THE MARCH ON THE PENTAGON

CLARK Akatiff's analysis of the march on the Pentagon during the weekend of October 19–21, 1967 is a welcome one.[1] His observations both as a participant and as a geographer are fascinating additions to the record of the campaign against United States military involvement in Indochina and of political demonstrations in general. As he aptly points out, geographers are involved in movements for social change, even when their involvement takes the form of passive inaction or resistance to change. It is unfortunate that geographers tend to shy away from analysis of contemporary public affairs, especially controversial ones. This fact makes Akatiff's observations of his own participation all the more valuable.

His remarks concerning the movement, distribution and the *esprit de corps* of the crowd during the demonstration at the Pentagon are insightful. I was not present during these events, and cannot comment on his detailed analysis. Unfortunately, in the larger context, however, Akatiff has claimed too much in my opinion. The events described certainly had a significant impact upon the character of American opinion toward the Indochinese war, but I dispute that the march on the Pentagon was "a major turning point in the development of militant antigovernment protest in the United States," or that it was the time when "the protest movement in the United States took the step from liberalism to radicalism."

Although an important and moving event, this particular march on the Pentagon was not the pivotal event that Akatiff claims. During the lengthy debate concerning American military involvement in Southeast Asia since World War II, there has been no single dramatic turning point in the development of American opposition to these activities. The march on the Pentagon may have been a moving experience for its participants, and it may have had an influence on the future conduct of certain segments of the antiwar movement such as the Yippies, but changes in the antiwar movement as a whole, as expressed by changing American public opinion, have been gradual and highly regionalized.

As Akatiff states, for example, the San Francisco Bay Area has long been a center of antiwar activities. Protesters were sitting on the railroad tracks near the Oakland Army Terminal long before they reached the steps of the Pentagon. Academic centers like Madison and Berkeley, as well as San Francisco and New York, have long been loci of antiwar sentiments. There were major antiwar marches on April 15, 1967, concurrently in New York, where an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 per-

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[1] Clark Akatiff, "The March on the Pentagon," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 64 (1974), pp. 26–33.

sons were present, and in San Francisco, where approximately 65,000 persons were in attendance. The organizers of these marches were elated and awestruck by the turnout at what were the largest demonstrations in American history.[2] Like the march on the Pentagon, these events were reported in the national media and contributed to the gradual change in American public opinion and governmental policy.

The major impact of these events, however, was highly regionalized. A respectable member of the community might march in the streets of San Francisco or Washington, but that same individual would have faced ostracism in many other communities. Other regions of the country did not have major demonstrations until several years later. For example, prior to the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State and Jackson State incidents in May, 1970, antiwar demonstrations were small and unwelcome in Austin, Texas. Following the impact of these two events, twenty thousand people marched where only a few hundred had the month previously. At the same time that the University of California, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Michigan were gaining reputations as centers of radical and militant activities, other university campuses were quiet. The University of Minnesota, in liberal Minneapolis-St. Paul, for instance, did not have a violent antiwar demonstration until May, 1972. Other campuses, like Texas A. and M., remain conservative supporters of hawkish views. Antiwar demonstrations, like the ideas they represented, diffused slowly and irregularly throughout the United States.

One minor additional observation is necessary. Akatiff writes that the confrontation at the Pentagon was "the clash of two armies," and says that the "battles are peak experiences." Although his attitudes toward violence and militancy during political demonstrations are unknown, given what one can assume to be his personal commitment against military involvement in Indochina, these military metaphors seem to be inappropriate and contradictory.

TERRY A. SIMMONS

[2] Thomas Powers, *The War At Home: Vietnam and the American People, 1964–1968* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), p. 183.

Mr. Simmons is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, MN 55455.

COMMENT IN REPLY

I am indebted to Terry Simmons, because his critique allows me the opportunity to reiterate and modify my original conclusions. I regret that my response must be primarily negative, for I sense in his ideas a certain commonsensical correctness, and more importantly, a person who shares the antiwar sentiments, of which I attempted to write. I am particularly appreciative of his insightful grasp of the fact that geographers are involved with revolution (my word), even when their involvement is "passive inaction or resistance to change." In all other areas, however, I must stick to my guns (to use another contradictory and inappropriate military metaphor), and insist that he is simply wrong when he disputes the fact that a qualitative change took place in the nature of political struggle during the 1960s. I am less sure of my assertion that the assault on the Pentagon was the pivotal event of this unfolding, but I do not see that Simmons introduces convincing evidence that no such pivotal events are identifiable.

It is relevant to an understanding of my paper to know that it was written during the fall of 1968, after the tumultuous Chicago Democratic Convention, but before the Ill-fated Presidency of Richard Milhous Nixon. In 1968 it was easy for movement people, such as myself, to see the Pentagon assault as a major turning point, for it represented a qualitative shift in the nature of political struggle which was reflected by the quantitative increase in our numbers. For the first time in recent memory a war conducted by the American ruling elite, instead of winning the support of the people of America, was gestating and nourishing a burgeoning revolutionary movement. Many of us had been into left-wing politics, the civil rights movement, Cuba, LSD, and a little street fighting—

but until the events of 1967–68 we had been obviously isolated. Now the tables had turned. Our numbers were increasing exponentially. Not since the imperial wars of the nineteenth century had there arisen as massive a movement in opposition to a war. Further—and most significantly of all—the very people who had the responsibility of fighting the war —the people of the "baby boom," were massively disaffiliated from the cause, and were flocking, in increasing numbers, to all manner of revolutionary and radical activities, organizations, and rhetoric. The Revolution seemed around the corner. Yippie!

I can now see that those perceptions were somewhat askew. The changes which were to come after 1967–68 were even greater than those which had come at that time. In particular, it seems clear that the events of 1969–70, especially the massive student strikes of that year in response to the illegal bombing of Cambodia and the killing of the Kent and Jackson State students, will match in significance the events of 1967–68. More fundamentally, the perceptions were askew in underestimating the time and struggle necessary to effect radical transformations. A certain juvenile aspect to the paper could scarcely be avoided, given the time of its creation and the nature of the movement it was attempting to reflect. The movement of the sixties was predominantly a youth movement which looked forward to rapid and positive change. "We want the world, and we want it now!" was a chant of the times. We got Nixon instead.

Although change has been slower in arriving, and has met with more positive resistance and repression than was expected, it seems to me that major changes have taken place with the political life of America since the Pentagon confrontation. Simmons himself substantiates this point in his mention of the eventual spread of large antiwar demonstrations to places such as Austin, Texas. Here is a point of congruity in our evidence. I also mentioned a delegation at the Pentagon from Austin; its militancy led to my understanding of the spatial dynamics of protest as expressed in my Figure 2. There is an obvious relationship between the small number of Texans who travelled the great distance to demonstrate at the Pentagon in 1967, and the twenty thousand who marched in Austin in 1970. It is the relationship between the innovators ("early adopters") and the majority ("late adopters"), and far from disproving my point, it provides a method of understanding the spatial and social diffusion of the "emergent revolutionary force."

In the past six years the "emergent revolutionary force," of which I give witness, has developed further and taken more serious turns, in spite of the fact that individual "members" —especially those in exposed locations and situations—have suffered nearly continual legal and extralegal harassment, and general economic discrimination. The revolutionary forces now include violent elements—terrorists, urban guerillas, prisoners, and others—whose actions, however much one may disagree with them, have proven capable of shocking the complacent foundations of bourgeois society.[1] More importantly, the nonviolent elements have increased their numbers geometrically. Where six years ago there were isolated, individual points of resistance and change, today there is a widespread community of change. All of these energies for change, piled upon the unfulfilled demands of black and brown peoples, and amplified by the rising demands of Indians, women, and other "scheduled castes," has led to an objectively revolutionary situation.

To Terry: Venceremos! We shall overcome.

To Geography: Hold on; it has only just begun. We have much to contribute if we will but turn our tools to the service of the people.

CLARK AKATIFF

Mr. Akatiff is co-director of the Saklan Institute, POB 4284, Berkeley, CA 94704.

[1] Thomas Powers, *Diana: The Making of a Terrorist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 190.