

UNFINISHED REVOLUTION



SUBURBAN ANTIWARRIORS: MONTGOMERY COUNTY IN THE VIETNAM WAR ERA

By Aaron G. Fountain, Jr.



MONTGOMERY
HISTORY



Montgomery County, Maryland marks its 250th anniversary on September 6, 2026. To commemorate the occasion, Montgomery History presents *Unfinished Revolution*, a project to share important stories from our past that combine to tell a more complete and inclusive history of this county. The numerous authors commissioned for this project explore topics related to the history of Montgomery County that either address events that took place from the 1960s forward or fill in gaps by addressing subjects that have been underrepresented or left out of the existing published historical narrative. In embracing the theme of an “Unfinished Revolution,” we bring focus to the still-unmet promise of 1776 while rotating its vision to align with our shared journey toward the future.

Montgomery History—the county’s historical society—has been serving residents and the region through its research library, adult programs, educational activities, publications, exhibits, and conferences since the organization was founded in 1944. Its mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and share the histories of all county residents and communities.

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SUBURBAN ANTIWARRIORS: MONTGOMERY COUNTY IN THE VIETNAM WAR ERA

By Aaron G. Fountain, Jr.

The anti-Vietnam War movement typically brings to mind images of large crowds swelling on the National Mall, college students gathering on campus grounds, or more subtle acts like high school students wearing black armbands. Kent State, the March on the Pentagon, Chicago's Democratic National Convention: these are all flashpoints that for many Americans defined the era. Yet they represent a limited portrayal in understanding how the Vietnam War affected many communities that rarely, if ever, appeared in national headlines.

The scholarship on the antiwar movement tends to focus on a college campus or provide national overviews, overlooking the unique dynamics prevalent among ordinary people disconnected from prominent institutions or huddled in urban centers. This movement was truly national and even international in scope. By examining Montgomery County, Maryland, a largely white, middle-class suburb of Washington, DC, several long-standing assumptions about the anti-Vietnam War movement are challenged.

Unlike in many other regions of the country, antiwar sentiment in Montgomery County did not stem from a major university. The county had no campus akin to the University of California, the University of Wisconsin, or Columbia University, which were all major hotbeds of antiwar dissent in their respective areas. Nor did it host a national group like Students for a Democratic Society that could organize major protests.¹ Instead, antiwar activism emerged from grassroots organizations, religious leaders, the local community college, and, most significantly, the high schools. Overall, the Vietnam War protest movement in Montgomery County emerged as a contentious issue that influenced local politics. Motivated by a range of factors, individuals gradually gravitated toward related causes and created significant social ruptures in the county.

More important, since it was a largely white, middle- and upper-middle-class county, where many residents held white-collar jobs, political dissent in Montgomery County took the form of more subtle acts of resistance, contradicting popular accounts of the antiwar movement as an emotional and, at times, militant reaction. Whether they were for or against the war, residents signed petitions, raised money for American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, spoke before school boards, and joined peace organizations that often avoided confrontational tactics.

It was these mundane and often non-theatrical events that made the antiwar movement so contentious for many Americans. In Montgomery County, and much of the nation, all it took for a fierce reaction was a petition or a symbolic student demonstration rather than thousands of people marching in the streets, clashing with law enforcement, or vandalizing government buildings. Indeed, the socioeconomic status of residents animated some actions. Some gained perspective through visits to foreign nations and talks with representatives from Vietnam. A minority engaged in confrontational tactics that often made the local news, but the majority were quite respectable in nature.



WSP members picket outside the White House on June 24, 1965 (*Women Strike for Peace, 1961-1972, Washington Area Spark Flickr*)

In March 1965, President Lyndon Johnson committed U.S. ground troops to Vietnam, essentially turning what had been a long military conflict involving French forces into primarily an American one. However, his action sparked little debate or concern in Montgomery County, which had reached a population of 423,500 earlier that year.² Most Americans at the time had never heard of Vietnam, nor could many point to it on a map. No reports appeared in the *Montgomery County Sentinel* about the escalation. Vietnam was simply too distant, both physically and conceptually.

But in the coming years the war would divide Montgomery County, just like much of the nation. Residents would see the names of numerous locals—many recent high school graduates—reported missing or killed in action. Political dissent was initially negligible but would soon balloon and pull many people into debates about the merit of the conflict and protest against it. In February 1965, about fifty area high school and college students picketed the White House, demanding an end to the conflict. But it would not be until July that any significant reporting on antiwar dissent emerged.³

Dale Steele and the Women Strike for Peace

One of the first inklings of political dissent came from Dale Steele, a Silver Spring woman who belonged to the Women Strike for Peace (WSP) organization. WSP had formed on November 1, 1961, after thousands of mainly white, middle-class women organized a one-day national peace protest. A small group of women from Washington, DC, who identified themselves only as “concerned housewives,” got an estimated fifty thousand women in more than sixty communities to demand that President John F. Kennedy “End the Arms Race—Not the Human Race.” The Soviet Union’s resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing after a three-year moratorium, followed by the United States’ declaration that it would resume testing in retaliation, led to the call for the strike. According to scholar Amy Swerdlow, WSP moved “‘ordinary housewives’ to militant political action in the name of motherhood,” challenging public perceptions of women as domestic and maternal rather than political. But many WSP members were already political and came from leftist political backgrounds, including pacifists, Quakers, New Deal Democrats, socialists, anarchists, and Communist sympathizers or party members prior to and after World War II. Steele herself was a social worker and mother of three who was married to a physicist.⁴

Steele's participation with WSP explains why she took an early interest in Vietnam. During WSP's second national conference, in June 1963, a group of women who knew about clandestine military developments in Southeast Asia proposed that the organization condemn U.S. activities in Vietnam. Many members initially opposed the move because they knew so little about the country's role and thought average Americans would care less so. Additionally, news about American advisers in South Vietnam came largely through the pacifist or left-wing presses, and WSP members believed disarmament should remain the group's sole focus.⁵

Steele likely would have been aware of these debates. She might have shared the same sentiments as other members and thought little about the conflict. But over the course of a year, she learned more about it. In early 1964, WSP women were educating themselves on the history of Southeast Asia, including French colonialism, the Geneva Accords of 1954, and the origins of the South Vietnamese regime. Once President Johnson escalated hostilities by ordering a bombing campaign, WSP sensed a crisis brewing, believing it could spiral into a nuclear exchange, and began demanding an end to "the illegal and immoral war in Vietnam."⁶

In the summer of 1965, Steele and ten other members of WSP met with twelve Vietnamese women in Djakarta, Indonesia, to discuss ways to end the war in Vietnam. Six of the Vietnamese women represented the National Liberation Front (NLF), also known as the Viet Cong (they were originally called Viet Minh, but South Vietnam President Ngô Đình Diệm renamed them Viet Cong, meaning Vietnamese communists), and six were from the Union of North Vietnamese Women. WSP delegates had arranged for the meeting in May at an international congress in Moscow during the twentieth-anniversary celebration of the end of World War II in Europe. There they made contacts with representatives of Vietnamese women's groups in both the North and South. Initially, according to Steele, the Vietnamese women rejected suggestions to meet but later accepted WSP's offer. The delegates viewed Djakarta as a diplomatically accessible place to meet.

"Since wars have to do with people, we feel that if people of the countries involved talk to one another then perhaps we can work toward some solution," Steele said. "We are involved in a serious stalemate." Steele was quite ambitious and keenly aware of the growing conflict. "I've felt this great sense of urgency over the Viet Nam situation for more than a year," she explained before departing to Indonesia. "Now, things have reached a point where I'm almost in despair as to what can be done there. We hope that we can come up with some peaceful alternatives." The delegation had no backing from the government, but she wanted to present its views to President Johnson and Congress on July 21.⁷

Steele reported back to the *Sentinel* in late July about her impressions of the meeting. Her analysis would be prophetic. "Nationalism is the first order of concern there," she affirmed. "It's more a matter of fierce pride in their country rather than one of Communist ideology which motivates the NLF." She told a reporter that the Vietnamese women at the conference viewed South Vietnam's government as corrupt and Diệm and his successor as U.S. puppets. They blamed the United States for numerous atrocities that had not yet reached the U.S. press, and demanded a return to the basic principles outlined in the Geneva agreement: peace, sovereignty, unity, independence, and territorial integrity. But she noted that the women she was speaking for "did not use the word immediate in requiring our troops to be withdrawn and our bases dismantled." Steele admitted her presentation was one-sided, but expressed the hope that her experience could "get an American dialogue going, so that the public will examine all sides of the Vietnamese situation with as open a mind as possible."⁸ Steele and other members conferred with their congressmen and hoped President Johnson would listen to them so that "the tide can be reversed soon and peace can be brought to war-ravaged Viet Nam." The women in the NLF submitted their own demands, mainly asking for recognition of basic national rights of the Vietnamese people, peaceful reunification, and self-determination without foreign intervention.⁹

As courageous as they viewed their efforts, Steele and WSP seemed to have little effect on the war policy. Even if they did get their congressmen's attention, the presidential administration had no interest in adjusting its Cold War views on communism. Steele's assessment of the meeting in Indonesia ran counter to the omnipresent domino theory, which held that if South Vietnam fell to communist aggression by the North, then it would spread to the rest of Southeast Asia and even to Malaysia. Unfortunately, despite their attempts to lobby for a peaceful solution, they could not overcome the prevailing views within the administration.

The Antiwar Movement Grows

A year into the Vietnam conflict, President Johnson continued to enjoy high approval ratings. No mass demonstrations or direct actions had yet captured widespread public attention beyond a handful of events in 1965, frustrating activists. Meanwhile, U.S. troop levels in Vietnam had more than doubled, from 185,000 to 385,000, and American battlefield deaths had climbed from 1,400 to more than 5,000, with no end in sight.

Several factors contributed to the antiwar movement's early limitations, chief among them the lack of a centralized leadership structure. But this decentralization, often seen as a weakness, also became a source of strength. Throughout 1966, local activists across the country quietly laid the groundwork for broader resistance as they organized rallies, fasts, and petition drives; challenged draft procedures; and convened strategy meetings.¹⁰

Montgomery County saw its own early stirrings of dissent. In October 1965, sixteen local clergymen partnered with the Washington Area Committee on Vietnam to sponsor a public forum at the Rockville Civic Center Auditorium. The event featured speakers presenting opposing perspectives on the war and marked one of the first visible signs of organized, local concern about the growing conflict.¹¹

By late fall and into winter, the war was becoming more personal for many Montgomery County families. An increasing number of local servicemen were being deployed to Vietnam, and some had already lost their lives. In December, draft quotas more than doubled, and the Rockville draft board reported more than 9,000 young men registered for service. In a significant policy shift, nineteen-year-olds, who were previously not subject to classification until age twenty-one, were now receiving induction calls. The board also tightened requirements for student deferments, demanding proof of enrollment in twelve to fifteen credit hours per semester to qualify. Despite rising anxieties over the draft, only a small number of residents sought conscientious objector status. In fact, many young men volunteered for service. "We have very good compliance with the draft law in Montgomery County," stated draft board chairman Frank William. "We've encountered very few cases where a boy was deliberately trying to avoid military service." William expressed sympathy for those losing their student deferment status. "As I said, many of these cases are tough and unfair," he admitted. "But there are so many things in life that are unfair."¹²



Seymour Spelman (*Montgomery History*)

While grassroots efforts continued, a few public figures also cautiously voiced their concerns. In July 1966, Democratic congressional candidate Royce Hanson of the Eighth District announced his opposition to both unilateral withdrawal and further escalation, calling instead for a negotiated peace. His statement followed a move by fellow candidate Seymour J. Spelman, a forty-nine-year-old labor attorney from Chevy Chase, who had launched his controversial campaign by directly criticizing the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy. Spelman called for a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and for peace talks involving the Geneva powers, Hanoi, and the NLF. Some voters saw him as undermining support for Hanson, but Spelman stood firm. He pledged to devote 90 percent of his campaign to opposing the war, impacting others in the race. Previously silent Democratic candidates were now compelled to articulate their own positions, with most publicly backing the president.¹³

Other, quieter acts of dissent also emerged. Members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the county sent \$1,000 to the International Red Cross, requesting the funds be distributed equally to the Viet Cong, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam to alleviate wartime suffering. Though modest, this gesture was a deliberate challenge to federal policy. Under the Federal Export Control Act, gifts to North Vietnam or areas controlled by the NLF were illegal. Still, the Quaker group chose to move forward, prepared to test the law.¹⁴

Alongside growing protests appeared numerous articles chronicling heroic stories and heartbreaking accounts of county residents' experiences in Vietnam. In one notable story that appeared in November 1966, Captain Milton F. Smith wrote a letter to his family about returning home. "I have flown my last mission and I'm anticipating beating the Thanksgiving deadline by two days," he wrote. "I'll be home from Viet Nam two days earlier." He never returned home. Instead, an Army chaplain visited the family home a week before Smith's scheduled return and broke the news that their son had been killed in action on Veterans Day. He left behind a wife and two children, including a four-month-old daughter he had never seen.¹⁵ Stories like Smith's appeared regularly throughout the war. These accounts humanized a distant conflict and revealed the toll it was taking on residents at home.

High School Opposition

Distinct from most other regions in the country, the strongest antiwar dissent in Montgomery County emerged from area high schools rather than college campuses. Montgomery College certainly had students who were involved in the antiwar movement, but as a commuter campus it was not a hotbed of protest activity. Some controversies occurred, but not enough to sustain any visible campus movement. Instead, it was high school students who divided the community the most through their activism. Since the students were minors, adults rarely viewed their actions as truly independent from outside influences. Furthermore, they brought the issue of the war to seemingly apolitical grounds, as high school campuses have traditionally avoided taking stances on partisan issues. Teenagers who participated in antiwar activities had to overcome more barriers to attain the right to protest and often had to contend with outraged parents over any evidence of political activities on school grounds. Eventually, for many of these teenagers, the struggle to participate in the antiwar movement became inseparable from fighting for constitutional rights on campus to do so.

Norman Solomon's political awareness began at age thirteen and only deepened throughout his high school years. Born in 1951 in Washington, DC, to parents who were committed New Deal Democrats, Solomon spent his early childhood in Ohio, Delaware, and even a year and a half in India before his family settled in Silver Spring, Maryland, when Norman was about ten years old. His interest in politics began as a hobby, cutting out images of Republican presidential candidates from *Parade* magazine and *The Washington Post*. At thirteen, he already found Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater's rhetoric about using nuclear weapons in Vietnam troubling. His first direct involvement in electoral politics came in 1966, when he distributed campaign flyers for Maryland Republican gubernatorial candidate Spiro Agnew. "Ironically enough," Solomon recalled, "I was flyering for Agnew in the neighborhood during the general election." Agnew was running against Democrat George Mahoney, who had vehemently opposed fair housing legislation and campaigned on a racially divisive platform. "Mahoney was an avowed racist," Solomon explained, "so Agnew, by comparison, seemed like the better option."¹⁶

Solomon first encountered the Vietnam War as an issue at a school assembly at Eastern Junior High School in 1965. NBC News correspondent Elie Abel addressed the students about the growing conflict in Southeast Asia, describing the situation without any apparent skepticism or critique. "To my young ears," Solomon remembered, "the take-home message was: this is happening, it's important, get used to it." The war itself, however, had not yet galvanized him. Compared to the more immediate racial tensions in his own neighborhood, the Vietnam War remained distant. "But not for much longer," he reflected.¹⁷



R. Norman Solomon (right), Vice President of the Student Council at Eastern Junior High School in 1966 (*Montgomery History*)

As a teenager in Silver Spring, Solomon threw himself into publishing about politics. He bought a hand-cranked mimeograph machine, taught himself how to type stencils, and launched what he called a “little neighborhood newspaper,” naming himself editor-in-chief. In the summer of 1966, he published a critical take on the Vietnam War and U.S. policy:

- By bombing North Vietnam, and now heavily populated areas around Hanoi and Haiphong, it is nearly impossible
- not to have a profound effect on the attitudes of the North Vietnamese civilians. Millions of these people live in
- fear, fear of United States bombers overhead. ... By our actions, we are making negotiations impossible. ... Since
- LBJ is in control, we hope that he is playing the right cards, for the stakes are much too high.

Less than a year later, on April 15, 1967, Solomon attended his first antiwar protest. A quarter-million people marched through the streets of Manhattan, in what was then the largest peace demonstration of the war. What stuck with him most, he later recalled, was something an older protester said: “Johnson will have to listen to us now.”¹⁸

At Montgomery Blair High School, Solomon tried to maintain a respectable image. He served as the sophomore class president, earned top grades, and built a strong résumé for college. “When I saw an acquaintance step out of bounds,” he remembered, “I was careful not to follow suit.” But controversy erupted in the spring of 1968, near the end of his junior year, when a provocative leaflet appeared at school. Titled “Napalm a Dog?” the flyer highlighted the horrors of the war: “Napalm is used every day in Vietnam—on people.” It suggested, as a rhetorical device, that a dog would be burned alive at the school’s entrance in protest. The flyer caused panic and outrage. Some students threatened violence against the anonymous author, who was discovered and suspended even though he had no intention of harming an animal. Solomon was assigned to write about the incident for the school paper. The faculty adviser warned him not to show sympathy for the student behind the flyer, and, as he put it, “I complied.”¹⁹



Political cartoon commenting on the draft, featured in the *Red & Black* student newspaper from Northwood High School, 1967 (*Montgomery History*)

That same year, Solomon began writing for the *Montgomery County Sentinel*. He landed a Saturday reporting job for the paper’s high school highlights page. “It was a god-awful bus trip up from Silver Spring to Rockville,” he recalled, “but I was very excited to do it.” One of his first published articles addressed the county school system’s policies on Vietnam. Solomon was not alone as a high school antiwar activist. By 1967, high school students across the county were becoming increasingly outspoken in their opposition to the war. The turning point came as the conflict dragged on longer than many leaders had promised, and after President Johnson put nineteen-year-olds at the top of the draft list. That June, about 150 students attended a student-faculty forum on Vietnam at Winston Churchill High School. Similar forums took place at Montgomery Blair and Walt Whitman high schools.²⁰

Students and parents also began questioning the county’s longstanding practice of sending the names of graduating seniors to military recruiters. Solomon reported that a local chapter of the Washington Area Committee on the Draft, which included concerned county residents, had managed

to obtain the list and used it to advocate for more informed decision-making. In a statement to school officials, the group urged educators to recognize their “educational, legal, and moral obligation to these young men” by ensuring they understood all legal alternatives available under the Selective Service System. The draft law, they noted, was complex and difficult to navigate without guidance. Their call resonated with county residents. Although the district’s cooperation with military recruiters had been routine, critics pushed for change. They wanted schools to stop automatically providing names and to ensure that students heard from advocates for conscientious objection alongside military representatives. The *Sentinel* endorsed their position. Soon after, Superintendent Homer O. Elseroad responded by ordering a “concise synthesized review” of draft regulations. He directed that the school system produce and distribute information about alternatives to military service to all high school seniors as part of the county’s draft counseling program.²¹



March on the Pentagon in October 1967, featured on the cover of *High School Mobilizer*, Vol 1, No. 2 (Hoover Institution Library and Archives)

Elsewhere, on a national level, localism and isolation defined high school antiwar activism. Most students remained apathetic, and school officials were persistently hostile to on-campus partisan politics. Antiwar activists were a minority among their peers, and their small numbers reinforced their sense of isolation. By 1966, there was no significant outlet informing high school students about what their like-minded peers were doing across the country. However, by 1967, the boundaries of localism and isolation slowly began to erode.

A reported 257 students from college and high school campuses across the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico attended the founding conference of the Student Mobilization Committee (SMC) from December 28 to 30, 1966, in Chicago. The SMC formed amid competing ideas within the antiwar movement—whether to appeal to the broadest audience possible or focus primarily on students and demand an immediate withdrawal of troops. The group was in a “state

of disarray” when it first published *Mobilizer*, a newsletter aimed at organizing student protests against the war.²² As the committee established itself, it began its high school outreach within a few months. However, high school antiwar activism was highly localized, with students organizing primarily at their respective schools or within their communities. Nevertheless, by inviting students to meetings, the SMC helped foster a growing sense of community.²³ By 1969, many SMC chapters would appear in Washington, DC, area high schools.

Draft Resisters

Montgomery County was home to its share of draft resisters, commonly known as “draft dodgers.” One such individual was nineteen-year-old Matthew C. Clark of Gaithersburg. A committed opponent of the Vietnam War, Clark was prepared to face prison for his beliefs. The previous spring, while in New York City, he had burned his draft card. When he received a new one that October, he returned it, prompting an order to report for induction. Clark had previously enrolled in a six-year PhD. program at Cornell University but left in June 1967 to work with the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. His activism was extensive: he helped develop direct-action strategies, distributed antiwar literature to U.S. senators, picketed the Pentagon, and joined about sixty others in picketing the Rockville Draft Board at dawn, as a busload of inductees departed for service. This latter act stirred public reaction, as his family received letters criticizing Clark’s actions.²⁴ In another incident in February 1967, the FBI announced it had begun an investigation into Montgomery Blair High School students for buying and selling phony draft cards. Their actions potentially carried a hefty penalty: five years in prison or a \$10,000 fine. But in the end, authorities decided not to press charges against the students and passed the buck to the county’s juvenile authorities.²⁵



Col. James Lo Hays, III cleans up the Silver Spring Selective Service office following the vandalism in 1969 (*Montgomery History*)

Some Montgomery County residents took a different route by leaving the country. During the mid-1960s, growing numbers of Americans—between 5,000 and 8,000 annually from 1968 to 1973—emigrated to Canada to avoid the draft or military service. They followed a longer history of Americans fleeing to Canada even before the countries existed. Canada had received American immigrants crossing the border during the Revolutionary War and prior to the Civil War. While many were men seeking refuge,



Jonathan Bayless (left) with fellow protesters Leslie Bayless, and Mike Bransome, 1969
(Montgomery History)

a sizable portion were women who were often partners, spouses, or individuals making the journey on their own. Over the course of the war, an estimated 50,000 Americans relocated to Canada for this reason, comprising about 20 percent of all U.S. immigrants to the country during that period. Because neither the U.S. nor Canadian governments kept precise records, the exact number is unknown. Few Montgomery County residents went public with their stories.²⁶

Still, their presence did not go unnoticed. One senior at Montgomery Blair High School traveled to Montreal on a school trip and used the opportunity to interview several American draft resisters living in Canada. The conversations offered personal insight into the motivations and reasoning behind their decisions. The men he

interviewed admitted the difficulties of leaving their country, but believed they were more politically effective working in Canada than being incarcerated in the United States. One man who lost his teacher deferment in New York City claimed he “would have gone to jail if I had been assured of a short sentence, one or two years.” Notably, the Reverend Fred Cappuccino, formerly of the Unitarian Church in Silver Spring, officially supported draft resistance from his new pulpit at the Lakeshore Unitarian Church in Montreal.²⁷

While many draft resisters pursued nonviolent means of protest, a small number turned to more confrontational tactics. In May 1969, three young men from the Washington, DC, area broke into the Silver Spring Selective Service office, located at the corner of Georgia Avenue and Jesup Blair Drive, and caused significant property damage. They tore and defaced an American flag, overturned desks, attempted to destroy draft records, smashed windows, poured paint and possibly blood onto the floor, and threw typewriters out the windows. Reporters arrived on the scene soon after the perpetrators were arrested, suggesting they may have tipped off local media in advance. That November, vandals targeted and ransacked the same draft office. One month later, seventeen-year-old Jonathan Bayless of Falls Church received three years in prison for his role in the attack. Though rare, these incidents illustrated the range of resistance tactics employed during the Vietnam War era.²⁸

Moratorium and Kent State

The fall of 1969 saw a surge of antiwar activism. The Vietnam Moratorium Committee planned for a demonstration to express discontent among average citizens who wanted an immediate end to the war. By this time, members of Congress and 70 percent of the American public were critical of the war. More than fifteen million Americans nationwide, a majority of whom were members of the middle class, participated in the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam on October 15, 1969.²⁹

Montgomery County saw the highest level of reported student organizing in response to the Vietnam War moratorium. Superintendent Elseroad acknowledged the wave of student engagement, stating that participation would take different forms depending on decisions made collaboratively by principals, staff, and students at each school. He emphasized that schools were permitted to hold class discussions, schoolwide assemblies, or after-school forums to present “both sides of the Vietnam War issue.” The Montgomery County Teachers’ Union endorsed the moratorium and encouraged classroom discussions centered on war and peace. Students responded with enthusiasm. “Student support is just phenomenal,” said Thomas Quinn, a junior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, noting that many students planned to wear black armbands to class in solidarity with the moratorium. At Walt Whitman High School, 72 percent of students approved a referendum to endorse the moratorium and oppose the war.

Beyond schools, other sectors of the community mobilized. Members of the Montgomery County Alliance for Democratic Reform organized efforts to distribute informational leaflets at local shopping centers to promote broader public participation. The group sent letters to more than one hundred area business owners urging them to support the antiwar effort. However, the Montgomery County Education Association, which represented most of the county’s teachers, voted on October 2 against endorsing the moratorium.³⁰



Images from high school yearbooks and student newspapers across the county reflect local participation in activism, politics, and social commentary during the Vietnam War era.



Moratorium gathering at Walt Whitman High School (*Saga: Walt Whitman High School, 1970. Bethesda Historical Society*)

The moratorium took place on a Wednesday, with widespread participation across Montgomery County schools and surrounding areas. At Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, the day began with an 8 a.m. memorial service followed by a student-led panel discussion. Similar observances occurred at Montgomery Blair and Springbrook high schools, as well as in neighboring counties and the District of Columbia. Students across high schools and community colleges wore black armbands, held vigils, participated in marches, and organized assemblies while also attending regular classes.³¹ Some faculty members also joined the day's activities. At Walt Whitman High School, about a dozen teachers marched alongside four hundred students from River Road Unitarian Church to the school. Former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford

addressed students at Sandy Spring Friends School, while off campus, antiwar leader Dr. Benjamin Spock delivered a speech on "Our Children's Needs, the War, and the Right to Dissent" on the steps of the National Institutes of Health.



Dr. Benjamin Spock, speaking at NIH on October 15, 1970 (*The Windup: Walter Johnson High School, 1970. Bethesda Historical Society*)

Elsewhere, signs of protest and counter-protest emerged in more subtle ways. Some motorists drove with their headlights on in broad daylight, which some observers interpreted as support for the moratorium while others were not sure of their intent. In contrast, the Veterans of Foreign Wars encouraged citizens to display American flags in support of President Richard Nixon's Vietnam policies. Meanwhile, the Reverend William R. Moors of the Unitarian Church of Rockville collaborated with clergy from various Christian denominations to lead two non-sectarian services in support of the moratorium.³²

Public opinion shifted significantly as a second moratorium, slated for November 15, approached. President Nixon promised in his speech to the nation on November 3 that he would search for a just peace, and his criticism of antiwar activists made some antiwar liberals distance themselves from the movement.

While most Americans opposed the war, an even greater number opposed radical antiwar activism. Demonstrators had to work around Nixon's Vietnamization policy, which called for U.S. troops to train South Vietnamese soldiers to take over the conflict, and his plan for gradual withdrawal of American combat forces from Vietnam. His repeated insistence on "peace with honor" struck a chord among large segments of American society. Antiwar activists also had an image problem because the media highlighted the violence and countercultural behavior exhibited by some protesters. All these factors convinced most Americans that antiwar activists were spoiled and anti-American.³³

Such sentiments existed in the county too. In the weeks prior to the November moratorium, the executive committee of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce expressed "concern for the safety and welfare of the citizens of the County during the November 14-15 period." Believing that the upcoming protest would be less coordinated and potentially more disruptive than the one in October had been, the chamber urged area business owners, local government, and the schools not to participate.³⁴



Moratorium gathering at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, featuring black armbands and protest songs (*Pine Tree: Bethesda Chevy Chase High School, 1970. Bethesda Historical Society*)

Despite concerns raised by residents and school officials, antiwar activism continued in Montgomery County, particularly among high school students. However, turnout for the November moratorium was notably lower than during the October protest. Several factors contributed to the lower level of participation. Many activists focused their energy on larger demonstrations in Washington, DC, and San Francisco.³⁵ Local school administrators declined to grant students permission to strike and some even threatened to assign zeros for missed work. Still, organizers remained hopeful. “We can get five hundred kids striking from B-CC [Bethesda-Chevy Chase High] with their parents’ permission,” said Lee Levin, a B-CC student and organizer with the county’s SMC.

Yet, most high schools reported quiet campuses. Approximately six thousand students were absent, about 20 percent more than the typical absentee rate, but it was unclear how many were skipping class in protest versus for other reasons. Montgomery Blair and Walt Whitman high schools reported the highest absentee numbers. Peary High School in Rockville was the only campus to experience an on-site demonstration. Just before 8 a.m. on Friday, about thirty students gathered outside the building and refused to enter when directed by the principal. The protest ended after school officials called the police and four squad cars arrived, prompting the students to disperse. Winston Churchill High School was the only school known to have officially excused student absences with parental permission. A few teachers also attempted to take personal leave to attend the demonstrations, but their requests were denied.³⁶

A lull in the county’s antiwar movement occurred following the November moratorium, though the SMC’s support for high school student activism continued. During the holiday break leading up to its February 1970 conference in Cleveland, Ohio, the SMC sought to initiate a “High School Bill of Rights” as part of its organizing campaign. The draft document went through several iterations after members criticized the absence of women’s rights and its unrealistic assumptions about high school student rights. “The problem of repression in high schools is deeper than temporary political issues,” the SMC official began. “We are forced to acknowledge the fact that often students are deprived of their civil liberties because of deep-rooted beliefs and attitudes that simply will not be changed by a sheet of demands.” The writer argued that rather than serve as a symbolic document, the bill of rights needed to be a source of strength for students and deal only with students’ rights.³⁷

The finalized document represented the culmination of various struggles to make the Vietnam War a part of school curriculum and to secure rights to speak and raise awareness about the war. Printed copies of the bill of rights appeared in high school underground newspapers and local periodicals in places such as Detroit, Michigan; Phoenix, Arizona; and Salem, Oregon.³⁸ The document outlined six fundamental rights for high school students: freedom of political activities, speech, and the press; due process; free elections; an end to the “war machine”; and the right to determine curriculum and evaluate teachers. In regard to the war, the document argued that students had a right to not be subjected to military programs and influences of federal agencies unaffiliated with the school.³⁹ Attempts across the nation to make it official school policy revealed that students were indeed optimistic about its potential to provide a clear articulation of their grievances. If anything, the widespread acceptance of the document showed that young activists all shared the same experience with repression of their ideas and with adults’ perception that they were too immature for politics.



Robbie Ross, editor-in-chief for the *Silver Chips* student newspaper, is not “too immature for politics,” according to the decorations in her workspace, (*Silverlogue: Montgomery Blair High School, 1970. Montgomery History*)

The popularity of the High School Bill of Rights caught the attention of school administrators, who quickly moved to crack down on its presence on campuses. In March 1970, tensions flared at a junior high school in North Bethesda after a ninth-grade student was suspended for attempting to distribute the document along with antiwar buttons. In response, about twenty-five students picketed outside the school. The situation quickly escalated when other students confronted the demonstrators, leading to shoving matches and fistfights. Officials called the police to the scene and they ultimately restored order.⁴⁰

Gradual withdrawal of troops, Vietnamization, and the draft lottery, which gave students with high draft-call numbers little incentive to protest, all contributed to a decline in mass demonstrations. The next and last major protest occurred when President Nixon announced U.S. troops' participation in the invasion of Cambodia on April 30, 1970. Nixon's announcement triggered immediate protests at some colleges and universities around the nation, but the largest protests erupted days later after the tragedy at Kent State University. During an antiwar protest at the university on May 4, Ohio National Guardsmen were summoned to the campus. In a state of pandemonium and confusion, the guardsmen fired into the crowd, leaving four students dead and thirteen injured. A similar shooting incident occurred a week later at the historically Black Jackson State University, but most major media outlets provided little coverage. The possibility of campus riots in reaction to the shootings at Kent State caused colleges and universities around the nation to close for several days, and some shuttered for the remainder of the semester.⁴¹



Northwood High School students hear from their principal, Harold Packer, regarding student rights and school policies following the Kent State shooting. The school endured controversy over whether its flag should be lowered to half-mast in recognition of the tragedy (*Red & Black*, May 12, 1970. *Montgomery History*)

In the wake of the Kent State shootings, high school students across Montgomery and Prince George's counties staged a wave of antiwar actions that mirrored the unrest seen on college campuses nationwide. In Montgomery County, absentee rates at five high schools spiked to 33 percent in the two days leading up to a major Washington, DC, demonstration, which was far above the usual 8 percent. At Walt Whitman High School, about two hundred students canvassed their Bethesda neighborhood, going door-to-door to speak with residents about the war. Briane Pinkson, a senior at Walter Johnson High School and a member of the Washington Regional Strike Committee, emphasized that students aimed to sustain pressure not

just to end the war, but also to confront racism and military involvement on campuses. In Prince George's County, one hundred students at Oxon Hill High School received administrative approval to hold an all-day teach-in on the athletic field, while 150 students at Crossland Senior High walked out in protest. Though walkouts and boycotts were usually tolerated, seventy-two students at High Point High School were suspended for boycotting classes the previous Friday, after school officials denied them permission to rally that day. Despite mounting unrest, Montgomery County school officials, including Assistant Superintendent Joseph J. Tarallo, urged a swift return to normal operations.⁴²

In the weeks after the widespread protests in May 1970, a planned student assembly on the Vietnam War at White Oak Junior High School in Silver Spring sparked a political firestorm. Parents received a letter notifying them about the upcoming event, which highlighted invited speakers from both the Black Panther Party and the underground newspaper *Quicksilver*, but omitted key information that a retired Army colonel and a representative from the Veterans of Foreign Wars had also been invited to speak. The announcement prompted an immediate backlash. Principal Hilleary C. Rockwell received roughly one hundred phone calls in protest and canceled the event just thirty minutes before it was set to begin.

Despite the cancellation, the issue escalated. The Republican majority on the Montgomery County Council, unaware that the program had already been called off, voted to seek a policy review with the Board of Education. Republican Councilman James P. Gleason, a potential candidate for county executive (a post he was later elected to), decried what he called a “growing permissiveness” in county schools. He warned that allowing such a program would “divide this county between parents and students” and “encourage anarchy among our youth,” and accused some teachers of permitting unchecked political expression. “If they can hold this [assembly], there isn’t anything they can’t cover,” he added. The event had been organized by the school’s newly formed SMC, and approximately 550 of the school’s 1,250 students had expressed interest in attending. Three Democratic members of the county council criticized the Republican push for intervention, emphasizing that educational policy decisions fell under the authority of the Board of Education, not elected county officials.⁴³

Robert E. Peary High School Controversy

In February 1971, a major controversy related to the Vietnam War occurred at Robert E. Peary High School in Rockville when students protested a ban on outside speakers. The Student Workshop initiative aimed to create dialogue on pressing social and political issues. Organized by an informal group of about fifty students, the seminar was scheduled to take place during regular school hours and featured a diverse lineup of forty-four invited speakers. Topics ranged from the Vietnam War and campus unrest to student rights, women’s liberation, abortion rights, and gun control. Among the invited guests were members of the SMC and other progressive advocacy groups. However, controversy erupted when Principal Fred L. Dunn Jr. barred eight of the speakers, labeling them “potentially disruptive.” His decision drew sharp criticism from students, particularly for excluding SMC representatives based not on behavior but on their political affiliations. “Would you invite a guest into your home who advocates disrupting your home?” asked Dr. Ernest W. Snodgrass, a regional school director, echoing administrators’ concerns.

In response, roughly 350 students boycotted classes and marched five miles to the Montgomery County Board of Education headquarters. Reporter Bill Bancroft interviewed the protesters during the march. “Most of the blame goes to Dr. Dunn, he stifles almost anything at our school,” one participant said. “Students have no rights. The student involvement policy means nothing. The student newspaper is censored, and the whole scene at Peary is very bad,” the student continued, further asserting that the cancellation of speakers for the seminar day “just blew everybody up, they can’t take it anymore.” When Dunn refused to meet with them, many marched or hitchhiked the long journey back to school. According to Dunn, some workshop participants had conducted a phone campaign the night before, encouraging students to walk out.⁴⁴



Peary High School students marching in protest of the speaker ban (*Sentinel*, March 11, 1971. *Montgomery History*)

After the student boycott at Peary High, attendance quickly returned to normal, but the controversy over free speech and administrative control lingered. Some parents criticized Dunn for being “too strict and old-fashioned.” Others, like Silver Spring resident Carl Hersh, supported the administration’s hardline stance. In a letter to the local newspaper, Hersh warned of growing radicalism in the school system. “I see the Berkeley syndrome as stronger than ever in all of the Montgomery County Public Schools,”⁴⁵ he wrote, referencing frequent student protest and radicalism at the University of California.

Dunn's effort to block certain speakers went further than many realized. In May of that year, two armed sheriffs appeared at Peary High to serve legal papers preventing two teenage girls who were members of the SMC from speaking at a student-organized seminar. Judge Joseph M. Mathias had signed the court order the night before, effectively banning the girls from addressing their peers. The speakers, who had helped plan the seminar since September and believed they had the school board's approval, were blindsided. "I was kind of wondering why no one came to hear me," recalled SMC representative Dale Brown, "and then someone said, 'there's a court order forbidding you to speak.'" The local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union quickly responded, with Chairman John Risher announcing its intention to challenge the injunction.⁴⁶ Despite pushback from the Parent-Teacher Association, the Montgomery County Board of Education ultimately sided with the students in a 4-2 vote later that month, upholding their right to free speech and allowing the SMC to invite and hear antiwar speakers.⁴⁷

Montgomery College

The antiwar movement has long been known for galvanizing university campuses, but there was also activism at the community college level. The first issue of Montgomery College's underground newspaper *The Spark* appeared in October 1971 and immediately addressed the Vietnam War, which by then had become a less significant issue on the political left.

One notable development at the campus that month was the opening of a draft counseling center. Because many men were unaware of all their options when drafted, counselors often advised them on ways they might be eligible for a deferment. These officials looked out for men who were too young, who had physical ailments, who might be gay—as the military barred gay men and women from serving—who could get a hardship deferment, who were enrolled in college, or who qualified for work in certain professions. Overall, these young men were advised to apply for deferments and even appeal the process with the hope that their case could run into a bureaucratic error, which might drag the process out for years. The center even offered support for military deserters, helping them find housing and legal assistance.⁴⁸ But in November, the college's draft counseling program was discontinued. The original counselors could no longer staff the center during the day due to job changes. Activists hoped to find replacements, either by recruiting new volunteers or encouraging someone to take a draft counseling course offered by the Washington Peace Center, to no avail.⁴⁹



Rennie Davis speaking to Montgomery College students in October, 1971
(*Montgomery History*)

The Freedom Party, a student activist group on Montgomery College's campus, also played a leading role in mobilizing antiwar activity. It helped coordinate student transportation to demonstrations in Washington, DC, including those organized by the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice. While the Freedom Party remained active, it clashed with more traditional groups such as the campus Veterans Club, whose members were criticized for their encroachments on activist spaces.⁵⁰

Despite these efforts, student apathy was growing. On October 25, 1971, antiwar leader Rennie Davis visited Montgomery College ahead of a national Moratorium Day protest. While Davis argued that U.S. troop withdrawals were a direct result of years of public pressure, many students were unconvinced. The general attitude on campus, reflecting disillusionment after seven years of protest and little progress, was summed up as "why bother?" On Moratorium Day, the Freedom Party screened *Time Is Running Out*, a film based on the Seven-Point Peace Proposal, and hosted speakers in the student lounge. Although the Student Senate had voted to excuse class absences for the day, most students were unaware of the policy and turnout was low.⁵¹ Nonetheless, about sixty Montgomery College students participated in a November 6 rally at the Ellipse near the White House, joining a crowd of 2,500 protesting both the Vietnam War and President Nixon's wage freeze.⁵²



Michael Bailey
(Montgomery History)

Another flashpoint in October 1971 came with the suspension of Mike Bailey, a liberal antiwar activist and member of Local Draft Board no. 54 in Bethesda. Appointed in 1970 through a recommendation chain that included Governor Marvin Mandel and the Reverend Moors of Rockville Unitarian Church, Bailey had built a reputation for supporting conscientious objector claims. His suspension followed his request that registrants be allowed legal counsel during their draft board hearings, which was a right not recognized under the Selective Service regulations at the time. The Bethesda board had a long-standing reputation for unfairness, and Bailey's removal confirmed suspicions of political interference. In one troubling incident, a Catholic applicant for conscientious objector status was told by a board member, "Well, I'm a Catholic too and I'm not a conscientious objector. Are you a better Catholic than me?" Bailey, who remained strongly antiwar and maintained friendly ties with local activists, vowed to fight the suspension.⁵³ But in November 1972, the U.S. Selective Service tried Bailey, with the ACLU stating that it would take up his case.⁵⁴

War Comes to an End

For much of Montgomery County, the Vietnam War ended quietly and without ceremony. Servicemen returned home with little to no fanfare, here as across the rest of the country. No reported parades or events for soldiers occurred, save for one group of homeowners in Rockville's Twinbrook subdivision who lined up in their streets with flags, signs, and Christmas lights to say "Welcome," all for one man: Captain Daryl Gonyon. The Gonyon family was the only military household on the block and had been in the area for just two years before Daryl went to Vietnam. "I was speechless, actually speechless," he said happily.⁵⁵

By February 1973, four residents of Montgomery County were still listed as prisoners of war and six remained missing in action. More than one hundred men from the area had died, leaving behind grieving families and communities forever changed. While the release of the Pentagon Papers provoked some outrage about the government's long involvement in Vietnam and public deception, few returning veterans were eager to publicly revisit the war's moral or strategic failures. The local press avoided the contentious political questions, focusing instead on honoring the service and sacrifice of returning soldiers. Many veterans came home to neighborhoods that looked the same on the surface but had undergone deep cultural shifts in their absence.⁵⁶

Montgomery County residents encountered the same political divisiveness and fatigue of a prolonged war as had many Americans. Residents from various levels of society mourned fallen soldiers and spoke out against the conflict, while private businesses and public schools that normally avoided commenting on politics raised concerns about protests disrupting their activities. Interestingly, the area belied popular media portrayal and historical memory of antiwar protests as anti-establishment and prone to violence. Given that the antiwar movement was youth led, and the county lacked a major collegiate campus, high school students were at the forefront of notable protests throughout the movement, unlike in many counties across America.

What began with cautious civic discussions and school-sanctioned debates gave way to impassioned student protests, community activism, and institutional pushbacks. The war challenged assumptions about patriotism, dissent, and generational authority in a suburban county that was unfamiliar with radical politics. While not all residents joined the antiwar movement, and some resented its presence, antiwar activists ensured the conflict would remain on everyone's mind. The war may have ended without fanfare, but the debates it sparked reshaped the county's views and relationships with public officials.



Draft lottery "winners" report for induction in Silver Spring, March 1972 (*Red & Black*, March 24, 1972. Montgomery History)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Endnotes

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Additional Photo Credits

Page 2: Women Strike for Peace, 1965

Washington Area Spark Flickr: Craig Simpson, editor. Uploaded on October 21, 2017

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Page 7: Cover Photo: *Highschool Mobilizer Against the War in Vietnam*, Volume 1, Number 2.

The *Militant* Photographic Collection, box 2, folder 12, Hoover Institution Library & Archives

Provided by the Bethesda Historical Society:

Images from *Pine Tree* (Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School), *The Windup* (Walter Johnson High School), and *Saga* (Walt Whitman High School)

Provided by Montgomery History's Jane Sween Research Library and Special Collections:

Images from the *Red & Black* newspaper (Northwood High School) Montgomery County Public School Newspapers Collection (SC-SCH-00028) Box 2.

Images from *Silverlogue* (Montgomery Blair High School), *Arrowhead* (Northwood High School), and Eastern Junior High School yearbooks: Montgomery County Public School Yearbooks Collection (SC-SCH-00009).

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Image of Peary High School student protest: from the Rosemary Hilberg Montgomery County Board of Education Scrapbooks Collection (SC-SCH-00007), Folder 5.

Images appearing in the collage on on page 9 taken from multiple sources, all referenced above



Students sing anti-war folk songs during a sit-in for peace (*The Windup*, Walter Johnson High School, 1970)



