

On the morning of Nov. 9, 1965, 22-year-old Roger Allen LaPorte sat cross-legged outside the United Nations in midtown Manhattan, poured gasoline over his body, and set himself on fire.

"I'm against wars, all wars," the devout Catholic said before dying in the hospital the next day. "I did this as a religious act."

LaPorte's was one of the more tragic acts of protest against the Vietnam War, a decade-long conflict that tore the U.S. apart, spawned a near-revolution by young people, and left many Americans' faith in their nation and its political leaders shaken.

"The Vietnam War was one of those events that touched practically everybody in America," says David L. Anderson, a historian and co-editor of *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*. "It led people to question . . . is their country always right? Does America always win?—concepts that Americans had never thought about."

One reason the Vietnam War was so divisive is that many Americans came to see it as a civil war in a faraway country that didn't concern the U.S. Another reason was because of the draft. Since 1973, the U.S. has had an all-volunteer army;

WHY THE VIETNAM WAR WAS UNPOPULAR

&

FORMS OF PROTEST

[MARCHES AND RALLIES]

[BURN-INS/TURN-INS]

[SIT-INS]

[CHANTS]

[SELF-SACRIFICE]

no one is now forced to serve. But during Vietnam, when able-bodied men ages 18 to 26 were called up, they had no choice, and many ended up fighting, and dying, in Vietnam. Exemptions for people like college students made the draft even more controversial since the system seemed to favor privileged Americans.

U.S. combat troops first landed in South Vietnam in 1965 to help prevent a Communist takeover. By the time the last U.S. soldiers withdrew in 1975, more than 2.7 million Americans—many of them teenagers—had served in the war and 58,000 had been killed.

Hell, No, We Won't Go!

By 1966, the antidraft movement also was growing. As the United States became more involved in Vietnam, the armed forces needed more troops. In response, the Selective Service System – the group in charge of the draft – changed its rules. In the past, full-time students had been exempt (excused) from the draft. Now, full-time students who did not make good grades could be drafted. The change sparked protests from both universities and their students.

Some professors complained that grades had become a matter of life and death. If they flunked male students, the students might be drafted and sent to Vietnam. Students held antidraft protests on several college campuses. Kids chanting "Hell, no, we won't go!" marched in front of their local draft boards. Students also held "burn-ins" and "turn-ins" – protests in which they burned their draft cards or mailed them back to their draft boards.

In Minnesota, Barry Bondhus broke into the offices of a local draft board and destroyed hundreds of draft records. About a year and a half later, Catholic priests Philip and Daniel Berrigan made national news when they were arrested for burning draft

records in Catonsville, Maryland. Other antidraft protests followed these examples.

“Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?”

Starting as early as 1963, Americans had begun protesting in public against the Vietnam War. Sometimes they marched around the White House and chanted slogans. Sometimes they tried to stop trains and buses carrying soldiers. College students and others staged sit-ins in public buildings and held large rallies. Several hundred draftees burned their draft cards. By 1968, about 10,000 Americans had fled to Canada to escape the draft.

At first, most of the protesters were young people. By 1968, however, the antiwar movement included Americans of all ages.

Most in the antiwar movement were horrified by the violence. They wanted peace – both at home and in Vietnam. So did most Americans. By the late 1960s, public opinion had turned against the war. In October 1969, thousands of Americans across the United States took part in Moratorium Day – 24 hours of peaceful antiwar rallies, marches, and teach-ins. In November, 250,000 antiwar protesters held the biggest rally in the history of the nation's capital.