

Module 09: The 1960s: Who Won? Student Protest and the Politics of Campus Dissent

Conclusion

The events that took place at VPI in the spring of 1970 — and the varied responses they elicited in the days, weeks, and years that followed — largely paralleled those taking place at colleges and universities across the nation. Most of the students at VPI refrained from joining the militant antiwar cause, although student radicals did play an important role in campus and national politics. The small but visible and outspoken coterie of militant VPI activists worked hard to make as powerful an impact as they could. Their mediagenic and dramatic tactics drew the attention of journalists, photographers, and TV news shows. Young rebels seemed "newsworthy," and their newsworthiness turned student radicals at VPI and elsewhere into highly publicized objects of fascination and fear and imprinted their images on the collective memory of the nation.

Nevertheless, as articles, editorials, and letters from *The Collegiate Times* make clear, student radicals comprised only a minority segment of the total student population at VPI. Most students were apathetic, more concerned with succeeding in their classes than with joining an activist movement, and many students supported the Vietnam War as strongly (and sometimes as vocally) as their antiwar counterparts protested it. As for the students who did oppose the war in Vietnam, most preferred to work for change within existing governmental and institutional systems rather than protest outside of them, and they prided themselves on developing a far more moderate and liberal antiwar stance than that of their more radical classmates.

Like other students around the nation, an overwhelming percentage of VPI students tended to rally more around the politics of cultural rather than political change. The enormous demonstrations against VPI's "open door" policy in the spring of 1971, which dwarfed on-campus protests against the Vietnam War, highlight just how important students considered the battle over culture and lifestyle. They may not have willingly rallied on the campus Drillfield to abolish the Corps of Cadets or to end the war in Vietnam, but they eagerly gathered in astonishingly large numbers to protest any university policy that infringed on their personal freedoms or attempted to stamp out the budding sexual and cultural revolutions taking place on campus. Notably, it was in the latter area of concern that student activists achieved lasting success: the sexual autonomy and social

freedoms that young people fought for in the late sixties have become an accepted part of college and American life today, along with the tie-died T-shirts, ragged blue jeans, and rock-and-roll music that horrified parents four decades ago.

Lifestyle concerns in fact comprise a significant part of the legacy of the sixties "revolution," with key aspects of the countercultural revolt now incorporated into mainstream American life. Political rebels, in contrast, were not nearly as successful. Radical activists did not manage to shift the politics of the United States left along the political spectrum. As the story of VPI illustrates, radical activists simply did not represent the majority opinion. Instead, in an era generally characterized as one of militant dissent, the conservatives won the political contest, as evidenced by the election of Presidents Richard Nixon in 1968 and Ronald Reagan in 1980. Sixties radicals and their hippie cohorts, as the events at VPI suggest, succeeded in ushering in an era of profound social and cultural change, although they ultimately lacked the support to enact their political agenda.