

## **Organizing the anti-war movement in rural America: lessons learned, 50 years later**

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### **Abstract**

*This article documents anti-Vietnam War activities in a small city in rural Western New York State, from a first-hand account. The article also documents harassment activities used against anti-war activists, as a form of social control. The conclusion offers an analysis of what can be learned about social movements in rural areas, from the perspective of 50 years later, in light of Trump's white nationalist movement.*

**Keywords:** social movements, anti-Vietnam war movement, informal social control, formal social control, political harassment, political minorities, rural political activism, rural-urban political division.

### **Abstrait**

*Cet article documente les activités pacifistes contre la guerre du Vietnam dans une petite ville en zone rurale dans l'ouest de l'état de New York. C'est une récollection personnelle. Cet article documente également les activités de harcèlement utilisées contre les pacifistes comme forme de contrôle social de déviance contre les normes majoritaires. La conclusion de cet article offre une analyse des leçons à tirer sur les mouvements sociaux en régions rurales 50 ans plus tard. Il compare également le mouvement pacifiste avec le mouvement des nationalistes blancs de Trump.*

**Mots-clés:** Mouvements sociaux, mouvement contre la guerre du Vietnam, contrôle social informel, contrôle social formel, minorités politiques, activisme politique rural, division politique rural-urbain.

### **Introduction**

Social historians have very little information about the anti-Vietnam War movement in small towns and rural areas. Almost all information about the emergence of the anti-Vietnam War movement comes from large cities. It is more difficult in a small town to come out against prevailing majority support for a war, and to freely express publicly anti-war opinions. Small towns have powerful conformity pressures in face-to-face relations that do not exist in large cities, where people are anonymous to each other. In small towns, there is an easy familiarity and sense of community that does not exist in large cities. The other side of the same coin is that there exists strong pressure to conform, and

to get along by going along with the perceived majority (Gimpel et al., 2020a).. People who live in small towns find it difficult to be anonymous and can become targets for local harassment.

This article documents anti-Vietnam War organizing activities in a small town in rural Western New York from 1967 to 1972, with a first-hand account. The article also documents harassment activities used against anti-war activists, as a form of social control of deviance from majority norms. The conclusion of this article offers an analysis of what can be learned about social movements in rural areas of the United States, in the perspective of 50 years later. It also compares the anti-war movement with Trump's white nationalist movement, when rural-urban political polarization has increased greatly by the 2020 presidential election(Gimpel et al., 2020b).

### **The socio-cultural context**

Jamestown is in Chautauqua County, the most western county in New York State. A large rural region of farmland and small villages surrounds it. The nearest big city is Buffalo, a drive from Jamestown of one and a half hours away, via The New York State Thruway. The population of Jamestown in 1970 was 39,795, according to the U.S Census (Wikipedia 2021). Jamestown was once a thriving and vibrant manufacturing center for furniture and tools. By the late 1960s, it was undergoing rapid deindustrialization. Most of the large factories had closed. The wages of factory workers had not kept up with prices. The bulk of the population had changed from being prosperous blue-collar and lower-middle class people, to poor working class and just plain poor. At that time, shopping was limited. There were no shopping malls, but there were Woolworth, Murphy's and Grant's -- five-and-dime stores that were once the mainstays of rural America.

Most local people were conventionally conservative, although not ideologically so. There remained lingering remnants of 1950s McCarthyism. People worried about being thought to have a "different" opinion. Many people expressed racism and homophobia, without the least embarrassment. In terms of political views, people constantly complained about taxes, of course. Yet, any criticism of the nation's military or foreign policy was regarded as suspicious and potentially sympathetic to Communism. A few wealthy families, mostly factory owners, dominated politics. Workers who tried to organize unions were blacklisted and would never find jobs in town. Most of the local people had gone to the one city high school, stayed in town and knew each other, at least indirectly.

My wife and I were both "outsiders", in the sense of coming to the town from quite different cultures. I came to Jamestown in 1965, to take a position as a Professor of sociology at the local community college. I was raised in the suburbs of New York City. My wife was (and still is) a French citizen. We had married in her village in France, shortly before we arrived. I was the main organizer of anti-war activities, along with a few friends. I was also the main

target of harassment. That circumstance enabled me to keep records of the details of what happened.

The goal of small-town anti-war protest groups was to influence prevailing public opinion, by showing that opposition exists where none could be imagined. In the limited technology of the 60s, the communication media that reached small towns was primarily mainstream radio and television. The Internet did not exist as a tool for organizing. The problem was that mainstream television and radio was permeated by implicit pro-war “news”. Attempting to be non-critical (“objective”) about the government during the war meant that the mainstream media constantly reported messages such as: “the American military says that we are on the verge of defeating the Viet Cong”. (Such was the accurate, non-critical reporting of the times.)

Most people in rural areas, such as Jamestown, could only imagine from scenes on television news that opposition to the war existed only among weird “hippies” and “leftists” in big cities. Therefore, the goal of anti-Vietnam War protestors in rural areas was to show local people that opposition did exist on the grass roots. We did so by “creating events”, such as petition drives, teach-ins, marches, and ecumenical peace services in churches, that might get attention in local newspapers and radio. We tried to create local events in conjunction with national events, to attract more attention in the local newspaper. However, only local people did the organizing work, and there was no direct connection with any national organization.

### **Chronology of local anti-Vietnam War events**

Date	<u>Local</u>	National
Spring 1967	Debate at Unitarian Universalist church on Vietnam War	
April 15 1967	Author’s speech criticizing Vietnam War at Veterans Memorial Park, Jamestown – 8 attend ( <i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i> , April 15, 1967)	NYC Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam – 400,000 attend
March 15 1968	Petition signed by 53 professors, called for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam and starting negotiations toward ending the war. ( <i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i> , March 15, 1968)	<i>National Anti-War sentiment grows</i>  <i>March 12 --- Anti-War Senator Eugene McCarthy gains more votes in the New Hampshire presidential primary than widely expected.</i>

March 29-30 1968	Two-day teach-in at Jamestown Community College ( <i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i> , March 29, 1968).	
Spring 1968	Formation of New Democratic Coalition.  The 14 members announced support for Senator Eugene McCarthy for President, and a young lawyer, Stanley Lundine, for mayor of Jamestown, because he supported the anti-war effort.  Lundine was elected.	
Nov 1968		<i>President Nixon elected</i>
Oct 15 1969	Organized all day teach-in at the Jamestown Community College for Vietnam Moratorium Day. Speakers included several Vietnam War veterans and the father of a Jamestown graduate killed in Vietnam. Jamestown native Senator Goodell sends telegram, commending my efforts to stop the war in Vietnam ( <i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i> 14 Oct. 1969).	<i>Millions of Americans take the day off from work and school to demonstrate against the war. Organized by the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam.</i>
Nov 15 1969	I worked on an organizing committee with two Catholic priests and a Presbyterian minister to hold an ecumenical religious peace service at the largest church in town. About 250 people attended. The event received considerable attention in the local newspaper ( <i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i> , Nov. 16, 1969)	<i>Anti-war demonstrations took place across the country in large cities, organized by the New Mobilization Committee.</i>
	As a follow-up, we organized sending two bus-loads of people from Jamestown to attend the March on Washington, in conjunction with the National Student Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam. Some of Jamestown people who went to Washington got tear-gassed. After	

	that, they became more strongly opposed to the war.	
May 1970	<p>All-day community-wide meeting at Jamestown Community College, broadcast on local radio and attended by 400 people.</p> <p>Read telegram from Senator Goodell which he encouraged our efforts to stop the war (<i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i>, May 7, 1970; May 8 1970).</p>	<p><i>Students shot at Kent State University by Ohio National Guard, four dead and nine seriously wounded.</i></p> <p><i>In response, anti-war protests break out across the country among university, college and high school students. More than 4 million students protested on a national strike.</i></p>
May 9, 1970	<p>200 people marched from Jamestown Community College to the federal building downtown, to present an anti-war petition to State Sen. James F. Hastings.</p> <p>Mayor Lundine spoke to our anti-war gathering in front of Jamestown City Hall, lending public support to the anti-war movement in Jamestown. Lundine went on to be elected Congressman and Lieutenant Governor of New York State (<i>Jamestown Post-Journal</i>, May 9, 1970) (See attached photo.)</p>	
July 12, 1972		<i>Senator George McGovern won the nomination of the Democratic Party for President.</i>
Fall 1972	Local group fundraises and elects Democratic Presidential candidate Sen. George McGovern.	
Aug 9, 1974		<i>President Nixon resigns in disgrace after</i>

		<i>revelations of political corruption.</i>
April 29, 1975		<i>Final American withdrawal from Vietnam.</i>

## **Harassment in a small town**

After Nixon was elected President in 1968, repression of the anti-war movement intensified, became more systematic and sometimes involved illegal government activities. Such repression involved illegal break-ins of offices and homes (even before the Watergate break-in was revealed), widespread tapping of telephones, funding of local police counter-intelligence efforts, and placing false information in newspapers about antiwar activists. The Nixon government also sought to use the mass media to arouse public anger against antiwar protestors. These national efforts to repress dissent precipitated down into small town America.

In small towns, local harassment of unpopular minorities takes two different forms: 1) informal, face-to-face harassment by local people and 2) organized harassment by various government authorities. In a sociological perspective, these social processes can be understood as the social control of “deviant behavior”. In other words, these are punishments for disapproved non-conformity to the informal norms in small towns. For example, gossip and rumors are classical ways in which small communities everywhere attempt to control behavior. They are not simply expressions of particular personalities.

## **Informal social control in personal relationships**

### **Threats to employment**

One of the most common forms of informal social control in small towns and rural areas consists of threats to one’s employment. In the region of Jamestown, such informal punishments for unpopular identities were used against Afro-Americans, homosexuals and labor union organizers. It can also be used against people who hold unpopular religious, or political beliefs.

At one point, a local newspaper editorial vilified me as a “Communist sympathizer”. There were also letters to the editor, labeling me a “Communist”, called upon my college to fire me. A local radio talk show, hosted by a popular, politically conservative woman, presented a discussion and call-in program about what should be done about the “Communist” professor at college. Later, I learned that she was a member of the local branch of the John Birch Society.

Another example occurred when a member of the college Board of Trustees, a prominent person in the community, took my wife aside at a social event, and advised her to divorce me. She even offered to have her lawyer husband handle the case. My wife was not about to consider that idea, but the threat was understood. Soon afterwards, the President of the College met with me and

suggested that I “might be happier elsewhere”. Fortunately, I was protected by tenure at the time, and could not be easily forced to leave my job.

A fellow professor, another anti-war activist, was not so fortunate. He did not have tenure. He was the target of a false accusation of making sexual advances against a female student (who was failing his course and was from a prominent local family). Most of the faculty knew that he was innocent of the charges, because he was homosexual. A faculty trial was held and he was cleared. But, because of the scandal, he left the town and teaching forever.

### **Harassment by local vigilantes**

Another kind of informal harassment involves local vigilantes. The local John Birch Society group spied on my activities. (The John Birch Society was an extreme right wing, secretive anti-Communist organization. It was organized into “chapters,” much like secret cells in the Communist Party.) My car was followed at times by one of their amateur subversive hunters. This was confirmed years later by one of my more adventurous students who did a class project (field work) for one of my sociology courses. He joined the local John Birch Society, which was glad to attract a young member. He wrote an interesting report about his experience.

In a related incident, I received anonymous letters containing vague threats such as: “We know where you live.” I discovered the author of one such letter, when he made the mistake of enclosing it in an envelope with his business logo. He was a prominent businessman, an extreme conservative and a regular participant in the local radio talk show that had discussed having me fired from the college. I learned later that he was also a member of the local John Birch Society. In historical context, these efforts of local vigilantes can be understood as a vestige of 1950s paranoid McCarthyism.

### **Gossip and rumors**

One basic means of social control in small communities is to apply derogatory stereotypes to people who deviate from majority norms. Everyday examples are slut, queer, hippie, and lowlife (Victor 2004). I was labeled a “radical” in local gossip, according to good friends. Even a few of my sympathetic colleagues took to greeting me as “Mr. Radical”. It was a friendly epithet I am sure. However, it was not how I thought of myself, or wanted to be stereotyped. A few of my conservative colleagues began to ridicule me to my face. One frequently greeted me, when I passed him in a hallway, with the sarcastic salutation, “Ho Ho Chi Min”.

## **Formal social control by government authorities**

### **Surveillance by local police**

I was not involved with any anti-war organizations from big cities or large universities, but a few local police detectives were convinced, from rumors, that I must have been working with some national radical group. I was alerted to this one day, when a friend who was experienced in anti-war activities in Buffalo, asked to use my telephone. He heard a click on it when he began to make a call. My friend told me that the click indicated that some amateur authority, probably the local police, was tapping my phone. He told me that if the FBI had made the phone tap, I would hear nothing. I had often heard the clicking sound, but had assumed that something was wrong with the telephone line. The FBI encouraged local police to keep an eye on suspected local “subversives”, as part of the COINTELPRO program (Churchill and Vanderwall 1990).

I eventually learned that one particular police detective had been spying on me. I learned his identity after the detective had assigned a policeman to sign up for one of my courses. (many local officers enrolled in my criminology courses). He told me that he was asked to report if I preached the violent overthrow of the American government and. advised me never to go to any party where illegal drugs were being used. At the time, it was a well-known police practice to arrest anti-war activists on drug charges, because they could not be arrested for their speaking or marching. I was well aware of this police practice, so I did not use any illegal drugs in the 1960’s.

Many years later, I met the then-retired detective. He had become a bus driver who drove my son to high school. I told him in a friendly way, that I knew he had spied on me in the 1960’s. He confirmed that I had been watched and spied upon. He tried to console me a bit by saying that it “wasn’t anything personal.” He was just doing his job.

Sometimes in a small town, it is easier to find out who is doing what, than it might be in a big city. It is comparable to learning which garage or medical doctor does a better or worse job.

### **Surveillance by the FBI**

The 1960s and `70s were still a time when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s suspicions of Communist influences in the anti-war movement affected the FBI. His Counterintelligence Program’s (COINTELPRO) methods included infiltration, burglaries, illegal wiretaps, planting forged documents, spreading false rumors about key members of target organizations and using agents provocateurs (Churchill and Vanderwall 1990).

The FBI field office in nearby Buffalo had about 100 agents covering Western New York, because the nearby University at Buffalo was a center of anti-war activity and housed many leftist students (ibid). (The university was frequently referred to as “Berkeley East”). One of those FBI agents spied on my anti-war activities. I learned about his spying from his wife after she divorced him. We



met at church and became friends. She told me that she would go with him to anti-war demonstrations, so he could seem to be on a family outing.

### **Government agents provocateurs**

During the fall semester of 1969, I met a rather strange visitor to our college campus. He was neatly dressed in a suit jacket and tie, unusual for the time, and probably in his late 20's. He told me about wanting to start "the revolution now" by "killing the pigs". I thought that he must be either a crazy fanatic, or a police undercover agent. I said little and walked away as fast as possible. Later that day, I learned that he had offered to obtain guns and bombs for some naïve students. I did not know at the time that I had fortunately avoided entrapment by a government agent provocateur.

Months later, during June 1970, I saw a picture of the same man on a national television news report about a student riot at nearby Hobart College. Someone firebombed the ROTC building. Afterwards, students saw this man with police, leading a narcotics raid on campus, when several students were arrested. They learned that this man, who had urged them to make bombs and destroy buildings was an undercover agent. Several hundred angry students surrounded and shook two the police car with the stranger inside. The agent was Thomas Tongyai, dubbed "Tommy the Traveler" by students (Farrell 1971; Rosenbaum 1971). He was reported to be a narcotics agent, supposedly hired by the local Genesee County sheriff's department.

It was later reported that Tongyai had been traveling for more than two years across rural Western New York State, visiting many college campuses while acting as an undercover agent for an unidentified "government agency." Tongyai traveled as a salesman selling veterinary drugs from 1967 until mid-1969, when he was fired. The FBI sometimes hired traveling salesmen to conceal their undercover work. New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller ordered a grand jury investigation of Tongyai, because of his dangerous and illegal activities. However, he was never convicted of committing any crime even though he provided students with arms and bombs. Most likely, the FBI paid Tongyai, as part of their COINTELPRO program (Churchill and Vanderwall 1990; Farrell 1971; Rosenbaum 1971).



*8 May 1970: The next day, about 200 people marched from Jamestown Community College to the federal building downtown. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Victor.)*

### **Fifty years later: lessons for small town organizing**

Fifty years after the events recorded here, what can be learned about social movements in rural-small town areas, particularly in small towns? The time of this writing is at the end of the Trump presidency, when a right-wing mob invaded the Capitol building. This event was the expression of a white nationalist social movement. There are vast differences between the Trump-supported, white nationalist social movement, and the anti-Vietnam war movement (Collins 2020). However, there are also some similarities in how these social movements get organized on the local level.

In terms of organizing social movements in rural areas, there does not need to be any direction from outside organizations. There is, however, a top-down influence by events at the national level. In the 1960's, local organizers took inspiration from distant events happening on the national level, such as large-scale demonstrations in Washington, D.C. and New York City. In addition, the newer technology for organizing has made it much easier for people in isolated rural and small-town areas to get organized. In the 1960's, the telephone, and its telephone trees, was the main organizing tool. Today, the Internet has made it much easier to set up communication networks, as Trump's white nationalist supporters have done. Much larger numbers of people can be quickly activated for events.

In American culture, unlike in the more secular cultures of Western Europe, religion plays a major role in organizing social movements. Some religious groups and individual clergy support progressive causes and others support conservative and even extreme right-wing causes. The anti-alcohol temperance movement was led by Protestant churches. Black churches led the American civil rights movement. Trump's white nationalist movement is strongly influenced by evangelical Protestant organizers, as can be confirmed by a view of the signs and flags of mob that invaded the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. Similarly, anti-war and pacifist clergy, Catholic and Protestant, were crucial in organizing the anti-Vietnam War movement, especially in rural America. Organizers for progressive causes in rural areas need to be more attentive to liberal religious leadership, and sincerely respectful of any help.

The rural-urban divide polarization plays an increasingly central role in American politics, as it did during the Vietnam War (Gimpel et al., 2020). The anti-war movement arose primarily in larger American cities. People living in rural America were much more supportive of the war, as an expression of their patriotism, and only slowly changed their opinions as reported in this study. Today, the majority of Trump's white nationalist support comes from the rural areas (Rakich & Mehta 2020; Kanik & Scott 2020). The 2020 presidential election from the small town of Jamestown, in contrast with the surrounding rural county provides an example. In Jamestown, Joe Biden received a clear majority (67%) of the votes over Donald Trump (33%). (Chautauqua County Board of Elections, 2020) In sharp contrast, the overall vote count in rural Chautauqua County was 60% for Trump vs. 40% for Biden.

One similarity between the anti-Vietnam war movement and Trump's white nationalist movement is that both were aimed at changing the national government. However, the similarity ends there. The anti-war movement desired to change one government program: the war in Vietnam and it ended with the end of the war. Trump's right wing nationalist movement is aimed at total takeover of the national government, under an authoritarian, anti-democratic leader. It is likely to continue for a long time, just as McCarthy's paranoid anti-Communism lingered for a long time in rural America, as reported in this study.

The targets of harassment and stereotyping are different in different social movements. In response to Trump's white nationalist movement, the targets were not political minorities, but ethnic minorities. Inspired by President Trump's hate filled rhetoric, there has been an increase of hate crimes targeting Muslim-Americans, Arab-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Jews, some of whom were victimized in violent attacks (Hassan 2019). Most of this increase took place in large cities, where, logically, ethnic minorities are much more common.

According to public opinion research, few Americans, less than 10 percent, ever participate in anti-government protests. During wartime, most Americans disapprove of anti-war protests. Even long after unpopular wars have ended, many Americans disapprove of past anti-war protests. A Gallup opinion poll in 2003 found Americans still divided in their opinions of the Vietnam anti-war protests, with 39 percent approving and an equal 39 percent disapproving, with the remainder unsure (Lyons, 2003). At the time of this writing, the residue of the Vietnam War continues to influence American politics. Conservative white nationalists look back at the Vietnam anti-war protests as a betrayal of loyal Americans who risked their lives in Vietnam. On the other hand, civil libertarians regard the American government's attempts to repress dissent as one more example of American society of repressing dissent (Goldstein 2001).

Social protest movements in rural and small-town areas must adapt flexibly to specific issues. Some guidelines apply: create events that appear to serve the larger community, collaborate with diverse groups, especially with religious groups and seek support from prominent local people. Don't get involved in tangential issues that might discourage potential allies. Finally, a few personal words: have patience and don't expect immediate results from your efforts. It is easy to become discouraged. I always kept in mind the advice of folksinger Pete Seeger. At the Newport Folk Festival in 1964, when I asked him: "Isn't it useless for one person to try to stop a war?" He replied that: "every drop is needed to fill up the bucket."

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