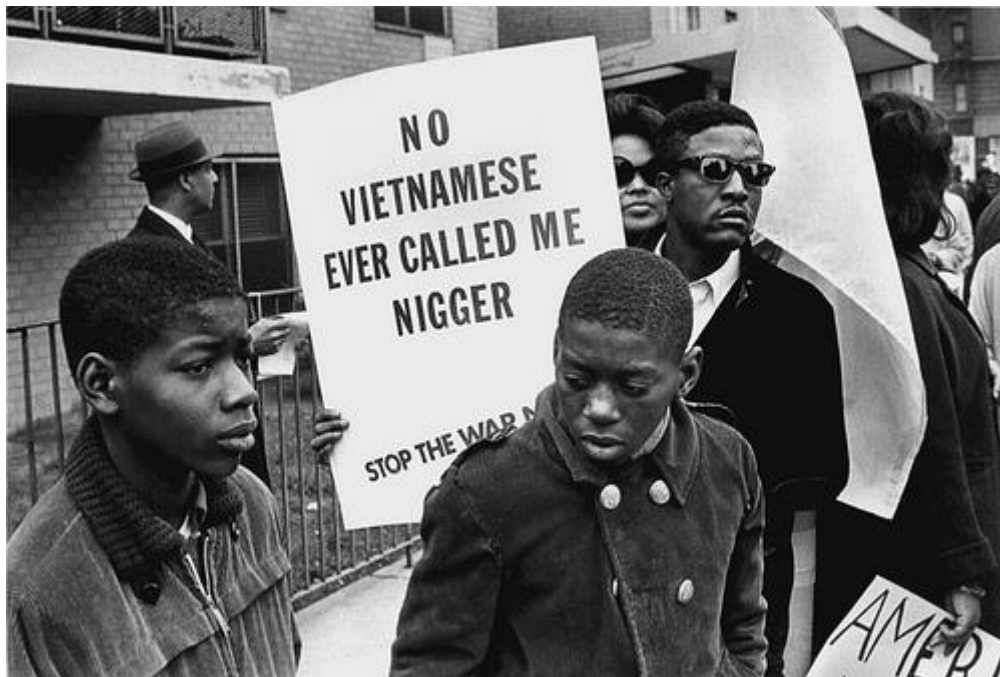


The Price for Principles

A comparison of the Vietnam War opinions of America's most important civil rights organizations and their relationship with the Johnson Administration



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List of abbreviations

COINTELPRO	-	Counter Intelligence Program
CORE	-	Congress of Racial Equality
FBI	-	Federal Bureau of Investigation
JFK	-	John Fitzgerald Kennedy
LBJ	-	Lyndon Baines Johnson
FBI	-	Federal Bureau of Investigation
MFDP	-	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MLK	-	Martin Luther King, Jr.
NAACP	-	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NALC	-	Negro American Labor Council
NBC	-	National Baptist Convention
NCNW	-	National Council of Negro Women
NLF	-	National Liberation Front
NOI	-	Nation of Islam
NUL	-	National Urban League
SDS	-	Students for a Democratic Society
SCLC	-	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	-	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
USA	-	United States of America

Introduction

Up to 1964, the army of the United States was not heavily involved in the Vietnam War: in order to prevent communists from gaining a foothold in South Vietnam, America mainly trained and armed South Vietnamese troops to help them in their battle against the communist North. When direct American military involvement in Vietnam escalated, large units of American militaries – including black soldiers of African-American descent – were sent to serve in the American army.

While things got more intense at the war front, tensions at home also increased for the administration of President Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1973). There were many individuals, informal groups and official organizations, all housed in an overarching concept called the civil rights movement, which opted for the full elimination of racist laws and practices – along the lines of the ‘Separate but Equal’ doctrine, dating from the end of the 19th century – in the United States. Although they greatly differed in means, goals and backgrounds, all members of the civil rights movement raised their voices to reach a common goal: reducing the social, economic and legal inequalities between blacks and whites in the country in which, according to its Declaration of Independence, ‘all men were created equal’.¹ President Johnson was aware of the problematic character of racial inequality in especially the Southern part of the States, and therefore made it one of the focal points of his Great Society project. As a part of this project, ‘LBJ’ passed several landmark pieces of legislation through Congress: the Civil Rights Act of 1963, the Voting Rights Acts of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 were all signed by the Democratic president from Texas. The full implementation of these (and other) acts in everyday life in the American ghettos was, however, a completely different story. In practice, many poor African-Americans still suffered from unequal rights in the field of voting, education, job opportunities and police protection. An important contributor to this persisting inequality was the growing American presence in Vietnam. The enormous amount of money that was needed to finance the Vietnam War choked off Johnson’s ambitions to narrow the gap between black and white in the USA, as the president himself would later admit. ‘That

¹ The Charters of Freedom, ‘Declaration of Independence’: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (2-1-2015)

bitch of a war,' Johnson recalled toward the end of his life, 'killed the lady I really loved – the Great Society.'²

When looking back on the state of civil rights after his presidency, Lyndon Johnson himself was very positive about the way in which he and his administration had contributed to the black emancipation struggle in the United States. In his biography *The Vantage Point. Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-69*, Johnson recalled his successes: 'We had come a long way. In five short years we had put into law our promises of equality – at the ballot box, the employment center, the jury, the public inn, the public school, and the private housing market.' By emphasizing the success of blacks in key organizations such as the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, the Foreign Service, the Federal Reserve Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the former president wanted to underline his enormous contribution to the emancipation of blacks. Additionally, he also pointed out that – with the help of his old civil rights friends – landmark legislation pieces such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the Federal Jury Reform Act of 1968 had passed during his leadership.³

In spite of Johnson's positivity, however, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, better known as the Kerner Commission after its chairman Otto Kerner (1908-1976, Governor of the state of Illinois), made a very critical evaluation of the results of Johnson's civil rights policy near the end of his reign in February 1968.⁴ The most basic and famous conclusion of its report was that, during Johnson's presidency, 'Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.'⁵ Indirectly, the administration was blamed for the explosive situation at home, where urban problems were reflected in racial struggles on the battlefield in Vietnam.⁶

This thesis focuses on the connection between civil rights, the war in Vietnam and the Johnson Administration (1963-1969). Since the civil rights organizations – of

² Julian E. Zellizer, *The New York Times Online*, 'The Nation: Guns and Butter; Government Can Run More Than a War': <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/30/weekinreview/the-nation-guns-and-butter-government-can-run-more-than-a-war.html> (12-6-2015)

³ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point. Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (London 1971) 178-179.

⁴ Eisenhower Foundation, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Summary)* (29-2-1968).

⁵ Eisenhower Foundation, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Summary)*, 'Introduction' (29-2-1968) 2.

⁶ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Boston, 2001) 218-219.

which the most influential five will be discussed in this research – were partially dependent on the federal government for reaching progress, a compelling question comes to mind: how did the Johnson Administration, which governed the United States for a period of over five years, handle the complex intertwinements between its actions in Southeast-Asia and the groups that were preoccupied with the nation’s most pressing domestic issue? By focusing on the Vietnam-related behavior of the core of the civil rights movement, as well as its interplay with the country’s authorities, this research aims to clarify this interconnection, which greatly shaped Lyndon Johnson’s presidency.

Chapter 1. The research

1.1 Hypothesis & main research questions

For structuring historical research, it is helpful to use a hypothesis, an assumption that can be confirmed or falsified. By creating a hypothesis, the study is driven to a clearer direction. Proving or disproving a hypothesis may provide a research with more scientific depth, because it reduces the 'danger' of simply describing a historical period without working towards any relevant, compelling conclusions.

As the historiographical debate (paragraph 1.5) will show, there is a significant historical issue upon which scholars have not yet fully agreed: was speaking out against American involvement in the Vietnam War helpful for civil rights activists, or not? Opinions on this subject differ, and in this thesis, I will try to add my contribution to this extensive historical question. Therefore, this thesis is built upon the hypothesis: *'Speaking out about American involvement in the Vietnam War was a vehicle for black emancipation.'*

To prove or disprove this hypothesis, the following research questions will be used:

'What were the opinions of the major civil rights organizations about American involvement in the Vietnam War, and how did these opinions affect their relationship with the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson?' This is the main overarching research question of this thesis. By finding out (if there was any) which causation there was between pro- or anti-Vietnam opinions by civil rights groups and the effect this had on their relationships with the Johnson Administration, it is possible to find out if forming an opinion about the Vietnam War was useful or counterproductive for reaching progress in the main civil rights cause, more equality between black and white in the United States.

'How did the civil rights organizations express their opinion about Vietnam War involvement?' This is the most important question to answer the main research question, necessary to find out which civil rights organizations were in favor of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, and which were against it. If the groups supported or opposed it, did they do so openly and actively, or was it more of a tacit

(dis)approval, and in which ways did the organizations publicly show their viewpoints on Vietnam?

'Which position did the civil rights organizations take towards the military draft of African-Americans?' This question deals with the way the five investigated organizations stood towards the military service of African-American soldiers. Did the groups urge blacks to evade the draft, or did they motivate them to fight in Vietnam?

'Was the Johnson Administration equally accessible for all major civil rights organizations?' This question focuses on the frequency and nature of the contact that the various civil rights leaders had with the president and his confidants. Did the leaders of the civil rights groups keep in touch with the Johnson Administration regularly, or were their contacts less frequent? Were the civil rights leaders able to lay down their worries and requests with the president, or was it difficult for them to reach him?

'Did Vietnam War opposition have consequences for the treatment which the civil rights organizations received from the Johnson Administration?' This question is two-sided: on the one hand it takes into account concrete measures – economic or political support/counterwork, monitoring and surveillance – and on the other hand it focuses on the more informal side of governmental relations with civil rights groups. How did the White House speak about the actions and leaders of the civil rights organizations, and did respect increase or decrease as a result of Vietnam War opinions?

1.2 Method & periodization

Method

Instead of dedicating a chapter to each sub-question, all of these themes will be discussed for each one of the five researched civil rights organizations. This choice was made after drawing up an inventory of the sources (paragraph 1.4): it quickly became clear that the amount and nature of the source material differed for each organization. Several of the civil rights groups were much more active in their public communication about Vietnam, while it was not always easy to gain access to records which include their interaction with (representatives of) the federal government. Since these five organizations were not fixed, systematic blocs that can all be investigated in a

systematic, quantitative manner, it is more useful and logical to analyze them in a qualitative way.

Taking these factors into consideration, I have decided to carry out a chronological evaluation of every one of the targeted five organizations. The nature of this research, which focuses on descriptive concepts such as 'opinions', 'relationship' and 'access', is much better suited for a qualitative comparison. It is self-evident that such an approach has pros and cons; the lack of uniform sets of statistical data makes it harder to evaluate the organizations one-to-one on the same criteria, but on the other hand, an examination of important official statements and personal decisions makes it easier to place developments inside the historical context of the 1960s. By analyzing the most important internal and external discussions, written statements and public manifestations about American involvement in the Vietnam War within the civil rights groups, as well as their relationship with the White House, I hope to shed more light on the interconnectedness between the two. When concurrent developments between war opinions and federal treatment are visible, it is possible to find out if Vietnam War opinions were a vehicle or an obstacle, which is the main goal of this research.

Since one of the biggest pitfalls of historical research is the danger of oversimplification, it is crucial to keep in mind the difference between correlation and causality: the simultaneousness of certain events or developments inside the civil rights movement could have been a result of federal interventions, but could also have been caused by other factors. This will be taken into account in the conclusion, which will present a nuanced answer to the hypothesis and main research question.

Periodization

The research period starts in the spring of 1965, when President Johnson escalated the war, sending American soldiers to Vietnam on a large scale. My research period ends in April 1968, when Lyndon Johnson decided not to run in the election, after which Richard Nixon (1913-1994) succeeded him.

Firstly, it is highly plausible that Johnson's announced departure marks the start of a clearly different state of the dynamics involved in civil rights-presidential relations. Awareness of the administration's withdrawal is likely to have caused crucial differences in the strategic considerations of both the civil rights groups and the White House itself. Therefore, analyzing the roughly ten months in which the administration's

takeoff was already public, would likely cause such a rupture with the trend of previous years that a huge distortion would appear.

Secondly, Johnson's successor Richard Nixon – who took office on January 20th, 1969 – decided to pursue a policy of so-called Vietnamization of the war, meaning that American soldiers were gradually pulled out of Vietnam. Since the heyday of American involvement in Southeast-Asia took place during Johnson's presidency, it is therefore most logical to analyze events, opinions and sources from this period.

1.3 Main concepts

In order to understand the implications of the aforementioned hypothesis and research questions, it is helpful to further explain several central concepts. Some of these are tangible, concrete concepts, while others are more open to interpretation.

First of all, the ***civil rights movement***. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the American civil rights movement was a 'mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s.'⁷ The roots of the movement can be found in efforts by African slaves and their descendants, who, during the last two centuries, fought to resist racial inequality and the abolishment of institutional slavery. Even though slaves in the United States were emancipated after the Civil War (1861-1865) and were formally granted the most basic civil rights as a result of the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the American Constitution, African-Americans were still struggling for federal protection of these rights throughout the 20th century. By starting a wave of protests in the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement tried to end the pattern of racial segregation in the areas of voting, housing and the labor market, as well as in many public facilities like bathrooms and public transport vehicles through segregation laws. Additionally, the civil rights movement fought to end the informal

⁷ Clayborne Carson, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'The Civil Rights Movement': <http://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement> (31-1-2016)

side of racial inequality, which, especially in the Southern states, was widely spread among the American population.⁸

Ever since 1896, when the African-American train passenger Homer Plessy was legally punished for riding an all-white railroad car, American race relations were structured by a doctrine called 'separate but equal': the government and legislative authorities were allowed to organize public places through a system of separation along racial lines. This practice of racial segregation had free rein until 1954, when the legal case *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* resulted in the abolishment of separation in public schools. Given the important symbolic implications of this case, the year 1954 is usually marked as the start of the civil rights movement.⁹ A myriad of significant acts of resistance, in the form of marches, gatherings, speeches and sit-ins – such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955) set into motion by Rosa Parks' (1913-2005) refusal to stand up for a white man – occurred during the following years.

While one can also argue that the civil rights movement is a still ongoing struggle, this research joins the general historical consensus that the assassination of the movement's most famous public figure Martin Luther King (April 4th, 1968) marks the end of this organized mass emancipation movement. Because the periodization of this study almost precisely corresponds with this event, this thesis will follow the most common definition and time frame of the civil rights movement.

Secondly, the **Big Five** is a key concept that requires additional description. In order to successfully draw any conclusions about the civil rights movement as a whole, it is essential to know which organizations, groups or persons were most important and influential in this movement. Today, it is generally agreed upon that among all those who battled for more equality between blacks and whites in the United States, there were five main groups in which the voices of civil rights activists were mobilized.¹⁰ Within the span of the movement, there were also local organizations that represented communities all over the country, but because of their large national influence, the

⁸ Clayborne Carson, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'American civil rights movement':

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119368/American-civil-rights-movement> (31-1-2016)

⁹ Carol Posgrove, *Divided Minds. Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York 2001) Prologue, xv-xviii.

¹⁰ Christopher M. Richardson and Ralph E. Luker, *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham 2014) 512.

following organizations are considered to have formed the Big Five, as was also acknowledged by the country's most influential newspaper *The New York Times*: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).¹¹

A concept that has less sharply defined boundaries, is **emancipation**. The term can apply to the enfranchisement of a myriad of repressed or unequally treated groups of people – for example women and religious or sexual minorities – but its perhaps best-known historical example refers to the abolition of slavery, which was officially implemented after the passing of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in December 1865.¹² This milestone was achieved roughly 100 years before the peak of the American civil rights movement, and therefore Johnson's important civil rights acts can be seen as the delayed follow-up of the post-Civil War efforts to enhance the freedom of blacks. In this research, emancipation refers to the opportunities of African-Americans to live in equal legal, social and economic conditions as whites in the United States.

1.4 Sources

In this thesis, a variety of sources are used to support the validity and reliability of claims made in this research. Apart from the mentioned literature in the historiographical overview, the scholarly discussion in which this thesis can be placed, many books have been written about the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the interfaces between the two. This thesis is partially built upon this literature, but is strengthened and enriched by primary documents dating from the researched period. Below, a short overview of the used sources is presented.

¹¹ M.S. Handler, 'The Big Five in Civil Rights', *The New York Times* 24-07-1966.

¹² Unknown author, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 'Emancipation Proclamation': <http://www.britannica.com/event/Emancipation-Proclamation> (13-6-2015).

The Roosevelt Study Center (RSC) has a large amount of primary documents about the civil rights movement and the Johnson Administration. Statements of the civil rights organizations, reports from the White House and its security agencies such as the FBI are present at the RSC in large amounts. These documents contain valuable information about the way civil rights organizations looked at the Vietnam War, and how the Johnson Administration – especially the federal surveillance – viewed and/or treated these groups subsequently. Wherever possible, these primary documents have been used to strengthen this research.

Especially Martin Luther King (MLK), the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was famous for his charismatic, uplifting speeches. During the heyday of the civil rights movement, speeches were a highly effective method to place certain subjects – such as the Vietnam War and the position on military draft – on the public agenda. Since websites such as *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute* have the full speeches of King in their possession, they have also been consulted.

Influential national newspapers and magazines offer important information for this research. *The New York Times* was America's most authoritative newspaper and most of all preoccupied with civil rights. Articles from the *NYT* contain many original quotes of civil rights leaders, government officials and other directly involved individuals. These newspapers, supplemented with other newspapers and magazines, contain valuable information for the enrichment of this research.

Finally, a significant amount of information for this research is extracted from secondary literature about the civil rights movement (especially detailed studies about the five investigated organizations), the Vietnam War, the Johnson Administration, and, most importantly, the connection between these subjects. An important part of the literature used in this research is (auto)biographies, especially those written by or about leaders of the Big Five.

Problems to be expected

A difficulty in comparing five organizations that differ in age, size, scope and followers, is the fact that the available source material is not equal for all of them. For some of the Big Five, there is a large amount of well-documented primary material, while most information about the others can only be found in secondary literature. Since organizations did not express their opinion out about Vietnam on fixed moments and in the same frequency, it is hard to compare all of the Big Five on the exact same features.

Also, there are not a lot of sources which explicitly state how opinions regarding Vietnam were met by the Johnson Administration. There is a lot of information about how the organizations developed their view on the war, and how their relationship with the Administration developed during that same period, but this does not necessarily imply that the two were causally connected. For drawing a conclusion about the relationship between civil rights groups and the White House, it is important to keep in mind that many other factors than their war opinions could play a role. While it is possible to discover if Vietnam War opposition had positive or negative consequences, it can never be said that this was the only contributing factor to explain the fortunes of the organizations. Such nuances need to be taken into account when drawing conclusions.

1.5 Historiographical overview

When looking at the literature regarding the broad subjects of this research, it is possible to make a division into four major areas: the civil rights movement in general, the Vietnam War protest movement, the development of civil rights during the Cold War period, and finally – most closely related to this research – the way in which the Vietnam War affected the civil rights movement. These four areas, including their most important historiographical implications, will be examined in the following paragraph. After that, I will present in which way this research will add to the existing knowledge and debate(s) about this subject.

1.5.1 The civil rights movement in general

First of all, many studies about the American civil rights movement have been conducted. The study of the civil rights movement has been very popular among historical scholars that research the sixties in the United States. The majority of the authoritative studies regarding the 1960s as a decade is focused towards two major branches of the civil rights movement: 'We Shall Overcome', dealing with the less aggressive, relatively peaceful movement before 1965, and the more vigorous, radicalized period of Black Power among some branches. John Robert Greene researches the former period in his book *America in the Sixties* (2010)¹³, while Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines look at the Black Power movement in *Takin' it to the Streets* (1995).¹⁴ This major division between the mentality of 'We Shall Overcome' and the Black Power movement is often viewed by historians as the only important internal dispute in the African-American community, dealing almost exclusively with domestic issues in the deep South of the United States. Stating that this domestic division was the only aspect of the civil rights movement that was worth studying, led to an oversimplified view of the civil rights struggle. As can be seen further in this overview, understanding the development in the 1960s cannot be seen separately from the Cold War stage, as several authors have also acknowledged.

1.5.2 The Vietnam War protest movement

Secondly, the Vietnam War protest movement and, occasionally, its connection to black protest movements have been researched by historians. The historiographical debate about the Vietnam War is quite comprehensive and intricate. Apart from a few books, which I will discuss below, it can easily be said that studies of the Vietnam War have often neglected the influence of the war on the course of the civil rights movement.

Studies about the impact of the war on domestic issues in the United States, like in *Working Class War* (1993) by Christian G. Appy, have been done quite frequently.¹⁵ However, there have been very few studies that actually acknowledge the important link between the war and the civil rights movement. Protest movements are regularly taken into account when researching Vietnam because they were directly related to the

¹³ John Robert Greene, *America in the Sixties* (Syracuse 2010)

¹⁴ Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, "*Takin' it to the Streets*": *A Sixties Reader* (New York 1995)

¹⁵ Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill 1993)

war, but only a few historians have acknowledged that even a minor connection between the war in Vietnam and the civil rights struggle exists. A good example of this 'blind spot' is George Donelson Moss's book *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* (1990), in which a variety of sides of antiwar movement is covered, but the African-American side is left unmentioned.¹⁶ *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War*, written by Rhodi Jeffreys-Jones, was one of the earliest efforts to actually zoom in on the African-American side of the antiwar movement, but only involved a short chapter on this very comprehensible topic.¹⁷ Simon Hall's article 'The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam' in *The Historical Journal* (2003) is a more detailed study on two of the less radical civil rights organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League, and the way they responded to American involvement in the Vietnam War.¹⁸ Hall concludes that this moderate wing of the movement did not take a stand against the war for strategic reasons, although the conflict in Vietnam provided several reasons to principally condemn it, as other civil rights groups did acknowledge.¹⁹

Some historians have also looked at black soldiers in the American military units that went to Vietnam, and the way in which they connected black inequality at home to serving the American army abroad. The most authoritative and complete book on the intersection between these two subjects is *Brothers in Arms: The African-American Experience in Vietnam*, written by James E. Westheider in 2008. Westheider emphasizes that military service by African-Americans started out as a tool for integration because, for one of the first times in American society, blacks and whites operated on an equal basis. While black solidarity to the USA increased at first, rapid changes in the civil rights movement became a problem as the war progressed. Judicial backwardness on the domestic level and alleged equality on the military level proved to be a discrepancy that would characterize the 1960s as a decade.²⁰

¹⁶ George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* (Bergen County, NJ 1990)

¹⁷ Rhodi Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War*, (New Haven 1999)

¹⁸ Simon Hall, 'Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam' in *The Historical Journal* Volume 46:3 (September 2003) 669-701.

¹⁹ Hall, 'Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam', 699-701.

²⁰ James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham 2007)

1.5.3 Civil rights during the Cold War

The third major research area to which scholars have paid attention is the development of the civil rights movement during the twentieth century, more specifically the Cold War. Several historians have written about the relationship between American foreign policy and the civil rights struggle in the United States. These works focus on either the entire 20th century, the post-World War II period or the Cold War period. While in most of these works the Vietnam War gains only a limited amount of attention, these scholars do recognize that the two topics were closely related. The three most relevant authors have varied opinions on whether or not American intervention abroad affected progress of the battle for more racial equality in the United States in a positive or a negative way.

One of the most authoritative works on American foreign policy and the civil rights movement is *How far the promised land? : world affairs and the American civil rights movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (1999), written by Jonathan Rosenberg. He examines the interweavement between American foreign relations and the struggle for racial justice, the most significant reform movement in the modern history of the United States. By connecting civil rights history, the history of American foreign policy, and international history of the 20st century, Rosenberg makes an important contribution to the study of an essential episode of America's past through a global scope. After zooming in on the link between events on the international stage and the African-American struggle for racial equality, Rosenberg states that the leaders of civil rights organizations were very much interested in looking further than only the United States. Civil rights leaders incorporated their view on American foreign policy abroad into their reform program at home to reinforce and justify their message of full racial equality, which they carried out to their members, followers, the American citizens, and the entire global community.²¹

In *How far the promised land?*, Rosenberg looks at the ways cosmopolitan groups of biracial civil rights activists used global conflicts – such as the two World Wars, the decolonization process in the Third World and the Cold War – to improve the progress of their domestic goals. According to Rosenberg, this complex dynamic must be

²¹ Jonathan Rosenberg, *How far the promised land? : world affairs and the American civil rights movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Ann Arbor 1999)

understood in the light of America's growing interference and activism in international affairs, a development which was reflected on the civil rights battle at home. One of Rosenberg's most important concepts is 'color-conscious internationalism', built on the idea that the African-American backwardness at home was a reflection of worldwide racial struggles by colored minorities. This thought motivated leaders of the civil rights movement and gave a significant legitimization for opposing the Vietnam War.²²

Agreeing with Rosenberg, Mary L. Dudziak states in her book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2000) that the Cold War also contributed to civil rights awareness, not in the least because it could amplify hypocrisy in American policy: fighting for democracy abroad, while neglecting it at home. However, while Rosenberg emphasizes that American actions in global conflicts offered opportunities to point out American bigotry, Dudziak draws an opposite conclusion. In her eyes, the Cold War contained mostly retardant elements for the civil rights movement. In the eyes of Dudziak, the Vietnam War in the 1960s played a role in the eclipse of the domestic problematic of racial inequality. On the one hand, the civil rights movement lost a crucial element of leverage because of the Vietnam War struggle, that was prioritized by the government of the United States. Because of disagreements in the support or opposition to LBJ's foreign policy, the civil rights movements splintered and thereby lost effectiveness. On the other hand, divergent voices had always been present within the movement, which, as Dudziak argues, had never been completely unified.²³

In his book *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (2001), Thomas Borstelmann points out an interesting fact: the Apartheid period in South-Africa (1948-1990) and the Cold War (1947-1989) almost precisely overlapped.²⁴ According to the author, this remarkable parallel is not a coincidence, but instead underlines the high degree of racial inequality in the Cold War conflict. Both the domestic struggle of black Americans, who fought for the same judicial rights as whites, and the Third World colonies, which strived for autonomy from one of the two global superpowers, were important products of the deeply-rooted idea of white supremacy in American policy. Because this tradition of white primacy in the United States was

²² Rosenberg, *How far the promised land?*, 1-12.

²³ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton 2000) 249-254.

²⁴ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 265.

embedded in a broader global pattern of unequal white-black control relations, both systems of racial inequality appeared to be directly related. Therefore, Borstelmann argues, it was predictable that the civil rights movement and Cold War struggles would survive or fall together.²⁵ In the case of Vietnam, this seems to be true to some extent. In the beginning of 1969, the Nixon Administration decided it was time to de-escalate the conflict and pursue a policy of Vietnamization, gradually transferring the military actions to the South-Vietnamese army and retreating American soldiers.²⁶ Less than a year before that, on April 11th 1968 – one week after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed – President Lyndon Johnson signed the final Civil Rights Act, which provided equal housing opportunities for blacks.²⁷ Although it is highly debatable that this established real racial equality, this is considered to be the ending point of the ‘official’ civil rights movement. Therefore it seems reasonable to state the decline of American involvement in the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement went hand in hand.

1.5.4 The civil rights movement during the Vietnam War

After this examination of the most important literature regarding American foreign relations and its entanglement with the battle for racial equality, it has become clear that historians have not yet reached a real consensus. Did American intervention in Vietnam accelerate or slow down civil rights struggles? This is the central question in the following literature that directly address the Vietnam War and the way it affected the civil rights movement. Frequently referring to the above mentioned literature, all scholars provide clear answers to the central question. Although they don’t agree – and therefore leave room for further research – these scholars give some compelling arguments to support their claims. Below a short overview of the main conclusions of their books.

One of the pioneers in researching the link between the Vietnam War and the American civil rights movement is Herbert Shapiro. As early as 1989, he published an article called ‘The Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement’ in *The Journal*

²⁵ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 46.

²⁶ Charles DeBenedetti, *An American ordeal : the antiwar movement of the Vietnam era* (Syracuse 1990) 205-207.

²⁷ Nick Kotz, *Judgment days : Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the laws that changed America* (Boston 2005) 421.

of *Ethnic Studies*.²⁸ In his study, Shapiro examines several expressions of antiwar protests by three of the Big Five organizations (SNCC, CORE and SCLC) until 1967. An important part of this article contains information about (the refusal of) military service by blacks, an issue in which the three mentioned organizations were involved. One of the most interesting findings of this article is the fact that, relatively speaking, blacks were drafted a lot more frequently than whites (64% of eligible blacks versus 31% of eligible whites), something that Shapiro himself sees as a possible punishment for opposition to the Vietnam War.²⁹ In spite of only researching three organizations, Shapiro uses his findings to draw a very broad and ambitious conclusion: the societal fuss that was caused by the black antiwar protest movements resulted in the crossing of the 'racial barrier with regard to the making of American foreign policy.' According to Shapiro, this struggle resulted in the disappearance of the idea that blacks should not get involved in USA's question of war and peace. In conclusion, it is therefore clear that Shapiro thinks that the Vietnam War has been a blessing for the civil rights movement in the long run.³⁰

In a more extensive and detailed study, *Peace and freedom: the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s* (2006), the earlier mentioned Simon Hall focuses on the way in which the entire civil rights movement and the antiwar movements cooperated in the 1960s. The historian comes up with several convincing reasons to assume that the Vietnam War protest movement and the civil rights movement, two of the most significant social movements in American history should have worked together closely: many early opponents of the Vietnam War were icons of the civil rights movement, blacks had powerful reasons to oppose the war, and both the civil rights and the antiwar movements were very critical of American society. In spite of these factors, a meaningful coalition between the two was never constructed. Loyalty to the Johnson Administration, black fear of repression if they were to oppose the war, a lack of white concern with civil rights, welfare rights and other progressive policies were some of the most important reasons why the civil rights and antiwar movements never really joined forces but, eventually, diverged. According to Hall, it can be said that

²⁸ Herbert Shapiro, 'The Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement', in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* Volume 16:4 (Winter 1989) 117-141.

²⁹ Shapiro, 'The Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement', 135-136.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 137.

the primacy that many gave to the Vietnam War was not helpful for the development of equality between blacks and whites in the 1960s.³¹

Daniel Seth Lucks, a scholar who most recently published a study on these subjects, comes to a radically different conclusion than his predecessors. In *Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War* (2014), Lucks has a very outspoken view on the symbiosis between the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War: the latter one heavily stood in the way of any serious improvement in the battle for legal, social and economic rights for blacks. While President Johnson actively battled for more equality, Lucks argues, the intense military expenditure that was necessary for the war was at the expense of the Great Society project, which eventually collapsed because of it. Also, emotional debates on American involvement in Vietnam among civil rights activists turned tensions below the surface into fissures between these activists, which turned out to be disastrous for their effectiveness. Together with decreasing devotion in the civil rights struggle and the death of many African-American soldiers in Vietnam, the intensification of schisms within the civil rights coalition, the war greatly drained the strength of the various civil rights groups.³²

As this literature report has shown, the relationship between American foreign relations and the civil rights movement is a far from unexplored field. A respectable group of scholars has examined the ways in which individuals, regions, organizations as well as the United States as a whole dealt with the intersection of these two topics. Small as well as broad scopes of research have provided better insights on racial tensions in the US in a period of international turmoil. Some authors have shed light on the main question of my research ('Was the Vietnam War helpful or unhelpful in the struggle of the American civil rights movement?'). While there are several similarities between their conclusions, it can easily be said that a veracious and satisfying consensus has not yet been reached.

³¹ Simon Hall, *Peace and freedom: the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s* (Philadelphia 2006) 187-194.

³² Daniel Seth Lucks, *Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War* (Lexington 2014) 252-253.

1.5.5. Innovative aspects

Although quite a lot of attempts have been made to explain how the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War were related, this thesis is innovative in two ways.

First of all, the above mentioned studies have focused on either the civil rights movement as a whole – which is an oversimplification because of its huge diversity – or, by focusing on a few leaders or groups, only in a fragmentary way. Until now, there has never been a comparative research that systematically takes into account every single one of the Big Five civil rights organizations. This has caused an incomplete and perhaps incorrect picture of the struggle of the African-American population in the 1960s. By examining the behavior of each organization and relating it to presidential actions in a period of approximately four years, this thesis contributes to the existing knowledge about the civil rights movement. Given the current lack of a comprehensive research in which the Big Five are covered, this research is a step towards a more inclusive and complete scientific description of the black struggle during one of the most important decades in American history.

Secondly, scholarly research on the civil rights movement and antiwar protests was up to now primarily focused on the movement itself. Significantly less detailed studies, however, have been conducted about the response of the federal government. Books and articles that give attention to the way in which Lyndon Johnson and his administration treated the activists among the black part of American Society, are quite scarce. If this thesis shows how the Washington authorities dealt with African-American antiwar behavior, the question about the (counter)productivity of Vietnam War opposition can be answered more satisfactory.

1.6 Design of the thesis

After this paragraph, the research will be split up into five main chapters. Each chapter provides valuable information which is necessary to form a complete and correct answer to the thesis' hypothesis and main research question.

Chapter two describes the historical context in which the remainder of the research needs to be placed. Starting with the postwar situation in Vietnam, this

chapter will give an overview of the developments and considerations that preceded the Johnson Administration's choice to escalate the war in the summer of 1964. Also, the implications of this decision for the African-American community in the United States will be sketched.

Chapter three focuses on the history, background and signature of the Big Five of civil rights organizations and their leaders. The historical narratives of the five targeted groups are necessary to fully understand how and why they differed, and which implications these differences might have had for their opinions towards Vietnam. In order to provide the legitimation for the structure of the most important part of this research, the five organizations will be divided into two main categories or subgroups.

The fourth and fifth chapters comprise the core of the thesis. For the three groups that openly opposed the conflict in Vietnam (chapter four) and the two groups that did not openly attack it (chapter five), all the sub-questions will pass in review through a chronological analysis. By doing this, several stages and patterns of Vietnam War opinions among the Big Five and their leaders will be discerned. At the end of both chapters, the developments for all the individually researched groups within the chapter will be tied together for the purpose of sketching a general narrative, after which an evaluation of the researched period can be made.

The sixth and last chapter serves as a prelude to the conclusion. In two different ways, a final balance of Johnson's contribution to the black emancipation struggle will be drawn. Firstly, the chapter discusses a broad picture of the state of racial relations in American society, after which a brief comparison of the Big Five after Johnson's withdrawal will finish the analytical part of the research.

After these chapters, a concise summary of the research's main findings will follow in the conclusion. Each of the original sub-questions will be answered by building on the results of fourth, fifth and sixth chapters. Finally, the main starting point of the thesis – the question whether or not speaking out about Vietnam was a vehicle or an obstacle for black emancipation – will be reviewed in a hypothesis recap.

Chapter 2. Vietnam, Johnson's dilemma and African-Americans

In order to understand the relationship between the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of how and why the United States got involved in the Southeast-Asian conflict. Although President Lyndon B. Johnson – who took office immediately after the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) – was resolute to make the reduction of black inequality his main priority, the geopolitical climate and policies of his predecessors forced 'LBJ' to divert the lion's share of his energy to the conflict in Vietnam. This chapter will give an overview of the developments prior to Johnson's decision to escalate the war in the summer of 1964. Also, developments in the American society after World War II will pass in review, after which the complicated position of the African-American community will become clearer.

2.1 American help for the French colonizer

Just as many decolonization struggles in Southeast Asia, Vietnam's battle for autonomy started shortly after the Second World War.³³ On the day that Japan formally surrendered to the United States (September 2nd, 1945) Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) – the communist leader of the Vietnamese independence movement Vietminh since 1941 – read the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, using a terminology similar to that of Thomas Jefferson's famous Declaration of Independence. For achieving full autonomy, Ho Chi Minh counted on the support of the United States, the country that defeated Vietnam's occupier Japan. Despite of their self-proclaimed rule as liberator of the colonized, the United States decided to adapt to a strategy of informal imperialism: instead of taking control of the countries they liberated from Japan themselves, the Americans 'outsourced' territorial rule to their European allies.³⁴

One of the clearest examples of this strategy is American support for the battle of France – which had been the colonial ruler of Vietnam from 1887 until the Japanese

³³ David B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance. European Overseas Empires 1415-1980* (New Haven & London 2000) 140.

³⁴ Julian Go, 'Global Fields and Imperial Forms: Field Theory and the British and American Empires', *Sociological Theory* 26:3 (September 2008) 209-213.

occupation in 1940 – to regain control of its former colony. The United States heavily supported the French (who lacked serious economic and military power after the devastation caused by World War II) during this First Indochina War, which started in 1946. Besides Cold War interests on the European continent – by aiding the French in Vietnam, then-president Truman hoped to win French support for the pro-German restoration of Europe’s economies – there was one major argument for re-establishing French rule in Vietnam: the Domino theory. In the beginning of the 1950s, American policymakers were convinced of the importance of this comprehensive geopolitical concept, which implied that when Indochina would ‘fall’ to Communism, the other nations of Southeast Asia would inevitably follow like a sequence of collapsing dominos. Events that reinforced American belief in the Domino theory were Mao Zedong’s communist coup in China (1949) and the Korea War (1950-1953), resulting in a communist, Soviet supported North Korea.³⁵

Despite the massive American assistance – by 1952, the United States was paying for around 80 percent of France’s military expenses – France was unable to secure victory. Under the leadership of the charismatic Ho Chi Minh, over 300,000 Vietnamese citizens were willing to fight, and in the end the French were humiliated at Dien Bien Phu (March 1954) after eight years of brutal warfare.³⁶

The Geneva Conference and Diem’s puppet regime

After the definitive end of the First Indochina War in May 1954, a solution for the power vacuum in Vietnam needed to be found. In order to determine the country’s provisional fate, the Soviet Union, China, France, the United Kingdom and the United States came together in the Swiss city of Geneva to discuss the possibilities for lasting peace and stability in Vietnam. Although the Vietminh, a party that was led by the communist-inspired Ho Chi Minh, had won the war against the French colonizer, American officials were very keen on limiting communist influence on the country. After more than two months of negotiations, a solution was reached on July 21st, 1954: Vietnam was divided into Northern and Southern halves and would be ruled by separate regimes. The Geneva Accords seemed to mirror the decision to split Korea one

³⁵ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States And Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Oxford 2001) 11-13.

³⁶ Paul Atwood, *War and Empire. The American Way of Life* (London 2010) 191.

year earlier, as the division of Vietnam was also intended to be only temporary. Elections to reunite the country under a unified government were scheduled for the summer of 1956, and in the South, these elections would be aided by the United States. It was also agreed upon that Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh, which enjoyed huge popular support, would lead the North of the country. In a short period of time, Ho Chi Minh successfully implemented Communism as the leading political-economic system in North Vietnam.³⁷

In the South, Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-1963), a Catholic politician who had lived in Washington for many years and was largely unknown to the majority of South Vietnam, was put into power by the United States. According to many historians, Diem's presidency was the result of rigged elections: Diem won the election contest with the sitting head of state Bao Dai with a questionable 98 percent of the votes.³⁸ Diem was only supposed to lead the South until the summer elections of 1956 would unify Vietnam, but out of fear for a nation-wide victory for the Vietminh, the president prevented the democratic elections from taking place. Since the Eisenhower Administration (1953-1961) shared this same fear, Diem retained American support, making it possible for him to continue his dictatorial regime. Because of his enormous aversion against Communism, Diem's assistants brutally repressed and silenced the people who were suspected of sympathizing with the National Liberation Front (NLF), a militant arm of the Vietminh that wanted to liberate the South Vietnamese countryside from western influences. Because, in the eyes of the Buddhist majority of the country, Diem favored Catholics, popular support for the president rapidly dropped.³⁹

The decreasing popularity of the Diem government created fertile ground for infiltrations by the so-called Vietcong, which became a sort of sobriquet for the NLF after President Diem used the term to discredit the North Vietnamese communists. By 1959, the Vietcong began a large scale insurgency to 'liberate' the South from Western influences. While the date is still debated up to this day, the first battle between the South Vietnamese army and Vietcong warriors (September 26th, 1959) is often

³⁷ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 36-41.

³⁸ Atwood, *War and Empire*, 192.

³⁹ Herbert Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President. Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton 1977) 5.

considered as the start of the Second Indochina War, in the West better known as the Vietnam War.⁴⁰

Although he was supported and advised by the United States' government, Diem's policies regarding land reform were ineffective, which only bolstered support for the Vietcong in large parts of the Southern countryside. Since Vietnam was divided in 1954, the United States had also provided the South Vietnamese army with military equipment, ammunitions and advisers. In spite of these intentions to reach a stable situation that would ensure American interests, the result of Diem's 'puppet regime' was a corrupt and generally incapable fighting force, which gradually strengthened the belief of many American policymakers that they needed to take matters into their own hands.⁴¹ In November of the year 1963, Diem was arrested and assassinated by some of his generals with the tacit approval of the Kennedy Administration.⁴² Three weeks later, the American President John F. Kennedy got shot in Dallas, after which his Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in to be the 36th President of the United States.

2.2 Kennedy's inheritance and Johnson's dilemma

When he became president, Johnson inherited a conflict that was much more intense and flammable than any of his predecessors had anticipated. During Diem's nine years in power, the opposition had systematically been destroyed, causing a political vacuum in the South after his assassination. While Buddhists and Catholics were the largest and most important groups in Vietnam, their hatred of each other, internal fragmentation and lack of political appeal resulted in the absence of powerful political leadership. The North Vietnamese communists were quick to exploit the confusion in South Vietnam through a powerful political and military offensive in late 1963. Especially in the countryside, the Vietcong's control was far tighter than US officials had anticipated.⁴³

⁴⁰ Unknown Author, *The Pentagon Papers*, 'Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954-1960', (Gravel Edition), Volume 1, Chapter 5, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Section 3, pp. 314-346; International Relations Department, Mount Holyoke College.

⁴¹ Donald W. Katzner,, 'The Civil Rights and Vietnam War Protest Movements', in *At the Edge of Camelot: Debating Economics in Turbulent Times* (Oxford 2011) 4-5.

⁴² Unknown Author, *JFK Library*, 'Vietnam': <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Vietnam.aspx> (1-2-2016)

⁴³ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 108-110.

For the Johnson Administration, the timing of this crisis in Vietnam could not have come at a worse moment. After JFK's death – a great national tragedy – the new president was set on restoring calm and order in the USA, as well as the Great Society project, the battle against poverty and racial injustice in America, Johnson's brainchild that was supposed to be the main objective of his presidency. Johnson himself had experienced poverty when growing up in the Southern state of Texas, but entered the White House as one of the wealthiest American presidents in history. The way Johnson climbed up the social ladder to achieve political and material success was a great representation of the American Dream, something which 'LBJ' hoped to reflect in his policy through battling for equal possibilities and welfare for all Americans, regardless of the color of their skin.⁴⁴ The president tried to reach this goal by launching his Great Society, the largest and most far-reaching domestic legislation program since Franklin D. Roosevelt's (1882-1945) New Deal in the 1930's. Central to the Great Society, which encompassed Johnson's vision for a new America, were the promotion of racial equality, the improvement of education and the rejuvenation of impoverished cities. The most ambitious and demanding aspect of the project was the War on Poverty, first introduced by Johnson during his State of the Union address on the 8th of January, 1964. As a result of this legislation, the federal government's financial resources for improving education, health care and poverty reduction greatly increased. Among other things, this led to the implementation of the Economic Opportunity Act, Food Stamp Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Social Security Act.

Since poverty, illiteracy and general socio-economic backwardness were especially high among black citizens in the Southern states, Johnson saw the Great Society as one of the most important vehicles for closing the gap between blacks and whites in the United States. Johnson and his policymakers had scheduled to spend several tens of billions on the Great Society, making it the main objective of the administration.⁴⁵

The crisis in Vietnam was an intrusion to this ambition, but out of fear to lose face – Johnson did not want to go down in history as the first president to lose a war – the

⁴⁴ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 172-173.

⁴⁵ Unknown Author, *Miller Center of Public Affairs*, 'Lyndon B. Johnson: Domestic Affairs': <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/lbjohnson-domestic-affairs> (01-02-2016)

president felt he could not afford to cut back on military spending. Because of Johnson's inexperience in complex foreign policy issues, he decided to retain Kennedy's top advisers such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. They had all played important roles in creating Kennedy's Vietnam strategy, and they decided that American commitment to holding the line in South Vietnam was very important for America's position in world politics. Johnson's advisers felt that Chinese aggression in Southeast Asia and Soviet expansionism would thrive with a communist-dominated Vietnam, which would, according to Rusk, have 'profound consequences everywhere', referring to the American disaster scenario of an Eastern hemisphere dominated by Communism. The Johnson Administration felt the necessity to suppress Vietcong influence in South Vietnam, but there was very little enthusiasm about sending large groups of American forces, because it would probably choke off Johnson's Great Society program and provoke a huge amount of anti-American propaganda. Therefore, during the first half of 1964, the United States government decided to expand the size of the South Vietnamese army and to discourage coups against the military leadership of general Nguyen Khanh. Because the Vietcong was too firmly entrenched into large parts of the country, however, they could not be contained without the intervention of massive American forces.⁴⁶

Tonkin incident and escalation

After Johnson took office in the United States, stability in South Vietnam was very far away, while the South Vietnamese troops were generally weak and ineffective. In addition to the support of continuous attacks on areas under Vietcong control and the bombing of supply lines near the border with Laos, the American military forces began backing South Vietnamese raids of the North Vietnamese coast. After an incident with two destroyer ships in August 1964, the Johnson Administration officially decided that the only solution to the flammable situation in Vietnam was escalation: increasing the amount of American troops. The US marines stationed two destroyers, the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*, in the Gulf of Tonkin (close to the North Vietnamese coast) to provoke a reaction. On the 2nd and 4th of August, American military forces reported two attacks on the ships. Doubts later emerged as to whether or not the attack against the *Turner Joy*

⁴⁶ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 112-119.

had really taken place: critics of the Vietnam War said that the incident was made up to orchestrate a *casus belli* (an attack or event that justifies going to war) for American involvement.⁴⁷

After the second attack, the Senate and the House of Representatives passed the Tonkin Resolution, which the Congress supported. This provided the justification for further American escalation of the conflict in Vietnam. The Johnson Administration did not immediately attack North Vietnamese targets after the incident, because elections were fast approaching in November. By escalating the war, Johnson feared, he would possibly jeopardize his chances for a re-election. After he won the elections (by a landslide victory) and got inaugurated in January 1965, LBJ and his advisers agreed that Communist infiltration from North Vietnam needed to be stopped, just as the weapon supply lines that ran from the north to the Vietcong on the Southern countryside.⁴⁸ Johnson and his advisers believed that, as damages would rise, the North Vietnamese capital Hanoi would eventually stop supporting the Vietcong in the South. The administration ordered the American military to start a bombing campaign against the north on February 13th, 1965, which marked the start of Operation Rolling Thunder. The bombing campaign was the start of the escalation of American involvement in the Vietnam War. The air strikes in the North were only effective to a limited extent, and after intelligence reports warned about the worsening of the military situation in South Vietnam, Secretary of State Robert McNamara (1916-2009) declared that 'bombing would not do the job alone'. US intelligence forces therefore decided to deploy large numbers of American marines and, after some hesitation, around 40,000 ground forces in the countryside to combat Vietcong guerrilla troops.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty. The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore and London 2004) 416-418.

⁴⁸ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 124-125.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 129-133.

2.3 The United States after World War II

After World War Two, the United States stood at the peak of the world in terms of economic, political, military and cultural power. The European continent, which was in ruins after five devastating years of warfare, was economically powerless and its inhabitants looked at their American liberators with awe. With the Marshall Aid, an enormous project to rebuild Europe financially, the Americans made sure that their European allies adopted free market economies. Through this strategic support plan, the United States ensured that Europe's main economic focus would be aimed across the Atlantic Ocean, rather than towards the communists in Eastern Europe.⁵⁰ American trade greatly benefited from this dynamic, which definitively banished the Great Depression. Shortly after the end of the war, the United States became the most prosperous, well-faring state of the world.⁵¹ As a result of the return of militaries, peace and the post-war optimism, the birth rate dramatically increased in this period, which is why the first years after World War II are often referred to as the baby boom. Especially during the end of the 1950s, the American economy skyrocketed due to this baby boom and America's enormous popularity in Europe, which made the transatlantic continent an enormous market for US products. While there were still huge wealth differences among the American citizens, one could say that this growth positively affected not only the happy few but the majority of the large middle class. Social mobility became significantly higher during this period.

All these advantages didn't apply to the majority of the black population in the South, which still lived in backward conditions and had little possibilities for proper education. Also, the so-called Jim Crow-laws, legitimated by the 'Separate but Equal' doctrine, prohibited blacks from obtaining basic rights such as voting, as well as segregation in schools, buses and other public facilities.⁵²

In the approximately 15 years after the war, America had turned into the world's first mass consumerist society: enormous economic growth enhanced possibilities for many poor groups. Social mobility, which embodied the original idea of the American dream, also created hope for the African-American community that– despite serving in

⁵⁰ Bert Altena en Dick van Lente, *Vrijheid en Rede. Geschiedenis van Westerse Samenlevingen 1750-1989* (Rotterdam 2011) 290-292.

⁵¹ Andrew Bacevich, *The Short American Century. A Postmortem* (Boston 2013) 16.

⁵² H.W. Brands, *American Dreams. The United States Since 1945* (London 2011) 86-91.

the war side by side with whites – was far from equal in daily practice.⁵³ William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) DuBois (1868-1963), one of the most influential black intellectuals of the first half of the 20 century, declared that he hoped that World War Two might ‘openly and declaredly become a war for full racial and cultural equality’.⁵⁴ Three years after the war, DuBois’ wish was far from reality. Segregation based on skin color was still widespread in the USA, which led Philip A. Randolph (1889-1979), also highly regarded in African-American circles, to say that racial segregation was ‘the greatest single propaganda and political weapon in the hand of Russia and international Communism today.’⁵⁵

A spirit of activism

During the 1960s, a large amount of the children of the postwar baby boom became adults. This generation, growing up in the second half of the sixties, unhitched a disobedience to the values of the traditional authorities, inter alia regarding faith, sexuality and patriotism. Unlike their parents, who regarded foreign policy in a paradigm of good (the United States) versus bad (Nazi’s and communists), this generation continuously questioned the justness of American policy abroad.⁵⁶ They developed a spirit of activism, agitating against their elders and the establishment of the country. Influenced by this activist spirit, which developed the strongest in the more progressive North, black Americans from the South also started to understand that ‘the times they are a-changin’, as the immensely popular protest singer Bob Dylan sung it in 1964.

Especially in the South, the disenfranchisement – the lack of basic rights, in particular referring to voting – of blacks led to activism among the African-American community. This became all the more apparent due to the earlier mentioned growth of welfare for the majority of the American population. Protests against inequality were not limited to communities of disadvantaged blacks, but were fueled by a nationwide tendency of protest and discontent.⁵⁷ Particularly among young people, increasing resistance arose against Cold War militarism, materialism and the general moral

⁵³ Bacevich, *The Short American Century*, 38-39.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 65.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 69.

⁵⁶ Brands, *American Dreams*, 68-84.

⁵⁷ Michael Anderson, *The Civil Rights Movement. 20th Century Perspectives* (Chicago 2003) 38.

orthodoxy of older generations. Together, these elements of resistance formed the basis for an anti-establishment counterculture. Protests, gathered under the umbrella term New Left, were organized by students and other high-educated individuals who were critical about the traditional culture in the United States, and opted for pacifism, tolerance and (racial) equality.⁵⁸

In this spirit, the struggle for black civil rights, which had officially started roughly ten years earlier, could begin to flourish. Even though most moderate blacks said to consider civil rights as a patriotic, domestic affair, African-American struggles for justice had a wider scope. It retained worldviews and claims to truth that sharply clashed with the prevailing terms of Cold War foreign policy.⁵⁹

The African-American connection with the war

While President Johnson cared most about domestic politics, the Vietnam War formed an inconvenient distraction and, eventually, an obsession that slowly diverted his attention away from the Great Society.⁶⁰ Early in 1966, Johnson admitted that the drastic cuts in the domestic budget were a result of the battle in Southeast Asia: 'Because of Vietnam, we cannot do all that we should, or all that we would like to do.'⁶¹ Money and energy which were intended to fight poverty in the American ghettos, were drained away to fight guerrilla soldiers of the Vietcong, an unsuccessful undertaking that was only gradually reversed when Johnson's successor Nixon decided to implement a policy of 'Vietnamization'. At least \$150 billion was spent directly on the war, a sum that, had there been no Vietnam War, could have largely been used for national health care, education and housing programs that were so badly needed in the United States.⁶²

For African-Americans, there was another reason to be worried about the impact of the Vietnam War on their own wellbeing. Although the armed services were traditionally seen as a vehicle for black advancement, a way to escape the harsh reality of the ghettos, statistics about blacks in Vietnam proved otherwise. In 1967, 64% of eligible blacks were drafted, while, in comparison, only 31% of eligible whites was

⁵⁸ Anderson, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 57-58.

⁵⁹ Bacevich, *The Short American Century*, 70.

⁶⁰ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 175.

⁶¹ Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (New York 1993) 205.

⁶² Atwood, *War and Empire*, 196-198.

drafted to serve in the military in Southeast Asia. This was partially the result of *Project 100,000*, initiated by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in the fall of 1966.⁶³ Officially, the project was part of the War on Poverty, a liberal effort to uplift the poor. This program, McNamara claimed, would offer valuable training and opportunity to America's 'subterranean poor.' In the Secretary's own words, lowering military standards to enable the draft of many illiterate, undereducated Americans offered them the tools to escape poverty. 'The poor of America have not had the opportunity to earn their fair share of this nation's abundance, but they can be given an opportunity to return to civilian life with skills and aptitudes which for them and their families will reverse the downward spiral of decay', McNamara said.⁶⁴

For *Project 100,000*, medical and mental standards used to recruit soldiers were lowered, making many black Americans – who had previously evaded the draft because of poor education opportunities – were now eligible. Ironically enough, these black soldiers were now obliged to fight alongside often racially intolerant white men from the Southern States. About 246,000 men were recruited between October 1966 and June 1969 – 41% were black, although black Americans represented only 11% of the US population. 58,000 American soldiers lost their lives in the conflict, 22 percent of whom were black. In comparison with white American soldiers, blacks were disproportionately assigned to infantry positions, making them extra vulnerable for being killed by Vietcong guerrilla troops. In addition to this disproportionately high amount of African-American casualties, there was also a striking difference in their military ranks. In total, there were over 17,000 draft board members, but only 261 of them were black. Less than 3% of the officers in the army were black, less than 1% in the marines.⁶⁵ One could say that 'Jim Crow was enforced even among those fighting to bring democracy to Vietnam.'⁶⁶

In spite of the promises that serving would lead to self-determination and social mobility for the less fortunate Americans, many poor, confused and unprepared young black men were sent to risk death in Vietnam. In a way, McNamara's promises were exemplary for the way in which American officials explained and justified the Vietnam

⁶³Robert McNamara, 'Memorandum for the President: Subject: Project One Hundred Thousand http://www.aavw.org/protest/draft_100000_abstract15.html (20-4-2015)

⁶⁴ Appy, *Working Class War*, 32.

⁶⁵ James Maycock, *The Guardian*, 'War within war': <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/sep/15/weekend7.weekend3> (20-4-2015)

⁶⁶ Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart. SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill 2007) 233.

War itself. These officials claimed that, instead of a unilateral military intervention to support a corrupt and unpopular regime, military intervention in Vietnam was a generous effort to improve the possibilities for welfare of the people of South Vietnam. In the same way, dragging many powerless blacks into the war was presented as a gesture, something from which the African-Americans would greatly benefit.⁶⁷ Many black Americans felt betrayed by their own government, which had promised to fight for their wellbeing at home. For many of them, including a variety of members from the five biggest civil rights organizations, it became more and more difficult to deny the interconnectedness of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement's emancipation struggle. This connection provided the Big Five of civil rights organizations with an interesting and complex problem: since it apparently stood in the way of their own emancipation struggle, should they oppose the War in Vietnam?

Conclusion

It seems clear that the war was a potential obstacle for the effectiveness of the civil rights movement. The majority of blacks in the United States had not profited from the socio-economic progress of the country after World War II, and their possibility to bridge the socio-economic gap was endangered by the Vietnam War, a neocolonial conflict that heavily drew upon black military personnel. For some civil rights activists these were reasons to oppose the war, while others remained silent. For an analysis of the development of the Big Five's Vietnam War opinions, it is first helpful and necessary to examine these five organizations in more detail.

⁶⁷ Appy, *Working Class War*, 32-33.

Chapter 3. The Big Five in civil rights

It is too simple to state that the Big Five – NAACP, the National Urban League, CORE, SCLC and SNCC – encompassed the entire civil rights movement. Many important individuals, such as the head of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), Philip A. Randolph, and the wealthy entertainer Harry Belafonte were heavily involved in the black emancipation struggle. The same can be said for organizations like the Nation of Islam (NOI) – with icons such as Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Louis Farrakhan and Elijah Muhammad –, the Black Panther Party, the National Baptist Convention (NBC), the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which all empowered the civil rights movement through moral, organizational and financial support and contributed to several landmark events in civil rights history.

Without doing injustice to the contributions of other groups and individuals, however, it is safe to say that the majority of influential civil rights activists was represented in these five organizations, which were also frequently referred to as the Big Five in national media.⁶⁸ Most sit-ins, marches, speeches and conventions that addressed civil rights on the national level were organized by members of these five, which were the only civil rights organizations that had the opportunity of keeping frequent contact with President Johnson. A good example of the close contact between the Johnson Administration and the Big Five was the White House Conference on Civil Rights in June 1966, in which affiliates of all these organizations – except for SNCC that boycotted the conference – were present.⁶⁹ Ground-breaking events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington and the Selma-Montgomery marches, all of which will be briefly explained in the following paragraphs, were mostly a result of the actions of the Big Five.

For each one of the Big Five, this chapter will contain a short overview of how, when, why and by whom the organization was established. The main goals, the strategies to achieve these goals and the leadership of the organization until the Vietnam War will be roughly sketched. For understanding the way the Big Five of civil rights organizations formed opinions about the conflict in Southeast Asia, and how this

⁶⁸ M.S. Handler, *New York Times*, 'The Big Five in Civil Rights', 24-7-1966.

⁶⁹ Kevin L. Yuill, 'The 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights', *The Historical Journal* Volume 41 (January 1998) 259-282.

affected their relationships with the Johnson Administration, it is crucial to understand the roots and developments of each of them.

3.1 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

Before the outbreak of the civil rights movement as we know it today, which is considered to have started with the *Brown vs. Board of Education Case* in 1954, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was by far the dominant and most important African-American protest organization. Established in 1909 with the sole purpose to battle for equal rights for black Americans, the NAACP is considered to be a pioneer within the movement.

Until the Second World War, racial segregation (especially in the South) was quite common and accepted in the United States. Nevertheless, there were already organizations that resisted this seemingly unchangeable dynamic. High-educated black individuals, which lived mainly in the North because education opportunities were more equally divided there, started an official organization in the beginning of the 20th century. The initiator was W.E.B. DuBois, who experienced racism in his home state Massachusetts from the beginning of his life. Because his intellectual potential was recognized by teachers, he was able to follow a university education, which finally led him to become a renowned author and professor at Pennsylvania and Atlanta.⁷⁰ Gradually, he became one of the two main spokespersons for the black community, only second to Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). Around the start of the 20th century, Washington's strategy of so-called *accommodationism* was the standard in the United States. This strategy assumed that blacks would eventually achieve full equality if they showed themselves to be productive, compliant members of society. Exemplary was the Atlanta Compromise (1895), in which Washington and several white Southern political leaders agreed that blacks would submit to white rule in exchange for the funding of black educational charities.⁷¹ DuBois criticized the ideas of Booker T. Washington, and argued that black political action and agitation were required to reach progress. In New York, DuBois' ideas were well received and in 1909 the National

⁷⁰ Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword. The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (London 2004) 7-13.

⁷¹ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York 2009) 180-181.

Negro Committee was created, changing its name to NAACP a year later.⁷² Through legal action, the NAACP was committed to bridging the huge judicial gap between black and white everywhere in the country. During the 1920s and 1930s, the association was quite successful. It instituted litigations for the well-being of black soldiers serving in the US military during the First World War, as well as countless other proceedings in which the NAACP advocated the rights of disadvantaged blacks. Only ten years after its foundation, the NAACP also became influential in the South, where local churches provided the funding for the organization's work. By 1919, the amount of members was higher in the South (roughly 42.000) than in the North (roughly 38.000) of the country.⁷³ Many of the NAACP's legal cases were initiated in the South, where political disenfranchisement, segregated public transport, segregated education and lynching were the most intense.⁷⁴

NAACP was biracial: it was founded by both black and white intellectuals, mostly based in New York, to organize the black masses to struggle for their rights. With one exception – DuBois became the Director of Publicity and Research – all the top administrative positions in the organization were filled by whites. During the next few decades, the African-American share in the most important organizational positions increased, but whites always stayed involved and had important roles inside the organization.⁷⁵

Because of the centrally organized policymaking of NAACP, the New York hierarchy largely decided which plans of action were to be followed. Given the intellectual origins of the organization, its principal tactics were based upon the idea that black emancipation could be achieved through persuasion and legal action. With its strong belief in the power of education, the NAACP believed that racism in America was rooted in ignorance: if prejudices and stereotypes could be disproven, whites would eventually overcome their own ignorance and treat blacks as equals. Especially high educated community leaders, such as lawyers, doctors, union organizers and other professionals – who were usually already affiliated with NAACP in one way or another –

⁷² Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York 1984), 12-14.

⁷³ Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, 22.

⁷⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 14-16.

⁷⁵ Yvonne Ryan, *Leading from the Back: Roy Wilkins and his leadership of the NAACP, 1955-1968* (Leiden 2009) 18-20.

strongly identified with this strategy, and strengthened their ties through participating in the NAACP.⁷⁶

The intellectual identity of the NAACP attracted widespread sympathy and support, but at the same time it stood in the way of the organization's chances to organize a mass popular base. Mass participation among different socio-economic layers within the black community was discouraged by the NAACP's bureaucratic structure and complex legal procedures, affairs which African-Americans from humble descent knew very little about. Individual contribution often consisted of little more than making donations and informing the (relatively small) local organizations about racial injustice and discrimination. Being the dominant black protest organization during the first half of the twentieth century, NAACP nevertheless enjoyed great respect among the majority of African-Americans. It was through their pioneer work that the stage for the challenging of racism and segregation was set, making NAACP the example for many local leaders during the modern civil rights movement.⁷⁷ In this light it is no coincidence that the main catalyst in the black emancipation struggle, the successful *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) case, which legally ended segregation in public schools, was largely instigated by NAACP.⁷⁸ Under the leadership of the law-abiding, legislative lobbyist Roy Wilkins (1901-1981), who succeeded Walter White as executive secretary in 1955, NAACP remained a key player in the civil rights movement throughout (and after) the Cold War period. Wilkins' resentment to aggressively challenge the existing political and legal authorities, as well as his continuous anticommunist stance, greatly shaped both the organization's civil rights actions and its view on the Vietnam War.⁷⁹

3.2 National Urban League

The National Urban League, established in 1910, was quite similar to the NAACP in terms of mission, followers and strategy. Just as its 'big brother' one year earlier, the National Urban League was founded in New York City through biracial cooperation to

⁷⁶ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 12-14.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 14-16.

⁷⁸ NAACP, 'NAACP Legal History': <http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-legal-history> (23-4-2015).

⁷⁹ Hall, 'The response of the moderate wing of the civil rights movement to the war in Vietnam', 669-701.

achieve socio-economic progress among blacks in urban areas. The organization formally came into existence after a merger of three organizations: The National League for the Protection of Colored Women, The Committee for Improving the Industrial Conditions for Negroes in New York and the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes in New York. These three joined forces under the name National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, and in 1920 this was shortened to the National Urban League.⁸⁰

After the landmark *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision (1896) – which gave legal grounds for the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine in the South – thousands of blacks fled northwards during the first decades of the 20th century to escape the vivid racial segregation in their Southern home states. The National Urban League’s main focus was helping these migrants, who were used to life in rural areas, assimilate into the city. Although living conditions for blacks were a lot better in the North, there was still a high degree of inequality on the labor market, in health care and housing and education opportunities. With the financial and organizational help of many academics – such as the Urban League’s first leader George Edmund Haynes, who was the first African-American to obtain a PhD at Columbia University – and philanthropists, the Urban League gradually expanded its primary goal of helping migrants in cities in the New York area into larger concerns. After the organization’s initial success in New York City, National Urban League offices also arose: by the end of World War I, the organization had staff members working in 30 cities.⁸¹ Especially during the 1930’s Great Depression, the League fought hard to improve labor opportunities for blacks through boycotts of racist firms, job training for young people and negotiations with segregated labor unions.⁸²

Despite its useful affirmative action for socio-economic emancipation for blacks in (mostly) Northern areas, the National Urban League was smaller and less influential than the other four. However, under the leadership of Whitney Young (1921-1971), who grew up in the segregated South, the organization came significantly closer to full involvement in the civil rights movement. During World War II, Young was assigned to

⁸⁰ Susan Altman, *The Encyclopedia of African-American Heritage* (New York 1997)

⁸¹ National Urban League, ‘Mission and History’: <http://nul.iamempowered.com/who-we-are/mission-and-history> (7-5-2015).

⁸² Richard Wormser, *Jim Crow Stories*, ‘Urban League’: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_org_urban.html (7-5-2015).

a road construction crew of black soldiers under the supervision of white Southern officers. In spite of the racial tensions between black and white soldiers, Young's wise decisions in wartime got him promoted from private to sergeant. He addressed racial issues inside the army, and stressed that blacks wanted to be treated with respect for their service to the country. Young's military superiors respected his bravery, which resulted in less hostile behavior towards blacks. When returning home, however, Young realized that the racism he witnessed in his first period in the army was still very much alive inside the United States. After discovering he had hidden skills in debating and negotiating about racial issues, Young decided to devote his life to civil rights.⁸³ At the end of the 1940s, Young started working for local branches of the National Urban League in Nebraska (St. Paul and Omaha). Quickly gaining more respect among the civil rights movement's most influential individuals, such as his good friend Roy Wilkins (NAACP), Young was unanimously elected as the Executive President of the National Urban League in 1961.⁸⁴

Young greatly expanded the League's mission by negotiating with policymakers on the local, state and federal level, while at the same time keeping the support of important businessmen by following a relatively moderate, cautious approach. By advising the presidents Kennedy and Johnson on civil rights, as well as developing close relationships with CEO's of major corporations – such as Henry Ford II – Young was able to improve the influence, staff and budget of his organization enormously. Many blacks accused him of selling out to the white establishment, but Young and the National Urban League nevertheless took a firm stand in favor of the civil rights struggle, exemplified by their involvement in organizing the famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963).⁸⁵ Even though, compared to the pre-Young era, the National Urban League became more involved in battling for black equality, its strong ties with the American officials somewhat distanced the organization from the others.

⁸³ Dennis C. Dickerson, *Militant Mediator. Whitney M. Young, Jr.* (Lexington 1998) 31-34.

⁸⁴ Nancy Weiss, *Whitney M. Young Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton 1990) 87-99.

⁸⁵ Victor Okocha, 'Young, Whitney M., Jr. (1912-1971)': <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/young-jr-whitney-m-1921-1971> (7-5-2015).

3.3 Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded by pacifist graduates from the University of Chicago in 1942. Just as NAACP and the National Urban League, CORE was originally interracial, dominated by white intellectuals who greatly outnumbered African-Americans in the first years of its existence. Since the organization was based around Chicago, it was hardly known among blacks in the South, who most suffered from racism and discrimination. Given the pacifist nature of the majority of CORE's founders, the organization's most important principle was nonviolence: members were keen to show that large abuses in the United States could be overcome without the use of force.⁸⁶ Because of this deep-rooted faith in nonviolence, which some members considered to be even more important than reaching concrete goals, CORE usually attracted middle-class white intellectuals. For Southern blacks, who were eager to desegregate the public domain, prevent racial violence and overthrow white domination in general, it was hard to combine the broad philosophical mindset of CORE with the difficulties of their everyday lives.⁸⁷

When CORE decided to expand its membership in 1957, it entered the South with an attitude of intellectual superiority. James Farmer (1920-1999), one of the few black founders of the organization, recalled a paternalistic viewpoint from the white establishment: 'They viewed the black brother as the junior partner in the alliance, not quite of age. So, thus they viewed themselves as senior partners, obviously'.⁸⁸ During the late 1950s, more and more people inside CORE began claiming that, since whites were not affected by problems that blacks did confront, black influence in the organization needed to increase. Racial tensions inside the movement became more frequent, and internal bickering – especially blacks were suspicious of the true interests of whites – slowed down the process of a broad popular base in the South. One of the main reasons that CORE remained active and was able to become one of the leading national civil rights organizations, was the financial support from black churches, NAACP and Martin Luther King, who approved and endorsed CORE's activities.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Marvin Rich, 'The Congress of Equality and its Strategy', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 357 (1965) 113-117.

⁸⁷ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 129.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 128-131.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 132-136.

In 1961, the black James Farmer was elected the National Director of CORE. Farmer continued the organization's official strategy by nonviolent direct action in the form of sit-ins, jail-ins and, probably Farmer's most well-known project: the Freedom Rides. On May 4th, 1961 two small groups of activists would ride two buses from Washington DC to New Orleans to test if they were segregated or not. Although the turnout was far from enormous – initially, only thirteen persons attended the first Freedom Ride – the probability was high that such a ride would provoke very hostile reactions inside the segregated Southern states. After entering the state of Alabama, the Freedom Riders, assisted by student activists, were severely attacked and subsequently arrested when they tried to use white-only facilities. This forced the CORE leaders to abandon their rides, but on the upside, the events produced a lot of publicity and support for the organization. The Kennedy Administration (1961-1963) could not ignore the impact of the Freedom Rides, which helped CORE to take a more central position in the movement.⁹⁰ Over the next few years, Farmer occasionally cooperated with the other civil rights organizations, while keeping the interracial, nonviolent position on which CORE was based. This changed after Farmer left the organization and was succeeded by the more revolutionary Floyd McKissick (1922-1991), who steered the organization towards a more militant strategy, which would also be reflected in the development of CORE's Vietnam War opinion.⁹¹

3.4 Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

The main catalyst for the establishment of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was the Montgomery Bus Boycott that started on December 1st, 1955 and lasted more than a year. On this famous day in history, Rosa Parks – an important member of NAACP in the state of Alabama – decided not to stand up for a white bus passenger, after which she got arrested. Martin Luther King, Jr., an until then quite unknown reverend who witnessed the incident, decided to resist this form of public segregation by urging blacks in Montgomery to follow Parks' example. During the many challenges that followed, blacks lost nearly a quarter of a million dollars, but

⁹⁰ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 231-236.

⁹¹ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE. A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York 1973) 293-294.

in this period, King became popular on a nation-wide scale and the foundations for an effective Southern black leadership were laid.⁹² After the great success of the boycott – on November 13, 1956 the Supreme Court decided that racial segregation in buses was illegal, which authorized blacks to sit anywhere they would choose – several activists, such as King’s close friend Bayard Rustin (1912-1987), addressed the possibility of expanding protest efforts in Montgomery to other cities in the South. In February 1957, King invited about 60 black ministers to the Ebenezer Baptist Church (Atlanta, Georgia) for the formation of a central organization to coordinate Southern civil rights protests: the Southern Negro Leadership Conference, which was later renamed to Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁹³

Unlike the NAACP, which was severely suppressed in the South, the SCLC had a local, decentralized nature: the black masses were mobilized through the churches of which they were a member.⁹⁴ Because of its Christian background – only four of the 36 original leadership positions were filled by non-clergymen – the SCLC was a religiously inspired protest organization, which largely relied on churches for its resources. The Christian character of the organization was reflected in its uncompromising belief in nonviolent direct action, time and time again emphasized in King’s inspiring and dramatic sermons. Through peaceful sit-ins, marches and protest campaigns, such as the Crusade for Citizenship (1957), which was aimed at registering thousands of disenfranchised voters and continued through the early 1960s, the SCLC aimed at legally reforming the segregated practices in the South. The SCLC and King in particular also played a major role in one of the most famous moments in civil rights history, King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech (August 28, 1963), which was part of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. King’s landmark speech inspired millions of Americans and, more importantly, raised awareness for the urgency of a proper civil rights bill with President Kennedy, who had developed a good relationship with King.⁹⁵

Although the SCLC has often been seen as a one-man enterprise, there were several strong personalities– such as the reverend James Bevel (1936-2008), Ella Baker (1903-1986) and the earlier mentioned Bayard Rustin – that helped shape the course

⁹² Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 37-40.

⁹³ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA 1987) 29-33.

⁹⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 86-88.

⁹⁵ Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 147-153.

of the organization. Nevertheless, the ultimate authority was in the hands of King, who had veto power and could be considered as the public face of SCLC.⁹⁶ Not all civil rights activists, among whom the Black Power militant Malcolm X (1925-1965), were happy with the moderate way in which SCLC tried to seek connections with the establishment.⁹⁷ Notwithstanding the good relationship that SCLC and its leader(s) tried to keep with white officials, the organization would play a pivotal role in the Vietnam debate that would influence the civil rights movement during the Johnson Administration.

3.5 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

In April 1960, the youngest large civil rights organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was established after a series of sit-ins in the segregated lunch-counters of the Woolworth department store in Greensboro, North Carolina. After the sit-ins, which were unsuccessful but received a lot of publicity, the SCLC's Executive Director Ella Baker invited the students that participated to a gathering in the state's capital Raleigh. Because of the enormous energy that the students injected into their struggle, Baker believed that the students had the right to direct their own affairs in a unified, less fragmented form, but still tied to the SCLC. Originally, Baker, King and many other SCLC members hoped that student movement would serve as the youth wing of their own organization. However, after several days of fierce discussion, the students decided not to give up their autonomy but rather form an independent but still impermanent institution for organizing the sit-ins, the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. During follow-up meetings in May and October 1960, delegates from several Southern states decided to drop the 'Temporary' from SNCC (pronounced as 'Snick'), and an official chairman, Marion Barry (1936-2014), was chosen to lead the organization in its start-up months.⁹⁸

Although – in spite of what King and his advisors had envisioned – SNCC had rejected the possibility to become an affiliate of the SCLC, the two organizations worked together during the next few years. Their close relationship was emphasized by the fact

⁹⁶ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 93-94.

⁹⁷ Unknown Author, *King Encyclopedia*, 'Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)': http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/about_king/encyclopedia/enc_SCLC.htm (26-4-2015).

⁹⁸ Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 82-85.

that SNCC got an offer to use a corner of SCLC headquarters in Atlanta during its first months.⁹⁹ In ideological terms, the SNCC's Statement of Purpose also strongly resembled the rhetoric of King. Just as its 'big brother' in the South, the SNCC tried to seek a social order of justice through nonviolence, in their own words growing out of the Judaic-Christian tradition. Despite the SNCC's more energetic spirit of activism – exemplified by the continuous sit-ins and involvement in the Freedom Rides in 1961 – the organization initially embraced the same peaceful route to equality as SCLC did.¹⁰⁰

During the following years, under the leadership of the new chairman John Lewis (elected in 1963), the SNCC would prove to be most activist and outspoken organization of the Big Five. Next to the sit-ins at segregated public facilities, the SNCC's main area of attention became voter registration campaigns in Southern states such as Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi, where the Freedom Summer (a campaign to register as many black voters as possible) of 1964 took place. SNCC was, more than its counterparts, very critical of the federal government's stance towards civil rights and, for example during the March on Washington, this sometimes led to tensions inside the movement. John Lewis, who was scheduled to speak at the Lincoln Memorial, had planned to denounce John F. Kennedy's proposed civil rights bill as 'too little, and too late', but at the insistence of more moderate activists, Lewis decided to soften his tone.¹⁰¹ SNCC worked together with other organizations during the earlier mentioned Freedom Summer in 1964 and Selma-Montgomery marches (1965), but, when internal resentment to cooperation with whites and the lack of militancy of the movement was increasingly expressed out in the open, SNCC's relationship with their partner organizations inside the movement became more complicated.¹⁰² This became all the more apparent when the militant Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998) replaced Lewis as the organization's chairman in May 1966. While, by then, SNCC was already known as the most radical branch of the Big Five, the organization then became alienated from the rest of the movement.¹⁰³

⁹⁹Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 219.

¹⁰⁰ Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 85-94.

¹⁰¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle. SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge 1995) 93-94.

¹⁰² Emily Stoper, 'The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization', *Journal of Black Studies* Vol 8. No. 1 (1977), 25-27.

¹⁰³ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 204-205.

Conclusion

As we can see from the previous paragraphs, the Big Five of civil rights organizations were far from united when it comes to their origins, preferred strategies, financial means and the character and scope of their followers. Some chose the path of pursuing socio-economic reform through legal and intellectual negotiations, while others found direct action and activist resistance to the establishment to be more effective. The differences in tactical approaches and reform methods can partly be explained by looking at differences in social status and location.

Interracial civil rights organizations in the North that consisted mostly of wealthy, established urban intellectuals, tended to act more delicate and tactful, mainly because they thought keeping ties with the predominantly white establishment would be useful in the black emancipation struggle. For them, battling black inequality was the key point of attention, but they remained cautious about the existing relationships that they were willing to jeopardize. At the other end of the spectrum were the organizations with highly religious, (almost) exclusively black grassroots supporters. These groups, which arose in strongly segregated Southern areas, were much more closely connected to the people that actually needed the emancipation struggle the most: poor, undereducated blacks with very little to lose. Because of this difference in popular support, it was self-evident that these young, less established black masses opted for a more direct path towards black emancipation.

Even though all black leaders often reminded their members of the importance of a good relationship with the US officials, this difference in followers was essential for the policies of the two subgroups. When analyzing the stature and behavior of Big Five, it is possible to make a clear distinction: on the one hand there were the SCLC, the SNCC and CORE, who all – sooner or later – chose to oppose American involvement in the Vietnam War, while the NAACP and the National Urban League remained hesitant to do so during the reign of Lyndon B. Johnson. The following two chapters will contain chronological, in-depth analyses of the development of the Vietnam War statements of these two subgroups, as well as the way they affected their relationships with the Johnson Administration.

Chapter 4. Opposing the war

4.1 SNCC's youthful activism against a war of white men

Although most members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) immediately felt resentment to American involvement in the Vietnam War, SNCC's official statement opposing American intervention was only formulated after long discussions inside of the movement. Some individuals in the organization did not immediately feel the necessity to connect civil rights struggle with foreign policy. There were also members – for example former chairman Marion Barry and Dona Richards – who were principally against American involvement in Vietnam, but did not think it wise to express it out of fear for the possibility of losing governmental funds. In response, chairman John Lewis stated that an eventual cut in donations would be all the more reason to take a powerful stand: 'If we are going to go out of existence, let's do it standing on principle and not clutching at a few meager and useless dollars.'¹⁰⁴

Over the course of the years, accusations of sympathizing with Communism became an issue for SNCC because the movement was looking to win broad sympathy, which also included the predominantly anticommunist white middle class. As a result of its long-standing policy not to exclude communists, SNCC became extra vulnerable to 'red-baiting'.¹⁰⁵ While SNCC believed that no ideological group should be excluded from joining the civil rights movement, the leaders sometimes felt the need to make pragmatic decisions about the consequences of working together with people of certain backgrounds. Out of fear for a backlash in broad support, SNCC wasn't too eager to be associated with people at the far left of the political spectrum. At a meeting of the Executive Committee in April, Lewis said: 'Sometimes we leave ourselves too open by the company we keep', attenuating his principle of non-exclusion.¹⁰⁶

Personal approach

¹⁰⁴ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind. A Memoir of the Movement* (New York 1998) 372.

¹⁰⁵ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line. American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, 203.

¹⁰⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 182.

Despite of the fact that the majority of the SNCC carried out quite an outspoken statement against American involvement in Vietnam War, individual members were initially in no way forced to adopt an antiwar stand. Over the course of the year 1965, this gradually changed. Vietnam became less remote for SNCC because of increasing human and material resources that America poured into the conflict. Because of this, the lion's share of the organization's members – young students from a draft eligible age category who were very suitable to serve in Vietnam – received their draft notices to be sent out to fight in Vietnam. This made the war much more personal for many blacks, which was an important reason for SNCC to re-evaluate its views on the conflict in Southeast Asia. One of the SNCC's main reasons to be against the war, was because of the way it illustrated how Lyndon Johnson seemed to neglect problems at the home front. 'I do not know how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam, Congo, Africa etc. but cannot send troops to Selma, Alabama', John Lewis stated during one of the famous Selma-Montgomery marches in March, which were not specifically intended to protest the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁷

Hardly a month later, in April, the Executive Committee agreed to support an antiwar protest in Washington DC. At this first massive antiwar protest in the United States, secretary Robert Moses was one of the demonstrators to show his vigorous sentiments against Vietnam, which he connected to the civil rights movement.¹⁰⁸

Another month later, at a teach-in at the University of Berkeley, Moses emphasized his antiwar statement by suggesting that black people were members of the Third World, which was a mirror of the state of affairs in both the American foreign policy and the United States itself.¹⁰⁹

First official statement

While the lion's share of the SNCC members was already convinced of the unjustness of the Vietnam War, staff members of the Executive Committee did not authorize an official and definitive antiwar statement until November.¹¹⁰ On January 6th, 1966, the SNCC was the first major civil rights organization which officially and publicly declared

¹⁰⁷ Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 343.

¹⁰⁸ Carson, *In Struggle*, 183-185.

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey A. Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South, 1960-1970* (Athens, GA 2010) 226.

¹¹⁰ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*

its opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War. Antiwar sentiments had already been in the air for quite a long time, but a tragic incident finally pushed the organization over the edge. Three days earlier, a black student named Sammy Younge got shot by a police officer, allegedly because he attempted to attend a 'white' restroom at a filling station in Tuskegee, Alabama (where the world famous civil rights activist Rosa Parks was born). The killing of Younge – who had previously worked on SNCC projects in Mississippi and Alabama – did not have an immediate connection with the Vietnam War, but for the organization's leaders, the tragedy of Younge's death was closely related to the conflict. Three days after the killing of Younge, the Executive Committee announced that the SNCC had 'a right and responsibility to dissent with the United States foreign policy on any issue'.¹¹¹ The murder of the 21-year old student was compared to the murder of Vietnamese citizens who, in the eyes of the SNCC, were both killed by a United States that – when in pursuit of its own needs or desires – did not respect any form of freedom.¹¹² Denouncing the hypocrisy of America's self-imposed duty of preserving freedom in the world, leaders of the SNCC showed themselves in favor of draft resistance: 'We believe that work in the civil rights movement and with other human relations organization is a valid alternative to the draft. We urge all Americans to seek this alternative, knowing full well that it may cost them their lives – as painfully as in Vietnam.'¹¹³

A torrent of criticism from the White House arose after this public statement, and as a result, the Johnson Administration cut off most of its ties with SNCC.¹¹⁴ As a result of this troubled relationship with the government, Julian Bond (1940-2015) was denied his seat in the Georgia state legislature – after already being elected – solely because of his antiwar statement, while nine other African-Americans were sworn in as planned; a perfect illustration of the consequences that SNCC members paid for their continued activism.¹¹⁵ Many others were forcefully drafted or taken under government surveillance by the FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972) and his

¹¹¹ Roosevelt Study Center, *SNCC Papers*, Reel 56, 6-1-1966, 'SNCC Statement on Vietnam'.

¹¹² Amanda L. Higgins, *Instruments Of Righteousness: The Intersections Of Black Power And Anti-Vietnam War Activism In The United States, 1964-1972* (Lexington 2013) 124.

¹¹³ Roosevelt Study Center, *SNCC Papers*, Reel 56, 6-1-1966, 'SNCC Statement on Vietnam'.

¹¹⁴ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 202.

¹¹⁵ Higgins, *Instruments of Righteousness*, 125-127.

Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which was mainly concerned about tracing connections between civil rights activists and communists.¹¹⁶

Radicalization

SNCC kept encouraging draft resistance among its members (and blacks in the USA in general) actively, not only because sending workers to serve in the army in Vietnam threatened to deprive the organization of the majority of its manly personnel, but also because there was a current of pacifism within the movement: some SNCC members considered every war to be unjust. As mentioned before, a distrust of the government's motives, combined with sympathy for Third World struggles against white domination, further reinforced the organization's belief to discourage military service.¹¹⁷

From May 1966 onwards, when Stokely Carmichael – sympathizing with the more aggressive strategy of Black Power – replaced John Lewis as the SNCC's chairman, the rhetoric of the organization became more militant and aggressive, which reinforced its label as the most radical of all the civil rights organizations. A good illustration of this radical character was Carmichael's plan to conduct a protest at the wedding of Lyndon Johnson's daughter Luci in August 1966, which was prevented by several other civil rights leaders at the last moment.¹¹⁸ Illustrative for the aggressive way in which Carmichael looked for the confrontation with the administration, were his words at another Berkeley campus rally in November 1966. Here, he encouraged draft resisters to keep their foot down and resist pressure from the president and his Defense and State secretaries. 'We have to say there's a higher law than that racist McNamara, a fool named Rusk and a buffoon named Johnson', Carmichael ranted. Not many journalists were able to separate Carmichael's thoughtful and well-argued criticism of American society and its so-called liberalism from his sometimes bombastic public pronouncements, which made it easier to depict him as an aggressive, radical Black Power advocate.¹¹⁹ To punish SNCC for this 'anti-patriotic' behavior, President Johnson and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover used the draft as a means of repression: by increasing draft notices for SNCC members, Washington tried to force protesters to serve in a war which they opposed. Carmichael was already a distrusted individual because of his

¹¹⁶ Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power. The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York 1987) 424-426.

¹¹⁷ Carson, *In Struggle*, 183.

¹¹⁸ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 204-205.

¹¹⁹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 221.

firm, outspoken on civil rights, but when he explicitly attacked the government and actively organized draft resistance, he became an important target for federal supervision.¹²⁰

During the second half of 1966, SNCC increasingly became an all-black organization, seeking to connect to larger causes like Pan-Africanism, Marxism and the empowerment of colored Third World nations to the civil rights struggle in the United States. For Carmichael and his followers, the Vietnam War was something that made the Third World mentality – treating blacks as second-class citizens – possible in the United States.¹²¹ Exemplary for this increasingly internationalist stance and the skepticism and distrust of whites, was the involvement of many SNCC workers within the War Crimes Tribunal, which investigated military activities of US soldiers in Vietnam. Although they were well aware of the flood of critique and accusations of treason that would follow, SNCC members participated in the tribunal.¹²²

Being wary of this behavior, the federal government tightened its surveillance on the organization. In May 1967, Carmichael stepped down and was replaced by Hubert Gerald Brown, better known as H. ‘Rap’ Brown, a very charismatic and militant Black Power advocate.¹²³ He took the radical, aggressive tone of his predecessor several steps further, by urging African-Americans to seek vengeance against Johnson, Rusk and McNamara for their ‘crimes in Vietnam’: ‘we will kill first and we will aim for the head.’¹²⁴ During the second half of that year, when Johnson and Hoover decided to intensify their COINTELPRO against the civil rights movement even further, Brown got arrested on charges of the incitement of riots and violence several times.¹²⁵ In an extensive FBI report on SNCC from August 1967, the FBI tried to prove that the organization was closely tied to Communism and Black Power.¹²⁶ The report, which describes SNCC’s Vietnam statements in great detail, is full of proof that the students urged their followers to dodge the draft, to end the conflict in Vietnam and to show solidarity with mistreated minorities all over the world. On August 27th, 1967, SNCC

¹²⁰ Higgins, *Instruments of Righteousness*, 141.

¹²¹ Ibidem, 223-225.

¹²² Carson, *In Struggle*, 265, 272-273.

¹²³ Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 394-395.

¹²⁴ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 211.

¹²⁵ Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 422-425.

¹²⁶ Roosevelt Study Center, *FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)*

member Marion McMillan – an assistant to chairman Brown – visited a meeting of the Nation of Islam, which was considered to be a militant, dangerous organization. The FBI report quotes McMillan: ‘[...]the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee is a Human Rights Organization, interested not only in Human Rights in the United States, but throughout the world; in the field of International Relations, we assert that we encourage and support the liberation struggles of all people against racism, exploitation, and oppression. We see our battle here in America as an integral part of the world-wide movement of all oppressed people, such as in Viet-Nam [...]’¹²⁷ This expression of an internationalist, trans-border outlook on the civil rights movement was combined with repeated urges to resist the draft, and explanations for members about how to dodge it.¹²⁸ As was stated in a 1967 FBI memorandum, the Bureau regarded SNCC as a group that had evolved from a ‘peaceful civil rights movement... to a hate group preaching violence and black supremacy’.¹²⁹

During Carmichael’s visit to North Vietnam in that same month, when he had already stepped down as the leader of SNCC, rumors had it that the CIA closely monitored his actions.¹³⁰ Especially Carmichael’s and Brown’s repeated consorting with Black Power fueled FBI suspicion, which would persist until after LBJ’s departure from the White House.¹³¹ While this was not completely new – in the eyes of the Johnson Administration, SNCC had been the least acceptable civil rights organization for quite a long time – the close surveillance and punishment of SNCC leader marked a period of the organization’s eventual demise.

The students of SNCC were the first to openly oppose the Vietnam War. Being a young, Southern organization with a membership that consisted of student activists, SNCC had not yet established strong ties with the Johnson Administration. Experiencing the deep-rooted segregation and racism every day in states as Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia, the students felt as if they had little to lose by fiercely protesting against the foreign policy of the government. Quite quickly, SNCC and its followers chose to

¹²⁷ Roosevelt Study Center, *FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)*, Reel 2, section 9-19, Appendix.

¹²⁸ Roosevelt Study Center, *FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)*, Reel 2, section 9-19.

¹²⁹ Roosevelt Study Center, *FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)*, Introduction.

¹³⁰ Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, ‘Carmichael Held a Target of C.I.A.’, 22-8-1967.

¹³¹ Roosevelt Study Center, *FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)*, Reel 1, 8-8-1967.

confront the authorities by using (military) sabotage, incitement and aggressive rhetoric. Eventually, sympathizing with Black Power took away most broad support that the organization had left among the white establishment. Given the roots of the organization, this path of radicalization is hardly surprising. Even though it is true that the Johnson's intelligence agencies played a role in limiting the organization's influence, SNCC's radical leaders mainly contributed to its deterioration by creating a barrier between black and white. As a result, the students were unable to win broad sympathy among the mainstream American population. A combination of internal chaos and external repression eventually made the downfall of SNCC inevitable.

4.2 SCLC: Vietnam as an obstacle for King's dream

During the first two years of the Johnson Administration, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) – and its president Martin Luther King, Jr. in particular – cooperated quite fruitfully. By drawing attention for local crises, the SCLC compelled the government to make gestures towards blacks in the United States. This strategy proved to be very successful at first: it made possible the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of July 1964, prohibiting segregation by public institutions, and the Voting Rights Act of August 1965, which formally ended racial discrimination in voter registration. Both crucial pieces of legislation were, in large part, a result of SCLC's direct action campaigns in Birmingham (1963) and Selma (1965). President Johnson and the civil rights groups had a close alliance in the first two years of LBJ's presidency, which was one of the reasons why Johnson fought for the Civil Rights Bill with skill, energy, and success.¹³²

Although Johnson had a close and good relationship with King, FBI leaders J. Edgar Hoover and William C. Sullivan were suspicious about the influence of the rhetorically gifted King on communist sympathies among African-Americans. The two intelligence officials urged their agents to exploit every opportunity to monitor King, mostly using the pretext that he was in contact with communists.¹³³ An explicit example of the FBI's early distrust with the SCLC was a conference of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an African-American political party battling for

¹³² Fairclough, Adam, 'Martin Luther King, Jr. and the War in Vietnam', *Phylon* Vol. 45:1 (March 1984) 23.

¹³³ Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 417.

emancipation in the state of Mississippi, in August 1964. Afterwards, John Lewis writes in his biography, it was revealed that the FBI had placed wiretaps in the hotel rooms of King and Bayard Rustin, one of his closest SCLC advisors.¹³⁴

Dilemma

King – being a Christian reverend with a strong belief in nonviolence – had always advised his followers not to fight white violence but rather turn the other cheek, which had a positive influence on the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.¹³⁵ Ever since American involvement in Vietnam escalated, King had been confronted with a dilemma: while he believed in negotiations and cooperation with the federal government, the SCLC's president regarded the LBJ Administration's policy in Southeast Asia as misguided. The key point of this outlook was King's strong belief in pacifism – the idea that no political argument could justify war – but there was also a political basis for King's resentment of American policy in Vietnam. King saw the Vietcong insurgency as a righteous nationalist revolt against a corrupt and unlawful intervention, in his eyes a perpetuation of colonialism.¹³⁶ While being careful not to reveal his sympathy for the perceived arch-enemy that was the Vietcong, he urged to negotiate with the militant Vietnamese independence movement during a tour of the Alabama Black Belt on May 11th, 1965. At first, President Johnson encouraged King to rally for peace, because the administration was eager to negotiate as well. After the suggestion of Bayard Rustin and Harry Wachtel (MLK's closest advisors), King decided to use SCLC's annual convention to launch a Vietnam peace initiative. When addressing the convention at the 12th of August 1965, the SCLC president asked President Johnson to make an 'unconditional and unambiguous statement' about willing to negotiate with the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong.¹³⁷

Even though they principally opposed the Vietnam War, SCLC members Andrew Young and the earlier mentioned Rustin disassociated themselves and their organization from King's antiwar initiative, because they wanted to emphasize the need for producing social change through 'building an enlightened electorate' among black

¹³⁴ Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 289-90.

¹³⁵ Higgins, *Instruments of Righteousness*, 57.

¹³⁶ Rosenberg, *How far the promised land?*, 561-563.

¹³⁷ Roosevelt Study Center, *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, 'Statement by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. SCLC Convention', Reel 20, 12-8-1965,

men. In their eyes, a full-fledged attack on the Vietnam War would not help reaching this.¹³⁸ At that moment – the autumn of 1965 – few black men (18% according to a poll of *Newsweek*) favored US withdrawal: the majority did not consider it their problem. None of the Big Five of civil rights organizations had officially opposed the war at this point yet, and the SCLC did not want to squander its opportunities with the administration either. After presidential pressure and advice from his SCLC colleagues – King was warned that an antiwar statement would provoke merciless attacks from critics – King was convinced to drop his Vietnam initiative in September: ‘I really do not have the strength to fight this issue and keep my civil rights fight going.’¹³⁹

The reverend from Alabama decided to keep his disapproval of the American military intervention in Vietnam silent for the following months, but there were still plenty of signs that he was not about to fully comply with the administration’s wishes. After the SNCC’s official statement – the first public statement of opposition to the war by a civil rights organization – on January 6th, 1966, leaders of several moderate organizations (NAACP, National Urban League) ‘rushed’ to the side of President Johnson and his Vice President Humphrey to distance themselves from SNCC.¹⁴⁰ Because SCLC shared most of SNCC’s disapproval of American involvement in Vietnam, the organization (and King in particular) refused to take a stand against its more impulsive colleagues of the SNCC. A few days later, King even reverted back to his active resistance by backing the SNCC’s attempts to get Julian Bond back into the Georgia Senate from which he was expelled because of his antiwar sentiments.¹⁴¹

King’s turnaround

In addition to backing Bond, King publicly spoke out against Vietnam while preaching and in television interviews during the months of February and March. While earlier, the SCLC president mostly kept his war opinions to himself because he was convinced of the harm that Vietnam War opposition could do to the battle for black emancipation, this changed during the year 1966. MLK’s turnaround, from silent to active opposition, was the result of developing personal convictions, developments in Vietnam and

¹³⁸ Roosevelt Study Center, *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970*, ‘Summary of Ninth Annual Convention’, Frame 703, Reel 119.

¹³⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*. 273-274.

¹⁴⁰ Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 375-376.

¹⁴¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 188-190.

circumstances regarding the administration's civil rights policy. By the end of the year, the White House had already lost interest in the movement; there could be little to lose in breaking with the administration for SCLC. Another reason was the fact that King saw the war itself as the greatest obstacle for social progress among black Americans, an issue that was draining away resources from the black struggle at home. Despite pressure from several more moderate civil rights activists (Rustin, NAACP's Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young from the National Urban League), the determined King had no intention of backing down a second time.¹⁴² King's increased activism would have serious consequences, because by the close of the year 1966, all personal communication between Johnson and King had come to an end.¹⁴³ The agitation came from both sides, and it was definitely not only Johnson's decision to break with King. The latter became reluctant to confront the president, whom he distrusted and whose policies he could no longer reconcile with his conscience.¹⁴⁴

Since the opposition to the war outside of the SCLC was also mounting fast in this period, King was determined to keep (nonviolently) battling for peace in Vietnam. On the 25th of February 1967, King gave his first public speech against 'a war that seeks to turn the clock of history back and perpetuate white colonialism' in Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁵ More than a month later, on March 30, King organized his first antiwar march in Chicago, stating that Johnson's heart was with the Vietnam War, keeping him from the 'woman he loved', the Great Society.¹⁴⁶ The next day, in a *New York Times* article, civil rights journalist John Herbers also paid attention to King's criticism on the hierarchy on the battlefield: 'The Vietnam conflict itself is being fought by America's young men who have been lifted from society by racially exclusive Selective Service boards in a system of selection that discriminates against the poor and places Negroes in the front line in disproportionate numbers...'¹⁴⁷

One of the most memorable speeches of King's life, titled *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, took place in the Riverside Church of New York on April 4th,

¹⁴² Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 333-334.

¹⁴³ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 202-203.

¹⁴⁴ David G. Jarrow, *Bearing the Cross. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York 1988) 548-549.

¹⁴⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The King Center*, 'The Casualties of the War in Vietnam': <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/casualties-war-vietnam>, 25-2-1967.

¹⁴⁶ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 209.

¹⁴⁷ John Herbers, *The New York Times*, 'Dr. King's Aides Score Asia War' (31-3-1967).

1967. In New York, the SCLC's president firmly and convincingly opted for peace in Vietnam: '...I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such', the charismatic reverend motivated his war opposition.¹⁴⁸ Another important aspect of King's messages was his resentment against violence and racism which, regardless of the landmark legislations that were passed in the previous years, were still deeply intertwined with the state of America. According to him – and many other civil rights activists – the Vietnam War was a reflection of the institutional inequality of colored people in the Western world. In King's eyes, this war was not just the clash of strategic or ideological interests, but the ultimate result of white, capitalist dominance.¹⁴⁹

Thwarted by the authorities

After the *Beyond Vietnam* speech – by John Lewis considered to be the best speech King ever held – President Johnson flushed with anger, saying King was 'a naive black preacher who was being duped by a Communist.'¹⁵⁰ Not all of the SCLC board was happy when their president decided to take part in the national antiwar Spring Mobilization in New York (April 15th, 1967), but King nevertheless marched along in the massive demonstration to end the war. Despite warnings from his colleagues (among whom the ever wary Rustin) that the administration would not reward his actions, King was clear in a speech to the SCLC staff at the end of April: 'The cross may mean the death of your popularity. It may mean the death of your bridge to the White House. It may mean the death of a foundation grant. It may cut your budget down a little, but take up your cross and just bear it...'¹⁵¹

King's words would prove to be prophetic, because by making opposition to the war his top priority in, he had burned his bridges to the Johnson Administration, to the Congress and to his most influential allies in and around the White House. In addition,

¹⁴⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Speeches*, 'Beyond Vietnam': <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/categories/C39/> 4-4-1967.

¹⁴⁹ Roosevelt Study Center, *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, Reel 21, 12-4-1967, 'Statement by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'

¹⁵⁰ Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 229.

¹⁵¹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 333-342.

influential newspapers described King's criticism of the Vietnam War as destructive to his people and the civil rights cause. Exemplary for this was a speech was called an editorial of *The New York Times*, which labeled the *Beyond Vietnam* speech as an 'error', because the newspaper believed that fusing two 'distinct and separate public problems', could very well prove to be 'disastrous for both'.¹⁵² Many other influential journalists, such as black columnist Carl T. Rowan (*Reader's Digest*) repeatedly attacked King for his antiwar stance. In Rowan's eyes, King had 'become *persona non grata* to Lyndon Johnson' by his anti-Vietnam activism, which cost him his credit with the 'Negro's friends' and armed the 'Negro's foes'.¹⁵³ According to David J. Garrow in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Bearing the Cross*, King was frequently attacked by many other right-wing columnists with ties to the FBI.¹⁵⁴

Johnson and his confidant J. Edgar Hoover, intensified efforts to limit the influence of King in more direct ways as well. Hoover researched the history of the SCLC's leader, and tried to blackmail him by threatening to spread sensitive personal information, specifically King's alleged adultery. SCLC specialist Adam Fairclough states that the FBI sent King an audiotape – which would contain proof of his extramarital affairs – with attached a note which urged him to moderate his tone or commit suicide. Because the press refused to publish these personal details about King, this never became public knowledge in the US.¹⁵⁵ Another way of discrediting King and his organization, was by attacking his close allies, such as his personal advisor Stanley Levinson (1912-1979), who helped King write speeches and organize events. During the spring and the summer of 1967, the FBI wiretapped many telephone conversations between King and Levinson.¹⁵⁶ Despite of the fact that Levinson had been critical of King's stance in his *Beyond Vietnam* speech - he feared that King would lose credibility as a civil rights leader – he was continuously labeled as a dangerous communist by the Bureau.¹⁵⁷ These allegations damaged King's image and unjustly placed him on par with radical militants, something which he had always tried to avoid.

¹⁵² Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'Dr. King's Error' (7-4-1967).

¹⁵³ Carl T. Rowan, 'Martin Luther King's Tragic Decision', *Reader's Digest* 91 (September 1967) 37-42.

¹⁵⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 576-577.

¹⁵⁵ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming. Blacks and Equality, 1980-2000* (London 2002) 281.

¹⁵⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Subversive Influences*, 'Transcript of Conversation with Stanley D. Levinson', 8-4-1967. & Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Subversive Influences*, 'Transcript of Conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr.', 29-7-1967.

¹⁵⁷ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 426-468.

The Spring Mobilization and its aftermath had little to no impact on governmental policy, and due to financial and organizational problems inside the organization, SCLC could not focus as much as money, time and energy to ending the Vietnam War as King hoped. Together with the collapse of its 'smaller brother' SNCC, the decrease of SCLC workers led to a sharp decline of Southern civil rights activity. An additional factor that complicated the organization's impact, were the many travels of the increasingly internationally oriented King. Due to the lack of a permanent, powerful executive director, internal discipline deteriorated and SCLC dissolved into anarchy from the summer of 1967 and onwards.¹⁵⁸ Counteraction from the government was also a contributor to this drop in effectiveness of King and his organization, which meant that SCLC could never make ending the Vietnam War a top priority. In spite of his never-ending emphasis on nonviolence, the intelligence forces depicted King as a possible 'black messiah', who, in the words of Hoover, could unify and electrify the 'militant black nationalist movement.' In the spring of 1968, preventing the rise of a redeemer for African-American radicalism was officially set as a long-range goal for the COINTELPRO.¹⁵⁹ Although the intelligence forces were not responsible for his knockout, King would shortly thereafter disappear from the stage of the civil rights movement for good. When he was in Memphis, Tennessee for the support striking African-American sanitary workers on April 4th, 1968, King was shot to death by James Earl Ray. A combination of grief, anger and confusion took possession of SCLC, and despite appointing Ralph Abernathy (1926-1990) as King's successor, stability never returned. For the anti-Vietnam battle of the SCLC, which already found itself in a downward spiral on other areas, the death of its anchorman and the alleged 'black messiah' was the mortal blow.¹⁶⁰

4.3 The rapid radicalization of CORE

When John F. Kennedy decided to choose Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate, James Farmer, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was far from amused. He considered this decision to be 'a disaster, because of his Southern

¹⁵⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 345-346.

¹⁵⁹ Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 425.

¹⁶⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 381-383

background and his voting record on civil rights.¹⁶¹ There were indeed good reasons for Farmer's skepticism towards LBJ, because during his time as a Texan Senator, Johnson's voting behavior was far from progressive. However, rather than being part of any principal opposition against black emancipation, Johnson's at times indifferent position on civil rights can be explained by opportunism: it would have been nearly impossible to retain popular support in Texas as a civil rights advocate.¹⁶² Despite his initial reservations, Farmer's autobiography frequently contains passages about his warm personal relationship with the president, strengthened by their shared Texan origins. Especially during the first year of his presidency, LBJ proved to be very helpful and accessible for the CORE leader.¹⁶³ Over the next three years this changed, not in the least because of the organization's Vietnam standpoint.

In line with the – in Southern black circles – highly respected SCLC and SNCC, many members of CORE felt that it was hardly an option to stay neutral about the problematic relationship between their own emancipation struggle and American involvement in Vietnam. Given the activist worldview of many of CORE's young members, it was not surprising that some local or regional chapters of the organization were immediately critical about Johnson's decision to get the United States involved in Southeast-Asia in August, 1964. Farmer did not disagree with this criticism on the personal level, but he was not willing to disassociate himself from the war in public.¹⁶⁴

Johnson's discontent

Although Farmer did not to steer his organization into the direction of official Vietnam War opposition, President Johnson was still far from happy with the growing antiwar sentiments inside CORE. Throughout 1965, when the war became a more pressing issue inside the organization, Farmer recalls that his understanding with the president deteriorated and access to the White House became more difficult. According to Farmer, Johnson tended to equate disagreement – in this case on foreign policy – with disloyalty: "Those who were not for him unconditionally were considered to be against

¹⁶¹ William S. Clayson, *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and The Civil Rights Movement in Texas* (Austin 2010) 28.

¹⁶² Garth E. Pauley, *The Modern Presidency & Civil Rights. Rhetoric on Race from Roosevelt to Nixon* (College Station 2001) 165-168.

¹⁶³ James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart of America. An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York 1986) 296-297.

¹⁶⁴ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 404.

him', said the CORE icon.¹⁶⁵ 'The fact that I did not let CORE adopt a resolution calling for a unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in no way softened his anger at my personal opposition to his Vietnam policy. A tenacious friend to those who were "loyal", LBJ was an unforgiving enemy to the "disloyal". His animosity showed itself in petty ways', referring to the signing ceremony of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. On August 6th, Roy Wilkins (NAACP), Whitney Young (National Urban League), Farmer and many other influential African-Americans were at a table in Washington DC's Capitol building for the ceremonial signing of this landmark piece of legislation. All attendees were given a pen, except for Farmer, and it was only after the repeated urging by Farmer's colleague civil rights leaders that Johnson handed Farmer a pen, be it without looking him in the eye.¹⁶⁶

As insignificant as the event regarding the signing of the Voting Rights Act might be, it was illustrative for how the way in which the communication between President Johnson and the CORE leader worsened. According to Farmer, the president was much better able to understand 'the courteous, middle-class representatives of NAACP and NUL than the angry young blacks who would like to tell it like it is, and call him an MF [motherfucker, MvS]', emphasizing the paternalism of Johnson's older Southern manner, which did not go along very well with young black radicals.¹⁶⁷ Being a part of the left wing of the civil rights movement, CORE members started to advocate for the necessity of revolutionary changes in the social structure of American society, and in doing so, they gradually geared towards a more violent rhetoric. In the eyes of many, the only way in which the black community could free itself from the power structure of white capitalists, politicians and bureaucrats was to abandon biracial membership in favor of black separatism. It is therefore no coincidence that the radical black supremacist Malcolm X – who had been assassinated by three Nation of Islam members in February 1965 – became a sacred symbol for the majority of CORE's followers during this period.

In spite of these increasing sentiments to break the coalition between blacks and the white establishment, there was still no consensus on the preferred direction of CORE. A number of individuals openly attacked United States policy in Vietnam because

¹⁶⁵ Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart of America*, 298.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 300.

¹⁶⁷ Roosevelt Study Center, *Oral History of the Johnson Administration*, 'Interview with James Farmer', 26-1-1976.

it diverted attention and funds away from the country's main domestic problems. Furthermore, these critics accused the administration that the motivations for involvement in the Vietnam War were cut from the same cloth as domestic racism: both represented the 'white power structure' to keep a colored race in a colonial status. CORE was, however, a diverse organization in which there was little consensus on several issues, including whether or not to oppose Vietnam.¹⁶⁸

Ambiguous position

Just as in most branches of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam issue did not become a top priority until the summer of 1965.¹⁶⁹ One of CORE's earliest public expressions of doubt about the administration's foreign policy was spoken out during a so-called Negro conference in Petersburg, Virginia (the first five days of July 1965), where many of the country's most influential civil rights leaders were present. A woman in the audience was critical about the scheduled construction of a new Defense Building in Washington, saying that 'here is an opportunity for the peace and civil rights movement to get together in protest.' Farmer stated that he understood the appeal of such a connection, but did not (yet) believe in a formal merger between the two movements. 'CORE should not be a peace movement. It would divert too much of our energies. Yet on specific issues the two should be coordinated. As an individual I object to our Vietnam policies. As individuals we should and would be involved in both', he did not definitively rule out an informal link between the two, leaving room for a possible merger between the antiwar and civil rights movements in the future.¹⁷⁰

The official manifestation of CORE's ambiguous position took place on July 5th, which was the final and most heated day of the convention in Virginia. After discussing a variety of pressing civil rights subjects, the final session was devoted to the organization's official stance on the Vietnam War, an issue that inevitably had to be discussed in the eyes of many members. While most of CORE's present delegates opposed the war, many of them feared that the organization would be alienated if they would pursue an official policy of condemning the administration's 'immoral policy of racism abroad', as they saw the American involvement in Vietnam. Despite the

¹⁶⁸ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 374-376.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 336.

¹⁷⁰ John Herbers, *The New York Times*, 'Civil Rights & War. Peace Movements and Negro Groups Seen as Forming Closer Relationship', 5-7-1965.

resentment that the vast majority of CORE's membership felt against the war, the official resolution of opposition did not pass that day. This was largely a result of the advice of Farmer, who let strategic considerations prevail over his personal principles. By blocking CORE's approval of the resolution, Farmer aroused the anger of several chapter leaders such as Ollie Leeds and Lincoln Lynch, who worked hard for the resolution to pass.¹⁷¹ According to the *New York Times* civil rights correspondent Gene Roberts, many of the delegates had speculated that the CORE leader might be persuaded to follow the antiwar stance of SCLC's Martin Luther King. Farmer personally agreed to the resolution completely, but added that the task of CORE was to 'mobilize as many people as possible' into the civil rights battle, and that the risk of losing the sympathies of many influential people would be very high if it became formally involved in the peace movement.¹⁷²

Change in leadership and strategy

During the months that followed, the National Action Council of the organization increasingly criticized Farmer, making his position less and less secure. This was partly a result of declining membership and activity as well as a financial crisis inside CORE, but Farmer's refusal to openly condemn the Vietnam War greatly reinforced this criticism.¹⁷³ This continuing undercurrent of critique convinced Farmer that his skill might be more useful in another position, and accordingly, he started developing a national literacy program. The retiring national director requested President Johnson to fund his program, but in the end, the White House did not grant Farmer the necessary budget to continue his battle against illiteracy in the black ghettos. Farmer left CORE disillusioned, formally transferring power to Floyd McKissick in January 1966.¹⁷⁴

While he was a close friend of his predecessor Farmer, who supported him in becoming the national director, McKissick proved to be a very different, more radical leader. As a regular member, he had already invited Black Muslims to speak at CORE's national convention in 1965, an early indication of his respect for the ideals of Malcolm

¹⁷¹ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 404.

¹⁷² Gene Robert, *The New York Times*, 'CORE Reverses Call for Vietnam Pullout', 6-7-1965.

¹⁷³ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 396-397.

¹⁷⁴ Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart of America*, 295-305.

X.¹⁷⁵ The election of McKissick was an important moment in CORE history: it resulted in a revision of the biracial, nonviolent principles that had been self-evident since the establishment of the organization. Especially during the summer of 1966, it became clear that McKissick and his close advisors were no longer opposed to using force as an act of self-defense, and black separatism – ‘Racial co-existence through Black Power’, to use the words of Roy Innis, chairman of CORE’s Harlem chapter – was considered ‘the only meaningful way to total equality.’¹⁷⁶ It is hardly a surprise that such a radical form of civil rights activism went hand in hand with the formal, public condemnation of American foreign policy. During the White House Conference on Civil Rights (June 1 and 2, 1966), McKissick tried to table a resolution on Vietnam, which was quickly ruled out of order.¹⁷⁷ A month later, at CORE’s national convention in Baltimore, the director spoke out the official organizational position against American involvement in Vietnam. ‘The escalation of that war is wrong, we believe. The war which must be escalated is the war against poverty and discrimination.’ Not only did CORE Convention lead to condemning American involvement in Vietnam, but also to the support of draft resisters. ‘You cannot send troops to Vietnam and not send troops to Mississippi, where Negroes are beaten and gassed’, McKissick said at the convention.¹⁷⁸

Ali support and federal distrust

In the months that followed, CORE’s antiwar activism intensified. McKissick declared that violent outbursts in the black ghettos were in large part caused by black discontent with LBJ’s Vietnam Policy. Negroes living in ghettos were ‘frustrated and angry’ over the disproportionate number of black casualties in Vietnam. The CORE leader was critical about moderate civil rights leaders, who were in his eyes misrepresenting the ‘angry mood’ of the black community towards Washington’s policies. While Whitney Young (National Urban League) claimed that only a small minority of civil rights leaders had taken a position against US involvement in Vietnam, McKissick countered: ‘A small minority of civil rights leaders could very well mean a majority of black people.’¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 402.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, 414-415.

¹⁷⁷ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 293.

¹⁷⁸ Unknown Author, *Los Angeles Times*, ‘Director of CORE Criticizes Nonviolence as Dying Principle’, 3-7-1966.

¹⁷⁹ Henry Raymont, *The New York Times*, ‘McKissick Says Negroes Are “Frustrated and Angry”’, 26-7-1966.

CORE had already lost most of the administration's sympathy with its uncompromising war opposition, but after its declaration of sympathy with boxing icon Muhammad Ali, the organization lost all remaining credit. With his famous words 'No Vietnamese ever called me nigger', Ali motivated his refusal to serve in Vietnam, after which he was arrested on April 28th, 1967.¹⁸⁰ CORE was the only organization that publicly backed Ali, sending him a letter of support and calling him a role model, who 'gave black youngsters an independent black hero.' This letter also contained a passage in which NAACP and the National Urban League were urged to support Ali's decision. CORE stated that these two organizations needed to be made aware that they were helping 'no one, not even themselves' by their lack of support for the boxer.¹⁸¹ The US Supreme Court initially convicted Ali to five years in prison for draft evasion, but his sentence was overturned within little more than a week. Ali was granted absolution, but the intelligence organizations of the Johnson Administration thereafter closely monitored the behavior of his supporters, including CORE. Given the frequent mentions of CORE as a 'subversive influence' in FBI and CIA papers during the second half of 1967 and 1968, the organization was distrusted to the same degree as the SNCC and the SCLC.¹⁸² CORE's growing affiliation with the black supremacy ideology resulted in predictable accusations of consorting with Communism by Hoover. In 1968, when the civil rights movement had already lost a great deal of its effectiveness, the FBI director said that the Black Power movement's antiwar activism was inspired by 'Reds': 'There is nothing which the party would like more than to witness a continuation of widespread opposition, especially non-Communist opposition, to the Government's policy in Vietnam.'¹⁸³

After the annual CORE convention in July 1967, the organization had deleted the word 'multiracial' from its constitution, which was the official confirmation of a mindset that had already taken grip of the organization during the previous months.¹⁸⁴ According to McKissick, it was time to 'let the world know the direction that CORE is going.'¹⁸⁵ Many followers, which were attracted to CORE because of its interracial and

¹⁸⁰ Higgins, *Instruments of Righteousness*, 134-136.

¹⁸¹ Floyd McKissick, *Congress of Racial Equality Papers*, 1959-1976, 'A Letter to the Champ', Reel 31, 3-5-1967.

¹⁸² Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Subversive Influences*, 'Racial Violence Potential in the United States This Summer' 23-5-1967.

¹⁸³ Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'Hoover Says Reds Use Black Power', 6-1-1968.

¹⁸⁴ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 419.

¹⁸⁵ Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'Negro-Only CORE Near', 6-7-1967.

nonviolent image, found it very hard to accept the new path of black radicalism that was firmly applied to the policy of the organization. This led to a serious drop in supporters, a trend that McKissick was only moderately successful in countering. As he aligned the organization under the banner of Black Power, many whites turned away from CORE. McKissick realized that he was mainly responsible for this 'wedge' between black and white inside the organization. Losing white, liberal support meant that CORE had to raise its funds from blacks, which failed pitifully. At the end of 1966, McKissick admitted that appeal letters to middle class blacks 'had given the poorest response'.¹⁸⁶ CORE was already facing bankruptcy since the start of 1967, and it could only avoid this by large cuts on its own expenditures.¹⁸⁷ Eventually, the decline in followers, serious substantial financial support and the increasing racial fissures limited the influence of CORE. McKissick left the organization in the summer of 1968, when its flame was all but extinguished.¹⁸⁸

In spite of CORE being very unpopular among the nation's establishment, the decline of the organization's influence over the course of 1967 and 1968 is more likely to be explained through choices inside its own ranks. Internal division, as well as the dismissal of the nonviolence principle and the rejection of racial cooperation greatly eroded the image of CORE. Especially since McKissick's takeover in 1966, the relationship between CORE and the Johnson Administration was far from flawless, but the organization's Vietnam War opinion is not the primary factor for explaining this.

Conclusion

After analyzing and comparing SNCC, SCLC and CORE, it is safe to say that the major authorities inside these three civil rights groups were principally against American military involvement in Vietnam right away. These organizations shared the idea that intervention in Vietnam was hypocrite: in their eyes, the battle for freedom (as the Americans saw the fight against Communism in Vietnam) in a faraway land, while ignoring the obvious lack of freedom for blacks at home, was unjust. These practical discrepancies between the Vietnam War and the struggle at home was not the only reason to oppose the conflict. Pacifism, solidarity with oppressed people of color, and a

¹⁸⁶ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 417-418.

¹⁸⁷ CORE National Advisory Committee, *Minutes*, 26-1-1967.

¹⁸⁸ Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 423.

broader critique on American society were also important contributing factors. In explaining why SNCC, SCLC and CORE objected the war, Jonathan Rosenberg's concept of "color-conscious internationalism" – the idea that worldwide racial struggles were a reflection of the African-American backwardness at home – was at least as important as the domestic disadvantages for this subgroup.¹⁸⁹

Martin Luther King, Jr. – who had a very good relationship with President Johnson in the first half of the 1960s – was the first civil rights leader to ask attention for the problematic influence of the war on the black battle for emancipation. Rather than only looking at advantages for his own group's struggle, his resentment was firmly rooted in his strong belief in nonviolence and his aversion against neocolonialism. Because the rest of SCLC was less focused on principles and more on strategic cooperation to make substantial progress inside the United States, this personal opposition didn't immediately result in a public statement against the Vietnam War.

When SNCC, which was more radical and less close with the Administration, decided to publish an official statement against American intervention, it only reinforced their status as the least acceptable civil rights organization in the eyes of the government officials. After King and SCLC finally joined them in their formal stance against Vietnam, Johnson's distrust led him to – together with the FBI's Hoover – monitor and damage the organization with success. This was also the case for SNCC and CORE, which suffered under the administration's continuous efforts to discredit their personnel. The new course of Black Power, in which SCLC never believed, was both a cause and a result of the administration's continued disinterest of the civil rights movement. As CORE's former director James Farmer would later declare in an interview, people like Floyd McKissick and Stokely Carmichael – who both steered their organizations more toward radicalism – never had any hearing at the White House.¹⁹⁰

While the relationship of SNCC and CORE with the president and his officials was never very harmonious, the gradual discrediting of the nonviolent SCLC shows that Vietnam War opposition could turn a friend (King) into an enemy of the administration. In the end, all three leaders were, in the words of the FBI, grouped under the category of 'dangerous demagogues', symbolic for the status which their organizations had

¹⁸⁹ Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?*, 214-229.

¹⁹⁰ Roosevelt Study Center, *Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration*, 'Interview With James Farmer', Reel 8, 26-1-1976

among the administration.¹⁹¹ In spite of important differences between the three organizations – SCLC remained much more moderate, held on to nonviolence and didn’t adopt the Black Power strategy – the Johnson Administration lumped them together as a group of uncooperative, unpatriotic black militants which sided with Communists. With this perspective, the conclusion of the book *Cold War Civil Rights*, in which Mary Dudziak argues that the civil rights movement lost a crucial part of leverage due to objecting against the war, seems justified.¹⁹² It is, however, not the only explanation for the problematic course of these groups. As the next chapter will show, internal factors and existing ties are also key factors for fully understanding the dynamics between Johnson and the movement.

¹⁹¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Subversive Influences*, ‘Racial Violence Potential in the United States This Summer’: http://www.aavw.org/special_features/govdocs_fbi_abstract03_excerpt.html (2-2-2016).

¹⁹² Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 249-254.

Chapter 5. Remaining silent

5.1 NAACP's refusal to mix internal and external affairs

Being a Northern-based organization founded by (mostly) white intellectuals, who believed in emancipation through legal persuasion, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had always been quite close to the most important American policymakers. During the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, this was no different. In the establishment of NAACP's close ties with the Administration, Roy Wilkins, who was the organization's executive director from 1955 until 1977, played an important role. When John F. Kennedy chose Johnson as his running mate for the 1960 presidential elections, many civil rights activists were surprised and outraged. 'To choose a Texan who had voted against every important civil rights measure until the 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts was a shock', Wilkins said in his autobiography. NAACP head, however, suspected that Johnson's negative record on civil rights was tactical rather than principal, and therefore he decided not to share the negative sentiment of many of his colleagues.¹⁹³ Wilkins' trust in Johnson set the tone for a good understanding during the 1960s, making it relatively easy to gain access to White House for NAACP leader.

No risks of alienation

It goes without saying that NAACP was keen on maintaining its good relationship with the Johnson Administration, and keeping his full-fledged support during its legal battle for racial equality was the organization's main aim. The leadership of NAACP was very grateful to LBJ for passing the Civil Rights Act (July 2nd, 1964), and was not willing to jeopardize its position at the forefront of the movement at any cost.¹⁹⁴ The fundamental objective of NAACP had always been the full participation of African-Americans in all stages of American life. The leaders of NAACP were determined that nothing would deflect them from this goal. Clearly, opposing the Vietnam War would have made the

¹⁹³ Tom Mathews and Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast. The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York 1994) 276.

¹⁹⁴ Glen Ingram, 'NAACP Support of the Vietnam War 1963-1969', *Western Journal of Black Studies*, Volume 30:1, 54-61.

ship very unsteady. Unlike the militants in the movement, NAACP did not advocate a revolutionary overhaul of the American socio-economic and political system.¹⁹⁵

The civil rights achievements of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations during the first half of the 1960s represented the fulfilment of NAACP's dream of reaching racial equality through legislation and government intervention. There was little room for bitterness or disillusionment, and less motivation to view the war in Vietnam as anything other than a necessary defense of freedom in the face of communist aggression.¹⁹⁶ Ever since the summer of 1965, when civil rights organizations began to form an opinion about the conflict in Southeast-Asia, NAACP had refused to speak out against Vietnam, believing it would endanger the cause of reform. In July 1965, for example, Roy Wilkins said: 'We have enough Vietnams in Alabama.'¹⁹⁷ A few weeks later he elaborated this statement further in a radio interview: 'When you mix the question of Vietnam into the questions of Mississippi and Alabama and getting registration and the vote and all the things... Negroes want... you sort of confuse the issue.' The idea behind Wilkins' opinion was that black Americans first ought to strengthen their position as an American. 'If he's a third-rate citizen his opinions on South Africa or Vietnam will have no effect.'¹⁹⁸

In the judgment of NAACP leaders, opposing the war would be a counterproductive strategy for achieving the movement's domestic goals of social reform. Arguing that tying together the battle for black equality and the antiwar movement would sap away energies and resources of the black emancipation struggle, NAACP was the organization that was least willing to take the risk of alienation.¹⁹⁹ According to Manfred Berg, the nature of NAACP's refusal to oppose the president's Vietnam War escalation can also be partly explained by its policy of anticommunism. From the start of the Cold War, the organization joined the anticommunist hysteria in the United States, which formed an important part of its political legitimacy. It is highly

¹⁹⁵ Hall, 'The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam', 676.

¹⁹⁶ Ibidem, 677.

¹⁹⁷ John Herbers, *The New York Times*, 'Civil Rights & War. Peace Movements and Negro Groups Seen as Forming Closer Relationship', 5-7-1965.

¹⁹⁸ Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?*, 566-567.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem, 572.

plausible that this made it almost impossible for the organization to have any serious criticism on American involvement in Vietnam.²⁰⁰

Condemning colleagues

In addition to its own refusal to take a stand against Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policy, NAACP leaders also actively reprovved fellow civil rights activists who did express their discontent about the conflict. Commenting on King's proposals to negotiate for peace in Vietnam (August 1965), Roy Wilkins argued that civil rights groups did not have enough information on Vietnam, or on foreign policy in general, to make it their cause.²⁰¹ A similar, more formal occasion on which NAACP clearly chose sides against antiwar sentiments was shortly after SNCC drafted its first official statement of war opposition on January 6th, 1966. Immediately thereafter, Wilkins was quick to remind the president and his followers that his organization – and the majority of the movement – did not agree with the rebellious students. 'The public must be careful to recognize that this statement is one by only one of the many civil rights groups, and is not the statement of other groups of what is loosely called the civil rights movement', NAACP executive director tried to play down the importance of the antiwar statement.²⁰²

While a majority of blacks highlighted the discrepancy between fighting for freedom abroad while experiencing repression at home, Roy Wilkins showed to be a supporter of Johnson's policy to simultaneously fund the Great Society and the Vietnam War. In a private telegram of January 13th, 1966 to President Johnson, Wilkins said: 'your call for carrying on domestic crusade for the Great Society projects including all aspects of anti-poverty program along with fulfilling our nation's commitment in Vietnam is the right call and is a challenge for every American.'²⁰³ Given Johnson's generous attitude towards those he considered loyal, the White House was easily accessible for Wilkins. In his autobiography, the NAACP executive director articulated his positive experience of working closely with the Johnson Administration. Wilkins stated that he

²⁰⁰ Manfred Berg, 'Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War', *The Journal of American History*, Volume 94:1 (June 2007) 94-96.

²⁰¹ Adam Fairclough, 'Martin Luther King, Jr. and the War in Vietnam', *Phylon* Vol. 45:1 (1984) 24.

²⁰² Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'N.A.A.C.P. Disassociates Itself From Attack on Vietnam Policy', 9-1-1966.

²⁰³ Ryan, *Leading from the Back*, 283.

often came away from conversations with LBJ 'feeling that he was not only with us but often ahead of us.'²⁰⁴ This feeling of closeness towards the president is also illustrated by NAACP's prevention of the earlier mentioned plan of CORE chairman Stokely Carmichael to protest at Luci Johnson's wedding on August 6th, 1966. Julius Lester – who worked as a photographer for SNCC – said to be disgusted with Wilkins and Young (National Urban League), who in his eyes behaved as 'errand boys' for the white establishment: 'As sure as the cavalry always comes to rescue the settlers, here come Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young riding across the plains, yelling, Here we is, white folks. Let's get them niggers.'²⁰⁵

Minor internal friction

Opposition to NAACP's Vietnam standpoint and its relationship with the Johnson Administration did not only arise among civil rights groups, but criticism – albeit fragmentary – also existed inside the organization itself. Several members of local NAACP branches expressed their discontent with the subservient attitude of their organization's central leadership towards the federal government. One of them was Henry Wallace from the Kentucky chapter, who castigated Wilkins for his rejection of SNCC's antiwar stance. According to Wallace, the executive director that represented his organization was fast becoming the civil rights movement's 'Uncle Tom': an epithet for a black person that behaves slavish or subservient towards whites, originating from Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

After the influential member Gloster Current spoke out similar critique at a staff meeting in March 1966, Wilkins denied that there was any substantive basis to these accusations. Current withdrew his criticism, admitting that his remarks had been tactless. However, these concerns that the organization was tying itself too close to the LBJ Administration showed the first signs of divisiveness inside NAACP.²⁰⁶ Until the spring of 1967, however, the opposition towards the organization's reserved stance on Vietnam remained minimal. This does not mean that the Association's policy went unchallenged. It is difficult to measure the exact extent of opposition to the war within NAACP, but it is clear that there were many members who not only opposed the war

²⁰⁴ Mathews and Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, 321.

²⁰⁵ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 204-205.

²⁰⁶ Hall, 'The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam', 685-687.

personally, but also worked to generate opposition to the war within the Association. Although such activity was limited, its very existence makes it clear that the notion of a united, unanimous NAACP was not accurate.²⁰⁷

It would be a misconception to state that NAACP was a convinced, enthusiastic advocate of Johnson's battle against the threat of Communism in Vietnam, but Wilkins and his companions were always quick to condemn harshly those who felt the need to merge the civil rights and peace movements. Until April 1967, NAACP had never spoken out an official statement about their position towards American Vietnam war involvement, but when the authoritative King spoke out his opposition, NAACP immediately responded. The directors unanimously called King's stand a 'serious tactical mistake', which would not serve the cause of black emancipation nor the peace movement.'²⁰⁸ The official resolution of NAACP – drafted by public relations director Henry Lee Moon – briefly mentioned that the group was also in favor of a just peace in Vietnam, but emphasized that the civil rights movement should focus only on racial equality: 'We are not a peace organization nor a foreign policy association.'²⁰⁹ Stressing the importance of keeping the focus exclusively on racial equality would have been plausible if it were not for the fact that, by promoting strict neutrality on external issues, NAACP contradicted its own actions in the past. The organization had spoken out about foreign affairs earlier, for example with its condemnation of the American occupation of Haiti (1915), as well as the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.²¹⁰ Furthermore, with its statement that NAACP was not a foreign policy association, the organization also overlooked its earlier mentioned private telegram to Lyndon Johnson, in which Wilkins endorsed the president's commitment in Vietnam.²¹¹

In spite of the fact that critics from both inside and outside the organization often publicly accused NAACP of hypocritically burying its head in the sand, the organization fiercely held on to its cautious public Vietnam standpoint. Instead of following the rising tide of national discontent over the problematic and resource-

²⁰⁷ Manfred Berg, 'Guns, butter, and civil rights: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Vietnam War, 1964–1968', in David K. Adams and Cornelius A. van Minnen, eds., *Aspects of war in American history* (Keele, 1997), 215-221. & Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*, 690.

²⁰⁸ Ryan, *Leading from the Back*, 307-308.

²⁰⁹ Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'N.A.A.C.P. Decries Stand Of Dr. King on Vietnam', 11-4-1967.

²¹⁰ Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*, 693-694.

²¹¹ Ryan, *Leading From the Back*, 283.

consuming conflict, Wilkins and his fellow directors did not in any way want to get involved in 'left-wing shenanigans' of the peace movement.²¹² The organization never resented Vietnam War opposition in such a clear, unambiguous way as they condemned the use of Black Power, but the combination of its long-standing anticommunism and patriotism provided President Johnson with the certainty that NAACP would never turn against his foreign policy.²¹³ Unlike the majority of influential civil rights activists, Wilkins never considered supporting draft evasion among his members. Historian Manfred Berg argues that, rather than ideological convictions, the stance of NAACP director is best explained by strategic considerations: 'In essence, NAACP secretary was demanding that black men fight and die in Vietnam so that civil rights leaders could put their loyalty, heroic service and sacrifice...on the bargaining table.'²¹⁴

Regardless of the truth of Berg's bold statement, it seems quite clear that NAACP's Vietnam strategy proved to be productive for the maintenance of a good relationship with the Johnson Administration. The fact that Wilkins was the only civil rights leader who was invited to attend the Kerner Commission – dealing with the investigation of race riots and recommendations for the future of race relations – meetings (July 1967-February 1968) is exemplary for the pivotal role with which NAACP leader was rewarded.²¹⁵ Even several days after Johnson had already announced not to run for office for the coming elections, Wilkins kept showing his admiration for the president. In spite of his Texan descent, which aroused skepticism among his own followers at first, LBJ 'has been better in pronouncement and performance on America's old and emotional problem of race than any other President in our history', Wilkins argued.²¹⁶ Such a statement is exemplary for NAACP's unconditional faith in the president's policy, which was cemented in a relationship of mutual respect. Although other factors contributed as well, it is undeniable that there

²¹² Berg, *Guns, Butter and Civil Rights*, 215.

²¹³ Ryan, *Leading from the Back*, 302-303.

²¹⁴ Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville 2007) 226.

²¹⁵ Ryan, *Leading from the Back*, 300.

²¹⁶ Roosevelt Study Center, *Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration. Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission)*, 'Remarks of Roy Wilkins, executive director, NAACP, before National Press Club regarding Commission', Reel 14, 2-4-1968.

existed a connection between (the lack of) the organization's opinion on Vietnam and the favorable position that NAACP enjoyed among the Johnson Administration.

5.2 National Urban League: pragmatism over principles

Given the similarity in the background of their mission, followers and strategies, it is no surprise that the National Urban League's stance on Vietnam in many ways mirrored that of NAACP. In line with moderate activists as Wilkins, Randolph and Rustin, the New York-centered organization had always insisted that foreign policy and civil rights issues remain disconnected.²¹⁷ This stance was mainly a consequence of the long-standing ties between executive director Whitney Young and the federal authorities. Young had easy access to the White House, where he advised three successive presidential administrations (Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon). Young's smooth understanding with the government was not in the first place a result of his thorough political expertise, but more of his polite and eloquent leadership style. Especially Johnson often preferred consultation from the NUL director when he wanted quick, trustworthy advice about race relations. Young was often present at crucial federal commissions and drew contracts for his organization with various governmental agencies. Already during the presidency of John F. Kennedy, Young developed strong ties with his running mate Johnson, smartly responding to LBJ's frustrations and limitations as JFK's subordinate. Young convinced the president to be of the necessity of civil rights legislation, which paved the way for a good understanding between Young and President Johnson.²¹⁸

Defending the president

As early as August 1965 – when the movement's talisman King started pointing out how deeply Vietnam and the civil rights struggle were intertwined – the League's Delegate Assembly had approved a resolution recommending its members to stay out of the burgeoning Vietnam controversy. The resolution, which was backed by the League's national office, stated that the organization should 'not divide nor divert its

²¹⁷ Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*, 681.

²¹⁸ Dickerson, *Militant Mediator*, 237-246.

energies and resources by seeking to merge domestic and international issues where armed conflict is involved'.²¹⁹ Whitney Young renounced King's statements on Vietnam, cautioning that Johnson needed a consensus: 'If we are not with him on Vietnam, then he is not going to be with us on civil rights.'²²⁰

While remaining as silent and neutral as possible about the conflict for the following months, a few occasions occurred on which Young felt called to express his opinion. Although he did not go as far as giving his full-fledged support to American involvement, he uncompromisingly attacked those that dared to attack President Johnson's decision to intensify military presence in Southeast-Asia. On January 6th, 1966, after SNCC released its official declaration of Vietnam War opposition, the National Urban League was one of the many parties that put the torrent of criticism on the student organization into motion.²²¹

Young did not limit his critique to his African-American colleagues, but – illustrative for his established position within the higher ranks of Washington – also did not spare white politicians if he disagreed with them. At a dinner of the Interracial Council for Business Opportunity in the New York Waldorf-Astoria hotel (March 2nd, 1966), the NUL leader accused the democratic senator William Fulbright (1905-1995) of showing anger about abuses in the distant Vietnam, but not caring so much for the civil rights in his own country. 'When he stands up to Governor Faubus (who opted for segregation in Arkansas, MvS) with the same courage he shows President Johnson, then I'll believe him,' Young accused the senator of selective indignation. 'I'm concerned about Saigon, but I'm more concerned about Selma and Birmingham', a quote which was exemplary for his overall view on the merger of civil rights and peace movements.²²²

At the White House Conference on Civil Rights on the first two days of June, 1966, the National Urban League maintained a nuanced, prudent position in an increasingly militant black national leadership, which greatly aided the White House. Towards his fellow civil rights activists, the NUL's executive director kept stressing the importance of remaining a single-issue movement. 'The people are more concerned about the rat tonight and the job tomorrow than they are about Vietnam.' Young kept defending the

²¹⁹ Fred Powledge, *The New York Times*, 'Young of Urban League Says Negroes Seek Lasting Change', 2-8-1965.

²²⁰ Fairclough, 'Martin Luther King, Jr. and the War in Vietnam', 24-25.

²²¹ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 202.

²²² Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'Urban League Head Assails Fulbright' 2-3-1966.

embattled president, helping LBJ to keep his credibility with blacks, making the president politically indebted to the Urban League leader.²²³ ‘Those who criticize LBJ over Vietnam must realize that his domestic program – Medicare, urban aid, anti-poverty programs, aid to education, and countless other far-seeing measures mark the beginning of a new era in American life’, Young praised the president.²²⁴

Young’s Vietnam visit

Sensing the other organizations’ growing discontent over his refusal to oppose the war, Whitney Young embarked upon an independent fact-finding trip to Vietnam at the end of July 1966. Goal of the trip, funded by the National Urban League, was the investigation of the welfare of serving black soldiers, as well as motivating them to carry on. Despite showing his personal support to the troops, Young was careful not to make any moral judgment on the conflict itself.²²⁵ Contrary to many African-Americans, the Urban League did not urge blacks to refuse draft, but expressed its pride in the role of African-American soldiers in Vietnam. By comparing the battlefield there with the struggle against injustice at home, rather than highlighting the unfairness of blacks fighting in the US army, Young emphasized the positive side of black patriotism: serving on the battlefield was a sign of loyalty towards the nation.²²⁶ Although it is questionable if he principally agreed to his own statement, Young could use quotes like these as leverage for more black emancipation.²²⁷ After returning from Vietnam, for example, the NUL executive director said that the ‘high morale’ of blacks in Vietnam was a great sign of integration, but that, at the same time, their high death rate (at the time, blacks accounted for around 22 percent of the war’s casualties) worried him. Young did not blame racial discrimination in the draft for the high presence of blacks in Vietnam, but argued that this was rather a result of voluntary enlistment and high willingness among blacks to volunteer for hazardous duty in groups as the airborne troops.²²⁸ Young claimed that in Vietnam, for ‘all intents and purposes, race is irrelevant. Colored soldiers fight and die courageously as representatives of all

²²³ Dickerson, *Militant Mediator*, 253.

²²⁴ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 229.

²²⁵ Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*, 682.

²²⁶ Dickerson, *Militant mediator* & Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*

²²⁷ Westheider, *Brothers in Arms*, 51.

²²⁸ John W. Finney, *The New York Times*, ‘President Backs Negro Promotion’, 27-7-1966.

America.’²²⁹ To reduce the disproportionate numbers of black Americans, Young requested that more African-American soldiers would be promoted to officer ranks. President Johnson assured the League leader he would endorse this request, that he would indeed ‘make greater effort to promote and identify Negroes in higher ranks’. Although *Project 100,000* (the program to enlist formerly ineligible citizens, implemented in the fall of 1966) initially resulted in an increase of black soldiers, black death rates had significantly dropped to about 13 percent by late 1967, which suggests that Johnson’s promise to Young was not just an empty gesture.²³⁰

A counterweight for King

Shortly after Martin Luther King’s landmark speech in New York in April of 1967, Whitney Young expressed serious critique on SCLC leader: ‘The limited resources and personnel available to civil rights agencies should not be diverted into other channels’, said Young, once again emphasizing that the peace and civil rights movement had different goals and that it would be inappropriate to merge them.²³¹ This direct response to SCLC’s official antiwar statement highlighted the tension between the leaders of SCLC and the Urban League.

At an Urban League national conference in Portland (August 1967), Whitney Young declared that, if a choice could be made between ‘guns and butter’ (military expenditures or domestic reform), the ‘first priority ought to be peace and justice at home’, a statement that endangered the neutrality of Young and his organization.²³² With the enormous influence of King and the rising anti-Vietnam sentiments, Johnson felt that he needed to balance King’s antiwar position in order to keep broad support for his Vietnam policy.²³³ Johnson asked Young to become an observer of the South-Vietnamese elections in the end of August, which the NUL director initially resisted because he felt the civil rights struggle needed his attention and energy more. The president, however, had some important leverage: shortly before, Johnson had nominated Thurgood Marshall (1909-1993) as the first African-American Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. ‘Whitney, you wanted a Negro on the Supreme Court and I

²²⁹ Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 135.

²³⁰ Appy, *Working Class War*, 19.

²³¹ Douglas Robinson, *The New York Times*, ‘Jewish Veterans Attack Dr. King’s Stand on War’, 6-4-1967.

²³² Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*, 695.

²³³ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr. and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 163.

put on one. Now I want a Negro on this group going to Vietnam', LBJ insisted.²³⁴ Young made the trip, and got accused of letting himself 'be used as a puppet' of the white administration by various civil rights colleagues. In response, Young kept accentuating that it was important not to get distracted by participating in the antiwar movement.²³⁵

After returning from South-Vietnam, Young's statements regarding African-American war involvement started to show ambivalence, by on the one hand objecting to the propagation of black draft resistance ('The greatest freedom that exists for Negroes in this country is freedom to die in Vietnam'), but on the other hand defending SNCC's militant leader H. Rap Brown: 'Rap Brown did not cause unemployment and Rap Brown did not create ghettos', and 'the Negro has as much right to have his extremists as the whites.'²³⁶ Despite these statements, Young's trip to Vietnam reinforced the idea that his National Urban League was convinced of the justness of Johnson's policy. When the group had returned to the United States, they reported that the elections had been fair, making it seem that American involvement in the war against North Vietnam was justified: the Americans were fighting for emergent democratic state in Southeast-Asia, and the US military was required to protect South Vietnam from Communist aggressors. In short, Young's trust in Johnson's civil rights policy guided the NUL leader to – albeit reluctantly – endorsement of the president's controversial policies in Vietnam.²³⁷

For Whitney Young, his continuous refusal to speak negatively about the Johnson Administration and its decisions regarding Vietnam had positive consequences. Contrary to his more critical counterweight King, Young was never a target of FBI surveillance during LBJ's presidency. According to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, Young was a 'very expedient person' who had a 'cooperative attitude toward the Bureau.'²³⁸ Johnson himself was also very positive about Young, when recalled a great example of his special relationship with the Urban League at the annual Equal Opportunity Days awards dinner of the Urban League: 'It was a warm, sentimental evening. But nothing meant more to me than the presentation made by Whitney Young. The Urban League,

²³⁴ Hall, *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*, 695.

²³⁵ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 162-163.

²³⁶ Unknown Author, *The New York Times*, 'Young Cites 'Freedom' to 'Die in Vietnam'', 26-8-1967.

²³⁷ Dickerson, *Militant Mediator*, 270.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*, 261.

he announced, was pledging \$100,000 to establish a scholarship fund in my name at the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas to provide annual fellowships for deserving black students.'²³⁹

The weighty role of the warm personal contacts between Young and Johnson should not be underestimated when analyzing the dynamics that played a role in the National Urban League's position on Vietnam. Despite the doubts he had about the conflict, Young refused to jeopardize his high-level position around the White House, maintaining the privileges he enjoyed during LBJ's presidency. The NUL's executive director served as an insider, a bridge and interpreter between black America and important businessmen, executives and public officials surrounding the president. Young was consulted extensively about The War on Poverty, and his relationship with the president also shaped his response to the Vietnam War. Rather than alienating his most important ally by associating with antiwar advocates, Young used the peculiar connection between civil rights and Vietnam as a pressure point to maintain presidential support for black advancement.²⁴⁰ Eventually, however, Young could no longer ignore the voice of the many antiwar blacks, who put him under pressure to acknowledge the unjust character of the war. Indicative for his loyalty to the president, he delayed doing this publicly until Johnson stepped down. Only after March 31, 1968, when LBJ had decided not to accept the Democratic Party's nomination for another term as the US president, Young officially reassessed his position and spoke out against Vietnam.²⁴¹

Conclusion

This analysis of the Vietnam War opinions of the Big Five's two organizations underscores the influence which the elitist, moderate and strategical identities of NAACP and the National Urban League had on their Vietnam statements. Although it is important to note that the two moderate organizations never took a hawkish position in favor of the war, they continuously kept insisting that the black emancipation struggle in the United States and involvement in the Vietnam War were distinct

²³⁹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 178-179.

²⁴⁰ Dickerson, *Militant Mediator*, 273-274.

²⁴¹ Unknown Author, *King Encyclopedia*, 'Young Whitney Moore':

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_young_whitney_moore_1921_1971/index.html (1-2-2016).

phenomena that needed to be approached separately. In their eyes, civil rights activists would do well not to concern themselves with the peace movement in any way. In addition to their own neutrality, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young frequently mentioned that they disagreed with dissenters within the movement. Due to their anticommunist, conservative identities, NAACP and National Urban League resented the idea of being associated with the predominantly left-wing peace movement.

The main reasons of NAACP and the National Urban League for taking this position were largely similar: getting involved with foreign policy would limit the scarce resources for reaching racial equality even more, and both organizations were cautious not to jeopardize their excellent relationship with the Johnson Administration. In this tactical companionship lies another important explanatory factor for the moderates' refusal to attack LBJ's foreign policy. By maintaining a neutral stance towards the conflict, NAACP and the Urban League hoped to keep the close ties with the White House. Since the antiwar movement was punctuated by personal attacks on the president, Wilkins and Young felt they could not afford to be associated with it, regardless of their personal doubts and resistance they experienced inside their respective organizations. For their political power and the respect they enjoyed among the white establishment, the distance which NAACP and the Urban League took from any form of White House criticism was a blessing. In return for their unconditional support of the course that Lyndon Johnson chose, the president considered Wilkins and Young as important allies and perhaps even as good friends. Opposing Vietnam was, in short, never a serious option for both NAACP and the National Urban League during LBJ's presidency. Because the two most established groups of the Big Five kept stressing that the civil rights movement was a single-issue operation, they chose to deny the harmful effects that the Vietnam War allegedly had on their own emancipation battle. Regardless of the moral righteousness of this neutral stance, it cannot be denied that NAACP and the National Urban League benefited from it.

Through adopting a considerate and cooperative stance towards the government's Vietnam policy, the two moderate groups created more room for strategical negotiations, which would (modestly) improve the situation of blacks. Occasionally, this attitude towards Vietnam – which implicitly echoed elements of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist approach – proved to be successful, for example when Whitney Young's successfully opted for better treatment of black

soldiers in 1967.²⁴² In a way, the view of Herbert Shapiro, who argues that the simultaneousness of the Vietnam War and the civil rights struggle resulted in a recognition of black participation in foreign affairs, is confirmed by the history of NAACP and the National Urban League.²⁴³ It is, however, highly doubtful if his main conclusion, in which he argues the Vietnam War has been a blessing for the civil rights movement in the long run, also contains elements of truth. In the conclusion of this thesis, the answer to the sub-questions and a hypothesis recap will be presented to shed more light on this question.

²⁴² Mark Bauerlein, 'Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois: The Origins of a Bitter Intellectual Battle', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 46 (Winter 2004-2005) 106.

²⁴³ Shapiro, 'The Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement', 135-137.

Conclusion

As the in-depth chronological analysis of both subgroups during Johnson's presidential term show, it is hard to deny that the Vietnam War had a profound influence on the civil rights movement. When tying all chapters together in a summary of the research's main findings, it becomes clear that the choice to divide the Big Five into two subgroups has resulted in many compelling, relevant conclusions. The answers to each sub-question summarize the main findings of this research in a clear, concise manner. But as a conclusion should be more than only the sum of all answers to the sub-questions, a final answer to the most important question, asked in the form of the hypothesis, will be provided. This research offers new insights, as well as a realization of the limitations. Therefore, this conclusion ends with a few critical remarks.

'How did the civil rights organizations express their opinion about Vietnam War involvement?'

SCLC, SNCC and CORE strongly opposed the Vietnam War, and expressed this through speeches, written statements, letters and other manifestations. They did so for several reasons: pacifism, the destructive impact of military spending in Vietnam on the Great Society project and 'internationalism': the war against the Vietcong as a mirror of the broader white, capitalist domination under which colored minorities suffered. According to these three anti-Vietnam groups, domestic and foreign affairs were inseparably linked, and thus it went against their principles to keep silent about their resentment to the war.

In certain cases, NAACP and the National Urban League stated to be principally in favor of Johnson's intervention in Vietnam, mainly out of anticommunist and patriotic considerations. Mostly, however, these organizations were neutral and if they – especially Young from the Urban League – objected to the war, they kept this to themselves for strategic reasons. Both groups first and foremost believed that domestic and foreign affairs should not be connected, and they carried out this message in their official external communication.

'Which position did the civil rights organizations take towards the military draft of African-Americans?'

The three anti-Vietnam organizations were convinced supporters of draft resistance, and especially SNCC and CORE often encouraged their followers to evade the draft so that they could spend their time and energy on the civil rights struggle in their own country. Regarding this subject, CORE's support to the draft-resisting Muhammad Ali was exemplary for the way in which the organization supported blacks that refused to serve in Vietnam. While King's SCLC didn't put as much effort into dodging the military draft, their pacifism also implied the renouncing of serving on the battlefields against the Vietcong, as is clearly visible in the *Beyond Vietnam* speech.

NAACP and the National Urban League never spoke out against the draft of African-Americans, and emphasized that black Americans should fulfill their military duty as was expected of them. One of the clearest examples was Whitney Young's statement about being proud of the many African-Americans that fought in Vietnam. Because of their patriotism, loyalty to the administration and its military apparatus, these two organizations never seriously considered to urge blacks to resist the draft.

'Was the Johnson Administration equally accessible for all major civil rights organizations?'

During the period 1965-1968, it got increasingly difficult for SNCC, SCLC and CORE to get in touch with Johnson, Speaking about civil rights on equal terms was complicated by the president's resentment of the activist, direct and more principal attitude and ideas of these three organizations and their followers. Especially the relationship between King and Johnson, which was excellent initially, quickly worsened during this period. For the leaders of the other two groups, the distance to the White House was already fairly big before the Vietnam War became a serious issue. This fissure became only larger and more apparent because of the disagreements about the war.

The history of the different groups of the Big Five shows that this was definitely not the case. NAACP and National Urban League had leaders that were highly regarded by the white establishment in the North of the country, and they also had a good understanding with President Johnson. Both Young and Wilkins were frequently consulted by Johnson, and a relationship of mutual respect between them existed. This was only strengthened by their uncritical stance towards LBJ's foreign policy.

'Did Vietnam War opposition have consequences for the treatment which the civil rights organizations received from the Johnson Administration?'

While it is difficult to extract very concrete, irrefutable evidence for the answer to this question from the used sources, there are enough indications to be able to claim that the opinion on the Vietnam War indeed influenced the way in which these civil rights organizations were treated.

Evidence – mostly indirect – for negative consequences of Vietnam War opposition (resulting in less favorable treatment by the Johnson Administration) can be found for the three war-opposing groups. Opponents of the war, such as Julian Bond who was denied his seat in the Georgia Senate, were thwarted, critics were wiretapped or blackmailed, contact was limited or broken or arrested. Also, journalists frequently wrote – whether the White House encouraged them or not – critically about antiwar activists, particularly about King. The drop in governmental funds can also possibly be explained by the anti-Vietnam War position of these groups, but as said before, there is no hard evidence for this.

As it can be seen, the NAACP and the National Urban League hardly experienced any serious difficulties with Johnson and his confidants. Next to the earlier mentioned factors, it is highly probable that this can be explained by their cooperative attitude towards LBJ's largest foreign project, the Vietnam War. By showing themselves to be supporters (or, in most cases: no outright opponents) of this war, the ties between these groups and the White House remained strong. The sources indicate that the NAACP and the Urban League had a favorable position with the president, and, among other causes, their refusal to choose sides against the intervention in Vietnam was also helpful.

Hypothesis recap

'Speaking out about American involvement in the Vietnam War was a vehicle for black emancipation.'

After researching the Big Five of civil rights organizations and their Vietnam statements in great detail, it can be said that this hypothesis has been debunked. Instead of being a vehicle, the war sapped away the power of an important wing of the civil rights movement: they had to pay the price for their principles.

During the second half of the 1960s, the emancipation struggle could not be prioritized due to the prominent role that the government assigned to the conflict in Southeast Asia. When compared to the two groups that never openly pointed out the discrepancy between fighting for freedom abroad while neglecting it at home, the three organizations that noticed this and decided to put it on the public agenda, were punished for this.

In the troublesome development of SNCC, SCLC and CORE during Johnson's reign, many factors played a role, and it would be a huge oversimplification to see their resentment towards the Vietnam War as the only reason for this. It cannot, however, be denied that the Vietnam War enlarged existing differences, and brought the different characters of the groups and their leaders to the surface. Where earlier, disputes could be subordinated to the larger, common goal, the war in Vietnam was an issue on which the civil rights leaders had to make a clear decision. Especially the anti-Vietnam groups considered the position towards this conflict as a fundamental choice between good and evil. They viewed black supporters of the Vietnam War as 'slavish Uncle Toms', who sold their soul to the white regime, which oppressed a colored minority in Vietnam under the guise of freedom and equality, which the African-Americans in the United States lacked. Because of this, the Vietnam War caused division and discontent within the civil rights movement, which slowly splintered and fell apart after 1968.

As said before, many other factors played a role in this development. NAACP and the National Urban League already had significantly better ties with Johnson before the war started. Additionally, especially SNCC and CORE had younger, more activist followers because of their location and socio-economic position, and thus they were less aligned with the white establishment to begin with. Therefore they were more likely to make radical, aggressive statements and they had more affinity with the Black Power movement. Openly attacking Johnson's decision to fight in Vietnam deepened the fissures between the president and the three antiwar groups. SNCC, SCLC and CORE suffered reputational damage, which was underpinned by their internal division as well as their militant rhetoric and attempts of LBJ and the FBI to discredit them. Finally, the impact of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. should also not be underestimated. King was a man who, because of his knowledge, charismatic rhetoric, nonviolence and modesty, had the opportunity to once again unite and lead the civil rights movement, of which the credibility was already crumbling. In Memphis, this opportunity was taken

from him, and despite the fact that many civil rights organizations still exist, the movement has never recovered from this blow.

In short, the opinion of the Vietnam War was one of the many reasons to explain why the Big Five fared as they did, but far from the only one. There seems to be a correlation – being against the war went hand in hand with difficulties, counteraction and internal problems – but this does not necessarily imply that causality can also be found in this relationship. Certain events – such as Bond’s removal from the Senate, the FBI’s monitoring of antiwar activists, the deteriorated relationship between King and Johnson, the disproportionate drafting of African-Americans – imply a negative impact of war opposition, but it cannot be concluded that this was the only and/or most important contributor.

The limitations of this research

This thesis has offered several compelling insights about how profoundly the Vietnam War influenced the course of the civil rights battle, and how the conflict created and amplified differences inside of America’s largest social reform movement. Also, it has shown that due to this war, the black emancipation struggle has not been conducted in the most effective, unified manner possible. The comparative, qualitative analysis of the five most important civil rights groups has provided enough information to be able to state that the Vietnam War was not a vehicle for black emancipation. However, the earlier mentioned limitations of this research may not be ignored. The used material does not contain enough clear-cut evidence for determining to what degree federal treatment was adjusted a result of expressed opinions about the war.

To be able to determine with more certainty to which degree the White House punished or put antiwar groups under pressure, different, more profound sources need to be consulted. Given the uproar which public punishment for the antiwar civil rights groups would have caused, it is highly plausible that irrefutable proof for this cannot be found in official documents or public statements. For finding clues about the exact motives for the treatment of the organizations, personal interviews with Johnson’s confidants, private diaries and other unofficial sources, in which the president could

talk freely, come to mind. Since this kind of sources is hard to get access to with the means and time-span of this thesis, it is up to professional, highly regarded scholars to dig further into this relevant and interesting question.

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