



Hesston, Kansas, 1961



Clashing Symbols in a Quiet Town

Hesston in the Vietnam War Era

by James C. Juhnke

On May 7, 1970, six days after President Richard Nixon's "incurSION" into Cambodia and three days after the National Guard killings at Kent State University, Henry Anatole Grunewald, managing editor of *Time* magazine, visited the small town of Hesston, in Harvey County, Kansas. Grunewald and other top brass from *Time* were putting their ears to the ground. They visited with ordinary people in the cities of Indianapolis, Des Moines, Denver, and Wichita, and in Hesston. Fourteen selected citizens from Hesston met with the distinguished visitors. At the end of the conversation, editor Grunewald concluded, "there is an even greater impatience with Vietnam than I had realized." The next issue of *Time* did not mention Hesston but reported more generally: "Even in the Midwest . . . the Silent Majority may prove thin. *Time* correspondents around the nation found little enthusiasm for the president's new policy."¹

Kansans in general had never been enthusiastic about the war in Vietnam. Robert Docking, a conservative Democrat who governed a Republican state, did not make sup-

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1. *Time* 95 (May 11, 1970): 10; *Wichita Eagle*, May 8, 1970.

Having a dominant Mennonite community, Hesston supported three Mennonite churches, including the Hesston Mennonite Church, depicted here, on the Hesston College campus.



port for America's war policy a major issue in his four successful gubernatorial campaigns from 1966 to 1972. In 1968 Docking supported Hubert Humphrey in the volatile Democrat Convention in Chicago. In 1972 Docking distanced himself from the McGovern-Shriver national ticket.² In April 1967 Calvin Trillin, a writer for the *New Yorker*, visited Kansas and found the people largely indifferent to the war. There were some economic benefits. The small town of Protection enjoyed a small economic boom as its Lane Myers Company received contracts to produce concertina barbed wire. The town of Parsons in southeast Kansas grew rapidly with the reopening of the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant. The head of Wichita's Chamber of Commerce worried what would happen to the economy in case of peace. "If the war stops tomorrow you're going to have some panic."³

But prominent Kansas voices also were raising questions. On January 18, 1967, Whitley Austin, editor of the *Salina Journal*, wrote an editorial that began, "Let's get out of Vietnam." When readers responded positively, Austin concluded that "an unexpressed opposition to the war may extend to a majority of the citizens."⁴ In December 1966 Kansas's senior statesman Alfred M. Landon inaugurated the lecture series named for him at Kansas State University criticizing the South Vietnamese government for its lack of democracy and the United States government for its lack of candor.⁵ Kansas never became a hotbed of antiwar protest, but uneasiness with the war escalated rapidly in the late 1960s as failures of American war policy became manifest.

The greatest trauma wrought by the Vietnam War was expressed in private grief rather than in public demonstra-

tions. A total of 677 military personnel from Kansas died in Southeast Asia during the war.⁶ Most of these were members of the First and Ninth Infantry divisions who trained at Fort Riley. A "Waiting Wives Club" in Junction City, led by Dorothy Lauri, provided support for young widows.⁷ The only man from Hesston to die in the war was John Michael Hiebert, killed in a helicopter crash December 2, 1971. Hiebert's family was of Mennonite background, but his funeral was in the Evangelical United Brethren Church of Hillsboro. One Hesston Vietnam veteran committed suicide after returning. Another man who had a difficult experience in Vietnam returned embittered, believing that the government had not allowed the American armed forces to win the war and his sacrifice was not appreciated.⁸

The town of Hesston, with about fifteen hundred people in 1970, makes an interesting case study in the tensions raised by the Vietnam War. Hesston had a longstanding reputation as a socially peaceable, economically progressive, and politically conservative community. In national elections the town invariably voted Republican. The Nixon-Agnew ticket in 1968 received 81 percent of Hesston's votes. It was a town of thriving churches, mostly Mennonite. According to one of the town's chroniclers, Hesston was "a Mennonite town in the same sense that Salt Lake City is a Mormon City."⁹ The town's newspaper edi-

2. Joel Paddock, "Democratic Politics in a Republican State: The Gubernatorial Campaigns of Robert Docking, 1966-1972," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Summer 1994): 108-23.

3. Calvin Trillin, "A Reporter at Large: The War in Kansas," *New Yorker* (April 22, 1967): 56, 57, 88.

4. *Ibid.*, 96; "Killing Too Costly A Price For Pride!" *Salina Journal*, January 18, 1967.

5. Trillin, "A Reporter at Large," 145; Diane Prentice Carlin and Meredith A. Moore, eds., *The Landon Lecture Series on Public Issues: The First Twenty Years, 1966-1986* (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 7-19.

6. [Southeast Asia] Combat Area Casualties Current File (CACCF), as of December 1998 (electronic record), Records of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Record Group 330, National Archives, College Park, Md.

7. Trillin, "A Reporter at Large," 72, 75.

8. Murray C. Bandy, *Hesston, Kansas 1886-1986* (N.p.: 1988), 114.

9. Mary Hess, *Anatomy of a Town: Hesston, Kansas* (New York: Carlton Press, 1976), 160.



Major players in the Hesston community and political scene: Vernon Nikkel (right), mayor from 1967 to 1969; Harold Dyck (center), director of marketing for Hesston Corporation, a member of the Hesston Mennonite Church, and mayor from 1969 to 1970; and Harold Sommerfeld (left), editor of the Hesston Record and chairman of the board of elders of the Hesston College Mennonite congregation.

tor, the CEO of Hesston Manufacturing Company, and the president of Hesston College, were all members of the same congregation—Hesston Mennonite Church on the campus of Hesston College. It was a community where people were committed to the durable virtues of discipline, hard work, and responsibility.

Church life and community life were linked closely in Hesston. The town had three Mennonite congregations and a Mennonite retirement home, Schowalter Villa, founded in 1961. The Mennonites had operated a high school academy and junior college in Hesston. The presence of the academy helped delay the establishment of a public high school until 1964. Mennonites were actively involved in local politics. In 1969 four of Hesston's five city councilmen were Mennonites. Mennonite conservatism benefited local industries as Mennonite workers resisted union organization. Hesston Corporation, a manufacturer of farm equipment, did not have to pay union wages and therefore had a competitive edge in marketing. Mennonite clergymen helped promote understanding among workers, management, and religious leaders. Peter Wiebe, energetic pastor of the Hesston Mennonite Church, took initiative to invite the pastors of all the workers at Hesston Corporation—a list of some forty men of the cloth—to an all-day event at the manufacturing plant. The pastors observed the working conditions of their church members and discussed labor-management relations with corporation executives.¹⁰ Religion and ordinary life were not separate spheres in Hesston.

Because Mennonites were pacifists who refused military service, the coming of war accentuated the differences be-

tween them and the non-Mennonites in Hesston. Some members of Hesston's Methodist congregation were former Mennonites who had left their church because they disagreed with the pacifist position. Vernon Nikkel, mayor of Hesston from 1967 to 1969, was a former Mennonite turned Methodist. He took a "non-combatant" stance rather than one of strict conscientious objection. Alvin King, automobile dealer and major force in Hesston politics, was of Mennonite grandparentage. King was politically conservative and strongly patriotic. In 1967 he recruited Nikkel to run for mayor in Hesston's nonpartisan elections and wrote letters encouraging people to vote for him. Two years later Harold Dyck, director of marketing at Hesston Corporation and member of the Hesston College Mennonite Church, ran for mayor against Nikkel and was elected. Harold Sommerfeld, editor of the town's weekly newspaper, the *Hesston Record*, was a quiet and non-threatening person who was not inclined to write or report anything controversial. He was chairman of the board of elders of the Hesston College congregation.¹¹

From the 1950s Hesston had experienced steady industrial growth. Hesston Corporation led the way, initially producing a grain unloading auger and other combine implement parts. Eventually the corporation moved into an extensive line of hay-processing equipment. Sales of Hesston Corporation products leapt from a million dollars in 1955 to 16.5 million in 1965 and nearly 207 million in 1975. Hesston Corporation took advantage of a large pool of laborers from farm families in the region, many of them hard-

10. Peter B. Wiebe, interview by author, July 30, 1998.

11. Vernon Nikkel, interview by author, November 17, 1998; Harold Dyck, interview by author, March 18, 1999. Dyck was a Republican who later served in the Kansas legislature.

During the Vietnam era, political conflicts in Hesston first became visible on the campus of Hesston College. Students of the college are photographed here in ca. 1970.



working and conservative Mennonites, whose small farms lacked economies of scale for modern farm operations.¹² As the corporation grew, many Hesston Corporation employees had to drive long distances to work. According to one report, in 1973 the plant employed fourteen hundred workers who drove a total of 37,958 miles per day.¹³ Other thriving industrial and business enterprises contributed to Hesston's growth. Excel Industries built cabs for combines and tractors, as well as mowers. King Construction Company, run by two nephews of Alvin King, had major bridge construction contracts for interstate Highways I-70 and I-135 in Kansas.¹⁴

Thriving industrial growth made possible an array of new civic projects in the 1960s and 1970s, including a new high school and new middle school. In 1968 Hesston completed and dedicated a new municipal building. A new public swimming pool came in 1971 and a new eighteen-hole golf course in 1974. The thriving Hesston industries were taxed to pay for improvements. According to Lyle Yost, head of Hesston Corporation, "Around 1970 our taxes provided paving for city roads, new schools, a city building and city library. Well over half the city budget came from Hesston Corporation." For Hesston's civic officials, the times of growth were something to be remembered with pride. According to mayor Vernon Nikkel, "Hesston has always had smooth sailing in city politics."¹⁵

In 1969 and 1970 Hesston's smooth sailing boat hit some rough water. The conflicts first became visible, as in many communities in the Vietnam War era, on the college campus. Hesston College had been founded in 1909 as a conservative school, a more socially safe and theologically orthodox place for parents to send their children than state schools or the alternative Mennonite colleges in far away

Goshen, Indiana, or nearby Newton, Kansas. Both Hesston and Goshen were sponsored by the (Old) Mennonite denomination. Bethel College, affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite branch and just seven miles down U.S. Highway 81 from Hesston, was more liberal. Bethel College students began active public protests against the war in the fall of 1966. Some students from Hesston College participated in protest events at Bethel before the public demonstrations began at Hesston.¹⁶

Student enrollment at Hesston grew rapidly from 230 in 1960 to 462 in 1970. As the college grew, its leaders felt their traditional control of student life slipping away. One symbol of change in the late sixties was popular music. Students listened to protest songs by popular folk and rock musicians such as Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, and Country Joe and the Fish. In the fall of 1967 some students asked to play the songs in Hesston's chapel/convocation service and to explain the socially redeeming message of the lyrics. The music professor walked away from that event with a scowl and a complaint that such inappropriate music was allowed on stage at Hesston. In the spring of 1968 the students protested when President Tilman Smith disciplined a student couple he found in broad daylight on a blanket on the college lawn. The couple said they had been studying. That evening after supper a dozen or so student couples took blankets and textbooks for a public protest on President Smith's front lawn. They called it a "love in" after the 1960s fashion of sit-ins and teach-ins.

12. Billy M. Jones, *Factory on the Plains: Lyle Yost and the Hesston Corporation* (Wichita: Center of Entrepreneurship of Wichita State University, 1987), 215; Lyle and Erma Martin Yost, interview by author, October 10, 1998.

13. Hess, *Anatomy of a Town*, 257.

14. Bandy, *Hesston, Kansas 1886-1986*, 88, 98.

15. Yost interview; Nikkel interview.

16. Terence R. Goering, "A History of the Bethel College Peace Club," Social Science Seminar paper, Bethel College, May 1975, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kans.



Peter Wiebe, pastor of the Hesston Mennonite Church, supported the peace movement on the Hesston College campus.

The potential fallout from the event in the college's conservative Mennonite constituency was alarming.

Two changes in student religious life in the late 1960s had special long-range implications. Most of the female students, all at once it seemed, stopped wearing the small white prayer coverings, which had been a traditional Mennonite sign of women's submission and of literal obedience to the biblical command to keep one's head covered for prayer.¹⁷ And the number of students attending Sunday morning worship fell off precipitously. Clayton Beyler, the Bible teacher, told Peter Wiebe, pastor of the Hesston Mennonite Church, "Peter, do you know you are losing the kids? They are not coming to church any more."¹⁸

To meet the demand for worship services more suitable to the students' liking, the congregation invited the young people to plan their own "contemporary worship" for the second service on Sunday mornings. The first service remained traditional. For the second service a student committee, chaired by campus minister John Lederach, organized informal and participatory worship. Student attendance rose again, at least for several years. The creative innovations brought inter-generational controversy, especially when students tested the boundaries with loud rock music in a "celebration of anger." "We had given them the right to do their own thing," reported Pastor Wiebe.¹⁹ Changes toward nontraditional worship also took place in other Hesston congregations. The Whitestone Mennonite congregation, which had relocated in 1964 from the country to the northern edge of Hesston, also introduced more informal and contemporary worship styles under the leadership of Jerry Weaver, the pastor there from 1967 to 1975.²⁰

The Vietnam War politicized the Hesston student body as never before. Antiwar sentiment and activity among Hesston faculty and students escalated to a peak in the fall of 1969. The international contacts of the school helped inform and stimulate the antiwar mood. Mennonite relief and service workers who had been in Vietnam visited the campus and told about the evils of the war. Earl Martin and Pat Hostetter Martin, Vietnam service workers, were at Hesston College in early September 1969, when Ho Chih Minh, North Vietnamese leader, died. The Martins put on black armbands, an expression of Jesus's teaching of love for the enemy, a theme emphasized in Earl's later book *Reaching the Other Side*.²¹ A group of students decided to commemorate Ho's death by creating a North Vietnamese flag—a yellow star sewn onto a red field of fabric from the Hesston dry goods store—and running the flag up the college flagpole. One student remembered, "The idea hatched in the dorm room of two bright, neat missionary kids from Japan." The flag flew over the campus at half staff from midnight until morning, and then again, briefly, at the time of the chapel service.²² College officials took the flag down but returned it to the students, under the condition that they not fly it again. Dan Clark, one of the student activists, gave the flag to some other students and told them to hide it so he could honestly say he did not know where it was.

The flag incident might soon have been forgotten except for the crusading patriotic zeal of Pastor Vern Bender, the leader of a small nondenominational congregation, the People's Church, in Newton. Bender went to Hesston College and demanded that college officials give him the flag to be destroyed. When they refused, the pastor outfitted his station wagon with loudspeakers, an American flag and a Christian flag, and an eight-foot sign that read, "PEACE (?) MARCHERS REFUSED TO SURRENDER VIET CONG FLAG." He drove his car down main streets of towns in Harvey, McPherson, and Marion Counties, playing patriotic music and loudly announcing that a communist flag had flown over Harvey County for eight hours. Bender held a series of three meetings in his church to expose what he called the "Hanoi-Kremlin pseudo peace endorsements of the Bethel and Hesston College peace clubs." In a sensationalist advertisement in the *Newton*

17. The key texts are I Corinthians 11:13 and 14:35.

18. Wiebe interview.

19. Ibid.

20. Joseph S. Miller, *Beyond the Mystic Border: A 100 Year History of the Whitestone Mennonite Church* (Hesston: Whitestone Mennonite Church, 1985), 145–6.

21. Earl S. Martin, *Reaching the Other Side: The Journal of an American who Stayed to Witness Vietnam's Postwar Transition* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978).

22. Daniel G. Clark to Joseph S. Miller, March 3, 1998, private collection of James Juhnke, North Newton, Kans.; "North Vietnam Flag Flies Briefly," *Hesston College Journal*, September 23, 1969.

This sensational advertisement was placed in the Newton Kansan by Pastor Vern Bender in response to a North Vietnamese flag briefly being flown over the Hesston campus.

Kansan Bender announced “The Kremlin Plot for blood to flow on the Kansas Prairie.”²³

In mid-October 1969 a national “Vietnam Moratorium Committee” coordinated antiwar protest demonstrations around the country. Some Hesston students joined events sponsored by the Bethel College peace club—public debates with the John Birch Society and, on October 18, a protest march in which some two hundred people walked eighteen miles along U.S. Highway 81 from Newton to Wichita.²⁴ In November, at the time of the national “New Mobilization,” the Hesston College “Peace Concern” organized a march from the campus on Main Street, past the College Church and across the highway to the town post office to mail antiwar letters to public officials. The students were joined by some faculty and community folk, including Jerry Weaver, pastor of the Whitestone Mennonite Church. The event proceeded peaceably, despite some advance rumors that the marchers would be met with violence. Photos show the Hesston protesters to be clean cut and well organized.²⁵

In Hesston concerns arose about the controversy and protests at the college. Hesston College’s November antiwar demonstration led to a patriotic counter-demonstration on February 23, 1970, downtown. City officials planned to dedicate the new flagpole that had been erected, with support from the Lion’s Club and the Women’s Civic Club, outside the new (1968) municipal building. They invited the Newton VFW color guard and the Hesston high school band to play the national anthem. Congressman Garner Shriver supplied a special flag that had flown over the national capitol in Washington. The Methodist pastor, Bob Baer, gave the invocation, and Sergeant Stanley Corkum from McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita made some opening remarks. “Can we fly the flag too much?” asked Corkum. “Can we read the Bible too much?”²⁶

Pastor Peter Wiebe gave the main dedicatory address. He assumed the organizers chose him because he had not participated in the college’s protest demonstration in November. He had been out of town at the time. Solomon

23. *Hutchinson News*, February 24, 1970; *Newton Kansan*, February 20, 1970.

24. Goering, “A History of the Bethel College Peace Club,” 42–43, 51.

25. For one account of the student march, see Joseph S. Miller, “The View from the President’s Window,” *Hesston College Today* (Winter 1998): 9.

26. James C. Juhnke, “Anabaptists at the Flagpole,” *Mennonite* 86 (April 13, 1971): 243.

VIET CONG FLAG
7 HOURS OVER HARVEY COUNTY
ON CAMPUS FLAG POLE!

In respect to "The George Washington of North Viet Nam, Ho Chi Minh," boasts proud protest marcher.

HEAR—

- ★ **CONFESSION OF THE ENEMY FLAG RAISER**
- ★ **THE LIE THAT GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS AN ATHEIST!**
- ★ **How A Professor Cries Out In Agony, "The Peace Club Is On Trial!"**
- ★ **A blistering Washington's Day expose' of the present march on his city!**
- ★ **Our planned "civil disobedience" stage outlined in North Newton. The Kremlin plot for blood to flow on the Kansas prairie as another step.**
- ★ **JURVEIN BEFORE YOU'VE LOST!** This nation's public opinion—from 1961 P.M. to a quarter past midnight—between The People's Church and The World Peace Club. The next Sunday's historic display against the Hesston Peace Concern marchers. The flagpole location The People's Church would not patronize the protest tape recordings, and even bid them for safety.
- ★ **WHAT CAN HAPPEN TO YOU** if you definitely demonstrate your faith in the faith in words of the Cross and Concern, and the Cross and Concern.
- ★ **The White-Crosser campaign** that just Pastor Vern Bender is a preacher, etc. Separately, how The World's Churches should guide and protect all this people in the present situation of what Jesus really stood for? (John 17: 14-16). In fact, how this anti-protestor was staged and set out of "the same paper-patchers who created 777" (Rev. 18, 19-20).

HEAR IT ALL!
7:00 P.M. Sunday, February 22, 1970, in

The People's Church

1 block west of U.S. 81, at the corner of E. 25th and Logan, in Newton, Kansas

Yoder, Hesston College history teacher, had urged Wiebe to withdraw from the event which, in Yoder’s view, would be a display of idolatrous civil religion and an affirmation of the United States’ war policy in Vietnam. Wiebe decided to accept the invitation but to use it as an opportunity to make a statement against the Vietnam War and to call for the proper use of the American flag as “a symbol of the best for which the American people stand.” Wiebe wrote out the complete text of his speech, unlike his sermons which he always delivered extemporaneously. He spoke of his pride in America and the places he liked to see the flag flying. But, he said,

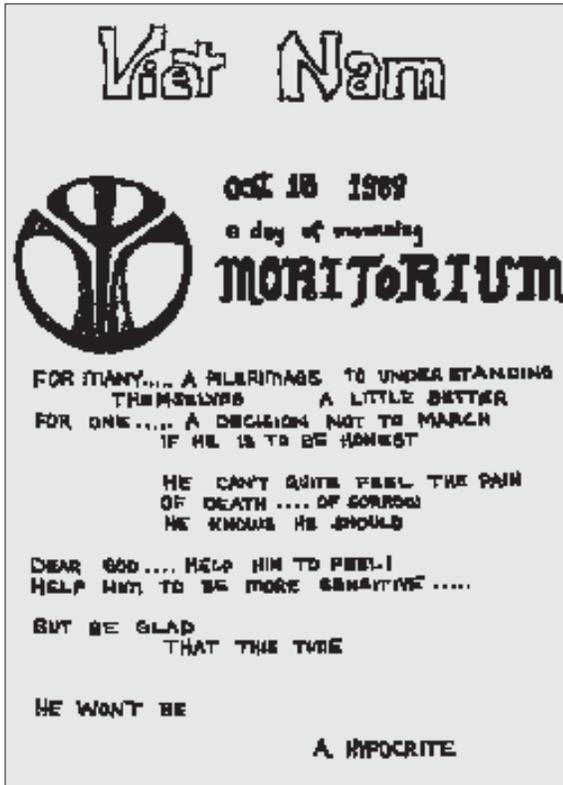
I don’t like to see the flag fly on a military base in another country. I have a feeling that we do not belong there, and history in Vietnam and elsewhere is proving how badly mistaken we have been about our military efforts.

... Not a narrow patriotism or nationalism—but a new and international spirit needs to emerge.

... The flag is not a whip for lining people up.²⁷

After his speech, while the crowd joined in the pledge of allegiance to the flag, Wiebe stood silently with his head bowed and his hands behind his back. Later he gave a copy of his speech to Harold Sommerfeld, editor of the *Hesston Record*, who published it without comment.

27. *Hesston Record*, March 5, 1970.



As part of the national Vietnam Moratorium in October 1969, students from Hesston participated in various events and a protest march. This illustration was produced by a Hesston College student at the time of the moratorium.

put them on display under glass in his church and brought them out for special occasions to bolster his moral authority in the community—for the next twenty-five years and more. In 1997 Bender displayed the liberated flag remnants at a Newton City Commission meeting in connection with his campaign for a city shelter for homeless vagrants.²⁹

Wiebe's speech at the flagpole dedication had addressed another hot issue before the Hesston community in 1970—low-cost housing. To help alleviate the severe housing shortage, the city government had created a "Housing Authority" and applied for funds under the Federal Housing Administration. Local opponents of the project worried that it would bring unwanted poor and black people into this all-white middle-class town. FHA projects had to meet the nondiscrimination requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Wiebe, a strong supporter of racial integration, used his speech to support low-cost housing for Hesston. He tied it to true patriotism and to the American flag:

We have, in Hesston, hopefully, agreed on low-cost housing; we have agreed to have a safe and free community. If this flag flies over Hesston and we do less than this for our underprivileged millions, then it is a sham, a farce, it ought to be torn down.

The March 5, 1970, issue of the *Hesston Record* announced official word, received from the office of Congressman Garner Shriver, that twenty units of low-rent housing had been approved for Hesston. That same issue included the text of Wiebe's speech at the flagpole dedication. On the following day, March 6, the Hesston City Council voted to abandon the low-rent housing project. The Citizen's Advisory Council reported the kinds of questions people were asking: "Do we actually need this type of housing? . . . Why don't the businesses pay a living wage? . . . Would this type of labor bring the wages down? . . . Would these homes be on the tax roll or will subsidy come

29. "Burn Flag at Hesston Confrontation," *Hutchinson News*, February 26, 1970; "Viet Cong Flag Burned at Hesston," *Newton Kansan*, February 26, 1970; "Burned Flag Remnants Open for Public Display" advertisement, *ibid.*, February 27, 1970.

30. *Hesston Record*, March 12, 1970.

On February 24, 1970, the day after the Hesston flagpole dedication, Vern Bender's relentless campaign to claim the North Vietnamese flag came to a head. John Lederach, Hesston College chaplain, agreed to meet with Bender and some students at the Lederach home on Lancaster Street near the campus. The students brought the North Vietnamese flag. Bender came to the event with two friends who were veterans and demanded that he be given the flag for a public burning in Newton at the Harvey County courthouse. When Lederach refused, Bender stormed away with screeching tires, leaving his two friends behind. In his back yard, Lederach put the flag on a shovel, soaked it with lawn mower fuel, and the Air Force veteran, Buddy Gene Seeley, struck a match. "The flames lit up the evening sky," Lederach later recalled. After the fire died down, Lederach put the ashes and a few remaining fragments in a shopping bag which he gave to the veterans. Lederach drove the veterans back to their homes in Newton. While he was gone, the distraught Bender returned, entered the empty Lederach home, and searched the place. One of Lederach's sons came home from a high school activity and discovered Bender coming out the bedroom. The dog, Sugar, was "growling, showing his teeth, and cowering, something he never did."²⁸ Apparently the flag remains were given to Bender; he later

28. John Lederach to Daniel Clark, March 5, 1998, Juhnke collection.

Pastor Vern Bender (far right), with flags and signs, campaigned against James Juhnke, a peace candidate from Hesston running for the fourth district congressional seat in 1970. Juhnke lost the race to longtime Republican congressman Garner Shriver.



from previous homeowners of the town?"³⁰ Questions about race could not be raised in public or acknowledged in the newspaper, but popular fears were not far below the surface. One racist story circulated in Hesston: A Negro man, it was said, had applied for work at Hesston Corporation. The personnel man asked him how many children he had. "Twelve," the Negro said. "Can you do anything else?" the personnel man asked.³¹

The superheated local political context, charged by polarization over war protest, flag dedication gone awry, and racial fears, must have contributed to the defeat of the low-rent housing proposal. According to Vernon Nikkel, member of the local Housing Authority, the federal program involved was not suitable for Hesston in the first place. It assumed a kind of metropolitan urban redevelopment that included clearing slums and building new structures. Hesston had no slums to tear down. The need for affordable housing was met in part in the early 1970s when mayor Harold Dyck and a group of investors developed "Paradise Park," a trailer park on the southeast side of town.³²

In the first week of May 1970 President Richard Nixon's announcement of the "incursion" into Cambodia, an apparent violation of his campaign promise not to widen the war, led to a new wave of protests on college campuses and communities around the country. National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio shot and killed four students.³³ At Hesston College the entire campus community became engaged in a discussion about the meaning of the American flag. On May 1 the "Campus Community Congress" voted that the college should refuse to fly the United States flag in protest and mourn-

ing. On May 6 the flag was again raised, and the college published a "Flag Policy Statement" that disassociated the flag from American militarism. To fly the flag was "consistent with our Anabaptist heritage" because it

recognizes the separation of church and state in America. We fly the flag because the United States government tolerates dissent, and makes a serious attempt to respect personal convictions, and because the United States from early colonial times has welcomed religious dissenters of every type.³⁴

Some antiwar students were not happy with the new flag policy. Daniel Clark, a student leader, complained that the college administration was overly hasty in getting the flag up again.³⁵

Within a few weeks, however, Hesston College administrators took quiet action to remove the American flag and keep it down. President Laban Peachey in fact had personal reservations about flag veneration, stemming from his childhood experiences with more conservative Mennonites in the East. Growing up as the son of a minister of the Conservative Conference of Mennonites in Maryland, Peachey had refused to salute the flag in seventh grade in public school and had been reprimanded by his teacher. John Lederach, campus minister and member of the administrative cabinet, also did not want the flag on the college campus. He simply took matters into his own hands:

I noticed early one morning that the folded flag was on the bench outside my office. Someone from the maintenance staff, after taking it down the night be-

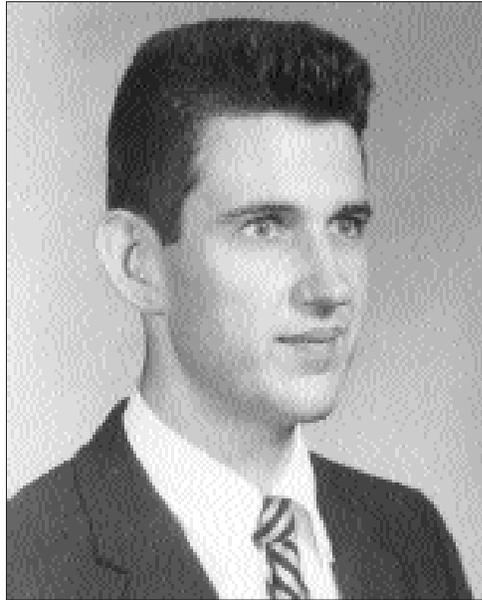
31. Wiebe interview.

32. Nikkel interview; Harold Dyck, interview by author, March 3, 1999.

33. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1972*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996); Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976); William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983).

34. "Flag Policy Statement," *Hesston College Journal*, May 19, 1970.

35. Daniel G. Clark to John M. Lederach, March 6, 1998, Juhnke collection.



Although a peace advocate, Laban Peachey (left), president of Hesston College, came into conflict with fellow Mennonite Sol Yoder (right), a young college instructor who radically challenged America's presence in Vietnam.

fore, had apparently left it there. . . . I saw it, picked it up and put the flag in the back of my bottom desk drawer. . . . That day the flag did not fly over the campus. As I remember, no one seemed to notice! Several times toward the end of that year the question was asked, "What happened to the flag?" No one seemed to know. I did not say anything. The reality was that it became a non-issue. The year ended and nothing was said. . . . To me, this little story illustrated how at times, making things into such a big issue could have divided the faculty and campus, but a quiet intervention kept the issue from becoming divisive and destructive.³⁶

In the immediate wake of the Kent State killings and the renewed flag controversy, rumors circulated in downtown Hesston that some angry patriots were planning to invade the college campus for a violent confrontation. Paul Friesen, a fine arts teacher at the college, was worried that people at the college who were concerned for peace in Vietnam were contributing to a collapse of peace in Hesston. Friesen initiated discussions that led to a Methodist-Mennonite rapprochement. On May 9 about seventy college students, teachers, and administrators took part in a "school-church work day" to help prepare the building and grounds of a newly constructed United Methodist Church building for its consecration service the following Sunday. Methodist church leaders published a letter of thanks in the college newspaper. Friesen said the event

marked a turning point toward better college-community relations.³⁷

During the 1970-1971 school year the American flag did not fly at Hesston College. Late that year the flag pole itself, including its large cement base, was removed from the campus. According to one account, some unidentified persons sawed off the flagpole near its base, after which the maintenance department removed the remaining stump and the large cement base.³⁸ Thus the American flag was not flown at Hesston College after May 1970—a few weeks after the college had published an official statement to justify flying the flag.

On Independence Day, July 4, 1970, an anonymous telephone caller threatened Peter Wiebe and his family. The caller was concerned not about flags, but about race mixing. The Wiebe family had recently adopted a mixed-race child, partly from the encouragement of the Wiebe's young daughters who had seen appeals for adoption on a Wichita television station. The caller said, "I want you to know that we are going to run you out of town. Two things we don't need in Hesston are long haired people and Blacks." The caller attempted to disguise his voice, but Wiebe was convinced that it was Alvin King, one of the most prominent leaders in town. Some time later, after the Wiebe family had adopted a second mixed-race child, the same man called again, this time identifying himself as "a brother in your church" and advising Wiebe to "start packing" because they were prepared to run him out of town. Although he again was certain who had made the call, Wiebe did not make it public.³⁹

36. John Lederach to James Juhnke, May 12, 1999, *ibid*.

37. Doris Weaver, "A Change of Direction: Positive, Creative, Practical," *Hesston College Journal*, May 19, 1970; Paul Friesen, interview by author, January 28, 2000.

38. Nelson Kilmer, interview by author, June 24, 1999.

39. Wiebe interview. The identity of the caller is indirectly supported by Solomon Yoder, who also reported receiving an "anonymous" telephone call from Alvin King.

Whether or not King had anonymously threatened Peter Wiebe, the incident demonstrated the existence of racial prejudice in Hesston. Activist students at Hesston College complained that African students were victims of discrimination at a nearby truck stop. They reported an incident in which the black students were snubbed by a waitress and made to wait while white customers who came later were served first. Dan Clark reported in a column in the *Hesston College Journal*, "If you're black or have hair, you're a target for snickers, stares, catcalls, and even violence if you step off campus." Larry Bontrager, president of the student government, talked with Hesston's civic leaders about race issues. They reportedly told him that "there is no prejudice here."⁴⁰

The national elections of 1970 provided a referendum of sorts in Hesston on the Vietnam War. James Juhnke, a young Bethel College history teacher who had taught part-time at Hesston College (1967–1969) and was an active member of the Hesston Inter-Mennonite Fellowship, ran as a peace candidate in Kansas's fourth congressional district. Juhnke had been active in antiwar protests at Bethel College but had not been involved in the earlier conflicts in Hesston over the North Vietnamese flag, low-cost housing, or racial incidents. The fourth district congressional seat had been held by Republican Garner Shriver since 1960. Juhnke won the Democrat Party primary in June over Robert C. Martin, a war hawk, but he lost to Shriver in the general election with 36.5 percent of the votes in the district.⁴¹

Some Hesston students, faculty, and church leaders helped with Juhnke's campaign. Solomon Yoder, history teacher, and his wife, Naomi, lent their automobile to Juhnke for the duration of the campaign and helped in other ways. Gideon Yoder, pastor of the Inter-Mennonite Fellowship, said that Hesston folk frequently asked questions about Juhnke's "religious, moral, and patriotic commitment." Yoder wrote a strong letter of support in the *Hutchinson News* in response to rumors that Juhnke was unpatriotic or subversive.⁴² Pastor Vern Bender of Newton campaigned against Juhnke, driving around the district with his car, loudspeaker, and sign, attempting to link

40. Dan Clark, "Cutting Edge," *Hesston College Journal*, September 23, 1969.

41. "Abstract of votes 1952–1973, Harvey County," Records of the Harvey County Clerk, Newton; Elwill M. Shanahan, *State of Kansas Election Statistics*, 1970 (Topeka: Secretary of State, 1970), 15, 72; "Harvey Countians Follow State Vote," *Newton Kansan*, November 4, 1970.

42. *Hutchinson News*, November 1, 1970.

Alvin B. King, an automobile dealer, was a major force in Hesston politics. He was a patriotic conservative who opposed the liberal sentiment and activism of individuals affiliated with the community's Mennonite Church and college.



Juhnke to the North Vietnamese flag. The intense polarization of public opinion in Hesston was reflected in local campaign problems. Persons distributing Juhnke leaflets door-to-door often were met with rudeness and hostility. Juhnke's campaign reported that more vandalism and defacement of their candidate's yard signs occurred in Hesston than in any other town in the district.⁴³

Hesston votes in 1970 showed an interesting pattern. Only 49 Democrat votes were cast in the June primary, with 40 (82 percent) for Juhnke and 9 (18 percent) for Martin. In the November general election, Juhnke received 240 votes in Hesston (40.3 percent) to Shriver's 352 votes (59 percent). Juhnke was disappointed that he was unable to win a majority in a town with such a strong Mennonite population. An analysis of Hesston votes for Republican congressional candidates over time, however, shows that the 1970 voting results were indeed exceptional compared with the previous five elections. Juhnke had cut deeply into Shriver's consistently strong majority of more than 80 percent.

PERCENT OF VOTE FOR THE REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE IN
FOURTH DISTRICT CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS, HESSTON,
1960–1972

1960 (Garner Shriver)	85.0
1962 (Shriver)	83.8
1964 (Shriver)	81.6
1966 (Shriver)	86.5
1968 (Shriver)	83.4
1970 (Shriver)	59.0
1972 (Shriver)	80.3

43. The collected papers from Juhnke's 1970 campaign are in Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College. See James C. Juhnke, "A Mennonite Runs for Congress," *Mennonite Life* (January 1971): 8–11. Juhnke in fact had had nothing to do with the North Vietnamese flag incident.

During the 1970–1971 school year, the resentments of conservative Hesston town leaders against Vietnam War protesters came to focus upon Solomon Yoder, who taught history at Hesston College from 1960 to 1963 and again from January 1970 to 1973. Yoder’s prophetic witness, grounded in a vision of radical sixteenth-century Anabaptism, challenged not only American foreign policy in Vietnam but also the modern Mennonite accommodation to American materialism, secularism, and civil religion. Dan Clark, a student inspired by Yoder’s Anabaptist two-kingdom radicalism, critiqued Hesston College’s dependence on federal funds and national defense loans and cooperation with the Selective Service System.⁴⁴ One of Clark’s columns in the student paper implied that students thought Yoder’s continued employment was at risk. Indeed, according to Yoder’s later recollection, in April and May 1971 President Laban Peachey “tried to fire me under pressure of wealthy Hesston contributors who demanded my scalp.”⁴⁵

According to Peachey, Yoder’s job never was in jeopardy. A problem, as the administration viewed it, was that Yoder wanted college endorsement in advance for whatever the protesters would do. In response to Yoder’s plan for a protest demonstration at the Internal Revenue Service office in Wichita on April 14, 1971, Peachey said, “Sol, I can’t make you any promises.” Yoder agonized over what he considered a threat to his employment but decided to participate in the protest.⁴⁶

On May 31, when academic dean Clayton Beyler gave Yoder his contract for the 1971–1972 school year, in Yoder’s words, “he named five persons of the Hesston community-constituency who did not want me to teach at Hesston College: four of them were my Mennonite brothers, all of them were wealthy and heavy donors.”⁴⁷ One of Yoder’s critics had attended Yoder’s Sunday School class at Hesston Inter-Mennonite Fellowship and shared his notes on Yoder’s radicalism with the Hesston College administrators. Yoder stayed at Hesston until 1973 when he left to pursue advanced academic studies.⁴⁸

The conflicts in Hesston in 1969 and 1970 stand out as a relatively brief tension-filled parenthesis in the history of a generally placid and conventional small town. There were only fourteen months between the Hesston students’ commemoration of Ho Chi Minh’s death with the North Vietnamese flag and the 1970 Congressional election that returned the Republican incumbent to office. After the 1969–1970 school year, student life at Hesston College returned to more normal patterns. The politicized student leaders of those years moved on to other places. New students after 1970, in the short turnover span of junior colleges, were less oriented toward political activism. Peter Wiebe, who had spoken out more clearly against the Vietnam War than Hesston Mennonite pastors had spoken in World Wars I and II, resigned from his pastorate on January 1, 1972, and moved to pastor another Mennonite church later that year.⁴⁹ In 1971 James Juhnke left Kansas for a two-year church assignment in southern Africa. An anonymous phone caller to Solomon Yoder offered him a free one-way airline ticket to Africa if he would go along with Juhnke.⁵⁰ Yoder recognized the voice as that of Alvin King. Yoder’s departure after 1973 removed a controversial prophetic voice from the community. Alvin King did not leave, but he sold his automobile business and concentrated on developing a local antique car museum. The war in Vietnam lost its force as an issue with the withdrawal of United States troops in 1973 and the final victory of North Vietnam in 1975.

Henry Grunewald and his colleagues from *Time* magazine could only scratch the surface of the Hesston community in their short visit of May 7, 1970. But they were in Hesston long enough to learn that this small Kansas town was not isolated from the social and political upheavals that afflicted the country at large. Hesston reflected tensions that could be found in towns and cities all across America, especially those blessed with the presence of a college or university. The Mennonite identity of the community had lent a special character to the conflicts there, but Hesston was hardly unique among American towns in experiencing the Vietnam War years as a time of troubles.



44. Dan Clark, “Cutting Edge,” *Hesston College Journal*, May 19, 1970.

45. *Ibid.*, April 21, 1970; Solomon Yoder, interview by author, April 17, 1999.

46. Laban Peachey, interview by author, May 10, 1999; Yoder interview.

47. Solomon Yoder to Keith Sprunger and James Juhnke, March 24, 1976, Juhnke Collection; Yoder said the college delayed offering his contract for the 1970–1971 school year. The contract in the Hesston College Archives is not dated.

48. Yoder interview.

49. Justus G. Holsinger, *Upon this Rock: Remembering Together the Seventy-Five Year Story of the Hesston Mennonite Church* (Hesston, Kans.: Hesston Mennonite Church, 1984), 66.

50. Yoder to Sprunger and Juhnke; Yoder interview.