Radical Sixties and Vietnam

By the 1960s, women in the USA had already begun to raise their profile in reforming politics. Billie Holiday, a black woman, had recorded *Strange Fruit* in 1939. This song protested the lynching of black people in the South, which had become commonplace. Holiday was a star and for her, in that era, to sing such an overtly political song was a ground-breaking statement.

During the war years and through the 1950s, dissent and protest were muted because the national focus in both the US and in Europe was on ensuring survival. War has always been a self-serving invention of the patriarchy; as long as there was a real military threat to bind people together, the patriarchy would not be challenged.¹

After the end of the war and through the 1950s, Americans were revelling in their new-found financial strength, and the rest of the world was busy repairing itself. But the post-war baby boom meant that the population had increasing numbers of young people, characterised by their daring and their desire to push boundaries and to establish a cultural identity for themselves. Everything changed in the 1960s.

There were many causes. The oppression of black people in the South had continued unabated and had become a national disgrace. The black Civil Rights movement grew and became more effective in response. In 1960, four black students went into a branch of Woolworth's in Greensboro, Alabama. They sat at the counter marked 'whites only' and asked to be served. When they were refused, they remained seated till the store closed. The next day, they returned with twenty others and again stayed all day. The day after, hundreds took part. The 'sit-in' protest caught the public imagination and within weeks it had spread to fifteen cities across the South. This galvanised other groups who saw how powerful it could be. Mark Kolinsky wrote:

'by the mid-1960s the movement...had thrilled the world with its imagination and the daring of its ideas, inspiring students as far away as Poland to stage sit-ins.'²

In 1964, the USA embroiled itself in the aftermath of a colonial war that France, the former master, had left behind: Vietnam. At the time, the so-called 'domino theory' was widely accepted within American politics. It held that Communism would spread from country to country, as if by contagion. The Vietnamese Communists, led by Ho Chi Min, were supported by the USSR

¹ The patriarchy has never been slow to commit to war in order to bolster itself.

² Kurlansky, M. 1968. Random House. 2008. (ebook)

and it was widely believed that the USSR was a direct threat to the US. Preventing the expansion of its sphere of influence into Southeast Asia became a priority.

Unlike previous wars, however, the Vietnam war did not automatically bring with it increased support for the Government. Americans had fought hard in Europe and the Pacific with many casualties, and they had fought again in Korea. A naturally isolationist perspective, which has always been a part of this most self-sufficient nation's character, was provoked. Life was good, and everyone was doing well. Was there really support for American involvement in another war?

Then, in 1964, the *USS Maddox* was attacked by a few North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, which it easily fought off.³ These attacks gave President Lyndon Johnson an excuse to escalate the war.

Conscription was an immediate focus for dissent. In a House debate, Senator Ernest Gruening was forthright in his objection to:

‘sending our American boys into combat in a war in which we have no business, which is not our war, into which we have been misguidedly drawn, which is being steadily escalated.’

Gruening was not alone, and as the death toll rose, the war was increasingly seen as a pointless political exercise. Far from unifying the US, the war tore it apart.

Incongruously perhaps, the interests of the black Civil Rights movement and anti-war protesters came together. A new atmosphere of radicalism appeared. Central to this was a creative, non-violent form of protest pioneered by the Civil Rights activists.⁴ This reached its zenith in 1968, when protest dominated the news across the US, Europe and Japan. Although they were not a united front and were protesting a wide range of injustices, all of the protestors across the world had one thing in common: they regarded the political status quo as having failed. They realised that it was dominated by vested interests. They had torn aside the mask of the patriarchy.

The women's movement was galvanised by the general mood of dissatisfaction and determination to organise and do something about it. Women were prepared to protest and to stand up against the violence of the authorities. Not only were women prominent in campaigns

³ There were two alleged incidents, on the 2nd and 4th of August. The first appears to have actually happened, whereas the second may have been invented to bolster the case.

⁴ They took their lead from Mahatma Ghandi's non-violent protest that did so much to liberate India.

against the Vietnam War and institutionalised racism, now they were campaigning on their own behalf. The modern feminist movement was born in the radical crucible of the 1960s.

All of these popular movements had their roots in the same phenomenon: the financial empowerment of the people supporting them. There was now an educated black middle class and black students of both genders were involved in the Civil Rights movements. While the majority of those conscripted to Vietnam were young men with little education and low-status jobs, better-off women and men dominated the protests. Consumer capitalism had led to the direct challenge of the old, monolithic certainties of the patriarchal state and to the end, not just in the US but across the world, of the 'deference society'.