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Illinois Wesleyan Historian Assesses Current Anti-War Movement

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Illinois Wesleyan Historian Assesses Current Anti-War Movement

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — In comparison with protests against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, the current anti-war effort has become much closer to a “people’s movement,” according to Illinois Wesleyan University history professor Paul Bushnell.

Rather than one social class or a group of intellectuals voicing opposition to the possibility of war with Iraq, Bushnell believes that today’s anti-war movement seems to be more inclusive. “In developing any social protest movement, whether it is a civil rights movement or an anti-war movement, you want to include a large body of citizens, and I think that the anti-war movement is currently getting close to that,” says Bushnell.

“The leadership is much more diffuse than our movements of the past, and this makes it harder to attack and stereotype. It can become a moral force and may make it harder for the [Bush] administration to twist this war or its meaning or even its aftermath into something that it’s not.”

Comparisons between the anti-war movement today and what developed during the Vietnam era are difficult, says Bushnell, since very few Americans raised voices in opposition to Vietnam until the war was well under way. “If any anti-war movement was afoot before the United States made huge commitments to fighting in Vietnam, that opposition was coming out of the civil rights movement,” says Bushnell, who was himself active in civil rights protests in the South. “Those of us in the civil rights movement, even early in the 1960s, were aware of Vietnam and were aware that blacks might be asked to lay down their lives for freedoms that they did not have at home.”

As he watches a new generation of college students confront these issues of war and peace, Bushnell has been impressed by the differences between their approach and the approach of students during the anti-Vietnam period.

“I have been really impressed, following 9-11 and moving forward to the debate over Iraq, with the real seriousness and thoughtfulness of these students,” says Bushnell. “It seems to me that they are better informed, more deeply moved, and have searched more diligently for something meaningful that they can do that would steer a better course for us. Backs in the late ‘60s and the ‘70s especially, the student movement had a knee-jerk radicalism that is less true in today’s student reaction.”

Another major difference, Bushnell notes, is the Internet and its use in both informing and organizing.

Still, Bushnell doubts that the current anti-war movement will prevent President Bush from conducting a war. “Dedicated anti-war movement people, in my experience, do not predicate their actions on calculations of possible victory,” he says. “They act out of moral conviction and will not be silenced or satisfied by a quick victory in Iraq. They will be further provoked by likely government efforts to prevent journalists from getting in soon after military action to report on damage and consequences.”

To interview Professor Bushnell, contact either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.