

In the Line of Fire

How Napalm Fueled the Antiwar Movement

By Andrew Coyne

Most Americans understand that the Vietnam War forever changed the course of American history, but few comprehend that some of the fundamental changes of this period were brought on by objects as mundane as a strange brown jelly that became known as napalm. Napalm can refer to a variety of petrochemicals, but the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “A thixotropic gel consisting of petrol and this thickening agent (or some similar agent), used in flame-throwers and incendiary bombs; jellied petrol.”¹ While the chemical was initially celebrated for its ability to incinerate Viet Cong strongholds, and thus contain the spread of communism, the American media soon made the public aware of its devastating effects on civilians and Americans detested the substance for its inhumane use. As historian Robert Neer puts it, “Napalm was born a hero but lives a pariah.”² In addition to having a notable impact on the way the Vietnam War was waged, the gel became a symbol of the brutality and negligence of Americans abroad in their attempts

¹ Napalm [Def. 2] (n.d.) in Oxford English Dictionary Online, Retrieved November 29, 2018, from

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125006?rskey=7AKg9F&result=1#eid>

² Neer, R. (2015). *Napalm: An American Biography*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. p.4

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to further their country's interests, a symbol that Americans rallied against and used to force policy-makers to consider the costs of waging war in Vietnam.

As with most revolutionary findings, napalm came about as a solution to a reoccurring issue, only to later take on a far greater role in history. The problem that a secret war laboratory at Harvard was aiming to address was the speed at which gasoline burns. With the First World War came the advent of flamethrowers, and while the weapons were highly effective, the gasoline that fueled them was expensive and burned too quickly. Years later, the U.S. Chemical Warfare Department attempted to add rubber to the gasoline to slow down the burning process, but war raged in the Pacific, causing a shortage of rubber. The solution was found in 1943, when a team of chemists at Harvard, led by Louis F. Fieser, added naphthenic and palmitic acids to gasoline. In combining the first portion of the names of the two acids, they titled their finding "napalm." The incendiary weapon was first tested on the Harvard soccer field, as it was originally intended to burn structures, rather than to be used on humans. In fact, looking back on his creation, Fieser lamented, "I couldn't foresee that this stuff was going to be used against babies and Buddhists. The person who makes a rifle ... he isn't responsible if it is used to shoot the President."³ The first usage of the chemical was in 1944, when the U.S. attacked Japanese forces on Pohnpei, a tiny Micronesian island 2,500 miles southwest of Hawaii.⁴ The United States has since used the largest quantities of the weapon, but other countries, including Cuba, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, France, and the Soviet Union, have all taken advantage of napalm at some point in their military history.

³ Ibid.,138.

⁴ Ibid., 56.

While napalm was initially used in World War II and more frequently in Korea, the unconventional nature of the fighting in Vietnam forced napalm to take on a greater role in American military strategy. Unlike previous conflicts, in which the enemy was manifest, the Viet Cong in South Vietnam were elusive and often had to be flushed out of deeply entrenched positions. Recognizing their enemy's advantage of holding such a position and having extensive knowledge of the terrain, U.S. military leaders were more reluctant to send in troops, as high casualty rates would be inevitable. Therefore, a strong argument could be made for napalm's use, and early on in the war, its ability to reduce casualties brought the public to accept it. Napalm bombs slowly became one of the more reliable ways to flush out the Viet Cong while minimizing U.S. casualties, and the United States would go on to drop 388,000 tons of napalm on the Vietnam countryside between 1963 and 1973.⁵ While the bomb was heavily relied on for its power, as a single bomb could cover 2,500 yards in flames, that same power worked against the United States, as civilians were often in close proximity to the fighting and were likewise affected by the torching.⁶ Napalm was also manufactured for flamethrowers, which were used extensively to clear out Viet Cong positions, as they sucked the oxygen out of bunkers, allowing them to be effective in places that bullets and explosives could not reach. Due to the physical damage that the chemical could inflict and Vietnam's unique landscape, the Vietnam War created the perfect atmosphere for napalm to rise to prominence as a potent weapon.

⁵ Rohn, A. (2014, January 18). *Napalm in the Vietnam War*.
<https://thevietnamwar.info/napalm-vietnam-war/>

⁶ Ibid.

While the substance was relied on more heavily as the war waged on, its ascent to infamy would not have been possible if it were not for the unique role that the media played in the conflict. The war in Vietnam is often described as the “first television war,” as the American media covered it far more extensively than it had ever previously documented combat. The effect of this newfound role for the media is complex and often contradictory, as it sometimes aided the military in its pursuit of stirring up patriotic, pro-war sentiment, but also often fostered antiwar passions by exposing the horrendous consequences of the United States’ military intervention. On one hand, the media received most of its information regarding military affairs from the military itself. It therefore often relayed information that the Army had phrased in a way that would maintain support for the war, narratives that tended to emphasize progress in the struggle and heroism from American soldiers. On the other hand, when the Army’s narratives were not enough to convince the public that their losses created progress in the Cold War struggle, support for the war diminished. Likewise, while the reporting on facts and figures was primarily neutral, some reporters incorporated anecdotes into their coverage to make it more intriguing. By concentrating on specific Vietnamese civilians, these reports, in either pursuing veracity or a political angle, highlighted the terrors of war and aided the antiwar movement. As the war waged on and the public grew weary of the fighting, the use of anecdotes to rally Americans to protest became more frequent. In a 1972 nightly report, CBS’s Bob Simon, at a hospital in Vietnam, explains how one three-year old “was asleep when a Communist rocket crashed through the roof of her house; she still calls out for her mother, who is dead.”⁷ Since the report also

⁷ Bob Simon. (1972, June 8). *Vietnam/South Vietnam Accident*. Retrieved from <https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/223638>

mentions a girl who was struck by an American napalm bomb, Simon bashes both armies, and his horrible story of this injured child shows the devastating effects of the war on the country. The media may have promoted several narratives crafted by the military, as well as disseminated their facts and figures, but its anecdotal coverage was far more persuasive, and likely made antiwar protestors out of those who were previously neither dove nor hawk.

Just as the mainstream media brought the war into every American's living room, it put napalm on everybody's mind. Similar to the war in general, the media's coverage of napalm was far more documentary than analytical.⁸ Yet, without giving their opinion, news reporters across the country exposed the horrors of napalm, and more often, its lack of discrimination between Viet Cong and innocent civilian. There were many contradictory reports coming out of Vietnam about how widely used the chemical was, as many reports out of the country were inconsistent, but the images of injured civilians swayed American viewers significantly.⁹ Napalm's ability to reduce American deaths brought it to prominence, as the Army's justification for the substance was that it was better than Americans dying. While the public largely agreed with this in the early stages of the war, the civilian casualties caused by napalm forced the public to question if the deaths of American soldiers were less offensive than those of civilians, and America became hostile towards napalm over time. The messages regarding napalm in the mainstream media also changed over time, as both the media companies and the general population grew in their animosity towards the substance. In 1968, while

⁸ Neer, 155.

⁹ Maraniss, D. (2004) *They Marched into Sunlight*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster. p.72

describing the war, CBS reporter David Culhane commented on how U.S. forces often note the enemy's position and "allied planes roar over the hill and send napalm flaming along through the enemy bunkers," portraying the fiery weapon as an aid to U.S. troops at risk.¹⁰ Four years later, at the same broadcasting studio, Bob Simon paints a much darker picture, reporting on how Vietnamese children were scarred by the sight of the sky "raining fire" on their villages.¹¹

Not only did the media expose napalm's role in ravaging the Vietnamese population, but it also gave napalm the stigma of being unnatural. Due to chemical nature of the substance, many protesters compared it to Zyklon B and thus implied that the destruction that America was bringing to Vietnam was comparable to the war crimes of the Nazis. Additionally, the artificiality of napalm starkly contrasted with the environment of Vietnam, which made napalm strikes appear as if the industrial were corrupting the natural. George McGovern, at a political rally at the University of Minnesota, stunned an audience with the testimony of a veteran on a radio talk show, in which he recalled, "We went into villages after they dropped napalm, and the human beings were fused together like pieces of metal that had been soldered. Sometimes you couldn't tell if they were people or animals."¹² Overall, the media's role in the napalm issue was in asking the public if the lack of risk for U.S. troops was worth the inhumanity of civilian casualties. Eventually, as Americans saw more and more footage of Vietnam and the unnatural brutality that napalm brought, the napalm controversy emerged to fuel the antiwar movement.

¹⁰ David Culhane. (1968, September 3). *Vietnam/Fighting/Special Forces*. Retrieved from <https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/199889>

¹¹ Bob Simon, *Vietnam*.

¹² Neer, 153.

While the Tet Offensive served as a turning point in the war and caused Americans at home to grow weary of fighting, napalm's contribution to public disillusion was a protest that brought violence to the antiwar movement. The University of Wisconsin-Madison was, like many other universities, a hotbed for antiwar sentiment. Unlike other universities of its kind, however, the school was markedly diverse and featured a significant number of Jewish students from the northeast for a school in the Midwest. The school also featured a long history of civil disobedience and sought to continue that tradition on October 17th and 18th of 1967. With an antiwar protest coming up that weekend in Washington, D.C., students decided to do their part locally and picketed outside the Commerce building to protest Dow Chemical's on-campus recruitment due to Dow's role in the manufacturing of napalm. While the picketing remained outside on the 17th, protestors entered into the Commerce building the next day and turned away potential interviewers interested in Dow. As the morning went on, the crowd swelled, and the students repeatedly refused to leave when demanded by police, so eventually the police shattered the windows and barged through the front door. The police were ordered to not use their riot sticks, but once heavily outnumbered and surrounded, they did. Due to the quiet nature of Madison as a town, very few of the police were properly trained in riot-prevention, and instead of using the riot sticks to defend themselves, with both hands, they resorted to swinging them over their heads and bashing students. The protest descended into chaos and violence, with the police beating any student in range and protestors hurling rocks, sticks, and pipes at the fully-armored police. After the melee had gone on for roughly 30 minutes, the chief of police decided to use tear gas to break up the fray, marking the first time that the weapon had

ever been used on the campus. At the end of the frenzy, 47 students and 19 policemen were injured and needed medical attention.¹³

As news of the protest spiraling out of control spread, the University of Wisconsin became ammunition for the antiwar movement. The widespread use of violence on young adults by the police turned pacifists into extremists, as many students with slight liberal tendencies were pushed to more radical views about the war and their government's obligation to its people. On the other side, conservatives, police allies, and war supporters were infuriated by the protests, as they found absurdity in the idea that those who could afford to go to school were protesting the establishment, while those who could not were fighting for the American way in Vietnam. The events of October 18th also enflamed existing tensions in Madison, namely between the pro-war, Catholic, and largely uneducated citizens of the city and the antiwar, primarily Jewish, young adults from the Northeast. Incidents similar to the events of October 18th continued in Madison, but also affected the country as a whole, as the resulting polarization led to more drastic ideologies on both sides.

What the media's depiction of napalm and protests such as the one at the University of Wisconsin did, in effect, was change the substance from a simple combination of acids to a symbol of America's sinister means in fighting the Cold War. This transition is evidenced by napalm becoming slang for anything involving extremism and violence.¹⁴ In the late 1960s and 1970s, artists began to use the slang, which became a buzzword for the antiwar crowd and a way for the artists to demonstrate their values. One song, called "Napalm Sticks to Kids," became an

¹³ Maraniss, 396.

¹⁴ Neer, 163.

anthem for antiwar protestors and touched on the sentiment of the far left that was tired of both the military-industrial complex and American capitalism as a whole.¹⁵ After the protest in Madison, napalm also became a symbol of war profiteering and the sins of capitalism. While many companies were accused of profiting from the war, none were so heavily protested as Dow Chemical, which had a government contract to produce the military's napalm. On March 19th, 1968, months after the University of Wisconsin incident, seventeen students and two faculty were arrested for trespassing onto Dow property in Rockefeller Plaza, where they passed out leaflets protesting Dow's manufacturing of napalm.¹⁶ Trespassing onto Dow property was not a regular occurrence, but within a five month section of the war, 43 anti-Dow protests took place across the country.¹⁷ As napalm encouraged the antiwar movement to also take on an anti-capitalism stance, the chemical brought together groups of dissenters that aimed to liberalize various aspects of society, as the chemical's power as a symbol expanded beyond just antiwar sentiment.

The change over time of the public's view of napalm can also be evidenced by Hollywood, which made many films that bashed the substance in the post-Vietnam era. Hollywood films, both those with large budgets and those with smaller ones, depicted napalm as unnecessarily destructive.¹⁸ Yet the recurring theme throughout American films at this time was not just about how abusive napalm is, but also how futile, as Hollywood tended to depict the war as unwinnable.¹⁹ Even the

¹⁵ Ibid., 153.

¹⁶ New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 7, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times pg. 58.

¹⁷ Maraniss, 70.

¹⁸ Neer, 156.

¹⁹ Ibid.

most famous scene regarding napalm, in *Apocalypse Now*, which gave the world the famous line of “I love the smell of napalm in the morning,” subtly attacks the military’s reliance on the substance. Throughout the dialogue, the soldier implies that napalm was used extensively, to the point of being abused, and no longer under the justification that the military once provided, which was that napalm was saving American lives. The endurance of this anti-napalm and antiwar message throughout the latter half of the twentieth century strongly implies that napalm and the stigma around it not only fueled the antiwar movement in the 1960s and 1970s but a larger tide of pacifist sentiment that swept the country long after the conflict had ended.

Historians today argue about the degree to which the antiwar movement was effective, as its successes were often not clear and did not impact American society immediately. Likewise, the efficacy of the demonstrations against napalm, in Wisconsin and elsewhere, is difficult to determine. What is clear, however, is that the napalm controversy throughout the Vietnam War shattered the Cold War consensus on the use of chemical weapons. The substance became a central issue at the first international Human Rights Conference in 1993, and the United Nations created numerous reports on the hazardous material.²⁰ While the reports strongly advocated against the use of all incendiary weapons, they especially assailed napalm, which was seen as prone to misuse and too easy to manufacture. Following these reports, international legislators attempted to outlaw the material, but struggled due to the difficulty of defining the legal terms related to the detriments of napalm, such as “collateral damage” or “superfluous injury.” In all, it took roughly two decades for the protests to formulate into

²⁰ Ibid., 174.

international law, when the United Nations declared that any use of napalm against civilians is a war crime. Looking back, it appears that public outrage was unable to jump over some of the legal and political hurdles, which echoes various other aspects of the antiwar movement.

Napalm as a weapon is incredibly powerful, but napalm as an idea had a greater overall effect on the Vietnam War, as it mobilized protestors whose actions forced American leaders to de-escalate the conflict. Regardless of its effectiveness on the battlefield, its role as a sign of American injustice abroad greatly influenced both radicals such as the Weather Underground and every day Americans who saw its devastating effects on Vietnamese children during the evening news. Its tendency to inhumanely affect the lives of civilians, coupled with the newfound role of the media during the war, allowed it to become a tangible, visible sign of the ramifications of America's presence in Vietnam. Much like how waterboarding became the focal point for those who protested against the War on Terror, napalm affected such a sympathetic group of people in such a horrible way that it was a natural argument against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The controversy around napalm serves as a reminder of the extent to which Americans care about the means that their government uses to protect or represent them. Even if the public agrees with the government's end goal, unethical acts can create dissent and public pressure to discontinue, just as disapproval for napalm restricted American leaders in terms of policy towards Vietnam. Strangely enough, what started as a bizarre gel in the basement of a Harvard laboratory became a key factor in the rising popularity of the antiwar movement and would end up contributing to the liberalization of American society for years to come.

