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May 27, 2010

# The 60s and Why We Still Fight

By David Paul Kuhn

Once again we find ourselves debating the seminal 1960s conflicts. Two would-be senators, in 2010, have jeopardized their careers with words on civil rights and the Vietnam War. Despite talk of a bygone culture war, almost a half-century later, we are still fighting the original wars. It would be absurd if it were not true.

Last week Richard Blumenthal and Rand Paul offended different sides of the sixties divide. Each man, and many of their allies, saw the controversies as political sideshows. But both men's words tapped into enduring wounds.

The conflicts of the sixties are still with us, in part, because those who fought the battles are still with us. But ultimately these fights concern honor. And honor concerns character, the currency of leadership. Little is more precious in politics.

This is partly why the broader public, who did not have to make the hard choices, also feels invested in this fight. We want to honor the character of Americans of this era, those who risked, bled and died -- and what was right in their fight.

Yet Blumenthal and Paul's words also remind us that neither side, to this day, fully grasps the psychic wounds of the other.

Blumenthal's wrong is more obviously joined with this narrative. It is more egregious. He said he went off to war, though he did not. He sometimes correctly described his service. But, too often, he did not. Over years, he offered some version of "I served in Vietnam." He spoke of the experience, the hard fight and the hard return, in the first person.

As America heads into Memorial Day weekend, we are reminded that these were not mere political lies. Vietnam tore the national soul apart and took 58,159 American lives with it. Choices concerned life and death.

Blumenthal was given five military deferments before gaining a coveted slot in the Marine reserves. That slot assured he remained stateside.

Many progressives still fail to fully grasp how Blumenthal's words ripped the scab off old wounds. Vietnam came at a pivotal political moment. The Democratic Party was migrating from its blue collar roots to college educated whites and minorities. And it was mostly college-educated whites who evaded Vietnam. This fracture was forever captured in the New York hardhat riots, when the old Democratic coalition attacked the new.

Republican leaders, including George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, also entered the reserves or procured deferments. But the new left opposed the war, at times with vitriol. That vitriol is what the other side finds hardest to forgive.

Men like Bill Clinton became emblematic of a real grievance. Many college men, especially those who avoided the draft, had the luxury to protest. One study found that from 1962 to 1972, among Harvard and M.I.T. graduates, 1-in-1,542 died in Vietnam. In nearby working class

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South Boston, over the same period, 1-in-80 blue collar sons died. Blumenthal reminds veterans and their families of the "fortunate sons."

Meanwhile, as an emerging counter culture championed new codes, hundreds of thousands of boys went to Vietnam because they still cherished some measure of the old codes. Their country called. Their fathers served. Many were not at ease with the war. But they believed in duty. So they went.

"I can remember not quite understanding the reasons for Vietnam. I was not convinced that monolithic communism was going to take us down. But my country called," said military historian Ron Milam, a Vietnam veteran and author of "[Not a Gentleman's War](#)." "The people I was, and am, most critical of are those who left the country and became Canadian citizens. I had that choice. I lived in Detroit. I could have walked across the bridge."

Blumenthal did not cross that bridge either. He took an easy way out. But it was a legal way. Baby boomers might not have honored Blumenthal's route, but they would have understood.

Instead, as time progressed, Blumenthal dissembled about what he did. And his fictions touched on even deeper wounds -- what happened when the soldiers came home.

The antiwar protestors had good cause. They were right to question the war. Many protesters did not scorn veterans. The sooner they ended the war, in their minds, the fewer Americans would die. There was even a measure of honor in these protesters' actions, providing they accepted the repercussions of their civil disobedience.

Yet many veterans cite other motivations in activists. They see self-preservation. "That's certainly how a lot of veterans perceive it. That they were being slandered, accused of fighting a bad war, accused of doing bad things, so those who did not serve could rationalize their decision," said Mark Moyar, a U.S. Marine Corps University national security professor.

Those who did not serve in the war, like Blumenthal, also had a professional head start. These sons were not only fortunate to have a choice, they benefitted from the easier choice.

These uncomfortable facts are why, one suspects, Blumenthal became a strong advocate for veterans. It was an expression of his contrition.

But Blumenthal's lies have dearly compromised that contrition. He claimed a purchase on the valor he did not earn, and the struggle he did not endure.

That reminds us of what soldiers did endure. Many men who dodged their duty were shameless and it was soldiers, in fact, who were shamed. This is why phrases like "baby killer" resonate beyond their actual use. Veterans felt robbed of the honor in their fight. "The ones who were not willing to go saw fit to condemn those who did," Moyar notes. Soldiers were branded as bad because the war went so badly.

"Those of us who came back, we tried to hide that we were in Vietnam," Milam said.

"A large part of the American public really did look at the warriors and war in the same way," said UC-Davis political scientist Larry Berman, a Vietnam War historian. "It was a terrible thing to have done."

It was also a new thing. During the First World War, English women handed white feathers to men who could serve, but did not. The counter culture came to question, among other things, military service as a path to honor. Many veterans sought to reclaim that honor.

And here is Blumenthal. He falsely claimed veterans' honor. And he did it by the time America again honored them. He avoided the war when it was costly. He claimed the war when it was valued. To Milam, "Blumenthal was trying to have it both ways."

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Rand Paul, in another respect, also sought to have it both ways. Paul was born in 1963. One year later, LBJ agreed to the war's escalation and passed the Civil Rights Act.

That is the critical distinction between Paul and Blumenthal. Paul was not old enough to act one way and later recall his biography the better way. But his words still stir up the domestic war of the sixties.

Paul's victory in the Kentucky Republican primary made him one of the most prominent libertarians in the country. That prominence led NPR and MSNBC to select an obvious event that confronts the borders of libertarianism. Do you support the 1964 Civil Rights Act?

Paul compared government action to end institutional racism to censoring ugly free speech. He expressed discomfort with government regulating the private sector. He spoke admirably of Martin Luther King Jr. But he ignored that the free market failed to allow King to eat at private lunch counters or freely protest his second-class citizenship. Paul appeared to occupy a

cloistered academic world. He said the question involved "hypothetical" scenarios.

"It is not hypothetical. It may be hypothetical to him. But it is something we face everyday," said University of Maryland political scientist Ron Walters, who was earning a graduate degree in African American studies in 1964. "It's also offensive. This idea that it's okay to segregate in the private realm. It misses the point of how American society is structured because the private spaces are much more critical to American society and how we make progress."

A couple days after Paul's controversial interviews, with pressure mounting, he explicitly said he would have voted for the act. In a subsequent interview, he said, "We don't always explain what we mean very well" and that he weighed "too much into a philosophic debate about a moot point."

But little is "moot" about this point. Contemporary cases, like employment discrimination claims, wrestle with the 1964 act. It's also especially personal to Walters' generation. There is an "emotional investment" in the act. "I'm connected to that legacy," he said.

Paul's problem also exceeds poor word choice. The issue, as with Blumenthal, concerns the intended words he has continuously chosen, and what those words mean.

Paul expressed the controversial views one month earlier to a local newspaper. Back in 2002, in a letter to his hometown newspaper, Paul also wrote: "Decisions concerning private property and associations should in a free society be unhindered. As a consequence, some associations will discriminate."

This calls to mind, for the left, a long-standing grievance. Many of today's conservatives speak of the civil rights movement's virtues and denounce racism. But they also rail against an activist government that was vital to ending Jim Crow. For liberals, Paul personifies how the right tries to have it both ways. They hear a conservatism that espouses the virtues of equality but opposed the only means to attain it.

They hear Barry Goldwater. Goldwater was no racist. He was a member of the NAACP and hired black staff. But he also voted against the Civil Rights Act. Goldwater said it was federal encroachment.

Goldwater's vote, in effect, allowed for institutional racism. And as Mr. Conservative, his choice was emblematic of the conservative cross to bear on civil rights -- one shared by the era's conservative southern Democrats and conservative Republicans.

"Bill Buckley was scathing about the civil rights movement," said Columbia University sixties historian Todd Gitlin, a prominent student activist of the time. "I never cared whether Bill Buckley went out to lunch with black people. They were on the side of segregationists."

Buckley later expressed deep regret for his stance on civil rights, as did Goldwater. But to liberals, that leaves much unresolved. They believe one cannot champion the civil rights movement today without coming to terms with yesterday's arguments for opposing it. This is why phrases like "states rights" still anger progressives.

"I have always thought that the Goldwater view about the size and role of government," Walters said, "was really a synonym for what government was doing at the time and who government privileges."

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The nature of a mea culpa often tells us more about the offender than the offense. Blumenthal and Paul's subsequent words compounded their problem.

By Monday, one week after the news broke, Blumenthal finally said, "I'm sorry." But too much time had passed. The pregnant pause speaks volumes in screenplays. And in politics, when one ducks the hard truth too long, it also speaks volumes.

And it speaks most to baby boomers. The past is always a part of those who lived it. "My generation is still fighting all the wars of the sixties," Milam said. "And always will."

Baby boomers hard choices define them to this day. Later generations, like my own, have not been forced to answer for our citizenship or our sense of justice in such fundamental respects. Thus we honor the brave and hard choices by asking ourselves, what would we have done?

At best, Paul failed to do this on civil rights. He also repeatedly minimized the issue by describing it as "hypothetical" or "moot." Think about that. This nation owes its president to civil rights victories. Paul's later support for the act does not erase earlier statements. Contradictions linger.

Blumenthal's contradictions also linger. He initially described past statements as "misplaced words." It was a serious moral evasion. And like Paul, subsequent statements do not expunge

the evasion. The public mind is not like a jury. Nothing is stricken from the record.

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But what does it all mean?

Both men will still likely become senators. And that too reminds us of our divisions and what goes unhealed.

Imagine the states reversed. It's impossible to conceive of Connecticut electing a senator who questioned the Civil Rights Act. It's equally unimaginable that Kentucky would elect a senator who lied about his Vietnam War record.

Thus both issues concern not only personal honor but also what our culture (or cultures) honor. The sixties is a metaphor. It encompasses battles that predate and postdate it. And to this day, those battles force us to decide what we shall honor.

That forces us to confront who "we" also are. So it's not simply that Americans of the sixties are still with us, even lead us. It's also that many of us, who were not there, are with them. We are invested in their story because it's an expression of our story, and in aggregate, an expression of the American story.

Today, we tend to take refuge in an airbrushed American story. We want to believe in consensus. That we now honor civil rights. That we now honor our veterans. That America has moved on.

These events remind us of how we have not moved on. The divides are far smaller today. But they remain deep. Each event returns us to that depth and those divisions. And it is those divisions that define us. And it is what defines us that we defend.

"What was fought over in the sixties were controversies so deep, with such reverberation throughout American history, it's not surprising that they reverberate for decades. They get to fundamental values, for which there is no consensus," Gitlin said. "I'm not surprised that it reverberates. Is it surprising when the San Andreas Fault quivers?"

Yes and no. Yes, because of the initial shock. But also no. Because the fault line endures.

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