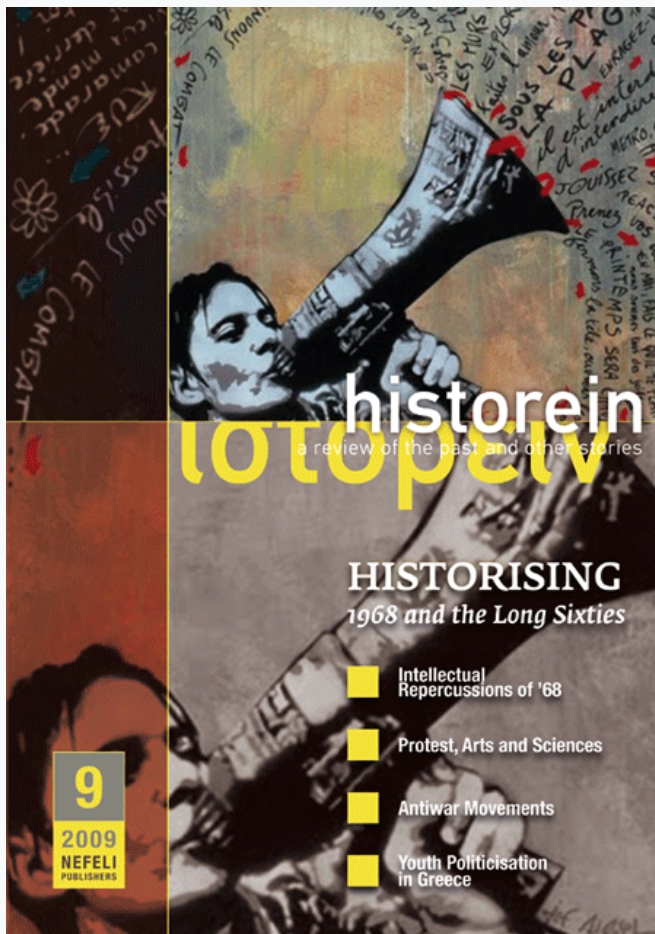


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### "Got a Revolution, got to revolution": Student Activism and the Anti-war Movement. An Historical Assessment

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*Look what's happening out in the  
streets  
Got a revolution, got to revolution . . .  
Hey now its time for you and me  
Got a revolution, got to revolution  
Come on now we're marching  
to the sea  
Got a revolution, got to revolution  
Who will take it from you  
We will and who are we  
We are volunteers of America*  
—Jefferson Airplane, "Volunteers"

The Jefferson Airplane's anthemic song from 1969 aptly captures the spirit of the age. The song's refrain simultaneously proclaims that a revolution is underway, "got a revolution", while also imploring the listener to become a volunteer of America by taking up the imperative to revolt, "got to revolution". This song introduces one of the topics discussed in this article, and that is, was the student movement of the 60s revolutionary or not? I examine this question in the context of a broader discussion regarding the movement's legacy as debated by historians and other scholars from the early 1990s to the present. A few years ago, Charles Chatfield observed that the rate at which publications about the antiwar movement were appearing between 1988 and 2004 had reached the level of a cottage industry.<sup>1</sup> If the volume and rate of scholarly production was protoindustrial before 2004, since then we have clearly moved to full-scale industrial mode. A bibliography of recently published works on the antiwar movement, posted on an academic webpage fills 77 single-spaced pages.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of factors that account for this greatly increased interest in the 60s antiwar movement.

# ***"Got a Revolution, got to revolution": Student Activism and the Antiwar Movement. An Historical Assessment***

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One is the staging of commemorative celebrations, like the conference on 1968 sponsored by *Historiein* in the summer of 2008. But the most important factor is unquestionably the US war in Iraq. I am not alone in being struck by the lack of antiwar activism on university campuses across the US today. The contrast on my own campus, the University of California San Diego, between 1968 and now is stark and remarkable. In that momentous year, Herbert Marcuse held forth in his lectures so radically that he incurred the wrath of Ronald Reagan; Angela Davis received her degree and joined the ranks of the faculty; Library Walk, in the heart of campus, was bedecked with posters and crammed with students protesting the war and social injustice; and the air was filled with music exhorting students to change the world. Today, library walk is bedecked with posters for sororities and fraternities and for vendors selling iPods and other electronic gadgets; and the air is filled with music calling on students not to protest but to find Jesus. One looks in vain for a hint of student antiwar activism. This, of course, begs the question as to why this is so? This issue is addressed more directly by Marilyn Young, who knows far more about it than I do. In this article, I want to review the way that the legacy of the student movement of the 60s has been construed and constructed in the recent scholarship. Given its sheer size, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive review of the historiography. So instead what I do is to sketch out the main contours of the literature, focusing on a number of key topics and examining how historians are writing about them and how these writings shape our understanding of the legacy of 1968 and the student movement.

The legacy of 1968 is like a Rorschach blot: every individual and each generation reads into it what they want to see. "The decade has been transformed into a morality play, an explanation of a world gone astray or, conversely, how hope was squandered."<sup>3</sup> The polarising effect of the student movement permeates the very fabric of the way one approaches the topic. Almost everyone who writes on the subject feels compelled to include an autobiography that situates themselves in the context of the 60s. Given the frequency with which Charles Dickens is paraphrased, for many it was the best time of their life or the worst. In either case, it was the most memorable.

According to Mark Kurlansky, "There has never been a year like 1968 and it is unlikely that there will ever be one again",<sup>4</sup> and it is difficult to disagree with him. Indeed, the word 1968 alone is a metonym for the 60s, that fateful decade that was the most important in the history of the US in the twentieth century. From the momentous, like the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Robert Kennedy, to the trivial, such as the appearance of the TV show "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-in" in January 22, a list of the events that took place that year demonstrates its lasting importance on American politics and society. It was the year of the Tet Offensive, an event that arguably changed the course of the war. After that embarrassing battle, for the first time a majority of Americans began to question why the US was in Vietnam. The sequence of events, beginning with the announcement by President Lyndon Baines Johnson that he would not seek re-election as president of the United States, followed by the assassinations of King and Kennedy, the violent and chaotic Democratic convention in Chicago, and then the election of Richard M. Nixon, changed American politics forever. The pictures broadcast by the media created a repertoire of iconic images that enthralled and enraged some, and repulsed others. Many of the archetypal images, music, and writings of the 60s were created in 1968. Consequently, I suspect that scholars of all political stripe can agree that 1968 was the most important year in this most important of decades.

Another conclusion on which there seemed to be a scholarly consensus until recently referred to the question of to what extent the antiwar movement contributed to the ending of the war. Melvyn Small summarised the consensus view when he argued that the movement did not stop the war, but that it did change its trajectory and hastened its conclusion.<sup>5</sup> The argument is that for different reasons the movement helped mobilise public opinion in opposition to the war. One way it did so was by keeping the war in the public's eye and by demonstrating the widespread support for American withdrawal from the conflict. Another way it did so was by frightening moderates. As Small has noted, "ordinary middle-class parents, who worried about the seduction of their children by hippies and radicals, reasoned that if only the war was over, their sons and daughters would cut their hair and return to traditional family values."<sup>6</sup> So the orthodox view is that the antiwar movement helped to change the course of the war.

There has emerged, however, among neoconservative pundits a revisionist view that bestows on the movement the honour of having directly caused the war to end: but they do this to criticise, not to praise, the movement. The motive they impute to the movement was not that of ending the war and bringing home the troops. Instead, they give it a prominently anti-American twist, arguing that the movement wanted and, in fact did, cause America's *defeat* in the war. In his most recent memoirs, for example, Henry Kissinger stated that the movement caused the US to lose the Vietnam War. In his recollection this time around, he blames the student movement for undercutting what would otherwise have been a solid base of support for the continuation of the armed struggle against communist aggression in Southeast Asia. He does this in the context of explaining why the Vietnam war was lost while, in his view, the Iraq war is being won: the reason – the absence now of an antiwar movement.<sup>7</sup> In like vein, on 27 May 2008, conservative columnist Linda Chavez<sup>8</sup> in a nationally syndicated editorial deployed this assessment to criticise Barack Obama: "In his stubborn refusal to admit things have changed in Iraq, Obama is looking more and more like a throwback to the Vietnam protestors who actively promoted America's defeat in order to prove they were right in their opposition to the Vietnam War . . . Obama's pessimism is simply old school [1960s] anti-Americanism dressed up in patriotic rhetoric." Both of these assessments harken back to Ronald Reagan's characterisation of the student movement in California as being about nothing more than "sex, drugs, and treason." I have no doubt that as the occupation of Iraq drags on and as, hopefully, more visible and widespread opposition to it develops, that conservatives and Bush apologists will deploy this argument often.

One of the main issues in the revisionist debate over the legacy of the student movement is whether it was reformist or revolutionary. A great deal depends on how one answers this question. Indeed, how one assesses the legacy of the moment is directly related to this issue. There are, I suggest, four main schools of thought about the student movement that emerges from a review of the literature: two of them argue that the movement was revolutionary and two that it was not.

The view that enjoys the largest support among scholars is one that I label the liberal-progressive consensus. This school of thought argues that the student movement was reformist rather than revolutionary in nature. As one president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) proclaimed, "we must name the system. We must name it, analyse it, understand it, and change it."<sup>9</sup> The broad goals of the movement were to challenge the establishment and to change it in

the name of social justice, racial equality, women's liberation, and the expansion of individual freedom. Ending the war in Vietnam was just one item on the movement's agenda. They argue that we should not view the movement as monolithic but instead need to appreciate that it was a movement that was constituted out of hundreds of different organisations, all of which had their own specific goals and beliefs but which shared a few common ones, like those set out above. These scholars stress the relationships and connections between the student antiwar movement and the civil rights movement and its major organisations. In this argument, the New Left, not Third World Marxism, provided the movement's dominant ideological framework.

They readily concede that students were motivated not just by opposition to the war but by many issues, such as the restrictive policies of universities that insisted on acting *in loco parentis* (sexually segregated dorms, forbidding male and female student from living together even if they resided off campus) and the need for university curricula to become more relevant to students' needs and interests. Liberal progressives also insist that student opposition to the war was rooted in idealism and not in simple self-interest, i.e., opposition to the draft. Even though the idealism they espoused was rather naive. "On campuses one found an army of energetic and idealistic, and maybe also a little adventure-seeking and fad-following, young people, with time on their hands, especially on weekends, with access to 'free' mimeograph machines in department offices, with pied pipers among junior faculty and teaching assistants, and often with daddy's credit cards."<sup>10</sup> Ideas, ideals, and hope motivated the vast majority of students, not self-interest, as some would have it.

The liberal-progressive argument concedes that there were some student groups that were provocative, radical, and revolutionary. But they insist that these groups were also small and marginal. That the images which shaped, and continue to shape, popular perceptions of the student movement derive mainly from the activities of small, marginal, fringe groups was due to the media. "The media, particularly television reporters, looked for the unusual and the colourful to make their coverage interesting. They were not especially interested in the short-haired, well-dressed, middle-class adult who made reasonable arguments about negotiations [about ending the war]. Instead, they sought the person carrying a Vietcong flag or a picture of [the] revolutionary Che Guevara, to the radical provoking the police to violence, or the bearded, dishevelled person smoking marijuana wearing a profane T-shirt or an upside-down American flag on the rear of his or her jeans."<sup>11</sup> The media, then, created a distorted image of the student movement. What the liberal-progressive argument does is to restore nobility and respectability to the movement while retaining the core conclusion that the movement was reformist and wanted to *change* the world.

Another group of scholars who agree that the student movement was not revolutionary are the moderate conservatives. But their explanations as to what the movement stood for is quite different from the liberal-progressive view. The conservative critique follows a number of lines of criticism. One argument is that the student antiwar movement was driven purely by self-interest: the draft. As the war progressed and as the government contemplated changing, and then actually did change, the laws regarding draft deferments for men in college, student opposition increased. Coincidence? They argue not. Interestingly, they try to boost support for their argument about the 1960s by pointing to the absence of a draft today and the concomitant absence of student protest: their syllogism is: draft = student protest, no draft = no student protest.

Another more charitable interpretation credits the student movement with more idealism, but argues that that idealism was directed toward more trivial, local issues. So, they suggest, if one examines the activities on other college campuses, and not just Columbia or Berkeley, one finds that student agitation even by groups such as the SDS were very much geared to local issues and grievances.<sup>12</sup> The last variant of the conservative critique simply trivialises the moment completely. While conceding that there were many students who were motivated by ideas and ideals, they argue that the majority were attracted mostly by the lure of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. They love to quote people who recollect that they went to meetings, rallies, and marches to “meet chicks and get laid”, to listen to great music, or to score some dope. In sum, this view suggests that the student movement was driven by baby boomers who had too much time, too much freedom, and too much money – in the form of daddy’s credit card (I have recorded no less than six different authors who trot out this tired trope).

The conservative critique, then, argues that the student movement was neither revolutionary nor especially reformist. It developed instead at a specific time in response to a variety of factors, most of them local. The antiwar dimension to the movement they attribute almost exclusively to the draft. The movement, in their view, never constituted a real threat to the establishment nor did it gain much traction among the majority of students, which explains why it fell apart so easily during the early 1970s.

Conservatives also draw on the same media images that the liberal progressives do, but they accept them as depicting the ‘true’ nature of the student movement. So for conservatives one legacy of 1968 is the creation of a repertoire of iconography that they can deploy any time that they want to trivialise and criticise any group or movement with whom they disagree. So deeply ingrained have the images of the 60s become that they provide conservatives with a shorthand vocabulary either to support or to castigate contemporary events. Take the following: “Now, I’m sure these heady offerings from [San Diego State University] faculty . . . get their nourishment from that grand old ‘60s precedent of on-campus activism. You know, where a swarm of brats came together on campuses across these United States, smoked a pile of hemp, read Noam Chomsky and then ran screaming into the streets proclaiming, ‘We have the antidote for Western civilisation – and it is us’.”<sup>13</sup> The author of this invective, Fred Dryer, did not need to elaborate on his criticisms: the images said it all. For conservatives, like him, to say ‘60s’ was all that was needed to make his point. In this case it was to level criticism at San Diego State University’s faculty senate for its ‘radical’ vote to demand that the institution’s president not use discretionary funds to bail out the financially failing football programme at a time when the institution was laying off faculty and cutting classes.

For scholars writing from a radical-leftist stance, there is no doubt the student movement was revolutionary. One of the most powerful and eloquent of those espousing this argument is Max Elbaum. In a very important article published in 2002 issue of the *Radical History Review*, he set out the framework of the radical-leftist critique. While recognising that the student movement encompassed a large number of organisations, which espoused many different viewpoints, he argues that from early on many of them had close ties to organisations, like the Trotskyite Socialist Workers’ Party, which were explicitly revolutionary. What connected the movements at

different college and university campuses across the country was a commitment to force wide-ranging social and political changes that would touch all areas of life in America. In other words, the revolutionary agenda included much more than just opposition to the war. On many campuses students of colour were active participants in organisations such as the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the Raza Unida Party and the American Indian Movement. Third World Marxism exerted a powerful influence on the student protesters, and connected them to global revolutionary movements. As Elbaum notes, "based on Third World Marxism, a host of new (or transformed) organisations and institutions emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Together they formed a dense network of overlapping – sometime cooperating, sometimes competing – forms. As of 1968, many components of his network were just beginning to gain mass influence or assume definite shape. But as the political earthquake of this pivotal year shook the country, one wave of young activists after another turned leftward and transformed Third World Marxism in the United States from a set of ideas into a trend poised to take-off."<sup>14</sup>

By 1968, mainstream student organisations such as the SDS had become far more radical and had adopted a far more confrontational approach to achieving their goals. According to the radical critique, we should take at their word SDS leaders, like Gregg Calvert, when he announced: "We are working to build a guerrilla force in an urban environment . . . we are actively organising sedition . . . Che lives in our hearts."<sup>15</sup> According to Elbaum and others, we must take words such as these at face value. Che, Communist China, and revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world were the guiding lights for fomenting revolution in America. The SDS, then, by the end of 1968 had become a large organisation with approximately 100,000 members, had forged ties to other even more explicitly revolutionary organisations such as the Maoist Progressive Labour Party, and had a leadership that was prepared to act as the revolutionary vanguard. "To guide this process, not just Marxism but Marxism-Leninism was deemed indispensable. This was a common view at the time, with harsh critics of Leninism such as former SDS leader Carl Oglesby acknowledging in 1969 that 'There was – and is – no other coherent, integrative, and explicit philosophy of revolution [except Marxism-Leninism].'"<sup>16</sup> These were not, radical leftists argue, the sentiments of weekend revolutionaries or sunshine socialists but of committed individuals working for revolutionary change.

So in the opinion of those writing from a radical-leftist point of the view, the student movement of the 1960s was idealistic, revolutionary, and part of a broader, transnational revolutionary trend that aimed at 1) displacing Euro-American dominance around the world and 2) achieving social justice at home for all Americans. Stopping the Vietnam war, in this interpretation, was just one of many of the movement's goals, and the question of the draft was a minor issue. They argue as well that the legacy of 1968 is manifest today in the revolutionary spirit shown by the young women and men who have taken to the streets in Seattle, Bern, Milan, Montreal and Berlin at G7 and at World Trade Organisation conferences to protest the dominance and expansion of corporate-dominated global capitalism.

Another group of scholars and writers who argue that the student movement of the 60s was revolutionary are those who approach the subject from a right-wing, neoconservative perspective. Like radicals, these historians take the words of the dominant student groups at face value and

believe them when they said that they aimed at the violent overthrow of the government. They also have a tendency to cherry-pick from the historical record to select groups whose beliefs and activities exaggerates the violent and subversive nature of the movement. Gerard J. DeGroot, for example, in his recently published book, *The Sixties Unplugged*, trots out groups like the East Village Motherfuckers, “who proudly asserted their intention to ‘defy law and order with . . . bricks, bottles, garbage, long hair, filth, obscenity, drugs, games, guns, bikes, fire, fun and fucking’.”<sup>17</sup> Or the Action Faction, a group which gauged a member’s loyalty by his or her willingness to mix Molotov cocktails. So, even though they admit that the extremists did not constitute a majority in the student movement, they still conclude that, at its core the student movement was radical and that it aimed at fomenting revolution to overthrow the American way of life.

And for them 1968 was the crucial moment when America stood at the edge of an abyss. The riots that wracked the country after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr set the country on a path to anarchy. Thus when the protests at the Democratic convention erupted into violent clashes with the Chicago police, neoconservatives argue, the country was truly on the verge of revolution. As well as agreeing with radical-leftist scholars that the movement was revolutionary, they also concur that it was closely tied to Third World Marxist parties. Except, of course, they interpret the meaning of this relationship differently. Rather than seeing the connection between them as positive, they argue that it shows that America’s enemies abroad were manipulating the student movement. They cite, for example, the report by attorney general Ramsey Clark in 1968, which concluded that the largest and most important student protest groups had been infiltrated and were being controlled by agents provocateurs and communists.<sup>18</sup> Ramsey’s report is especially useful to them because of his change of heart about the Vietnam War after he left office; they assert that since he was against the war, his inquiry into the student movement *must* have been unbiased. In sum, the neoconservative view is that the student movement was radical, violent, deeply ideological, and had as its central goal nothing less than the fomenting of social and political revolution in America.

As to the legacy of the 60s, they point, with a smug sense of triumphalism, to the emergence and ascendancy of neoconservatism in American politics, the Reagan Revolution, and the Culture Wars of the 1990s, which in their view, the conservatives won. Let me turn briefly to these arguments.

During the 40 years before 1968, a Democrat occupied the White House for 28 of them; in the 40 years since, it has been a Republican who has for all but 12 years. And arguably the two Democrats who have held the presidency since 1968, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, occupy a place on the American political spectrum farther to the Right than any of their pre-1968 predecessors (Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, or Lyndon B. Johnson). There are, I think, few who will disagree with the proposition that the centre of the political spectrum in America has moved substantially to the right since 1968. The argument is that the radical extremism of yuppies, hippies, and their kindred spirits so shocked Middle America that it pushed society in a more conservative direction. The images of women burning their bras, of couples fornicating in public, as happened at the 1967 protest at the Pentagon, and of all manner of other lewd and lascivious behaviour shocked and traumatised much of the country. While many young people embraced the culture of sex, drugs and rock and roll, it terrified that vast sector of Ameri-



can society which Richard Nixon dubbed the "Silent Majority." Others opposed the cultural revolution, not because they feared it but because they didn't get any – sex, drugs or rock and roll. For neoconservatives, the moral decline of America has its roots in the 60s. "To this day," DeGroot observes, "people have been eager to blame their problems – moral decay, crime, violence, and the plight of the family – on a permissive generation [in the 60s] of misfits, delinquents, and revolutionaries . . ." <sup>19</sup> In short, at the heart of the critique from the right is the belief that "a culture of permissive extremism was the source of all that was and is wrong with the baby-boomer generation." <sup>20</sup> The shift to the right politically and the emergence of powerful socially conservative movements, such as the Moral Majority and other fundamentalist groups, is portrayed by them as one of the most important legacies of 1968.

Recently, a study has been published that connects the emergence and rise to prominence of conservative religious organisations in the US to the protest movements of the 1960s. In his new book, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, Preston Shires argues that "the Religious Right owed no small debt for its political success in the late Seventies to the hippie movement of the 60s". <sup>21</sup> But his argument is not that the Religious Right developed in opposition to the cultural revolution but in some important ways actually grew out of it. The generation of the 60s was turning away not just from the social mores and rigid politics of their parents, but also from their religious beliefs and its institutions. A strong streak of spiritualism ran through the counter-cultural movement and it took on a number of forms. Some looked to Indian mystics or Native American spirit animism, along with some peyote, to expand their consciousness. Others looked to Christianity but not as their parents practiced it; they had little truck with institutions like the Catholic Church, and they saw Jesus as a symbol of what they believed in: social justice, peace and brotherhood. This was the spirituality of the Jesus Freaks and other Countercultural Christians that infused a new spirit into the commune movement. Shires argues that when the Vietnam War ended and as the antiwar movement began to dissipate, disillusionment set in and those who embraced counter-culture Christianity turned to biblically grounded evangelical Christianity. But they brought with them their commitment to political activism. And these people, he shows, played very important roles in the emergence of the religious right as a political force. Some would argue, then, that an important legacy of the 60s was the creation of a more intolerant, socially and politically conservative America.

The legacy of 1968, the antiwar movement and the role of student organisations in it will remain contested terrain forever. As with most truly momentous events, the legacy of 1968 will always be susceptible to multiple, competing and conflicting interpretations. Tinged with nostalgia for some and with resentment for others, no assessment of 1968 can ever truly be objective and no conclusion about it can ever be free from complexity and ambiguity. Some lyrics from a song written in 1968 captures well this complexity and ambiguity: the Beatles' "Revolution" from the *White Album*:

"You say you want a revolution  
Well you know  
We all want to change the world  
You tell me that it's evolution  
Well you know

We all want to change the world  
 But when you talk about destruction  
 Don't you know you can count me out  
 Don't you know it's gonna be alright

You say you'll change the constitution  
 Well you know  
 We all want to change your head  
 You tell me it's the institution  
 Well you know  
 You better free your mind instead  
 But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao  
 You ain't going to make it with anyone anyhow  
 Don't you know know it's gonna be alright  
 Alright Alright"

–Lennon/McCartney, 1968<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

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- 3 Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2008, p. 1; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, New York: Bantam, 1993.
- 4 Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*. New York: Ballantine, 2004, xviii.
- 5 Melvin Small, "The Doves Ascendant: The American Antiwar Movement in 1968", *South Central Review* 16:4 (1999): 44; see also his *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002; *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005.
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- 11 Small, *Antiwarriors*, p. 27.
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- 15 Interview published in the *New York Times*, 1967 and cited in Small, *Antiwarriors*, p. 29.
- 16 Elbaum, "What Legacy?" p. 51.
- 17 DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged*, p. 342.
- 18 See, Small, *Antiwarriors*, p. 76 for a discussion of the Ramsey report and how conservatives interpret it.
- 19 DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged*, p. 3; see also Peter Collier, and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties*, 2nd ed., San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2006.
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- 21 Preston Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, Waco, Tx.: Baylor UP, 2007, x.
- 22 On the role of music in movement, see Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation*, New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988.