

**Radical Action and a National Antiwar Movement:  
The Vietnam Day Committee**

**By Michael Lowe<sup>1</sup>**

In August 1965, a few hundred demonstrators marched from the University of California, Berkeley campus to a provocative, dangerous antiwar demonstration. Flanked by policemen and flash bulbs, demonstrators stood on a Berkeley train track, carrying signs and chanting. A train carrying troops bound for the Oakland Army Terminal headed straight for them. Suspenseful seconds passed while many stayed put. The train let out an immense rush of steam, confusing demonstrators as a shrill, piercing conductor's whistle rendered everything else chaotic but silent. One woman was pulled from the tracks moments before a collision, but other activists scrambling to escape the train's path could not see through clouds of steam; the train to Oakland soon advanced forward, carrying troops closer to war.

Throughout most of 1965 and the early months of 1966, Berkeley's Vietnam Day Committee (VDC), an early antiwar organization which sought to build a nationwide consensus against the war, held rallies and supported the quick withdrawal of U.S. military forces in Vietnam. The group formed on the University of California, Berkeley campus while the Free Speech Movement (FSM) trials were reaching their conclusions; the VDC gained a great deal of attention among the general public and respect among the growing minority of antiwar students because of its connections with the FSM, which had recently achieved victories for student rights

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through massive demonstrations on the Berkeley campus. Students and non-students alike joined the Vietnam Day Committee during and after participating in the FSM. Jerry Rubin, a former UCB student, and Stephen Smale, a University math professor, played large roles in the Vietnam Day Committee's founding and led the planning and implementation of its events. In May and October 1965, tens of thousands of students participated in a few of the Committee's largest public demonstrations. These early VDC demonstrations formed the basis of what they hoped was a national movement against American intervention in Vietnam. The group had no *official* stance on the Vietnam War, but its members and the speakers they invited tended to strongly emphasize facts that supported an antiwar position. The VDC's participants, with minimal variation, took a radical position: the group opposed not only the war but also the foreign policy guidelines and strict anti-communist rationale justifying it. In 1965, the Committee intended to establish the Bay Area as a leading center of radical dissent through which a national antiwar movement could develop.

The Vietnam Day Committee operated according to the principles of participatory democracy, and it had no exact definition of membership. It did not have a traditional hierarchical structure, and participants routinely debated the same matters; not even Smale or Rubin, who coordinated group activities more often than anyone in the early months of the organization, could finalize group plans without overwhelming support. Due to this organizational tendency, the VDC pursued varied forms of antiwar demonstration. While it enjoyed limited support on the Berkeley campus, its influence rarely extended into the rest of California or the United States. In retrospect, it is debatable whether average citizens in Berkeley sympathized or agreed with the Vietnam Day Committee, or even that they distinguished the group from the Free Speech Movement. Some openly expressed their disapproval of the group.

Likely, many Bay Area residents conflated the FSM and the VDC; their actions overlapped chronologically, and a majority of Americans supported their country's involvement in the Vietnam War in 1965.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to these popular public opinions, the VDC promoted radical antiwar positions: immediate troop withdrawal, physical opposition to the war effort in Vietnam, and mass civil disobedience. In Berkeley, as elsewhere, these positions alienated pro-war students and citizens in 1965.

The Berkeley Free Speech Movement, which began in 1964, broadly and moralistically sought to alter on-campus policies regarding student rights (especially free speech on campus about political matters). Yet, while the FSM was well-publicized and drew widespread criticism and moderate approval, only a small group—though still a significant number at the modern Berkeley “multiversity”—of students actively took part.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Heineman notes that only 3,000 of 27,000 Berkeley students participated in the FSM: “a minority movement with only 3,000 members was still large enough to disrupt a campus, paralyze administrators, and divide a faculty.”<sup>4</sup> The VDC similarly cultivated a small base of student support and sought to expand it in the assembly of a much larger social movement. Campus activism had a moralistic justification, but the VDC expanded the FSM's radical agenda beyond the campus to American foreign policy, attracting a small, though still sizable, group of supporters on the Berkeley

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<sup>2</sup> Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times, 1995), 190, in Steve Batterson, *Stephen Smale: The Mathematician Who Broke the Dimension Barrier* (Providence, Rhode Island: American Mathematical Society, 2000), 123-4.

<sup>3</sup> W.J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9. Clark Kerr, a UC Berkeley President, coined this term. It denoted the cooperation of governments and universities for the improvement of society based upon liberal principles: “The prestige of the university and the splendor of its accomplishments bolstered the government, while the authority of the government and its largess assisted the university. Modern society required a large government, and the government depended upon the university both to staff its bureaucracies with properly trained experts and to engage in research that enabled the government to improve its performance. The result was a new kind of large-scale, public university, which Kerr called the multiversity.”

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Heineman, *Put Your Bodies on the Wheels: Student Revolt in the 1960s* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 12.

campus and forming an early attempt at a national antiwar movement—along with the alienation of non-radicals that would characterize later antiwar activism nationwide.

Jerry Rubin, who had assumed a role of public leadership in the VDC, sought high attendance figures rather than disciplined, prudent demonstration tactics. The tensions between the educational merits of a teach-in and the social agenda of a mass protest were evident even in the planning of the first Vietnam Day. In some ways, the VDC equated media exposure with success. If a large number of activists marched on a given day or attempted to stop a train transporting troops to the Oakland Army Base, the VDC viewed it as a success. More media coverage was termed an even greater success. Rubin and the Vietnam Day Committee planned increasingly radical demonstrations to gain further media exposure and build a national antiwar movement; to the VDC, developing a sizable national movement and organizing radical antiwar demonstrations in the Bay Area were both simultaneously possible. However, the politics of confrontation and spectacle presented the VDC with difficulties.

The Vietnam Day Committee was a unique early antiwar organization in that it enjoyed large local participation and believed a national movement was possible as a result. The VDC coordinated actions in hopes of building a nationwide movement comprised of antiwar activists who would coordinate mass demonstrations and at times physically oppose American military involvement in Southeast Asia. This essay describes the birth of the Vietnam Day Committee and its exploits, both in terms of Bay Area student movements and campus activism on American college campuses beyond the Bay Area. It will explore specific concepts of VDC objectives and tactics. The organization's leadership shifted rapidly, and its popularity decreased sharply after 1965. The Vietnam Day Committee attempted to build a movement beyond the Bay Area, but its increasingly confrontational demonstrations hindered its possibilities. This essay

describes the role Jerry Rubin and Stephen Smale played in the VDC, the Vietnam Day teach-in in May 1965, the group's troop train demonstrations in August and International Days of Protest (IDP) in October of that year, and its attempts to build a larger antiwar movement through confrontational politics and radical causes: its main contention is that these tactics and positions on the Vietnam War found little support outside Berkeley but had a significant influence on the antiwar movement in the U.S. in 1965.

After the VDC's turn towards conventional politics and gradual decline, Rubin moved on to larger demonstrations across America, after a failed and surprisingly straight-laced attempt to run in Berkeley's mayoral election.<sup>5</sup> The Vietnam Day Committee folded while Rubin gained national stardom, but its early place within the broader antiwar movement is significant. It sought ever-increasing attendance in its demonstrations like later antiwar organizations, but it was one of the first to incorporate physical demonstrations against the war effort into its activities. Though its tactics in Berkeley were only somewhat effective, the VDC attempted to create an antiwar movement using them.

### **The Place of the VDC in Historiography of Vietnam-Era American Social Movements**

A few works about twentieth-century Bay Area history have analyzed the Vietnam Day Committee in some depth. W.J. Rorabaugh's *Berkeley at War*, for example, describes the VDC's exploits in the process of arguing that the Left remained mostly unaffected by extreme anticommunism in the mid-twentieth century. He presents Berkeley as an area which was politically different than almost the entire country: "...the Berkeley Left, when united, was not impotent. To leftists, both the large size of the HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] protests in 1960 and the success of the Free Speech Movement in 1964 offered

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<sup>5</sup> Jerry Rubin, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 50.

proof. In this environment SDS had little appeal, and the organization never became dominant in Berkeley.”<sup>6</sup> The inability of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a multi-issue, locally-varying antiwar and civil rights group which gained considerable nationwide popularity by the late 1960s, to influence the city’s political scene is a testament to the tradition of the left in Berkeley. The city had such a tradition of leftist politics that there were many organizations already supporting causes SDS introduced elsewhere. For this reason, Berkeley’s political landscape was ripe for the development of a radical antiwar movement and the thorough criticism of American foreign policy it entailed. Rorabaugh’s assertion that SDS had little bearing on Berkeley politics is important because it contrasts the general, and usually accurate, view among scholars of the 1960s that SDS mobilized antiwar groups on college campuses.

The Vietnam Day Committee was short-lived, and there are no monographs that analyze it specifically. Additionally, no comprehensive biography of Jerry Rubin—the VDC’s leader if there ever was one—exists. Scholars tend to group the VDC with other Bay Area organizations like the Free Speech Movement or Stop the Draft Week in Oakland in 1967. This grouping is not unwise, and it is necessary to consider the VDC in the context of other Bay Area social movements and other national antiwar efforts. However, it was one of the first anti-Vietnam War organizations anywhere; thus, it was unique even in the Bay Area. Scholars have also written about the VDC infrequently because of its rapid demise. Despite holding a well-attended series of speeches in May 1965, controversial but attention-grabbing troop train demonstrations in August of that year, and another teach-in<sup>7</sup> and a march in late October, the Vietnam Day

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<sup>6</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> The “teach-in” was a new manifestation of activism popular on college campuses during the Vietnam War. College administrators or faculty jointly or individually suspended classes for the purpose of discussing the Vietnam War and educating students about the origins of American involvement in the region. Students often played a major role in these discussions, which were not always supported by administrations. Student groups who opposed

Committee failed to gain public support outside the Bay Area—and then quickly ceased to exist. Rubin and Smale formed a unique but effective partnership based on the causes of immediate withdrawal and resistance to the war effort in as many noticeable ways as possible.

Scholars of the Vietnam era antiwar movement usually assert that SDS was the primary radical student organization and that it had a major influence on student activism for a number of years. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin even argue that “by the later 1960s, the times *were* ‘a-changin’ in ways that would make the FSM protest seem tame and old-fashioned in contrast... Within the New Left, the chief organizational expression and beneficiary of this trend would be a group called Students for a Democratic Society.” However, Isserman and Kazin also argue that the New Left, though it had shed “the old political and intellectual order,” was more diverse than just SDS. They contend that “one of the defining characteristics of student radicalism in the 1960s was its high degree of decentralization and spontaneity (SDSers played very little role, for example, in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, or in subsequent protests on the Berkeley campus).”<sup>8</sup> In Berkeley, the situation was much different than in most of the rest of the country. However, no matter which organization students belonged to, increasing numbers developed a radical critique of American foreign policy in the case of the Vietnam War.

Two detailed monographs about the antiwar movement—Tom Wells’ *The War Within: America’s Battle over Vietnam* and Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan’s *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975*—discuss the VDC only slightly in the process of uncovering the motivations of the larger antiwar movement. Wells and Zaroulis agree that most antiwar groups disagreed on objectives and tactics, frequently causing dissent. In fact,

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the Vietnam War organized teach-ins nearly as soon as the U.S. military committed ground troops in March 1965, and dozens of others followed. The trend continued as the United States’ role in Vietnam increased in the late 1960s.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176-8.

both assert that dissent against the Vietnam War was nearly the only thing that antiwar groups generally shared—every expression of that dissent was open to argument and debate. Wells argues that diversity of perspectives and objectives weakened an antiwar movement that was ultimately successful:

Often, participants at anti-war meetings could agree on little more than their opposition to U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Both the student and adult national antiwar coalitions split bitterly into opposing factions. Internal strife also destroyed Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the dominant radical youth group. The tendency of many protesters to combat each other rather than the war wreaked tremendous damage. It sapped energy from the movement that could have otherwise gone into building it. The strife also turned off recruits, alienated the public, demoralized activists, created personal enemies, and led protesters to drop out.<sup>9</sup>

The VDC experienced the same struggles Wells observes in the larger antiwar movement. Arguably, it met even greater difficulty than other antiwar groups because it embraced radical, confrontational methods and because it organized and acted well before most Americans opposed the Vietnam War. The VDC's political effectiveness was therefore limited to the Bay Area. Scholars of the VDC generally argue that it proved unsuccessful in the short term but that the group contributed to antiwar dissent in the Bay Area and established a radical antiwar position on moral grounds. Wells makes this assertion on a larger scale; he claims that early antiwar organizations advanced political causes that became more prominent years later and argues that these groups had a major impact.<sup>10</sup> However, a number of possible plans, most of which were confrontational, divided the Vietnam Day Committee and alienated its possible supporters outside Berkeley.

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<sup>9</sup> Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (New York: Holt, 1994), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Wells, *The War Within*, 6.



Despite a lack of specific scholarly attention on the VDC, a few authors have written about the group as a politically and socially unique one, even in the Bay Area. Gerard DeGroot has authored the most detailed, comprehensive studies of the VDC. He has written two articles which share many argumentative similarities but contain different overarching arguments. In “The Limits of Moral Protest and Participatory Democracy: The Vietnam Day Committee,” (1995) DeGroot asserts that the VDC employed tactics too radical for anyone outside Berkeley and limited its political effectiveness by insisting on participatory democracy. In another article, “‘Left, Left, Left!’: the Vietnam Day Committee, 1965-66,” included in his edited collection *Student Protest: The Sixties and After* (1998), DeGroot revises his argument. He maintains that the Vietnam Day Committee chose antiwar radicalism over antiwar cooperation and traces the limits of participatory democracy within the organization, sometimes within the same passages. DeGroot focuses on the Vietnam Day Committee’s use of spectacle in both articles. Though he relates the Committee’s tactics to those of the Free Speech Movement, DeGroot also asserts that the organization attempted to build a movement primarily through carefully orchestrated media exposure.

Though studies of the antiwar movement and the New Left do not usually discuss the Vietnam Day Committee in great detail, they do explore themes that relate closely to the organization’s history: participatory democracy, the development of a national antiwar movement, and advocacy of immediate withdrawal, among others. However, the VDC originated a direct, often confrontational method of antiwar activism that many other participants and organizations did not accept. Most monographs about sixties activism make at least some mention of the VDC. Scholarly opinions on the group differ widely. Melvin Small argues that the improvised organization of the International Days of Protest by the National Coordinating

Committee to End the War in Vietnam (NCCEWV), of which the VDC was a part, was effective and noteworthy for its inclusion of “at least 100,000 people” and its geographical scope encompassing “eighty American cities and several European capitals.”<sup>11</sup> However, Heineman contends that the organization was not unique or original, pointing out that Kent State University students successfully protested their administration’s prohibition of political speech on campus a year before the FSM and formed antiwar organizations months before Berkeley students formed the VDC.<sup>12</sup> Works that describe the VDC’s history in any capacity tend to emphasize its unique elements, such as its early founding and its lack of dependence on SDS—aspects that make the VDC’s attempts to build a radical national antiwar movement impressive in retrospect and legitimate in its historical moment. A close look at the VDC shows the group’s radical positions and its parallels with later antiwar activism.

### **Formation of the Vietnam Day Committee**

A small assortment of UC Berkeley students, including Jerry Rubin, formed the Vietnam Day Committee in collaboration with mathematics professor Stephen Smale in the spring of 1965. Scholars debate which Berkeley activists initiated this process; nonetheless, the VDC soon formed plans for a teach-in on the weekend of May 21-22, 1965. DeGroot argues that the Vietnam Day Committee “was the brainchild of Jerry Rubin.”<sup>13</sup> However, he also argues that faculty adviser Smale was the VDC’s “organizer” and Rubin its “inspiration.”<sup>14</sup>

Based on its partial leadership from Smale, the VDC pursued a radical, internationalist sort of antiwar protest. Smale was a “red diaper baby,” known internationally for his

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<sup>11</sup> Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Hearts and Minds* (Lanham, MD: SR, 2002), 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, “‘Left, Left, Left!’: The Vietnam Day Committee, 1965-66,” in *Student Protest: the Sixties and After* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 86.

<sup>14</sup> DeGroot, “Left, Left, Left!” 86.

mathematical theories, and a “veteran of the Young Progressives, the Labour Youth League and the Communist Party.”<sup>15</sup> Smale had traveled internationally, as had Rubin. Both had only been in Berkeley a short time, and as members of the Vietnam Day Committee they promoted the consideration of Vietnamese sovereignty, along with radical changes in American diplomacy.

The U.S. government’s policies in Vietnam caused student demonstrations on multiple campuses in March 1965. Many scholars of 1960s student activism agree that students expressed mass antiwar dissent for the first time after the introduction of ground troops that same month. Isserman and Kazin note that University of Michigan professors held the first teach-in in late March, and they argue that “hundreds” of schools held similar demonstrations in the following weeks.<sup>16</sup> Wells argues that “the grandest of the teach-ins took place at the University of California in Berkeley.”<sup>17</sup> The VDC formed to organize that teach-in and called it Vietnam Day, a thirty-six-hour event with a dozens of celebrity and activist speakers. The group planned for sizable marches after the rally.

The Vietnam Day Committee was a new organization, but it benefited from previous Berkeley groups and events. Besides drawing ideologically upon Berkeley’s traditionally steadfast Left, the group advanced its causes on the shoulders of the FSM. It was “one of the fruits of the FSM’s victory,” claimed the group.<sup>18</sup> The members of the VDC embraced and used the leftist tradition in Berkeley; indeed, Rubin and others had chosen to go to school in Berkeley at least partially because of the University’s prior student activism. Student members of the VDC had participated in far-left groups as Smale had in his youth. Leftist groups besides the FSM

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<sup>15</sup> DeGroot, “Left, Left, Left!” 86. “Red diaper baby” is a shorthand phrase for the child of former communists or communist sympathizers.

<sup>16</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Wells, *The War Within*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Vietnam Day Committee, *We Accuse: A Powerful Statement of the New Political Anger in America, as Revealed in the Speeches Given at the 36-Hour ‘Vietnam Day’ Protest in Berkeley California* (Berkeley: Diablo, 1965), 2.

preceded the VDC: W.J. Rorabaugh names the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, SLATE, and the Young Socialist Alliance (of which, Rorabaugh notes, VDC member Robert Scheer was a member).<sup>19</sup> The VDC's connections with the FSM, proved most advantageous. DeGroot posits that the VDC emerged out of the "freer, but also more tense" political environment on the Berkeley campus that the Free Speech Movement had brought about.<sup>20</sup> Faculty, too, had eventually supported the FSM, but not necessarily for its provocative tactics.

Rubin and Smale were the Vietnam Day Committee's two most influential members. They agreed to implement mass civil disobedience to advance their cause of immediate American troop withdrawal from Vietnam. Smale, an accomplished theoretical mathematician, worked in Berkeley's Department of Mathematics. He had traveled abroad frequently and had just arrived for a second teaching stint on the Berkeley campus after a short time at Columbia. Smale formed a proto-communist political consciousness while studying at the University of Michigan, developing his political beliefs, like his mathematical theories, with sensitivity and scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> He was well-versed in international politics, and he felt that "as chair of the Political Affairs Committee of the Berkeley Faculty Union, [he] had some standing to push the protest [against Vietnam]."<sup>22</sup> Rubin, another recent arrival to Berkeley, enrolled in January 1964 as a sociology graduate student but withdrew in favor of activism soon thereafter.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after enrolling, Rubin traveled to Cuba with other radicals and observed the beginnings of the FSM a month after returning to California, "watch[ing] the leaders of the Free Speech Movement create

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<sup>19</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, "Left, Left, Left!" 86.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Batterson, *Stephen Smale: The Mathematician Who Broke the Dimension Barrier* (Providence, Rhode Island: American Mathematical Society, 2000), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Batterson, *Stephen Smale*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> DeGroot, "Left, Left, Left!" 86.

a mass base.”<sup>24</sup> In what seemed like a culmination of radical influences, Rubin’s life took another turn: he was instrumental in the founding of a new political movement modeled after the recent successes of student activism in Berkeley. He made a direct connection: “Inspired by the FSM, a group of us organized ‘Vietnam Day.’”<sup>25</sup> The VDC aimed to change events much larger than student-administrative relations on the Berkeley campus, and as a result it was not as effective.

Utilizing participatory democracy created difficulties among VDC members. Smale consistently advised the group, but his participation declined after aggressively confrontational demonstrations in the second half of 1965. However, he believed in the antiwar cause so strongly that he briefly considered leaving his enviable teaching position to pursue activism full-time.<sup>26</sup> He and Rubin “tended to agree on most things, including the priority of producing a large spectacle and the important role that the media served in obtaining that end.”<sup>27</sup> The group found support for its positions as evidenced by its massive participation, but it valued the expression of its antiwar sentiment over the explanation of its position to outsiders—even pro-war residents of neighboring Oakland.

The VDC applied the FSM’s tactic of coordinating confrontational mass demonstrations to antiwar protest. The groups shared a similarity besides members and ideology: interactions with university administration. He argues that acting Chancellor Martin Meyerson and other Berkeley administrators treated the VDC more favorably because of the Free Speech Movement.<sup>28</sup> DeGroot, writing about the FSM and the increased student uncertainty and unrest

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<sup>24</sup> Rubin, *Do It!* 74-75; Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Rubin, *Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven*, 76.

<sup>26</sup> Rubin, *Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> Batterson, *Stephen Smale*, 99-100.

<sup>28</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 91. Perhaps “less repressively” could serve as a substitute to “more favorably.”

that resulted from greater political freedoms, asserts that “the VDC bubbled out of this political ferment” and that “the catalyst came in February 1965 when Lyndon Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam.”<sup>29</sup> Such a position suggests that the Vietnam Day Committee had unique objectives and that its idea for a teach-in was as original as its counterparts’ plans at the University of Michigan that same spring.

### **Vietnam Day Committee Actions & Tactics**

The Vietnam Day Committee organized demonstrations to build support beyond Berkeley, and the group thought such a social movement was entirely possible. As the VDC planned rallies, two organizational techniques were evident: the usage of media exposure as a means to build the VDC and dependence on large numbers of committed students, faculty, and community members. Famous entertainers and well-known activists spoke on the first day of the VDC’s first official event in late May of 1965, but local demonstrators and even a few students made speeches as well; individuals or groups made forty-five speeches or performances in all.<sup>30</sup> Norman Mailer, a well-known novelist who later accompanied Rubin on his famed march on the Pentagon in October 1967, spoke at the first Vietnam Day, as did FSM hero Mario Savio and Robert Scheer, who had written for *Ramparts Magazine* from Vietnam in 1964.<sup>31</sup> In 1965, Scheer published a serious, scholarly analysis titled *How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam*. In this work he argued that the U.S. Government violated the Geneva Accords. In Scheer’s view, the Viet Minh had maintained peace in Vietnam until elections, required by the Geneva accords, were not held.<sup>32</sup> Celebrities from philosopher Bertrand Russell and comedian

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<sup>29</sup> DeGroot, “Left, Left, Left!” 86.

<sup>30</sup> Vietnam Day Committee, *We Accuse*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 114; Vietnam Day Committee, *We Accuse*, 5, 6-22, 31-36.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Scheer, “How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam,” in *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade*, ed. Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Edward Albert (New York: Praeger, 1984), 283-85.

Dick Gregory also spoke, and the VDC made its own small statement at the end of the lengthy program. After “more than thirty hours” of debates and speeches, demonstrators “marched to the Berkeley draft board at Bancroft and Fulton; they hanged Lyndon Johnson in effigy, and nineteen draft cards were burned.”<sup>33</sup> This teach-in, not the first but the largest at that time, constitutes an important early antiwar demonstration, even if limited mostly to Berkeley.

Scholars question the importance of Vietnam Day and its attendance figures. The editors of *We Accuse*, writing just after the protest, justified their tactics and stressed that a new possibility for radical antiwar demonstration had emerged: “do-it-yourself” politics.” These editors called Vietnam Day the “largest teach-in, with the broadest speaker representation in the country.”<sup>34</sup> Zaroulis and Sullivan identify the first Vietnam Day as an influential demonstration that gained attention and helped spread and strengthen antiwar efforts nationwide.<sup>35</sup> The VDC experienced success in its first demonstration through sheer numbers. Wells estimates that “more than thirty thousand attended” with “perhaps twelve thousand at one time”; Heineman puts the figure at “twenty thousand” while pointing out the irony that “veterans of the Free Speech Movement” booed a grand total of two pro-war speakers; and Rorabaugh claims that “as many as 30,000” people attended but counters that “more students had been drawn...to see celebrities and to hear singers than to listen to Left arguments against the war.”<sup>36</sup> Jo Freeman, a Berkeley student in the massive crowd, shares that she “was there for most of those thirty-three hours,

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<sup>33</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 92.

<sup>34</sup> Vietnam Day Committee, *We Accuse*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 44.

<sup>36</sup> Wells, *The War Within*, 24; Heineman, *Put Your Bodies on the Wheels*, 114; Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 92.

even though I hadn't quite made up my mind on Viet Nam and did not find one-sided debates to be persuasive."<sup>37</sup>

The fledgling VDC only perceived greater opportunities for expansion and larger rallies. Rubin sums up his assessment: "The teach-in was a bore. Too many words and not enough people."<sup>38</sup> FSM leader Jack Weinberg admitted that Vietnam Day was "telling us what we didn't really know."<sup>39</sup> This VDC teach-in (biased though it was) and march set an early precedent for mass antiwar demonstrations, but the VDC's insistence on immediate withdrawal hindered its early attempts to build a national movement in May of 1965. It was already part of an embryonic antiwar movement; in an official statement at Vietnam Day, VDC members including Rubin, Smale, another professor Paul Ivory, and others officially stated that their group formed part of the Madison, Wisconsin-based National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> Frank Emspak, a recent University of Wisconsin alumnus and potential graduate student, had formed the NCCEWV during the 1964-65 school year as a state-recognized nonprofit organization so he could become eligible for in-state tuition and organize nationally against the

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<sup>37</sup> Jo Freeman, *At Berkeley in the Sixties: The Education of an Activist, 1961-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 257. Freeman challenges the notion that Vietnam Day was a legitimate teach-in: "Although advertised as a debate, speakers who supported U.S. policy withdrew, claiming that the event was too biased for their views to get a fair hearing."

<sup>38</sup> Rubin, *Do It!* 40. Of course, Rubin did not publish the work in which he shared this view until 1970, but it still indicates his mindset as an antiwar organizer both in 1965 and 1970—two very different years as far as nationwide antiwar activism is concerned. In 1965 the Vietnam War was a small military commitment and the American public did not know a great deal about it. Cities like Berkeley formed isolated pockets of antiwar dissent, and Rubin was already an outspoken critic of the war. By 1970, troop increases and conflicting reports of military success stirred a more widespread public distrust of the war effort. Students on campuses of all types more often confronted administrators and police, and growing numbers of students attended antiwar rallies. Moderate working adults also began to publicly criticize the war. Rubin, a countercultural celebrity fresh from his conviction in the Chicago conspiracy trial that year, expanded his efforts at attention-grabbing tactics. Jerry Rubin had changed in some ways, but the political orientation of the U.S. population had undergone serious changes too.

<sup>39</sup> "Berkeley in the Sixties," VHS, Directed by Mark Kitchell (Kitchell Films, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Vietnam Day Committee, *We Accuse*, 160; Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973), 219. Chapters formed in Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Madison, Milwaukee, New York, Oakland, and Portland soon after the NCCEWV established itself in 1965.



Vietnam War.<sup>41</sup> Only weeks before Vietnam Day the VDC consisted only of Rubin, Smale, Clara Smale (Stephen's wife), Morris Hirsch (another Berkeley professor) and Smale's advisee Mike Shub, according to Batterson.<sup>42</sup> Other students played less visible roles in the group: Freeman names Syd Stapleton, a member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP); Bettina Aptheker, who was put on "disciplinary probation" for her actions at a VDC demonstration; and Steve Weissman, who was active in the FSM before the VDC.<sup>43</sup>

Over the next few months, the Vietnam Day Committee's tactics became more confrontational and the group began to implement strategies that garnered publicity and attention. When events occurred, media receptivity largely determined the nation's knowledge of the VDC. The movement, based on its success in late May, grew over the summer. The group's membership was 400 by summer 1965; the group had "about two dozen real activists and ten paid staff who worked out of a shabby house at 2407 Fulton Street."<sup>44</sup> The group passed around a plate at rallies to collect funds for its staff, but Rubin "could draw on a trust fund and did not have to work for a living."<sup>45</sup> The VDC's actions in late summer 1965—and the way in which it coordinated these actions—demonstrates the group's increasing use of publicized mass demonstration to attempt to build a national antiwar movement. On August 13, the *Berkeley Barb* published its first issue; most of it was devoted to the VDC.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Frank Emspak, interview by author, Madison, WI, August 8, 2011. Emspak said that organizing hundreds of groups with various motivations into a national antiwar movement in 1965 was "far more chaotic than most people today realize."

<sup>42</sup> Batterson, *Stephen Smale*, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Freeman, *At Berkeley in the Sixties*, 274-78.

<sup>44</sup> DeGroot, "Left, Left, Left!" 90.

<sup>45</sup> Gerard DeGroot, "The Limits of Moral Protest and Participatory Democracy: The Vietnam Day Committee," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (Feb. 1995), 104; Heineman, *Put Your Bodies on the Wheels*, 113.

<sup>46</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 94.

This first *Barb* reported the group's radical demonstration: an attempt to block trains transporting troops through Berkeley on August 6-7. One article claimed that the train "forced its way into the ranks of demonstrators" and later posed a question: "WHAT ARE RAILWAY ENGINEERS? AUTOMATONS OR HUMAN BEINGS?"<sup>47</sup> Another article was subtitled "GI's Cheer; Trainmen Jeer." Although the VDC's demonstration ultimately failed to stop the train, it accomplished another objective: it informed a great number of people about the VDC's existence through media coverage. Wells notes that "soldiers...didn't appear sympathetic; nor were any trains stopped" yet the VDC "generated reams of newsprint" for its dangerous, attention-grabbing tactics.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Rorabaugh asserts that protesters were forced away by police, but those who attempted to meet the train at another point were "followed" by "police and television crews."<sup>49</sup> The VDC had publicity and intended to use it to build opposition to the Vietnam War.

The VDC demonstrated remarkable skill in organizing this controversial demonstration that likely turned many potential supporters away from its cause. The group established a "phone tree" to inform demonstrators to assemble at the Berkeley tracks. The VDC's network stretched to Nevada.<sup>50</sup> Rubin claimed that the VDC "ran up bills of \$2000 a month calling all ends of the earth to mobilize people against the war in Vietnam."<sup>51</sup> Such tactics were successful in the short term, considering that the organization aimed to gain members through controversial actions. Rubin's and the VDC's definition of success was murky at best. The VDC aligned itself with many idealistic student activists and coordinated widely differing projects; the group's divergent goals limited its potential to increase attendance or develop a national following. DeGroot clearly

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<sup>47</sup> "Black Day for Berkeley," *Berkeley Barb*, August 13, 1965.

<sup>48</sup> Wells, *The War Within*, 50.

<sup>49</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 93.

<sup>50</sup> DeGroot, "The Limits of Moral Protest and Participatory Democracy," 109.

<sup>51</sup> Rubin, *Do It!* 37.

states his position: “given that the main goal of the VDC was always publicity, the troop train protests were successful. They focused attention upon the escalation of the war—not to mention upon the VDC.”<sup>52</sup> As the group became more radical and drew more attention to itself and its cause, phone trees and other grassroots types of mobilization proved to be effective. Any move to engage in reasoned debate and abandon mass civil disobedience was contrary to the organization’s goal: confrontational politics to promote the rapid, decisive end to American involvement in Vietnam.

The Vietnam Day Committee’s approach to building a movement may have gotten it attention, but this approach was difficult to maintain. Rubin wrote that Vietnam Day: “taught us to believe in the *Apocalyptic Action*. History could be changed in a day. An hour. A second. By the right action at the right time. Our tactic was exaggeration. Everything was ‘the biggest,’ ‘the most massive.’ Our goal was to create crises which would grab everybody’s attention and force people to change their lives overnight.”<sup>53</sup> This rhetoric continued while the VDC planned what was supposed to have been its largest event on October 15 and 16, 1965. DeGroot summarizes the VDC’s dilemma succinctly: during the summer the group organized a “second teach-in...to coincide with the ‘International Days of Protest against the Vietnam War’”. The VDC had to bear the burden of its own success: in order to appear thriving, it had to improve upon the 21 May extravaganza.”<sup>54</sup> Hence, the VDC sought to specialize in coordinating provocative mass demonstrations, linking its national designs with confrontational, attention-driven methods.

The VDC promoted itself through group decisions, massive demonstrations, and symbolic opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War. Predictably, such a

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<sup>52</sup> DeGroot, “The Limits of Moral Protest and Participatory Democracy,” 109.

<sup>53</sup> Rubin, *Do It!* 37.

<sup>54</sup> DeGroot, “Left, Left, Left!” 94.

movement was extremely difficult for the VDC to maintain. Isserman and Kazin argue that the group's troop train demonstrations were part of a "trend toward ever more theatrical confrontations" in national antiwar activism. The VDC initiated a trend that became more popular in national antiwar demonstrations: "the standard of political effectiveness used to measure and justify the campus antiwar movement's embrace of ever more militant tactics increasingly became the sense of gratification and commitment such tactics provided to participants."<sup>55</sup> Such tactics would alienate pro-war, moderate, and antiwar Americans in most regions of the country by the late 1960s, even as many began to consider the merits of withdrawal. Heineman relates the VDC's organizational stress to Rubin's personal philosophy: his techniques promoted enjoyment, but "[he] realized, to maintain the level of excitement that Boomer students were coming to expect from their political activism, each successive confrontation had to be more violent."<sup>56</sup> While the VDC was not a violent organization, Heineman's argument is true in terms of the group's confrontational politics and radical tactics.

The VDC intended that the October event introduce its antiwar views to greater numbers of people after the August troop train demonstrations. In the late summer, plans called for four general sections of speeches: "The War in Vietnam," "Effects of the War Machine on American Society," "American Democracy—Promise and Reality," and "How Changes Can Be Made in America."<sup>57</sup> These titles suggest that the VDC was founded on more than a narrow critique of American foreign policy; they intended radical domestic changes to the nation itself. The group further developed plans just before the march: a teach-in was to be held all day on Friday, October 15, and a then a march to the Oakland Army Terminal. The VDC organized these events

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<sup>55</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 191.

<sup>56</sup> Heineman, *Put Your Bodies on the Wheels*, 114.

<sup>57</sup> "Schedule & Program," *Berkeley Barb*, August 20, 1965.

as “part of the International Days of Protest,” an event the group designed.<sup>58</sup> Demonstrating the beginnings of a national antiwar movement, Jerry Rubin had proposed the IDP at the Assembly of Unrepresented People (AUP) in Washington, D.C. in early August.<sup>59</sup> Speakers played a smaller role in the October demonstration than in May’s Vietnam Day, and the group devoted its efforts to organizing the march, confirming its commitment to escalating radical, confrontational actions. The Oakland city government, into whose boundaries the VDC planned to march, “waited until the eve of the march to deny the VDC a parade permit, thus leaving insufficient time for a legal challenge.”<sup>60</sup> The total process of securing the permit took around a month. The protest of October 15 drew between 10,000 and 15,000 students and other activists, and the next day’s march drew “two to five thousand.”<sup>61</sup>

The march did not meet the VDC’s optimistic expectations. Marchers encountered Oakland police and Hell’s Angels at the border to the city. After a group of pseudo-leaders who planned to convene should anything dangerous arise did just that, this nine-member committee voted to turn back to Berkeley rather than risk physical harm, overriding the votes of both Smale and Rubin, who “preferred an immediate sit-down.” To DeGroot, the choice to turn rightward to Berkeley instead of left into a chaotic, violent situation in Oakland was symbolic of the VDC’s abandonment of participatory democracy.<sup>62</sup> At this point, the VDC abandoned confrontational politics for its own safety. Such politics resulted in positive publicity and the opportunity to expand, but the VDC’s turn toward Berkeley in October 1965 limited its influence to the Bay Area. Rubin, the headline-grabbing VDC leader of sorts, had already traveled nationwide in an

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<sup>58</sup> “Mass Arrests Won’t Stop March –VDC,” *Berkeley Barb*, October 1, 1965.

<sup>59</sup> Wells, *The War Within*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> DeGroot, “Left, Left, Left!” 96.

<sup>61</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 96-97.

<sup>62</sup> DeGroot, “Left, Left, Left!” 96-97.

attempt to build national antiwar alliances. The VDC formed the basis of a small national antiwar movement, as evidenced by its cooperation with the NCCEWV and the AUP, but its influence waned by late 1965.

### **The VDC's Disparate Goals and Its Dissolution**

As the VDC attempted to pursue a variety of broad radical antiwar objectives, it further divided its organizational energy. One tactic was fairly evident in the October protests: the rhetoric of an international protest movement. The group's international designs, based on optimistic expectations of worldwide disapproval of American military policy, actually served to limit the VDC's influence in the U.S. by dividing its already limited energies. Stephen Smale claimed that fifteen American cities would protest on that day as would a VDC chapter in London and faculty at the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina.<sup>63</sup> While these demonstrations took place, they were very small. The *Berkeley Barb* claimed that "worldwide there will be mass demonstrations in at least twenty countries on every continent including Australia" with over 200,000 people projected to participate.<sup>64</sup> The VDC hoped to pursue international demonstrations to promote mass civil disobedience and advocate immediate withdrawal in an effort to build its base. The organization expressed positions that would develop into full-fledged antiwar protest both in the United States and abroad, but it had little support nationally because it directly confronted the American war effort in its demonstrations. But the VDC had broader intentions; according to Stephen Smale, "our leadership consisted

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<sup>63</sup> "Vietnam Com Set to Defy Army Base," *Berkeley Barb*, September 10, 1965.

<sup>64</sup> "UC Center of World-wide Peace Action," *Berkeley Barb*, October 15, 1965; NCCEWV Records Box 4, Folder 1—"Projects: International Days of Protest, 1965, Oct. 15-16"—Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin. A NCCEWV report from October 19, 1965 mentions 18 foreign nations on several continents in addition to thirty-three cities or regions in the U.S. The NCCEWV staff (unsurprisingly) saw this outpouring of demonstration as a major shift in the American left: "...a feeling arose of real togetherness, of real communication, no longer talking to ourselves, of not fearing our friends because our enemies were redbaiting. This is a significant change from the 1950s. Not only were we acting together on a national scale, but on an international scale as well."

especially of setting examples of dramatic actions which could resonate nationally and internationally.”<sup>65</sup> In a sense, the group succeeded, but it only achieved moderate success at the expense of its goals within the United States.

The group’s international designs were significant even if unsuccessful and unproductive. These failures exemplify the group’s emphasis on a mass movement at the expense of specific national goals. The VDC contacted a considerable number of peace groups worldwide in preparing for the IDP. Dr. Thomas Basckai of the International Institute for Peace in Vienna, Austria, wrote to the NCCEWV office in Madison to communicate his group’s solidarity with the VDC: “With great interest we follow your preparations for Vietnam Day [temporary shorthand for the second VDC demonstration] on October 15/16.”<sup>66</sup> Ichiyo Muto of the Japan “Peace for Vietnam” Committee wrote from Tokyo to Frank Emspak that his group was “planning to hold a protest teach-in in Tokyo on Oct. 16 as part of the proposed international action to protest the Vietnam War.”<sup>67</sup> Alex Cramer reported from Montreal that students from McGill and Sir George Williams universities demonstrated in accordance with the VDC’s plans, and he relayed that Toronto’s VDC chapter partially sponsored a picket of the American consulate there.<sup>68</sup> Demonstrations were held in many other nations and in cities large and small across the U.S. The VDC’s attempt to develop national and international antiwar movements at once indicates the scope of the group’s expanding intentions and the breadth of its diverse goals. It even pursued success in electoral politics: Robert Scheer, a Berkeley radical antiwar organizer and scholar, ran for Congress with large but not total support from the VDC.

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<sup>65</sup> Stephen Smale, email correspondence with author, May 11, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Basckai to NCCEWV October 4, 1965, NCCEWV Records Box 4, Folder 12—“Austria, Correspondence, 1965-1967”—Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>67</sup> Ichiyo Muto to Frank Emspak October 1, 1965, NCCEWV Records Box 5, Folder 13—“Japan, 1965-1967”—Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>68</sup> Alex Cramer to Joan Levenson & NCCEWV October 18, 1965, NCCEWV Records Box 5, Folder 3—“Canada: Lancaster, N.B.-Regina, Sask.”—Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

Scholars of the VDC characterize the group's post-1965 actions as ineffectual to different degrees. "By early 1966," Rorabaugh avers, "the VDC was more than an ad hoc committee to protest the war and less than a political movement."<sup>69</sup> Rorabaugh claims that "Berkeley radicals increasingly doubted the value of electoral politics" after "militants had taken over the VDC"; DeGroot argues that "the more credible Scheer's campaign became, the more he distanced himself from the VDC"; and Todd Gitlin names the VDC and Scheer's campaign as distinct events within Berkeley's "full decade...of protest and cultural ferment."<sup>70</sup>

By the time Robert Scheer ran for moderate incumbent Democrat Jeffrey Cohelan's seat in the House of Representatives, the VDC had suffered major setbacks. Berkeley radicals observed Scheer's defeat amidst other gradual VDC failures. The march planned for October did not take place until the next month. The group's optimism stagnated through the winter months of 1965 and 1966. In April 1966, the VDC hosted speeches on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley in which speakers addressed the crowd from a fire escape. The event "attracted four thousand people," but the VDC organizers who planned this event—who, like in October 1965, had not secured a permit—went to trial only to be saved by a paperwork technicality.<sup>71</sup> Rorabaugh proposes that antiwar and Socialist objectives clashed in the Scheer campaign, and "the VDC split in twain."<sup>72</sup> VDC headquarters were bombed in April 1966, and by August 1966 the University had banned the VDC on the grounds that many of its members were nonstudents, reflecting not only the distrust that those from outside Berkeley held towards the organization but also the limited victories of the FSM.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 98.

<sup>70</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 105; DeGroot, "The Limits of Participatory Democracy," 116; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 353.

<sup>71</sup> Wells, *The War Within*, 72. The technicality was that the indictment had the wrong date listed.

<sup>72</sup> Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 98.

<sup>73</sup> DeGroot, "Left, Left, Left!" 97.



The Vietnam Day Committee's confrontational tactics and radical antiwar position remained the same after 1965, but Rubin used methods that originated in the VDC and tried to build a national movement through other organizations. These goals eventually necessitated Rubin's move past the Vietnam Day Committee to other organizations. Founding members of the group left it before Berkeley officially banned it from the campus.<sup>74</sup> Rubin committed himself to ever-larger media events in an attempt to develop a radical national antiwar movement and later wrote of it: "In the 1960s I helped create a cultural model and a national youth organization, the yippies. I participated in the early stages of the antiwar movement, from troop-train demonstrations and mass marches to civil disobedience, in Berkeley from 1965 to 1967. I helped organize the October, 1967, march on the Pentagon, and was one of the organizers of the Chicago demonstrations during the 1968 Democratic Convention. . . I helped develop a style of guerrilla theater, humor, and politics."<sup>75</sup> All of Rubin's activities were based upon the development of a larger movement, through media coverage if a great number of people had attended an event or through ambitious rhetoric if they had not. As he participated in increasingly radical, massive, and dangerous demonstrations, he carried out his original intentions with the VDC. As Rubin tried to spread the VDC's confrontational politics nationwide, he would develop his own personal tactics in similar activism. The VDC's role in the antiwar movement, then, is quite significant.

The Vietnam Day Committee attracted thousands of people to its demonstrations for a short period in 1965 and 1966. It expressed antiwar views which became immensely popular as America escalated its commitment in Vietnam, but in 1965 these views met minimal public support anywhere outside the University of California, Berkeley campus. As established by

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<sup>74</sup> DeGroot, "Left! Left! Left!" 97.

<sup>75</sup> Rubin, *Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven*, 5.

Rorabaugh's *Berkeley at War*, Isserman and Kazin's *America Divided*, and other scholars' works, the Left had a much stronger influence in Berkeley than elsewhere in the country. This political climate was the source of the Bay Area minority which passionately supported the VDC. DeGroot places the VDC within the context of the antiwar movement as a whole: "Within Berkeley, the group was influential in combating ignorance and apathy about United States policy in South-East Asia. But that is a very limited success."<sup>76</sup>

The Vietnam Day Committee's formation in spring 1965 and its actions in May, August, and October of that year provided publicity and built expectations. Rubin's theory of radical protest worked too well: people expected greater successes of each demonstration while many Americans only gingerly accepted a broad rejection of the Vietnam War and its justifications. Though Rubin's later activist endeavors were much larger and nationally recognized, his tactics—marching on the Pentagon in 1967 and helping to organize radical protests at the Democratic National Convention in August 1968—alienated Americans in the same way the VDC had earlier. His celebrity increased more rapidly than the antiwar movement and expanded nationwide. The VDC's goals were not well-defined, but, generally, it worked to physically stop the United States military's war effort through mass demonstration and confrontational politics. This may have helped the VDC gain a following—and it definitely helped Jerry Rubin develop as a national radical media celebrity—but it did little to stop the broader war effort or to change the minds of most Americans. It did, however, introduce radicalism into the antiwar movement, and its limited successes influenced later mass demonstrations against the war, especially on college campuses.

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<sup>76</sup> DeGroot, "Left, Left, Left!" 98.

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