

Days of protest: The Century and the war in Vietnam

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

Part of the fabric of public life in America during the post-World War II years, perhaps the cross-stitch that held the symbolic boundaries in place, was anticommunism. Most mainline church editors were part of it. The launching of Sputnik in 1957 provoked a “crisis” and, explained a *Century* editorial, exploded the “assumption of a kind of general, built-in American superiority” (January 1, 1958). Over the next few years, the editors became certain there existed an absolute incompatibility between Christianity and communism. Though a 1961 editorial warned readers not to “commit the great blasphemy of confusing democracy with the kingdom of God,” its author, most likely Harold Fey, intoned that “Christianity and communism cannot coexist in the same person any more than Christianity can share the same disciple with Buddhism or Islam” (November 15, 1961).

Under Fey’s leadership, however, the *Century* could also hold positions that made it rather unpopular with average anticommunist groups and individuals. The journal strongly sought United Nations recognition of the People’s Republic of China (July 10, 1957). On the issue of space, even given the threat of initial Soviet successes, Fey condemned American exploration as a “fantastic waste” of economic resources (May 24, 1961). The *Century* welcomed the change in Cuba from Fulgencio Batista, who had been backed by the U.S., to Fidel Castro and criticized the Bay of Pigs invasion as a “debacle” (May 3, 1961). The editors also argued for de facto recognition of the East German communist regime in the Berlin crisis (August 30, 1961). Just after the Cuban missile crisis, they insisted that Americans look to the “enemy within” for part of the cause of the crisis itself, especially “the shameful history of [American] exploitation of Cuba” (November 7, 1962). Clearly, the *Century*’s anticommunist position had some sophisticated and reflective edges to it.

The *Century* heralded the birth of the Republic of South Vietnam in November of 1955 and said not another meaningful word about it until April 25, 1962, when it demanded that President Kennedy tell the truth about why “American soldiers

[were] dying almost every day in South Vietnam.” A plane carrying 93 American soldiers to Vietnam had crashed into the Pacific. This event woke the editors from their slumber. Why were there nearly 5,000 American troops, accompanied by ships and planes, in a country over 10,000 miles away? If a communist takeover seemed imminent, why did the president not inform Congress to let it act accordingly in a proper debate concerning a declaration of war (April 25, 1962)?

In 1962, the *Century's* editors feared a communist takeover in southeast Asia as much as anyone else did. They did not question the fact that South Vietnam needed help. The domino theory made limited sense to them at the time. The editors objected primarily because Kennedy had acted alone when the UN should have been contacted to deal with the situation. They recognized the legitimacy of the cause against communism throughout 1963 and 1964. Editorials denounced President Diem's denial of religious freedom to the Buddhists (September 4, 1963), argued against expansion of the war into North Vietnam (March 11, 1964), and called for an early, peaceful, negotiated withdrawal (December 23, 1964). Without exception, however, editorials during this period accepted the necessity of American action in Vietnam and expressed a cautious affirmation of the general lines of U.S. policy there.

The prospect of a presidential election at such a crucial time concerned the editors. Just before the Republican Convention in 1964, Harold Fey wrote an editorial entitled “Goldwater? No!” He figured that Goldwater might be the presidential nominee of the Republican Party and believed his ideological bent “would inflame the cold war” and probably escalate the war in Vietnam (July 1, 1964). Just after Fey retired in September, Kyle Haselden, in one of his first tasks as editor, endorsed President Johnson for reelection. He was confident that a Johnson-Humphrey team would handle Vietnam with wisdom and could be trusted to avoid the “hair-trigger action” of a Goldwater. Johnson, he wrote, would work toward peace and prevent any move toward all-out nuclear confrontation. Haselden also favored Johnson's much better history on civil rights issues (September 9, 1964).

The presidential endorsement not only cost the journal its tax deductible status for two years, but also led to a more realistic understanding of politics and less willingness to wed Christian goals to the election of particular leaders. Johnson's policies forced the *Century* editor to eat his words. Haselden's profound disappointment with Johnson found expression as early as May 1965.

The Pentagon Papers later revealed that Johnson, prior to the election, had already taken steps to escalate the war. By the end of 1965, troops in Vietnam numbered over 185,000; one year later they would number 385,000, building eventually to over 540,000 troops. These developments jarred the *Century*. The 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution authorizing presidential authority in sending American troops to Vietnam had originally brought barely a whimper. By early 1966, editors had decided the resolution had blown “a hole in the Constitution of the United States big enough to drive an undeclared war through” (February 16, 1966).

When Senators Leverett Saltonstall and Edward Kennedy, both from Massachusetts, presented a bill in the Senate to give public recognition to God through requiring the post office department to cancel all postage with the words “For God and Country,” *Century* editors replied: “If the nation really wants to give public recognition to God let it abandon its unjust crushing of the aspirations of little peoples in various parts of the world” (April 6, 1966).

In the interim between Johnson’s election and 1966, the editors became more openly critical of the domino theory and began to speak of the war as a “civil conflict,” one in which the aspirations of a proud Vietnamese people to conduct their own affairs were at work. They tired of words like “democracy” and “freedom” and began arguing that the war’s only purpose was the containment of the Chinese (March 10, 1965, and March 23, 1966). They attacked the American use of “nonfatal” gas as a weapon, fearing an introduction of chemical warfare (April 7, 1965)—a fear later realized. By mid-year, Americans felt the domestic costs of the war more intensely and editors took note of the war’s effect on the “great society” (July 28, 1965). They urged the involvement of the United Nations to work out a negotiated peace (September 8, 1965).

By the end of 1965, editorials more frequently defended dissent. “It is a spurious argument to say that the protests weaken and embarrass this nation abroad and comfort its enemies,” wrote the editors. “Demonstrations within peaceful bounds are not a shame but an index of our glory” (November 3, 1965). Stepped-up and indiscriminate bombing had its effect. The members of the staff became more active in expressing their own dissent.

Kyle Haselden and Martin E. Marty were both members of the National Emergency Committee of Clergy Concerned about Vietnam, a group of religious leaders pressing the president to work toward negotiation and deescalation (January 29, 1966).

Haselden joined the march on Washington in early 1967 (February 15, 1967). Alan Geyer wrote a defense of selective conscientious objection in early 1966 (February 2, 1966), and he became the *Century's* editor two years later. Haselden and staff picked up the just war defense of selective-objector status after Geyer offered it and encouraged the church to speak to the issue. Marty joined 17 other religious leaders and signed a statement pledging "to risk fine or imprisonment to assist young men who resist[ed] the draft on grounds of conscience" (December 13, 1967).

Century opposition to the draft is clear throughout this period, well before Vietnam was ever an issue. At the pinnacle of the Vietnam war, editors argued that the draft, as long as America used it, ought to be as equitable as possible. They were especially concerned about its tendency to include more blacks than whites, poor than rich, illiterate than educated. Interestingly enough, in the late '60s, the editors became rather vocal about the need to do away with the ministerial and seminary exemptions from the draft. These positions were consistent with the support for conscientious-objector status, for they felt that removing clergy exemption would force clergy to clearer expression of their convictions on the issue (February 1, 1967).

As editor, Geyer oversaw perhaps the strangest (and easiest to write) editorial ever published by the *Century*. It summed up very well the journal's feelings about the early Nixon administration's conduct in the war. Titled, at the top of the page, "Beyond Rhetoric: The Positive Record of the Nixon Administration in Matters of Justice and Peace, January-June 1969," the editorial left the rest of the page blank. Strong editorial resistance to the war effort continued right down to the implementation of Nixon's "peace with honor," which the magazine, under new editor James M. Wall, damned as the "final self-deception" (February 7, 1973).

Throughout the conflict, editors for the *Century* attempted to speak in Christian terms about the war. Two entire issues, one in 1966 (January 26) and one in 1968 (January 3), were devoted to exploring the Christian and moral dimensions of the war. But, in most cases, editors offered only piecemeal theological analysis, here and there in editorials, without ever offering their own article-length theological arguments against the war. At several points, they chastised the church for its silence and urged it to formulate a "Christian consensus" in order to address the issues involved. They wondered aloud if Christians were so "thoroughly dispersed in and absorbed by the general fabric of society" that any truly Christian opinion was impossible (November 10, 1965). Though they were confident that their own

understanding of the issues grew out of Christian commitments, they were never very deliberate in stating a specifically theological rationale.

Nonetheless, it is clear that they spoke from faith in a transcendent God who meted out justice and cared deeply for the poor and outcast, whether in Vietnam or in America.

The struggles of these Christians among the mainstream who chose to speak out about Vietnam illustrate well the new setting occasioned by Protestant displacement in American culture. The old setting, where Americans in power could count on the presence and support of clergy to undergird prevailing social mores, had passed. But, as the editors of the *Century* acknowledged, many in the church preferred the old environment to the new and did not appreciate clergy who challenged it.

By 1968, editorials more regularly faced and addressed the shortcomings of American life. At approximately the time when Geyer replaced the ailing Kyle Haselden as editor, the journal printed an editorial titled "Universal Moral Myopia." The Soviet Union had just invaded Czechoslovakia. But the editor was in no mood to engage in simple anticommunist banter. Instead he pointed to America's "two evils," racism and Vietnam, and stated that the Russian invasion should not serve as "a scapegoat for our own guilt." Though the editorial took seriously the situation in Czechoslovakia, it compared the invasion to both the American intervention in Vietnam and the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic. Communism, in other words, had no monopoly on immorality. The editor defended his position with solid theological reasoning. He pointed out that Americans "live as if the meaning of our lives was ours alone to create" (September 4, 1968). This theological approach to the culture enabled the *Century* to assume a more prophetic posture toward American society as a whole.