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Christians in Conflict: How American Christians Responded to the Vietnam War

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Is war hell, or is it peace? William Tecumseh Sherman is attributed with the statement, "War is hell,"[1] while the famous slogan in George Orwell's *1984* says that "war is peace."[2] During the 1960s, the American presence in Vietnam escalated greatly, from about 17,000 American military in Vietnam in 1963, to 23,000 in 1964. Over 500,000 American troops were in Vietnam by 1968, and by the end of that year, 220,000 enemy soldiers and 13,500 American soldiers had been killed, along with a number of civilian casualties. Not only was this war the longest war America has fought, spanning 10 years, but it was also the most divisive in terms of the American public's response.

As the war escalated many Americans grew to disfavor the war and American involvement, and activist movements sprang up in all parts of the country.[3] Americans, whether interested in politics, humanitarianism, or social activism, were divided over the topic of whether or not the United States should be fighting in Vietnam. Interestingly, Christians in the broader American church were just as divided over the war's justification as the rest of America. It is well researched that there were Christians in every denomination on both sides of the debate, with Christian activist groups protesting the war, as well as Christian leaders writing powerful messages supporting it.[4] Believing in the same God and having the same faith, these believers all found political and theological backing to support their respective opinions. The widespread division of American Christians' views on the war in Vietnam was displayed by the experience of the Southern Baptist Church, and their beliefs were rooted in how they viewed the conflict in Vietnam in the context of the Cold War as a whole.

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[1] William Tecumseh Sherman, quoted in, Edward J. Blum, *War is All Hell,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18dvv9h.6?seq=2.
[2] George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).
[3] James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 596-598, https://taylor.on.worldcat.org/oclc/32273033.
[4] David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 62, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg7zf.6?seq=1?seq=1.

Research shows that broader Christian support for the Vietnam War was based in both political and religious reasoning. Often, more conservative Christians showed distinct support for the war effort in Vietnam, and this was largely due to the fact that they saw the Vietnam conflict as inextricably a part of the larger Cold War. Thus, victory in Vietnam was a pivotal piece of the dominos, and that victory must be achieved in order to stop the spread of communism.[5] *Christianity Today* fell on this conservative side, and their support for the war as a necessary evil to stop communism was strong. In 1968, an editor of *Christianity Today* wrote that communism must be stopped at the cost of this war, and that those who think that freedom and human dignity will be protected "by an end to effective resistance to communist expansion seem incredibly naive."[6] The editor reflected a popular Christian sentiment that doing what it takes to end communism was not just a political stance, but a humanitarian stance. This was rooted in the belief that the United States removing its presence from South Vietnam would be much worse for the safety and well being of the Vietnamese than the conflict of the war. After visiting South Vietnam in 1968, Dr. Ockenga, a minister in Boston, wrote for *Christianity Today*. He described the horrifying actions he witnessed at the hands of the Viet Cong against the South Vietnamese. He argued that either a United States withdrawal or an attempt at negotiations would lead to a communist takeover, and based on his experience, he believed that this takeover would ultimately be much worse for the Vietnamese.[7]

This view was not limited to that press, as the Reverend George R. Davis gave a sermon on the Christian perspectives of the Vietnam War, and he followed these same political and humanitarian sentiments that *Christianity Today* so strongly expressed. He believed as well that

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[5] David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg7zf.6?seq=1?seq=1.

[6] Christianity Today, "Is Ecumenism Running Out of Fuel?" *Christianity Today,* March 1, 1968, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1968/march-1/editorials.html.

[7] Dr. Harold John Ockenga, "Report from Viet Nam," *Christianity Today*, March 15, 1968, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1968/march-15/books-in-review.html.

US withdrawal would leave a huge gap in Vietnam, which would immediately be filled by Communist forces. In his words, Christians who called for the United States to "wash their hands of their responsibility in Vietnam [were] living in a dream world."[8] With this, he echoed *Christianity Today's* accusations of naivety for those who advocated withdrawal, believing that a withdrawal would not end in peace in Vietnam, based on the political and humanitarian necessity of stopping communism.

Christians across America also cited theological reasoning for their support of the war. Much of this theology was rooted in the desire and calling to advance the Gospel, in both Vietnam and across Asia. In this view, atheist communism was the supreme enemy, as it stood in the way of the advance of the Gospel in any region it controlled. In 1964, *Christianity Today* referred to the conflict in Vietnam as "a war being waged for souls."[9] Proponents of this kind of thinking viewed the Vietnam War not just as a fight against communism, but as a fight against atheism, and therefore victory in Vietnam was the only way to protect Christianity in Southeast Asia.[10] In this light, the importance of spreading the Gospel made the violence in Vietnam justified. Just four years after calling it a "war waged for souls," the newspaper came down on Christian anti-war movements as undermining international missions. According to the writer, the display of anti-war sentiment in the Church represented a lack of motivation to take the Gospel to the countries of Asia. It also showed a concerning apathy to atheistic communism where there should be a stark critique. "The primary task of the Churches seems to have become something other than the Proclamation of the Good News."[11] Christians in various denominations

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[8] Rev. George R. Davis, "The Vietnam War: A Christian Perspective," in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*, ed. Michael P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1967), 52.
[9] H. Daniel Friberg, "The Spiritual War," *Christianity Today*, September 25, 1964, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1964/september-25-viet-nam-spiritual-war.html.
[10] David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 66, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg7zf.6?seq=1?seq=1.
[11] Christianity Today, "Is Ecumenism Running Out of Fuel?" *Christianity Today,* March 1, 1968, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1968/march-1/editorials.html.

across America felt these political and theological convictions deeply as a reason for fighting to stop communism, and this led to their support for the American war effort in Vietnam.

A close-up look at the Southern Baptist Convention during the 60s displays the kind of conversations and convictions felt by Americans across the country. Having an array of opinions, each containing politics and theology, the SBC's experience of the homefront during the Vietnam War was quite divided. Even so, there was an overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists who claimed to support the war. The Baptist Press released results of a survey taken at the Southern Baptist Convention in 1967 which showed these strong trends. Of those who visited the surveyors exhibit at the convention, about ⅔ believed that the United States needed to do "whatever it takes to win the war."[12] A year later the Baptist Press released another survey revealing support for the war to be just as strong if not stronger. The results of the survey of 500 Baptist pastors showed that 75% felt the United States "could not afford to lose in Vietnam," and 69% supported U.S. escalation if that was necessary to achieve a victory.[13] Whether they were aware of it or not, much of the reasoning for Baptist support of the war was rooted in how they viewed Vietnam in context of broader anti-communism and the Cold War, like most American Christians.

The Southern Baptist leaders who bought into the containment theory often found their political support for Vietnam within it. An editor of the Kentucky Baptist's *Western Recorder* displayed this in an editorial in which he explicitly said that if communism as a force was not stopped, "this Godless darkness will cover the Earth."[14] One of the most influential Southern

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[12] Walter K. Knight, "Survey Shows SBC Messengers Have "Hawkish" Attitudes," *Baptist Press*, June 1, 1967, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/2401,01-Jun-1967.pdf.

[13] Editors of *Baptist Press*, "500 Pastors Surveyed: Nixon, Wallace Favored By Most," *Baptist Press*, August 5, 1968, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/2637,05-Aug-1968.pdf.

[14] David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg7zf.6?seq=1?seq=1.

Baptists in history, the Reverend Billy Graham, also shared these strong anti-communist sentiments, and stirred them in Christians across the nation. As early as 1949, Billy Graham preached a sermon in which he passionately pronounced:

> The world is divided into two camps! On the one side we see Communism. On the other, we see so-called Western culture, and its fruit had its foundation in the Bible, the Word of God, and in the revivals of the 17th and 18th centuries. Communism, on the other hand, has declared war against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion!"[15]

Graham carried this anti-communist sentiment into the 60s, as he became a public supporter of the war effort, through both his sermons in America, as well as his active support of troops in Vietnam.[16] Anticommunism was the main political fuel that Southern Baptists used for their strong majority of Vietnam War support, due to their belief that stopping communism in Vietnam was necessary to stopping communism as a worldwide threat.

Southern Baptists also cited theological support for the war, again showing a close-up of the various convictions of the broader American church. Like many Christians, Southern Baptists found their support was rooted in evangelism and the importance of the spread of the Gospel. Some of the strongest theological proponents of the Vietnam War in the SBC were missionaries who had been to South Vietnam. They wrote that a U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam would stamp out any hope of Baptist missions because of communism's direct threat on the advance of the Gospel.[17] This type of theological backing for war is best understood in the context of

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[15] Billy Graham, quoted in, Daniel Alexander Hays, "A Babe in the Woods?: Billy Graham, Anticommunism, and Vietnam" (Masters Thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 2017), 25.

[16] Daniel Alexander Hays, "A Babe in the Woods?: Billy Graham, Anticommunism, and Vietnam" (Masters Thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 2017), vi.

[17] Nathan A. Finn, "Baptists and the War in Vietnam: Responses to 'America's Longest War,'" in *Baptists and War: Essays on Baptists and Military Conflict, 1640s-1990s,* ed. Gordon L. Heath and Michael A.G. Haykin (London: The Lutterworth Press, 2015), 208.

Southern Baptist evangelicalism—the deep call they felt to advance the Gospel. In 1968, the President of the Southern Baptist Convention, Franklin Paschall, gave an address to the annual gathering of Southern Baptists. In it, he pronounced that the primary responsibility of the Christian is to preach the Gospel, and he calls for international evangelism as the necessary means to counter the darkness of the world. Social activism, human dignity, and the value of life were all mentioned as very important aspects of the Christian life, but without true evangelism, it would all come up empty. To him, the Gospel was the only answer to the world's problems.[18] Understanding this strong theological conviction sheds light onto why communism in Vietnam felt like such a threat to Christians, specifically Southern Baptists.

Despite this strong sentiment of Christians for supporting the war in Vietnam, there was a substantial group of Christians across America who felt very differently about America's role in the war, and many took action with these anti-war beliefs. More liberal Christians wrote about these anti-war beliefs, and they made them public through protests, campaigns, and the like. One of the most notable forms of Christian protest to the war was a group called the Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), which was formed in 1965 and had the support of Martin Luther King Jr.[19] As a whole, these Christians who did not support the Vietnam War did so because of how they viewed the war in the Cold War context.

Throughout the 50s and even into the 60s, Christians had a fairly well-rounded consensus in being anti-communist; and yet, with their shared faith and (mostly) shared anti-communist beliefs, many Christians were still outspokenly anti-war, and this all went back to their beliefs

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[18] Franklin Paschall, "President's Address: Good News For Today's World," (address given at the Southern Baptist Convention, Houston, TX, June 4, 1968), http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/sbc/president_address/1968_Franklin_Paschall.pdf.
[19] Jennifer C. James, *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War Across the Disciplines* (Toronto: Toronto Press, 2012), 165, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442686731.15?searchText=clergy+and+laity+concerned+about+Vietnam+Martin+luther+king+jr.

about the Cold War and containment. These liberal Christians shared in common a loss of faith in the Containment Theory, especially in relation to Vietnam. They did not see anti-communism in this case to be a convincing enough cause for the violence of escalation in the war. This was not necessarily because of a lack of anti-communist zeal, but because of a belief that roping in communism in Vietnam with the communism of the Soviet Union or China was a misjudgement. In their eyes, Vietnam was not inextricably linked with the Cold War, but was a different scenario altogether. Reverend Robert S. Billheimer displayed this lack of belief in containment in Vietnam in a 1967 sermon, calling on Christians to question whether or not communism in South Vietnam posed an ultimate enough threat to American democracy, and to freedom in Southeast Asia. In his view, the communism of North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union were not connected and did not represent a united communist takeover plot; therefore, communism in Vietnam did not pose a big enough threat to warrant U.S. involvement in the war.[20] American Christians who opposed escalation in Vietnam often had this failing political belief in the necessity of war due to a differing view on the Cold War context of the war.

Anti-war campaigns were not just political for Christians, but they had a huge humanitarian push as well, calling for the United States to stop warring in Vietnam for the sake of both the Vietnamese and the American troops. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a sermon in 1967 coming out against the war in Vietnam. He spoke of both of these groups of people when he said that he must speak out against the war on behalf of "the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence." Describing the years and years of war that Vietnamese citizens had lived through already, he called for the United States to make peace in their country.[21]

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[20] Reverend Robert S. Billheimer, "Christian Conscience and the Vietnam War," in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*, ed. Michael P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1967), 17-18.
[21] Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam," in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*, ed. Michael P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1967), 117-119.

The Southern Baptist Church specifically, while having such a large majority of supporters of the war, did also experience dissension for similar political and theological reasons as the broader American Church. In the previously cited 1967 survey, while ⅔ of responders argued for victory no matter the cost, the other ⅓ was in favor of doing whatever it took to begin peace negotiations.[22] The Christian Life Commission, a liberal group within the Southern Baptist Convention, was one group who very outwardly came out against the war for both political and theological reasons. In 1966, the Christian Life Commission sent out its newsletter and explicitly spelled out their views on the war in Vietnam. They reminded readers that peace must remain the immediate objective, and that it called for protest of the government for its quickness to military action. The publication argued that the U.S. government was becoming far too reliant on using military might in order to accomplish its objectives, and also accused Christians of leaning too heavily on the government's war efforts as well.[23]

The Christian Life Commission did not stop at strong political statements, but also took action on behalf of their humanitarian beliefs. At the 1967 Southern Baptist Convention, the Christian Life Commission caused a small disturbance by bringing up a resolution to discuss peace in Vietnam. They hearkened back to the necessity of protecting human life, commenting that population growth had added 70 million people "to the human total fending for existence on this planet." The Commission finished their resolution by calling on their fellow believers not to be "blinded by a distorted patriotism," but to instead consider the cost of human life.[24] The Christian Life Commission represented the group of minority dissenters within the Southern Baptist Convention who did not find anti-communism to be a desirable enough cause to fight in a

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[22] Walter K. Knight, "Survey Shows SBC Messengers Have "Hawkish" Attitudes," *Baptist Press*, June 1, 1967, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/2401,01-Jun-1967.pdf.
[23] Editors of *Light*, "Resolution on Vietnam," *Light*, August, 1966, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/periodicals/light/light_1966_08.pdf.
[24] Dallas M. Lee, "Survey Shows SBC Messengers Have "Hawkish" Attitudes," *Baptist Press*, June 1, 1967, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/2401,01-Jun-1967.pdf.

war that was so costly to human life. The Christian Life Commission's outspokenness within the SBC displays the small, but very evident, percentage of Southern Baptists who differed from the majority opinion about the war.

The partition of views that took place within the Southern Baptist Convention during the Vietnam War was representative of how the conflict impacted Christians across America. While sharing a faith, following the same Scriptures, and worshiping the same God, Christians differed greatly in how they viewed the conflict as a whole. Even having a fairly broad anti-communist tendency did not keep churches from becoming divided over this issue. The common denominator for how Christians split over the war question was how they viewed the Vietnam War in the context of global communism, with supporters viewing Vietnam as an inextricable piece of the Cold War, and dissenters seeing it as its own separate conflict. Based on these two Cold War interpretations, Christians were able to find Scriptural backing for their stance, whether it was rooted in the advance of the Gospel or in humanitarian concerns. The complicated and wide-ranging experience of Christians during the Vietnam War is reflective of the experience of all Americans during this period, as differing opinions of the "right thing" for America to do split up families, friends, and even faiths.