

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A DISSIDENT BLUE BLOOD:  
REVEREND WILLIAM SLOANE  
COFFIN AND THE VIETNAM  
ANTIWAR MOVEMENT

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A long and bloody conflict, United States military action in Vietnam tore the fabric of American political and social life during the 1960s and 1970s. A wide coalition of activists opposed the war on political and religious grounds, arguing the American military campaign and the conscription of soldiers to be immoral. The Reverend William Sloane Coffin Jr., an ordained Presbyterian minister and chaplain at Yale University, emerged as a leader of religious antiwar activists.

This project explores the evolution of Coffin's antiwar rhetoric between the years 1962 and 1973. I argue that Coffin relied on three modes of rhetoric to justify his opposition to the war. In the prophetic

mode, which dominated Coffin's discourse in 1966, Coffin relied on the tradition of Hebraic prophecy to warn that the United States was straying from its values and that undesirable consequences would occur as a result. After seeing little change to the direction of U.S. foreign policy, Coffin shifted to an existential mode of rhetoric in early 1967. The existential mode urged draft-age men to not cooperate with the Federal Selective Service System, and to accept any consequences that occurred as a result. Federal prosecutors indicted Coffin and four other antiwar activists in January 1968 for conspiracy aid and abet draft resister in violation of the Selective Service Act. Chastened by his prosecution and subsequent conviction, Coffin adopted a reconciling mode of discourse that sought to reintegrate antiwar protesters into American society by advocating for amnesty.

A DISSIDENT BLUE BLOOD: REVEREND WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN  
AND THE VIETNAM ANTIWAR MOVEMENT

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: William Sloane Coffin as a Religious Dissident.....	1
Historical Research in Perspective .....	6
Vietnam Antiwar Movement Scholarship.....	6
Historical Studies of Coffin .....	16
Rhetorical Research in Perspective.....	17
Rhetorical Studies of the Antiwar Movement.....	17
Rhetorical Studies of Coffin .....	20
Research Procedure .....	21
Object of Investigation .....	21
Modes of Analysis.....	24
Organization of the Project.....	25
CHAPTER TWO: Coffin and the Prophetic Mode, 1962-1966.....	29
Prophetic Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature.....	32
Prophecy and the Judeo-Christian Tradition.....	33
Studies of Coffin and Prophetic Rhetoric.....	38
Coffin, Prophetic Rhetoric, and the Civil Rights Movement .....	40
“The Church and Civil Rights”: A Rationale for Activism in the Prophetic Mode.....	42
Coffin and the Early Antiwar Movement.....	48
“The Spirit of Lamech” .....	48
“Plea to the President” .....	51
“Why Are the Clergy Concerned About Vietnam?” .....	57
Conclusion .....	65
CHAPTER THREE: The Existential Mode, 1966-1967 .....	66
Existentialism: A Brief Survey.....	70
Defining Existentialism.....	70
Existentialism in the 1960s United States .....	75
Laying the Groundwork for Draft Resistance.....	77
Personal Correspondence .....	78
“On Civil Disobedience” .....	80
Reactions to “On Civil Disobedience” .....	86
Implementing Draft Resistance .....	90

The Boston Resistance Protests .....	93
Coffin’s Arlington Street Church Speech .....	94
The Justice Department Speech .....	98
The Resistance Aftermath .....	101
“On Martin Luther” .....	105
Conclusion .....	108
CHAPTER FOUR: The Trial and the Reconciling Mode, 1968-1975 .....	110
After the Indictment .....	115
Meet the Press .....	118
The Battell Chapel Sermon of February 4, 1968.....	121
The National Resistance Day Rally.....	127
The Trial of the Boston 5 .....	129
Coffin’s Testimony .....	132
The Verdict.....	137
After the Trial .....	138
Implications of the Trial.....	139
Remnants of the Existential Mode .....	142
The Emergence of the Reconciling Mode.....	143
The Bryant Park Speech .....	143
1970-1971 .....	147
Amnesty: Reintegrating the Antiwar Movement .....	148
The Battell Chapel Sermon of April 16, 1972 .....	149
Remarks to the National Conference on Amnesty, May 5, 1973....	153
Conclusion .....	155
AFTERWORD.....	157
References .....	166

## CHAPTER ONE

## WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN AS A RELIGIOUS DISSIDENT

The 1960s were a time of social and political turmoil in the United States. The civil rights movement, urban race riots, and women's liberation shook domestic politics. In foreign affairs, millions of draft-age men found themselves faced with the possibility of serving in a jungle war thousands of miles away. As one commentator later argued, the sheer number of Americans affected by the Vietnam War was staggering: "30 million women and 30 million men reached draft age during the war; ten million of the men wore the uniform, three million of them went to Vietnam. About 300,000 were wounded and nearly 60,000 died" (Wheeler 1985, 749). But despite hundreds of antiwar protests between 1964 and 1975—some of them violent—the Vietnam antiwar movement struggled to change the direction of U.S. foreign policy. In a September 1967 staff editorial, *Commonweal*, a Catholic newsmagazine critical of the war, lamented the growing policy stalemate:

The war in Vietnam, the mounting fury in the ghettos, and the whole intent and direction of the poverty program have shattered not only President Johnson's "consensus," a fragile thing to begin with, but more importantly, they have also brought the various forms of American political dissent to a dead end. The dissent was first of all verbal: university debates, Congressional speeches,



books, articles, petitions to the President, full-page advertisements in newspapers, even television jokes. Then the dissent became more active: sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, riots, and, on a smaller scale, refusal to pay taxes and a willingness to go to jail or Canada rather than be drafted. But none of these forms of dissent has managed to change the drift of American policy, at home or abroad. On the contrary, the war has escalated again and again, white resistance to Negro demands has hardened; Congress steadily hacks away at the poverty program (“Dissent at a Dead End” 1967, 597).

Politically, the war had significant long-term consequences for United States public policy. Although a Democratic president escalated the war, Republicans accused antiwar Democrats of opposing a strong national defense (Buzzanco 1996, 3). Democrats lost the 1968 and 1972 presidential elections and fared poorly in Congressional races at least partly because of the war (Levy 1991, 87). The antiwar movement shook American culture. As Levy asserts: “The debate over Vietnam was clearly a moment of critical and traumatic self-scrutiny for the American people” (1991, xiii).

Vietnam antiwar protesters are commonly remembered as countercultural radicals who rejected American society even though they only represented a small portion of the movement: “This myth—antiwar protesters as stoned hippies—officially promoted by guardians of the

standing order, stands alongside the myth of antiwar activists as agents or dupes of the international communist conspiracy. Both die hard in America” (Farber 1992, 21). Scholarly accounts remain unsettled about the historical and cultural significance of the Vietnam antiwar movement, or what lessons can be learned as a result. As Melvin Small (1987) claims, “We still know little about how to attract the attention and sympathies of the president and his or her advisors on major foreign policy issues” (185). Within the field of communication, approximately a dozen previous studies have examined dimensions of the antiwar movement. These studies have typically employed an instrumental view of rhetoric, concerned with the effects produced by that discourse.<sup>1</sup>

We know even less about the ways that religious protesters contributed to the antiwar movement. Rhetorical histories of the 1960s have not fully accounted for the role of religion in the American political left. For example, in their survey of American religious discourse in *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (2009), James Darsey and Joshua R. Ritter claim, “Too little attention has been paid to the moral grounding of much of the political activity on the left during the 1960s, perhaps because not all of it enjoyed the benison of the church” (567). Yet Darsey and Ritter’s narrative emphasizes the countercultural strains of religion in the 1960s: “Children of the sixties made the pilgrimage to Tibet;

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<sup>1</sup> Bitzer’s influential definition of the rhetorical situation argues that the goal of rhetoric is to modify an exigence, or “imperfection marked by urgency” through the persuasion of an audience capable of modifying the exigence (1968, 6).

explored Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism; sought themselves in sweat lodges and in the books of Carlos Casteneda; and flirted with paganism” (567-568). Although Darsey and Ritter are correct to assert that new religious movements arose in the 1960s, their account ignores a coalition of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish activists who strongly protested the war and attempted to influence foreign policy.

In what follows, I offer an account of the religious antiwar movement’s rhetoric, by focusing on explaining the characteristics and outcomes of the antiwar discourse of a single figure—namely, Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. An ordained Presbyterian minister and campus chaplain at Yale University, Coffin’s significance to the religious antiwar movement is unmistakable. The *Encyclopedia of Christianity* calls Coffin a leader and icon of the Vietnam antiwar movement (Burkholder 1997, 114). Appelbaum (2009) claims that “mainline Protestants like William Sloane Coffin became strong public voices in the antiwar movement. Many individuals and congregations worked at the grassroots level” (203).

Born to a wealthy family in New York City in 1924, Coffin studied at the elite Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts and finished high school at Phillips Andover Academy in 1942 (Goldstein 2004, 22, 28). Coffin served in the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1947, eventually earning the rank of second lieutenant (*ibid.*, 37). After the war, he earned a bachelor’s degree in Russian from Yale University in 1949 (*ibid.*, 65). He completed

one year of postgraduate study at Union Theological Seminary in New York (ibid., 73). He served as a CIA agent during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, where he used his Russian language skills to train Soviet expatriates as American spies (ibid., 76). After leaving the CIA, Coffin enrolled at Yale Divinity School, and eventually earned a masters' of divinity degree in 1956 (ibid., 97). He then began a series of chaplaincies, serving at Philips Andover Academy for the 1956-57 academic year, at Williams College for the 1957-58 academic year, and eventually became chaplain at Yale University in 1958. He remained at Yale until 1975.

During the 1960s, Coffin became an outspoken supporter of the civil rights movement in the American South and later, a leader of the religious branch of the Vietnam antiwar movement. In the following chapters, I shall argue that in spite of several historical accounts which examine Coffin's antiwar activism, rhetorical scholars have mostly overlooked his Vietnam-era texts. Through analysis of Coffin's public discourse from 1962 through 1973, my dissertation aims to provide a more nuanced account of his participation in the antiwar movement. I shall argue that as the social and political circumstances evolved, Coffin employed distinct modes of rhetoric to express his opposition to the war.

This chapter begins with a survey of previous research, broadly grouped into historical and rhetorical categories. Within both categories, I first examine general accounts of the Vietnam antiwar movement, and

shift to more specific accounts of Coffin. I then offer a general description of my research method and outlines of subsequent chapters.

### **Historical Research in Perspective**

Historical accounts acknowledge that Coffin and other religious leaders played a distinct role in the Vietnam antiwar movement. A smaller body of literature deals with Coffin specifically, and seeks to contextualize his social activism in the 1960s and 70s.

#### *Vietnam Antiwar Movement Scholarship*

There is voluminous historical scholarship about the Vietnam antiwar movement in the United States.<sup>2</sup> My review of literature identifies five types of accounts: (1) synoptic accounts of the overall antiwar movement and the 1960s, (2) accounts about policymakers opposed to the war, (3) accounts about the religious antiwar movement, (4) specialized accounts about the antiwar movement in specific geographic and cultural communities, and (5) studies of public opinion toward the antiwar movement. Coffin is mentioned frequently in the first and third types of accounts; however, his rhetorical activities are generally not subjected to close analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> In an essay about the historiography of the Vietnam-era antiwar movements Charles Chatfield (2004) classifies previous studies by date published. These categories include: wartime accounts from 1965-1975, histories and memoirs from 1978-1988, and historical syntheses and specialized studies from 1988-2004 (485).

*Synoptic Accounts.* Numerous monograph-length studies have provided narratives of the antiwar movement from a synoptic perspective. The earliest of such accounts, by Thomas Powers (1973), focuses on antiwar events between 1964 and 1968. More recent studies, including Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan (1984), Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield (1990), Tom Wells (1994), Adam Garfinkle (1995), and Melvin Small (2002) trace the antiwar movement from its beginnings in the early 1960s through the evacuation of the last Americans from Saigon in 1975. Other synoptic accounts have focused on the 1960s more generally, by examining the Vietnam antiwar movement alongside other contemporaneous social movements.<sup>3</sup> Most synoptic accounts of the antiwar movement begin by describing precursors to the movement in the 1950s and early 1960s. These events include the anti-nuclear movement of the 1950s (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990), Barry Goldwater's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 1964 (Powers 1973), the civil rights movement (Small 2002), and self-immolations committed by radical pacifists (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984).

Synoptic accounts offer conflicting judgments about the antiwar movement's consequences. Powers asserts that the antiwar movement "created the necessary conditions for the shift in official policy from

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<sup>3</sup> General historical treatments of the 1960s that include coverage of the Vietnam antiwar movement include O'Neill (1971), Shachtman (1983), Gitlin (1987), Farber and Foner (1994), Koerselman (1987), Steigerwald (1995), Isserman and Kazin (2000), McWilliams (2000), Heale (2001), Lytle (2006), and Hayden (2009).

escalation to disengagement” (1973, 318). Zaroulis and Sullivan avoid drawing specific conclusions, arguing that “[T]he effectiveness of [the antiwar movement’s] tactics is still a matter for debate; probably it always will be” (1984, xii). DeBenedetti and Chatfield similarly avoid drawing effects-based conclusions, but claim that in-fighting between liberals and radicals hindered the movement (1990, 391). Small (2002) argues that the antiwar movement achieved success at two points during the conflict: in early 1968, antiwar sentiment forced Lyndon Johnson to de-escalate the war, and prevented Richard Nixon from re-escalating in 1969 (161).

Only Garfinkle (1995) argues that the antiwar movement had no effect on policymakers. In particular, Garfinkle asserts that the Johnson administration de-escalated the war in early 1968 because of self-restraint, and not growing public unrest (1995, 265, 266). He rejects claims that antiwar protests prevented Nixon from re-escalating the war, observing that Nixon *did* escalate by ordering the bombing of Cambodia (ibid., 185). In Garfinkle’s view, the antiwar movement succeed only at pushing the Democratic Party leftward (ibid., 266).

Synoptic historical accounts largely overlook the rhetorical activities of individual movement participants. Coffin earns mention in several of the narratives, both for his leadership role in Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, Small 2002) and for being a co-defendant in the Boston Five trial (Powers 1973,

Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990). However, these studies provide only descriptive summaries of Coffin's activities.

*Political Accounts.* A second group of studies focus on policymakers who opposed the war in legislative settings. Although these studies are relatively small in number, they effectively summarize common arguments made against the war by policymakers.

David W. Levy (1991) provides one of the broadest accounts of Vietnam-era policy. He frames American intervention in Vietnam as an outgrowth of Cold War-era anticommunist ideology. War opponents argued that Vietnam represented the failure of U.S. foreign policy toward communism, while war supporters argued that American defeat in Vietnam represented the failure of national will (1991, 171). Levy claims that three lessons can be learned from policy debates about Vietnam: first, the conflict illustrates "how wars are justified (or how they fail to be justified) among men and women," second, the conflict illustrates the reluctance of Americans to become entangled in foreign wars, and third, the conflict illustrates a fundamental human debate about meanings of good and evil (ibid., 182, 183).

Gary Stone examines opposition to the war amongst members of the United States Senate. He finds that senators opposed to the war made three types of arguments: escalating the war might provoke a broader conflict with China or the Soviet Union, the South Vietnamese government was corrupt, and the war was a civil war rather than a war



between two independent states (2007, 187, 188). Senate opponents viewed the war as a threat to the Senate's reputation with the American public (2007, 189). Although Stone draws few conclusions about the effects of Senate opposition to the war, he claims that senators "played a decisive role in ensuring that voices opposed to the war were audible and accessible to people throughout the United States" (2007, 191).

Andrew Johns (2006) analyzes a small but vocal number of Republican policymakers opposed to American involvement in Vietnam. These Republicans included Rep. Eugene Siler of Kentucky, who opposed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, and several members of the Senate Foreign Relations committee who voted for the Tonkin resolution but later supported de-escalation (2006, 589). One such Senator, George Aiken of Vermont, called for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in 1967 (*ibid.*, 597).

These political narratives provide a clear chronology of antiwar arguments in institutional policymaking settings. However, they largely ignore the relationship between policymakers, social movement activists, and public opinion. As a result, important questions about the role of social-movement rhetoric in the formulation of Vietnam-era foreign policy remain unaddressed.

*Accounts of Religious Opposition.* Five previous studies examine Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish activists' contributions to the Vietnam antiwar movement.

Charles Meconis examines the Catholic antiwar left. He bases his account on personal involvement with the movement, primary sources, and personal interviews conducted with movement leaders. Meconis concludes that the Catholic Left had a three-fold impact. First, it moved the individual conscience of some Catholic leaders, particularly bishops (1979, 143). Second, the Catholic Left expanded the meaning of nonviolent civil disobedience (*ibid.*, 144). Third, it attracted the attention of President Nixon (*ibid.*, 148).<sup>4</sup>

Penelope Moon provides a more nuanced account of the Catholic antiwar left, by analyzing the strategies of the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CFP). She argues that the CFP initially used apostolic witness to justify their opposition to the war, invoking Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and Vatican II documents in support of their position (2003, 1037). After apostolic witness failed to move a majority of Catholic laity and clergy to oppose the war, Moon claims the CFP shifted to more radical forms of resistance (*ibid.*, 1040, 1041). Moon argues that this shift represented a move from apostolic witness to prophetic witness: "Unlike apostolic work, which relied on discussion, research, and writing, prophetic antiwar witness employed drama, theater, and action to jolt the public conscience and force American Catholics to assess the intersection of their religious and civic identities" (1043).

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<sup>4</sup> Meconis's claim about Nixon strains credibility, because it relies on a secondhand account of a conversation between a movement participant and an FBI agent (179, 148).

Mitchell K. Hall (1990 and 1992) focuses on religious opposition to the war organized by Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), an ecumenical organization with Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leadership. Hall (1990) charts the chronological progression of CALCAV, focusing largely on its day-to-day activities and its collaboration with other antiwar organizations. His second study (1992) links CALCAV to the post-WWII ecumenical movement and the civil rights movement in the American South (35, 36). He concludes that media coverage of radical antiwar protesters drowned out CALCAV's initially moderate message, and that the group failed to connect with the public (*ibid.*, 50-51). Nevertheless, Hall finds that CALCAV's moderate image gave the organization more access to government officials for lobbying purposes than other antiwar groups (*ibid.*, 52). Hall acknowledges that Coffin held an important leadership role within CALCAV and summarizes his leadership role in the organization, but gives only cursory treatment to Coffin's speeches.

Finally, Michael Friedland (1998) examines the relationship between the religious branches of the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960s. Unlike Meconis and Hall's more narrowly-focused studies, Friedland examines a broad cross-section of the antiwar movement. Significantly, he argues that individual activists moved between causes and organizations as they saw fit, a finding which helps to explain some of Coffin's antiwar activities.

Together, these five accounts of antiwar religious groups describe the extent of religious antiwar movement that existed during the Vietnam era. Yet the narratives remain conflicted about the effectiveness of religious opposition.

*Specialized Accounts of the Antiwar Movement.* A third type of study focuses on the antiwar movement as experienced in specific geographic and cultural communities. As Levy (1991) asserts, “The Vietnam debate was given some of its special flavor by the fact that it so often occurred between and within particular subcommunities” (77).

Michael Foley (2003a) focuses on the draft resistance movement in Boston between 1966 and 1969. The book is significant because it provides an extensive contextual account of Coffin’s participation in draft resistance protests in October 1967. Jessica Mitford (1969) and Foley (2003b) provide detailed accounts of the subsequent Federal indictment and prosecution of Coffin and four other leaders from the October 1967 protests.

Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones (1999) focuses on the role of four groups in the antiwar movement: students, African Americans, women, and labor unions. Although each group initially supported Lyndon Johnson’s domestic political agenda, they eventually lost faith in the president because of his Vietnam policy. Jeffreys-Jones claims that the disunity among different factions of the antiwar movement and recurring protests confused the Johnson and Nixon administrations (223). She concludes

that although policymakers disliked the antiwar movement, the protests cumulatively weakened the government's desire to continue the war (1999, 223).

Yet another strand of research examines the role of opposition to the war within the military itself, including Anderson (1992), Corthright (1992), Buzzanco (1996), and Hunt (1999). These studies claim that military resistance influenced public perceptions of the war. For example, Buzzanco argues that dissident officers "had no trouble reaching the public with their antiwar message and they arguably played an important part in the national debate over Vietnam" because of their firsthand experience with the war (1996, 344). Anderson argues that the GI antiwar movement achieved a major victory with the end of conscription in 1973 (1992, 115).

These specialized accounts indicate that debate over Vietnam permeated diverse American communities. Foley and Mitford's accounts are particularly useful for contextualizing Coffin's rhetorical activities during and after the October 1967 resistance protests.

*Public Opinion Studies.* Three empirical studies and one historical study measured the effect of the antiwar movement on general public opinion toward the Vietnam War. These studies suggest that the antiwar movement did not directly turn public opinion against Vietnam, but may have indirectly influenced policymakers.

The earliest public opinion study, Schuman (1972), concludes that although the antiwar movement did “not speak the same language as the general public,” antiwar activists influenced journalists and opinion leaders, who in turn influenced the general public (534, 535). Schreiber (1976) asserts that “the assumption that anti-Vietnam war demonstrations reduced, or helped to reduce, the American public's support for the Vietnam war . . . is not supported by the evidence” (232). Instead, Schreiber suggests that elite opinion leaders and unfavorable media coverage more likely contributed to the end of the war (*ibid.*). Similarly, Lunch and Sperlich (1979) argue that elite opinion leaders—but not antiwar demonstrators—turned the American public against the war (31).

Small (1988) analyzes public opinion’s influence on presidential policymaking. He asserts that the antiwar movement contributed to ending the war in two ways. First, it forced LBJ to de-escalate the war in spring 1968 and later prevented Nixon from re-escalating (21). Second, Small speculates that citizens who did not support the antiwar movement may have nevertheless wished for an end of war, because they disliked the social turmoil it created (*ibid.*).

In sum, these studies suggest that the Vietnam antiwar movement influenced public opinion indirectly. Although antiwar demonstrators apparently did not move the public to direct action, evidence suggests

that protests influenced elite opinion leaders and prevented policymakers from escalating the war.

### *Historical Studies of Coffin*

A separate, much smaller strand of literature examines Coffin's life from a historical perspective. Warren Goldstein (2004) provides the most comprehensive account of Coffin's life, from his childhood through 2003. Goldstein's account is important to my project for two reasons. First, he situates Coffin theologically, arguing that his faith represented a mixture of social gospel and neo-orthodox theologies. Second, Goldstein traces the circumstances that gradually drew Coffin into the civil rights and antiwar movements during the 1960s.

Joseph Heister (1973) also provides a historical account of Coffin's theological beliefs and his participation in the civil rights and antiwar movements. Heister's work contributes to my project by explaining the sources of Coffin's beliefs. First, he asserts that the writings by French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Andre Malraux influenced Coffin during his undergraduate years at Yale (17). Second, Heister claims that Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and the Book of Jeremiah influenced Coffin during divinity school (*ibid.*, 201, 209).

Both Goldstein and Heister provide rich historical accounts of Coffin's career and contextualize many of the ideas expressed in his public discourse. Goldstein quotes extensively from Coffin's sermons and speeches to support larger historical claims about Coffin's life. However,

neither study purports to explain Coffin's antiwar activities from a rhetorical perspective.

### **Rhetorical Research in Perspective**

Like historians, rhetorical scholars have studied the Vietnam antiwar movement and Coffin's public discourse, but with different objectives in mind. As Zarefsky argues, rhetorical history seeks to explain

[H]ow people defined the situation, what led them to seek to justify themselves or to persuade others, what storehouse of social knowledge they drew upon for their premises, what themes and styles they produced in their messages, how their processes of identification and confrontation succeeded or failed (1998, 31-32).

Previous studies of antiwar movement rhetoric focus on the instrumental effectiveness of the movement's messages, namely, whether they persuaded audiences to take action. Rhetorical scholars have examined Coffin's public discourse, but as we shall see, these studies most frequently analyze Coffin's post-Vietnam era rhetoric, especially his speeches from the 1980s.

#### *Rhetorical Studies of the Antiwar Movement*

Only a handful of published rhetorical studies deal directly with the Vietnam antiwar movement. Sutton's "The Rhetoric of the Vietnam War: An Annotated Bibliography" (1994) identifies only three published



studies of antiwar movement discourse: Cox (1974), Bass (1979), and Jurma (1982).<sup>5</sup> An additional study, Gustainis and Hahn (1988), also examines the movement in general terms.

J. Robert Cox (1974) examines the antiwar movement from a Bitzerian perspective. He concludes that antiwar activists' strident demands made it difficult to mobilize a broad audience to take action. Bass (1979) examines the generic features of antiwar discourse from the American Revolutionary War and Vietnam War. He claims that antiwar activists offered moral, legal, and economic arguments, and that such arguments intensify when a war progresses without clear signs of victory (191). William Jurma (1982) argues that the Moratorium Day protests of 1969 failed, because the protestors misunderstood the goals of their political adversaries and did not adjust their message to mass media (271). J. Justin Gustainis and Dan Hahn (1988) claim the Vietnam antiwar movement failed and actually prolonged the war with their divisive rhetoric (203).<sup>6</sup> Yet with the exception of Jurma, who classifies the Moratorium Day organizers as 'moderates,' the authors of these

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<sup>5</sup> The other twenty-seven sources listed deal with either presidential rhetoric justifying involvement in the war or popular culture texts responding to Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> In the authors' judgment, six intrinsic rhetorical strategies proved to be unsound: "identification with the counter-culture, immoderate protest tactics, the use of violence, attacks on capitalism, the use of obscenity, and desecration of the American flag" (1988, 205). Gustainis and Hahn further argue that five extrinsic factors—anti-communist ideology, general opposition to protest, violence by protest opponents, media coverage, and polarization by political figures—further undermined the goals of the antiwar movement (1988, 211-213).

studies speak of the antiwar movement in general terms, as if it were a monolithic entity.

A second strand of scholarship focuses on individual antiwar speakers.<sup>7</sup> Gregory Olson (1995) analyzes U.S. Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield's antiwar discourse during the Johnson and Nixon administrations. George Dionisopoulos, Victoria Gallagher, Steven Goldzwig, and David Zarefsky (1992) analyze the intersection of the civil rights and antiwar movements in Martin Luther King Jr.'s April 4, 1967 speech "A Time to Break Silence." James Jasinski and John Murphy (2009) also examine a "Time to Break Silence."

Scholars have also examined the rhetoric of individual Catholic peace activists. John Patton (1975) argues that the Jesuit priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan used rhetorical enactment to challenge the political order when they burned draft cards at a Catonsville, Maryland draft board office in 1968 (1975, 10). Similarly, Gustainis (1983) classifies the Berrigans as part of the Catholic ultra-resistance to Vietnam. More recently, Sara Ann Mehlretter (2009) argues that Catholic activist Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement embraced moderate

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<sup>7</sup> I also wish to acknowledge three descriptive accounts of antiwar rhetoric. Benson and Johnson (1968) describe the experience of observing an antiwar protest firsthand. Rosenwasser (1969) provides a descriptive analysis of antiwar speeches made by Senators Frank Church, William Fulbright, Ernest Gruening, Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, and Wayne Morse. Yoder (1969) offers a descriptive analysis of early religious opposition to the Vietnam War.

protest tactics during the Vietnam era that allowed her to maintain ties with both Catholic radicals and the church's institutional hierarchy (26).

*Rhetorical Studies of Coffin*

Previous rhetorical critics have analyzed specific subsets of Coffin's public discourse; however, most of these studies have focused on his post-Vietnam rhetoric. Margaret Hambrick (1990; and as Margaret Cavin 1994) analyzes six of Coffin's speeches from the nuclear freeze movement of the 1980s. Marianne Rhebergen (2002) analyzes one hundred Coffin sermons delivered at Riverside Church between 1977 and 1987, and classifies twenty-two of those sermons as Jeremiads. Similarly, Steven Loy (2003) analyzes sixteen of Coffin's Riverside Church sermons to compare prophecy in contemporary homiletics with ancient Israeli prophecy.

Only two previous studies examine Coffin's Vietnam antiwar rhetoric. William Carl (1977) builds a theory prophetic rhetoric based on personal interviews with Coffin and a single sermon that was delivered on multiple occasions, "Vietnam: A Sermon."<sup>8</sup> John C. Lang (2008) examines the sources of Coffin's sermons. Significantly, Lang argues that theologians Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Richard Niebuhr informed Coffin's preaching (1).

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<sup>8</sup> Coffin delivered "Vietnam: A Sermon" multiple times during his career. Carl relies on a version preached at the Washington National Cathedral's evensong on April 30, 1967 that was subsequently anthologized in the volume *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*.

In summary, previous rhetorical analyses of the Vietnam antiwar movement provide a useful but incomplete background for my study. Cox (1974) and Jurma (1982) provide useful background information about the rhetorical constraints faced by antiwar activists. Carl (1977) and Lang (2008) provide background information about some of the intellectual and theological trends that informed Coffin's antiwar preaching. However, no previous studies explain how Coffin's antiwar rhetoric evolved over time, how he responded to changing political circumstances, or how his arguments incorporated religious perspectives other than prophetic discourse. My dissertation will contribute to this literature by analyzing the modes of rhetoric that Coffin used to oppose the war, and how these modes related to his political and social context.

### **Research Procedure**

#### *Object of Investigation*

Given the gaps in previous studies of religion in the Vietnam antiwar movement, my dissertation will examine Coffin's activities between 1961 and 1975. Through analysis of Coffin's sermons delivered at Yale's Battell Chapel, speeches given at antiwar events, transcripts of media appearances, personal correspondence, and courtroom testimony, I shall argue that it is possible to trace the gradual evolution of his antiwar discourse. **It is important to note that Vietnam is mentioned in only a fraction of Coffin's corpus of written work. Coffin performed routine**

pastoral duties throughout the 1960s, including baptisms, weddings, funerals, and weekly services at Battell Chapel, where he preached sermons unrelated to Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

The main source of this primary discourse will be Coffin's papers, available at the Yale University Manuscripts and Archives Division (MSSA), which I visited in August 2006, March 2008, and August 2009. I also draw on documents from the Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam papers available at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. The Coffin sermons, speeches, and public statements I analyze include:

- A. "The Church and Civil Rights," lecture delivered in February 1962;
- B. "The Spirit of Lamech." Sermon delivered at Battell Chapel, Yale University, January 9, 1966.
- C. "Plea to the President." Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 25, 1966.
- D. "Why Are the Clergy So Concerned About Vietnam?" March 28, 1966
- E. "On Civil Disobedience." Lecture for the Washington Seminar, February 21, 1967.
- F. Reply to WHNC editorial. March 9, 1967,
- G. Speech in Boston on October 16, 1967.

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<sup>9</sup> Some of these routine pastoral duties and sermons are available in the Coffin papers at Yale ("Guide to the William Sloane Coffin, Jr. papers," 2003).

- H. Statement-Turning In of Draft Cards, Washington D.C., October 18, 1967.
- I. "On Martin Luther." Sermon delivered at Battell Chapel, Yale University, November 5, 1967.
- J. *Meet the Press* Interview, January 28, 1968.
- K. Untitled Sermon delivered at Battell Chapel, Yale University, February 4, 1968.
- L. Comments by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., at the third National Resistance Day Rally, Yale University, April 3, 1968.
- M. Speech to be Delivered by William Sloane Coffin at Bryant Park, October 15, 1969.
- N. Untitled Sermon delivered at Battell Chapel, Yale University April 16, 1972.
- O. Remarks by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., National Conference on Amnesty, May 5, 1973.

Accordingly, my dissertation draws on the following letters:

1. William Coffin to Members of CCAV, 2 February 1966.
2. William Coffin to Peter Grothe, 8 March, 1966.
3. William Coffin to Mike Land, 28 March, 1966.
4. William Coffin to William Bundy, 30 June, 1966.
5. William Coffin to Talmage Rogers, 19 December, 1966.
6. William Coffin to Gordon W. Stearns, Jr., 10 January, 1967.
7. William Coffin to the *Yale Daily News*, 24 February, 1967.

8. William Coffin to the *Yale Daily News*, 4 October, 1967.
9. William Coffin to Sidney Lovett, October 1967.

### *Methods of Analysis*

My study approaches Coffin's antiwar discourse from the perspective of public address. I situate Coffin as an individual orator within the larger Vietnam antiwar movement.

In offering one possible meaning of rhetorical history, David Zarefsky (1998) asserts that "the historian views history as a series of rhetorical problems, situations that call for public persuasion to advance a cause or overcome an impasse. The focus of the study would be on how, and how well, people invented and deployed messages in response to the situation" (30). My study adheres to Zarefsky's definition by considering how Coffin used the prophetic, existential, and reconciling modes of rhetoric to advance arguments against the Vietnam War.

I adhere most closely to definitions of rhetorical movements offered by Leland Griffin (1952) and Zarefsky (1980). Griffin introduced the idea of movement studies to the communication discipline in his seminal 1952 essay "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements." For Griffin, the goal of studying movements is to discover the historical development of rhetorical trends:

From the identification of a number of rhetorical patterns, we may discover the various configurations of public discussion, whether rhetorical patterns repeat themselves when like movements occur

in the intervals of time and whether a constituent set of forms may be said to exist (188).

Zarefsky (1980) extends Griffin's argument about studying rhetorical movements in historical terms, claiming that, "The historical scholar of social movement rhetoric takes, as given, instances of collective behavior which the sociologist labels a 'movement' and then examines their rhetorical dimensions" (252). Zarefsky's definition assumes that the study of social movement rhetoric contributes to a richer understanding of rhetorical history, rather than a systematic theory of social movements.<sup>10</sup>

### **Organization of the Project**

This project analyzes Coffin's public discourse, beginning with his 1962 lecture "The Church and Civil Rights" and ending with his 1973 speech that advocated amnesty for draft resisters. I argue that as the war progressed, Coffin's views about how to challenge the war evolved, along with his preferred mode of rhetorical expression. Each of these modes reflects Coffin's changing views of the war. I assert that Coffin initially used a prophetic mode of rhetoric to oppose the war in 1966. In early

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<sup>10</sup> Social movement scholarship published in communication journals during the 1970s focused on defining movements as theoretical constructs. For example, Herbert Simons (1970) claimed that movements were organizationally-centered, Michael McGee (1980) argued they were discursively-centered, Robert Cathcart (1978) claimed movements existed only when confrontation occurred between institutions and outside groups, and Suzanne Riches and Malcolm Sillars (1980) argued that such distinctions were largely irrelevant to the practice of rhetorical criticism.



1967, he shifted to an existential mode of rhetoric, and in the early 1970s shifted yet again to a reconciling mode.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter Two focuses on Coffin's use of the prophetic mode between 1962 and 1966. My analysis here draws on previous studies of prophetic rhetoric. Most notably, Darsey (1997) argues that American radical reform rhetoric shares with the Hebrew Bible "a sense of mission, a desire to bring the practice of the people into accord with a sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience" (16). Jackson (2009) asserts that prophetic rhetoric champions the needs of socially and economically marginalized people, aims to disrupt the political status quo by reminding people "of the covenants they have made with God," and, emphasizes the prophet's role as God's messenger (51). Similarly, Bobbitt and Mixon (1994) highlight prophetic rhetoric's emphasis on judgment: "Prophecy announces impending judgment upon a recalcitrant people who are not living up to God's expectations with the promise that if the people turn away from their wicked ways and live according to God's laws, judgment will be

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<sup>11</sup> My use of the term 'mode' refers to a recurring pattern of ideas with common substantive characteristics. Literary theorist Northrop Frye offers one possible definition, explaining that "[t]he conception of modes developed out of one of the first features of literature that attracted me as a critic. This was the strength and consistency of literary conventions, the way in which, for example, the same plot and character types in comedy persist with astoundingly little change from Aristophanes to our own day" (1990, 47). I do not regard the three modes in this study as synonymous with 'genre,' since genres are identified by common situational and stylistic characteristics in addition to substantive ones (see Jamieson and Campbell 1982, 146).

averted and peace and prosperity will reign” (27). In light of these studies, I analyze Coffin’s texts “The Church and Civil Rights ” (1962), “The Spirit of Lamech” (1966), “Plea to the President” (1966), and “Why Are the Clergy Concerned About Vietnam?” (1966) as representative examples of the prophetic mode. I also argue that Coffin’s antiwar rhetoric bears striking resemblance to his earlier civil rights rhetoric. Coffin’s letters to Mike Land (1966), Peter Grothe (1966c), William Bundy (1966), and Talmage Rogers (1966) provide context for my analysis.

In Chapter Three, I argue that Coffin shifted from a prophetic mode of rhetoric to an existential mode in early 1967, after seeing that earlier antiwar efforts did not seem to be affecting U.S. policy in Vietnam. In the existential mode, Coffin argued that individuals should commit acts of protest as their consciences dictated and accept responsibility for those actions. Public discourse I analyze in this chapter include: Coffin’s lecture “On Civil Disobedience” (1967), his Reply to a WHNC editorial (1967), his speech at Boston’s Arlington Street Church (1967), his speech at the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. (1967), and his sermon “On Martin Luther” (1967).

Chapter Four analyzes Coffin’s antiwar rhetoric between 1968 and 1973. After a Federal grand jury indicted him for conspiracy to aid and abet draft resisters in January 1968, I argue that Coffin refused to follow the existential mode through to its logical end, badly damaging his credibility. After the trial ended, I argue that Coffin relied on a reconciling

mode of rhetoric to reintegrate war opponents into the mainstream of American society. In a sense a veiled plea for mercy, Coffin's discourse during this era conspicuously avoided blaming either pro-war or antiwar advocates. The public discourse I will analyze in this chapter includes the transcript of Coffin's *Meet the Press* interview (1968), his February 4, 1968 Sermon at Battell Chapel, his comments at a National Resistance Day Rally in New Haven (1968), the transcripts of his testimony in Federal district court (1968), his speech in New York City's Bryant Park (1969), his Battell Chapel sermon of April 16, 1972, and his remarks at the National Conference on Amnesty (1973).

Finally, my afterword examines the implications of studying Coffin's antiwar rhetoric. I shall argue that my study makes two significant contributions to studies of Vietnam-era public discourse. First, I expand the field's understanding of Coffin as a speaker by analyzing texts overlooked in previous studies. Through analysis of these texts, I show that Coffin's use of rhetorical modes changed over time, as his own views about how to best oppose the war changed. Second, I argue that Coffin's antiwar rhetoric shares intertextual resemblance to other texts that circulated within his social milieu. I conclude with a call for additional research about other antiwar activists that considers their intertextual similarities to the three modes of rhetoric used by Coffin.

## CHAPTER TWO

## COFFIN AND THE PROPHETIC MODE, 1962-1966

American military advisors entered South Vietnam during the Eisenhower administration. U.S. military presence escalated dramatically during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency in 1964. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese gunboats allegedly fired at the *U.S.S. Maddox*, while it patrolled off the Gulf of Tonkin near North Vietnam (Herring 2002, 142). North Vietnamese forces again fired at the *Maddox* and the *U.S.S. C. Turner Joy* two nights later.<sup>12</sup> In response to the incident, President Johnson asked Congress for authorization to use military force against the North Vietnamese. Johnson declared in a televised address late on the evening of August 4, "I shall immediately request the Congress to pass a resolution making it clear that our Government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in southeast Asia" (1964, 927). The resolution authorizing force passed the Senate 88-2. Senators Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska cast the only "nay" votes in the Senate. The resolution passed by unanimous consent in the House of Representatives.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The exact events surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin incident are highly controversial. Subsequent evidence suggests that the United States provoked the attack or misread North Vietnamese intentions entirely.

<sup>13</sup> Representatives Eugene Siler of Kentucky and Adam Clayton Powell of New York both signaled their intention to oppose the resolution, but

The American public initially supported Johnson's Vietnam policy by a large percentage. In the immediate aftermath of the Tonkin incident, Johnson's approval rating rose from 42 to 72 percent in one public opinion poll (Herring 2002, 145). Johnson won re-election in November 1964 in a 46-state landslide, in part by portraying his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater of Arizona, as a foreign policy extremist. Coffin later wrote that he supported Johnson's re-election bid in 1964 because he was "confident that, unlike Goldwater, a self-professed hawk, Johnson, if elected, would be remembered for the lives he saved in Vietnam, not for those he lost" (1977, 210).

Americans opposed to the war initially struggled to challenge the Johnson administration. Early war opponents mostly came from social movement organizations already active in pacifist causes, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the War Resisters' League, the American Friends Service Committee, Students for a Democratic Society, and the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, 100; Friedland 1998, 142). John C. Bennett of Union Theological Seminary organized one of the earliest religious protest groups in June 1963 when he founded the Minister's Vietnam Committee (Friedland 1998, 142). The group remained dormant in 1963 and 1964, but moved to action in late 1965.

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the House leadership used parliamentary procedures to circumvent a formal roll call (Kaiser 2000, 543).

In October 1965, Bennett convened a group of religious leaders in New York to discuss possible responses to the war. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a professor at Jewish Theological Seminary, Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan, and Lutheran Pastor Richard Neuhaus helped organize the meeting (Goldstein 2004, 160). During an October 25 press conference about the event, Heschel announced that the group would continue to meet on an ongoing basis (ibid.). On November 28, the group hosted 400 clergy at New York's Park Avenue Methodist Church for a "study conference" about Vietnam, which Coffin attended as an invited speaker (ibid., 161). Encouraged by the results of the conference, Bennett convened a meeting on January 11, 1966 to discuss turning the group into a national organization (ibid., 161). The organization initially took the name Clergy Concerned about the War.

Coffin chaired the press conference announcing the formation of the organization and helped to secure office space from the National Council of Churches (Goldstein 2004, 163). He briefly served as the group's executive secretary, but handed daily responsibilities over to Richard Fernandez, an unemployed Congregationalist pastor from Philadelphia (ibid., 169). Eventually, the organization added "Laymen" to its name, becoming Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV). Coffin remained involved with the organization for the duration of the war. Although Fernandez and Bennett assumed responsibilities for behind-the-scenes organizing, Coffin served as a

public face to the group by writing fundraising letters and position papers and speaking at antiwar demonstrations.

Previous studies correctly argue that Coffin used prophetic rhetoric to oppose the war. Notably, Carl (1977) argues that Coffin's rhetoric drew on prophetic commonplaces that circulated within the social milieu of the 1960s. However, Carl offers a factually incorrect chronology of Coffin's antiwar rhetoric and fails to connect Coffin's antiwar discourse with his civil rights activism. The result is a gap in the narrative of how Coffin's rhetoric developed. In this chapter, I shall provide a brief synopsis of previous accounts of prophetic rhetoric. I next analyze Coffin's use of the prophetic mode in speeches and letters between 1962 and 1966. I argue that Coffin first employed the prophetic mode during his civil rights activism, as illustrated by his 1962 speech "The Church and Civil Rights." Next, I claim that Coffin's antiwar discourse, beginning with his 1966 sermons "The Spirit of Lamech" and "Plea to the President," as well as the March 1966 draft of his position paper "Why are the Clergy Concerned About Vietnam?" echo the prophetic arguments first introduced in "The Church and Civil Rights." Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the circumstances surrounding Coffin's shift away from the prophetic mode in early 1967.

### **Prophetic Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature**

Prophetic rhetoric has attracted the attention of rhetorical scholars during the past half-century. Jasinski (2000) offers a succinct overview,

asserting that “prophecy might best be characterized as a *vision* one has experienced that is rendered accessible to others through a linguistic translation . . . Prophetic visions reveal truths; they remove blindness and replace it with clarity” (460). The American tradition of prophetic rhetoric began in New England in the seventeenth century and continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

*Prophecy and the Judeo-Christian Tradition*

The Hebrew Bible provides the most common source of prophetic rhetoric within the American Judeo-Christian tradition (Zulick 2009, 133). On the North American continent, seventeenth century Puritan ministers used a form of prophetic preaching known as the Jeremiad to remind listeners of their community’s relationship with God. Miller first described the formal characteristics of the Jeremiad in *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956). Although the Puritan theocracy’s influence waned in the late seventeenth century, Bercovitch (1978) asserts that the stylistic and substantive characteristics of the Jeremiad remained present in other types of public discourse.<sup>14</sup> Zulick (2009) sees Bercovitch’s monograph as a watershed moment in the scholarship of religious rhetoric, claiming that “Bercovitch opened up the world of Puritan

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<sup>14</sup> Bercovitch (1978) argues that Halfway Covenant of 1661 weakened the institutional church, but guaranteed that its cultural forms would be transmitted to future generations. The influence of Bercovitch on subsequent rhetorical studies is unmistakable. Ritter (1980) sees the Jeremiad present in presidential nominating speeches, Johanessen (1986) sees it present in economic reform rhetoric, and Murphy (1990) observes it in Robert F. Kennedy’s eulogy for Martin Luther King.



religion, a world in which America figured as the landscape of promise as prefigured by the prophets. But the concept now transcends the strict oratorical genre of the jeremiad to become a mode of discourse, a style of speech grounded in an entire worldview. This mode is better termed prophetic” (133). To Zulick, the prophetic mode “projects a deliberative future, one in which oral performance has been translated into written text. This future always takes the form of an indeterminate warning to persevere in faith, and it always serves the reflexive function of justifying God as well as authorizing divine speech” (ibid., 134)

During the first half of the twentieth century religious orators expressed renewed interest in prophetic rhetoric. Three theological trends motivated this interest. One such trend, Christian liberalism, optimistically believed the kingdom of God could be created through material conditions on earth. For example, Social Gospel advocate Walter Rauschenbusch argued that Christians were compelled “to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating and reconstituting human relations according to the framing covenant between humanity and God” (Allen 2000, 97). But the horrors of two world wars shook faith in Christian liberalism.

Two alternative perspectives to liberalism emerged within Protestant thought. Neo-orthodoxy emphasized original sin and God’s

separateness from humankind.<sup>15</sup> Mark Silk (1984) argues that neo-orthodoxy's power stemmed from its claim to offer prophetic judgment that stood outside of human time. As Silk claims,

Neo-orthodoxy insisted on the limited and historically conditioned character of all earthly institutions. The great sin, endemic to humanity, lay in absolutizing the contingent; this was idolatry. The great virtue, embodied in the prophetic tradition, was constantly to question society's false absolutes in the name of the only true absolute, the God who transcended history. (72-73)

However, neo-orthodoxy rejected any connection between theology and worldly political affairs, leaving religious speakers with few ways to justify their social reform agenda. Some of these reformers found a middle ground between Christian liberalism and Neo-Orthodoxy in a perspective known as personalism.

Personalism originated in the writings of nineteenth century philosopher Borden Parker Browne. As a philosophical perspective, personalism rejected materialist and idealist explanations of the human condition. Barbara Allen (2000) writes that “personalism taught that as a self-directed creature made in God’s image, the human being strives to attain a greater understanding of God and human purpose by reflecting on experience” (98). Consequently, personalists analyzed social

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<sup>15</sup> Neo-orthodoxy found its earliest expression in the writings of German-Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who sought to dissociate theology from politics during the rise of Nazism in the 1930s (Silk 1984).

institutions in terms of their effects on individuals. Warren Steinkraus (1973) argues that “there is no higher means of principle than the person. All other values are subordinate. Abstract laws, the state, property, and other institutions are all to be judged in the light of their effects on persons” (103). After Browne’s death, personalist philosophy resonated with Boston University theologians, including L. Harold DeWolf, Walter George Muelder, and Peter Anthony Bertocci (*ibid.*, 103). Personalism played an especially significant role in the rhetorical career of DeWolf’s most famous doctoral advisee, Martin Luther King, Jr.

King used personalist theology to craft a rationale for Christian social activism. Through personalist reasoning, King acknowledged humankind’s sinful nature, while simultaneously arguing that Christians had a duty to improve social conditions for oppressed individuals. John Rathbun (1968) asserts that “if God is love, and if men shares in the divine nature, then love is a part of the human condition even though all men do not respond in terms of love. Here King’s prophetic role plays its part, because he can view the atonement as historical assurance that a better social order is possible” (1968, 48). King challenged oppressive social structures by placing such structures into Biblical context, stating that

As members of the [human] race, individuals find that they are not only involved in sporadic acts of sinful conduct, but that they participate, sometimes actively, in sin on a public level. On a

public level, sin institutionalizes its power and thereby becomes collective in nature. Thus evil can corrupt social custom, and, by being locked into institutional behavior, descend unchallenged through the generations. The belief that institutional forms may themselves suffer from a collective guilt has led King to identify himself with the tradition of Hebraic prophecy and, like Ezekiel, to declare to that God judges societies as well as individuals. (ibid., 41)

Rathbun that as a result of this influence, King frequently drew on the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, especially Ezekiel and Amos (ibid., 42).

Rhetorical scholars corroborate Rathbun's claim that King used Hebraic prophecy to justify civil rights activism. For example, Gary Selby (2001) asserts that King's use of the Exodus narrative during the Montgomery bus boycott of 1957 allowed King to connect secular events to a larger cultural tradition familiar to black churchgoing audiences. Along the same lines, David Bobbitt and Harold Mixon (1994) claim that King's use of prophetic arguments in his speeches "Give Us the Ballot" and "I Have a Dream" emphasized "human action in the socio-political realm as the means to bring about a type of secular Kingdom of God in race relations" (27). As we shall see, similar themes emerged in Coffin's civil rights discourse and ultimately, his antiwar rhetoric.

*Studies of Coffin and Prophetic Rhetoric*

Previous Coffin scholars have documented Coffin's the prophetic mode during his rhetorical career. Rhebergen (1987) and Loy (2003) focus on Coffin's prophetic rhetoric while serving as senior pastor at Riverside Church in New York City between 1977 and 1987, well after American entanglement with Vietnam had ended. Only Carl (1977) provides a detailed account of Coffin's Vietnam-era rhetorical activities from a prophetic perspective. Carl's study offers a theoretical account of prophecy's rhetorical characteristics, traces the historical development of prophetic preaching in Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions, and finally, analyzes a single instance of a Coffin sermon that contains prophetic qualities. Carl defines prophecy as a type of commonplace, or an instance of "ready-made slogans, and clichés that are accepted flatly" (1977, 77) Drawing on the work of French philosopher Jacques Ellul, Carl asserts that commonplaces represent a taken-for-granted worldview present in a particular social milieu:

The argument here is that a sort of commonplace has emerged, a symbolic image to be more exact, that has gone unquestioned for the most part; that has in secular circles said "prophetic involves predicting" and in ecclesiastical circles, "prophetic involves ethical criticism of society." In the Church this commonplace has for the most part gone unquestioned. It is then a commonplace that at

least in the 1960's retained power and helped political critics in the Church to legitimize their activity. (ibid., 29)

Yet Carl's account of Coffin as a prophetic rhetor lacks sufficient historical scope. This leads Carl to offer a factually incomplete account of Coffin's antiwar preaching. He identifies Coffin's April 30, 1967 delivery of "Vietnam: A Sermon" at Sunday Evensong in the Washington National Cathedral as his "first formal, public statement in a sermon that took as its major theme the Vietnam War" (ibid., 208). A paragraph later, Carl qualifies this statement somewhat, asserting that "some sermons, preached at Yale's Battell Chapel and other places, dealt with Vietnam *but rarely in a major way*" (ibid.; emphasis mine). However, I shall demonstrate that archival records plainly contradict both of Carl's claims. Several primary sources show that Coffin expressed concern about Vietnam a full year before "Vietnam: A Sermon."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Carl's account of Coffin's prophetic rhetoric overlooks important textual evidence.

Furthermore, Carl completely ignores Coffin's involvement with the civil rights movement and gives only minimal attention to the Vietnam antiwar movement after 1967. Even as Carl argues that the period from April 1967 to October 1967 represented "the transition from dissent to resistance in the peace movement" (ibid., 208), he operates on the

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<sup>16</sup> Coffin references Vietnam in his sermon "The Spirit of Lamech," preached at Yale's Battell Chapel on January 6, 1966, in his speech "Plea to the President" given on January 26, 1966, and the March 1966 draft of the position paper "Why are the Clergy Concerned About Vietnam?"

assumption that Coffin's discourse remained prophetic in nature.<sup>17</sup> As a result, we know relatively little about Coffin's rhetoric during this period.

### **Coffin, Prophetic Rhetoric, and the Civil Rights Movement**

Making sense of Coffin's use of prophetic rhetoric in the antiwar movement requires a brief historical detour through his participation in the civil rights movement. As I shall argue, Coffin's civil rights discourse utilized prophetic arguments that he would draw upon again during the antiwar movement later in the decade.

Coffin became an outspoken supporter of civil rights during the 1950s. During his year as chaplain at Williams, he endorsed ending the school's fraternity system because he believed it discriminated against blacks and Jews (Goldstein 2004, 100). Shortly after he became Yale's chaplain in 1958, Coffin hosted Martin Luther King, Jr. as a guest preacher at Battell Chapel (*ibid.*, 131). When violence erupted in the American South in May 1961 over ill-fated attempts by civil rights activists to integrate interstate bus transportation, Coffin and six other activists staged their own Freedom Ride (*New York Times* 1961, 26). In addition to Coffin, the group included Yale Divinity School professor Gaylord Noyce, Wesleyan University professors John Maguire and David Swift, Johnson C. Smith University students Clyde Carter and Charles Jones, and Yale Law student George C. Smith (*ibid.*). In Atlanta, the

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<sup>17</sup> In Chapter Three, I will argue that Coffin used an existential mode of rhetoric for most of 1967.

riders appeared at a press conference at Ebenezer Baptist Church and then boarded a Greyhound bus (Goldstein 2004, 116). When the group arrived in Atlanta, Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy provided logistical support and lodging (ibid., 117). Although the riders planned to continue onward to Jackson, Mississippi, police arrested them in the cafeteria of the Montgomery bus depot on May 25 before they could complete the full journey (Parke 1962, 38).

Initially, Coffin offered a secular explanation for participating in the Freedom Rides. Immediately after his release from jail, he wrote a short essay for *Life* magazine about his experience. The essay made only two oblique references to religion. Coffin wrote in the opening paragraph,

Many people in the South have criticized the Freedom Riders as “outsiders” who went there to stir up trouble. But if you’re an American and a Christian you can’t be an outsider on racial discrimination, whether practiced in the North or in the South. Discrimination has always been immoral and now, as it undermines U.S. foreign policy, it is a matter of national concern, not local mores. Here was a group of fellow Americans striving for rights that were legally and morally theirs. As Christians, and Americans we couldn’t *not* go on the Freedom Rides. On this issue all Americans are insiders. (1961, 54)

The remainder of the essay cited the United States Supreme Court rulings in favor of racial desegregation and called for further discussion



about the issue among university educators and “the sea of silent moderates in the South” (ibid.). But Coffin would soon invoke a prophetic explanation as well.

*“The Church and Civil Rights”: A Rationale for Activism in the Prophetic Mode*

Coffin’s delivered his lengthiest discourse about civil rights in February 1962. Delivered to a live audience at Yale’s Strathcona auditorium, “The Church and Civil Rights” also aired on the radio program *Yale Reports*. Coffin expressed four themes in the speech: the fundamental value of humans as individuals, the primacy of original sin, the mission of the church to save souls, and the significance of speaking in the prophetic voice rather than the priestly voice. These four themes combined to form a rationale for civil rights activism grounded in the prophetic mode, and reflected the unmistakable influence of neo-orthodoxy and personalist theology on Coffin’ public discourse.

The first section the speech articulated a personalist rationale for believing in the equality of all humans, regardless of race. Coffin began by claiming that “[t]he dignity of man is conferred upon man by God, bestowed upon man by God. Man does not achieve it, he receives it as a gift. When the church talks about man being made in the image of God, the glory belongs to God and only reflectively to men” (1962, 2). But, he acknowledged, fully grasping this premise represented “the hardest presupposition for any of us ever to accept. It means that we never have

to prove ourselves, only express ourselves” (ibid., 2). Through a series of parallel clauses, Coffin next illustrated how the premise of equality played out:

Man cannot be said, for instance, to have value because of his self-awareness. This would put the mystic, in the eyes of God, ahead of the dullards. It cannot be said that man’s worth derives from his rational capacities as much as intellectuals would like to believe so, because this would put an intellectual, again in the eyes of God, ahead of a worker. One cannot say that even knowledge of good and evil constitutes the worth of man because this would put a pathological liar outside the ken of God’s love. All these equalities are essential for a complete person but in none of them, nor in all of them, does the value of man reside. (ibid., 2)

Consequently, Coffin claimed that all individuals had worth, because “If Christ then died for all men indiscriminately, to discriminate against any man in terms of value is not only, in humanistic terms an offense to the human spirit, from a religious point of view it is blasphemy in the face of God” (ibid., 2). Yet in spite of this theological impetus, racial inequality still existed.

In the second section of the speech, Coffin analyzed the origins of racial prejudice. Coffin’s argument in this section fused together two competing explanations for prejudice, one social and one individual. The first explanation viewed prejudice as socially learned and thereby

perpetuated by social structures. Coffin asserted that this type of prejudice “is not a cause but a result which in turn becomes a cause, and thereby a self-perpetuating system is set up.” (ibid., 3). Drawing heavily on historical and journalistic accounts, he wrote,

Carey McWilliams says, “Race relations are not based on prejudice. Prejudice is a byproduct of race relations as influenced by other factors.” By other factors he may mean economic factors. The invention our great New Haven inventor, Eli Whitney. Or he may mean historical factors, the War between the States in which, as Lillian Smith says, ‘the moral arguments of the North were oh so right and the motives of the North were oh-so-selfish.’ That could be called perhaps, a psychological reason. And there is a psychological explanation of this same point of view. Once you degrade somebody, the sense of guilt makes it imperative to justify the entire procedure. So the only defense left is to hate the object. (ibid., 3, 4)

Yet Coffin saw another explanation for prejudice, one far more innate to the human condition. According to this second view, prejudice was the result of original sin latent in all humans.<sup>18</sup> Through a garden metaphor,

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<sup>18</sup> Coffin attributes this perspective to Toynbee’s *An Historian’s View of Religion* (1928), which, in Coffin’s words, argues that “every living creature is striving to make itself into the center of the universe, and in the act is entering into a rivalry with every other living creature” (Coffin 1962, 4).

Coffin suggested that this sense of original sin combined with socialization to develop into full racial prejudice. He argued,

Children are not born prejudiced in a racial sense, but they are born hostile with a sort of undifferentiated hostility which society then gives form and substance to. In other words, from a Christian point of view, society does provide the ground, the soil, in which the seed can germinate and grow. But the seed is already within the person. Therefore, Christians cannot charge the evil of prejudice to a corrupt society. Prejudice is most fundamental; an expression of man's inherent, his constitutional self-centeredness. (ibid., 4)

The argument here was significant, because it shifted responsibility for prejudice back to the individual, who in turn would be responsible for repenting from his or her own wicked ways. Like the scolding prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Coffin had reminded his audience of their broken covenant with God.

Coffin gave an implicit nod to neo-orthodox theology by asserting that "[t]he primary concern of the church is not with social structures nor with political parties, or any other type of social or economic or political organization, its primary concern is with the heart of every man" (ibid., 4). But because neo-orthodox theology believed the church should be completely separate from politics, Coffin had to offer an alternative argument to justify his civil rights activism. Like King, Coffin gave an

explanation implicitly rooted in personalism. Here, Coffin argued that civil rights activism was justified because it acknowledged the need to protect individual rights. He claimed that laws existed primarily to protect individuals from evil actions. "While it is true," he stated, "that you cannot legislate morality, you can legislate conditions which are more conducive to reality. It is precisely because we are so prone to evil that we need the support of a good legal, political, and economic structure" (ibid., 5). Coffin argued protecting individuals from acts of evil was bound to produce opposition, claiming that "if you do try to prevent [men] from lynching Negroes, if you try to prevent men from segregating buses and parks and libraries and theaters and all other public utilities, you are, of course, going to disturb the peace." (ibid., 6).

Coffin next offered a lengthy exposition of the difference between the priestly and the prophetic roles of the church (ibid., 5). The priestly role, most commonly associated with clergy, "is to administer the sacraments, to baptize, to heal when possible, to counsel people in all types of situations" (ibid., 5). On the other hand, the prophetic role "is the role of the disturber of the peace; to bring the minister himself, to bring the congregation, to bring the entire Christian church, to bring the entire social order unto some type of judgment" (ibid., 5). Although he believed that the prophetic role "is a very necessary role for the church to perform," Coffin acknowledged that it caused controversy when it came into conflict with the priestly role (ibid., 5). He admitted, "There are going

to be those who will hate him, not only disagree with him, but violently hate him, perhaps for good reasons and perhaps, also, for bad reasons” (ibid., 5). He next claimed, “I think that the church by and large in our country has been remiss in its prophetic role” (ibid., 5). The lack of prophetic voices in the public sphere directly paralleled the rise of racial segregation. Coffin argued, “It was precisely when the voice of the church was silent and withdrawn that Jim Crowism established itself in this country. Therefore, if we are to err today perhaps we should err on the compensatory side, on the side of the prophetic role” (ibid., 5).

Anticipating common objections to the prophetic mode, Coffin drew from a series of Biblical and contemporary examples to remind the audience that Biblical prophets spoke disturbing messages even when they were socially inconvenient or unpopular. He first drew on the Hebrew Bible to illustrate this point, arguing that,

In terms of the Old Testament, Moses didn’t wait around for Pharaoh’s hard heart to soften, he went down to Pharaoh and he said “Let my people go!” And Amos wasn’t shy about leaving Israel and going up into Judah and prophesying there. Jonah went all the way to Nineveh in order to say, “Thus, saith the Lord.” (ibid., 5)

Coffin acknowledged that embracing the prophetic role carried risks. Drawing again on the example of Jesus Christ, he asserted that “[w]e cannot forget that it was His prophetic role that ended His priestly role at the age of thirty-three. As ministers, we have to try and be

responsive. For we cannot forget whom our model is, and we cannot forget that the requirements of Christian love are fantastically difficult” (ibid., 7). In spite of these dangers, Coffin argued it was the responsibility of the Christian minister to work to bring about social change consistent with God’s word. “Our job is to try to make sure that the finger of God finally does reach the finger of outstretched man,” he stated, “and that man comes alive only through that particular touch” (ibid., 7).

### **Coffin and the Early Antiwar Movement**

In January 1966, Coffin participated in the formation of Clergy Concerned about Vietnam. During this period, his public discourse drew on prophetic themes analogous to the arguments he used in “The Church and Civil Rights.” The prophetic mode is particularly evident in three of Coffin’s early antiwar discourses: the January 1966 sermon “The Spirit of Lamech,” his first major public statement against the war; the speech “Plea to the President” delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania later that month; and an early draft of his position paper “Vietnam: The Clergyman’s Dilemma,” completed in March 1966.

#### *“The Spirit of Lamech”*

Coffin delivered his earliest antiwar sermon, “The Spirit of Lamech” at Yale’s Battell Chapel on Sunday, January 9, 1966. The next day’s *Yale Daily News* provided a brief summary of the sermon with significant quotations under the headline “Coffin Warns Vietnam Escalation May

Court Disaster” (Gardner 1966, 5). As he had in “The Church and Civil Rights,” Coffin employed the prophetic mode to argue for a particular course of political action.

The sermon’s main scriptural proof came from the Book of Genesis account of Lamech, a seventh-generation descendant of Cain, who knows no remorse for his evil actions. Quoting from Genesis 4: 23, Coffin stated,

Lamech said to his wives: Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say: I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold. (1966g, 1)

Coffin’s decision to quote the passage is significant, given Lamech’s role in early Genesis as symbolizing humankind’s wicked ways that would eventually culminate in the Great Flood.<sup>19</sup> One Biblical scholar’s account suggests that the Hebrew etymology of the name Lamech may be

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<sup>19</sup> Fretheim argues, “Whereas God avenged the death of Abel, Lamech takes vengeance into his own hands; he exacts death for only an injury; he appropriates God’s own measures and intensifies the level of retribution so much that only a blood feud could ensue . . . the song shows how Cain’s violence has been intensified through the generations. Progress in sin and its effects matches the progress in civilization” (1994, 375). Another commentator sees the Song of Lamech as structurally significant, arguing that “Over and against these descendants of Cain is set Lamech, who boast of his vengeful reign of terror. This dark story of violence ends with a genealogy that moves from murderer to murder; the framing of a genealogy by two acts that bring death stands in contradiction to the genealogical record of the continued life of a family” (Kselman 1988/2000, 87).



metaphorical for a transition point (Hess 1991, 24, 25).<sup>20</sup> Clearly aware of this deep symbolism, Coffin argued that the United States had become Lamech. He argued that

The story of Lamech in the Book of Genesis warns that the greatest evil can take place there where people say “I don’t see anything so bad about that.” Significantly, man’s progress from primitivism to civilization is attributed to the descendants not of Seth, but of the murderer Cain. And the progress is no moral escalator, ever upwards and onwards . . . Today, the spirit of Lamech is moving over the face of our land. The crusades for freedom are really for chauvinism bolstered by the naïve assumption that God is automatically on the anti-communist side. But this nation is separating itself from God, and in separating itself from God[,] isolating itself from others, so that our national life threatens increasingly to become one of cruel self-sufficiency—what’s good for America is good for the rest of the world. Morally speaking, the

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<sup>20</sup> While acknowledging that the origins of the name Lamech are unclear, Hess speculates that “Lamech encompasses the three middle consonants of the Hebrew alphabet. Could it be that, as these letters join the first half of the Hebrew alphabet with the second half, so Lamech joins two halves of the genealogies in the line of Cain just as he also joins the lines of Seth and those genealogies which follow in Chapters 10 and 11?” (1991, 24). Hess believes that such an argument is plausible, because ancient Hebrew and Ugaritic abecedaries tended to divide the alphabet in halves for pedagogical reasons (*ibid.*, 24). Thus, it would follow that “a reader who had learned the alphabet using similar abecedaries would naturally associate the name Lamech with a transitional movement from the first to the second half of the text, similar to the change in the alphabet at these letters” (*ibid.*, 24).

U.S. Ship of State is today comparable to the Titanic just before it hit the iceberg. If we decide to escalate the war in Viet Nam we are sunk. (1966g, 1)

As a result, the rest of the sermon can be read as a prophetic warning about the ways in which the United States has violated its covenant with God.

The speech conclusion returned to the Biblical passage. American actions in Vietnam were indefensible in spite of the administration's claim to the contrary. Coffin pessimistically warned,

America, thy pride swollen face hath closed up thine eyes. Thou has become as Lamech. I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold. O America, my country, my country. (ibid., 5)

On a pragmatic level, it seems obvious that Coffin meant the war in Vietnam was unjust and represented the moral decline of the United States. Just as Lamech represented the decline of humanity in the early Book of Genesis, Coffin postulated that Vietnam would represent the decline of the United States.

*"Plea to the President"*

Coffin delivered a second speech about the war, "Plea to the President," at an antiwar rally in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on January 28. Although the speech repeated some of the same phrases and

arguments used in “Spirit of Lamech,” the speech made a clearer argument about the horrors of the war and contained no overt religious references. These substantive differences suggest that Coffin was distinctly aware of his audience and sought to broaden the appeal of his arguments.

The text of “Plea to the President” shares two intertextual similarities with “The Spirit of Lamech.” Again, Coffin invoked the *Titanic* metaphor nearly word-for-word, this time near the beginning of the speech text. He stated, “I am persuaded that at this very hour the American ship of state is comparable to the Titanic just before it hit the iceberg. If we escalate, if we enlarge the war in Vietnam, then morally and perhaps politically and economically we are sunk” (Coffin 1966f, 1). As he had in “Lamech,” Coffin again criticized the U.S. for backing a morally bankrupt dictatorship in South Vietnam, arguing that

The unpleasant truth that we the American people simply must face now is that the origins of this war lie far more in Diem’s repression than in whole subversion, and that even today despite billions of dollars of aid, the heroic labor of many American civilians and the blood of many soldiers, both the Vietcong and Hanoi can talk of national independence, land reform, and social justice, far more convincingly, than can the government of

Saigon.<sup>21</sup> The unpleasant truth is that we are now backing a losing horse ridden by a mediocre jockey. (ibid., 2)

Yet despite these intertextual similarities to “Lamech,” Coffin’s “Plea” contained significant stylistic and substantive differences. First, Coffin employed the stylistic device of apostrophe, addressing President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara as though they were present in the audience.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in paragraph two, he stated, “Secretary Rusk, you bear a major responsibility for putting us on this collision course with disaster” (ibid., 1). This “you” structure recurred three additional times within the same paragraph. He stated, “Only a few years ago, you were assuring us that Premier Diem was a statesman and that we were winning the war, when as it turned out, Diem was a catastrophe and we were losing the war. Now you tell us that you have done everything possible to end the war, when in fact you have refused to do the one thing necessary—grant the

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<sup>21</sup> Coffin’s handwritten notes on the speech text indicate that this sentence may have been delivered as “The unpleasant truth is that we the American people must *be told* is that the origins of this war lie for [far?] more in Diem’s repression than in *Ho’s* subversion, and that even today, despite the billions of dollars in aid, the heroic labor of American civilians and the blood of soldiers, both the Vietcong and Hanoi can talk of national independence, land reform and social justice, far more convincingly, than can the government of Saigon” (ibid., 2; italics indicate handwritten changes to the text).

<sup>22</sup> Jasinski defines apostrophe as “a device by which a speaker begins to address an audience other than the one to which he or she is speaking” (2001, 545).

Vietcong their own seat at the negotiating table” (ibid., 1).<sup>23</sup> The “you” structure enabled Coffin to cast the American administration as responsible for the failure of the Diem administration, and therefore as responsible for the war.

Second, “Plea to the President” contained no overt references to the Hebrew Bible. Coffin warned that the United States faced potentially horrific losses in the war. Again addressing the absent LBJ officials, he asserted, “Secretary McNamara, surely you don’t want a war on the Asian mainland that will cost tens of thousands of American lives and hundreds and thousands of Vietnamese, most of them innocent civilians” (ibid., 2). He warned that the conflict risked further inflaming tensions with the North Vietnamese, claiming that “A resumption of bombing and an escalation of the war can only push both Vietcong and Hanoi to the waiting arms of Russia or China with all the risks of a major conflagration such as confrontation with Russia or China entails” (ibid., 2, 3). The speech’s only reference to religion was an oblique reference to McNamara. Coffin portrayed the Secretary of Defense as a false prophet, claiming, “The Pentagon too has misled us. Secretary McNamara has consistently proved a brilliant administrator but just as consistently a

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<sup>23</sup> Handwritten notes on the manuscript suggest that the “you” phrasing was added to the speech after initial drafting. The typewritten manuscript reads, “In all brutal frankness it must be said that the state department bears the major responsibility for putting us on this collision course with disaster. Only a few years ago the department was assuring us that Premier Diem was a statesman and that we were winning the war. In fact it has refused to do the one thing necessary—grant the Vietcong their own seat at the conference table” (ibid., 1).

mistaken prophet. Again and again he has said 'This time it's going to work' and it hasn't" (ibid., 2).

Finally, Coffin made a specific policy appeal absent from his argument in "Lamech." He begged the president not to resume bombing, which had been discontinued in January 1966. Again, Coffin appealed to the president directly, stating, "We plead with you therefore *not* to resume bombing. Hold fast in the South. Cease seeking military solutions for problems which can only be solved at the conference table" (ibid., 3).

#### *After the Cease Fire*

The United States resumed bombing of North Vietnam on February 1, 1966. CCAV issued a press release on February 1 denouncing the end to the ceasefire. In a February 2 letter to CCAV members, Coffin called the resumption of bombing "a severe set-back" (1966a, 1). He asserted, "we must not stand in the background like members of a Greek chorus bewailing the tragedies taking place before our eyes" (ibid.). Religious leaders should put pressure on the public to pressure Congress to take corrective action, he claimed,

The president needs to be telegraphed our displeasure,  
Ambassador Goldberg our encouragement. Senators and  
congressmen obviously hold up wet fingers to political breezes, and  
these must become a gale force for peace. Nothing is going to  
change until the people themselves want a change. This means we

ourselves must become informed interpreters of those aspects of the war which are properly the concern of every Jew and Christian . . . we must arouse, educate, and stir to political action not only our people but key members of our communities. (ibid., 1)

This passage indicates that Coffin saw the goal of CCAV as to produce policy change through a pressure point system. In a rhetorical move that illustrated the committee's political moderation during this time, Coffin stopped short of endorsing civil disobedience without completely disavowing it. He explained, "As a committee we cannot now call for withholding of income tax or other acts of civil disobedience but should such acts take place, our job should be not to [c]ondemn such acts but rather to point again to the situation that produced them" (ibid., 1)

Coffin's activities during this time also garnered attention from the *Yale Daily News*. The January 27 edition included front-page coverage of Coffin's trip to France in late January to meet with dissident Vietnamese exiles (Yergin 1966, 1). On February 3, the *News* quoted Coffin stating, "Secretary Rusk is guilty of having misled the American people on numerous occasions" (*Yale Daily News* 1966, 4). On Friday, February 7, the *News* reported Coffin delivered a speech at the Yale Law School auditorium declaring that the United States had made a "well-nigh impossible demand" by excluding the Viet Cong from peace negotiations (Armstrong 1966, 1).

*“Why Are the Clergy Concerned About Vietnam?”*

Despite resumption of the bombing, Coffin continued to believe that a negotiated settlement to the war represented the best possible outcome. In a March 8, 1966 letter to Peter Grothe, Coffin asserted, “I am not for walking out of Viet Nam, but I am certainly against any escalation. We never should have gotten into this war, and we must do everything decently possible to get out. But don’t worry. I realize how messy it could be” (1966c, 1). By mid-March, Coffin had completed a draft of his most detailed statement yet about reasons for opposing the war, a written manuscript entitled “Why Are the Clergy Concerned about Vietnam?” In a March 28 letter to *LOOK* Magazine editor Mike Land asking for feedback about the document, Coffin explained, “While it is very well known that many clergy are opposed to the war in Viet Nam, what is less clear, to us as well as to others, are the grounds on which we can properly speak out” (1966b, 1). Coffin added, “You probably know that the world Council of Churches, The National Council of Churches, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and other religious groups have stated their opposition to the war” (ibid., 1). Although *LOOK* did not publish the manuscript, a printed version of the essay was subsequently circulated to CALCAV contacts across the U.S.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Copies of “Why are the Clergy Concerned about Vietnam?” exist at Minnesota Historical Society, The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas



The eleven-page document of twenty-seven paragraphs followed four lines of argument. In the first seven paragraphs, Coffin defended the right of religious leaders to speak against the War. In paragraphs eight through nineteen, Coffin enumerated reasons why U.S. policy in Vietnam had failed. In paragraphs twenty through twenty-two, Coffin argued that a negotiated settlement with the North Vietnamese represented the most pragmatically attainable and philosophically defensible solution available to the conflict. Finally, in paragraphs twenty-four through twenty-seven, Coffin criticized the conduct of U.S. foreign policy more generally.

In the first seven paragraphs, Coffin asserted that clergy had the right to speak against the war. For example, he asked in the third paragraph, “[W]hat can we say? What competence have we to speak out? While this article speaks only for its author, its sentiments are widely shared by rabbis, priests, and fellow pastors. Let us concede immediately we may be wrong, but let us hope that those who disagree with us will think it right that we should state our views as forthrightly as possible” (1966h, 1). In the sixth paragraph of the document, Coffin asserted that false patriotism stifled dissent, lamenting that

It is a terrible thing when agreement takes the place of mutual concern as the basis of human unity. For then “Play it safe,” “Don’t rock the boat”; these slogans become as it were the eleventh

commandment, the commandments on which are “hanged” all the law and the prophets. (ibid., 2)

Just as the guise of goodness had cloaked Lamech’s evil deed in “The Spirit of Lamech,” the unspoken eleventh commandment cloaked the sins of the United States during times of war. Coffin claimed,

For it is the commandment that drops the mask of dissimulation over the face of the truth, the commandment that makes us turn the other cheek—in order not to see the evil, that makes us hide behind our specialties, claiming insufficient knowledge. Wartime avoidance of controversial issues is often but a sophisticated version of unsophisticated Cain clubbing his brother to death.

(ibid., 2)

In the seventh paragraph, Coffin insisted that he did not question the sincerity of American leaders, opining that “Our leaders too we must question, but not their sincerity. On the contrary, it is their passionate conviction of the rightness of this war that concerns us” (ibid, 2).

In paragraphs eight through nineteen, Coffin enumerated specific reasons why he objected to U.S. foreign policy. He claimed in this section that the United States had failed to acknowledge the material conditions that produced the conflict between North and South Vietnam in the first place. Coffin asserted in paragraph eight that the United States was a conservative nation “for the simple reason that it has much to conserve” (ibid., 3). Yet the United States failed to understand the collective

suffering of much of the world. Revolutionaries in Vietnam and elsewhere existed because “no one is anxious to conserve poverty, illiteracy, and disease . . . For a conservative nation to give relevant leadership to a revolutionary world is phenomenally difficult” (ibid., 3). As a result, a variety of ideological interests sought to influence the foreign policy process. Coffin stated, “[I]n international affairs many kinds of experts are needed to develop foreign policies that reflect broad political wisdom informed by moral sensitivity” (ibid., 3).<sup>25</sup>

In paragraph twelve, Coffin claimed the war possessed an “utterly self-defeating character” (ibid., 4). Human misery had long aided the Viet Cong. Coffin claimed, “this misery is not alleviated by our bombing and burning of villages, by our destruction of crops, and our killing of at least as many civilians as Viet Cong fighters” (ibid., 4). Instead, the U.S. bombing had increased human suffering, he insisted. “This misery is growing as peasants now flee from our bombs as much as from Viet Cong terror, crowd into totally inadequate refugee camps, and increasingly send their daughters into Saigon to become mistresses for our soldiers, and cast their children into the streets to fend for themselves” (ibid., 4). Further, the United States bombing campaign failed to honor the Geneva

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<sup>25</sup> In an interesting digression, Coffin argues that elite policymakers lack the perspective necessary to understand the plight of the materially disadvantaged. He asserted that “often a civil-rights worker in Mississippi or a slum priest in Chicago will prove more sensitive to an explosion of human frustration in Latin America than a Rusk or a McNamara; and more sensitive also to the wrongness of a government like that of Diem that conferred so little justice or self-respect upon the vast number of peasants it sought to rule” (ibid., 3).

Accords because U.S. leaders feared communist victory (ibid., 4). As a result, the United States had prolonged a conflict that should have been an open-and-shut domestic matter. In Coffin's view, the results were devastating to the moral standing of the United States. "By repudiating the heart of the Geneva agreements," he observed, "the United States must bear a major responsibility for the war. For when a civil war ends on the agreed condition that the competition will be transferred to the political level, then the side which repudiates the agreed conditions can expect the military struggle to resume" (ibid., 4).

In paragraph seventeen, Coffin asserted the actions of the United States failed to give the South Vietnamese government any sense of legitimacy, noting that

it seems accurate to say that were it not for our intervention, Saigon would long ago have lost this war, and for the basic reason that from Diem to Ky its leaders have been able to talk of social justice, land reform, and genuine nationalism far less convincingly than have both Viet Cong and Hanoi. (ibid., 7)

In Coffin's view, these actions created an irresolvable paradox. The U.S. military campaign produced results opposite of what policymakers intended. He explained, "In such a situation our anti-Communism in the long run can only amount to pro-Communism, and this is why to so many of us this whole war seems so self-defeating" (ibid., 7).

Beginning in paragraph twenty, Coffin advocated for a negotiated settlement. Such a solution, he argued, had the most pragmatic and philosophical advantages. He asserted, “Of the three basic alternatives now facing the United States—withdrawal, negotiation, escalation—we feel the last to be the worst. To seek military victory is almost certainly to assure political and moral defeat” (ibid., 7). However, Coffin conceded that immediate withdrawal was not a viable option because of the undesirable consequences it could produce. Such a withdrawal would endanger those Vietnamese citizens aiding the United States. Coffin argued that

We are impressed by the fact that the United States in Vietnam is now working with many “collaborationists,”<sup>26</sup> with those who collaborated previously with the French and are now collaborating with us. Should we precipitously withdraw not only could the Viet Cong be counted on to initiate a blood bath, but collaborationists would be expected to kill other collaborationists in order to prove they had always, if secretly, been with Ho Chi Minh. (ibid., 8)

Consequently, Coffin claimed that negotiation provided the most viable means for the United States to exit the conflict. He proposed that negotiation proceed immediately through the United Nations and should involve the Viet Cong, “for the simple reason that in war political

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<sup>26</sup> I have emended the punctuation around the word “collaborationists,” which are typed in nonstandard style in the original manuscript.

settlements must reflect military realities . . . to refuse to grant the Viet Cong their place at the conference table, to refuse to allow them any part in the political settlement of the South is to ask them to accept a defeat they have not suffered” (ibid., 8). Coffin chastised the Johnson administration for failing to make any concessions on this point. “It is important, he says, “that the American people realize that it is because of the Administration’s position, as opposed to that of Senators Fulbright, Mansfield, Kennedy, not to mention U Thant—it is because of the Administration’s position that the doors to negotiation are now virtually shut, if at any time they were ever seriously opened” (ibid., 8, 9).

Coffin further argued that negotiated settlement represented the most moral course of action. The United States, he warned, had strayed from its moral principles by ignoring the international community it supported after WWII. As a result, he notes, “Our rather disdainful disregard also of the United Nations gives credence to the charge that America has gone from isolationism to interventionism without passing through internationalism” (ibid., 10). Coffin criticized the United States for refusing to recognize the U.N.’s possible role in resolving the conflict, arguing that “Never has our government stated clearly or even suggested that it would accept the results of the arbitration of any international agency” (ibid., 10).

In the document’s conclusion, Coffin returned to addressing the legitimacy of clergy involvement in the antiwar movement. “Whether the

churches and synagogues of America are going to help people to their dream of world peace is debatable; that they could make a difference is not.” The question then becomes, “So what we ask is whether we shall continue to pick over old stones in comfortably self-limited fields, or whether, possessed by a high excitement, we shall plunge into the task of fulfilling our own vision of a world in which ‘each shall live under his own vine, and his own fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.’”<sup>27</sup>

Coffin’s activities during the spring and summer of 1966 are not well documented. Fragmentary evidence suggests that he continued to speak out against the war and to lobby Johnson administration officials to alter their position. In a June 30, 1966 letter to William P. Bundy at the U.S. Department of State, Coffin again lamented U.S. involvement in Vietnam:

I am sitting here with a heavy heart, retching at the sickening syrup of the President’s piety. There he is out in Omaha, filling the air with fighting creeds no longer in touch with the realities of the situation. He reminds me dreadfully of Billy Graham, delivering his simple message to simple people in simple times, when in fact neither the message nor the people nor certainly the times are that simple. History is going to judge us harshly, Bill. (1966d, 1)

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<sup>27</sup> The line is an allusion to Micah 4: 4, which reads, “but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken” (NRSV, 756).

## Conclusion

Coffin's use of the prophetic mode can ultimately be seen as paralleling external developments within his social milieu. The prophetic mode's connection to Neo-Orthodox and Personalist theologies allowed Coffin to depict his participation in civil rights protests and the antiwar movement as connected to his Christian faith. But as war escalated in early 1967, it became increasingly clear to him that a change in strategies would be necessary. Between December 1966 and April 1967, Coffin's rhetoric moved from a prophetic framework to an existential one.<sup>28</sup> This existential mode would again throw Coffin into the public spotlight.

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<sup>28</sup> Although I argue in Chapter Three that the existential mode dominated Coffin's public discourse in 1967, I acknowledge that the prophetic and existential modes chronologically overlapped to some extent in early 1967. For instance, Carl (1977) identifies Coffin's April 30, 1967 delivery of "Vietnam: A Sermon" as prophetic in nature. Specifically, Carl asserts that Coffin used the Biblical story of Jesus healing of a paralytic as a metaphor for the United States in Vietnam (259). Although Carl's interpretation is well-grounded in textual evidence, I would add that "Vietnam: A Sermon" also contains existential elements, including a direct quotation from Albert Camus.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE EXISTENTIAL MODE, 1966-1967

By December 1966, the media increasingly scrutinized U.S. military operations in Vietnam. When U.S. forces bombed targets near Hanoi on December 13-14, 1966, the National Liberation Front (NLF) claimed high civilian casualties. Two western observers in Hanoi confirmed heavy damage to the city, giving credence to NLF claims (Apple 1966, 5). U.S. officials struggled to manage their public response to NLF allegations. On December 15, the Pentagon admitted to bombing Hanoi, but claimed that only military installations had been targeted (Smith 1966, 1). A day later, U.S. General William Westmoreland denied that any American bombs had fallen on the city of Hanoi itself and offered aerial photographs to support his claims (*New York Times* 1966d, 1). The military again reversed its position on December 28, when an anonymous American source admitted to the Associated Press that the December 13-14 bombing raid had indeed killed North Vietnamese civilians (*New York Times* 1966a, 3). The source pessimistically stated, "The worst part of the whole thing is that we know it'll happen again" (ibid.).

Meanwhile, no military or diplomatic solution to the war appeared in sight. Mississippi Senator John C. Stennis, predicted on December 9

that U.S. policy would result in “a long, drawn-out and bloody war of attrition which will entail increased casualties and continued war costs of \$25 billion per year or more” and that “this war may go on for several, if not many, years” (quoted in Baldwin 1966, 4). Stennis further called for widening the bombing of North Vietnam immediately (*ibid.*). A month later, Stennis again reiterated his call for widening the war.

The U.S. military launched Operation Cedar Falls on January 8, which aimed to gain control of the NLF stronghold 30 miles north of Saigon known as the “Iron Triangle.” The rising conflict took a toll on U.S. forces. The number of U.S. military personnel stationed in Vietnam increased from 368,000 in December 1966 to 400,000 in January 1967 (*New York Times* 1967g, 3). By mid-February, the Pentagon projected that 470,000 Americans would be stationed in Vietnam by July 1 of that year (Baldwin 1967, 4). Casualties were high. In January 1967, the number of troops killed increased weekly. During the third week of January alone, 123 Americans were killed in action and another 716 wounded (*New York Times* 1967g, 3).

Amidst the bloodshed, war opponents criticized the Johnson administration in increasingly moralistic terms. On December 23, the Catholic newsmagazine *Commonweal*, endorsed an American withdrawal from Vietnam. The editorial invoked an ends-means justification for its position, arguing that “the Christian cannot consider the Vietnam war merely a mistaken government measure to be amended eventually but

tolerated. Meanwhile, the evil outweighs the good. This is an unjust war. The United States should get out” (*Commonweal* 1966, 336). On Christmas Day, twelve ministers associated with the Methodist Church released a public letter criticizing the administration for killing civilians, and warned that “any moral superiority of purpose the United States may possibly have had a few years ago has been obliterated by the cruel use of indiscriminate weapons and overwhelming firepower” (Perlmutter 1966, 6). Three days later, Oregon Senator Wayne Morse warned in a television interview that widening the war would tarnish President Johnson’s legacy. Morse argued, “any president that leads mankind into World War III will go down—with whatever history left—as a discredited president” (*New York Times* 1966b, 25).

Despite the gloom, antiwar groups were increasingly divided along radical and moderate lines about how to best respond (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, 174). CALCAV opted to not participate in the April 15, 1967 Spring Mobilization against the war. Richard Fernandez advised CALCAV contacts in a February 24 memo that the Mobilization was unlikely to attract moderate protesters. He wrote, “we do not believe that the Spring Mobilization is going to broaden the base (toward the middle) of the peace movement” (1967b, 1). He further advised that radical protesters could prove counter-productive to movement goals, noting that “while we draw no lines in our own committee with regard to pacifist or non-pacifist, it is our judgment that many of the groups participating

in the Mobilization represent a very radical pacifism as well as a considerable amount of 'total non-interventionist thinking.' We are not convinced that kind of perspective will be helpful in changing present military policy in Vietnam" (ibid., 1).

Like other CALCAV leaders, Coffin initially rejected the possibility of committing civil disobedience against the war. Goldstein speculates that Coffin knew civil disobedience would put him in a more precarious legal position than had his participation in civil rights activities (2004, 184). Yet by October 1967, Coffin would openly urge draft-age men to refuse to cooperate with the Federal Selective Service System. Goldstein further speculates that Coffin "had begun to think that the draft represented an easier target than administration Vietnam policy . . . Hundreds of thousands of young men and their families would be facing the draft, which would bring the reality of the war home far more than any flyer, article, or sermon" (ibid., 185).

Previous antiwar scholarship has rightly observed a dramatic shift in the antiwar movement's tactics between 1965 and 1967 (Moon 2003, 1040; and Carl 1977, 181). Moon claims that Catholic antiwar groups moved toward active resistance after American bishops began punishing priests for making antiwar statements (2003, 1040). As a result, she argues that lay leaders in Catholic antiwar groups escalated their protest tactics in an effort to make the church's leadership look out-of-step with the public (ibid., 1041). Similarly, Carl asserts that religious antiwar

activists moved from traditional policy advocacy to civil disobedience because they saw few, if any, signs that policy advocacy was working (1977, 181). In this chapter, I argue that Coffin embraced an existential mode of rhetoric as part of this shift in tactics. The existential mode enabled Coffin to argue that individuals had a duty to resist authority that violated their conscience, and to accept responsibility for the consequences of such actions. To illustrate how Coffin used the existential mode, I begin with a brief overview of existential philosophy and the role it played in 1960s movements. I next analyze Coffin's use of the existential mode between December 1966 and November 1967, and the responses it evoked.

### **Existentialism: A Brief Survey**

Two distinct strands of existentialism—French humanism and German-American Christian Existentialism—circulated in the mid-twentieth century United States. The discourse of existentialism emphasized individual responsibility, a contingent view of truth, authenticity, and angst.

#### *Defining Existentialism*

Vast in scope, existentialism represents a loose collection of philosophical and literary movements that resist easy definition. Traces of existential thought may be seen as early as Plato and Pascal, although it did not become systematized as a philosophy until the 19<sup>th</sup> century

(MacIntyre 1967, 147). Alasdair MacIntyre argues that existential thought is best conceptualized as a historical movement reflecting six themes: the relationship of individuals to larger social systems, being and absurdity, intentionality, the nature and significance of choice, the role of extreme experiences, and the nature of communication (1967, 147). To MacIntyre, the most important of these six themes is the primacy of individual choice. “If any single thesis could be said to constitute the doctrine of existentialism,” he claims, “it would be that the possibility of choice is the central fact of human nature” (ibid., 147). Similarly, David E. Cooper argues that existential philosophy shares a common concern with freedom and authentic experience, asserting that “inspired by the issue of estrangement, existentialist thought moves in a coherent direction, from conceptions of the world and human existence to a doctrine of radical human freedom that leads into an ethics of authenticity and reciprocal freedom” (2012, 49).

Existentialism’s intellectual forerunners include Blaise Pascal, Soren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2009, 4). Nietzsche inspired secular existentialists in post-World War II France, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus (ibid.). In contrast, the writings of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky were less hostile to religion and inspired a range of theologians and philosophers of religion during the first half of the

twentieth century, including Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Martin Buber (ibid.).

Coffin read Albert Camus, Andre Malraux, and Jean-Paul Sartre while an undergraduate at Yale University (Heister 1973, 17). Although the French existentialists' worldview resonated with Coffin's experiences during World War II, he later described his intellectual flirtation with French existentialism as uneasy.

[C]onvinced as I was that Sartre and Camus were asking all the right questions, still I couldn't help thinking that their answers lacked weight. Their despair was real but the stoicism with which they met it struck me as romantic, lacking strength. The theologians seemed to be in touch with a deeper reality. They too knew what hell was all about but in the depths of it they found a heaven which made more sense out of everything, much as light gives meaning to darkness. (1977, 82)

Because of his disappointment with French existentialism, Coffin instead turned toward Christianity. But existential philosophy would leave its imprint on Coffin through the writings of theologian Paul Tillich.

Tillich, a German expatriate who taught at Union Theological Seminary, proposed a complex theological system that combined Protestant theology with existential philosophy. His theology assumed that humans were fundamentally concerned about questions of existence. He claimed, "man is ultimately concerned about his being and

meaning . . . Man is infinitely concerned about the infinity to which he belongs, from which he is separated, and for which he is longing” (1951, 14). In some texts, Tillich used the term *boundary-situation* to describe these ultimate concerns. He explained, “[T]he human boundary situation is encountered when human possibility reaches its limit, when human existence is confronted by an ultimate threat” (1948, 197). Tillich offered an existential answer to these ultimate concerns, but differentiated between three meanings of the term existentialism. It could represent a point of view motivating philosophical or religious inquiry, a form of protest against Cartesian rationality, or a form of cultural expression (1952/2000, 126). It is significant to note that Tillich believed existentialism as a point of view predated the rise of existential protest in the nineteenth century by several hundred years. He argued that Martin Luther foreshadowed the rise of existential theology. Tillich claimed, “Luther had experiences which he describes as attacks of utter despair (Anfechtung), as the frightful threat of complete meaninglessness. He felt these moments as satanic attacks in which everything was menaced: his Christian faith, the confidence in his work, the Reformation, the forgiveness of sins. Everything broke down in the extreme moments of this despair, nothing was left of the courage to be. Luther in these moments, and in the description he gives of them, anticipated the descriptions of them by modern Existentialism” (1952/2000, 170).



In Tillich's view, a similar condition characterized humanity in the twentieth century. The rationality of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that culminated in two world wars meant that human beings were alienated from their spiritual centers. He believed that humans could recover ultimate meaning only by acknowledging the existential despair of their situation. In Tillich's view, humanity in the twentieth century

has lost a meaningful world and a self which lives in meanings out of a spiritual center. The man created world of objects has drawn into itself him who created it and who now loses his subjectivity in it. He has sacrificed himself to his own productions. But man is still aware of what he has lost or is continuously losing. He is still man enough to experience his dehumanization as despair. He does not know a way out but he tries to save his humanity by expressing the situation as without an 'exit.' He reacts with the courage of despair, the courage to take his despair upon himself and to resist the radical threat of nonbeing by the courage to be as oneself. (1952/2000, 140)

Tillich further asserted that the existential "courage to be" threatened the dominant values of conformist political systems, including Nazi Germany and the McCarthy-era United States (ibid., 141). For Tillich, the role of religion during such times was clear. "There should be no question of what Christian theology has to do in this situation," he insisted. "It

should decide for truth against safety, even if the safety is consecrated and supported by the churches” (ibid., 141).

*Existentialism in the 1960s United States*

Secular and religious strands of existentialism circulated within liberal social movements in the 1960s United States. Liberal social movements influenced by existentialism included the student New Left (Lynd 1969), the religious anti-nuclear group The Peacemakers (Danielson 2008), the October 1967 Resistance protests (Foley 2003), and Protestant campus ministries (Rossinow 1994 and 1998).

Existentialism allowed these groups to argue that the contingent nature of truth called for individual action that would inspire social change.

Existential social movements first emphasized the need for action even in the face of uncertainty. For example, Lynd believed that the contingent nature of truth was especially significant for the New Left, and asserted that “the existential commitment to action, in the knowledge that the consequences can never be fully predicted, is the single most characteristic element in the thought-world of the New Left” (1969, 69).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Boston Resistance protestor Michael Ferber—later one of Coffin’s four co-defendants in the 1968 Boston Five trial—acknowledged in an interview with historian Michael Foley that existentialism had inspired him to see “the unexpectedness and absurdity of life, the

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<sup>29</sup> In *Once to Every Man*, Coffin credits Lynd by name with shaping his evolving views about Vietnam during the mid-1960s (Coffin 1977, 211).

contingency of life, and the importance of living life with passion . . . It sort of discouraged waiting until you got a whole correct theory” (quoted in Foley 2003, 83).

Existential activists believed they could achieve political change by leading through personal example. Rossinow asserts that existential Christians active in campus ministry during the 1960s aimed to achieve “personal breakthrough . . . rooted in both Protestant theology and modern psychological theory. It meant a breakthrough to a new life . . . a personal breakthrough, which, if duplicated enough times, could produce a social breakthrough” (Rossinow 1998, 321). Likewise, Danielson contends that The Peacemakers attempted to persuade others to accept their nonviolent worldview “[by] acknowledging their own complicity in evil, pacifists believed that they would create and reaffirm the existence of a moral universe and inspire others to do the same” (2008, 224).

Despite existentialism’s unmistakable circulation in the discourse of the mid-twentieth century United States, remarkably few studies have examined its rhetorical features during this period.<sup>30</sup> Leliah Danielson (2008) very briefly discusses characteristics of discourse in The Peacemakers. She asserts the group’s discourse resists easy classification, because “pacifist use of the language of ‘personal

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<sup>30</sup> Weiman (1961), Galati (1969), Craig Smith (1972), and J. Michael Hyde (1990) describe existentialism as a possible basis for persuasion. They do not, however, extend this theorizing to case studies of public address.

responsibility,' which is typically associated with conservative thought, reflected the influence of Christian existentialism—and it is significant that excerpts from the writings of Paul Tillich and Soren Kierkegaard circulated at the conferences” (ibid., 224). Danielson claims that existentialism continued to circulate within Peacemaker discourse in the mid-1960s, but amid internal strife. She writes that, “the personalist concerns and existential framework of radical pacifists persisted through the 1950s and 1960s even as the consensus that brought them together frayed” along the lines of those who emphasized individual action and those who emphasized communal responsibility for achieving disarmament (ibid., 234).

In summary, it is evident that existential discourse circulated within the mid-twentieth century United States. It influenced religious activists, but also non-religious social movements, such as the student New Left. In what follows, I will demonstrate that these existential features can be seen in Coffin’s discourses beginning in late 1966.

### **Laying the Groundwork for Draft Resistance**

By late 1966, Coffin had grown frustrated with the antiwar movement’s inability to achieve policy change. Although he continued to believe that a diplomatic solution to the war was possible, external events pushed Coffin toward an existential mode of argument that emphasized individual responsibility to follow one’s conscience, even if that meant accepting serious consequences as a result. Coffin’s letters

from December 1966 and January 1967 suggest that he felt increasingly dissatisfied with the prophetic mode. By February 1967, the existential mode had become the central feature of his public discourse.

*Personal Correspondence*

In his December 1966 and January 1967 personal correspondence, Coffin expressed growing doubts about the war. In a December 19, 1966 letter to Talmage Rogers, Coffin acknowledged that Senator Stennis's argument for escalation was logically coherent, even though Coffin found the proposal to be ill-advised. "Stennis is right," Coffin wrote. "[W]e do not have at present a formula for victory. Victory could only be attained by major escalation, which of course risks bringing in the Russians in considerable numbers" (1966e, 1). In light of those potential consequences, combined with the dubious nature of the U.S. mission in Vietnam, Coffin believed that ending the war needed to be an absolute priority. He claimed, "Given the fact that we shouldn't have been there in the first place, and that escalation is no solution, I think we have got to start thinking in terms of ending the war" (ibid., 1). He believed that draft resistance represented a legitimate avenue for protest, although he demurred about how to publicly express that resistance. Responding to Rogers' inquiry about whether he supported draft-card burning, Coffin stated, "I did not advocate burning, but I would certainly advocate civil disobedience" (ibid., 2). He then argued, "[n]o man can surrender his conscience to the state" (ibid., 2). The

phrase would become increasingly central to his discourse throughout 1967. In a letter to Rev. Gordon W. Stearns on January 10, 1967, Coffin advocated that draft protests should be initiated by students. “[I]t would be a wonderful thing,” he wrote, “if five, six, seven hundred students on a given day were with dignity to assemble, let’s say, in ten different centers throughout the United States, and issue a moving statement, and return their draft cards to some selected Federal buildings” (1967b, 1). Coffin hoped that such protests would result in increased public recognition of the war’s moral dilemmas. He explained, “the idea would be, as you suspected, to try to arouse an American public not to hostility but to greater concern” (ibid., 1).

Even as he endorsed civil disobedience, Coffin believed a policy solution to the war remained possible. In his letter to Stearns, he expressed hope that a policy solution could be found, claiming that, “Right now, however, I am really more interested in trying to get the middle of the roaders out to bolster the forces of moderation. I think we have a real chance in the next month or two. The chance is not big but worth obviously every effort” (ibid., 1). It is unclear what sort of settlement Coffin believed moderates could achieve. What is clear is that by mid-February, Coffin would publicly and unequivocally endorse draft resistance.

*“On Civil Disobedience”*

On February 21, 1967, Coffin debated retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Charles Whittaker at the Washington Club. Entitled “On Civil Disobedience,” the debate took place in front of a live audience that included over forty journalists and television cameras (Goldstein 2004, 186). In his address, Coffin articulated an existential rationale for social activism in which race relations served as a representative example of existentially-driven social change (1967e). After Coffin explicated this rationale, he sketched a preliminary framework for draft resistance.

Although the speech never used the term ‘existentialism’ specifically, it is clear that an existential rationale informed Coffin’s argument. For instance, Coffin began the address by claiming that an individual’s social conscience was the central feature of human existence. In Coffin’s view, this sense of conscience contrasted with the purely individualistic sense of the self. He insisted, “[T]he most profound experience of the self is still the experience of the conscience, and not as frequently suggested today the experience of private sensations and interior vision” (1967e, 1). Furthermore, Coffin asserted that individuals who recognized this conscience would achieve a sense of agency over their own future, because “men are not trapped in their destinies, powerless against them” (ibid., 1). By following their conscience, Coffin believed that individuals could choose to resist laws they believed to be unjust. “On paper there are no answers,” he argued, “only in life are

there solutions. I do not think that any man ever has the right to break the law, but I do think that upon occasion every man has the duty to do so” (ibid., 2).

Unlike the existentialists of 1940s France, Coffin held that an existential framework could exist alongside of theistic beliefs. For Coffin, belief in a theistic entity could provide individuals with the courage needed to make a leap of faith, “[b]ecause there is a higher and hopefully future order of things, men at times will feel constrained to disobey the law out of a sense of obedience to a higher allegiance” (ibid., 1). For Coffin, this disobedience was a reflection of the Christian tradition rather than an opposition to it. He claimed that “[t]he New Testament concludes that man must respect but never worship the law; respect what is legal, but be more concerned with what is just” (ibid., 2).

To Coffin, contemporary race relations served as a representative example for how existentially-driven social change worked. His argument here drew support from Nat Hentoff’s 1966 account of public school 119 in Harlem, *Our Children Are Dying*. Hentoff’s book described squalid material conditions in Harlem schools, including leaky roofs and rat-infested buildings, which in turn produced alienated children unable to learn. Extending Hentoff’s analysis, Coffin argued that American consumer culture reinforced Harlem children’s sense of alienation. He claimed, “Their brain cells have never really been brought to life because when children’s lives are catastrophic they simply cannot learn very



much. Then their hearts so quickly fill with bitterness if only because their chief babysitter, the T.V. set, keeps shoving the good life down their throats” (ibid., 3). However, traditional policy argument rarely worked for communities faced with such conditions. Coffin contended, “very quickly, they [African-Americans] are forced to the realization that rational persuasion is rarely the best way to persuade people to be rational. Go through normal channels and you get few results months later” (ibid.). Some other form of persuasion was needed to achieve meaningful change.

As an alternative to rational argument, Coffin proposed that oppressed persons could achieve social change by forcing direct confrontation with their oppressors.<sup>31</sup> He asserted, “if you boycott a school, or physically occupy the seats of the Board of Education, then you *do* make contact with the public outside” (ibid., 4). The process worked by forcing oppressors to recognize the consequences of their own actions. Coffin explained, “You confront people with their beliefs, for the fact of the matter is that few people realize they have strong beliefs until things are stirred up . . . only when men realize that others are not going to pay the price, only when Watts, Hough, Harlem blow up, do men become willing to make necessary concessions” (ibid., 4). When successful, the result of these protests would be a recovery of

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<sup>31</sup> Coffin’s advocacy of confrontation bears some resemblance to Robert S. Cathcart’s (1972/1977) model of social movements as confrontational.

humanness of the people oppressed by unjust authority. He argued, “given these circumstances, a carefully planned non-violent act of civil disobedience such as a school boycott or a rent strike can be an act of intelligence and concern. It can reflect an effort to reach the public by refusing to be more loyal to a system than to the people the system was designed to serve” (ibid., 5).

According to Coffin’s logic, the same existential rationale used to justify civil disobedience in African-American communities also justified civil disobedience against the war. To make this point, however, Coffin needed to overcome arguments against dissent during wartime. He acknowledged that political conservatism frowned upon such dissent, stating that “unfortunately passion has now so frequently distorted judgment that many loyal citizens have found their patriotic motives impugned at the very moment they were demonstrating their allegiance to the ethics and tactics of a democracy” (ibid., 7). Coffin refuted these views by asking his audience to

recall that our Puritan Fathers came to this country precisely because they refused to surrender their conscience to the State; and that many Americans whom we now hail as heroes were in their generation notorious lawbreakers. The Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were not only imprisoned but executed. In Pennsylvania John Woolman broke with Benjamin Franklin and refused to pay taxes when in 1750 Pennsylvania decided to arm

against the Indians. Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, were of course traitors all until success crowned their efforts and they became patriots. (ibid., 7)<sup>32</sup>

Coffin hoped that these examples would bring respect for existential protest. He added, “Americans would better be able to applaud the spirit of those who refuse today to surrender their conscience to State even when they do not share their views” (ibid., 8).

Still, Coffin acknowledged that committing civil disobedience would be difficult, for three reasons. Civil disobedience might be unpopular, because “as men frequently vote their ignorance, fears, and prejudices, there is never a guarantee that majority rule represents the rule of conscience” (ibid., 8). It might produce no immediate effects. He warned, “we need to recognize that while one man’s witness may do wonders for that man’s conscience, it will do little, at least immediately, to alter the course of events” (ibid., 8). Most significantly, Coffin acknowledged that civil disobedience required protesters to take a leap of faith in the face of uncertain outcomes:

I said, you remember, at the outset to the question of civil disobedience I thought there were no easy or written answers, only solutions in concrete life situations. I think in this instance those opposed to the war must ask, “How great is the evil we protest? Have all legal remedies been exhausted? Or is the evil so

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<sup>32</sup> The words “In Pennsylvania” are handwritten on Coffin’s typed manuscript.

monstrous that there is no time for these? How many innocent will suffer, one way or another, now and in twenty years' time? And have we really done our homework?" Then, as these questions can never be more than partly answered, we have to proceed even as the government is now proceeding—to act whole-heartedly, without absolute certainty. (ibid., 9)

Despite the existential angst that would accompany such activities, Coffin believed that the time had arrived for civil disobedience against the war.

The speech briefly outlined how antiwar civil disobedience should proceed. Coffin suggested that clergy should play an active role in resistance. He explained, "I propose that seminarians opposed to the war should surrender their draft exemption in order to make it count on moral grounds, that they should declare themselves Conscientious Objectors to this war. I further propose that older clergy should publicly advocate their doing so in order that all be subject to the penalties of the Selective Service Act" (ibid., 9). He next suggested that draft-age students follow a similar course of action, asserting that "I think it would be a good thing if the students organized themselves. I would love to see one, two, or five thousand students and others of draftable age opposed to the war gather on some specified date this spring in some ten or twenty urban centers throughout the country, there with a moving simple

statement to surrender their draft cards at previously designated federal buildings” (ibid., 9).

*Reactions to “On Civil Disobedience”*

“On Civil Disobedience” evoked a flurry of negative responses from both individuals and media outlets. Public opinion mail consisted of two types of letters: interlocutors who advanced ad hominem arguments that questioned Coffin’s competence as a chaplain, and interlocutors who engaged Coffin in substantive argument by questioning the existential logic that informed his anti-draft advocacy.

The first category of letters addressed to Coffin in the aftermath of “On Civil Disobedience” consisted of ad hominem attacks. Elizabeth Knippenberg of Woodhaven, New York wrote on February 22, 1967, “I was horrified (not for the first time) to see and hear a man who pretends to be a chaplain utter some loathsome remarks—I hope there are everywhere decent students left to protest you and may I suggest your last name is very apt” (1967, 1). William Boyd of Pennsylvania went even further, claiming that Coffin represented a social disease requiring eradication. He wrote, “All across our land we have laboratories where we are continually striving to eliminate disease, but we are afflicted with a powerful disease caused by vermin in our society. Some of the most obnoxious of these vermin are the false prophets who profess to be a part of the host of honest men of the clergy” (Boyd 1967, 1). In a March 13, 1967 letter to Coffin, Robert S. Powell of Lexington, South Carolina

asserted, "I am not anti-clergy but I am decidedly against any person who engages in any activity to aid and abet unpatriotic activities" (Powell 1967, 1). Authors of ad hominem letters further questioned Coffin's masculinity. Knippenberg wrote, "To think that people like you are free to say such things because real men like my husband and son and thousands more are willing to fight and die gives you this freedom" (1967, 1). Similarly, Boyd asserted that "All across our great United States we have these insidious characters, not men but 'panty-waists,' who preach blaspheme" (1967, 1).

Another group of interlocutors appeared to grasp the existential logic of Coffin's argument, but rejected the claim that it necessarily warranted draft resistance. James F. Carney, a Yale alumnus with a self-described "sincere religious conviction and a background as a former pacifist" most clearly represented this view. In a March 1, 1967 letter to Coffin, Carney wrote, "I have consistently defended your past actions, particularly in the field of civil rights. I have been proud that Yale's chaplain had clear perception and the courage to stand for his beliefs as a Christian" (1967, 1). Yet Carney believed that draft resistance represented a line that Coffin should not cross. He claimed, "I am deeply hurt by your recent action in encouraging 'thousands of students to turn in your draft cards.' I feel that you have crossed a most important line between witness to your personal beliefs and an action which uses your position as Yale's chaplain to urge that students, whom you have been

chosen to lead, should take one particular illegal action to support your personal belief” (ibid.). Even so, Carney clearly recognized the existential leap that Coffin was attempting. He stated,

I have no question as to your sincerity and conviction. I hope that this same sincerity and conviction whether you have the right to use your position as Yale’s chaplain to advance this type of conviction . . . Mr. Coffin, you could continue to express your conviction about the war in many personal ways, and you could urge students to protest in other ways. (ibid.)

Similarly, one of Coffin’s Andover classmates, Nelson “Nick” Taintor Jr., wrote, “Everyone has the right to his personal opinions, and obviously, in the matter of this country’s foreign policies, there will never be 100% agreement-regardless of the policy in question. However, to encourage and incite men of draft age to disregard the law of the land, in my opinion is distasteful and even more distasteful when it comes from a chaplain of a highly regarded institution of learning” (Taintor 1967, 1).

An unsigned editorial aired by New Haven radio and television station WNHC the week after the speech criticized Coffin’s remarks as irresponsible. The editorial argued, “We respect freedom of belief. But when someone speaks from such a position as Chaplain of a great university, he should give far more thought to what gets said” (WHNC Editorial 1967, 1). It added, “Civil disobedience we see as a personal, individual thing. Using the power and esteem which go with an

important office as a means to openly advocate that thousands follow such a ridiculous scheme is another matter” (ibid., 1).

Coffin’s response to the criticism sought to clarify his views about the role of clergy in draft resistance. In a letter to the *Yale Daily News* published on February 23, Coffin insisted he did not want clergy to organize students as conscientious objectors, stating that “obviously that’s a job for the students if they’re inclined to do it” (1967c, 1). He ended the letter by offering to discuss the matter further with students (ibid.). In other responses, Coffin emphasized that civil disobedience represented a means of last resort necessary only to preserve one’s sense of conscience. In an invited reply to the WNHC editorial that aired on March 7, he asserted,

Obviously too, you do not engage in civil disobedience—not as a first resort. You speak out, write letters, sign petitions, all in the best American democratic tradition. But having done all this—many times, and for years—do you then decide to put your conscience to bed with the comforting thought that well, you have done your best, the Government remains unimpressed, and the law of the land is clear; or do you decide that having chosen the road of protest you have to choose to pursue it to the end, even if this means going to jail? How you answer that question clearly depends on how wrong you think the war and how deeply you care. (1967g, 1)



Coffin further claimed that he did not advocate acts that have been associated with radical protesters. “Now let’s be very clear,” he said. “[T]his is not to advocate violence. I am against violence, as I am against draft card burning, which I consider an unnecessarily hostile act” (ibid., 1). In a March 1 interview with *The Phillipian*, student newspaper of Phillips Academy, Coffin again clarified his view that civil disobedience required participants to make an uncertain leap of faith, because “a man has to act without absolute certainty, but has to act wholeheartedly, which is the way, of course, the Federal Government has to act, too” (*Phillipian* 1967, n.p.). In time, the existential currents in the larger antiwar movement would continue push Coffin toward committing civil disobedience.

### **Implementing Draft Resistance**

Several months passed before Coffin actively participated in draft resistance. Throughout the first half of 1967, Coffin worked to build support for the antiwar movement. He participated in CALCAV’s Vietnam Summer. In August 1967, CALCAV endorsed civil disobedience as a protest strategy. In an August 24, 1967 memorandum to other CALCAV leaders, Richard Fernandez called for the organization to move beyond policy statements to active resistance, arguing that “we believe that it is time for the religious community to stand in solidarity with the young men who, because of conscience, cannot go to Viet Nam and, as soldiers, enable our government to carry out its military objectives” (Fernandez

1967c, 1). The Fernandez memo included a draft version of the document “Conscience and Conscription,” which articulated CALCAV’s philosophy of draft resistance. As Fernandez explained, the document did not reference Vietnam specifically, “primarily because, in our judgment the statement is both accurate and something to be acted upon even if there were no war” (ibid., 1). Instead, the act of supporting conscientious objection itself was more significant than the reasons for that conscientious objector’s stance.

We have suggested in the statement that as members of the religious community we place paramount importance on the role of conscience in the process of ethical formulation. In so doing we have tried to make clear that the specific reasons why a particular young man may, in conscience, decide that he cannot fight for his country is of secondary importance in contrast to the importance of members of the religious community standing in solidarity with him in his objection. (ibid., 1)

But the memo remained short on details about how draft resistance would be implemented.

Fernandez acknowledged that CALCAV members would need to provide input about how to best proceed with active resistance. In the August 14 memo, he wrote, “any implementation of specific program ideas relative to this statement will necessarily mean that you and other persons in communities throughout the country will have to help us

think through the specifics of what such an implementation might mean” (ibid., 2). Fernandez called for a two-day meeting in Washington D.C. to discuss these implementation details. Although that meeting never took place, Coffin proposed in mid-September that the organization hold a draft-card turn-in at the Department of Justice headquarters in Washington, D.C. (Goldstein 2004, 195).<sup>33</sup> Richard Neuhas, a CALCAV executive board member, took responsibility for organizing the event (ibid.).

On October 2, Coffin chaired a press conference that revealed a document entitled “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority” to the public. The document’s author, Mitchell Goodman, presented the document’s substantive arguments. He argued, “when young men refuse to allow their consciences to be violated by an unjust law and a criminal war, then it is necessary for their elders—their teachers, ministers, friends—to make clear their commitment, in conscience, *to aid, abet, and counsel* them against conscription” (Goodman 1967, 1). It is significant to note that Goodman’s language bore striking resemblance to Coffin’s arguments in “On Civil Disobedience” eight months prior. Goodman further drew a distinction between private belief and public action, claiming that “most of us have already done this privately. Now, publicly,

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<sup>33</sup> The proposed Washington D.C. meeting was subsequently called off in a September 14 follow-up memo from Fernandez, citing the costs associated with transportation (Fernandez 1967b, 1). The memo also apparently deleted the word “refuge” from a “Conscience and Conscription” draft, because of concerns that would place an undue burden on local churches and synagogues (ibid., 1).

we will demonstrate, side by side with the draft resisters, our determination to continue to do so” (ibid., 1).

In an October 4 letter to the *Yale Daily News*, Coffin qualified his participation in the resistance slightly, asserting that the movement did not desire to force students into jail. Rather, the goal was to assist individuals who felt compelled to resist the war on their own. He explained, “we do, however, have every intention of trying to assert solidarity in all ways we can--which are precious few--with those who in conscience cannot serve in the armed forces as long as our country continues the war in Vietnam” (Coffin 1967e, n.p.).

#### *The Boston Resistance Protests*

Shortly after the appearance of “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” Coffin received an invitation from Richard Mumma, Presbyterian campus minister at Harvard, to preach at a draft card turn-in in Boston’s Arlington Street Unitarian Church on October 16 (Coffin 1977, 241). The event would be part of nationwide Resistance Day activities being coordinated by other antiwar groups. Foley (2003) asserts that elements of French existentialism circulated in the Resistance Day protests. But the Resistance Day protesters drew inspiration from a variety of intellectual sources. Foley acknowledged, “Although the Resistance owed much to the ideas of the New Left, the draft resistance movement in Boston, in particular, derived its theoretical underpinnings from a blend of existentialism, anarchism, nonviolence, and especially

religion” (2003b, 83). This existentialist impulse was most evident in the West Coast resistance protests, where participants “wore their hair long, rode motorcycles and read Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Nietzsche” (ibid., 83). Although the Boston protesters tended to be less flamboyant in appearance, they nevertheless remained influenced by existentialism and frequently quoted Camus (ibid., 83).

5,000 protesters attended a protest on Boston Common on the morning of October 16 (Goldstein 2004, 197). People then packed into the Arlington Street Unitarian Church in Back Bay, the home pulpit of nineteenth century abolitionist William Ellery Channing. Draft resisters sat in the first ten rows, while observers—including their parents and the news media—sat in the back (Coffin 1977, 242). Preachers who spoke at the service included Coffin and Harvard Divinity School professor George Williams (Goldstein 2004, 197).

#### *Coffin’s Arlington Street Church Speech*

Coffin spent the day before the Arlington Street Church service at Phillips Academy, preparing a speech text, ostensibly for distribution to the press. As Coffin wrote in his memoirs, “It was always a chore for me to write out every word of my speech. On the other hand, it was important not to be misquoted” (1977, 241). Although the Boston speech shared several intertextual similarities to “On Civil Disobedience,” Coffin broke new ground by offering a detailed plan for draft resistance that involved using churches as sanctuaries for conscientious objectors.

As he had in “On Civil Disobedience” eight months earlier, Coffin began the Arlington Street speech by appealing to a long tradition of protest. He quoted from “On Civil Disobedience” nearly word-for-word by stating,

Most words are dispensable. They can perish as though they had never been written or spoken. Some few, however, must forever remain alive if human beings are to remain human. “I love my city, but I shall not stop preaching that which I believe is true: you may kill me, but I shall follow God rather than you.” and: “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29). Why are these words of Socrates and St. Peter so indispensable? Because in the first place they tell us that the most profound experience of the self is the experience of the conscience, and not as frequently suggested today the experience of private sensations and interior visions.

(1967j, 1)<sup>34</sup>

As he had in “On Civil Disobedience,” Coffin also appealed to the tradition of American patriotism. He argued,

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<sup>34</sup> In on “On Civil Disobedience,” Coffin stated, “Most words are dispensable. They can perish as though they had never been written or spoken. A few, however, must forever remain alive if human beings are to remain human. For instance: ‘I love my city, but I shall not stop preaching that which I believe is true; you may kill me, but I shall follow God rather than you.’ ‘We must obey God rather than men.’ And perhaps even ‘Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.’—the somewhat sloganistic motto on the seal of Thomas Jefferson. Why are these words so indispensable? Because in the first place they tell us that the most profound experience of the self is still the experience of the conscience, and not as frequently suggested today the experience of private sensations or interior visions” (1967f, 1).

And how can Americans so quickly forget their own heritage? Our Puritan forefathers came to these shores precisely because they would not surrender their consciences to the state! The Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were not only imprisoned but executed because they refused to obey the law. In Pennsylvania in 1750 John Wollman refused to pay taxes when Pennsylvania decided to arm against the Indians. And Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Adams were not only civilly disobedient but traitors all, until success crowned their efforts and they became great patriots. (ibid., 1)

However, Coffin went a step further than he had in “Civil Disobedience,” by claiming that the existential dilemma created by the war called for action. “The issue *is* one of conscience,” he stated. “Let us be blunt. To us the war in Vietnam is a crime. And if we are correct, if the war is a crime, then is it criminal to refuse to have anything to do with it? Is it we who are demoralizing our boys in Vietnam, or the Administration which is asking them to do immoral things?” (ibid.). It then followed that young men should defy draft laws they believed to be unjust. Coffin insisted,

To us then the war is an issue of conscience. So too is the draft. For not only does the National Selective Service Act inexcusably defer the rich and better educated; it also insists that a man’s conscientious objection be based on “religious belief and training.”

Could anything be more ethically absurd? Have humanists no conscience? Why, many men become atheists because they think Christians are so inhuman that the only way to be a good humanist is to be an atheist. (Of course, they are mistaken. Christians have always been the best argument against Christianity. But Christ is the best argument for it, and that's the argument that has to be met!) But it is absurd once again to say a man must be a believer in order to be conscientious. (ibid., 2)

After Coffin had finished speaking, Harvard Divinity School professor George Williams delivered his message. The plan initially was that draft resisters would come forward to the altar to hand their cards over to clergy in a dignified and solemn ceremony. But Williams deviated from that plan. Coffin later recalled,

Suddenly, I heard his voice rise. I saw an excited finger shaking in the direction of the single candle on the table below. "There," he shouted in words I recall as follows, "there is Channing's own candlestick, the one he used night after night to illumine the progress of his writing. I am certain that were he here for this occasion, its flame, illuminating as it does the faces of you resisters, would seem to him almost Pentecostal. For you, gentlemen, are the very pillar of fire this nation needs to lead it out of the darkness now covering its people." (Coffin 1977, 242-243)



Coffin then realized that protesters intended to burn their draft cards, a sensational image that would dominate subsequent news coverage of the day's events (ibid., 243). 67 resisters chose to burn their draft cards with Channing's candlestick, while the remaining 214 simply handed over their draft cards to the clergy as planned (Goldstein 2004, 197). In his memoirs, Coffin wrote that "all the Yale students in the church, as was natural, gave their cards to me. That was the first of several times I was to receive draft cards. While always moved, I was never more so than this time" (1977, 243). After the burning of draft cards had concluded, the church sang "Once to Every Man" as its final hymn.

#### *The Justice Department Speech*

Resistance protesters converged on Washington, D.C. on October 20. Unlike the Boston Resistance events four days earlier, the DC protests were marred by confusion. Because of ambiguous written directions, protesters assembled at two different churches (Coffin 1977, 245). After organizers gathered the group in one place, protesters lined up two by two and marched under police escort (ibid., 245). In addition to draft resisters, the crowd included artists, writers, professors, and clergy (Goldstein 2001, 198). As the group rallied outside of the Justice Department, 25 representatives of resistance groups presented the draft cards to pediatrician Benjamin Spock, a noted war opponent.<sup>35</sup> Spock

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<sup>35</sup> Spock joined Citizens for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) earlier in the decade, and subsequently joined the antiwar movement.

then placed the cards in a briefcase, and handed the briefcase over to Coffin to carry into the Department of Justice.

Perched in front of television cameras, Coffin delivered a brief statement to the press. But unlike his sermon at the Arlington Street Church four days earlier, Coffin seemed to backtrack on the sanctuary claims. He argued, “we cannot shield them. We can only expose ourselves as they have done. The law of the land is clear. Section 12 of the National Selective Service Act declares that anyone ‘who knowingly counsels, aids, or abets another to refuse or evade registration or service in the armed forces . . . shall be liable to imprisonment for not more than five years or a fine of ten thousand dollars or both’” (1967h, 1). In spite of the high stakes, Coffin urged the draft resisters to follow through with the effort, stating that “we hereby publicly counsel these young men to continue in their refusal to serve in the armed forces as long as the war in Vietnam continues, and we pledge ourselves to aid and abet them in all the ways we can. This means that if they are now arrested for failing to comply with a law that violates their consciences, we too must be arrested, for in the sight of that law we are now as guilty as they” (ibid., 2). In unmistakable terms, Coffin grasped the gravity of his actions.

After the speech, eleven men entered the Justice Department: Coffin, Mitchell Goodman, Benjamin Spock, Marcus Raskin, Arthur Waskow, R.W.B. Lewis, Seymour Melman, and four draft resisters. Raskin was a last-minute substitution for Norman Mailer, whom Coffin

believed looked too hung over (Coffin 1977, 246). Coffin later regretted the substitution, believing that it directly led to Raskin's indictment as a co-conspirator in the Boston 5 case (ibid.).

The brief meeting inside the Justice Department unfolded in a bizarre manner. The eleven protesters were escorted to the office of Assistant Deputy Attorney General John McDonough. The draft-age resisters present at the meeting had not been screened in advance and included Dickie Harris, an afro-sporting U.C. Berkeley student active in the black power movement. Harris's mannerisms unnerved McDonough. In an interview with Jessica Mitford, Coffin recalled that

He rounded on McDonough. "Man, you gonna hear me?" he demanded. "Yes, I'm listening to you," said McDonough nervously. "I didn't say *listen*, man, I said *he-e-e-ar* me!" McDonough was looking most uncomfortable. Then Harris, with measured, contemptuous emphasis: "*Man... you . . . don't . . . exist.*" McDonough literally started checking himself out—patting himself up and down—and I thought, Watch out, McDonough! Here comes the West wind! (Mitford 1970, 42, 43)

A moment later, McDonough read a brief statement warning the group that they could be violating the law (ibid., 43). Coffin then attempted to hand McDonough a briefcase full of draft cards (ibid., 43). Coffin later recalled in his memoirs that

I picked up the briefcase and handed it to him. But he pulled back, putting his hands on his lap. Puzzled I said, “Shall we try it again, Mr. McDonough?” and once more offered him the briefcase. But again he recoiled. This is getting to be silly, I thought. “Shall we try the table, Mr. McDonough?” I said. This time I put the briefcase down squarely in front of him. McDonough started back as though it contained hot coals. (Coffin 1977, 250)

A moment later, the group thanked McDonough and exited the building (ibid., 251).

### **The Resistance Aftermath**

The October Resistance activities met a firestorm of controversy. Interlocutors argued that Coffin’s ‘sanctuary’ plan was incoherent, that his advocacy was insincere, and that he failed to grasp the possible consequences of draft resistance.

Coffin’s advocacy for making churches sanctuaries for draft resisters proved particularly controversial. In an October 24 letter to the *Yale Daily News*, Yale Divinity School faculty member David Little condemned the proposal in sharp terms. Calling the proposal “mystifying,” Little asserted that “the notion that the church is a place of immunity from the burdens or responsibilities of the law is highly questionable indeed” (Little 1967, n.p.). Instead, Little argued that the church should encourage conscientious objectors to take full responsibility for their actions. He wrote, “Willingness to pay the prices is

precisely what distinguishes civil disobedience from other kinds of disobedience. By suffering the legal consequences one acknowledges, even in protest, the right of the state to exact a penalty” (ibid.).

Interlocutors second claimed that Coffin’s anti-draft advocacy was insincere. In an October 7 letter, Yale President Kingman Brewster warned Coffin that “anyone who is not himself subject to the draft suffers a moral handicap when it comes to urging others to take a course which not only involves a serious legal penalty but bears the suspicion that it may not be motivated by conscience and involves putting the burden on someone else to serve in his place” (Brewster 1967a, 1). Brewster criticized Coffin in even stronger terms in a speech at the Parents Day Assembly on October 28, 1967. He first argued that Coffin’s advocacy was insincere. Brewster claimed, “the Chaplain’s effort to devise ‘confrontations’ and ‘sanctuaries’ in order to gain spot news coverage seems to me unworthy of and to detract from the true trial of conscience which touches most of your sons and preoccupies so many” (Brewster 1967b, 3). Brewster further implied that draft-age men should not heed Coffin’s advice, stating that “I do not think your sons are well-served by strident voices which urge draft resistance as a political tactic. This is especially distasteful when those who urge the resistance are too old to be able to share fully the personal and moral consequences of refusing to serve and thereby making it necessary for the nation to call someone

else” (ibid., 2). Despite his personal disapproval of anti-draft advocacy, Brewster tolerated Coffin’s right to speak on civil libertarian grounds.<sup>36</sup>

Critics third alleged that Coffin failed to grasp the significance of the disobedience he advocated. In a scathing editorial, the October 5 *Manchester Union-Leader* called Coffin’s claims incoherent, arguing that “The standard ‘line’ of advocates of civil disobedience is that those who oppose the law ‘for reasons of conscience’ should be willing, even eager, to go to jail for their convictions. But the outspoken New Haven clergyman will have none of that; he believes that such people should be above the law – a new class of ‘untouchables.’ Coffin also boasts that the government would back down rather than face a ‘moral’ confrontation with the church protected law violaters [sic]” (“Rev. Mr. Coffin’s ‘Untouchables’” 1967, 19). Similarly, Kingman Brewster advised Coffin that he needed to be willing to accept any consequences his activities created. He advised Coffin that “the entire [Yale] Corporation would not only permit but would honor and respect those who would, not for political effect but for personal, private reasons, witness their conscience by a willingness to pay the price which society exacts in order to assure

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<sup>36</sup> In the Parents Day Address, Brewster asserted: “Would Yale be a better place if the Chaplain were not free to pursue his own convictions, including the preaching and practice of non-violent disobedience of a law he feels he could not in conscience obey? I think not . . . I have great confidence in your sons’ ability to keep their own counsel and to sort out the true from the false if they are allowed to make up their own minds. I would have no confidence in them at all if they [word missing here?] protected from exposure to all argument and sheltered from the risk of error” (Brewster 1967b, 3).

itself that the motivation is truly conscientious rather than self-serving” (Brewster 1967a, 2). Echoing Brewster’s warning, an unnamed Yale senior told the *New York Times* on October 13 that “I don’t think Bill Coffin has quite squared with the fact that a student, in turning in his draft card, might be closing off all avenues for later life. Coffin acts as though he were just as vulnerable, but he’s not, because his life is already set” (“Yale Chaplain Urges Students to Ponder Spurning the Draft” 15, 1967).

After the conclusion of the Department of Justice protest, Coffin continued to advocate for draft resistance. On October 23, he attended a CALCAV strategy meeting in Detroit. In an October 27 memorandum to CALCAV members summarizing the meeting, Richard Fernandez stated, “Mr. Coffin outlined, in some detail, the historical significance of churches and synagogues being used as sanctuaries for conscience. There followed several questions with respect to both the draft and churches and synagogues being used as sanctuaries” (1967d, 2). Fernandez further noted that the arguments appeared to be having some resonance. He explained, “one of the more interesting developments that has occurred [sic], as some of you know about, is the use of actual churches for sanctuary in both Detroit and San Francisco” (ibid., 2).

Fernandez then summarized three main points that emerged from the draft discussion. First, the idea of draft resistance remained controversial. He explained, “In about three, four, or five major

metropolitan areas the populace is sufficiently fragmented that taking a stand on the draft is not by some of the ‘moderate’ peace people, considered an abnormal activity” (ibid.). However, such sentiments were not widespread: On the other hand, it was also clear, as the discussion developed, that identification with draft resistance—no matter the particular rightness of that activity—placed many people in a totally uncompromising position even among the ‘peace people’ in ones [sic] own community” (ibid.). Second, CALCAV members overwhelmingly agreed that their main focus should be to support draft resisters. Fernandez speculated that this was the case because “[y]oung men of draft age of course are the ones that are being told to go and kill Vietnamese and are in the position of being placed in a very personal confrontation as to what they will and will not do with respect to this war” (ibid., 2). Third, a detailed discussion emerged about ways to best support conscientious objectors. Possible ideas discussed included “draft counseling, going to court with young men who need adult support, preparations to help support persons financially who must pay legal fees and/or go to jail for their commitment[,] making the draft issue a more public one via the press . . . were among many ideas with respect to the ways in which people can support men of draft age” (ibid., 2).

*“On Martin Luther”*

Coffin’s next New Haven sermon on Sunday, November 5, “On Martin Luther,” also relied heavily on the existential mode. Three themes



punctuated the sermon: the existential angst of religious dissidents from the Hebrew Bible to the present, the need for purification, and the need to experience grace in order to achieve salvation.

The first theme reflected in the sermon is the existential angst experienced by religious dissidents. In the opening paragraph of the sermon, Coffin observed the tendency of ordinary persons who seek “a good excuse to do nothing” by criticizing the motives of those who raise controversial issues (1967g, 1). Here, Coffin cited the example of “the Buddhist monks who turn themselves into burning signposts pointing at the war, and the typical reaction is not ‘look at the horrors of the war’ but ‘Look at the crazy monk’” (ibid., 1). From the example of the self-immolating monks, Coffin next proceeded to the case of Martin Luther. Despite Luther’s prominent role in church history, Coffin claimed that Luther “did things with motives as mixed as our own” and was called a “wild boar” by the Pope for his radical actions (ibid.). But as Coffin noted, Luther’s ungentle style put him in good company with prophets from the Hebrew Bible. “The prophet Isaiah can be imagined as a dinner guest at a gentile party. But what about that dirty bearded sandled shepherd Amos who [was] given to complimenting the ladies by calling them ‘cows of Bashan?’ There is no telling what Ezekiel would have done at anyone’s dinner party, and had Hoshiah [sic] been invited, he would have insisted upon bringing along his harlot wife” (ibid., 1). The point, Coffin noted, was that prophets of the Hebrew Bible were not unpopular because of

what they said. Rather, “they were unpopular to begin with, and then simply made the best of it” (ibid.).

From the example of Martin Luther and the Hebrew prophets, Coffin underscored the fundamentally dangerous roles played by religious dissidents. He argued, “truth is always in danger of being sacrificed on the altars of good taste and social stability” (ibid., 2). This led Coffin to a major line of reasoning in the sermon, “It is a lesson worth time and attention, for what the Church was to Luther American society may be to the American today” (ibid., 2).

Analogically, Coffin warned that the United States was veering down the same path as Martin Luther’s Europe. He warned, “it is asking human beings to adjust to the social order rather than asking human beings to adjust to human needs” (ibid.). As evidence of this point, he offers the example of civil rights. “Martin Luther King raised his voice but it was not heard” (ibid., 4). Consequently, he reasoned, “the voices are more strident, the actions more violent, and the spectre [sic] of a country unraveling is real” (ibid.). More ominously, he stated, “even more terrible is the spectre [sic] of a new coalition forming not behind justice, not behind truth, but behind an order that will be achieved at the expense of justice, behind a stability that will demand that truth be sacrificed on its altars” (ibid, 4.).

Coffin concluded the sermon by calling for listeners to follow the example of Martin Luther. “So what the Christian community needs to do

above all else,” he said, “is to raise up men of thought and of conscience, adventuresome imaginative men capable like Luther of both joy and suffering” (ibid., 4). Acknowledging that following one’s conscience would be difficult, Coffin insisted, “most of all[,] they must be men of courage so that when the day goes hard [sic] and cowards steal from the field, like Luther they will be able to say, ‘My conscience is captive to the word of God . . . to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.’”

### **Conclusion**

By the end of 1967, Coffin had committed to civil disobedience in earnest. Motivated by a desire to end the war, he laid the groundwork for draft resistance by arguing that draft-age men should put their sense of conscience ahead of the state and, if necessary, accept the consequences for that choice. This rhetorical move was a logical outgrowth of the existential discourse already circulating within Coffin’s social milieu, including the civil rights movement, the student New Left, and the discourse of the Peacemakers. Given Coffin’s longstanding involvement with the civil rights movement, it should hardly be surprising that Coffin invoked existentially-driven race protests as a representative case of social change in “On Civil Disobedience.”

The October Resistance activities in Boston and Washington, D.C. showed that Coffin was serious about carrying those activities through to their logical end. But Coffin was about to be confronted with the harsh

consequence of the existential mode, one that would become the biggest crisis yet of Coffin's career. Eventually, it would force a new mode of rhetorical argument against the war.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE TRIAL AND THE RECONCILING MODE, 1968-1975

Despite Coffin's triumphant participation in the October Resistance activities, the backlash against draft resisters began almost immediately after the October 20 draft card turn-in at the Department of Justice. On October 24, Lieutenant General Lewis B. Hershey, Director of the Selective Service, signaled his intention to speed up the induction of draft resisters (Ayres 1967, 1). He further called for the prosecution of individuals without draft obligations who interfered with operations of the Selective Service system (ibid.). On November 8, 1967, the *New York Times* published the full text of an October 24 memorandum and letter from Hershey to local draft boards that outlined procedures for inducting draft resisters.<sup>37</sup> Hershey's plan was not well-received and appeared headed toward a legal challenge. In November, Justice Department officials indicated that they believed Hershey's plan to be unconstitutional (Sheehan 1967, 1, 12). Yale President Kingman

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<sup>37</sup> Hershey's memorandum specified that: "Whenever a local draft board received an abandoned or mutilated registration certificate or current notice of classification which had been issued to one of its own registrants, the following action is recommended: (A) Declare the registrant to be eloquent for his failure to have the card in his possession. (B) Reclassify the registrant into a class available for service as a delinquent. (C) At the expiration of the time for taking an appeal, if not appeal has been taken, and the delinquency has not been removed, order the registrant to report for induction or for civil work in lieu of induction if in Class I-O, as a delinquent, or in the board's discretion in a flagrant case, report him to the United States attorney for prosecution" (1967, 2).

Brewster criticized Hershey's proposed policy in a December 3 appearance on the CBS program *Face the Nation* ("Brewster Accuses Hershey of Usurping Power" 1967, 26).

The conflict between the Selective Service and the Department of Justice appeared over on December 9, when Hershey and Attorney General Ramsey Clark issued a joint statement pledging to prosecute draft resisters who refused to cooperate with draft boards after being classified as delinquent (*New York Times* 1967e, 5). However, Hershey stated in an interview two days later that his October memorandum and letter were still valid, and that he and Clark still disagreed about how to handle draft resisters (Sheehan 1967, 16). The about-face led the *New York Times* to declare in a staff editorial on December 14 that "this threat to use the draft as a means of punishment exceeded Mr. Hershey's authority and violated constitutional processes" (1967d, 46). *The Nation* went so far as to argue that Hershey's policy had galvanized political opposition to conscription (1967, 642- 643). Unrepentant, Hershey stated on December 29 that 618 men in 46 states had turned in or burned draft cards, and that approximately half of the men in those cases were "vulnerable to the draft" as a result of their activities (*New York Times* 1967b, 2).

Despite the heated argument, few local draft boards changed their policy on deferments as a result of Hershey's directive (Blair 1967, 1, 15). On December 30, the White House took the unusual step of releasing a

letter stating that the Selective Service system was not intended to punish dissent (*New York Times* 1967h, 5).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the Department of Justice soon took legal action against draft resisters as a way of appeasing General Hershey.<sup>39</sup>

On January 5, 1968 a Federal grand jury in Boston indicted Coffin, Benjamin Spock, Michael Ferber, Mitchell Goodman, and Marcus Raskin for conspiracy to aid and abet draft resisters (Graham 1968a, 1, 2).<sup>40</sup> The indictment held in part that the men had conspired “to unlawfully, knowingly and wilfully counsel, aid and abet diverse Selective Service registrants to unlawfully, knowingly, and wilfully neglect, fail, refuse and

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph A. Califano, Jr., a special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson, wrote the White House document. His letter was a response to a letter drafted by presidents of Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, Cornell, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania expressing concern regarding Hershey’s policy on draft resisters (*New York Times* 1967h, 2).

<sup>39</sup> Department of Justice official John Van de Kamp later admitted to Jessica Mitford that the indictments had been meant to appease General Hershey: “The prosecution of these five was thought to be a good way out—it was done to provide a graceful way out for General Hershey” (quoted in Mitford 1969, 56).

<sup>40</sup> Each of the indicted men had followed their own paths to involvement with the draft resistance movement. Spock, an internationally renowned pediatrician, entered the antiwar movement through his involvement with the anti-nuclear group SANE earlier in the decade (Mitford 1969, 15). Ferber, a doctoral candidate at Harvard University and the only one of the five defendants who was draft age, joined The Resistance after his local draft board refused to reclassify him as a conscientious objector (*ibid.*, 20). Goodman, a novelist and college instructor, was inspired by politically active students at Stanford University to draft “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority” in summer 1967 (*ibid.*, 32). Raskin, a former Kennedy administration advisor and co-director of the Institute for Policy Studies, participated in the Department of Justice protest on October 20 (*ibid.*, 50).

evade service in the armed forces of the United States and all other duties required of registrants under the Universal Training and Service Act (50 U.S.C. App. 451-471) and the rules, regulations, and directions duly made pursuant to said Act, in violation of 50 U.S.C. § 462(a).” The indictment further identified eleven overt acts committed by the defendants between August and October 1967 as part of the conspiracy. Coffin’s name was mentioned in seven of the eleven overt acts: (1) for circulating a draft of “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority” in August 1967, (2) for chairing the press conference announcing “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority” on October 2, (3) for speaking at the Arlington Street Church service on October 16, (4) for accepting draft cards during the Arlington Street service, (5) for speaking at the draft resistance rally outside the Justice Department on October 20, (6) for entering the Department of Justice Building, and (7) for abandoning a briefcase inside the Justice Department which contained returned draft cards.

The charges came as a surprise to the five men, who learned of the indictment from the news media. Most of the men did not know each other prior to the indictment (Goldstein 2004, 208). Coffin met Goodman once during the summer of 1967 and had exchanged only a dozen words with Spock prior to the “Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority” press conference on October 2 (Bannan and Bannan 1974, 97). Coffin had minimal contact with Ferber and Raskin during the Resistance protests



(ibid.).<sup>41</sup> The other defendants did not know each other at all (ibid.). Almost immediately, the indictment became a cause célèbre among the antiwar movement. The charges garnered media coverage on the front page of the *New York Times*. *The Nation* correspondent Jean Carper suggested the government had indicted the five because of their social prominence, speculating that “the government cannot tolerate the kind of rebellion Dr. Spock represents: a revolt in the ranks of the older generation, especially those with some status and influence. It cannot fill its prisons with doctors, and clergy and politicians and writers, without losing credibility as a free nation” (1968, 329). But despite the antiwar movement’s high hopes for the trial, the realities of the U.S. legal system would limit the rhetorical opportunities open to Coffin and his co-defendants.

Although Coffin briefly considered pleading guilty to the Federal charges, he agreed with the other four defendants to plead “not guilty.” The plea devastated Coffin’s credibility. The existential mode of argument that he used throughout 1967 had insisted that individuals accept responsibility for their own actions. Yet Coffin and his attorney subsequently argued at trial that he did not seek to recruit draft resisters and that his actions did not fulfill the legal definition of conspiracy. Such arguments appeared to be an evasion of responsibility that directly

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<sup>41</sup> Ferber delivered a speech at the Arlington Street Church service on October 16, 1967 (Bannan and Bannan 1974, 92). Raskin was part of the delegation that entered the Justice Department with Coffin and Spock on October 20 (Mitford 1969, 50).

contradicted the existential mode, even while Coffin continued to make existential arguments outside of judicial settings in early 1968. I argue that after the trial, Coffin's discourse moved away from the existential mode. Chastened by his prosecution and recognizing that the war was coming to an end, he employed a reconciling mode of rhetoric that attempted to rehabilitate war opponents. Coffin used the reconciling mode first, to argue for national confession, and later, to advocate for legal amnesty for draft resisters and deserters.

### **After the Indictment**

After their indictment came down, Coffin and his four co-defendants faced three legal options: plead guilty and accept the court's punishment, act as their own attorneys in court to draw attention to the conduct of the war, or mount a full legal defense by arguing their actions did not amount to a conspiracy (Mitford 1969, 74-75; Foley 2003, 82-83).<sup>42</sup> As Coffin later recalled in his memoirs, he initially favored pleading guilty:

Before the indictment in the rare moment in which I thought about being arrested, I generally imagined I'd go straight to jail. To plead not guilty and stand trial meant challenging the legality of the war. At CALCAV we had always stressed the moral aspects.

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<sup>42</sup> Because Coffin's antiwar activities in Boston and Washington D.C. and Boston were well-documented in the news media, disputing the factual definition of "conspiracy" was the only plausible defense available to him.

Furthermore a good courtroom battle would tend to distract public attention from the unpleasantness in Vietnam. After the indictment, I still felt much the same way. I pictured the five of us behind bars, our silence more effective than our words, a prospect which seemed all the more likely as literally hundreds of people all over the country arose to proclaim that their guilt was as great as ours and to prove thereby that the government had not cowed the movement. (1977, 260)

For Coffin, pleading guilty appeared attractive for both philosophical and practical reasons. Foley (2003) writes, “Not only did taking one’s punishment follow more consistently the examples of Socrates, Thoreau, Gahndi, and King, but they believed that the sight of Dr. Spock entering prison—handcuffed and in overalls—would prove extremely embarrassing to the administration” (82). But pleading ‘guilty’ and heading to prison would prove easier said than done.

Coffin’s legal advisors and the other co-defendants expressed strong reservations about pleading guilty. Yale Law School professor Alexander Bickel, an informal legal advisor to Coffin, warned him that the conspiracy charges were “a legal vacuum cleaner. It’s a worn-out piece of tyranny that has to be resisted if the government is not to become repressive” (quoted in Coffin 1977, 261). Of the four other defendants, only Michael Ferber shared his desire to not contest the charges (*ibid.*, 263). Coffin agreed to plead ‘not guilty’ and retained

James St. Clair as his attorney to mount a defense against the government's case.<sup>43</sup> The five defendants pleaded 'not guilty' at their arraignment in Boston on January 29, 1968.

Coffin later expressed regret about agreeing to mount a defense in the case. He recalled personal responsibilities as a husband and father softened his stance on a 'guilty' plea, writing that "when going to jail seemed very imminent—and inevitable if I pleaded guilty—I was suddenly assailed by feelings of guilt vis-à-vis my family" (1977, 262). Goldstein offers another plausible explanation for pleading not guilty, stating that "Coffin knew enough about jail to know that he would have had a very difficult time with the regimen, the inactivity, and the lack of an audience" (2004, 208). It is also possible that Coffin naively believed public support would turn the trial outcome in his favor. On January 25, Yale faculty released a petition in support of Coffin signed by 358 of the university's 1,169 faculty members, including 16 deans and department chairs (*New York Times* 1968, 2).

During this time, Coffin struggled to defend his actions. As will soon be clear, he awkwardly claimed that his participation in draft resistance activities was not meant to persuade anyone to join the draft movement, yet simultaneously made arguments outside of legal settings implying that individuals had an existential duty to resist the war. The

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<sup>43</sup> St. Clair gained national prominence for representing Joseph Welch during the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1953 (Mitford 1969, 76). He later served as President Richard Nixon's personal attorney during the Watergate scandal.

tensions between these two stances are most evident in Coffin's appearance on the NBC talk show *Meet the Press* on January 28, 1968 his Sunday sermon at Battell Chapel delivered exactly one week later, and his comments at the National Resistance Day rally in New Haven on April 3, 1968.

### *Meet the Press*

Coffin and Spock both appeared on the Sunday January 28, 1968 edition of the NBC talk show *Meet the Press*. Under questioning from the program's four panelists, Coffin defended his anti-draft activities with two ill-conceived lines of argument. First, he claimed that his activities represented a 'test case' that called the legality of the draft into question, along with the broader legality of the war. Second, Coffin asserted that he merely counseled young men who had already decided on their own to resist the draft and did not seek actively to recruit new participants into the draft resistance movement. The two lines of argument contradicted the existential mode, because Coffin appeared to be evading responsibility for his personal actions instead of accepting the results of his choices.

Coffin first argued that the Boston 5 indictment represented a test case against the United States government's Vietnam policy. He openly acknowledged that his activities in Boston violated the Selective Service Act, claiming, "The law that we violated has yet to be tested for its constitutionality. There's still a question as to whether the war is legal.

There are lots of questions about the draft law” (*Meet the Press* 1968, 4). Coffin admitted that if the war was found legal, he would be obligated to accept whatever punishment the courts chose to impose. He conceded, “It may turn out that the draft law is totally legal according to our courts, in which case then it’s up to me to accept the legal punishment; and this again it seems to me is quite proper. I’m not against the whole legal order; I’m willing to accept the legal consequences” (*ibid.*, 6).<sup>44</sup>

Coffin second argued that a distinction existed between counseling draft resisters and actively encouraging resistance. Early in the interview, Coffin claimed that he spoke to men who had already decided on their own to resist the draft.

I think to make it crystal clear it’s important for me to say that I have never told anybody to violate any law . . . I have not tried to Pied Piper any into jail. But I have said that I would stand with those who in conscience felt they could not serve in the war, in the army, as long as the war in Vietnam continued. And I think that’s an important distinction because I wouldn’t be playing a proper pastoral role if I were telling people to violate the laws. I am playing a proper role when I say to obey the dictates of conscience. (*ibid.*, 6)

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<sup>44</sup> Because Coffin had been indicted for *conspiracy* to aid and abet draft resisters, rather than for resisting the war itself, his argument about the legality of the war was a red herring.

However, the distinction between counseling draft resisters and persuading them proved difficult to maintain in the subsequent exchange with the *Meet the Press* panelists. When panelist Douglas Kiker asked Coffin if there was a distinction between ‘advocating’ and ‘advising’, Coffin conceded there was not.

KIKER: You described yourself earlier—I hope I’m accurate in this—as a sort of advisor on conscience to young men who might need it. But it seems that you’re more than that, that you’re advocating what a young man of conscience should do[,] so really aren’t you an advocate rather than an advisor?

COFFIN: Well, I’m advocating in the sense that I am presenting my own views, yes. But if you came to me as a student at Yale and said should I turn in my draft card? The last thing in the world I would ever tell you to do is to turn in your draft card. (ibid., 13)

Coffin’s admission in the first part of his answer that he *did* advocate undermined his larger claim that he only counseled young men who had already decided to oppose the draft on their own. As John Bannan and Rosemary Bannan wryly observe, “Coffin disavowed lawyers’ understanding of the terms ‘counsel, aid, and abet’” (1974, 98). His repeated insistence that he did not seek to recruit new draft resisters proved especially damaging when the case went to trial.

*The Battell Chapel Sermon of February 4, 1968*

Although Coffin's appearance on *Meet the Press* made clear that he intended to mount a vigorous challenge to the government's conspiracy charges, his other public statements at the time continued to use existential argument. In his February 4, 1968 sermon at Battell Chapel, Coffin argued that the present time represented the correct moment for social change. The sermon can be seen as continuation of the existential mode, although shrouded in language more metaphorical than his public discourse prior to the indictment. Kairos served as the central theme of the sermon. In the rhetorical tradition of the ancient Greeks, Kairos referred to the ideal moment for persuasion. In the early twentieth century, Paul Tillich reappropriated Kairos as a term with deep religious significance, most notably in his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>45</sup>

Coffin began the sermon with a series of temporal metaphors designed to elevate the significance of current time. In the first

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<sup>45</sup> Tillich's definition of kairos focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus as the central moment of human history (1963, 369). He argues in volume three of *Systematic Theology* that the term holds eschatological implications. He notes that, "In the New Testament it is the translation of a word used by Jesus when he speaks of his time which has not yet come. It is used by both John the Baptist and Jesus when they announce the fulfillment of time with respect to the Kingdom of God, which is 'at hand'" (ibid., 369). In addition to this "great kairos," Tillich acknowledges that other kairoi exist in history, representing a breakthrough of the Holy Spirit into a particular milieu: "The fact that kairos-experiences belong to the history of the churches and that the 'great kairos,' the appearance of the center of history, is again and again re-experienced through relative 'kairoi,' in which the Kingdom of God manifests itself in a particular breakthrough, is decisive for our consideration" (ibid., 370).



paragraph, Coffin described the experience of parachuting at night, an event marked by a particularly unique sense of time:

There is in the experience of parachuting at night one glorious moment. It follows a distinctly inglorious one when the jumper leaps from the plane into a gale roaring past the open door at about a hundred and thirty-five miles an hour. For a few seconds he is at the mercy of the wind—bashed, buffeted. But then of a sudden comes the shock of the opening chute. For a few seconds there is no sense of falling. The drone of the plane is distant. The stars on the horizon are lower than the jumper. So for one glorious moment he hangs in silence among the stars. But the vision quickly recedes, and presently with a rude jolt he is returned to earth, to business as usual. That strikes me as a pretty accurate picture of life, with time offering an occasional high or perhaps very low moment, but for the most part being low-voltaged. (1968c, 1)

Coffin immediately followed the parachuting anecdote with three additional examples of the momentary elevation of time. First, he contrasted Shakespeare's 53rd sonnet with the Bible, claiming that "Yes, to those who have ears to hear, minds to think, and hearts to feel business as usual is really business as never before, for in each moment there is something new, meaningful, painful, joyous" (*ibid.*, 1). Second, he offered an account of mathematician G.H. Hardy's visit to a

colleague's deathbed. "[H]e started the visit with 'The number of my taxicab was 1729. It seemed to me a rather dull number.' 'No, Hardy, no,' replied the dying man, raising himself up in his bed with excitement, 'It is a very interesting number. It is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways'" (ibid.). Third, Coffin offered Eric Hoffer as an example of someone easily excited by the mundane, observing that "everything going on in this world seems to pull him in . . . In this sense, surely, Eric Hoffer is a religious man. He is there, present, in every moment looking for its meaning, mystery, significance" (ibid., 2). Each of the three examples elevated the significance of seemingly ordinary events in a particular moment, calling attention to the possibilities for action or new understanding.

These examples served as metaphors for the central claim of the sermon: the present time was ripe with the possibility for Kairos-driven change. To advance this claim, Coffin offered his own definition of Kairos. His account drew heavily from Tillich's *The Protestant Era*.<sup>46</sup> Coffin explained, "In human history there are crucial times, turning points. Tillich talks of these moments as Kairos—special time—as opposed to chronos—formal time. A Kairos is a moment in history when the power of

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<sup>46</sup> In *The Protestant Era*, Tillich differentiates between two types of Kairos: "Kairos in its unique and universal sense is, for Christian faith, the appearing of Jesus as the Christ. Kairos in its general and special sense for the philosopher of history is every turning-point in history in which the eternal judges and transforms the temporal. Kairos in its special sense, as decisive for our present situation, is the coming of a new theonomy on the social of a secularized and emptied autonomous culture" (1948, 46-47).

life has a peculiar power to move life along. Kairos is a moment in history when the eternal judges and transforms the temporal. And in the Bible a Kairos is a moment of highest drama because in part it is one of highest tragedy” (ibid., 2). Coffin next elaborated an example of Kairos in Biblical terms:

For instance, we read of Christ that “his time (Kairos) had not yet come.” But then it did come. He entered Jerusalem. This was *the* moment--and Jerusalem missed it. The tragedy of a Kairos is always this failure of vision on the part of those to whom it comes. “And because Jerusalem did not know the time of its visitation,” Christ says of Jerusalem, “they will not leave one stone upon another within you.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, according to the Biblical view of history there comes a time when men and groups of men must choose between “blessings and curse, life and death:” and they reach a point of no return if they hesitate too long in choosing life. (ibid., 2).

In the subsequent paragraph, Coffin enumerated three characteristics of Kairos. The first such characteristic was conflict. “In nations conflict is inevitable,” Coffin stated, “for in a Kairos the power,

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<sup>47</sup> This line appears similar to Luke 19:44, which reads, “They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (NSRV, 855). The line also has similarity to Luke 21:6, which reads, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down” (ibid., 856).

pride, prestige of the government or ruling groups is being challenged by new forces” (ibid., 2). Second, Coffin argued that ruling groups resisted the Kairos. He stated, “If conflict is the first obvious characteristic, the second characteristic of a Kairos is hardly less obvious, and that is the extraordinary difficulty ruling groups have in recognizing that the time for change has come” (ibid., 4). As a result, Coffin argued that the third characteristic of Kairos was that only a small minority of people would recognize it, because “those who apprehend it before the point of no return are always few in number. They are a saving remnant. They cannot always save, but if anyone can save, they can” (ibid., 3).

Coffin next applied Kairos as a means for explaining the political situation of early 1968. He asserted that Kairos had arrived for the United States, as evidenced by mounting social unrest. Coffin explained, “Conflict, blindness on the part of ruling groups, a saving remnant--all three of these characteristics are present in the Kairos which beyond the shadow of a doubt has now come to this nation. The conflict was sensed by President Johnson when in his State of the Union Message he referred to ‘a certain restlessness in the land.’ But while he sensed the conflict, the President did not understand it, for he implied it should not be there given the benefits of his administration” (ibid., 3). Yet the moment was not simply a response to political crises. To Coffin, much deeper spiritual crisis existed, and meant that “the conflict is not only economic and political. It goes much deeper, and that is why we must take this Kairos

so seriously. The nation seems to have exhausted its spiritual substance” (ibid., 3).

In the conclusion of the sermon, Coffin suggested ways the audience could respond to the Kairos. He argued that students represented one group particularly well-suited to taking action, observing that “St. Benedict once wrote ‘God often reveals what is better to the younger. I think God is doing just that’” (ibid., 4). He closed the sermon by encouraging his audience to act for positive social change. “Perhaps,” Coffin stated, “the beginning of a new term is a good time to remember that despite all that is wrong with our universities, churches, and nation, we must not ‘Lie down in darkness. Rather, we must walk a ‘not as unwise men but as wise, asking the most of the time,’ so that this twilight which seems to herald an oncoming night may yet prove the early morning light of a new and better day” (ibid., 4).

The Battell Chapel sermon of February 4 is noteworthy for two reasons. First, Coffin’s repeated nod to social and religious unrest suggests that the existential mode remained present in his discourse during the period between the indictment and the trial. Although Vietnam is never specifically referenced in the sermon, statements such as “God often reveals what is better to the younger” and “this twilight which seems to herald an oncoming night” must be interpreted in the context of the antiwar movement and the deepening crisis in race relations of early 1968. Second, the uncompromising, even excoriating

tone of the sermon stood in sharp contrast to his equivocation on *Meet the Press* a week earlier. This uncompromising attitude would remain evident in his next significant public statement regarding Vietnam, delivered two months later.

### *The National Resistance Day Rally*

Coffin's boldest speech in the pretrial months of 1968 came on April 3, at the National Resistance Day Rally in New Haven. His brief remarks reflect continued use of the existential mode.

Acknowledging President Johnson's March 31 announcement that he would not seek re-election Coffin began the speech by asking, "Is it right to turn in draft cards less than seventy-two hours after the President's historic speech? And should we not now close ranks behind his peace offensive and give to our unhappy and disheveled country a much needed respite?" (1968a, 1). Rather than answer the questions immediately, the next five hundred words of the speech enumerated Coffin's criticisms of the Johnson administration's conduct of the war.

In the eighth paragraph, Coffin argued against patriotic calls to rally around the government. Coffin stated, "Last night I read the words of a war hero echoing Eisenhower's call to close ranks: 'The time,' he said, 'for arguing whether we should be there or not has passed. We should get behind our country'" (ibid., 2). Coffin argued that such a pronouncement was illogical because it failed to grasp the existential dilemma faced by war participants:

These sentences should be framed for their purity of incomprehension. They are the epitome of that cheap patriotic piety that lacks both candor and courage. They are the epitome of that false resignation that induces men to abdicate when they should be revolting. As of today the plea to close ranks still means to close minds and eyes to the incredible suffering of the Vietnamese people, not to mention our own boys. It is a plea for spiritual death. (ibid., 2)

In paragraph ten, Coffin offered a theological defense for his continuing protest activities. Here, Coffin invoked the example of Martin Luther to support his position, arguing that “Over four hundred years ago many good men pleaded with Luther to exercise some tact and restraint. But Luther understood that it was too early, that what they wanted was for truth and justice to be offered up on the table of social stability. His words are still explicable and pertinent to Christians at least in this season” (ibid., 2). Coffin then quoted Luther at length:

This is not a time to cringe, but to cry aloud, when our Lord Jesus Christ is damned, reviled, and blasphemed. If you exhort me to humility, I exhort you to pride . . . we see Christ suffer. If hitherto we ought to have been silent and humble, I ask you whether now, when the blessed Saviour is mocked, we should not fight for Him . . . If you will not follow permit me at least to go.” (ibid., 2)

The Luther quotation then became the basis for Coffin's exhortation to the audience, given in the last three paragraphs of the speech.

In paragraph twelve, Coffin argued that draft resistance represented a logical outgrowth of individual belief. He extolled the audience to respect the conscience of draft resisters. "My fellow citizens of New Haven," he implored, "if you cannot follow, permit at least these young men to go where their consciences lead them" (*ibid.*, 2). He contrasted the draft resisters with other dissidents protesting during this time, stating "remember they are not trying to disturb the peace. They are only trying to disturb the war. They are not rioting in fact, they are not infringing on the civil liberties of any other citizen" (*ibid.*, 2). In paragraph fourteen, Coffin acknowledged that "for me, once again, I am pleased to be with them. They have elected to risk something big for something good. I admire them and believe theirs is the true voice of America, the vision that will prevail beyond the distortions of the moment" (*ibid.*, 2).

The speech offered a clear indication that despite his looming trial, Coffin continued to use existential argument. But confrontation with the legal system would soon test the extent to which Coffin was willing to stand by his beliefs.

### **The Trial of the Boston 5**

In early 1968, the five defendants and their supporters hoped their case would be a watershed moment for the antiwar movement. But the



legal realities of conspiracy charges, the political turbulence of mid-1968, and the disposition of the trial judge would work against them.

Journalistic commentators recognized shortly after the indictment that the odds were stacked against the defendants. Fred P. Graham wrote in the *New York Times* on January 14, 1968 that “the upcoming trial in Boston will undoubtedly be a moral confrontation, because these men are not criminals in the accepted sense, yet they chose to violate the law as a means of opposing the war. But as a legal confrontation, the Spock case appears at this stage to be exceedingly one-sided” (1968b, E8). Similar cases against individuals encouraging draft resistance during WWI, WWII, and the Korean War had resulted in convictions (*ibid.*). In addition, the increasing social turmoil of early 1968 overshadowed news coverage of the Boston 5 case. The Tet Offensive in Vietnam, President Johnson’s announcement on March 31 that he would not seek re-election, Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination on April 4, and subsequent urban rioting dominated news coverage in the weeks preceding the trial (Foley 2003a, 81-82). Although a crowd of nearly 1,000 antiwar activists rallied outside the courthouse during the January arraignment, few protesters attended the trial itself (Bigart 1968, E15).

The case’s presiding judge, Francis J.W. Ford, also limited the options available to the defense in the case. The longest-serving district judge in the country, the 85 year-old Ford made little attempt to hide his

personal distaste for the defendants. In April, Ford ruled that questions regarding the legality of the war were irrelevant to the conspiracy charges and were therefore inadmissible as evidence (Foley 2003a, 88). The ruling proved particularly devastating to Spock's defense team, who had sought depositions from 25 witnesses about the legality of the war (Graham 1968c, 10). Ignoring the objections of defense attorneys, Ford also ruled that each defendant would present their case one at a time, determined by the first initial of each defendant's last name (Bannan and Bannan 1974, 95).

Additionally, each of the defendants hired separate attorneys, who subsequently discouraged their clients from discussing the case with each other. St. Clair filed unsuccessful pre-trial motions seeking to sever Coffin's trial from the other defendants (Mitford 1969, 81-84). As co-defendant Marcus Raskin later recalled, "the lawyers prevented us from taking our case to the people, into the streets, holding demonstrations and picket lines, or from any sort of public collaboration with the Resist [sic] groups" (quoted in Mitford 1969, 82).

The all-male jury seated to hear the case also gave the prosecution another strategic advantage. As *New York Times* reporter Homer Bigart wrote, "The Government, apparently suspecting that women in general might be biased in favor of Dr. Spock, a world-famous pediatrician, dismissed on challenges two women who appeared as prospective jurors"

(1968, E15). All but one of the twelve jurors eventually seated in the case lacked a college degree (*ibid.*).<sup>48</sup>

### *Coffin's Testimony*

During the trial, Coffin took the witness stand to testify in his own defense. In direct examination, St. Clair led Coffin through the chronology of events leading up to Coffin's participation in the October Resistance protests. Coffin claimed that he learned of the group known as The Resistance from students sometime in the summer of 1967, but could not recall precise dates (*United States vs. Coffin* 1969, 8-113). Coffin further testified that he had met Dr. Spock in-person only twice, once when he received an honorary doctorate from Yale in 1963 and the second time at a SANE rally in 1963, and that he had exchanged no more than half a dozen words with him during both encounters, and that he had not met Ferber and Raskin prior to September 1967 (*ibid.*, 8-122). He testified that he had been invited to speak at the Arlington Street Church service by Rick Bogel, a Yale graduate student who participated in the group planning the anti-draft protests in Boston (*ibid.*, 8-145).

In a crucial segment near the end of his direct examination, Coffin made a series of claims that would seal his fate at the trial. Coffin

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<sup>48</sup> During voir dire, attorney Leonard Boudin objected strenuously to the lack of female jurors, but was overruled by Judge Ford (*Mitford* 1969, 97). Ford also prohibited the defense attorneys from questioning potential jurors (*ibid.*, 97).

testified that he had three reasons for participating in the Department of Justice meeting with Deputy Attorney General John McDonough: to support draft resisters, to force a legal confrontation over the Selective Service Act, and to raise public awareness of conscientious objection to the war (ibid., 9-30 and 9-31). Oddly, Coffin testified that he did not believe the draft card turn-in would be an impediment to the war.

ST. CLAIR: Now sir, did you at that time believe that the delivery of the draft cards to the Attorney General would hinder or impede the function of the draft?

COFFIN: Certainly not.

ST. CLAIR: Why not?

COFFIN: Because turning in a draft card speeded up a man's induction and in no way impeded his induction. (ibid., 9-37)

Such testimony strained Coffin's credibility. If taken at face value, the statement amounted to an admission that the Resistance protests were counterproductive, at least as they concerned the fate of the men who turned in their draft cards.

Coffin also equivocated about why he participated in Resistance activities. He testified that he "never counseled anyone to refuse service in the Armed Forces" (ibid., 9-37) and insisted that his reference to "counseling, aiding, and abetting young men of conscience" in his October 20 speech outside the Justice Department had been a reference to young men who had already decided to resist the draft on their own

(*ibid.*, 9-37, 9-38). He openly admitted that he hoped such activities would result in prosecution, testifying that, “From the point of view of the Department of Justice, I hoped that the government would accept the invitation to prosecute us for violation of Section 12 of the National Selective Service Act in order to find out, through us, as a test case, to test the legality of the war and the provisions of the draft law regarding conscientious objection” (*ibid.*, 9-41). Coffin’s testimony amounted to an odd admission: he hoped it would bring him into conflict with the legal system, yet he simultaneously denied that he had engaged in any conspiracy to encourage draft resistance. One could reasonably conclude from this admission that Coffin was either unsure of his own reasons for participating in the protest, or that he was deliberately misrepresenting his intentions under oath as a means of evading the conspiracy charges.<sup>49</sup>

During cross-examination, prosecutor John Wall focused on Coffin’s claim that he did not intend to recruit new conscientious objectors. In particular, Wall narrowed in on the rhetorical nature of the events in Boston.

WALL: And did it occur to you that in those circumstances and that house of worship, at least in clerical garb, you and others

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<sup>49</sup> As one newspaper columnist wrote after the trial’s conclusion, “Except for Dr. Spock and [Michael] Ferber, the defendants seemed to waffle and equivocate on the witness stand, humiliating themselves and taking the starch out of the peace movement--partly because they felt they were being held to account for the wrong conduct. For the most part, they made exceedingly poor witnesses” (MacKenzie 1968, B3).

particularly you, might move some of those that had less iron in their spine than others to act on their convictions and turn in their draft cards?

COFFIN: No, it did not.

WALL: Did not?

COFFIN: It did not.

WALL: It was not your intention to convince anybody at all to turn in his draft card there; is that correct?

COFFIN: That is absolutely correct. (ibid., 9-56)

Wall's questioning strained the credibility of Coffin's claim that he did not intend to persuade draft resisters. For example, Coffin acknowledged that during the Arlington Street Church service, he asked each resister "are you sure you know what you're doing?," shook hands with each resister, and even returned a card to a Yale law student (ibid., 9-60). Wall's cross-examination second moved to establish factually that Coffin's activities made the legal definition for being a conspiracy.

WALL: Now, when you say you didn't know that to accept draft cards was a violation of the law, do you mean to tell us that you did not consider yourself to be, according to what the law purported to be, you did not consider yourself to be an aider and abettor if you accepted a draft card from someone who was turning it in, refusing to carry it in his possession?

COFFIN: That is correct. I was not sure in my own mind what aiding or abetting really would constitute. (ibid., 9-79, 9-80)

After a brief interjection by the defense attorneys, Wall highlighted the absurdity of Coffin's answer.

WALL: Well, if it wasn't clear in your own mind what aiding and abetting meant, will you please explain this, in Exhibit E, which is your speech at Arlington Street Church, as introduced by the defense " . . . And further, as the law regarding aiding and abetting is clear--up to five years in jail and a fine of \$10,000--church members could then say: if you arrest this man for violating a law which violates his conscience you must arrest us." (ibid.)

The exchange made Coffin look foolish for claiming that he had not sought to put himself in legal jeopardy. Besides contradicting available evidence, Coffin's equivocation ran counter to the existential mode's insistence on accepting personal responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions.

Coffin's cross-examination was also noteworthy because of a comment made by Judge Ford. When several courtroom spectators laughed at a tense exchange between Coffin and Wall, Ford angrily threatened to have the courtroom cleared of observers (ibid., 9-82). A moment later, after St. Clair and Wall exchanged arguments about a legal technicality, Ford told the jury, "if I make a mistake in the law, there is a higher court that will correct me" (ibid., 9-79). Leonard Boudin,

Spock's defense attorney, strenuously objected to the propriety of Ford's statement. An exasperated Ford told the jury, "I am not at the present moment indicating this case will go to a higher court, not at all . . . I meant to say that if it did and I made an error in the law a higher court would correct me" (ibid., 9-86, 9-87). Still, Ford's comments left little doubt that he believed the defendants were guilty.

### *The Verdict*

Ford's conduct at the end of the trial further illustrated his personal distaste for the defendants. After closing arguments ended, he presented the jury with unusual deliberation instructions. As Foley explains:

Now, in charging the jury, Ford, on his own, submitted a questionnaire to the jurors to help them reach their verdicts. The 10 questions (or, as lawyers call them, "interrogatories") broke down the different segments of the alleged conspiracy and asked the jury to decide if the defendants were guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of each charge. If they were guilty of any one of the 10 charges, they would be guilty overall. (2003a, 95)

It took the jury just a few hours to return "guilty" verdicts against Coffin, Ferber, Goodman, and Spock on June 14; Raskin was acquitted. At the sentencing hearing on July 10, Ford sentenced each defendant to two years in prison, fined Ferber \$1,000, and Coffin, Spock, and Goodman \$5,000 each (Bannan and Bannan 1974, 101-102). Ford refused to



accept the government's recommendation that the defendants be given suspended prison sentences (*United States vs. Coffin* 1969, 107 n. 66).

### *After the Trial*

After sentencing, Coffin and his three convicted co-defendants were released on their own recognizance pending appeal. Coffin put on a brave public face, but it was evident that the trial had taken a toll on him personally. He had amassed over \$39,000 in legal fees (Horton 1968).<sup>50</sup> The threat of incarceration loomed large enough that Coffin's predecessor at Yale, Sidney Lovett, wrote to Coffin about ideas for covering Yale Chaplaincy. "Suppose we gathered eighteen Yale graduates, clergy of wide ecumenical distribution," Lovett suggested, "who would indicate that, without expense to the University, we would each come for a month in residence to fulfill, as best we could, the pastoral and administrative functions of the Chaplain" (Lovett 1968, 1). Coffin responded favorably to the plan, which he urged Lovett to take up with Yale President Kingman Brewster (1968b, 1).

A year later, a 3-judge panel from the First Circuit Court of Appeals set aside the convictions (Fenton 1969, 1, 12). Writing for the majority, Chief Judge Bailey Aldrich and Judge Edward M. McEntee ruled that there was insufficient evidence to convict Spock and Ferber and ordered them acquitted, but ruled that Coffin and Goodman should

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<sup>50</sup> The \$39,000 figure was reported by Coffin's secretary, Charlotte E. Horton, in a letter to Coffin supporter Talmage Rogers.

face a new trial. Dissenting judge Frank Coffin (no relation to the defendant) went even further, opining that all defendants should have been acquitted on first amendment grounds.

On August 7, 1969, the Justice Department announced that Solicitor General Erwin Griswold would not appeal the ruling about Spock or Ferber to the Supreme Court, but sought extension of timeframe required to file an appeal of the court's ruling on Coffin and Goodman (Smith 1969, 1). The reason for the extension was that "Mr. Coffin and Mr. Goodman had already been granted an extension until Sept. 9 of the time during which they could appeal to the Supreme Court" and "The Government's decision 'whether to file an appeal may be affected' by what Mr. Coffin and Mr. Goodman do" (ibid., 5). Through private channels, the Department of Justice signaled to Coffin's attorneys that they would not seek retrial. The department issued a formal notice of intent not to prosecute in 1970.

### *Implications of the Trial*

The significance of the Boston 5 case for the antiwar movement remains disputed. Commentators generally concluded that the trial had been unsuccessful in allowing the defendants to make their case against the war. *New York Times* commentator Sidney E. Zion argued that Judge Ford had "virtually foreclosed the defendants from the confrontation that some of them, notably Dr. Spock, so actively desired" (1968, E10). The resulting trial became a disappointment for the antiwar movement. Zion

wrote, “Obviously, the peace flock expected more from men who had been among the first to raise the moral flag against the war. They wanted a front-page trial and they didn’t get it” (ibid.). Similarly, the June 29, 1968 *New Republic* editorialized, “In the peace movement, there is opinion that once it proved impossible to turn the Boston affair into a propaganda trial on the legality of the Vietnam war, there was no further defense that could be made worthily, and hence none should have been made” (1968b, 11). John C. Bennett argued in *Christianity and Crisis* that the trial’s outcome highlighted the moral bankruptcy of the American government, asserting that “For these men [Coffin and Spock] and their codefendants to be in prison would be an absurdity that would reflect on our legal processes themselves” (1968, 149-150).

Mitford, the earliest historiographer of the trial, pessimistically wrote that the trial failed to mobilize opponents of the war to meaningful action, speculating that “it is likely that if enough people were moved to concern themselves with political trials everywhere, in their own communities or on a national level—and by learning about these trials were stung into action to demand a stop to them—prosecutors, who are after all only cogs in the political system, would be forced to call a halt” (1969, 246). Foley likewise concurred that the trial failed to accomplish its intended aims, arguing that situational constraints almost completely overwhelmed the trial. He explained, “A combination of facts, including a complicated conspiracy charge (which led the defendants to adopt a

legalistic, defensive defense), a judge who summarily ruled out any discussion of the illegality or morality of the war in Vietnam, an all-male jury, and the judge's use of special interrogatories in his charge to the jury, guaranteed an anticlimactic trial—almost completely useless to a movement attempting to stop a war” (2003a, 97-98).

But not all accounts view the Boston 5 case as a failure. In the immediate aftermath of the conviction, John C. Bennett argued that prosecution represented an unsustainable strategy for dealing with draft resisters. Bennett asked rhetorically, “Does the Government plan to seek confrontation with these young men? How many persons sent to prison because of their conscientious conviction can our society absorb without morally destroying itself? Are ‘the Boston four’ only the beginning?” (1968, 150). Bannan and Bannan claim that the trial “turned the community against the prevailing selective service practices” (1974, 212). However, they concede that legal actions did not unfold in the way that antiwar activists anticipated:

Legal confrontation was the policy of the peace militants who were not radical pacifists and who hoped to enlist the coercion of law in their cause. In this they failed. They did succeed in helping to arouse consciences and to generate the eventual anti-war political current. But their success in this was of the sort envisioned by radical pacifists: not by coercion, but by persuasion, example,

witness. The policy of legal encounter, in short, proved to be a fairly acceptable strategy of sensitization. (ibid., 212)

This finding is consistent with Goldstein's claim that despite the legal shortcomings of the case, the trial ensured Coffin's status as a celebrity within the antiwar movement, because "Even though the trial absorbed energy and money, the ultimately unsuccessful prosecution added to the defendants' standing as peace movement celebrities and consequential moral figures for supporters—and notorious subversives for opponents" (2004, 222).

#### *Remnants of the Existential Mode*

Although Coffin abandoned the existential mode during the trial, traces of existential mode remained present in Coffin's personal correspondence. Coffin seemed particularly pleased to have shaped the thinking of Yale alumni serving in the military. George Hume wrote to Coffin on December 6, 1970 that "the life of a college student seems so far away, yet so much more meaningful than my current existence. I cannot wait to get out of the military and get back to graduate school, and hopefully serve my country in a more contemplative manner" (Hume 1970, 1). Replying on December 18, Coffin suggested to Hume that his discontent with the military represented a great moment of personal authenticity. "I am delighted you are not enjoying your life in the military," Coffin wrote. "Thanks a lot,' you say. But wouldn't it be worse if you and the Army all thought you were doing beautifully? Again and

again I return to the thought that alienation represents an act of understanding. How much better, at least, to understand than to be a fool, even though the pain obviously is far greater” (1970, 1). Here, Coffin’s words echoed Tillich, who suggested that anxiety represented a breakthrough to new life.

### **The Emergence of the Reconciling Mode**

Although Coffin remained active in the antiwar movement after the trial, Republican Richard Nixon’s victory in the presidential election of 1968 would change the shape of the antiwar movement. Although Nixon made vague promises to end the war during the 1968 campaign, he was slow to act on those policies.<sup>51</sup>

Coffin’s public discourse underwent a subtle but notable change during this time. Chastened by the outcome of the Boston 5 trial, he no longer encouraged direct civil disobedience against the war. In its place, Coffin employed a reconciling mode of rhetoric. The mode’s earliest traces can be seen as early as October 1969 in Coffin’s speech in New York City’s Bryant Park. As the war drew to a close, Coffin’s concerns gradually shifted toward advocating legal amnesty for draft resisters.

#### *The Bryant Park Speech*

By late 1969, growing public support for a negotiated settlement to the war crystallized into plans for a National Moratorium Day on October

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<sup>51</sup> As president, Nixon emphasized a gradual withdrawal from Vietnam (See DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, 247-248).

15. In New York, Mayor John Lindsay directed the city government to lower flags to half-staff as a way of mourning the war dead (Bigart 1969, 16). Extensive Moratorium Day activities in New York included a noon rally at Washington Square Park, a noon march from Wall Street to Trinity Church, a 12:30 PM rally near the United Nations, and a 4:30 PM rally at Bryant Park (*New York Times* 1969, 16). Speakers at Bryant Park included Coffin, Mayor Lindsay, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm of Brooklyn, Senators Charles E. Goodell and Jacob Javitz of New York, and Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota (Bigart 1969, 16). After the rally, demonstrators marched from Bryant Park to Rockefeller Plaza for a candlelight vigil and then to Fifth Avenue, for a closing service outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral (*ibid.*). The day's events attracted considerable media attention. NBC and CBS pre-empted their late night talk shows with 90-minute specials about the moratorium (Ferretti 1969, 12). Radio and television stations in the metropolitan New York area aired several hours of uninterrupted programming about the moratorium, including WBAI-FM radio, WVOX-AM radio, and WOR television (*ibid.*).

Coffin's brief speech at Bryant Park repeatedly urged national confession for sins committed in Vietnam. The first three paragraphs of the speech contained a brief exposition of American failings in the war. In the fourth paragraph, Coffin made his first call for confession, arguing that "Mayor Lindsay's day of mourning should also be a day of confession. We need to confess that we have intervened massively,

militarily, and unilaterally in the civil affairs of another country” (1969a, 1). Immediately after this sentence, in the speech’s fifth paragraph, Coffin claimed that the United States needed to confess that the South Vietnamese government was incompetent, stating, “Then we need to confess that, despite the blood of some forty thousand American dead, despite the billions of dollars in aid and despite the heroic labor of thousands of dedicated Americans, the government in Saigon which we support is incapable of winning the support of its own people” (ibid, 1). As evidence, Coffin cited the South Vietnamese government’s various failures. He asserted, “It is a government of militarists, war profiteers and fanatic anti-communists who imprison tens of thousands for the crime of simply being against the war” (ibid., 2).

In the speech’s sixth paragraph, Coffin claimed U.S. conduct during the war was immoral, arguing that “we need to confess—and this is hard—that we have waged this war in a fashion so out of keeping with American instincts for decency as to seriously undermine them” (ibid., 2). Coffin supported this point by insisting that “We have forcibly displaced millions of civilians. We have reigned [*sic*] terror from the skies” (ibid, 2). He further argued the U.S. military enabled the South Vietnamese government’s brutality against its own people, stating that “In Kuan Tin province alone, between January and April 1969, American-trained agents executed 239 South Vietnamese without trial and 153 who can [*sic*] be held without trial for two years” (ibid., 2).



In the speech's eighth paragraph, Coffin made clear that he believed fault for the war belonged to the United States as a whole, not the U.S. military. "Let us be clear," Coffin said, "the fault does not lie with the infantrymen, the bomber pilots, the Green Berets--our boys in Vietnam. Rather, the fault lies with our men in Washington, and with us for giving them our silent consent" (ibid., 2). As a result, Coffin asserted all of the United States needed to confess that "What all [of] America needs to recognize, and most needs to confess, is that violence in its worst form today is not individual and haphazard, but bureaucratic and efficient, antiseptic and profitable" (ibid., 2). He added, "For while all are not guilty, in a democracy all are responsible" (ibid., 2).

In the speech's eleventh and final paragraph, Coffin pledged to participate in further antiwar protests, including the November 15 Moratorium Day demonstration in Washington, "to continue constructive, clear dissent that seeks only to grant [the] Vietnamese a genuine chance for peace, to recall our sons from Vietnam and, thereby, to recall our citizens to their senses" (ibid., 3).

Although Coffin's use of the term confession did not appear to be religious in nature, it is nevertheless consistent with definitions of confession in recent rhetorical scholarship. For instance, Dave Tell argues that confession can have political implications, because "The confession, then, is not simply a religious form of speech in which sinners acknowledge their transgressions. It is also a political form of

speech whose decisive characteristic is its power to render transgression in speech and thus bring it into the realm of politics proper—that is, the realm of human affairs in which it can be discussed, debated, and thereby disarmed” (2008, 163). Thus, the Bryant Park speech can be read as Coffin’s attempt to bring American transgressions in Vietnam into the open, where they could be rectified.

### *1970-1971*

Archival documents provide limited details about Coffin’s speaking activities during 1970 and 1971. Available secondary materials indicate that Coffin remained active in the antiwar movement during this time, especially as a supporter of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee. He endorsed the Committee’s peace fast of April 13-15 1970 (Vietnam Moratorium Committee 1970), as well as the October 13, 1971 Moratorium Day (ibid. 1971). He also joined activists in filing an unsuccessful lawsuit against Dow Chemical Company, alleging that Dow had violated international law by supplying chemicals for the United States (*New York Times* 1970, 28). When the possibility of race riots in New Haven arose in April 1970 because of the nearby criminal trial of Black Panther Bobby Seale, Coffin played an instrumental role in maintaining calm on the Yale campus (Bigart 1970, 39).

*Amnesty: Reintegrating the Antiwar Movement*

By late 1972, it became apparent that American involvement in the Vietnamese conflict was coming to an end. Ongoing peace negotiations in Paris led by Secretary of State William P. Rogers and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger resulted in a negotiated settlement in January 1973. In a televised speech to the nation on January 23, Richard Nixon called the accords “peace with honor” and portrayed the agreement as a victory for the United States (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, 357). The actual terms of the accords were far less generous to the United States. The agreement stipulated that the United States would withdraw combat troops from South Vietnam within 60 days and that all prisoners of war would be released (Gwertzman 1973, 1). However, the accords did not mandate the withdrawal of North Vietnamese soldiers from the South, making the agreement difficult to enforce in practice.<sup>52</sup>

With the war winding down, amnesty for draft resisters became a priority for antiwar activists. A coalition of antiwar groups, including Clergy and Laity Concerned, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the American Friends Service Committee, and the War Resister’s League called for amnesty in the spring of 1973 (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, 354). But the antiwar groups faced an uphill fight. Public opinion polls throughout 1972 and 1973 showed strong opposition to granting

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<sup>52</sup> North Vietnam subsequently ignored provisions of the Paris Accords, and eventually recaptured the territory held by South Vietnam in the first four months of 1975.

amnesty to war resisters (Baskir and Strauss 1978, 209, 210). The Nixon administration opposed amnesty, even as other Republican officials began to advocate in favor of it (*ibid.*, 210).<sup>53</sup> Baskir and Strauss (1978) argue that supporting amnesty had four negative consequences for the antiwar movement: it focused attention on the most radical fringes of the movement, it alienated centrist participants, it provoked strong emotional responses from conservatives, and it created tensions between the moderate and radical antiwar protesters (*ibid.*, 206-08).

Keenly aware of the dilemma faced by draft resisters, Coffin increasingly turned toward advocating amnesty in the early 1970s. In two of his public statements about amnesty—his Sunday sermon of April 16, 1972 and his May 5, 1973 speech at the National Conference on Amnesty—Coffin presented amnesty as a means for achieving national reconciliation and reintegrating war resisters into mainstream American culture.

*The Battell Chapel Sermon of April 16, 1972*

Coffin first offered a detailed argument for amnesty in his April 16, 1972 sermon. The speech advocated for amnesty—as a means of encouraging forgiveness—by invoking arguments from history and ironic tropes that highlighted the social contradictions created by the war. In the first paragraph of the sermon, Coffin asserted that the end of wars

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<sup>53</sup> Republicans who called for amnesty programs included Robert Taft, U.S. Senator from Ohio, and former Pentagon officials Melvin Laird and Robert Froehlke (Baskir and Strauss 1978, 210).

often resulted in an ironic sense of justice. He claimed that by the end of WWII, “it was a commonplace necessity to destroy the innocents through mass bombing. So that ironically, when the war was over, we Americans and other victors could judge the German leaders for war crimes, the death of the innocent, without a single mention of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or Dresden” (Coffin 1972, 1). In the paragraph immediately following, Coffin claimed that the United States would soon face a similar choice regarding the end of the war in Vietnam, asking rhetorically, “Well, how are we going to handle our affairs as a nation once this terrible war is over? Are we going to be vindicative [sic], vengeful? Are we going to be sentimental, forgetting all kinds of moral distinctions? How are we going to handle our affairs? What about amnesty?” (ibid., 1).

After a brief digression about the need to care for veterans who did serve in Vietnam, Coffin offered a lengthy argument about the historical precedent for granting amnesty to war resisters. He asserted that George Washington offered amnesty to participants in the Whisky Rebellion, Jefferson pardoned deserters in 1807, and Andrew Jackson pardoned deserters in 1830 (ibid., 3). But most of all, Coffin found historical support for amnesty from the example of the Civil War. He asserted, “Once again we have proof that Abraham Lincoln is the spiritual center of our country. Lincoln refused to think of any prosecution or of any persecution. He was unwilling to let the erring sisters go in peace, but he

insisted that they return in peace” (ibid., 3-4). Only during the twentieth century did amnesty to war opponents become politically unfashionable.

Coffin next argued that amnesty would purge the nation of moral guilt caused by the ironies of the war. The first such irony was the class and race-based inequalities that had been perpetuated by the war.

Beginning in paragraph nine, he argued that amnesty needed to be granted to both draft resisters and those who had deserted the military while on active duty. Coffin offered a socioeconomic rationale, claiming that “when you stop to think of it and look at the record and talk to people, you realize that the draft evaders for the most part were white, middle-class, went to places like Yale where there was a lot of anti-war talk, and then took off” (ibid., 5). In contrast, active duty deserters were more likely to be racial minorities without a college education. In Coffin’s view, to treat the two groups differently was unacceptable. “wouldn’t it be ironic, then if amnesty were used as an instrument, another instrument of racial and class discrimination. We can’t morally do that; use amnesty in that fashion” (ibid., 5). Coffin next asserted that a second irony of the war had been created by shifts in public opinion, arguing that “When you stop to think about it, why are these people guilty? Most Americans now agree with the position that these exiles took, that the war was mistaken in its conceptions, immoral in its conduct, futile in its objectives” (ibid., 5). Draft resisters and deserters were therefore guilty of only being ahead of public opinion.

In the final two paragraphs of the sermon, Coffin drew an extended metaphor that compared amnesty to Biblical precedents. He argued that amnesty was analogous to the jubilee:

The Jews looked at themselves and said, you know, if all things were normal we would be slaves in Egypt. But by God's grace, we're out. Now, seeing that everything belongs to God we had better stop every now and then and take a look at the land and see what it would look like if we could look through God's eyes. What would we see? We'd see some people homeless. Yes, but I paid him good money for his home. Yes, but God doesn't want anybody homeless. So every fifty years you all go back to your homes. Every fifty years everybody gets his land back. Every fifty years, all debts are wiped out. All iniquities pardoned. We'll start it all over again, we'll proclaim a jubilee year. (ibid., 7-8)

In Coffin's view, amnesty would follow the same precedent. This would ultimately help to restore the reputation of the United States. He asserted, "If we abstain from all punitive acts, against those who prosecuted this war and against those who refused to participate in it, I think we shall be in the spirit of the year of jubilee, affirm a spirit of humanity that will stand this nation in good stead as it makes peace with itself and the world" (ibid., 8).

*Remarks to the National Conference on Amnesty, May 5, 1973*

Coffin again argued in favor of amnesty at the National Conference on Amnesty in Washington D.C. on May 3, 1973. As he had a year earlier, Coffin again invoked the examples of Abraham Lincoln and the year of the jubilee to argue for the historical precedence of amnesty. But the argument ultimately turned to healing psychological divisions that had divided the country.

Coffin began the speech by quoting from Lincoln's second inaugural the words, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle[,] and for his widow and for his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and among all nations" (Coffin 1973, 1). He then contrasted Lincoln with Nixon, stating that "the very fact that that the American president now, who has two strikes against him, still could knock the amnesty pitch clean out of the ballpark, is an indication of how far this nation is from its own spiritual center" (ibid.). He reminded the audience that the majority of Americans did not favor amnesty and that recent attempts by Ohio Senator Robert Taft to advocate for amnesty had been unsuccessful. In Coffin's view, "It is not politically expedient to introduce this because the nation doesn't know that generosity is expedient to the nation" (ibid., 1-2).



Rather than dwell on the historical precedent of Lincoln or the jubilee, Coffin instead argued for psychological reconciliation. To accomplish this, he first claimed that both opponents and advocates of the war needed to accept responsibility for their failures, noting that “when we are talking in ultimate terms, it doesn’t matter who broke the law, who kept the law, human relations are finally not contractual, they are human” (ibid., 3). Coffin criticized the antiwar movement for failing to embrace this principle, chastising them for being too strident in their demands:

We often hear that America has to confess her faults. For whose sake? I agree that America has to confess her faults. Confession is good for the soul, I’m committed to that. But when I hear people say that America must confess her faults, I hear people say that for my sake just as much for her sake. In other words, its [sic] an old psychological understanding that the need for reform can be as insistent a need for the reformer as the need not to reform is for the recalcitrant. And when the need for reform is laid on the recalcitrant by the reformer, in order to satisfy his need, what happens? He only increases the insecurity of the person that made him go for ‘America, love it or leave it’ in the first place. (ibid., 4-5)

Achieving amnesty as a political objective required understanding the mentality of war resisters. Coffin argued, “We cannot educate because what’s emotionally rooted is not intellectually soluable [sic]. So if we want

to engage in an educational campaign, we have to know how to get at the underlying anxieties” (ibid., 5). He then offered a list of common counterarguments to amnesty and ways to respond to them.

### **Conclusion**

Only after Nixon’s August 1974 resignation and Gerald Ford’s subsequent ascent to the presidency did amnesty for draft resisters become a real political possibility. Encouraged by his son, Jack, Ford announced a clemency program during his first days in office. Under the Ford program, fugitive draft resisters would perform up to two years’ of alternative service, after which time, the charges would be dismissed (Baskir and Strauss 1978, 212). Supporting a limited form of amnesty also proved politically attractive to President Ford, as way of quelling public anger over his controversial pardon of President Nixon (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, 369). The Ford program required draft resisters “to take a loyalty oath, undertake two years of alternate service, and submit to periodic review by a clemency board” (ibid., 370). The program proved to be unpopular with draft resisters, because, “those who refused clemency and pursued their cases in court had about a 90 percent chance of getting charges dismissed without having to do alternative service, and about a 99% chance of avoiding prison” (Baskir and Strauss 1978, 212). Of the 263,250 draft fugitives and non-registrants eligible under the terms of the Ford program, only 2,600 applied for the program, and only 1,800 eventually received clemency

(*ibid.*, 217).<sup>54</sup> On January 21, 1977, President Carter issued pardons for 7,150 convicted draft resisters and ordered the government not to prosecute the remaining non-registrants (*ibid.*, 231).

As the last Americans fled Saigon in April 1975, ahead of the rapidly-descending North Vietnamese military, the long Vietnam era had finally ended for the United States. By late 1974, Coffin had become restless at Yale. Vietnam no longer registered as a major public concern and the skirmishes of the civil rights movements had receded into the past (Goldstein 2004, 272). The prophetic mode no longer resonated with Yale students, the existential mode seemed unnecessary with military forces no longer in Vietnam, and the reconciling mode had been rendered obsolete by the Ford clemency program. In January 1975, Coffin announced that he would retire from Yale at the end of the academic year (*ibid.*, 273). He returned to the pulpit two years later as the senior minister at Riverside Church in New York City. For the time being, a major chapter had closed for the former CIA agent-turned minister-turned Freedom Rider-turned draft resistance leader.

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<sup>54</sup> Baskir and Strauss categorize civilian resisters into four categories: draft fugitives who remained at large within the United States, nonregistrants who refused to comply with the Selective Service Act, convicted offenders who went to prison, and expatriates who fled the country (1978, 217).

## AFTERWORD

This project examined Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr.'s public discourse during the Vietnam War era. As the chaplain at Yale University and a founding member of the organization Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, Coffin became a prominent spokesperson for the religious branch of the antiwar movement. I argued that as the war continued, Coffin employed prophetic, existential, and reconciling modes of rhetoric to express his opposition. Coffin's use of these three modes reflected his evolving views about how to best oppose the war; as political circumstances changed, so did Coffin's antiwar activities, and in turn, his rhetoric. My analysis drew on primary sources produced between 1961 and 1973, including sermons, speeches, interview transcripts, essays, personal correspondence, and courtroom testimony.

Coffin's earliest antiwar discourse used a prophetic mode of rhetoric. The prophetic mode relied on appeals from the Hebrew Bible to warn of God's impending judgment, and reflected the theological influences of Personalism and Neo-Orthodoxy. Prior to the antiwar movement, Coffin employed prophetic arguments to justify his participation in the civil rights movement and the May 1961 Freedom Rides. Notably, in "The Church and Civil Rights" (1962), Coffin defended his pro-civil rights activities by invoking prophetic arguments about the inherent dignity of all individuals. When confronted with the horrors of

the American bombing campaign in Vietnam, he instinctively employed the prophetic mode in his first antiwar sermon, "The Spirit of Lamech," delivered in January 1966. He likewise employed the prophetic mode in "Plea to the President" (1966) and in "Why Are the Clergy Concerned About Vietnam?" (1966/1967). At this stage in the war, Coffin called for a negotiated settlement to the war, rather than unilateral American withdrawal. However, as the war continued, Coffin grew increasingly frustrated with U.S. policymakers.

Disappointed with the continuing carnage in Vietnam, Coffin abandoned his call for a negotiated settlement in 1967. Instead, he began to argue that individuals had a duty to oppose the war by any means possible, including civil disobedience through draft resistance. He publicly endorsed this view for the first time in his lecture "On Civil Disobedience" (1967). The basic thrust of his argument was that individuals had an existential duty to follow their own conscience, even if those actions put them in conflict with the state, and to accept responsibility for any consequences that occurred as a result. This new, existential mode of rhetoric was consonant with contemporary views on the human condition in philosophy, theology, and popular discourse opposing the war in Vietnam. Coffin spent several months in the spring and summer of 1967 engaged in behind-the-scenes organizing with other antiwar activists. In October 1967, he participated in a flurry of antiwar protests, culminating in speeches and actions in Boston and

Washington, D.C. that openly urged draft resistance and facilitated conduct by resisters that was forbidden by the Federal Selective Service Act.

As a result of the October 1967 anti-draft activities, a Federal grand jury indicted Coffin and four other antiwar movement leaders in January 1968 for conspiracy to aid and abet draft resisters. During the subsequent trial, Coffin repeatedly testified that he did not seek to persuade anyone to resist the draft. This testimony contradicted what Coffin had said during the October 1967 protests in Boston and Washington, D.C. It also ran counter to the existential mode that Coffin had preached for most of 1967, which emphasized accepting personal responsibility for one's own actions--including any negative consequences. By refusing to accept personal responsibility for encouraging draft resistance, Coffin appeared hypocritical and evasive. A jury convicted Coffin and three of his co-defendants in June 1968.

Although a Federal appeals court later overturned the verdict, Coffin was shaken by his conviction and abandoned the existential mode. In its place, he employed a reconciling mode of rhetoric that sought to heal societal divisions created by the war. At first, Coffin emphasized collective national responsibility for the war and its effects, as evidenced in his "Speech at Bryant Park," delivered during the October 1969 Moratorium Day protests. Later, as the war drew to a close, Coffin advocated legal amnesty for draft resisters and deserters. Coffin's

discourse during this period conspicuously avoided assigning blame for the war, reframed draft resistance as a patriotic act, and argued that amnesty had historical precedent in the United States.

The main contribution of my study is a new and more complex interpretation of William Coffin's rhetoric on the war in Vietnam during 1961–1973. My interpretation is new, because it brings into consideration a broad range of rhetorical materials that have previously been ignored. Among these materials are five sermons, seven speeches, two essays, nine letters, one interview, and one trial court record that have never been examined in relation to Coffin's antiwar discourse. My interpretation is necessarily complex, because an inclusive review of Coffin's discourse makes clear that he employed at least three distinct modes of rhetorical discourse in adaptation to shifting circumstances in the war and religious responses to it.

In addition to providing a more nuanced historical interpretation of Coffin's activities, my analysis points toward a possible new approach to a common methodological problem in rhetorical studies of social movements. As J. Robert Cox and Christina Foust argue, it is remarkably difficult for scholars of social movement rhetoric to theorize effect:

The question of efficacy remains the white elephant in the room as scholars often ignore the conceptual ambiguities in the vocabulary and categories for assessing the consequential nature of movement[s] and, particularly, "resistant rhetoric." As a result, a

number of questions remain: In what ways are the linguistic and extralinguistic acts of activists related to changes (if any) in law, policy, prevailing discourses, activists' identities, or interests? If historical events are overdetermined or the result of multiple and complex causes, can SMR scholars speak intelligibly about "effects" at all? What are the conceptual or theoretical challenges in specifying rhetorical effects, instead of external policy or historical effects? (2009, 621).

Rather than claim that Coffin's antiwar rhetoric influenced target audiences to take specific actions regarding the war, I believe Coffin's significance to the Vietnam antiwar movement might be more fruitfully discussed from the standpoint of intertextuality. Because Coffin's antiwar arguments instantiated three modes of rhetoric that circulated within his intellectual milieu, it seems possible to use the categories of prophetic, existential, and reconciling rhetoric as categories for the investigation of discourse by other antiwar speakers.

Intertextuality provides a plausible framework for analyzing similarities between texts produced by many authors and writers in the Vietnam antiwar movement. First coined by literary theorist Julia Kristeva, "intertextuality" initially referred to the way that literary texts incorporated elements of other literary texts.<sup>55</sup> Early studies of

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<sup>55</sup> Kristeva defines intertextuality as the complex production of meaning in literary text, in which "[t]he text is defined as a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language by relating



intertextuality restricted the concept to the direct quotation of one text within another (Plett 1991, v.) However, more recent theorists argue that intertextuality may be implicit. For example, Gerard Genette describes a variation of intertextuality that he terms metatextuality; this “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes without even naming it” (1997, 3).<sup>56</sup> Norman Fairclough articulates this relationship more explicitly, arguing that “a text may 'incorporate' another text without the latter being explicitly cued: one can respond to another text in the way one words one’s own text, for example. The constitutive intertextuality of a text, however, is the configuration of discourse conventions that go into

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communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances. The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is distributive (destructive-constructive) and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (1980, 36)

<sup>56</sup> Genette identifies five types transtextual relationships: first, intertextuality, or the direct quotation one text within a second text; second paratexts, which are devices as titles, prefaces, or illustrations that situate a single text within a larger field of meaning; third, metatextuality, explained above; fourth, architextuality, large-scale semiotic patterns such as prose or verse; and fifth, hypertextuality, or the grafting of one text onto another (1997, 1-5).

its production” (1992, 104).<sup>57</sup> Thus, it is possible to analyze intertextuality even when texts do not directly refer to one another.

Scholars of Vietnam antiwar movement rhetoric might profitably analyze antiwar discourses from the intertextual standpoint by examining the types of relationships between such discourses. For example, scholars interested in the prophetic mode might compare Coffin’s prophetic discourses with Martin Luther King Jr.’s anti-Vietnam War sermon “A Time to Break Silence” delivered on April 4, 1967. King’s speech bears striking similarities to Coffin’s “The Spirit of Lamech” (1966). Most notably, King ended his sermon by quoting the James L. Lowell poem “Once to Every Man,” the same poem that Coffin used in the opening lines of “Lamech.” Protesters sang the hymn during the Arlington Street Church service during the October 1967 draft resistance protests, and the phrase “Once to Every Man” subsequently became the title of Coffin’s 1977 autobiography.<sup>58</sup> Other instances of prophetic rhetoric may exist in the speeches of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a CALCAV member and friend of Coffin, whose collected papers remain unprocessed.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Fairclough prefers the term ‘interdiscursivity’ rather than ‘constitutive intertextuality,’ to call attention to the social forces involved in the production of texts (1992, 104).

<sup>58</sup> “Once to Every Man” was first written by James L. Lowell in 1845. It subsequently became a hymn later in the nineteenth century.

<sup>59</sup> Duke University acquired Heschel’s collected personal papers in August 2012 (Mariner 2012, n.p.). The collection is currently being

Scholars interested in the existential mode might profitably analyze the antiwar speeches of Robert McAfee Brown anthologized in his 1972 book *The Pseudonyms of God*. A professor of religious studies at Stanford University, Brown participated in CALCAV-sponsored protests in the western United States and expressed support for draft resisters in late 1967. Brown's speech "From a Mandate for Murder to a Placard for Peace," delivered at an anti-draft protest in San Francisco on December 4, 1967, represents a particularly clear case of the existential mode. In the speech, Brown extolled the virtues of individual conscience and urged young men to resist the draft if they felt compelled to do so, and to accept any consequences their actions might produce.

Finally, scholars interested in the reconciling mode of antiwar rhetoric might analyze the March 1974 amnesty hearings held by the U.S. House of Representative's Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and the Administration of Justice. Fifty-four witnesses testified for the subcommittee and hundreds of additional persons offered written statements, resulting in over 900 pages of hearing transcripts. W. Sterling Cary, president of the National Council of Churches, testified for the committee on March 11, 1974. In his testimony, Cary expressed themes similar to Coffin's use of the reconciling mode. He emphasized that the Vietnam War had created national divisions and that a need for reconciliation existed, but conspicuously avoided assigning blame for the

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war. On the same day, Rev. J. Bryan Hehir testified to the committee on behalf of the United States Catholic Conference, and likewise emphasized the need for reconciliation.

On analogy with the foregoing, intertextuality, might provide a possible means for explaining the significance of social movement rhetoric which avoids the conundrum described by Cox and Foust. Rather than asserting a speech produced a particular effect in an audience, the rhetorical critic could use intertextuality to point to recurring ideas which circulated within a particular movement.

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