A Community Divided:
North Central College During the Vietnam Era

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The Vietnam War affected not only the U.S. forces fighting the war but also the American public at home. Across the country, communities gathered together, protesting the war or shouting their support for it. Over time, many Americans came to question the necessity and nature of the conflict. North Central College was no exception, with students and faculty instigating a period of social transformations that swept the community.
Student involvement was minimal in the early half of the 1960s, though by 1966, North Central College students focused their attention on the war and its consequences, a trend that only grew for the war’s remaining duration. Evidenced by the college’s newspaper, The North Central Chronicle (The Chronicle) student involvement in Vietnam related protests slowly grew as attitudes for and against the war developed and took on national priority.
Ultimately, the North Central College community faced the changes and trials of an era that transformed the way people of the nation interact with politics, offering insight into the challenges of the country at large.
The Vietnam War was a costly and lengthy dispute between South Vietnam and its ally, the United States, against the communist regimen of North Vietnam and the army of the North Vietnamese political group the Viet Cong. In 1954 North Vietnam had defeated the French colonial administration of Vietnam in order to unify the entire country under a single communist regime that was modeled after the Soviet Union and China. The South Vietnamese government rejected this ideal, hoping instead to model themselves more closely to the west. The U.S. initiated its involvement on December 11, 1961, with the first of American troops being deployed into Saigon, the capitol of South Vietnam. America’s desire to stop the spread of communism was the main reason the country became involved. The U.S. government had come to believe in the “Domino Theory,” an idea which argued that if one country fell to communism, its neighbors would suffer a similar fate. President John F. Kennedy backed the principle, suggesting that “…the

struggle [in South Vietnam] is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went…it would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists.”

Most U.S. politicians accepted this anti-Communist ideology. In 1961, South Vietnam signed a formal economic and military aid treaty with the United States that included American troops. Over time, U.S. involvement became more controversial as American troops killed thousands of Vietnamese civilians over the next decade continued. Finally, on March 29, 1973, two months after a peace agreement, the last U.S. troops left South Vietnam and American prisoners of war were released. Even after the conclusion of U.S. involvement, inquiries into its nature and purpose were a focal topic of discussion that shook the United States during its duration.

These questions and attitudes found their way to North Central College and many other college campuses, most

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3 Mann, A Grand Delusion, 713-715.
infamously Kent State University, as young people voiced their opinions on the political atmosphere of the time. Throughout the course of the war, the student body discussed the U.S. involvement in the college’s newspaper, The *North Central College Chronicle*, as well as the community’s programs and protests in response to the war. Much the same as it was across the entire United States, different opinions arose at North Central. Arlo Schilling, the seventh president of North Central, stated that students were attempting to find their “own footing in morals, religion, social relations, and some extent in politics.” Over the extent of the Vietnamese War, a majority of those attending North Central College supported the conflict, though as it continued, more accounts of protests and objections appear. Based on coverage by the *Chronicle*, during the course of the Vietnam War the North Central College community developed a complex attitude to the war. *The Chronicle* provides first-person accounts of these views, as well as coverage of student events.

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Despite the war’s origins in the mid-1950s, student based articles on the Vietnam War did not begin to appear at North Central until a decade into the war. It appeared that the students of the 1950s were a quieter generation, less motivated to be involved. Laura Carr, co-managing editor of the Western Reserve University student publication wrote in 1959, “Today’s students have been called the ‘silent generation’ for their lack of literary champions, the loud clear voices of earlier campuses, which were regarded as symbols of unity.” This conception of America’s youth would change, especially during the radical social shifts that took place in the 1960s.

The decade proved to be a period of immense change for the North Central, challenging the school to reexamine what it stood for. Even in 1965, student Dick Mills described the school as “A small, church-affiliated, liberal arts college, located 28 miles west of Chicago in beautiful Naperville through which runs along the lovely DuPage River, North Central is often considered

5 “Today’s Student-Beat or Neat?” Editorial, North Central College Chronicle (Naperville, IL), January 2, 1959.
and said to be removed from the affairs of the world.”\textsuperscript{6} Just four years later, this notion would be undone. Mills wrote in 1969: “Normally the university has not functioned as a political institution. But these are abnormal times and the university has no choice but to become involved in the democratic process, demonstrating the power of knowledge in providing a model of rational discourse and persuasion.”\textsuperscript{7}

In 1965, opinions varied within the college population over the significance of Vietnam and its civil struggle. Both students and faculty actively demonstrated opposing stances over Vietnam and the draft laws enacted by it. In that year, Dean of Faculty Victor C. Arnold, as well as Reverend George St. Angelo, the college’s chaplain, represented North Central at a convocation held at the University of Michigan concerning Vietnam.\textsuperscript{8} The event was held in order to lead “a series of discussions on alternative perspectives on the problems in

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\textsuperscript{6} Dick Mills, “Viet Nam Alternatives Sought at Teach-Ins” Editorial, \textit{North Central College Chronicle} (Naperville, IL), September 17, 1965.
\textsuperscript{7} James H. Birkey, “Faculty to Vote on Moratorium” Editorial, \textit{North Central College Chronicle} (Naperville, IL), October 3, 1969.
\end{flushleft}
Vietnam.” The war was not without its supporters. On November 19, 1965, during a student protest aimed at a Marine Corps recruitment station on campus, student protesters faced unidentified counter demonstrators denouncing the anti-war protesters, with signs such as “Burn your beards, not your Draft Cards.”

This sentiment of support for the war continued. In an article published in *The Chronicle* on February 11, 1966, a survey conducted on campus indicated that seven out of nine people answered yes to the question “Are you in favor of our commitment in Vietnam?” Out of the 89 people who were surveyed, 70 responded with a yes while the remaining 19 answered no. The article covering the survey implied that they carried “lack of knowledge about the entire issue.” In that same issue of the paper, the *Chronicle* announced a new initiative.

9 Gene Arnould, “NC Reps to Teach-Ins Air Views,” *North Central College Chronicle* (Naperville, IL), September 24, 1965.
10 Cover Photo in Editorial by *North Central College Chronicle* (Naperville, IL), November 19, 1965.
Choosing to focus more on personal pieces, the paper “decided to follow a new program of de-emphasis on publicity and emphasis on opinion.” This decision came as a means of reinvigorating interest towards the paper, as well as to serve as a response to the growing question of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1967, a former North Central College student, Foster

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\caption{Articles pertaining to Vietnam War (News, Editorials, Cartoons) between 1963-1976}
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Figure 1 illustrates the changing trends in number of articles regarding Vietnam at North Central College between 1963 and 1976. Source: \textit{North Central Chronicle}

Hall, wrote his perspectives on the war and the question of whether American troops belonged overseas to assist in the politics of another country. The *Chronicle* printed the article, in which Hall takes an affirmative position on the war, citing that “…you can tell any anti-war peace-at-no-cost thinker that they are free to ‘believe’ as they do, but tell them you know some people who are sweating, who are bleeding for them… we, the soldiers in Viet Nam are the ones who can tell you if we should be here. We say damn betcha.”14 While the reasons behind the war were still under question, many Americans such as Hall stood by the United States’ decision to send troops to Vietnam. For those involved in the fight directly, the call to service may have come through enforcing the will of their country rather than by personal belief. Hall supported this idea by stating that “I don’t want to fight, to die, but if in doing so to gain or keep freedom, I shall do my duty… why us? Who else is there strong

enough or willing enough to do it. It is our heritage. Damn our heritage?“\textsuperscript{15}

As the conflict continued into the later half of the 1960’s, the North Central College student body displayed a decidedly more active and engaged position. While the beginning of the war resulted in few articles discussing Vietnam, the period between 1966 and 1969 exhibited a large increase in the number of articles and events on campus that were directly related to Vietnam. As illustrated in Figure 1, between 1966 and 1969, a total of 107 articles relating to Vietnam appeared in the \textit{North Central Chronicle}, compared to only 11 articles published between 1963 and 1965. North Central students became both more engaged with the conflict and related events at least as seen in the college newspaper. However, the school’s yearbook, \textit{Spectrum}, between 1965 and 1973, contained few images or references to the Vietnam War. Instead, the yearbook details

\textsuperscript{15} Arnould, “The Bitter Paradox” Editorial, \textit{North Central Chronicle} (Naperville, IL).
many organizations, fundraisers, and sports. While the newspaper was produced almost entirely by students, the yearbook was created under a stricter control from faculty and staff. Perhaps the lack of Vietnam references reflected the reticence of some faculty and administration to take a public stand. Though, as was the case with the students, later events show the active involvement of some faculty and staff, as the community’s views as a whole had transformed during the course of the war.

Starting around 1966, the college faced many broad social changes. Besides the Vietnamese conflict, social changes spurred on by the civil rights movement and spread of feminist ideology caused students to become much more engaged with the issues currently facing the world at the time as they felt they were directly impacted and responsible. The student body reflected these broad changes: “the students of North Central have demonstrated a unique, new character; they are expressive this year as they have never been before. They seem to be

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empathetically concerned with every issue of the modern world.” On April 15, 1967, fifteen North Central College students journeyed to New York City to directly protest the war. The event began at Central Park and proceeded to the headquarters of the United Nations where Dr. Martin Luther King spoke to protestors. According to the Chronicle, an estimated 500,000 people attended, though historical records indicate the number was significantly lower, at 100,000-125,000 in attendance. Regardless, the event nevertheless displayed the sheer magnitude in which the Vietnamese ordeal had rocked the United States. Chronicle writer and student Jack Stanislaw pondered the meaning and significance of the rally. He suggested that for the majority of the people involved, the event served as a “…sense of involvement, a sense of something transcending the self.” Though students showed an active voice on social issues, the college’s faculty and administration found the transition

difficult. In many occurrences, student based events centered on social issues were met with restrictions and concern by some of the college’s staff.

The growing number of articles and references to Vietnam correlated with a growing national interest in student opinion. The opinions of college students were gaining attention as student protests shook the nation across countless campuses. In 1968, a poll was conducted, titled the Choice ’68 poll, designed to allow students to vote for the next President. In addition to voting for a candidate, the poll also allowed students to record their thoughts on the Vietnam War, specifically their views on the bombings and their proposed solutions to the situation.20 The

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Figure 2: On April 15, 1967, fifteen North Central College students (not pictured above) traveled to New York City and joined a hundred thousand protestors in rallying against the Vietnam War. Source: The North Central Chronicle, May 15, 1967.
poll demonstrated that by the late 1960’s students were expressing strong opinions on a variety of issues.

Beginning on April 20, 1968, the Ten Days for Peace Program commenced at North Central, designed with the intention of pushing for a peaceful resolution to the war. The aims of the event were as stated: “…to actively express their anger and outrage as the war continues. The second aim is to show the relationship between the anti-Vietnam War peace movement and the other significant movements at home and abroad.”

The committee for the event consisted of North Central College and Naperville High School students and faculty, with the greater Naperville community also being allowed invitation. Though there was some hesitation, the Board of Trustees ultimately permitted the event to occur, though they released a statement asserting that the college would nevertheless be “free from interference by any with the rights of others, from interference with free inquiry and expression of opinion and from

disruption of the college’s functioning by menacing and coercive means.”\textsuperscript{22} The administration’s strict policies towards peace protests and campus events were met with criticism from the student body. Students argued that the college should hold no jurisdiction in student affairs that existed outside of the classroom. To many the faculty and administration served “in loco parentis,” taking the role of a parent when it was not required.\textsuperscript{23}

Though the event was popular, according to Bob Schultz, an editor for the \textit{Chronicle}, it lacked “real, active participation.” He pointed out that “the ten-day period showed that while the movement against the Vietnam War has grown on the campus of North Central College… much work still must be done before every last U.S. solider is withdrawn.”\textsuperscript{24} Though it seems that initially the campus carried an equal number of those for and

against the war, by the late 1960s the hope of a quick and peaceful resolution had taken hold over the community.

In addition to events being held on campus, student protesters also engaged in rallies being held all throughout the United States. Around the same time as the ten days’ April 20 start date students participated in what has been called the April Peace Parade in downtown Chicago. Over 10,000 demonstrators took part in the event at the Chicago Civic Center, chanting “Bring our GI’S home” and “We shall overcome.”

In late 1969, North Central felt more than ever the full impact of the war on the people of America. Beginning in September of that year, the college’s student senate passed a proposal for North Central’s participation in a national moratorium, or in other words, a temporal postponement of activity regarding Vietnam. Over 300 college student body presidents and campus newspaper editors had signed on the event, seemingly securing for it to take place. The event was to be held on October 15, 1969 and would be in

effect for the entirety of the day.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, the event would occur during another Peace Week, set between the twelfth and eighteenth of October.

Then, on October 8, 1969, a week before it was to occur, North Central faculty members denied the moratorium. Faculty members made this decision based on the Christian principles on which the school was founded on as well as by the recommendations of the Educational Policies Committee, who decided not to support the suspension. Of the members involved, thirty-seven favored support for Educational Policies Committee while twenty-six opposed it.\textsuperscript{27} In response to why they condemned the moratorium, the Educational Policies Committee resolution said "This motion is made in full recognition of the rights of individual students and teachers to express their political sentiments on that day, and in commendation of the student initiative in planning a campus-wide program for that day. The

\textsuperscript{26}“300 Participate in Viet Peace March,” \textit{North Central College Chronicle} (Naperville, IL), October 17, 1969.
rights of individual members of the campus community to express their political views is in no way under question.”

Clearly, the college was unwilling to endorse a specific stance on the war. Instead, a more individualistic attitude amongst the student body and faculty was accepted. In response, students, as well as professors and citizens responded negatively to the news, citing the importance of the moratorium.

In a piece appearing in the *Chronicle*, Richard M. Eastman, a professor of English, wrote to the student body acknowledging their discontent with faculty and administration. Eastman also

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28 Sturk, “Viet Moratorium Killed.”

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Figure 3 shows protestors marching through the streets of Naperville in October 1969. The march was in response to North Central College’s decision to cancel the moratorium. Source: *North Central College Chronicle*
affirmed that their reasoning over siding with Education Policies Committee came from principle rather than opinion. He began his piece by making it clear that “most faculty members I know share the national agony over Vietnam. Individually they are proud of the students who organized the moratorium on campus. Many of them participated in this program.”\textsuperscript{29} He continues with reiterating that the decision came in a means of maintaining the principle of academic freedom. Professor Eastman argued in his writings that academic freedom extends far greater than freedom of speech or objectiveness to controversy. As Eastman affirmed, true academic freedom lies in diversity and truth. The faculty believed that siding with those who opposed the war stood as a direct confliction towards this idea of academic freedom. Eastman further made his case, affirming “we are poorer as a college if we diminish that diversity by throwing the whole weight of the institution on one side of an issue.”\textsuperscript{30} These ever relevant questions on truth, diversity, and the importance of

principle were continually analyzed and discussed throughout the conflict in Vietnam.

Despite the rulings of Professor Eastman and other faculty members, the protests were not silenced, as on Wednesday October 15, the moratorium was replaced with what became a recorded three-hundred-person protest. Cited as a “silent torchlight peace march”, the protest began at the campus’ Larrance Academic Center and continued with the group walking down Chicago Avenue towards downtown Naperville until finally the group marched towards the Centennial Park and then ended at the Evangelical Theological Seminary.31 The protest would prove to be a significant event. As stated by one participant, “Some students have decided that Vietnam really is a problem. They have crawled out of their sluggishness and have been awakened.”32

The success of the October 15th protest allowed for more involvement in protesting the Vietnam conflict to go undisrupted at the college. In addition, a second moratorium, scheduled for November 15, 1969, a month after the initial demonstration, commenced without any issue. On the same date, thirty protesters from North Central met and drove to Washington D.C. to further demonstrate their disdain for the war. Reflecting on the event, North Central’s Chaplain, David E. Durham, wrote on the importance of this trip. He explained, saying “I could not see the bounds of the crowd as we sat Saturday afternoon under the shadow of the Washington Monument… in this crowd of 300,000 or so were 30 persons from the North Central and ETS community.” Durham further wrote on the experience by describing the unity that everyone involved felt towards the experience. In his reflection, Durham writes “unity… we were all one family…In Washington help was offered on every hand, churches were open, concern expressed. One of the most striking things was the continual offer of an apple, cookies, cigarettes,
Kleenex all along the way. The attitude was contagious.”

Further commenting on the day was North Central student Jack Mudry, who wrote that it was “the largest antiwar protest in the history of our nation.”

With the onset of the 1970s, students adopted a noticeably lighter tone when referencing the war. Unlike before, the Chronicle adopted a less radical position, publishing numerous articles relaying the current news as opposed to opinion pieces. Though opposition to the war still appeared, such as in the form of political cartoons and images, the number of protests, workshops, and other formal events of protest vastly declined. The start of the decade had already seen a majority of the United States population support the withdrawal of American troops. Rather than continue in campaigning against the war, the paper seemed to have assumed its readers shared its past sentiments and decided to instead update on the actual war developments.

By January of 1972, President Richard Nixon publicly disclosed that the United States had been carrying out active peace talks with the Northern Vietnamese for two and a half years at that point. If an agreement was to be reached, the United States pledged that all American troops and its allied forces would withdraw from South Vietnam. News of active engagements involving peace for Vietnam were met with praise and relief that the conflict would see an end. Indeed, the war had taken its toll and left America and its citizens scared and divided. By this point in the war, 50,000 men had lost their lives to the conflict, while an additional

300,000 had sustained varying injuries, according to an article in the *Chronicle*. Furthermore, the conflict had left Americans both divided and untrusting of their government and America’s role in the larger world. Dave Nevers, a writer for the *Chronicle*, wrote in an article published on May 7, 1971, that “In these past ten years Vietnam has become a festering canker sore to which America yields ugly new atrocities with each examination. After we have pulled out, and some time has passed, the sore will heal. But even the passing of time will not remove the scars.”

In 1973, roughly a year after President Nixon first announced that peace talks were in place, American forces withdrew from Vietnam, essentially ending involvement although the conflict there continued until 1975. On March 29, United States troops had formally left Vietnam, ending what had been a decades-long controversy. Though American troops had left Vietnam, the internal situation continued to be reported in newspapers around the country.

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37 Nevers, “Student protests Vietnam War.”
The years of struggle and dissent had left their mark. For the community of North Central, the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam was welcomed. Years of violence and controversial debate had left the college and the nation as a whole to question and assess the war and its consequences, causing many to question the government and the U.S.’s international role. As written in a January, 1973 Chronicle commentary, writers Lisa Harms and Evie Craig discussed these mixed feelings; “It is difficult to understand our reactions to the long-awaited yet ironic news. There is a sense of awe at witnessing an historic moment…We are surprised at not feeling joyous and jubilant, and we are skeptical of accepting one more promise.”38 Indeed, the horrors of war had been felt. Though the conflict was at an end, the sheer level of death and turmoil could not possibly be ignored. He finishes by attesting that “Peace in Vietnam had

come at last, but we can only shake our heads and sigh, ‘I hope so.’ It’s been a long time.”

The events that transpired during the Vietnam era had a profound impact on the college and its community. Difference of opinion regarding our role in the war and the validity of its purpose caused for North Central College to become divided, much as the rest of the country was at the time. The war saw numerous factions form, seeing many come to either the defense of the country’s involvement or else maintain a critical perspective on the war and its motivations, with passionate arguments on either side. Over time the student body experienced an escalating frustration to the war overall, evident in its records. As time went on, the college community unanimously called for quick and peaceful resolution. Protests, articles, and workshops were established, all similarly questioning the U.S. involvement. It had become apparent that the country was facing a transitional period of change and North Central reflected this on the community level. The time saw a widespread emergence of

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39 Harms and Craig, “Vietnam: Is it a question of honor?”
individual protests and *The Chronicle* echoed this feeling, stating in its April 19, 1968 issue that “Every day, young people of college age are being offered an opportunity to be heard, for the nation is finally coming to the realization that we do, indeed, have something to say. Let's make sure that our voices are heard.”

As time continued, North Central joined the larger efforts being organized across the country, taking part in key demonstrations such as those in Chicago and Washington D.C. In observing North Central and its place during the war, it becomes easier to understand American life at the time on the larger scale, which was reflected in its campuses. Though its stance and the unfolding of events remains as complex as the war itself, it is apparent nevertheless through the legacy of the North Central Community that this moment in history and the history of the school itself are forever intertwined and moving forward.

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