Cold War and Civil Rights Era Narratives Revisited

"Contested History, Politics, and Textbooks: The American War in Vietnam, Dissent, and Civil Rights," Karl P. Benziger (Department of History, Rhode Island College)

"Shall Negro sharecroppers from Mississippi be sent to shoot down brown-skinned peasants in Vietnam – to serve the interests of those who oppose Negro liberation at home and colonial freedom abroad?" Paul Robeson, "Ho Chi Minh Is the Toussaint L'Overture of Indo-China," March 1954[1]

"No Mississippi Negroes should be fighting in Vietnam for the White Man's freedom, until all Negro people are free in Mississippi." A McComb, Mississippi Protest, 28 July, 1965[2]

The narrative of the Cold War found in American history textbooks at the secondary and higher education level tells the story of how children were socialized during the first decades of the affair. Duck and cover drills and requisite civil defense shelters were explicit reminders of the nuclear contest between the United States and the Soviet Union in the bipolar construct of the global system. The drama of the Cuban Missile Crisis found in all texts emphasizes the cataclysmic prospects that one false move could make on the global stage. In this light, the politics of decolonization and civil rights needed to take second place to superpower confrontation and the American commitment to contain the spread of communism. And yet, for those being denied basic civil rights in the United States, or bearing the brunt of the politics of decolonization, taking a back seat was no longer an option.

The Vietnamese bid for independence from France was dominated by the communists and led by their charismatic leader Ho Chi Minh. The United States was committed to contain communism in Asia, and because of this was gradually drawn into its longest and costliest war of the Cold War period in Vietnam. Perhaps the most poignant critique of American foreign policy during the Cold War linked African American aspirations for civil rights to the cause of Vietnamese national liberation. This was exemplified by the McComb Mississippi Protest that captured the growing antiwar sentiment among many within the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and eloquently expressed by Robert Moses in August 1964. Moses' opposition to the war and its intimate connection to civil rights germinated in the context of the lynchings that marked the Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Freedom Summer was a massive effort led

1 Paul Robeson, "Ho Chi Minh is the Tousaint L'Overture of Indo-China," March 1954, in *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918–1974*, ed. Philip Foner (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1978), 377–378.

2 "A McComb, Mississippi, Protest, 28 July 1965" in, *Black Protest: 350 Years of History, Documents, and Analysis*, ed. Joanne Grant (New York: Fawcett, 1996), 415–416.

by SNCC and other civil rights organizations to register African Americans to vote.[3] The savage violence used against African Americans and civil rights workers in Mississippi to maintain segregation and disenfranchisement was likened to the violence used against Vietnamese peasants in order to quell the National Liberation Front.[4] In spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, resistance to civil rights continued unabated. At the same time, African Americans were being drafted into the United States army to fight in Vietnam. The solution offered by Moses and many within SNCC was resistance to the draft.[5] To many Americans the idea was shocking, especially because by the summer of 1965 over 82,000 American troops had been committed to this effort of containment in Vietnam.[6] Textbooks continue to leave out the origins of this critique, creating the illusion that it simply appeared in the mid-1960s with the radicalization of the civil rights and antiwar movements. This should not be surprising, given that the critique was initially sidelined, and then in the wake of a lost war, ignored. This in fact exemplifies the painful history of racism that characterized the post-World War II period in the United States. This paper traces the origins of this narrative and then turns to the more difficult question of how to incorporate this globalized narrative into the classroom.

African Americans long understood the symmetry between their plight in an America characterized by brutal racial segregation and that of people of color living under the thrall of colonial oppression. As early as World War I African Americans linked

3 Three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman were murdered in June 1964 by members of the Ku Klux Klan in Neshoba County, Mississippi. The Imperial Wizard of United Klans of America claimed that the lynchings were a hoax perpetrated to raise money for the voter registration drive. A sentiment shared by many whites in Mississippi. The bodies were found in August 1964. According to SNCC the first two months of Freedom Summer were marked by 25 bombings in addition to reports of beatings, shootings, and other forms of intimidation. See Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 114–115, 122, David Cunningham, *Klansville, USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55–57, and William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), 229–234.

4 Eric Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Paris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 40–42, 49–53, 156.

5 "Vietnam Pamphlet Distorted" and "A Freedom Worker's View on War and Peace" in *The Movement: 1964–1970*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 66, 82, Russell Burns, "[John] Lewis [Chairman of SNCC] Lashes KKK-ism in Vietnam, Urges Unity of Black Leaders in U.S.," *Muhammad Speaks*, April 23, 1965, 7, Carson, *In Struggle*, 184–185, Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 191–192, and Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Hearts, One Mind: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 291–292.

6 "Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense to President Johnson," April 21, 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1964–1968, Vol. 2, Vietnam (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 574–576 and John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, 1945–1975 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 127–129.

their struggle for civil rights with the aspirations for freedom in the colonial world. The promise of self-determination enshrined in the Atlantic Charter that undergirded the war aims of the Allies in their fight against the Axis powers during World War II further cemented this linkage. The Double V campaign initiated by African Americans through the *Pittsburgh Courier* in the United States proclaimed victory over the Axis abroad and Jim Crow at home seemed inextricably linked to the demand for national liberation from colonial masters throughout the world.[7] The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh on September 2, 1945 challenged France to live up to these war aims. But by November 1946 the Vietnamese were locked in a war for national liberation as the French attempted to reestablish control over Indochina. The Vietnamese struggle for independence and America's role assisting France to maintain hegemony over their former colony caught the attention of members within the civil rights community. Just as France had failed to live up to goals proclaimed in Allied War aims, the United States did little to ameliorate the open and institutionalized racism faced by African Americans in the years following the war.

Journalist George Padmore met with Ho Chi Minh in mid-September 1946. Padmore was in Paris helping organize the fifth Pan African Congress.[8] Ho Chi Minh had been in Paris attempting to negotiate a settlement with France. The French agreed to Vietnamese independence in March 1946 as part of the French Union, but then backtracked demanding that France control Vietnamese foreign affairs and the economy, leaving the country as a protectorate of France. The negotiations failed, and Ho needed to prepare the fledgling Republic to fight.[9] Ho linked civil rights with national liberation exclaiming, "I know the struggle of the Negroes in America and they have my goodwill."[10]

Vietnam became entwined in the neo-colonial critique that emanated from African Americans associated with the old left. Fighting in Vietnam was brutal costing thousands of Vietnamese lives. France was allowed to buy American surplus war material left over from World War II at bargain prices. Though many within the United States government were uneasy about providing aid to help France recover their colony, the increasing fear of the communist threat led to a policy that firmly backed the French.[11] American support for the French pawn Bao Dai in Vietnam in 1949 was reinforced by the People's Republic of China's recognition of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam that same year. Between 1950 and 1954 the United States provided over to 2.6

7 Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 15–18, 83–86 and Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land? World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 42–46, 51–58, 142–143.

8 Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 155–156.

9 Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 129–147.

10 George Padmore, "U.S. Lynchings Called Barbarism," *Chicago Defender*, September 28, 1946.

11 Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 192–201 and Prados, *Vietnam*, 21–22.

billion dollars of assistance to the French effort. At the same time, international attention focused on the unending brutality of segregation and poverty found in the United States.[12] Singer and actor Paul Robeson likened the oppression of South Africans to that of the Vietnamese, claiming that Jan Smuts' regime had resurrected the "evil forces" that World War II was meant to stamp out.[13] This sentiment resonated within parts of the American Labor movement as well. In spite of intense scrutiny given to organized labor in the growing red scare politics of the Cold War, Walter Reuther and The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) provided robust support for Civil Rights and the anti-colonialist agenda akin to that of progressives within the Democratic Party and Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas.[14]

Howard University President Mordecai Johnson was a strong supporter of labor and intensely critical of the contradictions that segregation and colonialism posed for the United States during the Cold War.[15] On November 21, 1950 the *New York Times* reminded Americans of the increasing costs of aiding the French effort in Vietnam and included France's request for 721 million dollars in aid to help fight the war.[16] In an address to the CIO Convention on November 24, 1950 Johnson rebuked assertions that America was the leader of the free world. Responding to increased American aid to the French in Indochina he stated that the French had held sway over the Indochinese for more than a century "[but] we haven't ever sat down with the French and demand they change their system."[17] Johnson warned that Russia was likely to win the allegiance of peoples of the colonial countries unless the United States took the lead in performing "a great act of expiation." He called on the United States to provide 25 billion dollars per year to raise the standard of living in Africa and Asia.[18]

The old left included individuals and organizations with multi-faceted interests from the anti-communist stance of Mordecai Johnson and Walter Reuther to the communist affiliated Paul Robeson. They were united however, on the issue of decolonization and race. Robeson underwent intense scrutiny by the federal government because

12 Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 69–70, 132–133, 174–176, 192–194, 234, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3rd edition (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1996), 44, Prados, *Vietnam*, 23–25, and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 18–32.

13 "Racialism in South Africa," Friends' House, London, March 25, 1949, in Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 194–195.

14 Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism: 1945–1968* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 39–40, 54–55, 72 and H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 50–51.

15 Richard I. McKinney, *Mordecai, The Man and the Message: The Story of Mordecai Johnson* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1997), 111–115.

16 "Paris Hit by Indo-China War: France Sees Deficit in 1951 as She Tries to Arm in Europe While Fighting in Asia," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1950, 6.

17 Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 572, n. 4.

18 "CIO is Set to Give High Post to Quill: Way Clear for Election Today as VP as Green of Shipbuilders Withdraws," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1950, 22.

of his outspoken criticisms of American foreign policy and admiration for the Soviet Union. Robeson was impressed by Soviet strides to break poverty and the absence of racial animosity that pervaded the United States. On April 20, 1949 at the Paris Peace Conference he asserted, "Negroes would not fight against Russia [...]. Go ask the Negro workers in the cotton plantations of Alabama... Will they fight for peace so that new ways can be opened up for freedom [...] or be drawn into a war in the interest of the senators who have just filibustered them out of their civil rights."[19] This was viewed as subversive by the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC). Robeson's stance revealed fissures both within the old left and the civil rights community spawned by the red scare. He was denounced by baseball legend Jackie Robinson and other institutions such as the Urban League.[20] W.E.B. DuBois, on the other hand, rejected this critique claiming that Robeson was pointing to the contradictions of European neocolonialism as found in Indochina and its American mirror in the United States, in contrast to the Soviet Union where racism was a crime.[21] But the American government would have none of it and Robeson would lose his passport and be blacklisted for his critique of American Cold War policy and race. This was followed by an unsuccessful attempt by the federal government to frame DuBois in 1951 as an unregistered foreign agent.[22]

The Vietnamese thwarted France's design to reestablish hegemony over Indochina. As the French effort faltered, the United States became more deeply involved. Journalist William Worthy critiqued America's role in Vietnam in February 1954. After reviewing American support for the French in Vietnam he attacked America's "conspiracy of silence about not only the internal slavery our witch hunters are leading us step by step; but also slavery's external counterpart: namely, [the] counter-revolutionary direction of American policies among darker peoples." He concluded, "When [...] does a citizen brace his feet and ask why?"[23] Robeson's incendiary "Ho Chi Minh is the Toussaint L'Overture of Indo-China" followed the next month as direct American intervention was considered. In spite of Americans' unwillingness to intervene in Vietnam, public debate never considered connecting America's intransigent problem with race to the plight of the Vietnamese. The critique served up by Worthy and Robeson seemed radical and out of step with mainstream American politics. Robeson remained blacklisted and

19 "Paris Peace Conference," News Release, Council on African Affairs, May 11, 1949, in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 198.

20 C.P. Trussell, "Jackie Robinson Terms Stand of Robeson on Negroes False," *The New York Times*, July 19, 1949, 14 and Doris Greenberg, "Urban League Set to Chide Robeson," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1949. ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851–2006).

21 W.E.B. DuBois, "Paul Robeson: Right or Wrong? Right," *Writings by W.E.B. DuBois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1982), 136–140.

22 Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?* 196–198, Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 61–63, and Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 65–67.

23 William Worthy, "Our Disgrace in Indochina," *The Crisis*, 61, 2 (February, 1954): 83.

was hauled before HUAC in 1955 for a humiliating grilling that challenged his identity as an American citizen, a point not lost by those within the Old Left.[24]

Walter Reuther's anti-communism allowed him to continue to pressure for civil rights in a way that echoed the sentiments of Mordecai Johnson. Addressing the annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on June 26, 1957 Reuther explained, "This [the Cold War] is a struggle for hearts and minds [...] America's immorality in the field of civil rights could be the Achilles' heel of American democracy in the struggle against communist tyranny."[25] Gone however was the connection between American foreign policy in Vietnam and civil rights. After 1955 Reuther's foreign policy positions were compromised by the newly formed American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL CIO) dominated by its new President George Meany and Jay Lovestone who insisted that American foreign policy could not be questioned.[26]

The French disaster at the battle of Dien Bien Phu set the stage for American consideration of direct intervention, a proposition which 68% of the American public rejected in a Gallup Poll May 1954. The international community ended the conflict in July.[27] Vietnam was neutralized through the Geneva Accords, but the United States decided to continue its policy of containment in Vietnam through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) treaty and support of what became the Republic of South Vietnam. Americans fared no better than the French.[28] In spite of the insertion of over 16,000 advisors and an aid package costing hundreds of millions of dollars a year by 1963, the United States was thwarted by a determined National Liberation Front. Worse still, the deliberate antagonism of the Buddhist majority by the American backed regime exploded into violence in May 1963 and exposed the magnitude of the opposition to the government.[29] By fall of 1963 the dramatic escalation of the American effort by President

24 "Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of Passports – Part 3," in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 427.

25 "Address of Walter P. Reuther Before the Annual Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Detroit, Michigan, June 26, 1957" in *The Black Worker since the AFL-CIO Merger, 1955–1980*, Vol. VIII, ed. Philip S. Foner, Ronald L. Lewis, and Robert Cvornyek (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 424–425.

26 Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*, 103–106.

27 Prados, *Vietnam*, 27–30 and Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 51–52.

28 Though the United States had agreed not to disturb the Geneva Accords it had created SEATO in September 1954 that included a protocol that would protect the southern portion of Vietnam from the communist north. To that end they supported Ngo Dinh Diem as the leader of South Vietnam whose patron/client system and brutality largely worked against the American aim of creating a democratic counter to the north. See: Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States in Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 63–68, 95–96 and Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2006), 102–107.

29 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 2, 37–42, Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in Vietnam, 1964–1966* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 2–3, 8, and Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 144–149.

John F. Kennedy had largely failed, leaving Lyndon B. Johnson with the unenviable problem of how to resolve the chaotic political situation in South Vietnam beset by an internal revolution and open civil war with North Vietnam.[30] Dissent with American policy in Vietnam had largely been shut down by 1955. Popular dissent with what became the American War in Vietnam and its connection to the neo-colonial critique developed slowly. What is the connection between old left dissent as resurrected by SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)?

The connection was made by a variety of actors on both the international and domestic stage. The Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia April 1955 that included newly independent countries such as Egypt and India demanded a place in global politics and economics that assured their sovereignty. Importantly, they demanded an end to the bloody contest being waged throughout the former colonial world by the superpowers.[31] Bandung provided the foundation for the non-aligned movement and intensified the neo-colonial critique leveled against the superpowers. In the United States a collection of diverse groups such as the American Friends Service, the War Resisters League, and the Student Peace Union (SPU) opposed American Cold War policy in general and worked together on issues such as nuclear testing. The SPU was the largest student organization until 1963.[32] By 1960 labor cooperation between older civil rights groups was extended to a younger generation through the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), who in 1960 changed their name to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This was seen as advantageous for labor and civil rights. This cooperation which included financial support further cemented the relationship between the old and what would become the new left.[33] However, this same financial support by the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) through the AFL CIO initially served to restrain connecting civil rights to American foreign policy in Vietnam. SNCC was certainly one of the critical engines that spawned the New Left, but it was the SPU that acted as a bridge to publicly resurrect the fiery neo-colonial critique that directly connected American foreign policy in Vietnam to the politics of race as offered by the likes of Robeson and William Worthy.

To the chagrin of many within the Old Left SPU directly criticized the militarization of American policy in Southeast Asia on college campuses. The SPU monthly bulletin for October, 1959 featured a story on the Laotian elections of May 1959 that resulted

30 See Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 396–399 and Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, The NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 76–93, 101–149.

31 McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 73–74 and Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 95–97.

32 Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 5–6.

33 Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) 11–14. The role SNCC played in shaping the New Left is crucial see: "Bridges to the North" in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 95–116.

in the Communist MP's going to prison and the International Control Commission established by the Geneva Convention of 1954 leaving in protest. Beginning in 1958 the United States had backed a coup that unseated neutralist Souvanna Phouma for a more aggressive pro American General Phoui Sanankone which initiated a bitter Civil War that was stoked directly by both the United States and the Soviet Union.[34] The November bulletin featured University of California student, Fred Moore who went on a fast to protest compulsory Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) on the campus. In two days he had collected 1,000 signatures.[35]

By 1962 SPU targeted Kennedy's escalation in Vietnam, insisting on self-determination for the people of Vietnam "without the fear of American troops intervening in [their] civil war."[36] SPU also became deeply enmeshed in civil rights, which included the campaign to desegregate Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The consequences of accelerating violence unleased against civil rights projects in the United States and the unrelenting brutality of the Vietnam War came together at the SPU National Convention in June, 1963. The Convention likened Vietnam to an imperialist adventure at the expense "of first class citizenship for Negroes and other minorities."[37] Though the SDS Port Huron Statement June 1962 poignantly exposed contradictions between post World War II ideals and American Cold War policy, it failed to connect these ideas to specific policies as SPU had done. SDS was funded by organized labor through the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) who insisted that SDS not engage in united action with procommunist organizations. SPU unconstrained by such financial ties went bankrupt in 1964. It would be Robert Moses along with other parts of SNCC that would forcefully bring the connection of civil rights and Vietnam to the fore. SDS broke with LID in 1965 and was then free to officially adopt this line of protest.[38] The old left critique certainly resonated with Martin Luther King who in 1967 would elegantly explain the brutal connection between

34 Tamiment (hereafter TAM) Student Peace Union Records, 1959–1964, Box 1, TAM-057. SPU Bulletin October 1959, "Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs to the Deputy Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs," September 17, 1958 and "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, September 29, 1958 in *FRUS*, 1958–1960, Volume XVI, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos (Washington: United States Government Printing Office), 479–482, and McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 80–81.

35 TAM, SPU Bulletin, November, 1959.

36 TAM, National Council, Convention, 1962 Folder, 1962 National Convention, Political Action Resolution.

37 TAM, Correspondence et al., 1963–1964. SPU News Notes 7, SPU Field Worker Pat Cusick, Report from Chapel Hill, NC and National Council, Convention, 1963, Minutes, Resolution on Vietnam and Statement of Purpose, Civil Rights.

38 TAM, SDS Ephemera, Box 2, Letter from Vera Rony, Executive Secretary, LID to SDS, July 2, 1962, Letter from Tom Hayden to Vera Rony, July 24, 1962, LID News Bulletin, 1965 and Box 11, SDS, 1962–1963 Development, Letter from Tom Hayden to Todd Gitlin, August 2, 1963, National Secretary's Report, SDS National Convention, June 1963.

civil rights and foreign policy at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 5, 1967. "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam."[39]

How do we teach this narrative in the classroom?

Americans remain uncomfortable with this type of story as it sets the egalitarian ideals forwarded by the United States during the Cold War against the bitter reality of civil rights at home and its connection to American foreign policy in Vietnam. In 2010 the Texas School Board proposed that High School students learning about civil rights be required to understand that segregationists such as George Wallace were attempting to maintain the "status quo."[40] While this may be viewed as a distortion of the civil rights narrative, and one that distracts attention from Klan violence, there are other ways to avoid making connections between foreign and domestic policy. The State of Virginia's Standards of Learning underscores the importance of the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v Board of Education decision and Virginia's response, which forces students to confront the State's segregation policies of the time. Davis v County School Board of Prince Edward County, located in Virginia, became one of the cases challenging school segregation that was taken up by the Supreme Court as part of Brown v Board of Education.[41] Furthermore, the curriculum indicates that students must understand the importance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet the requirements seem to stop at what Manning Marable calls the politics of engagement. Missing is the connection that would help students understand the politics of confrontation.[42] This is due to an interpretation of the Vietnam War in which "the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into two countries," or that "the communist government of North Vietnam attempted to instill through force a communist government in South Vietnam." In this light American containment policy in Southeast Asia makes sense, but problematizes another standard that encourages students to understand how the war "bitterly divided" Americans.[43] The State of Rhode Island Grade Span Expectations for Civics and Government and Historical Perspectives/Rhode Island History take a different approach, as they were designed to "capture the big ideas of civics and history" and not "narrow or

39 Martin Luther King Jr. "Declares His Opposition to the War," in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co., 1995), 470–475.

40 Michael Brick, "Texas School Board Set to Vote on Textbook Revisions," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/21/education/21textbooks.html?ref=education&pagewan.

41 See especially "The Pride of Virginia" in Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 480–508, 540, 723–747.

42 Manning Marable identifies the politics of the Civil Rights movement following World War II to 1965 as that of engagement more in line with the non-violent tactics of Martin Luther King and SNCC, whereas after 1965 [in line with the escalation of the Vietnam War] politics become confrontational as evidenced by the demand for Black Power. See: Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 84–105.

43 State of Virginia, History and Social Science Standards of Learning, 2004. http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/history_socialscience/index.shtml.

replace existing social studies curriculum." Students are expected to "analyze democratic ideals" opposed to the "realities of American social and political life exemplified by the concept of equal protection of the law and the reality of discrimination." In another section, students are expected to "analyze multiple perspectives on current and historical events" such as Vietnam.[44] The concepts are important for high school students to understand, but in spite of attempts to understand American/Rhode Island history at a global level, the connection between civil rights and Vietnam remains absent. If these connections are not mandated, how and where can students make these connections?

Connections between America's enemies and dissent remain a volatile issue in American politics, exemplified by revelations about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not surprising, therefore, that connections made by Paul Robeson about the plight of people of color in Vietnam and the United States are absent in textbooks.[45] Interestingly, two recent textbooks proposed for use in Rhode Island utilize excerpts from Martin Luther King's Riverside address in 1967 in an attempt to reveal these connections. In Prentice Hall's *United States History* we find his devastating critique: "We have been repeatedly faced with the irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same school."[46] Glencoe's *American Vision*, considered for use by the Providence School District, features another King segment, "I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price for smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam [...]. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop must be ours."[47] Though the connection is made, it is not connected to the evolution of the critique reviewed here. Both texts indicate that opposition to the war began either in 1965 or 1966, affirming Bruce J. Schulman's criticism that early opposition to the war, with the exception of the free speech movement, is largely ignored.[48] The war is framed in foreign policy terms in which the United States continues its policy of containment. American support for French involvement in Vietnam is based on this bi-polar dichotomy, and though we find

44 Rhode Island Grade Span Expectations for Civics and Government and Historical Perspectives/Rhode Island History, Final Version, December 2008, 1, 7, 10.

45 Lorne Mason, Jesus Garcia, Francis Powell, and C. Frederick Risinger, *America's Past and Promise* (Evanston: McDougal Littell, 1988), Herman Viola, *Why We Remember: United States History* (Menlo Park: Addison Wesley, 1998), Lewis P. Todd and Merle Curti, *Triumph of the American Nation* (Chicago: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), David King, Norman McRae, and Jaye Zola, *The United States and Its People* (Menlo Park: Addison Wesley, 1993), and Daniel Boorstein and Brooks Mather Kelley, *A History of the United States* (Needham: Prentice Hall, 1996).

46 Emma J. Lapansky-Werner et al., *United States History* (Boston: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008) 993.

47 Joyce Appleby et al., *The American Vision* (New York: McGraw Hill/Glencoe, 2008) 894.

48 Bruce J. Schulman, "Out of the Streets and Into the Classroom? The New Left and the Counterculture in the United States," *Journal of American History*, 85, 4 (March, 1999): 1530, Lapansky-Werner, 992, Appleby, 893.

ourselves enmeshed in the terms of an authoritarian regime our intentions are noble.[49] Escalation becomes inevitable and the root causes of dissent encapsulated by World War II war aims are avoided. The power of this revitalized old left critique to shatter the liberal Cold War consensus in 1965 is obscured making it appear radical and unique.

After a review of the American escalation and expansion of the war, the texts continue to the politics of détente and the Cold War, moving away from the complexity of Vietnam to the inevitable conclusion of the Cold War. This mirrors the discomfort that many teachers have with Vietnam and its connections with the freedom movement.[50] In Rhode Island many teachers are unable to cover the topic, or do so, only at a surface level, because of time and a curriculum that packs all of United States history into one year. Others avoid teaching about Vietnam altogether, by ending U.S. History at the end of World War II. Some even jump over the topic.

Vietnam is difficult to teach in a narrative that points to a victorious past and to the promise of the future. Vietnam is sandwiched in between complicated discussions of Civil Rights centered on the politics of engagement, America's technological prowess, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and American success at reducing Cold War tension. Commitment to this narrative assures less possibility of criticism from nervous parents and an inoculation against the volatile politics that surround the story. Avoiding these painful connections remains the rule, despite the fact that students enjoy the challenge laid out by contested history. Engaging in creative activities enables students to grapple with some of the seemingly impossible choices and compromises that plagued the actors at all levels during this time.[51]

Most recently I had the opportunity to stage a role play I created with students from one of my foreign policy courses "The American War in Vietnam" at Rhode Island College and an advanced placement U.S. History class from Lincoln High School through a mini-grant from the State of Rhode Island which encourages collaborations between secondary and higher education. "A Cold War Reenactment: July 1965: America at the Crossroads, Vietnam" enabled students to participate in a fictitious debate regarding American escalation in Vietnam. Students play the roles of Lyndon Johnson, key players from the National Security Council, Dissenters within the National Security Council and the United States Senate, as well as Popular Dissent that included players from SNCC, SDS and notables such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and a skeptical press corps. The purpose of the exercise is to develop student's historical skills through formulating interpretations and analyses based on multiple perspectives and competing narratives in order to understand the intersections between United States foreign and domestic policy from a global perspective.

49 Lapansky-Werner, 982–983, Appleby, 882–885.

50 Lapansky-Werner, 1008–1013, 1087–1092, Appleby, 937–939, 990–992.

51 Karl P. Benziger and Robert Cvornyek, "American Foreign Policy at an Impasse: Teaching about Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement," *Perspectives on History*, 45, 5 (May, 2010): 41–43.

The players are chosen at random. Students are required to research their particular character in depth and to create detailed outlines or notecards that they use in the context of the reenactment. All players are provided with a basic set of documents that provide them with an outline of their character's argument and clues where to find more documents. To add depth and context for their character students make use of materials that shaped their particular character's point of view. For example, the Robert Moses and Malcolm X characters include old left critique as described earlier in this paper, whereas Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy characters make use of previous rationales made by their predecessors such as John Foster Dulles and the SEATO treaty to explain the need to contain communism. The press corps is divided into four groups in order to focus in on one point of view and formulate questions designed to challenge the arguments. This means they need to get into their documents and familiarize themselves with counter-arguments. All players make use of biographies and other interpretive materials.

The National Security Council presents its arguments for escalation. They are followed by dissenters within the executive and legislative branches, and finally the voices of popular dissent are heard. The three groups are provided with a follow up in order to respond to critique and undermine their opponent's position. At this point the President closely questions each group in order to weigh the options as he decides whether to escalate the war in Vietnam. This is followed by a twenty-minute press conference in which the press grills all parties. The reenactment closes with the President's decision and an examination of the rationale he used in making it.

This cooperative exercise provides students with the opportunity to test arguments they have formulated, and through debate understand where they need to fill in gaps in their research. Preparation for the group presentations provides students with a chance to examine a wider range of research models and character sketches which they can utilize in their final papers. Students in my class are required to write a research paper that cogently presents their particular character's point of view and actions. The exercise is reinforced on my final exam through an essay in which students are asked to weigh the arguments and rationale for escalation of the war in 1965. The high school students wrote an essay about their experience in which they explained what they might have argued differently resulting from the exercise.

Students from both classes became deeply engaged in the role play. The high school students took a cue from my students as they presented arguments designed to undermine their opponents. It was clear that the younger students enjoyed having the opportunity to argue forcefully with adults. The interaction between college and high school students proved interesting and certainly helped all students to better clarify their arguments. Important for both the high school and college students was the fact that the exercise quickly gets to the deep divisions that marked American society at this time and the volatility engendered by the connections of race and foreign policy. It also showed how our present understanding of this period is shaped by the contested politics of 1965 that were rooted in the promises of what the post-World War II world would be

as interpreted by all involved in the debate at the time. All parties in the debate undergirded the veracity of their claims with the promises of freedom enshrined both in America's rational legal documents and Charter of the United Nations. The stakes couldn't have been higher for all parties involved.

Race was a key component of politics in the post war WWII world as the former colonies broke the chains of the masters who had excused their domination of the third world based on the discredited theory of eugenics. The new world order envisioned by the Atlantic Charter seemed to be the death knell of old world order and the United States could not escape the new global reality that placed its policies of segregation under the spotlight. The logic of segregation was no longer acceptable to the freedom movement confronted by the Ku Klux Klan and institutionalized racism. The escalation of the Vietnam War coincided with the demand for civil rights, and by 1965 the arguments had begun to change from the politics of engagement to confrontation that would hasten the coming of Black Power in 1966.[52] What burned 1965 indelibly into the consciousness of both those within and outside the United States was the symmetry of violence exacted against people of color in Vietnam and places like McComb County, Mississippi. The violence that erupted in Watts on August 11, 1965 was emblematic of what the denial of access to the levers of economic power coupled with racism had wrought.[53] These problems could not be ignored. What Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois understood in 1949 certainly held true in 1965. What was viewed as fringe politics in the aftermath of World War II became the frame for popular dissent after 1965. It is no wonder then that it is a story many preferred to forget in the post 1945 Cold War world when the United States held sway as the bastion of freedom and democratic change.

52 Joseph E. Peniel, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power* (New York: Owl Books, 2006), 141–142.

53 The Watts riot lasted for six days, left thirty-four dead, and caused over two hundred million dollars of property damage. According to Adam Fairclough "Lyndon Johnson's 'War on Poverty' raised black expectations, but offered no route out of the ghetto" in *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890–2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 295–297.