

Vietnam War and Seventh-day Adventists

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The Vietnam War, perhaps the most controversial in American history, challenged Adventists to think anew about their position on military service and the implications of their faith for a wide range of social and political issues.

Historical Setting

In the late nineteenth century the lands of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia became a colony of France, known as French Indochina. During World War II Japan invaded Vietnam and assumed control of the country. As a reaction, Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh formed the Vietminh, also known as the League for the Independence of Vietnam, which was a Communist organization that fought and defeated Japanese occupation. On September 2, 1945, Minh declared Vietnam an independent communist country called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with Hanoi as the capital. However, France refused to recognize the DRV government and attempted to regain control of Vietnam as a colony, leading to military resistance from the Vietminh.¹

In 1949, France put their chosen leader, Emperor Bao Dai, in charge of the nation and established South Vietnam with Saigon as the capital. However, Bao was more interested in enjoying his status than governing well and was known as the "Playboy Emperor." He left control of the country to pro-French Vietnamese



PFC Michael Baldinger treats a wounded Viet Cong soldier captured in Phuoc Long Province near the Cambodian border.

Credit: U. S. Army photo. From *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, April 20, 1970.

administrators and appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister in June 1954. France withdrew from colonial rule over Indochina after its forces were defeated by the Vietminh at the battle at Dien Bien Phu, March 13 to May 7, 1954. The Geneva Accords resulting from a United Nations sponsored conference recognized Cambodia and Laos as independent nations while dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel as a temporary measure until national elections to unify the country under one government to be held in 1956. However, South Vietnam's leader Diem, with the backing of the United States, refused to allow the national elections, anticipating that votes from the more populous north would prevail in electing a pro-communist government. A civil war ensued between Diem's regime and Vietminh forces in the South, backed by men and supplies from North Vietnam.²

In the Cold War atmosphere of the 1950s the outlook of American policymakers on Southeast Asia was influenced by the "domino theory" that a communist victory in one country would lead to a chain reaction of nearby nations likewise succumbing to communist rule. Preventing a communist takeover of South Vietnam was thus seen as necessary to avoid the "domino" effect in Southeast Asia.³ To support Diem's government in South Vietnam, the U.S. sent billions of dollars in military and economic aid and thousands of U.S. military advisors, providing training and equipment. However, Diem's authoritarian rule caused dissension among a substantial portion of the South Vietnamese populace who, in order to resist it, formed the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) in 1960.⁴

The U.S. continued support for South Vietnam after a coup in which Diem was assassinated on November 2, 1963. The following year, the USS *Maddox* was fired on off the coast of North Vietnam on August 2, 1964, and, two days later, the USS *Turner Joy* also reported that it was fired upon by North Vietnamese boats. Though the evidence for an attack on the American ships would be disputed, the U.S. Senate, in response to a report from President Lyndon B. Johnson calling for action to "prevent further aggression,"⁵ passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 7 authorizing the President to use military force in Southeast Asia. The U.S. subsequently conducted warfare in Vietnam based on this resolution rather than a formal declaration of war. By 1968 nearly 500,000 American troops were on the ground in the military campaign to solidify a pro-western, non-communist government over South Vietnam.

American Religious Perspectives on the Vietnam Conflict

In 1949, during President Harry S. Truman's administration, communist forces led by Mao Zedong prevailed in China's civil war resulting in establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The "loss" of China reinforced concerns within the U.S. that communism was spreading. For many Americans, the Soviet Union and Chinese communism became synonymous with Vietnamese Communism. Therefore, communism represented a worldwide, monolithic force that sought to take over democracy, capitalism, and Judeo-Christian religion.⁶

For many American Christians this outlook was further entrenched by reports about the Soviet Union's treatment of Russian Christians and the government's attempt to indoctrinate atheistic communism among its citizens. Faith-based concerns took hold with greater collaborations among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews who diminished past disagreements to present a unified front against communism and the secularization of Western society in general. Another reaction to communism was the close relationship between religion and the U.S. military. Part of this connection was unintentional, and another part was a concerted effort by U.S. politicians and religious leaders to attract the support of religious institutions in military efforts to combat communism.⁷

Adventism, Politics, and Government Up To the Vietnam Era

From their emergence in the mid-19th century to the early 20th-century, Seventh-day Adventists were outspoken critics of the political evils of slavery and imperialism and activists in the public arena for prohibition and religious liberty.⁸ World War I, though, marked a turn to a more cautious approach resistant to church-based involvement in political issues and reticent about criticizing government policy, particularly foreign policy.⁹ This approach held sway among Adventists as they entered the Vietnam era.

Like many other American Christians, Adventists viewed communist governments and secularism as hostile towards religion. A specific concern for Adventists was the belief that communism was an atheistic ideology "offered in the place of religion."¹⁰ This view was also shared by other American Christians who received first-hand accounts and news reports from Protestant and Catholic American publications about communist countries' unfair treatment of Christians.¹¹ While in some ways Adventists' theological and political views seemed to move closer to Protestant conservatism in the mid-20th century, Adventists usually tried to avoid the political positions of "pro-war" and "anti-war" views, in favor of a cautious patriotism. That is, Adventists opposed the establishment of communist governments, so they tried to support their nation as good citizens where they felt they could do so conscientiously, but mostly avoided strident anti-communist rhetoric and activism.

The noncombatant conviction that Seventh-day Adventists affirmed at the outset of the denomination's history during the American Civil War developed in a trajectory that paralleled the church's political profile in the century leading to the Vietnam era. After a period of debate and uncertainty amidst changing conscription policies, Seventh-day Adventists in September 1864 successfully applied for recognition from the United States military as noncombatants—"a people unanimously loyal and anti-slavery, who because their views of the ten commandments and of the teaching of the New Testament cannot engage in bloodshed."¹² The General Conference session of 1865 reaffirmed this commitment with the following resolution: "While we thus cheerfully render to Caesar the things which the Scriptures show to be his, we are compelled to decline all participation in acts of war and bloodshed as being inconsistent with the duties enjoined upon us by our divine Master toward our enemies and toward all mankind."¹³

The church maintained the noncombatant commitment during World War I but American Adventist conscripts in numerous instances experienced harsh treatment due to inadequate communication and misunderstandings both on the part of local draft boards and of the Adventist young men themselves. Far more severe dilemmas arose in other nations. In the run-up to World War II, Adventists sought to portray themselves as “conscientious cooperators” even though the official designation for draftees who declared themselves noncombatants was “conscientious objectors.”

In October 1940, Carlyle B. Haynes, head of the National Service Commission (NSO), the denominational agency established to support and guide Adventist servicemen, stated that the title conscientious objectors did not represent Adventists, whom, he said, were not “war resisters, pacifists, [or] conscientious objectors to war.” He further explained that “we do not oppose war, we do not agitate against war, we do not organize against war, we make no protest against war, we are not unwilling to serve in the military organization when drafted, we are not opposed to saluting the flag, and we are not opposed to wearing our country’s uniform.”¹⁴

Thus, the church encouraged Adventist draftees to accept the I-A-O classification provided for in the Selective Service Act of 1940: “Conscientious objectors eligible for military service in noncombatant role.” This contrasted with conscientious objection mainly associated with the historic peace churches (Quakers, Mennonites, and the Church of the Brethren) that refused military service of any kind but accepted alternative civilian service (codified as I-O in 1950).¹⁵

To avoid the difficulties experienced during World War I, the denomination also supported development of a program, which became known as the Medical Cadet Corps in 1939, to prepare young Adventists for effective noncombatant military service while remaining faithful to their religious convictions.¹⁶ During World War II, roughly 12,000 Adventists enrolled in MCC training programs at Adventist summer camps, academies, and colleges.¹⁷ Due to its success in the U.S., the MCC program expanded across the denomination and in other parts of the world, including South Vietnam in 1953.¹⁸

American Adventist Military Service in Vietnam

At least 5,400 American Adventists served at least one tour of duty and 148 military personnel died in the Vietnam War. The actual numbers are probably much higher given the fact that not all young men may have identified themselves as “Seventh-day Adventist” on information forms for the armed forces. Adventist publications identified “thousands” of American Adventists who served. Union conference periodicals and at various times the Review and Herald contained obituaries of Adventists killed in the conflict.

Fifteen percent of Adventists who died in the armed forces were African-American. The number of other minority groups is unknown mainly because the Department of Defense did not offer other ethnicity choices, like “Hispanic,” on applications until 1972. The age of Adventists who served ranged from 18 to 45. More than a

quarter of Adventist servicemen who died in Vietnam were married and the average age that a soldier died was about 22. The number of non-American Adventist military personnel is even more unclear.¹⁹ There are simply no accurate records that reflect this figure.

Adventist Noncombatants in Vietnam

The MCC was a conduit for the continuing influence of the “conscientious cooperator” ethos among Adventists during the Vietnam War. Adventist academies and colleges continued to encourage young men to enroll in MCC training. For students who did not attend Adventist educational institutions the program was also made available at the National Medical Cadet Corps Camp at Camp Desmond T. Doss in Grand Ledge, Michigan during the summer.²⁰ The program was under the National Service Organization (NSO), which was a department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. According to one scholar, Adventists were “better prepared for military service than any other private group in the United States.” He added, “The Corps sought to prove that good Adventists were also ‘good Americans,’ eager and willing to serve in the military, albeit in noncombatant roles.”²¹

Conscientious cooperation in the Vietnam era also took the form of participation in “Operation Whitecoat,” a controversial U.S. Army program to develop medical defenses against biological warfare.²² It began in 1955 and continued until 1973 with roughly 2,300 Adventist volunteer participants who saw it as a viable option for noncombatant service for God and country.²³

At the end of 1967, a U.S. government periodical entitled Selective Service stated, “More than one half of all 1-A-O’s inducted in the U.S.A. since 1940 have been Seventh-day Adventists . . .”²⁴ Noncombatant service was defined as military service in which the person is unarmed at all times, and may include service in the medical field or service on any other military assignment that did not require the person to bear arms. But medic noncombatants prepared to assist soldiers on the front line of combat. During the Vietnam War, their basic training took place at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas and the training was very intense. Many studied to be the equivalent of a licensed practical nurse (LPN), which normally took a full year, but medics would be required to complete their training in sixteen weeks.

A common criticism of those who filed for conscientious objector status was that they were trying to avoid being sent into combat areas; however, medics were often on front lines in Vietnam. Once inducted, most objectors were designated as medics, which meant that they would be needed to help soldiers in combat.²⁵ One study stated: “According to the draft counseling literature of the time, a young man entering the military as a 1-A-O was more likely than draftees in general to be sent into combat; indeed, upon becoming a medic, one was virtually assured of going to Vietnam.”²⁶

The opinions of commanding officers and other soldiers were diverse about Adventist noncombatants, especially medics. In some military units, commanding officers and other soldiers viewed conscientious

objectors as, at best, an inconvenience, or at worst, a liability, particularly in an ambush or combat. They viewed noncombatants' presence and their refusal to bear arms as too closely associated with antiwar ideas. Also, some Adventists were able to receive accommodations for Sabbath observance from superiors, which created resentment among other noncombatants and combatants.²⁷

On the other hand, most soldiers recognized the value of noncombatants. Though some soldiers may have had negative opinions about noncombatants initially, their biases usually subsided as medics interacted with their units. One medic described the evolving relationship by stating: "After the first couple of operations, the guys protected me. These were guys who were really skeptical about me at first, but I became something special to them, I became their medic."²⁸ Usage of terms of respect like "doc" and "their medic" was indicative of their appreciation of noncombatants. Even commanding officers at times made distinctions between conscientious objectors, like Adventists, and the antiwar movement. One commanding officer gave this affirmation: "As far as we're concerned, conscientious objectors are not any different than any other soldier. They just don't receive training in combat firing or weapons training." He added, "These people are extremely fine people – highly dedicated, highly motivated." However, Adventist noncombatants were still in dangerous situations during the war. In fact, as "soldiers without guns," fifty-two Adventist medical personnel died while serving in Vietnam.²⁹

Medics who worked in emergency rooms at field hospitals described the gruesome nature of their jobs. They worked 12 hours on, then 12 hours off, sometimes for weeks at a time. Others might have worked eight hour days in hospitals in the cities. Supervisors, such as medical doctors, determined if they could be off on the Sabbath. Doctors and medics treated soldiers in emergency situations—treating diseases, caring for wounded soldiers, and at times even performing minor surgeries. However, they also treated afflictions such as tropical ulcers, also known as jungle rot, sexually transmitted diseases, and other medical needs.³⁰

Often a medic was the last person a dying soldier saw. Due to the remoteness of the battle locales or the hospital, clergy were not always available to their patients. Thus, many medics became their patients' father, minister, and comforter. They would go through periods of routine medical service to episodes where mass casualties would come in for treatment. They would also treat wounded civilian Vietnamese women and children injured because of combat. Some of the medics became very disillusioned about the treatment of soldiers and saw the government as simply using them. That is, they thought military commanders' strategies were not effective and put soldiers' lives at risk. Adventist medics were at times conflicted, but they expressed pride that they stood up for their convictions and that they did not serve as combatants.

Adventist Combatants in the Vietnam War

On March 8, 1965 the first U.S. ground troops deployed to the war landed on a beach near Da Nang in the Quang Nam province of South Vietnam. During the war American young men were drafted and some volunteered for military service. Part of the difficulty that the American military faced is that they were given the

task of waging a war against North Vietnam while also building-up the country of South Vietnam in the face of resistance from the Viet Cong (South Vietnamese forces opposed to the American-allied government). This led to continual calls by the U.S. military for more troops.³¹

There were many reasons why some Adventist young men chose to enter the military as I-A combatants, instead of the traditional and recommended I-A-O classification as noncombatants. First, the denomination more closely reflected the social and political views of conservative Americans during the Cold War especially in regard to anti-communistic views. Therefore, some Adventists may have rejected the church's position of noncombat service and decided to serve as combatants because they believed they needed to fight against communism. Second, as new members joined the Adventist church, they often came from faith communities or philosophical views that held a "just war" perspective and did not reflect the traditional Adventist noncombatant perspective. Third, as in previous wars, some saw that economic opportunity was available to those who could learn a trade, skill, or further their education in the military.³² Fourth, because the church emphasized that service should be approached as conscientious cooperation, the collaboration between the U.S. military and the denomination may have left some Adventists with the impression that combat service could be acceptable. Finally, like most Americans, Adventists who were eligible for the military draft were subject to local draft boards. Young men who might have requested noncombatant service were at times classified as combatants. In the military, it was especially difficult if a young person attempted to be "reclassified" as a noncombatant, either because they were not classified correctly, or they converted to Adventism and requested a change while in the military.³³

The first thing that soldiers noticed when they arrived in Vietnam was the heat.³⁴ The military culture was another surprise to Adventists. In part, this was due to the presence of alcohol and drugs—an unexpected experience that was very different from their homes and churches. In Vietnam, servicemen needed to constantly be aware of their surroundings because surprise attacks by the Viet Cong were a constant threat. At times, soldiers also lacked confidence in military leadership and the mission to "stop communism." One Adventist soldier was frustrated because he never received a clear answer as to why America was involved in Vietnam.³⁵ Like other soldiers, some Adventists grew more critical about U.S. propaganda of containing communism. They were still patriotic but during their service they focused more on fighting for fellow soldiers, helping Vietnamese people when they could with food, instead of focusing their support exclusively on trying to understand the mission of the U.S. military. Of course, others continued to support and believed that their service was to ensure that the government of South Vietnam would not become communist. Or, as one Adventist combatant stated, "We have to try to stop Communism wherever we can – which is our only reason for being here [in Vietnam]."³⁶ Sixty soldiers identified as Adventist in military records died as combatants during the war.³⁷

Adventist soldiers experienced the same difficulties after their service as other Vietnam veterans. At times, negative characterizations followed American soldiers because of incidents like the My Lai massacre of civilians

and the unpopularity of the war. After the war American society simply wanted to move on from the controversial and traumatic episode and thus the service of those who fought in Vietnam was largely overlooked. American society was also not prepared for veterans who were suffering from what was still sometimes characterized as “soldier’s heart” (a post-Civil War term), “shell shock” (a post-World War I term), or “combat fatigue” (a term used after World War II), and more recently termed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury.

Adventist Humanitarianism and the Vietnam War

On November 3, 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy signed the Foreign Assistance Act, which joined together several foreign assistance programs and organizations. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was “responsible for administering aid to foreign countries to promote social and economic development.” In the 1970s, the focus of the USAID shifted more towards “basic human needs” and focused on food and nutrition, population planning, health, education, and human resources development.³⁸ One program that worked with the USAID is the Advisory Committee On Voluntary Foreign Aid (ACVFA). It operated as a connection between the U.S. government and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) to aid in humanitarian and development assistance overseas.³⁹

The Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Service (SAWS), established in 1956, was one agency funded by USAID. SAWS would be the primary conduit through which the Adventist church would work to distribute aid during the war. In 1973, it became the Seventh-day Adventist World Service, and was finally reorganized into the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA) in 1983.⁴⁰

During the Vietnam War, many religious, non-religious, and government assistance programs coordinated efforts to assist the civilian Vietnamese people. SAWS efforts focused on programs in education, public health, and distributing clothing to needy families. Adventists also operated elementary and training schools. The church conducted “village clinics,” which operated education programs, and founded a nursing school at its hospital in Saigon.⁴¹ The Adventist hospital was well-known for its care and facilities in the country. In fact, one government report stated that the Saigon Adventist Hospital was “perhaps the best civilian hospital in the country.”⁴²

Despite the benefits of help that the church offered to the people of South Vietnam, questions arose about the close working relationship between the church and the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments. One Foreign Service officer who worked to establish the Education Development Program, which included the teaching of elementary through higher education, adult, vocational, and even textbook composition stated, “Among the most active church groups that worked closely with me were the Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Church of Christ.” In speaking about the church’s cooperation he stated, “I became assured of the Church’s complete cooperation in every project.”⁴³ The input by religious organizations in developing the education system of a

country should have raised important questions for religious leaders.

Perhaps a close association between the South Vietnamese and the U.S. governments was a by-product of the close proximity of the church's and government's work. But given Adventists' traditional and recent opposition to religion in public education during the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S., perhaps Adventist leaders could have proceeded with more caution.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the aid and service rendered on behalf of the South Vietnamese people should not be minimized, nor should the dedication of Adventist volunteers who often risked their lives.⁴⁵

Adventist Women and the Vietnam War

There are no official records on how many women served in Vietnam during the war. This is also the case with Adventist women; however, women volunteered to serve in all military branches and over 90% did so as nurses. Adventist publications showed that Adventist women helped as volunteers. They served in medical facilities and hospitals in South Vietnam, mainly as nurses at Saigon Adventist Hospital. They came mainly from the U.S., Australia, and the Philippines, but some may have come from other countries. Some had years of experience before they arrived in Vietnam, others just graduated, and Vietnamese nurses trained at the nursing school at Saigon Adventist Hospital.⁴⁶

The work of nurses was similar to medics in hospitals in regard to the number of hours that they worked and their treatment of mass casualties. Generally, nurses had more autonomy in their treatment of patients compared to nurses in America who were under the strict directions of a physician. Also, nurses volunteered their time to help the local and rural communities. They visited orphanages and distributed medical aid to Vietnamese civilians.⁴⁷

Women had to contend with issues that men did not. They were careful when they were outside of the hospital, trying not to draw attention to themselves, often dressing in Vietnamese clothing and not traveling at night. Due to gender stereotypes women felt the continual pressure to nurture soldiers in their care. Thus, they also were careful of American servicemen who might misunderstand nurses' care as affection or might simply be lonely.⁴⁸

Adventist nurses' experiences were similar to other nurses, except they worked with a religious organization. However, the impact of the war stayed with them. They were not in combat but some women suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their contribution, unfortunately, is understudied in comparison to other aspects of the war, but their service saved the lives of soldiers and civilians.⁴⁹

Adventists and the American Anti-Vietnam War Movement

Early understandings of nonviolence by Adventists reflected many of the same positions as other peace churches but Adventists would diverge sharply from the American peace activism that emerged in the decades

after World War I, which took direct action against the mobilization of American society for war.⁵⁰ Activists' use of political mobilization for peace was concerning to many American religious leaders as well as the military. By the 1950s, Cold War propaganda labeled pacifism as dangerous to the well-being of the nation because the U.S. needed to be prepared for a potential war. Throughout the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, there were antinuclear and antiwar protests. In response, American politicians and at times, clergymen, spoke against what they believed was a collaboration between antiwar activists and communism.

Important aspects of the American peace movement from which Adventists distanced themselves were as follows: first, the peace movement aligned their protests with political involvement to impact U.S. foreign policy; second, a broad coalition of domestic and international cooperation between religious and non-religious peace activists took place to initiate change. In the Adventist apocalyptic worldview, broad political and ecumenical collaborations were potentially repressive and thus to be avoided. Also, from the 1950s to the 1970s, sociologically and politically, Adventist Americans became more of a reflection of conservative American Christianity. That is, they were more likely to identify with what President Richard Nixon called the "great silent majority"—Americans who supported Nixon's Vietnam policy. Instead of the "vocal minority"—antiwar protesters who opposed American involvement in the Vietnam War.⁵¹

As the war in Vietnam dragged on, though, it became increasingly unpopular. The U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, the inability of American and the South Vietnamese military to substantially damage North Vietnamese forces, and the devastation of the country of South Vietnam left many Americans disillusioned by the war. Perhaps no event epitomized this more than the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Viet Cong forces attacked 13 cities and other targets throughout South Vietnam, in particular the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. In the end, South Vietnamese and U.S. forces regained control but much of the attacks were televised in the U.S. and around the world. Before Tet, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, and the Johnson administration claimed the war was near the end but after the Tet Offensive, Americans realized that was not the case.⁵²

The Vietnam antiwar movement included pacifists opposed to war in general but mostly focused on opposition to the war in Vietnam specifically, based on a variety of reasons. For those within the civil rights, Chicano, and black power movements, a central issue was racial inequality. That is, the U.S. government asked young minority men to fight and potentially die for a country in which segregation and racial inequality was a daily reality in their lives. This was the view of the former heavy weight boxing champion and Black Muslim Muhammad Ali who stated, "Why should they [the U.S. government] ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs?"⁵³ Another prominent critic of the war was civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Others drew inspiration from past antiwar and the civil rights movements and were known as the "New Left." Although not necessarily opposed to war, the older leftist groups and upper-middle-class college students believed the war was an example of the American ruling classes' exploitation of the poor and working class.

They maintained that those in power were not sending their sons to war, rather the young men of the poor and working class families. Some argued that the conflict in Vietnam was a civil war and the U.S. should not be involved. Still others questioned the domino theory and the view that a conflict in Southeast Asia was a threat to the security of America. Another ground for opposition was that in supporting an authoritarian government in South Vietnam, the U.S. government was betraying its own principles. Even some veterans grew critical of American military leaders because of the lack of an effective military strategy.⁵⁴

The tradition that developed in the 20th century of avoiding partisanship on controversial political issues along with the emphasis on conscientious cooperation with the military were strong factors against Adventists engaging in public criticism of the government's war policy. Most Adventist publications did not address the antiwar movement regularly, but when they did it was typically in a negative way. On the other hand, there were few statements reinforcing the legitimacy of the war. Articles simply encouraged Adventists to "pray for these boys [Adventist servicemen] and stand by their side every way we possibly can."⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, the focus of many Adventists was on the support of the Adventist noncombatant position and its servicemen. The actions of Adventist noncombatants were highlighted, and the service of Adventist combatants was acknowledged but not examined in detail. Also, in Adventist churches there were dedication services for servicemen and at times patriotic rallies at Adventist academies. But other congregations refrained from talking about the war.⁵⁶

There are no records of campus protests on Adventist college campuses. However, there were discussions about the Vietnam War and what it meant for Adventist youth.⁵⁷ Some questioned U.S. containment policy and involvement in Southeast Asia.⁵⁸ Also, some students did participate in protest marches in the nation's capital.⁵⁹ Independent Adventist periodicals reflected a frustration with the close relationship between the denomination and the U.S. government. Some of the discussions revolved around the same issues that antiwar and civil rights activists were addressing, such as the failure of the churches to speak out against the Vietnam War and its need to support racial equality more strongly. Also, there was a small revival of support for the pacifism that Adventists had espoused in the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁶⁰ One student resigned his commission in the Naval Academy because of the conflict he experienced between his faith and military service. He said, "I asked myself if it was possible for a born-again Christian to be involved in wholesale slaughter and mass destruction." He added, "It was one of the most difficult life decisions I have ever made; and yet, once I made the decision, I found peace that I had not known for months."⁶¹ Another college student said, "As a Seventh-day Adventist pacifist, I am anxious to see the ridiculous slaughter in Vietnam stopped."⁶²

Adventist students and young professionals began to raise concerns about the uncritical acceptance of "conscientious cooperation." According to one author, "Some Adventists in the Vietnam era were rediscovering that endeavoring to serve God could lead to conflict with the government not easily resolved by a cooperative agreement."⁶³ On the whole, though, American Adventists did not participate in the antiwar movement. Instead, they focused on supporting noncombatant military service and humanitarian efforts.

Non-American Adventists and the Vietnam War

Similar to American Adventist publications, the coverage of the Vietnam War by non-American Adventist publications focused on three aspects: they supported the traditional noncombatant position of the denomination, they highlighted the service of Adventist conscientious objectors, and finally they solicited support for Adventist relief efforts to help South Vietnamese Adventists and the general population impacted by the war. One difference between American and non-American Adventist publications was that in the latter, more pictures of the war appeared. These included images of South Vietnamese refugees and amputees being treated in hospitals. This was seen mainly in Canadian and European Adventist publications. American Adventist publications may have chosen not to publish these images because they did not want to promote antiwar sentiments.⁶⁴

Non-American Adventists also assisted in humanitarian efforts. Most came from countries like the Philippines and Australia. They were for the most part doctors and nurses who served as volunteers. There were some instances of racism towards the Vietnamese and a lack of awareness regarding the reality of war in the country. But, overall the work of non-American Adventists provided needed assistance to the people of South Vietnam and reaffirmed the churches' position as a worldwide faith that advocated noncombatant service.⁶⁵

Vietnamese Adventists and the Vietnam War

The first Adventist missionary to arrive in South Vietnam, then known as French Indo-China, was Rankin H. Wentland in 1929. By 1937, the Vietnamese Adventist church included roughly 250 members in five congregations. Soon a training school started and a press called the Vietnam Adventist Publishing House. At the onset of World War II, most missionaries left South Vietnam; American missionaries returned in 1947 to reestablish schools and, in 1955, the Adventist hospital in Saigon.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, there is little record of the activities of North Vietnamese Adventists, so most of the information reflects the experience of South Vietnamese Adventists (simply referred to as Vietnamese Adventists). Vietnamese Adventists had to contend with several challenges during the war. First, prior to and during the war, their acceptance of Christianity went against the norm in a country where the majority of people were Buddhist. One factor that made this a source of conflict was the anti-Christian attitudes resulting from abuse of power on the part of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was Roman Catholic. The conflation of imperialist rhetoric by the French and later anti-communist rhetoric with religion by the U.S. further complicated how the South Vietnamese viewed Christianity.

Interaction with Vietnamese communists, known as the Viet Cong (VC), was another challenge for Vietnamese Adventists were their interactions with Vietnamese Communists. This was a guerrilla force that received support from the North Vietnamese Army against the South Vietnamese government. The VC were suspicious of

Vietnamese Adventists who evangelized for their faith, even at dangerous points in the war. Reports by Vietnamese Adventists recounted that they were followed by the Viet Cong because the VC thought the Vietnamese Adventist could be spies. The VC were so suspicious that at times they captured and interrogated Vietnamese Adventists for weeks or months. From these interrogations, some Vietnamese Adventists were released and others were never seen again.⁶⁷

During the war there were roughly 16 churches and over 2,000 members of the Adventist church in South Vietnam.⁶⁸ Adventist educational and medical training were used by some Vietnamese, but it was difficult for most because of the war. The Vietnamese who converted to Adventist Christianity did so because of the denomination's educational, medical, and evangelistic outreach by non-Vietnamese and Vietnamese Adventists.⁶⁹

The evangelistic outreach of Vietnamese Adventists themselves was significant and regarded as "progress in God's work in spite of war."⁷⁰ Religious literature also remained in demand during the war; in fact, one report announced that the Adventist press in South Vietnam was producing 10,000 books per month. Outreach took place throughout South Vietnam and even close to the border of North Vietnam, also known as the "Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone" or the "17th parallel."⁷¹ South Vietnamese colporteurs, also known as literature evangelists, particularly faced difficult and at times life threatening interactions with North Vietnamese forces. Reports of their interactions revealed that they were questioned, harassed, and even imprisoned. Despite these difficulties there were reports of conversions, even among Vietnamese communists.⁷²

Aftermath and Legacy

The United States' involvement in the Vietnam War officially ended on January 27, 1973 with peace agreements between North Vietnam and the United States. But the war continued until April 30, 1975 when North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. On July 2, 1976 North and South Vietnam became united as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.⁷³

The Vietnam War had a major impact on both North and South Vietnam, as well as the United States. It is estimated that between 500,000 and one million North Vietnamese died and more than 350,000 South Vietnamese died. More than 58,000 Americans were listed as dead or missing, and around 300,000 injured. The U.S. bombing of North Vietnam destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. In South Vietnam, bombs also destroyed much of the territory, along with unexploded mines that left some areas dangerous or uninhabitable. Also, the effort to defoliate large sections of land with chemicals like Agent Orange had lasting detrimental effects on soldiers, civilians, and the land. The cost of the war to America was more than \$167 billion, and it impacted U.S. foreign policy and other nations on the international stage. The physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual impact of post-traumatic stress and moral injury has continued to affect soldiers, volunteers, and civilians today.⁷⁴

Adventists generally positioned themselves as “cooperators” and not “objectors” during the war in Vietnam. The church, like other conservative American Christians, largely failed to examine more closely and critique its relationship with the government. This was especially the case with important subjects such as the effectiveness of America’s containment policy and domino theory, racial and social inequalities in the draft, Vietnam military veterans’ critique of the war, and the larger implications of noncombatant cooperation with the U.S. government.

The Vietnam War also revealed emerging diversity within Adventism. The unified consensus in favor of I-A-O conscientious objection (noncombatant military service) was losing its hold, though arguably remained the majority view. Reluctantly, church leaders went on record to support members who did not choose the I-A-O designation. In 1969, the Autumn Council voted to support members who requested I-O status (opposed to combatant and noncombatant military service). Then, the 1972 Autumn Council voted to support members who entered the military as I-A (combatant military service).⁷⁵

In 1973 the U.S. Selective Service ended the military draft, making military service voluntary. In the absence of conscription, the church has advocated that members avoid military service, but allows for individual conscience and gives pastoral support to members who choose to enlist.⁷⁶

The Adventist church was fairly successful at avoiding characterizing either pro-war or antiwar views in religious terms, unlike other American Christians who continually conflated the Vietnam War and civil religion. Some Adventists rediscovered early Adventism’s concern for social issues and its peace witness. They recognized the need to take a stand on important issues like civil and women’s rights, among others. Some also became more outspoken against oppressive governments and the collaboration between the denomination and the U.S. government. Also, the evangelistic outreach of the church during times of war was important to give people hope. This was clearly the case in the experience of Vietnamese Adventists while their country was in the midst of a war.

The Seventh-day Adventist mission of sharing the “everlasting gospel” with the world (Rev. 14:6) is impacted by events that take place in the world. Thus, it is an important part of the church’s mission to remind members and those it seeks to reach about the cost of war—its impact on economies, politics, and society, and, most importantly, impact on human lives and the humanitarian crises that inevitably takes place during and after military conflict. The church’s experience in relation to the war in Vietnam highlights the importance of thinking carefully about difficult questions rather than avoiding them. For example, What does the Bible say about war and peace? How can the church think more holistically about war, taking into account such issues as national infrastructures, physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma, education, poverty, migration, and disenfranchisement of people because of race, gender, or class? How does nationalism, culture, politics, and theology impact Adventist understanding about war? When is it appropriate to confront or protest a nation’s engagement in war? How can the church work constructively with nations during times of war without

compromising its beliefs?

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