

was at stake. But as casualties mounted, the Cold War foreign policy consensus began to unravel. To SDS, the war seemed the opposite of participatory democracy, since American involvement had come through secret commitments and elite decision making, with no real public debate.

In April 1965, SDS called on opponents of American policy in Vietnam to attend a rally in Washington. In his speech, SDS president Paul Potter tried to reclaim the language of freedom from the administration. Potter went on to challenge the entire basis of American foreign policy in the Cold War. He ended by calling for the creation of a "social movement" to demand an end to the war.

VIETNAM, WE MAY say, is a laboratory run by a new breed of gamesmen who approach war as a kind of rational exercise in international power politics. It is the testing ground and staging area for a new American response to the social revolution that is sweeping through the impoverished downtrodden areas of the world. It is the beginning of the American counter-revolution.

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What kind of system is it that allows good men to make those kinds of decisions? What kind of system is it that justifies the United States or any country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? What kind of system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values—and still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world?

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We must name that system. We must name it, describe it, analyze it, understand it and change it. For it is only when that system is changed and brought under control that there can be any hope for

174. Paul Potter on the Antiwar Movement (1965)

Source: Paul Potter: Speech at Washington Anti-War Demonstration, April 17, 1965, Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader, Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, eds., pp. 214-16. Copyright © 1995 by Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

The war in Vietnam divided American society more deeply than any military conflict in the nation's history. Early in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson authorized air strikes against North Vietnam and introduced American ground troops in the south. The cause of freedom, he insisted,

stopping the forces that create a war in Vietnam today or a murder in the South tomorrow.

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If the people of this country are to end the war in Vietnam, and to change the institutions which create it; then the people of this country must create a massive social movement—and if that can be built around the issue of Vietnam then that is what we must do.

By a social movement I mean more than petitions or letters of protest, or tacit support of dissident Congressmen; I mean people who are willing to change their lives, who are willing to challenge the system, to take the problem of change seriously. By a social movement I mean an effort that is powerful enough to make the country understand that our problems are not in Vietnam, or China or Brazil or outer space or at the bottom of the ocean, but are here in the United States. What we must do is begin to build a democratic and humane society in which Vietnams are unthinkable, in which human life and initiative are precious.

Questions

1. Why does Potter challenge President Johnson's claim that the war in Vietnam is a defense of freedom?
 2. What does he mean by saying, "we must name that system"?
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