

EDITED BY
DAVID W. SEITZ

QUIET DEFIANCE



THE RHETORIC OF SILENT PROTEST

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David W. Seitz

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Chapter 2

Vigils for Peace

Silent Presence as Political Action

D. Graham Burnett

In these pages, I take on a crucial and largely overlooked episode in the emergence of the formal practice of “silent presence” as a form of political expression.¹ Drawing on close work with newly digitized archives, I argue that the mid-1960s saw, in the United States, the emergence of a specific and novel form of protest rooted in forms of “public interiority” previously unseen. At issue are the “Vigils for Peace” organized by Charles H. Hubbell (a professor of sociology), initially at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in early 1966. Rapidly spreading across the United States (and beyond), these “silent vigils” precipitated extensive commentary and drew widespread attention. Unlike previous important episodes of seemingly “voiceless” political expression (notably, the “Silent Sentinels” of early twentieth-century feminist resistance), Hubbell’s protest mode omitted even placards or signs. The emphasis was on a visible expression of silent interiority—a manifestation of “presence” that took on new meaning in a shifting ecology of media modalities in the period. These were not “sit-ins” or occasions of “occupation.” They were a mode of maieutic silence previously unseen in American political life. Not unrelated, of course, to modes of nonviolent expression pioneered by Gandhi and others, and drawing, too, on the emergence of “prayer vigils” in the Civil Rights movement, Hubbell’s silent vigils were nevertheless, as I show, a radically new kind of political symbolism, inextricable from the Cold War cultures of “vigilance” that had come to dominate the sciences of mind and behavior in the period 1945–1965.

To begin, then, let us turn to the opening of a crucial episode in the history of silent protest. In the second week of February 1966, a junior professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Charles H. Hubbell, wrote a short note to the campus newspaper, *El Gaucho*, which ran the item in

its letters section on Monday the 14th of that month (figure 2.1). It announced an “individual action as a war protestor”:

Until Americans stop killing and being killed in Viet Nam, I intend to take the following actions to express my sorrow and my protest: a black ribbon in my lapel, every day; and a quiet vigil every Wednesday noon, at the edge of the sidewalk in front of the library.²

And on Wednesday of that week, Hubbell did as he had promised—and found himself accompanied by about forty students and other persons from the campus. For an hour, they stood together in silence, and then they disbanded, as quietly as they had come.

Thus began an unbroken series of weekly “silent vigils” of war protest that ran for at least four years. But more importantly, Hubbell’s vigil protests spread rapidly as a distinctive form of collective social action. Writing in



LIBRARY STAND-IN--Dr. Charles Hubbell, Sociology professor, stood in silence Wednesday from noon until one p.m. in protest of the war in Viet Nam. Dr. Hubbell wrote *EL GAUCHO* that he intends to express his sorrow and his protest by “a black ribbon in my lapel, everyday, and a quiet vigil every Wednesday noon, at the edge of the sidewalk in front of the library.”

Figure 2.1 A Manifestation of Silent Protest: Charles Hubbell’s First “Silent Vigil” (February of 1966). *Source: El Gaucho* (the student newspaper of UCSB).

the *New York Times* a year later (on February 7, 1967), a reporter described what were by then already more than two months of Sunday silent vigils on the Town Commons of Amherst, Massachusetts. These were attracting more than 350 people weekly and had spawned parallel protests in neighboring towns. In Springfield, for instance, 175 people had shown up on the previous Saturday afternoon to conduct a similar hour-long silent vigil in front of the courthouse.

What is remarkable, historically speaking, is the strong sense in period sources that this form of protest was something “new.” Indeed, the Massachusetts congressman Silvio O. Conte took the floor in the House of Representatives on February 15 of that year to declare explicitly that “A *new technique* is being employed by peace marchers, many of them from the academic community, in the town of Amherst, Mass, the technique of the silent vigil.”³

The *Times* story on the Amherst protest went further, reconstructing the genealogy of the practice:

The first silent protest vigil is believed to have been held last winter on the University of California Santa Barbara campus. It was instituted by a sociology professor, Charles Hubbell. . . . There are now 89 of these nonviolent anti-war demonstrations, Dr. Hubbell reports.

By June of 1967, the *LA Times* reported that “silent vigils ‘in sorrow and protest’ at the Vietnam War, are now held in 114 cities throughout the United States and in Rome, Paris, Montreal, and Vancouver”—all of which “follow the pattern of the Weekly Vigils for Peace inaugurated by Charles Hubbell” (figure 2.2).⁴

By the autumn of 1968, Hubbell and his original cohort had moved from the front of the library to the intersection in front of the college Art Museum, and the group handed out small pamphlets that explained the action to passersby: “The vigil, being silent, criticizes actions rather than men. It leaves the way open for supporters of unfortunate policies to change their stand, without overt and hostile criticism which they might feel impelled to rebut.”⁵ By 1968, papers reported that more than 200 such silent vigils had mushroomed across the United States, and several dozen were known to be taking place elsewhere in the world.⁶ Perhaps the most affecting and concrete evidence of this proliferation are the long listings of locations and dates for exactly such “Peace Vigils,” which appear in the underground press of the period. Take this example from back cover of the New York-based *WIN: Peace and Freedom thru Nonviolent Action*, Volume IV, No. 2, January 31, 1968 (figure 2.3).



Figure 2.2 Silent Protest as Political Resistance: The Persistence of Presence (1968).
 Source: *El Gaucho* (the student newspaper of UCSB).

The proliferation of the silent vigils merits our attention. It may take some adjustment to our sensibilities to accept the notion that a “silent vigil” as a form of political action was indeed as novel as these cited sources from the mid-1960s seem to suggest. After all, the idea of such a vigil is now ubiquitous with us as a means of expressing solidarity, commemoration, and/or resistance. And, indeed, a line of people standing in silence as a form of political protest was not, in fact, “new” in 1966. Historians of the women’s suffrage movement in the United States will be acquainted with a much earlier instance of a very similar physical and collective manifestation of shared protest: the so-called Silent Sentinels of Alice Paul and the National Woman’s Party, who held a silent picket line in front of the White House for nearly two and a half years beginning in 1917—holding their ground heroically despite several episodes of shocking (official and non-official) violence. Union campaigners, labor activists, and many others, of course, engaged in diverse forms of picket-line activism reaching back well before the twentieth century.

And yet, we need to be clear about the conjunction of expressive activities that are at issue. Protest lines or “pickets” have their own long genealogy. That said, the tradition of formally *silent* displays of collective, embodied expression-via-presence appears to be of much more recent vintage. While it



Figure 2.3 The Silent Vigils Spread: The Proliferation of the Santa Barbara Actions. Source: WIN (the journal of the "New York Workshop in Nonviolence").

is true that refusing to speak has its own rich history as a mode of resistance, the collective manifestation, in a picket (traditionally an occasion for song and chant), of silence does seem to arise for the first time with the Silent Sentinels. But to understand the specific novelty of Hubbell's emergent campaign of the 1960s, another distinction needs to be drawn: the Silent Sentinels were "silent" only in the technical sense of their *keeping their mouths closed and making no sound*. But their protest centered on *highly expressive language*: even as they remained mum, they carried signs and placards and banners,

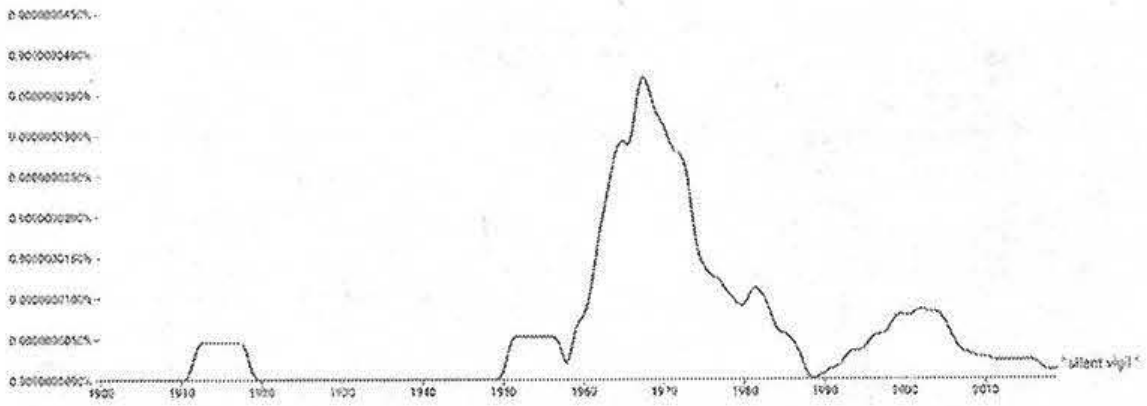


Figure 2.4 Plotting the Phrase “Silent Vigil.” Source: Google N-Gram, created by D. Graham Burnett, 2023.

and the words they displayed in this fashion were again and again the hottest flare-point of their actions.⁷

From the outset of his call for the silent vigil, Charles Hubbell explicitly renounced all forms of “political speech.” His initial letter, announcing his intentions, spelled out his vision in some detail and glossed the forms of articulated protest that he proposed to disavow: “No placards, picketing, or speeches; just silent meditation until one o’clock, and then a handshake with my nearest companion. I invite others to join me.” It is this specific feature of these “silent vigils”—the total absence of any “content”—that was widely greeted as a novelty. One sees the student editors of the Santa Barbara college newspaper reaching around for a neologism in their caption on their first published photograph of the inaugural vigil, where they refer to the event as a “Library Stand-in,” a reference, of course, to the established campus protest of the “sit-in.” But this was *not* a sit-in. Nothing was being “occupied” (the location was chosen precisely in such a way as to avoid blocking the sidewalk or otherwise disrupting pedestrian movement and campus activities), and its specific durational commitment stripped the occasion of any links to the raucous, open-ended, confrontational character of the protest sit-in.

While word-search historiography must be treated with caution, a more data-intensive inquiry bears out my claim (and that of the primary sources) that the “silent vigil” was indeed a genuine novelty in this period. Consider, for instance, this (to my mind, remarkable) Ngram result for the term (figure 2.4):

The “peak” here is pinned directly on 1967, indicating a high-water mark of interest in the form at exactly the moment that Hubbell’s tactic was achieving wide national reach.

But actually, it is a bit more complicated than that. This is an Ngram search for the phrase “silent vigil” *in quote marks*—meaning, this is an indication of the appearance of the term offset by “scare quotes” such as are used, by convention, to indicate a novel coinage or unusual usage. So what this graph

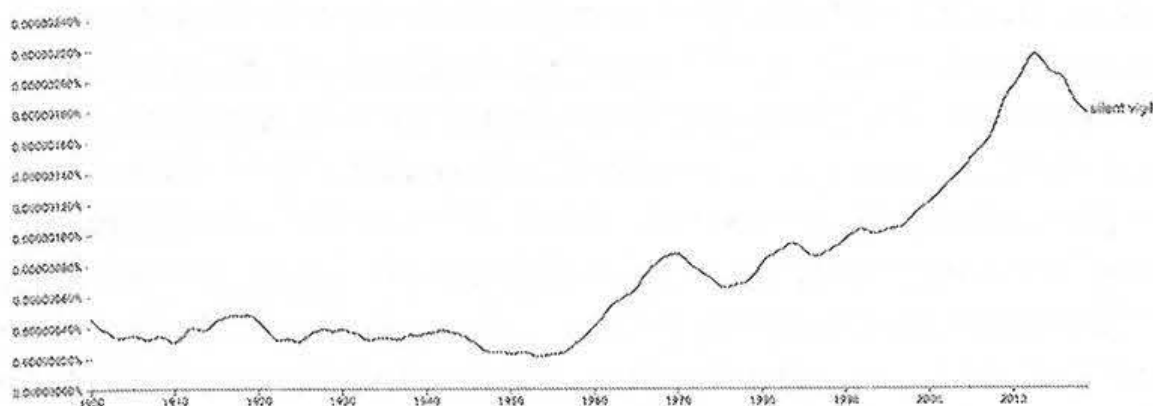


Figure 2.5 Removing the Scare Quotes. *Source:* Google N-Gram, created by D. Graham Burnett, 2023.

actually documents is exactly the sense of the “newness” of the very notion of a “silent vigil”—this is, I think, an extraordinary documentation of the novelty of a form that has become so familiar to us as to feel transhistorical.

And how familiar has it, in fact, become? The chart above does not actually tell us about that. But the chart below *does* (figure 2.5):

Removing the scare quotes permits us to see that the sudden notable mid-1960s uptick in talk about the phenomenon does not abate—but rather continues quite dramatically in a relatively steady march toward our own time. The “silent vigil,” this data suggests, entered into our collective discourse in a new way in the mid-1960s, and it has never gone away—on the contrary, it has become a more and more prominent collective form.⁸

* * *

Having established that there was indeed something “new” in the silent vigils of the mid-1960s, and further having offered evidence that this novel mode of collective (tacit) expression stands in integral relation to the vigil protests of our own time, I want now to dig a little deeper into what we might want to call the “phenomenology” of Hubbell’s practice. What was at stake—in the body, in the heart, in the mind—of those who answered the call in 1966 and in the years that followed? What were the rhetorical and somatic forms in play? How, exactly, did they “gather”—meaning, how were their bodies arranged in space? How did they “orient”—both physically and mentally—on these occasions? To what extent was their collective presence understood as “performative,” as against “internal” (or *for themselves* in one or more of the possible senses)?

It won’t be easy to answer these questions with the richness that might be desired. And it is possible that the sources from which I can work, at present, are inadequate to do justice to any of them. But let’s try to make something from what we have.

For starters, then, perhaps we can begin with the two photographs I have already presented, which appear to represent a pair of documentary “snapshots” of the Santa Barbara silent vigil taken about two and a half years apart. The first depicts the very first such occasion and shows Charles Hubbell himself prominently; in the second, which seems to show an “ordinary” vigil gathering in the autumn of 1968, Hubbell is not obviously present. If we take the first image to be exemplary of the original vision of these actions, the physicality of the participants can be understood to be expressive of the emergent form. One notes, for instance, that the general aspect of the assembled bodies is one of what psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists call “joint attention”: these individuals are positioned and configured in such a way as to index a *coordination* in the object of their attention. Joint attention creates conditions for shared choreographies of sensory and cognitive activity. It is a way of “keeping together in time,” in the formulation of the historian William McNeill, who focused on the revelatory dynamics of collective synchrony.⁹ In the case of these early Santa Barbara silent vigils, we can observe that most of the participants are standing, and while not everyone is looking in exactly the same direction, the majority appear to share Hubbell’s vector of regard, which seems to be directed loosely “out,” on a sightline maybe *slightly* above the horizontal, and perhaps ten degrees to the right of dead front (given the preponderant “facing” of the group).¹⁰

Interestingly, however, there is little evidence in the image itself, or in the inferences that can be drawn from its historical context, that the group is, in fact, “looking” at anything, exactly. For one thing, a number of the participants’ faces are not oriented on the same visual axis that Hubbell and a plurality of the others seem to define. Moreover, there is no visual “object” at issue in this vigil, as it was planned and organized. We know that the group is configured “at the edge of the sidewalk in front of the library.” And that means, presumably, slightly to the west of the main entrance of the Davidson Library at the center of the UCSB campus. This would suggest that they are looking toward the library itself, or “east.” But there is no specific thing to “see” there in front of them. Just the library building itself—its entrance. So, it seems likely that they are simply looking *out*, toward the library itself (in some general way, but without specific focus). Perhaps the general visual regard was intended to fall upon the “business as usual” of the students and faculty coming in and out of the library. But the vacancy, or “depth of field” manifested in the gazes we seem to be able to discern makes it feel unlikely that any of these individuals would be “making eye contact” with any of the students in any normal way, or even actually “regarding” any of them. These aspects are aspects that would seem to eye a horizon beyond the visible.

Even when that “horizon” is not the spatial one where the earth seems to meet the sky. After all, not everyone is looking “out” at all. A number have

a very definite downcast mien. The young man to Hubbell's immediate right, for instance, is evidently looking somewhat "down" in the manner of pensive introspection (though his eyes are open), and several of the other participants similarly seem to have lowered their faces, as if they were regarding a point on the ground before them, some six to ten feet away.

Most of the "vigilants" (as the press would come to call them) have their hands or arms folded—though the resulting postures differ. In a way that is legibly gendered, a number of the women have clasped their hands almost piously, fingers interlaced and arms hanging loosely down before their bodies. The most prominent men, in what amounts to the first "row" (though the rows are not clearly defined), have their arms crossed before their bodies, in a manner of some gravity: Hubbell himself is arranged this way, wearing what looks to be a dark, lightweight suit; but his body position is nearly mirrored by a younger, bearded man a little further on, whose casual shirt, jeans, and sandals evidence a different demographic. Perhaps most pious of all, though, is that young man just to Hubbell's right (also wearing a dark suit and tie), who is not only looking down, but also has his hands held behind his back, very much displaying the physicality of a meditative usher or Sunday-best congregationalist.

The term "meditative" is warranted and worth another moment of reflection. Returning to Hubbell's initial letter declaring his intentions, it is important to note that the action was explicitly conceived in meditative language: "No placards, picketing, or speeches; *just silent meditation* until one o'clock, and then a hand-shake with my nearest companion."¹¹ And it was this abstracted/contemplative aspect of the gathering that drew immediate comment. For instance, here is an extract from one letter to *El Gaucho* that ran in the wake of the first gathering: "the assumption that the conflicts troubling the complex world today can be resolved by resorting to reliance upon *meditation* . . . is morally inviting, but realistically illogical."¹² Hubbell's own defense of this posture of interiority centered less on its direct *mundane* effectiveness in the political battle to end the war (he was quick to acknowledge the existence of other "touchstone[s] of peace" on campus and beyond) and more on its place in a "tradition of non-violent and passive resisters such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King."¹³ The commitment to meditative silence was a commitment to a form of *interiority that had expressive content*. It was to be contrasted, in his view, with what he called "flamboyant protests," where, he said, "I often feel that participants . . . are making the noise in order to deal with their own anxieties."¹⁴

This concern about what might be called the menace of self-indulgence (or is it self-fashioning?) in the protest culture is interesting, and it is notable that Hubbell surfaces it to address and defend the "quietude" of the silent vigils. Though it is important, also, to note what might be called the "absent

presence" in Hubbell's presentation of these vigils: prayer. The close link between the term "vigil" and various religious traditions would bring such associations into view even if an established practice of protest-related "prayer vigils" had not already been in place; but of course it was.¹⁵ In this sense, there is certainly a way in which the discourse of "meditation" is facilitating what amounts to a (tacit) "secularization" of a protest form, the physical choreography and affective register of which have been substantially defined in more explicitly theological settings—church groups, pulpit preachers, faith-formation.¹⁶

The physical aspect of the vigilants in the photograph, and the way they have arranged their faces and sightlines, all combine to articulate a static solemnity, one that hinges on the (temporary) rejection of language, gesture, and movement. The aim is to signal not only their "cause" (opposition to the war), but also to invite a participatory "seriousness" in connection with this cause—through static, collective, contemplative *presence*. In response to the allegation by more radical students that the silent vigil action was "too calm," Hubbell insisted that the actions were having effects: "many people passing by feel like they are in a 'moral vise,'" he explained, suggesting that the demonstration forced passersby into a reckoning. He went on to say that there is a "tendency of a high majority going by to stop talking."¹⁷ This "contagious" quality of the silent vigil was gradually formalized. By the autumn of 1966, the physical practice on the line had adapted to leave gaps, expressly for the purpose of inviting those passing by to step into the formation.¹⁸

The most immediately salient difference between the image of the UCSB silent vigil in February of 1966 and that of the autumn of 1968 is the presence of *readers*. At least four of those participating in the latter image have a book open and appear to be engrossed in their texts. No one is sitting, and the configuration of the protest seems to have formalized into a single shoulder-to-shoulder line at the curb edge. Despite the introduction of these new bookish "attentional referents" for some of the vigilants, there remain enough faces directed "out-and-yet-in" that the mood of non-specific joint attention that characterized the initial action is generally preserved.

"Out-and-yet-in" does capture, I think, some measure of the distinctive attentional aspect manifested in these actions. And I like it because of what it evokes of the seemingly paradoxical collective-performativity-of-individual-interiority that is at issue in these images (and the vigil protests they depict).¹⁹ This *manifestation-of-withdrawal* feature of these events was specifically correlated with the physical "line" (of bodies) itself, and with the silence enjoined by that formation. Indeed, those who experienced the encounter with the silent vigil as sufficiently curious as to invite a question—or even a comment—learned that "on the line" *meant silence*: newspapers reported that the silent vigil protestors "do not respond" to hecklers, or, for that matter,

“any other comments” while they are in their formation. But, interestingly, the breaking of the line often meant rounding up into small conversations—as if the duration had created the conditions for a different kind of talking.²⁰ As Hubbell put it in an interview with a *New York Times* journalist: “Strangely, this silent vigil seems to provide a bridge. People wait to talk [. . .] and we seem to change some minds.”²¹

Not only was the silence understood to be propaedeutic to a different kind of talking, it was also understood to be, itself, in a manner of speaking, “articulate.” *The Hartford Courant*, writing about the more than 600 persons who had been gathering for various “silent vigils” in and around the state of Connecticut in the spring of 1967, alluded to this novel form of political non-speech: “The group announced there would be no speeches, no placards and no discussion of the war on the sidewalk. ‘Only utter and complete silence.’” And the paper went on to claim, in a lovely oxymoron that invokes the distinctive audibility of soundlessness, that exactly this kind of complete silence had been “heard throughout New England and the Connecticut Valley for the past four months.”²² This was a “loving silence,” as a number of the commentators put it, a view that Hubbell himself evidently worked to promote:

It is a quiet but insistent expression of concern [. . .] intended as a recurrent, visible, corporate witness [. . .] It seeks a loving and concerned confrontation—with our policy makers, with our fellow citizens, with one another, and with our individual selves.²³

In its distinctive interiority and imminence—its propaedeutic phenomenology and collective dynamic of incubation—the silent vigil that emerged in 1966 can be thought of as charged with a *maieutic* potency, a conceptual power that can be thought of as actively “obstetric” (in the sense invoked by the Greek etymology of *maieutic*, a term inextricable in English from the Socratic ideal of a pedagogy rooted in assisting that which is always already within to find its way to consciousness). The silent presence in question was centrally concerned with a *bringing forth*; Hubbell’s program represented an effort to aid in the emergence and accessibility of that-which-needed-to-come-into-the-light. Hence, we might say that the silence of the silent vigil was an essentially “pregnant” silence, and the work of the vigil can be thought of as collective attention to the essential dynamics of that pregnancy.

* * *

Having established that the silent vigil emerged as a distinctive and novel form of political expression in the second half of the 1960s, and emphasized its *maieutic* nature, I would like now to take a moment contrastively to

contextualize this attentional form with respect to the dominant attentional ethos of the period.²⁴ Doing so will heighten our appreciation of the forces in play in the vigil-culture of protest in the late 1960s.

This will require a turn into what was known in the period as “vigilance studies.” This is a large and important subject, and I will be forced to sketch the contours of this domain briefly here. Emerging out of military research during the Second World War, vigilance studies centered on a core problem of the era: the cybernetic problem of human beings attempting to monitor machines. No research better exemplified this work than the initially classified, but subsequently field-defining, studies of the English psychologist Norman Mackworth, who investigated how long military personnel could reliably attend to radar screens.²⁵ Responsible for identifying the “vigilance decrement” (a distinctive falling-off in human attentiveness to relatively low-frequency, low-volume stimuli; effectively, a statistically predictable collapse in human attentional capacities), Mackworth’s research precipitated an enormous range of new post-war investigations into the human capacity to “invigilate” the dials, screens, and indicator panels of Cold War industrial technologies. Subsequent work in “human factors research” and related research by scientists like Colin Cherry, Donald Broadbent, and others would give shape to a large field of psychological inquiry. At the heart of these investigations was “vigilance”: the new cybernetic hinge that joined human eyes (and ears) to surveillance screens and control-room speakers. All of this work posited a human subject who had to *maintain focus* and *respond effectively* while poised at the “tiller” of the Cold War machines of information and power. That attentional subject—wearing headphones, hearing commands, watching screens, hands on the *manipulanda* of complex devices, poised to pull levers and press buttons—was quite literally the *kubernētēs*, the “steersman,” whose name was Englished by Nobert Wiener as the etymological centerpiece of his epochal coinage: “Cybernetics.” Attention was the problem of managing the interface of man and machine in an era that worried in particular ways about how increasingly complex human systems of command would articulate with increasingly complex (and automated) technologies of speed and data.

What is most important to underscore here is the absolute contrast between the attentional phenomenology of Cold War vigilance studies and that which I have identified in the maieutic vigil-culture of Charles Hubbell’s silent protests. The former conceptualizes an empty temporality that *waits on* a specific percept. This is the vacuity of a switch, waiting to be closed—the silence of a trigger, which must be pulled. The antithesis with the silent vigil could not be more perfect, in that the latter waits for *nothing*—it is, rather, what actively happens within the silent time, the maieutic power of presence itself, that is the “point.”

Significantly, it is possible to discern a striking—and, I believe, historically significant—propinquity in these dialectically distinctive attentional modes. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the Cold War culture of silent vigilance and the counter-cultural commitment to the silent vigil can be understood to have been co-produced across the threshold of the 1960s.

This is a large claim, and I probably cannot cash it out in a wholly satisfactory way at the scale of this brief chapter. However, striking evidence for my assertion does emerge from the archive of Charles Hubbell's "Silent Vigil" protests. To see how, we need to ask a very basic question, one that has been held to the side across these pages: Who was Charles H. Hubbell?

The answer, as it happens, reaches back into the territory of "vigilance studies" and points precisely to the larger argument that interests me: the idea that the counter-culture "vigil" came to have its particular political force in contrastive relation to the temporality of Cold War vigilance; the claim, in fact, that we can only understand the rise of "vigilism" in the 1960s in the context of a dialectical co-production of these two radically different ways of configuring attention in relation to time.

And so, in the pursuit of this argument, it will be of interest to observe that Charles Hubbell had come a little late to academic life. During the Second World War, he completed no fewer than thirty combat missions as an Air Force navigator, and his post-war academic trajectory (an MS in mathematics and a PhD in social psychology at the University of Michigan; he had been an undergraduate at Oberlin) was interrupted by a return to active duty during the Korean War, during which he served as a staff officer at Air Force Headquarters.²⁶ This very specific military formation and experience place Hubbell solidly in the nexus of the "vigilance studies" discussed above. By the early 1960s, Hubbell would have spent nearly twenty years in and among those centrally concerned with the new techniques of durational screen-monitoring. And his graduate training in psychology, while not oriented to experimental work, would nevertheless have brought him into contact with what was, in the period, a significant psychological research program.²⁷

All of which is to say, Hubbell's effort to "thicken" the temporality of the protest culture through a focus on the silent vigil wants to be read against his immersion in the temporalities of response-time-oriented vigilance. He was a card-carrying veteran of the screen-watching world of the Cold War military, where to be on watch was to wait for the signal—in attentional durations that were voids wherein a percept could occur. Against this "empty time" generated by the conditions of vigilance, the "gestational time" of the vigils was *full*. They were meant to brim with everything that was not being said, and in the matrix of durational co-presence, it was hoped that something new might begin to quicken. If this distinction is accepted (the null time of vigilance, which waits on a signal, as against the vigil's figuring of

time as *itself* the signal), then Hubbell must be understood to have crossed from one attentional regime to another in a way that can be understood to have defined a broader transition: from the vigilance-cultures of the Cold War to the vigil-cultures of the emergent communities of resistance and re-imagining.

CONCLUSION

It is the ambition of the present volume to open the way to a richer understanding of the political valences of silence—as a form of expression, to be sure, and as a form of disavowal of expressive modalities as well. My contention in these pages has been that Charles Hubbell’s “silent vigils” of the 1960s represent a significant and specific innovation in the sphere of silent political “speech.” While earlier protestors had explicitly adopted “speechlessness” (meaning they had declined to give voice to their positions in song or declaration), the total disavowal even of placards or other forms of written “messaging” appears to be new with the emergent vigil protests that began in Santa Barbara in February of 1966 (and expanded rapidly thereafter). But it is my hope that this paper does more than merely identify an interesting historical “first,” since such benchmarks are always subject to dispute, and can only ever be of limited real interest. Rather, I hope that my close reading of the phenomenology of silent expression can shed light on techniques for “listening” to silence and for interpreting its modes. A “maieutic” silence must be contrasted with an uncatalyzed vacancy. Further, I believe that my effort to contextualize the specific attentional “ecology” of silent presence in the 1960s, by means of a wider analysis of Cold War vigilance studies (and its counter-formations), places in evidence the value of close historical work in every investigation of the changing meanings of that which seems not to speak. And I will go a step further, with a very gentle closing gesture at our own moment, and the possible implications of my argument in these pages for the ongoing work of protest, resistance, and progressive solidarity: I believe that our present hypersaturated “attention economy” and the dynamics of “human fracking” it has installed urgently require a new kind of “attention activism” centered on collective forms of pushback against the unregulated commodification of our eyeballs, ear-holes, and mindspace; given the ways that contemporary media culture hinges on volume, saturation, and trigger-happy immediacy, the apophatic attentionality of Hubbell’s vigils (specifically) and what I have called a “maieutic” silence (more generally) present potentially powerful inspiration for those hoping to hold space against forces that are not aligned with human flourishing.²⁸

NOTES

1. The author is the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History and History of Science at Princeton University. The material in this chapter has been drawn from a monographic study in process, tentatively entitled, "ATTENTION: Science, Power, and Perception in the 20th Century," a book that focuses on the laboratory study of human attention between 1880 and 1980. I am grateful to David Landes and David William Seitz for their engagement with this research in the context of communications-studies investigations of silence. My appreciation to the Princeton University Modern America Workshop, which considered an initial manuscript draft of this chapter in 2020. Additional thanks to the audience of the Bar-Hillel Colloquium in the History of Science at Tel Aviv University, which heard a version of this material in 2021, and to the participants in the "Campus in Camps" program in the Al Feneiq Center (Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Palestine) where I first experimented with the "Silent Presence as a Form of Action" workshop in 2014.

2. "Letters to the Editor," *El Gaucho*, February 14, 1966, 2. The letter ran under the heading, "Prof is planning individual action as a war protester." The photograph ran in the issue of the 17th, Thursday, on the front page. The chosen location for the "action" merits consideration. No archival sources directly addressing the issue have come to light, and so one is left to suppose that the centrality of "library walk" to campus life prompted the decision. But one thinks, too, of course, of the normative "silence" of libraries.

3. Congressional Record, Appendix A, 651. Emphasis added here and in the quote below.

4. *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1967.

5. Denise Kessler, "Hubbell Begins Third Year Leading Noon Peace Vigils," *El Gaucho*, October 24, 1968, 1 and 10. The image reproduced here hails from the same article.

6. See, for instance, the statistics given in: George DeWan, "Few Heed Silent Peace Plea," *Newsday* 8 (January 1968): 4.

7. As, for instance, their notorious baiting of the wartime President with banners addressed to "Kaiser Wilson."

8. A wider contextualization of the expressive traditions of the protest vigil, and of silence itself as an expressive form, are both needed. For now, I will put these matters aside and focus narrowly on the Hubbell-instigated "silent vigil" movement. However, the idea of an explicit "vigil" as a form of political protest was by no means novel in the mid-1960s. Perhaps most notoriously in American history, the "American Peace Mobilization" (a communist organization) conducted a 42-day "perpetual peace vigil" in front of the White House in 1941 to discourage US involvement in the Second World War. Closer to the period of Hubbell's call, the "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" organized a "vigil" and fast (which they also called a "24-hour picket") in front of the CIA building in Washington, DC in 1961. By the mid-1960s the term "vigil" was widely used for a protest action that could include durational co-presence, especially one that extended into or across the night; but in this context, the term was

not clearly or consistently distinguished from a “picket.” For a good example that sets the immediate context for Hubbell’s own activity, consider the “all-night vigil” on campus at UCSB on Friday-to-Saturday the 15th and 16th of October 1965, an event organized by student groups on campus in connection with the “International Days of Protest” called by the (national) Vietnam Day Committee. Interestingly, that event was described as a “rally” and a “picket” that would become a “vigil” (to the west of the library, and hence on what seems to be the very spot where Hubbell would later begin to stand) only during the nocturnal stretch—and this part, notably, would be “silent.” However, one gets the sense from the sources that in this instance, the commitment had more to do with managing concerns about campus disruption during the night than with a principled interest in the expressive role of silence itself. Also interesting to consider, in the context of silence: by 1968, Hubbell is a signatory on a public petition of “Individuals Against the Crime of Silence” [you printed out a copy of this—which ran in the newspapers]; what this highlights is the fascinating double role played by “silence” in the discourse of the period—it was both the “problem” and the “solution.” Of wider concern as I work to build this larger story: the place of religious leaders of various denominations in feeding “vigil-discourse” in the protests of the era. One thinks not only of the vigil actions of Buddhist monks (closely linked to the Vietnam conflict, on account of the Catholic-Buddhist tensions in the South that had been a catalyst in the unfolding conflict) and the work of Christians of various stripes, including the Berrigan brothers, Sister Corita, etc. I have yet to understand how vigil protests were conceived and manifested in the Civil Rights campaigns in the American South, but the most prominent explicit “vigil” I have come across to date is the interdenominational “silent prayer vigil” at the Lincoln Memorial organized by seminary and yeshiva students from New York, Washington, and elsewhere, which ran from April 19, 1964, until the passing of the Civil Rights Act of that year. See: *The New Yorker*, May 9, 1964, 33. Finally, a truly global treatment of the subject (one that took seriously the translation of Gandhian tactics from South Asia, etc.) is still beyond me. Has it been written? In part? References welcome.

9. William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

10. For an introduction to “joint attention” as it has been figured by an interdisciplinary field of developmental psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, and analytic philosophers of mind, consider: Axel Seeman, ed., *Joint Attention: New Developments in Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, and Social Neuroscience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

11. Emphasis added.

12. Art Johnson, “Dove or B-52: Neither ‘Bird’ is the Way to Peace,” *El Gaucho*, February 18, 1966, 3. Emphasis added. The author was a sophomore in the political science department, who expressed an appreciation for what he called Hubbell’s “sincerity.”

13. Kessler, “Hubbell Begins.”

14. *Ibid.*

15. Here the longer history of peace protests (see n. 41 above) and the Civil Rights movement are both relevant. An article in *The Crisis* of February 1963 on the Albany

Movement explicitly listed “prayer vigils” as among the ten formal protest tactics activated by the diverse Civil Rights campaigns. The description of their place is interesting enough to merit quoting in full: “The prayer vigil has more often been used in the peace movement than in the civil rights movement. In Albany, the prayer vigils was one of the first forms of public protest, but was not used again until this summer, when three or four groups followed Dr. King’s example in praying in front of city hall for an opening of negotiations. In all but one instance, they were arrested. A dramatic variation of the prayer vigil occurred on the night of July 21, when in defiance of a federal injunction, the Rev. Samuel Wells led over 150 persons toward city hall and, when commanded by Chief Pritchett to go back, dropped on his knees in prayer. Here was a way in which the deep resources of nonviolent declaration and the ritual of the Christian church could be brought together. Here was a means by which the worship of the sanctuary could be brought boldly into the midst of the world. Indeed on one occasion when such a vigil was held in front of City Hall, one of the older sisters ‘got happy’ as they say, and responded to the spirit just as if she were praying in the aisle of the Shiloh Baptist Church. For others it was difficult to pray genuinely with a policeman at one’s elbow, and the prayer vigil was ever in danger of becoming simply a coercive technique or a publicity measure. The police found it most difficult to deal with such a form of protest, especially when the group knelt on the sidewalk with some persons refusing to rise even after arrest. They were praying and would not be moved.” Vincent Harding and Stoughton Lynd, “Albany, GA,” *The Crisis*, 74–75.

16. Hubbell himself participated in the Santa Barbara Meetings of the Society of Friends, and though I have not yet been able to figure out if he was raised as a Quaker, it is clear that his commitments to nonviolent protest, as well as to silence and collective action, are informed by his ties to the Quaker community in those years. He also corresponded with the (National) *Friends Journal*, where an early report of the weekly silent vigil emphasized that the downtown Santa Barbara vigil (a Hubbell-supported offshoot of the original campus vigil) had been “initiated by Santa Barbara Meeting,” and mentioned Hubbell himself only as a contact. See *Friends Journal*, June 15, 1966, 318.

17. Ibid.

18. *Friends Journal*, October 15, 1966, 517–518: “At first, the vigilers aroused some heckling and counter-demonstrating on the part of onlookers, but as the weeks have passed, some of those who came to stare out of scorn or curiosity have been moved to step quietly into one of the gaps left in the line (left there for just this purpose) and to become part of the group.”

19. Interesting to consider here is Michael Fried’s dialectic of *Absorption and Theatricality*, which, while published in 1980, really has its origins in the polemic of “Art and Objecthood” (1967). In what ways might Fried’s preoccupation with “theatricality” be tied to the specific performative interiority of the counter-culture? Has this been explored?

20. This is explicit in several sources on the vigils, as here: “after the hour is over, small groups often gather on the sidewalk for quiet conversation.” *Friends Journal*, October 15, 1966, 517.

21. *New York Times*, February 6, 1967.

22. *The Hartford Courant*, March 30, 1967, 13.

23. The exact phrase “loving silence” hails from a direct quote in “Silent Vietnam Protest Vigils to Begin Today,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1967, 26. The block quote is taken from a citation of a handbook on the vigils authored by Hubbell, a source I have not yet found in the original. However, the cited passage appears in “Quiet, Insistent Vigil for Peace,” *Friends Journal*, October 15, 1966.

24. By “attentional ethos” I mean to invoke a larger claim about the historicity of attention itself (see n. 1, *supra*). Which is to say, I am, with a number of other scholars in the history of science, art, and literature, committed to the idea that human attention has a history, and that shifting social, cultural, economic, and technological circumstances have given shape to meaningfully different habits of sensory and cognitive engagement, while also changing the meanings ascribed to attentional situations. The literature that places such developments in evidence is already large, and growing quickly. Classic texts would include: Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and Lorraine Daston, “Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment,” in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, edited by Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 100–126. More recent works on the topic include: D. Graham Burnett and Justin E. H. Smith, eds., *Scenes of Attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), and Johannes Wankhammer, *Creatures of Attention: Aesthetics and the Subject before Kant* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024).

25. Norman H. Mackworth, “The Breakdown of Vigilance during Prolonged Visual Search,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 1 (1948): 6–21.

26. For biographical elements, see: “Santa Barbara Faculty Colleagues Honor Charles H. Hubbell with Plous Memorial Award,” *University Bulletin* (University of California System) 14, no. 39 (June 20, 1966): 244. Hubbell was given this junior faculty award “both for his research in mathematical sociology and ‘his broad impact upon the intellectual and moral values of the university community,’” an explicit reference to his role in initiating “The Weekly Vigil for Peace” and thereby “arousing ‘serious consideration of the important issues of national and world concern today.’” All this suggests that the university wanted to indicate support for his non-violent activism. By 1968, of course, the UCSB campus would be riven by several much more aggressive protest actions (the takeover of North Hall, ROTC protests at the airport) and violence (including a bomb in the faculty club that may have been intended to kill Freeman Dyson, but which took the life of a building custodian). It is perhaps important, in this context, to state explicitly that Hubbell’s silent vigils could easily be depicted as a “conservative” or even “regressive” retreat from the more radical forms of campus activism already visible at UCSB (not to mention neighboring Berkeley, etc.) by the winter of 1966. I am bracketing, in my discussion, these movement matters of left, right, accommodationist, etc. While these issues are hardly historically irrelevant, my central preoccupation here is with the phenomenology of the vigil in the period (and its place in a larger dynamic of attentional regimes), and I am much less concerned with its ideological valence in the spectrum of activist tactics.

27. Further work on Hubbell's actual dissertation and early publications beckons with its own allure, particularly in relation to his growing interest in extending his silent vigils into a national and international movement. His efforts in this regard bear consideration in light of his first significant scholarly article: "An Input-Output Approach to Clique Identification," *Sociometry* 28, no. 4 (December 1965): 377-399. This paper proposes a novel technique for modeling the social architecture of small and tightly-knit associative groups and displays numerous node-and-linkage models of different kinds of extended "cliques." He presented on "Communication Networks" at the 1965 meeting of the American Sociological Association in a panel specifically addressing "Small Groups." See the program of the sixtieth annual meeting.

28. I am here referencing the work of the "Friends of Attention" coalition and its institutional manifestation, the non-profit Strother School of Radical Attention in Brooklyn, NY. For an introduction to these projects, and an account of their roots in the work of diverse artists experimenting with silent presence as a medium, practice, and performance idiom, consider: Nathan Heller, "The Battle for Attention," *The New Yorker*, April 29, 2024, 40-49.