HISTORY This Week EP. 312: First Antiwar Teach-In
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. March 25, 1965. I'm Sally Helm.

Inside Angell Hall, on the University of Michigan campus, the auditoriums are full. Professors in ties are sitting on chairs in front of a half-erased blackboard. People are throwing around terms like "imperialism" and "domino theory." Some of the students take a coffee break at 3, to keep their energy up.

That's 3...AM. It's not a bright Ann Arbor spring day out the windows of Angell Hall--it's the middle of the night.

Some of the students here wouldn't normally be allowed to galivant around at 3 AM. In this era, female students at the University of Michigan have a curfew. But the university has made a special exception. And more than two thousand students--of all genders--have gathered for a first-of-its kind protest. Something called a teach-in. Talks and lectures and movies about one of the biggest issues facing the country—the Vietnam war. A lot of the students are hearing things they didn't know. One later admits to the student newspaper, "I'd never really thought very much about this.” But: “after tonight I think we should get out of Vietnam.”

Jack Rothman: For many students, this was a revelation.

Zelda Gamson: Raising awareness was really important. It was like Paul Revere, you know, “Hey, look at this!”

Howard Wachtel: We thought that American policy could be changed if the knowledge could be mobilized.

Sally Helm: Despite bomb threats, and sleepiness, and one mandatory evacuation--the teach-in goes on all night. And it won't be the last. In fact, it’ll help kick off the entire anti-war movement on campuses across the country.

Today: a time capsule of that first teach-in. Stories from the students and professors who made it happen. Why did they decide that this was the way to protest the Vietnam War? And what impact did the teach-in have in shaping the antiwar movement on college campuses?

Like any college campus, the University of Michigan has its own shorthand. The main crossroads of campus, with a large, open space in the middle, is called "the diag." On that diag is a bronze letter M, which people call “the M”, even though there are countless other letter M’s scattered all around campus. There's also this open lobby area at the intersection of three buildings. It's known as the fishbowl.

Michael Zweig: Called the fishbowl because it was floor to ceiling windows looking out at the main campus.
Sally Helm: Michael Zweig is a University of Michigan alum. He began there as an undergrad in 1960, and then started his PhD at the University right after. So, he knew his way around the diag. He’d spent plenty of time in the fishbowl. But when he gets to campus in 1964, he sees something he hasn’t noticed there before: the US military.

Michael Zweig: The Marines came and had recruiters set up a table in the fishbowl.

Sally Helm: They're recruiting, in part, because the US has slowly begun to step up its involvement in Vietnam—on a mission to limit the spread of communism.

Archival: My fellow Americans

Sally Helm: President Lyndon Johnson had recently ordered airstrikes against North Vietnam. But he said it was just a retaliatory measure after an alleged attack on American ships.

Archival: We still seek no wider war.

Sally Helm: At this point, in the fall of 1964, a lot of people take Johnson at his word. They think the war's not going to escalate. They don’t even really think there’s a war happening yet.

But Michael Zweig is troubled by what's going on in Vietnam. He isn’t communist, he says. But he thinks the Vietnamese should be able to choose their own government. America shouldn’t be getting involved. And he thinks if other people knew more about the conflict, they’d be troubled too.

Michael Zweig: So, we decided to bring information to the campus.

Sally Helm: That "we", is Zweig and his friend, an undergrad named Stan Nadel.

Stan Nadel: I'm Stan Nadel.

Michael Zweig: Stan and I thought it was very important to get people to understand what was going on there.

Stan Nadel: Most students didn't pay any attention at all to the war.

Sally Helm: Zweig and Nadel were both involved in the activist group Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS. SDS had held its first national meeting at the University of Michigan in 1960, but at the start of the 1964 school year, they weren't yet focused on Vietnam--few people were. So, Zweig and Nadel decide to take their own concerns about the war to the fishbowl. Right to the spot where the marines are recruiting.

Michael Zweig: We decided that we would set up a table right next to their table. We went out and we got four posters. And we taped them together into a very big poster and then we drew a big red arrow, and on the top of that arrow, we wrote:
**Stan Nadel:** In Vietnam American soldiers are committing war crimes.

**Sally Helm:** Below the arrow, they taped news clippings about what was going on in Vietnam. The response…?

**Michael Zweig:** People who were coming by were largely hostile to us.

**Stan Nadel:** There was a big uproar and there were people arguing and made a big fuss.

**Michael Zweig:** You know that we were un-American, and we weren't patriotic, that we didn't support our country.

**Stan Nadel:** We had to have a defense squad around the table to keep students, right-wingers, from tearing the sign down.

**Michael Zweig:** We got a lot of grief, but we also got some support and, and interest or curiosity.

**Sally Helm:** They fold up their table after a few days. Maybe having brought this issue to a few new minds. And then, in February of 1965:

**Gayl Ness:** All hell broke loose when the United States started bombing North Vietnam.

**Sally Helm:** Gayl Ness is an emeritus professor of sociology at Michigan, with a focus on Southeast Asia. So, in 1965, that gives him direct experience in a region that the whole country is suddenly looking at. A region most of them know very little about.

**Gayl Ness:** At that time, most people couldn't find Vietnam on a map.

**Sally Helm:** But with Johnson authorizing sustained bombing of North Vietnam, it’s becoming clear. The US is going to war.

**Archival:** policy is still the same and that is to any armed attack, our forces will reply…

**Gayl Ness:** Some of our more liberal or radical faculty and graduate students didn't like that.

**Sally Helm:** They’re worried the US is trying to control Vietnam, in an imperialist way. And they want to do something.

**Richard Mann:** We decided, well at least the tiniest little thing we could do would be to call off our classes.

**Sally Helm:** In 1965, Richard Mann is in his first year as a tenured professor of psychology. And after the bombing of North Vietnam, he and a small group of faculty decide to make a statement. Call off their classes in what they refer to as a “work moratorium”—essentially, a one-day strike.
Pretty quickly, faculty start signing on. Mann's department chair would stop by his office each day, to hear the running tally.

Richard Mann: He would just drop in and I, I'd see him at my door of my office (laughs) and he say, hi, how ya doing, I said, really good. We're up to 39, or 62.

Sally Helm: But then… the backlash starts.

Richard Mann: That's un-American fire these guys, even if they have tenure.

Jack Rothman: The university president came down against it. The governor came down against it.

Sally Helm: That’s Jack Rothman, one of the professors who decided to strike.

Jack Rothman: Even some of my colleagues are ignoring me or passing me by (laughs). There was such a lot of disagreement.

Sally Helm: At Michigan, and across the country, the majority of Americans support the war, and President Johnson. He had been the University’s commencement speaker just months earlier! They assume the government knows what it’s doing—and that it knows more than a bunch of liberal professors.

Some students are threatening to sue the professors, if they strike. A state senator says those professors “should be given a one-way transportation ticket to the University of Hanoi in North Vietnam.” And the University’s president tells them, “There is a time and place for making protests, but dismissing classes is not an acceptable one.”

All this makes some of the striker’s wonder… should we reassess this whole plan?

Jack Rothman: And I said, maybe so because nobody was talking about the Vietnam war, everybody was talking about the fact the faculty have the right to not teach

Sally Helm: One night, a group of about eight professors meets up at someone’s house to brainstorm. They’re trying to figure out whether they should go on with the strike, or if there’s something else, they can do. Something that’s strong enough to have an impact, but not so controversial that it distracts from the point they’re trying to make.

And eventually, someone proposes:

Richard Mann: Instead of teaching less, why don't we teach more?

Jack Rothman: Not only will we teach during the day, when we were supposed to be on strike, but we will teach all night.
Richard Mann: Till eight o'clock the next morning.

Jack Rothman: Well, that seemed to strike a bell.

Sally Helm: They come up with a name: a teach-in. It’s a take on the sit-in strategy that Civil Rights protesters have been using for years.

All that’s left to do is convince the die-hard strikers to sign on. So, they call another meeting. In a sign of what’s to come, the discussion starts around 8pm and continues until around 4:30 in the morning.

Jack Rothman: It was one of the most exciting meetings I've ever been at.

Sally Helm: There's a lot of debate. 11 pm...no resolution. Midnight...still stuck. But eventually, they reach a consensus: they’re going to try this teach-in idea. They bring the idea to the University. And the Dean loves it.

Richard Mann: He said, oh, you can have the rooms free. You know, we'll give you electrical people and so forth.

Jack Rothman: They couldn't give us enough, just don't have the strike! (laughs)

Sally Helm: This late strategy pivot means the teach-in planners are in crunch mode. They want to do this thing on March 24th. Just a few weeks away. And it's gonna take a lot of planning.

Howard Wachtel: What we did is handled some of the logistics, publicity.

Sally Helm: Howard Wachtel is a graduate student. He helps make this all happen. So do the Students for a Democratic Society. SDS. Including those tabling protesters, Stan Nadel and Michael Zweig. They have the expertise these professors need.

Stan Nadel: How to get out press releases, how to do mimeograph leaflets.

Michael Zweig: How's the program going to be distributed? Where was it going to be?

Stan Nadel: All the very, sort of basics that we knew how to do as student activists.

Sally Helm: The professors start recruiting speakers for the event.

Howard Wachtel: They said, ‘I could call this person up and call that person up.’ I recall being just mesmerized about all the people they knew, who I only knew by authors of books

Sally Helm: Turns out, some of those authors are willing to speak about the war, and why they think it’s a bad idea. The teach-in has a point of view. It's an educational event that is also an anti-war protest.
Stan Nadel: The administration and virtually the entire national press in the United States, at that point, were all backing the war.

Jack Rothman: And so, the only speakers there were, the only topics there were, were counter to the war. Not should we have the war, or should we not have the war? That was decided, we should not have the war! (laughs)

Sally Helm: At least, it's decided in the minds of these professors and students. But a lot of other students on campus haven't decided what to think. And on the night of March 24th...they show up at the fishbowl.

Stan Nadel: Not everyone who was there by any means was necessarily a supporter of our position against the war, but they were there to learn.

Sally Helm: For Stan Nadel, this is very different from the experience he had tabling next to the marines at the beginning of the year. And for his friend Michael Zweig:

Michael Zweig: I remember standing on a table, you know, starting around seven o'clock at night, and just directing people and shouting with a megaphone, go over here and, registration is over there. Watching these people streaming in and streaming in, it was really quite a moving experience that we had really done something here.

Sally Helm: The night begins with lectures. On things like the history of the French colonization of Vietnam.

Jack Rothman: For many of the students, I think it was a lot of new material.

Sally Helm: There are screenings of films made by South Vietnamese filmmakers. Panel discussions about alternatives to military action. Breakout groups to analyze government documents justifying the war.

Howard Wachtel: I'd never heard of Laos or Cambodia.

Michael Zweig: Just because we were against the war, didn't mean we understood very much. We understood enough that we needed to oppose it. But we needed to get straight what was it all about? What should we know? What about history should we learn?

Sally Helm: There's also less academic stuff, like folk singing. And, as the program put it, “other activities for those who don’t want to talk all night.” Some students get a game of bridge going.

Susan Harding: It was teaching turned upside down.

Sally Helm: Susan Harding was a freshman at the time. She said, the teach-in felt so lively. And so, unlike a typical classroom experience.
**Susan Harding:** Sometimes interruptions, definitely debates. People were arguing with each other on the stage. Sometimes people were calling out from the audience. It was very heated, very contentious not only in the level and emotion of the debate, but the fact that we were questioning authority.

**Sally Helm:** There are also people outside, questioning this event. Counter-protesters, carrying signs in support of President Johnson and the war. "Peace through Strength." "Better Dead than Red."

And soon:

**Richard Mann:** Somebody called in a bomb threat.

**Sally Helm:** The police rush into the room. And tell everyone: you have to evacuate.

**Jack Rothman:** Into the cold Michigan winter.

**Sally Helm:** Some of the counter-protesters outside start throwing snowballs, trying to break up the crowd. Meanwhile, police are inside the building, searching for a bomb. And the speakers just keep talking.

There's a rally at midnight, on the diag. One of the speakers is Alan Haber, who was one of the founding presidents of SDS. He didn’t write a speech. He just started talking.

**Alan Haber:** So, what was in my heart, that this war should never be happening, that United States should be looking at how to recognize the rights of the Vietnamese people to choose their own government. Our basic line (laughs)

**Sally Helm:** Finally, they get the word: No bombs after all. The coast is clear. Everyone piles back in for late night seminars, some 3am coffee. Some of the counter-protesters even come in at one point and join in the debate. This goes on until the sun comes up.

**Alan Haber:** And then it was morning, and we were tired.

**Sally Helm:** Bleary eyed students and teachers return to their normal classes. But by the next day, the media is all over the story.

**Archival:** Between 2 and 3000 students and the faculty and the student body at the University of Michigan spent all night protesting the American policy in Vietnam.

**Howard Wachtel:** You engage in a lot of meetings, activities, demonstrations, most of them have limited significance, but this exploded.

**Sally Helm:** It seems to strike a chord. Some of the organizers are interviewed for a segment on the Detroit news. One is Bill Gamson, a sociology professor who helped lead the teach-in. This is his widow Zelda, also a sociologist and activist.
Zelda Gamson: In an interview with a reporter outdoors in the dark, you can see Bill's a little bit uncomfortable.

Archival: Do you have any specific alternatives at this point in favor of pulling out? Uh, well no. I don't think there may be members of the group who would feel that way...

Zelda Gamson: He's not polished. He's not been trained in PR. He's a professor. But it gave Bill an opening to say, well, I think this is part of my job.

Archival: We feel this action is our way of meeting our responsibility to the students, to the university and to the larger community.

Sally Helm: The teach-in organizers didn’t want this to be a one-off event. They thought this new way of protesting fit their role as professors, and that it could work on other campuses, too.

Richard Mann: A lot of us just sort of got busy and started calling our colleagues and other places.

Zelda Gamson: You know, ‘Hi, Fred, it's me. How are you doing?’

Jack Rothman: ‘You know what we're doing, we would like you to do it too.’ And the person would say, ‘well, let me speak to my colleagues here. We’ll see what happens.’

Sally Helm: Two days after the Ann Arbor teach-in, Columbia University holds its own. Within a week, so do 34 other universities.

Richard Mann: And so, then the teach-in movement really began.

Sally Helm: While other campuses follow their lead, the Michigan organizers are planning their next move. Sure, they got 3,000 people to show up and listen, but on their campus of almost 30,000 students, antiwar activism is still far from mainstream. Plus, they want to channel this energy beyond the bounds of college campuses. As they're batting around ideas, they think: What if we go bigger? Do a national teach-in? And go up against someone in the Johnson administration?

Richard Mann: What we should do is challenge Bundy, Johnson's right-hand man, to a debate.

Sally Helm: McGeorge Bundy was Johnson's National Security Advisor.

Richard Mann: And there's a moaning. ‘Oh my God, he’ll never... He'll just throw it in the wastebasket. He’ll just laugh at us.’ And I said, ‘Well, I okay. I can I'll write the letter. You know, he was my dean.’

Sally Helm: Bundy came from the world of universities. He'd been a dean at Harvard. And Richard Mann had been a young Harvard professor. So, he writes this letter on behalf of a group of Michigan faculty. And a couple days later:
Richard Mann: I was out in the garden and, my wife, came out to the steps and said, ‘the white house is on the phone.’ Sort of nice moment in your life, you know, the white house is on the phone (laughs)

Sally Helm: Bundy says: okay. I'll do it.

With Bundy on the program, lots of professors beyond the University of Michigan sign up to get involved. And on May 15th, everything is ready. There's an audience of 5,000 at the Sheraton Park Hotel in Washington DC. Plus, more watching and listening in from afar.

Alan Haber: We were connected by telephone with 121 different colleges and auditoriums and venues around the country

Sally Helm: More than 100 campuses. More than 100,000 audience members in all. It's that night in Angell Hall, now extended outwards across the nation. And happening in daylight.

But when the time comes for Bundy himself to speak...he's a no-show. Apparently, he's been called off on important business to the Dominican Republic. One University of Washington professor says, Bundy "has turned in a terrible record on attendance."

Bundy later writes to Mann, apologizing for his absence. The point is, he says, “to make it clear to ourselves and to others that we believe in the processes of discussion.” And soon, he agrees to another debate.

The New York Times reports, "McGeorge Bundy, the teach-in dropout of the month, said today that he was available to prominent scholars for a make-up examination on Vietnam."

That debate airs on CBS as a special, hour-long program called “Vietnam Dialogue: Mr. Bundy and the Professors.” It’s the first time a high-ranking member of the Johnson administration has openly debated about the war in public. And the antiwar organizers think it goes great.

Alan Haber: Our view at the end of it was ‘Oh, we just wiped the floor with them.’

Sally Helm: But not everyone sees it that way. A New York Times critic says Bundy “proved a sharp and effective adversary who seemed to relish the academic confrontation.” But in some ways, no matter who won, the teach-in is doing what it was meant to do. Talking about ideas directly, publicly, in a really complex way. But all the talking doesn't seem to be changing the actual course of the war.

Howard Wachtel: When nothing changed, in fact, the escalation got larger and larger, the strategy changed from rational argument to mass mobilization.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: By the following school year, the anti-war movement is changing. Of course, the teach-in movement has spread. But also, student activists have led a protest march on Washington--at that point, it
was the largest peace protest in US history. And the tactics begin to turn away from talk and towards action. At the University of Michigan:

**Richard Mann:** A lot of rallies, like every month, had 33,000 in the Michigan stadium one time. We had demonstrations, people went out on the main highway, US 23, and just lay down on, on the street.

**Sally Helm:** In the fall of 1966, those demonstrations center on a new issue that is tied really close to campuses. The draft.

Before, students could get a deferral from military service. But the war has grown.

**Stan Nadel:** And when the army needed more bodies, they changed the rules. They were going to start drafting students who weren’t good students.

**Sally Helm:** Now, only male students in the top 50% of their class, or those who score highly on a special exam, could get a deferral. The bottom 50% were subject to the draft.

**Alan Haber:** And that just seemed too hard. I'm sitting and taking the exam next to somebody, which one of us goes to Vietnam?

**Howard Wachtel:** Whether or not we gave a student a B or a C could determine for male students whether or not they would live or die. And that was a heavy, heavy burden and responsibility.

**Sally Helm:** It was up to the University to hand over the class rankings to the government. And many Michigan students and professors say to them: just don't do it.

**Michael Zweig:** We had mass marches. We had sit-ins. And we also went to the president, and to the provost and to everybody we could.

**Sally Helm:** The university's response?

**Michael Zweig:** Well, they said, ‘go away. We have an obligation to do what the government says.’

**Sally Helm:** ... and that's that.

But instructors have another idea. What if we just don't give out grades at all? And as in the early days of the cancel-classes idea, dozens of instructors sign on. And, as before, the administration plays hardball.

**Michael Zweig:** And they said, ‘Well, you have to. You know, if you don't turn in grades, then you're not fulfilling your responsibilities and we're going to fire you.’

**Sally Helm:** *And* the university says...we'll punish your students, too.
Michael Zweig: Every student who didn't get a grade would fail. And that would then drive them into the lower part of the ranking. And, uh, our action would make our students more eligible for the draft.

Sally Helm: So, the last holdouts give in, and the protest falls apart.

In the months and years that follow, the war only continues to escalate. But so do campus protests. Telling the government to get out of Vietnam and telling universities not to be complicit in the war. Historian Ellen Schrecker, who just wrote a book about universities in the 1960s, told us that the teach-ins both jump-started and set the agenda for the entire antiwar movement that followed.

Armed with the knowledge of Vietnam’s history and the U.S.’s military actions, students and professors turn to new modes of resistance. For some, that’s more radical action. For others, like Professor Richard Mann, that’s counter cultural identity.

Richard Mann: We smoked a lot of dope, you know, faculty altogether. We listened to Pink Floyd or (laughs) that was a kind of counter-cultural thing, something had to unscramble the rage and fury and sort of helplessness.

Sally Helm: Helplessness. Because despite changing public opinion, getting people talking and thinking critically about the war, the teach-ins, and the marches, and the protests they spawned just did not end the war.

Jack Rothman: That's how things work, I'm sorry to say. It took the North Vietnamese themselves to win the war, the teach-in didn't end it. But it was, it was a good thing. It affected public opinion in a positive way, in a good way.

Sally Helm: And of course, it affected the people who were there, who made it happen. Like Zelda Gamson and her husband Bill, one of the teach-in’s main organizers.

Zelda Gamson: I think Bill, if you asked him what was his biggest accomplishment as an academic, he would say founding the first teach-in.

Sally Helm: Zelda Gamson was at the teach-in. And she says, there’s no forgetting that feeling of history being made right in front of you. And there’s no breaking the connections you make, building a movement like that.

Zelda Gamson: The experience of doing something with a purpose that you believe in, and that event leads to things that you couldn't have predicted exactly, but a sense of success, of accomplishment, of making a difference. That's really important. The emotional side of this, if you feel there's an injustice and you have people who agree with you, sit down and talk together and plan what you can do about that, collectively. I'm speaking to young people who think, oh, you know, that’s so boring or, or it's too hard or, whatever that you can really have a good time.

CREDITS: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.
And if you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, here in alphabetical order: Zelda Gamson, Alan Haber, Susan Harding, Richard Mann, Stan Nadel, Gayl Ness, Jack Rothman, Howard Wachtel, and Michael Zweig. Thanks also to Ellen Schrecker, author of *The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s*, and to Greg Kinney at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan.

This episode was reported and produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jennifer Goren and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julie Magruder, Ben Dickstein, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our executive producers are McCamey Lynn and Jessie Katz.

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**Title: The First Antiwar Teach-In**

**Description:**

March 25, 1965. Inside Angell Hall, on the University of Michigan campus, the auditoriums are full. Professors are throwing around terms like "imperialism" and "domino theory." Some students take a coffee break at 3, to keep their energy up. That’s 3am. These professors and students are staying up all night to discuss one of the biggest issues facing the country: the Vietnam War. Why did they decide that *this* was the way to protest the war? And what impact did this first-of-its kind “teach-in” protest have in shaping the antiwar movement on college campuses?

Special thanks to our guests: Zelda Gamson, Alan Haber, Susan Harding, Richard Mann, Stan Nadel, Gayl Ness, Jack Rothman, Howard Wachtel, and Michael Zweig. Thanks also to Ellen Schrecker, author of *The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s*, and to Greg Kinney at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan.