Opportunist Rhetoric and Principled Rhetoric: How Two Religious Leaders Responded to Vietnam from 1964 to 1975

Katherine Tung

In 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing President Johnson to use conventional military force in Southeast Asia. Energized by the prospect of defending Vietnam from communism, the American public strongly supported this decision to put "boots on the ground" in Vietnam. At first, President Johnson's assurance of U.S. military might and an easy victory in Vietnam persuaded the public. But as the war dragged on with no honorable exit in sight, the public began to doubt presidential rhetoric. After the Tet Offensive in 1968, which dealt a substantial blow to American morale, trusted news anchor Walter Cronkite famously commented that "we are mired in stalemate." As other journalists exposed American atrocities in Vietnam, most notably the My Lai massacre, many Americans vehemently expressed their discontent, staging antiwar demonstrations that included Columbia University protests in 1968 that temporarily closed the school and the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in 1969 that was one of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history. In this climate of social turmoil and moral ambiguity, religious public figures were challenged with offering moral and spiritual guidance to Americans. The pro-war religious right featured William Franklin Graham Jr., better known as Billy Graham, a nationally renowned televangelist with close ties to Presidents Johnson and Nixon. The antiwar religious left featured peace activist Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr., chaplain of Yale, minister of the United Church of Christ, and champion of the civil rights, gay rights, and pacifist movements. These two leaders wielded rhetoric masterfully but had different messages and different uses for religion. Shifting his rhetoric over time, Graham employed religion to strengthen his moral authority as he appeased the public while appealing to the president, while Coffin saw religion as the ideological basis for his activism and increased the strength of his rhetoric over time.

In order to understand Graham's and Coffin's rhetorical styles, it is necessary to understand their contexts. Continuing the legacy of evangelists Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson, Graham attracted wide crowds with his talents in show business. Since reaching national acclaim in the late 1940s, Graham seemed to craft his rhetoric to appeal to a wide audience, often contradicting his privately expressed beliefs. From the beginning of his career, Graham was highly focused on publicity. In 1940, he started the nondenominational organization Youth for Christ (YFC), which merged entertainment and religion, and offered "all the gimmicks that reason would allow: famous athletes, stunts, music."[1] He was also sensitive to changing national sentiment. For example, he at first condoned segregated seating at his crusades, but after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, he explicitly prohibited it.[2] A famous ecumenist, Graham explained that "I didn't know one theological position from another. I just knew that I had come

[1] Russ Busby, *Billy Graham, God's Ambassador: A Lifelong Mission of Giving Hope to the World* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1999), 40.
[2] Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 16.

to know the Lord as my Saviour."[3] Yet his ecumenism, which allowed him to extend his outreach, seemed more motivated by publicity than by intellectual understanding. Renowned theologian Reinhold Niebuhr commented that Graham's message tended to "negate all the achievements of Christian historical scholarship."[4] Graham's apparent acceptance of multiple races and faiths is also undercut by his private rhetoric in a conversation with Nixon. Supplementing Nixon's own anti-Semitic remarks, Graham said that his Jewish friends in the press "don't know how I really feel about what they're doing to the country," among other insults.[5] A master of intuiting public sentiment, Graham adapted his public rhetoric accordingly even if it was not consistent with his privately stated views.

Coffin's context was much different. Continuing the legacy of Niebuhr, Coffin specialized in approaching religion from an intellectual and philosophical perspective. Coffin's religious perspective derived mostly from Protestant theologian Niebuhr, whom historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described as "the most influential theologian of the 20th century."[6] Niebuhr was also a leading public intellectual who opposed American intervention in Vietnam, viewing it as a reflection of self-righteousness in Americans, and argued that political activism was central to the Christian faith. Niebuhr believed that after the Second World War, Americans acted as "self-righteous guardians of democracy against the Communist peril" and their involvement in Vietnam was a symptom of vainglory.[7] Niebuhr detected this attitude in President Johnson's 1966 State of the Union address "in which he proposed that a healthy and wealthy nation might erect a welfare-state paradise at home, and still pursue its saving police duties in Vietnam."[8] Though Niebuhr died in 1971 and therefore did not live to comment on the end of the Vietnam War, his idea that the Vietnam War reflected American self-righteousness and invited spiritual reflection lived on in Coffin's activism.

Historians recognize Graham and Coffin's rhetorical strengths, so it is not immediately obvious whose techniques and ideas were more successful. Commenting on the religious right, Grant Wacker argues that Graham's creative use of religious rhetoric and understanding of the forces shaping the America of his time were key to his overall success as a religious public figure.[9] He concedes that Graham did make mistakes; for example, his close ties with Nixon and his waffling statements about Vietnam stained his record.[10] However, Graham's vague and sometimes inconsistent rhetoric was not egregious enough to ruin his popularity in this time.[11] Commenting on the religious left, Tania Auquilla and Ximena Orellana claim that Coffin

---

[3] Peter J. Boyer, "The Big Tent: Billy Graham, Franklin Graham, and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism," *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2005, accessed May 11, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/08/22/the-big-tent.
[4] Boyer, "The Big Tent."
[5] Richard Nixon and Billy Graham telephone conversation, February 10, 1972. Accessed on May 11, 2020, http://nixontapeaudio.org/chron3/rmn_e662a.mp3.
[6] Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: Holy Impatience*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), 69.
[7] New Republic Staff, "Reinhold Niebuhr Discusses the War in Vietnam," *The New Republic*, December 31, 1969.
[8] New Republic Staff, "Reinhold Niebuhr Discusses the War in Vietnam."
[9] Wacker, 267.
[10] Wacker, 238.
[11] Wacker, 305.

persuasively applied the Christian Gospel and the ideas of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to social issues, attracting many young Americans and political leaders to his cause.[12] Though Coffin's rhetorical tactic of being arrested to attract media attention shocked some of his Yale colleagues and alienated members of the public, this tactic ultimately bolstered his religiously-informed activism.[13] Given the skill of religious public figures from the right and left, it may seem difficult to judge which side was more enduringly popular.

One could suppose that Coffin's polarizing, headline-catching rhetoric backfired on the religious left and bolstered the religious right. In historian David Mislin's article "antiwar Protests 50 Years Ago Helped Mold the Modern Christian Right," he argued that during and after the Vietnam War, the religious left's antiwar stance tended to alienate churchgoers, who flocked to the religious right. Before the war, tensions between the liberal ministers and their more conservative laity already existed due to the ministers' support of civil rights and affirmation of interfaith cooperation with Catholics and Jews.[14] During the war, these tensions grew as liberal religious leaders protested U.S. military policy.[15] In 1968, religious journals such as the *Christian Century* acknowledged that "the majority of church members" did not share the "opposition to American policy in Vietnam" showcased by liberal anti war protesters such as Coffin, who went so far in encouraging draft evaders that he was charged with conspiracy in a high-profile May 1968 Boston trial.[16] For many churchgoers, the activism of Coffin and others was simply too extreme. From 1970 to 1985, in the wake of the Vietnam War, liberal Protestant churches shrank by 15%, while the evangelical Southern Baptist Convention grew by 23%.[17] Evidently, liberal church leaders had erred rhetorically by alienating their followers instead of uniting them around a shared antiwar sentiment.

Those who make this argument are correct to note liberal churches' declining membership but are wrong to conclude that the religious left's inflammatory rhetoric was thoughtless and ineffective. Professor Warren Goldstein argued that the liberal ministers of CALCAV (Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam) were not irrational agitators by nature.[18] He noted that before 1967, CALCAV emphasized educational and legal persuasion techniques, such as forums, letters, press conferences, and rallies, instead of direct-action nonviolent tactics such as sit-ins or draft-card burnings.[19] This restraint appealed to clergy, who did not feel comfortable being grouped with "radicals" and "draft-card burners."[20] But as President Johnson escalated American

---

[12] Tania Auquilla and Ximena Orellana, "Analysis of the Socio-Political and Religious Influence of the Clergyman and Activist, Rv. William Sloane Coffin, during the Period 1960-1990 in the United States of America," (Bachelor's thesis, University of Cuenca, 2010).
[13] Auquilla, "Analysis of the Socio-Political and Religious Influence of the Clergyman and Activist, Rv. William Sloane Coffin, during the Period 1960-1990 in the United States of America."
[14] David Mislin, "Antiwar Protests 50 Years Ago Helped Mold the Modern Christian Right," *The Conversation*, last modified May 2, 2018, accessed March 16, 2020, https://theconversation.com/antiwar-protests-50-years-ago-helped-mold-the-modern-christian-right-90802?xid=PS_smithsonian.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Goldstein, 163.
[19] Goldstein, 164.
[20] Goldstein, 164.

involvement in Vietnam, CALCAV escalated its rhetoric. In 1968, Coffin and four others were arrested and tried for aiding with draft evasion. As a result of this rhetorical move, he became a "national figure of protest" who was "vilified by the right" but "lionized by the left," suggesting that he solidified his support base.[21] With the aid of CALCAV, Coffin clearly communicated his "holy impatience" with injustice and war, an idea which resonated with his followers. Even into the '70s, Coffin's ideas of moral questioning, which derived from theologian Niebuhr, permeated the public consciousness. In a *New York Times* article on Lt. William Calley's verdict, the emotional responses of a wide range of Americans -- from salesman to scholar; from Milwaukeean to Bostonian -- indicated that many were grappling with the issues of responsibility and guilt.[22] These concerns echoed those of theologian Niebuhr and indicate that while the religious left's channelling of Niebuhr's ideology might have been controversial in 1968, CALCAV eventually had far-reaching influence even as early as 1971.

Though somewhat opportunistic, Graham was a skilled rhetor who enjoyed unmistakable popularity in his time. Between 1948 and 2002, Graham appeared in Gallup's list of the "Ten Most Admired Men" 45 times, appearing on the list more often than anyone else.[23] For comparison, Reagan had 29 appearances, Eisenhower 21, and Nixon 20.[24] To be fair, Graham's frequent presence on the list is partly due to his longevity: he lived till age 99. In addition, Graham's 45 appearances do not necessarily make him a moral role model, just as Richard Nixon's 20 appearances do not vindicate him for the Watergate scandal. Indeed, a careful inspection of Graham's Vietnam War rhetoric suggests that he tailored it in order to appeal to the public and curry favor with the presidents, a strategy that invites moral scrutiny given his position as a religious public figure.

In the early and mid 1960s, public and presidential sentiments were both fairly anti-communist, in alignment with Eisenhower's "domino theory," so Billy Graham had no problem appealing to the public and the president through rhetoric that fervidly supported the Vietnam War. According to a Gallup poll, in 1964, Americans rated "the threat of Communism" as 86 on a scale from 0 (not concerning) to 100 (a great deal).[25] Also in 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed by the House of Representatives, unanimously, and the Senate with only two opposing votes, authorizing President Johnson to use conventional military force in Vietnam even though evidence suggests the Gulf of Tonkin incidents had not been instigated by the North Vietnamese. In line with public and presidential anti-communist zeal, Graham preached a hatred and fear of communism. His 1950s opinion that "Communism is a fanatical religion that has declared war

---

[21] Marc D. Charney, "Rev. William Sloane Coffin Dies at 81; Fought for Civil Rights and against a War," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2006.
[22] Robert D. McFadden, "Calley Verdict Brings Home the Anguish of War to Public," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), April 4, 1971, accessed February 27, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/04/archives/calley-verdict-brings-home-the-anguish-of-war-to-public.html.
[23] Joseph Carroll, "George W. Bush is 2002's Most Admired Man, No Consensus on Most Admired Woman," *Gallup*, December 27, 2002, https://news.gallup.com/poll/7486/george-bush-2002s-most-admired-man-consensus-most-admired-woman.aspx.
[24] Lydia Saad, "Americans Familiar With, Fond of Billy Graham," *Gallup*, June 23, 2005, https://news.gallup.com/poll/17029/americans-familiar-fond-billy-graham.aspx.
[25] Tom W. Smith, "The Polls: American Attitudes Toward the Soviet Union and Communism," *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol 47, Number 2 (Summer 1983): 280.

upon the Christian God" often surfaced in his 1960s rhetoric.[26] During television crusades, Graham brought young Marines to join him at the podium "to explain how God had helped them kill communists."[27] He repeatedly warned of the global communist threat, urging the U.S. to maintain "the strongest military establishment on earth."[28] He declared in a speech at the Denver Press Club in 1965, "I have no sympathy for those clergymen who [urge] the U.S. to get out of Vietnam."[29] These theatrical statements suggest that his show-business acumen seemed to be stronger than his religious conviction.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, public opinion generally turned against Vietnam War presidential policy, complicating Graham's apparent agenda of appealing to the public and the president. A growing proportion of the American public regarded involvement as a mistake. In 1965, only 24% of Americans saw sending troops to fight in Vietnam as a mistake, but by 1970, 58% did.[30] In contrast, in an attempt to save face, President Johnson was increasing American involvement through the deployment of more troops, the use of napalm and Agent Orange, and Operation Rolling Thunder.[31] Somehow, though, Graham stayed on relatively good terms with the public and the president: Graham was one of Gallup's "Ten Most Admired Men" every year from 1965 to 1975, he was Johnson's true friend "for all seasons" (Johnson's own words) and he was part of Nixon's "inner circle," according to Nixon's Chief of Staff.[32] To maintain strong relations with such polarized groups (the president and the people), Graham needed masterful rhetorical tactics.

One tactic Graham used was to employ hesitant, apolitical rhetoric in public and give confident, political advice in private. When Graham was asked during an April 1968 press conference to comment on the morality or justice of the Vietnam War, he answered, "I don't intend to answer political questions ... I have not made any statement on Vietnam [because] I don't know the answer."[33] At this time, about 48% of Americans thought their nation's involvement in Vietnam was a mistake.[34] By late September of 1969, this percentage rose to 58%, and Graham changed his tune accordingly. During an October 1969 interview, he said that "[America] can't be the

---

[26] Wacker, *America's Pastor,* 232.
[27] Cecil Bothwell, *The Prince of War: Billy Graham's Crusade for a Wholly Christian Empire* (Asheville, North Carolina: Brave Ulysses Books, 2007), 84.
[28] Associated Press, "Strongest Military Establishment," *Charlotte Observer*, July 31, 1965.
[29] Max Goldberg, North American Newspaper Alliance, Transcript of Interview with Billy Graham, Denver, CO, September 25, 1965, folder 3-6, collection 74, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL (original at Lyndon B. Johnson Library).
[30] Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam," *Gallup Vault*, May 24, 2016, https://news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx.
[31] As a testament to Graham's close relationship with LBJ, the name "Rolling Thunder" is taken from Graham's "How Great Thou Art," the theme hymn of his revival crusades. Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 595.
[32] Frank Newport, "In the News: Billy Graham on 'Most Admired' List 61 Times," *Gallup*, February 21, 2018, https://news.gallup.com/poll/228089/news-billy-graham-admired-list-times.aspx; Lyndon B. Johnson to Billy Graham, 5 December 1972, box 3, folder 6, collection 74, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL (copied from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library); William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), 400.
[33] Billy Graham, "Sydney Crusade Press Conference" (speech, April 1, 1968).
[34] Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam."

world's policeman. We have far too many problems at home ... I am not at all sure that the war is supportable, morally supportable."[35] Yet his hesitancy belied the confident Vietnam War advice he gave President Nixon in private. On April 15, 1969, Graham sent a 13-page private letter to Nixon that became known as the "Confidential Missionary Plan for Ending the Vietnam War."[36] In the letter, Graham ostensibly portrayed the views of a group of American missionaries in Vietnam, but his proactive distribution of the letter among government officials suggests that he agreed with the missionaries and was thus promoting his own ideas.[37] In October 1969, Graham sent a copy of the letter to Henry Kissinger, then assistant to President Nixon for national security affairs, with a note that Defense Secretary Melvin Laird was impressed with the letter and hoped Kissinger would consider it.[38] In the letter, the missionaries, and presumably Graham, assured Nixon that they had "great confidence in President Nixon as a leader" and then outlined several steps to "Vietnamize" the war, which included turning over the war to the South Vietnamese government, withdrawing American troops "rapidly," disseminating psychological propaganda, empowering South Vietnamese Special Forces for guerrilla warfare, and using North Vietnamese defectors to bomb and invade North Vietnam.[39] The recommendation of bombing North Vietnam would have killed roughly a million people and decimated the struggling country's agricultural system, thus targeting the civilian population, an act that violates the Geneva Conventions and the Christian principles of just war. This recommendation is antithetical to Christian ideals of mercy and contradicts Jesus' request to turn the other cheek, supporting the idea that Graham was more interested in using Christianity as a rhetorical tool than staying true to its religious teachings. Yet Graham's rhetoric was probably effective: just a few months after the letter was sent, Nixon announced his administration's "Vietnamization" policy, echoing Graham's word choice.

The dichotomy Graham created between his public and private rhetoric was just as masterful and unsettling as another rhetorical tactic of his: making measured, neutral-sounding public statements that implicitly supported the president and the war. This strategy is most evident in his rhetoric on the My Lai massacre, a "mass killing of 347 to 504 unarmed Vietnamese women, children, and old men, and rape of 20 women women and girls, some as young as 10 years old."[40] Responding to Calley's conviction for the massacre, Graham penned an April 9, 1971 *New York Times* editorial.[41] There is strong evidence that Calley wrote this editorial to appeal to President Nixon. On February 14, 1971, shortly after Calley's conviction, Nixon's Chief of Staff called Graham to solicit his views on Calley.[42] Graham's editorial seemed the answer to this

---

[35] Martin, 438.
[36] The letter was declassified in 1989. Graham to Nixon, "Confidential Missionary Plan for Ending the Vietnam War," 15 April 1969, box 3, folder 7, collection 74, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL (original at Richard Nixon Presidential Library); Graham to Kissinger, letter with enclosure, 28 December 1970, box 3, folder 7, collection 74, BGCA (RNPL).
[37] Wacker, 235.
[38] Billy Graham sends his missionary report to Kissinger. Billy Graham to Kissinger, 28 December 1970, CO box 84.
[39] Wacker, 236.
[40] Christopher J. Levesque, "The Truth Behind My Lai," *The New York Times,* March 16, 2018.
[41] Billy Graham, "Billy Graham: On Calley," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 9, 1971, accessed February 27, 2020, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1971/04/09/83206383.html?pageNumber=31.
[42] Martin, 832.

request. Two days before the editorial was published, Graham called Nixon and informed him that "you've given me something to hold onto and to really say. And I've got an editorial in *The New York Times* on Friday."[43] Advertising his rhetorical mastery to Nixon, Graham quoted from his editorial a section which discredited the "doves in the Senate."[44] Graham bragged, "And I got all that in there, and they've taken it" to which Nixon replied, "Yeah. Good ... I appreciate [it]."[45]

In addition to supporting Nixon, Graham implicitly supported the war in the editorial by excusing Calley in spite of reputable media coverage of the My Lai massacre. Graham suggested that his readers had a likeness to Calley: "We have all had our Mylais in one way or another . . . we have hurt others with a thoughtless word, an arrogant act, or a selfish deed."[46] Through this clever turn of phrase, he sought to excuse the war crime while also mollifying public outrage over the incident. Graham also invoked religion to trivialize the atrocity. He asked readers to withhold judgement by quoting Jesus' utterance, "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone," since "We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God."[47] Graham urged "forgiveness" because "Christians throughout the world believed that if it had not been for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there would be no forgiveness of sin and no hope of heaven."[48] Though these comments individually may sound neutral and not politically charged, taken together they suggest an attempt to divert attention from the facts of the massacre and the trial through tangential religious comparisons. In spite of journalist Seymour Hersh's well-known My Lai massacre investigation and reporting, for which he received a 1970 Pulitzer Prize, Graham questioned whether a sound judgement could be made by "the average American with his limited knowledge of what went on that dreadful day in Mylai."[49] By distracting readers from and questioning the facts of the massacre, Graham implicitly pardoned President Nixon and the war.

By 1973, when America withdrew troops from Vietnam in the Paris Peace Accords and Nixon announced "peace with honor," presidential policy came closer to public opinion, and Graham finally shifted to antiwar rhetoric. In January 1973, Graham issued a widely circulated press release with a revisionist version of his record on the Vietnam War in which he said "we will always have wars on earth until the coming of the Prince of Peace ... I have never advocated war ... I deplore it!"[50] In the spring of 1973, Graham supported President Nixon's plan for an orderly withdrawal from Vietnam, in keeping with his consistent rhetorical support of the president. At a June 1973 press conference, he reminded Americans to learn from the war that "we are not all-powerful and that America is not the Kingdom of God. We can go into it with a lot more humility. We have a lot to be proud of in the past; we have a lot to be ashamed of in the past."[51] In a 1975 press conference, Graham went further in saying that America should never have

---

[43] "Richard Nixon and Billy Graham Discuss the Vietnam War," *Politico* (Arlington County, US), April 7, 1971, accessed April 1, 2020, https://www.politico.com/pdf/PPM43_exc_nixon_graham.pdf.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Graham, "Billy Graham: On Calley."
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Peter Kihss, "Report of Songmy Incident Wins a Pulitzer for Hersh," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1970.
[50] Bothwell, 119.
[51] Billy Graham, press conference, Houston, 14 June 1973, box 3, folder 6, collection 24, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL.

become involved in a "no-win land war in Asia."[52] Throughout the war, Graham never clearly stated or explained his changes of mind, suggesting that he was merely supporting prevailing trends to balance the opinions of the administration and the general public.

Like Graham, Rev. William Coffin, chaplain of Yale from 1958 to 1976, wielded Vietnam War rhetoric masterfully, but unlike Graham, Coffin based his rhetoric on firm religious and theological conviction. In the mid 1960s, Coffin challenged the spiritual wisdom of American involvement in Vietnam with rhetoric that earned him a national reputation. He led activist organization Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), which by its name encouraged clergy and laity to recruit each other for the antiwar cause. Perhaps with this intention, Coffin helped to organize local CALCAV chapters by calling likely sympathetic clergy in communities in every state to connect them to each other, asking them to work together and report their progress.[53] He carved out a niche of supporters and broadened his base of support with rhetoric. For example, he synthesized his theological and political views of the war in his "The Spirit of Lamech" sermon, urging Christians to "make peace our major religious responsibility, and Vietnam our immediate one ... Just because we do not seek territorial expansion does not mean we cannot be corrupted by pride and power ... O America, thy pride-swollen face hath closed up thine eyes. Thou hast become as Lamech."[54] Referencing Niebuhr's earlier warning about American self-righteousness, Coffin's sermon coherently combined logical reasoning with religious references instead of using religion in place of logic, as Graham often did. Coffin's message elevated him to national political prominence and prompted the director of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, Sanford Gottlieb, to run for Congress as a "peace candidate," to bring Vietnam to the forefront of the political arena.[55] In a year's time, CALCAV grew nearly ninefold from eight chapters in May 1966 to sixty-eight by April 1967, a reflection of Coffin's rhetorical talent as a leader.[56]

As President Johnson's Vietnam War policies escalated in the late 1960s, Coffin and his support base escalated their rhetoric as well, opposing the draft with civil disobedience and garnering media sympathy. Coffin offered the Yale Battell Chapel as a sanctuary for Yale students resisting the draft and invited federal agents to enter to make arrests, saying, "If a further mockery of American justice is not to be made, we [the clergy] must be arrested too."[57] He also signed and promoted the anti-draft manifesto "A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority." On October 2, 1967, Coffin held a press conference to formally release the "Call" manifesto signed by individuals that included 320 eminent intellectuals, professors, clergy, writers, and artists.[58] He also made plans to participate in a mass protest to turn in draft cards at the Pentagon on October 20th.[59] During the protest, Coffin and a group of eleven luminaries, including well-known American

---

[52] Wacker, 237.
[53] Goldstein, 160-161.
[54] William Sloane Coffin, Jr., "The Spirit of Lamech" (speech, January 9, 1966).
[55] Goldstein, 173.
[56] Goldstein, 170.
[57] Dan Wakefield, "The antiwarrior," *The Nation*, July 12, 2004, accessed May 10, 2020, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/antiwarrior/.
[58] Goldstein, 194.
[59] Klaus P. Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray: A History of the Stormy 1960s* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 196.

pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, and four representative resisters met with Assistant Deputy Attorney General John McDonough, who refused their briefcase of draft cards.[60] These public acts along with other defiances led the U.S. government to charge Coffin and four other prominent participants, including Dr. Spock, with conspiracy to violate aspects of the draft law.[61] From Coffin's perspective, the spectacle was deliberate: he told *The New York Times* that he "wanted to be arrested in order to precipitate a 'moral, legal confrontation' with the Government over the draft."[62] Sympathetic press coverage of the case, especially from the *Times* and other secular newspapers, made Coffin into arguably the best known college chaplain and a national celebrity.[63] He recalled that "at universities, where before I had addressed hundreds, now there were thousands."[64] Though Coffin was convicted of conspiracy, this verdict was overturned on appeal due to errors made by the judge.[65] He could have been retried, but the government chose not to do so.[66] As the government gave way, Coffin cemented his centrality in the peace movement.

As Coffin gained national prominence, he increased his effectiveness as an activist by rhetorically uniting with other faiths and with the civil rights movement. Coffin and other CALCAV leaders organized a February 1967 event called "Viet-Nam: The Clergyman's Dilemma," that brought antiwar clergy together for training, for lobbying government officials, and for conducting a White House vigil.[67] Nearly twenty-five hundred clergy (Jews, Protestants, and Catholics) from forty-seven states attended the event, where Coffin gave the opening remarks and led the first evening worship, and three senators and the Rabbi Abraham Herschel gave closing speeches. Coffin's work to bring together different religious groups reflected not only a rhetorical strategy but also a coherent, reasoned religious belief. He commented in an interview that

> My understanding of Christianity is that it underlies all progressive moves to implement more justice ... Get [a] higher degree of peace in the world ... the impulse to love God and neighbor, that impulse is at the heart of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity ... We have much more in common than we have in conflict.[68]

In addition to uniting with other faiths, CALCAV united with preacher and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. He became co-chair of CALCAV and gave his famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech at a CALCAV event on April 4, 1967.[69] In the words of historian Goldstein, having the

---

[60] Goldstein, 198-199.
[61] Daniel Lang, "The Trial of Dr. Spock," *The New Yorker*, September 7, 1968.
[62] Fred P. Graham, "Spock and Coffin Indicted for Activity against Draft," *The New York Times*, January 6, 1968.
[63] Graham, "Spock and Coffin"; Marc D. Charney, "Rev. William Sloane Coffin Dies at 81; Fought for Civil Rights and against a War," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2006.
[64] Goldstein, 209.
[65] Graham, "Spock and Coffin."
[66] Ibid.
[67] Goldstein, 179.
[68] William Sloane Coffin, interview by Bill Moyers, Public Broadcasting Service, last modified April 5, 2004, accessed March 17, 2020, http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/archives/coffin_now_ts.html.
[69] Stanford University, "Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV)," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed May 10, 2020, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/clergy-and-laymen-concerned-about-vietnam-calcav.

most influential American preacher of the twentieth century join the antiwar movement gave CALCAV "the single biggest boost it had received since its birth."[70]

In the early years of the Vietnam War, presidential policy and public opinion may have largely aligned, but in later years they diverged significantly as protesters took to the streets. Amidst widespread social discontent and moral confusion, religious public figures were faced with the challenge of offering moral and spiritual guidance to Americans. Two Christian leaders, televangelist Billy Graham and clergyman-activist Coffin, gained significant influence through their different types of religious rhetoric. Apparently shifting his rhetoric throughout most of the Vietnam War, Graham employed religion to bridge the growing differences between presidential policy and public opinion. In contrast, Coffin's religious rhetoric was rooted in his religious conviction and the theology of Niebuhr; also, Coffin's rhetoric grew more dramatic as his movement expanded its influence. In some sense, Graham's rhetorical goals made him a man of his time, while Coffin's dedication to a timeless principle has contributed to its longevity in the minds of the public, both secular and religious. Reflecting widespread public opinion, Graham said Vietnam taught him that "we are not all-powerful ... We can go into it with a lot more humility." [71] Decades later, not everyone has learned this lesson, notably President George W. Bush when he gave the May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech announcing a premature end to combat operations in Iraq. As intervention in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries continues yet largely evades the attention of the media, activists might draw upon Coffin's rhetorical techniques to remind America of her sometimes dangerous hubris and of ethical implications of involvement.

[70] Goldstein, 181.
[71] Billy Graham, press conference, Houston, 14 June 1973, box 3, folder 6, collection 24, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL.

Bibliography

Associated Press. "Strongest Military Establishment." *Charlotte Observer*, July 31, 1965.

Auquilla, Tania, and Ximena Orellana, “Analysis of the Socio-Political and Religious Influence of the Clergyman and Activist, Rv. William Sloane Coffin, during the Period 1960-1990 in the United States of America,” (Bachelor’s thesis, University of Cuenca, 2010).

Branch, Taylor. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Bothwell, Cecil. *The Prince of War: Billy Graham's Crusade for a Wholly Christian Empire*. Asheville, North Carolina: Brave Ulysses Books, 2007.

Boyer, Peter J. "The Big Tent: Billy Graham, Franklin Graham, and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism." *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2005. Accessed May 11, 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/08/22/the-big-tent.

Busby, Russ. *Billy Graham, God's Ambassador: A Lifelong Mission of Giving Hope to the World*. Alexandria, Va: Time-Life Books, 1999.

Carroll, Joseph. “George W. Bush is 2002’s Most Admired Man, No Consensus on Most Admired Woman.” *Gallup*, December 27, 2002, https://news.gallup.com/poll/7486/george-bush-2002s-most-admired-man-consensus-most-admired-woman.aspx.

Charney, Marc D. "Rev. William Sloane Coffin Dies at 81; Fought for Civil Rights and against a War." *The New York Times*, April 13, 2006.

Coffin, William Sloane, Jr. "The Spirit of Lamech." Speech, January 9, 1966.

———. Interview by Bill Moyers. Public Broadcasting Service. Last modified April 5, 2004. Accessed March 17, 2020. http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/archives/coffin_now_ts.html.

Fischer, Klaus P. *America in White, Black, and Gray: A History of the Stormy 1960s*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006.

Goldstein, Warren. *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004.

Graham, Billy. "Billy Graham: On Calley." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 9, 1971. Accessed February 27, 2020. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1971/04/09/83206383.html?pageNumber=31.

———. Correspondence. Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL (copied from the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library)

———. Interview transcript. Billy Graham Center Archives. Wheaton College, IL (original at Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, TX).

———. Letters. Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL (original at Richard Nixon Presidential Library)

———. Press conference. Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, IL.

———. "Sydney Crusade Press Conference." Speech, April 1, 1968.

Graham, Fred P. "Spock and Coffin Indicted for Activity against Draft." *New York Times*, January 6, 1968.

Kihss, Peter. "Report of Songmy Incident Wins a Pulitzer for Hersh," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1970.

Lang, Daniel. "The Trial of Dr. Spock." *The New Yorker*, September 7, 1968.

Levesque, Christopher J. "The Truth Behind My Lai." *The New York Times,* March 16, 2018.

Martin, William. *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018.

McFadden, Robert D. "Calley Verdict Brings Home the Anguish of War to Public." *The New York Times*, April 4, 1971.

Merritt, Jonathan. "Billy Graham, the Last Nonpartisan Evangelical?" *The New York Times,* February 21, 2018.

Mislin, David. "Antiwar Protests 50 Years Ago Helped Mold the Modern Christian Right." *The Conversation*. Last modified May 2, 2018. Accessed May 11, 2020. https://theconversation.com/antiwar-protests-50-years-ago-helped-mold-the-modern-christian-right-90802.

New Republic Staff. "Reinhold Niebuhr Discusses the War in Vietnam." *The New Republic*, December 31, 1969.

Newport, Frank. "In the News: Billy Graham on 'Most Admired' List 61 Times." *Gallup*, February 21, 2018, https://news.gallup.com/poll/228089/news-billy-graham-admired-list-times.aspx.

Nixon, Richard and Billy Graham telephone conversation, February 10, 1972. Accessed on May 11, 2020. http://nixontapeaudio.org/chron3/rmn_e662a.mp3.

Politico (Arlington County, U.S.). "Richard Nixon and Billy Graham Discuss the Vietnam War." April 7, 1971. Accessed April 1, 2020. https://www.politico.com/pdf/PPM43_exc_nixon_graham.pdf.

Saad, Lydia. “Americans Familiar with, Fond of Billy Graham.” *Gallup*, June 23, 2005, https://news.gallup.com/poll/17029/americans-familiar-fond-billy-graham.aspx.

———. “Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam.” *Gallup Vault*, May 24, 2016, https://news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx.

Smith, Tom W. “The Polls: American Attitudes Toward the Soviet Union and Communism.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol 47, Number 2 (Summer 1983): 277-292.

Stanford University. "Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV)." The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/clergy-and-laymen-concerned-about-vietnam-calcav.

Wacker, Grant. *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014.

Wakefield, Dan. "The Antiwarrior." *The Nation*, July 12, 2004. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/antiwarrior/.