Presidential Decision-Making During the Vietnam War

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ABSTRACT

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The relationship between the president and the people is often hard to determine, especially in times of war. Several questions arise when looking at this relationship, including whether or not the president feels that the public is competent enough to formulate opinion and whether the president feels compelled to act as a direct result of incoming opinions from both the public and the media. The following analysis looks at the Vietnam War and the three administrations most closely dealing with the war – the administrations of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon – to determine whether there is a direct relationship between the opinions of the people and specific strategies employed during the war. It also examines the relationship between the president, the public, and the media during the war.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this analysis is to investigate the effect that public opinion had on presidential decision-making during the Vietnam War, specifically during the administrations of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. One of the questions that emerged during the Vietnam War was how public opinion influenced the three main presidents and their decisions to take military action in Southeast Asia. Until Kennedy took office in 1960, few people had been aware that the United States was considering military intervention in the region. However, even fewer people were aware of the commitments of time and resources that the U.S. had pledged to fight the spread of communism during the Cold War.

As the U.S. commitment to the South Vietnamese government grew and the U.S. became more involved in the civil war, the public began to notice the increasing soldier fatalities and millions of dollars spent to fight the Vietcong. And as the U.S. investment in the war continued to increase, the public became frustrated and disillusioned with the lack of visible progress. As a result, the Johnson administration faced a much different public than Eisenhower or Kennedy. By the late 1960s, the majority of the public were against the war. President Johnson had already declared that he would not seek reelection by the beginning of 1968, and this was likely the direct result of losing public support for the war.¹

Because of the failures of the Vietnam War, the public needed to direct its unease and anger to a specific target, and that target became the most public figure of the national government: the president. According to George Herring, “…this anger was

directed at the nation’s leaders rather than its enemies, and public frustration contributed significantly to the failure of Johnson’s policy. The backlash from Vietnam put restraints on American leaders for the next twenty years.”\(^2\) Herring was accurate in his assessment, and the “lessons of Vietnam” have lasted much longer than twenty years.

The next part of this chapter will introduce theories that have become central to the arguments made about public opinion. It will explore the literature that explains why it is important that policymakers understand the phenomenon of public opinion, particularly during times where the majority of the public has a stance that is different than the position of the decision-makers. The second chapter will focus on the methodology of this analysis. In the third and fourth chapters, the analysis will focus on two very different periods in public opinion. The third chapter will cover the war from the Eisenhower administration through the Kennedy administration and the Johnson administration. The fourth chapter will cover the Nixon administration. The fifth chapter will discuss the relevance and future implications of studying public opinion.

Researchers in many different fields of the social sciences have been enthralled by the study of the general public’s role in the democratic processes, with the United States serving as a prime example of a functioning representative democracy. It is important to first define what is meant by the term “public.” C. Wright Mills gives complete and adequately parsimonious definitions of both “public” and “the masses” that are sometimes not properly defined in other theories. According to Mills, the difference between a public and a mass has to do with the exchange of opinion. In a “public,” opinions are being exchanged freely and in a constant stream of conversation. There is

an immediate chance for growth of the discussion or a rebuttal to opinions expressed. Mills argues that a public operates completely independent of authoritative institutions (which in this case would be the president and foreign policymakers). The “masses,” on the other hand, are a collection in which few people actually express opinions. Information flows to the people and they can only receive it at face-value, instead of having a discussion that ebbs and flows. Unfortunately, the terms “public” and “the masses” are too easily interchangeable, making it simple to confuse the direction in which opinions are flowing and information is being received. In this discussion, it is the opinion of the “public” that is being considered because this analysis proceeds from the assumption that the phenomenon of public opinion is iterative, not linear. Only when one looks at the role of the media does the idea of “the masses” come in to play because citizens are fed information without being able to directly respond.

Existing Theories of Public Opinion

Scholars who focus on the definition of classic democracy have argued that it is the will of the people that gives government a legitimate basis from which to function. Thomas Jefferson wrote

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate power of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

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3 C. Wright Mills, Powers, politics, and people; the collected essays of C. Wright Mills, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 657.
However, modern interpretations of democratic theory demonstrate that it is not always the people who lead government and policy. Instead, the practice of democracy has demonstrated that democracy in theoretical terms and in practical terms are two separate forms of democracy that are sometimes irreconcilable. And because of this, the role of leaders and the role of the public are highly debated.

Some presidents believed that allowing the people to lead themselves was the only option for proper governance. Theodore Roosevelt once wrote “[t]he majority of the plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any smaller body of men will make in trying to govern them.” However, these leaders also felt that they should shape public opinion in order that their ideal policies could be implemented with the full-fledged support of the public. Since the T. Roosevelt administration, the executive office has seen many approaches to the public, including following their desires (almost blindly, in some cases) and trying to shape public opinion in a certain way so that the public would be supportive of policy.

However, not all policymakers and scholars agree with the idea that the public should have such an influential role in deciding policy. As Walter Lippmann writes,

The main premise [of Hamilton and Jefferson] was the same: to govern was an instinct that appeared, according to your social preferences, in one man or a chosen few, in all males, or only males who were white and twenty-one, perhaps even in all men and all women.

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Lippmann criticizes the use of opinion in developing policy for several reasons. First, he argues that people are generally unable to grasp the reality that is the world. Because people cannot grasp the entire world in which they live, they accept definitions that are taught to them as reality. As history has demonstrated, however, these definitions are not always entirely complete, and sometimes these definitions are entirely incorrect. Also, people base their present and future decisions on past decisions or previous knowledge of the situation. If, at some point in the decision making process, the information consumed by the public is incorrect, there is no self-correcting mechanism in the public to compensate for the false information. If the perception of the world is incorrect, as Lippmann argues, then decisions resulting from that worldview may also be flawed.\(^9\) The common man, according to Lippmann, has no desire to fully understand the world because he has to worry about his own survival. Personal issues take precedent over understanding concepts that are practically abstract such as foreign policy. He argues that the people are generally incapable of making important policy decisions because they are unable to have access to the necessary information pertaining to the decision at hand (for example, classified military information).

Gabriel Almond goes even further as to suggest that people are not privy to information about matters of national security because there is a need for secrecy in handling these types of issues. When sensitive information is made public, it is frequently not understood, and when it is kept secret it is usually discussed in the public under false or misleading pretenses. In addition, the potential consequences of each decision could have a tremendous impact on the security of the state, therefore

\(^9\) ibid.
necessitating that people have highly specialized knowledge in order to make competent decisions. Almond argues that it is the responsibility of the government to set the tone for public opinion, not the other way around. Almond also argues (in other works) that the people tend to fall victim to “moods.” According to this theory, people are normally unconcerned with the day-to-day operations regarding foreign policy. It is only during times of crisis or war that the public responds and takes an opinion to the situation at hand. However, Almond differs from Lippmann in that he argues that an attentive public could be created and the role of public may change as people become more educated on the highly specialized field.

**Formulating Public Opinion**

Lippmann makes a significant point in his discussion of the use of public opinion: in order to understand how opinion is used to formulate foreign policy, it is important to understand how that opinion is formulated. The way in which people formulate their opinions is just as vital to understand because the factors that people consider can add to or take away from the legitimacy of their opinions in the eyes of policymakers. Robert Shapiro and Benjamin Page argue that the people’s opinions are not as volatile as Lippmann argues. Instead, they build an alternate model to demonstrate how people formulate their opinions on issues of foreign policy. Page and Shapiro argue that it is not the issue with the most saliency at the time that shapes public opinion, nor is it solely the president’s poll standings or the population of particular candidates. Instead, there

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12 ibid.
are multiple influences that shape opinions. By using information collected by multiple polls, they compile a set of statistics to test the volatility of public policy.

Shapiro and Page find that there is more fluctuation in foreign policy than in domestic policy, but this increased fluctuation does not necessarily suggest that opinions are volatile. They found that half of the foreign policy issues that were addressed in the polls indicated that public opinion remained relatively stable over almost five decades. The other half of the issues that saw fluctuations could be easily attributed to other contributing factors, such as wartime versus peacetime conditions and the types of questions being asked.\textsuperscript{13} Shapiro and Page argue that the formulation of collective opinions is important in understanding what shapes public opinion.

There have been two main observable trends in the collective attitudes of the public that should be acknowledged. Specifically regarding foreign policy, the literature suggests that the people support the idea of the United States as an aggressive international actor so long as the intervention is an abstract idea and not a reality. However, in terms of becoming involved in a specific intervention, the people are much less reluctant to support U.S. action.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, this does not suggest that the people are staunch supporters of intervention all the time, or vice versa. Instead, people are generally fall into two categories: internationalist and isolationist. Internationalists tend to favor the United States playing a strong role in foreign affairs. This idea has been especially observable during specific periods of U.S. military intervention or times in which the stability of the international system was threatened.

\textsuperscript{13} ibid.
For example, during the 1940s, leaders encouraged Americans to embrace internationalist policies because of the challenges that the world faced during World War II.\textsuperscript{15} Shapiro and Page suggest people made the collective decision that the U.S. should be involved in foreign affairs based on both leadership and circumstance. Although there was some fluctuation based on specific events during and immediately following WWII, the trend of internationalism in public opinion continued throughout the 1950s during the Cold War. There was a rapid increase of people involved in the making of foreign policy during the war, both in U.S.-Soviet relations and in U.S. relations throughout the world. In addition, the executive bureaucracy increased dramatically, and in 1947 the Department of Defense was established under the National Security Act.\textsuperscript{16} There was also a drastic increase in foreign relations outside the government, including the creation of dozens of new humanitarian and relief organizations. Even with U.S. participation in the Korean War, the U.S. seemed to be facing few challenges to peace and the attitudes on foreign policy remained relatively stable until the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{17}

The other common collective mindset that is observed in trends of public opinion is the idea that the United States should remain relatively isolated from foreign affairs unless the issue directly threatens national security or is a pre-existing promise made to another country. Even under these conditions, the public is hesitant to engage in any kind of direct action. During the Cold War, there were many instances in which the public


favored isolationist policies, including times in which nuclear proliferation was at question. There were many instances during the Cold War that the U.S. questioned the decision to challenge the Soviets.\textsuperscript{18} Also, the state of domestic politics has considerably influenced the decisions on what role the U.S. should play in foreign politics. During periods of economic instability or periods in which domestic politics were in flux, the need to address domestic issues far outweighed concerns overseas. Americans also became extremely hesitant to engage in further action when it was perceived that the immediate losses (such as casualties) from intervention far outweighed the immediate gains (such as gaining a strategic foothold or gaining the upper hand in a negotiation). Especially after the Vietnam War, guidelines for intervening in international affairs became much more rigid and articulated with manifests such as the Weinberger Doctrine, which outlined the only conditions under which the use of force would be acceptable.\textsuperscript{19}

Aside from the two main collective ideas that shape general collective opinions about how the U.S. should behave in the international system, there are a variety of sources from which individuals develop their personal and collective opinions. For instance, the socialization of people shapes attitudes that can be translated into opinions and issue positions. Even as young children, people develop personal philosophies based on their personal circumstances, including age, gender, race/ethnic ties, socioeconomic status, religion, community, political awareness, and education.\textsuperscript{20} Opinions about the elections process (as will be explored in greater detail), attitudes about the performance

\textsuperscript{18} Kenneth W. Thompson, \textit{The presidency and foreign policy}, (1997): 179.
\textsuperscript{19} James A. Nathan and James K. Oliver, \textit{Foreign policy making and the American political system}, 3ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 323.
of the past and current governments and administrations, and general beliefs and expectations about the role of government in the international system are also concepts that shape individual opinions.\textsuperscript{21}

The media plays a tremendous role in the perpetuation of issue positions and associated stereotypes. The media – including journalists, newspapers, and television – is a virtually unlimited source of information that reaches a very broad audience. Being exposed to the opinions of others (via newspapers, radio, or television) can cause a phenomenon commonly referred to as the “bandwagon effect.” The “bandwagon effect” is the idea that if the media introduces one opinion as being favored by the majority, individuals may do one of two things: side with that opinion because it is popular and because a lack of detailed information may cause them to believe that others have more information and have therefore made a correct decision, or refuse to participate in activities (such as elections) because of a belief that an opposing opinion would not change the majority.\textsuperscript{22} Presidents have often been known to make public appeals to manipulate opinion. Because many people believe that the president has access to better information than that provided to citizens, the mass public has a tendency to go along with suggestions made by the presidents so long as there is not mass opposition by another political group (such as the legislature). When groups diverge, however, the president has a lower chance of winning over the public because they become less

\textsuperscript{22} Roger Hilsman, Laura Gaughran, and Patricia A. Weitsman, \textit{The politics of policy making in defense and foreign affairs}, 3ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 369.
trusting of his actions. In addition, presidents rarely try to appeal to the public about issues that are grossly popular or unpopular.\textsuperscript{23}

The Vietnam War was one of the first wars to reach millions of people because it was the first war to have extensive media coverage. And because of this, the mood of the people often mirrored the mood and opinion of the media. During the Kennedy administration, the media was generally supportive of military action because the presumed threat of the spread of communism was critical. Even news stories that criticized government policy did so without condemning the need to stop the spread of communism (and, by transitive properties, the spread of Soviet power). During this period (until 1965), the public was much more likely to support official policies and to not question the decisions of policy makers.\textsuperscript{24} However, as time progressed without any perceived success, the media started to question the appropriateness of U.S. involvement, and the public followed suit, leading to a great decrease in support for the war over the next several years. At the end of the Vietnam War, most Americans wanted to cut defense spending; and as late as 1975, only about 10 percent felt too little money was being spent on defense. However, immediately following the Vietnam War, the media shifted again and exposed the public to a barrage of pro-defense images. By 1981, Americans had returned to believing that the government should be more prepared militarily, and a slight majority of Americans believed that ‘too little’ was being spent on defense.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} ibid., 15.
As John Zaller argues, almost all of the information that the common citizen receives about foreign policy is secondhand information. In other words, the information that people rely on generally comes from another source, and is not based on personal knowledge. This is most likely attributed to the fact that foreign policy issues are complex and difficult to understand. The sources from which people most rely are politicians, journalists, activists, political elites, and other people most closely related to the issue at hand.26 This group can also include party officials because they are perceived to represent a particular party and therefore are knowledgeable about many issues pertinent to governmental affairs. Because of this, Zaller argues, the information that the common man receives is highly selective and often stereotypical, the public develops biased views of the international system and foreign policy. Zaller also argues that the issues that people take positions on are most often the issues that are the closest relatable issues to their everyday lives, meaning that they may not always have an opinion on specific foreign policy. He concludes his argument by suggesting that two things are true of the opinions of the public: “(1) that people vary greatly in their general attentiveness to politics, regardless of particular issues; and (2) that average overall levels of information are quite low.”27

Public Opinion and Policymakers

The degree to which public opinion is believed to influence foreign policy decisions is highly debated in the literature. The only commonly agreed upon theory within the literature suggests that public opinion about issues surrounding foreign policy

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26 ibid.
27 ibid., 18.
is much different than public opinion about domestic issues. One common argument suggests that the general public is more likely to defer to decision-makers on issues of foreign policy because they are less informed and therefore less likely to take a firm position on these types of issues. In addition, the public is slow to change their opinions on foreign policy, and only with the passage of time and changes in circumstances do opinions change significantly. It is also believed that because of the highly technical nature of foreign policy and the tremendous impact that one decision could have, the public rarely takes a position on specific issues, and instead focuses on broader concerns.

One of the most crucial questions that a president must ask himself is whether or not he believes that the public is educated enough to make their own choices about how they would like to be governed, including how they would like their elected representatives to behave in the international system. There have been various explanations given as to why foreign policy decisions are usually only considered and influenced by a small, select group of individuals. Even the Founders were confounded at who should lead and who should be lead. And, as expected, the role of public opinion had always been a consideration of decision-makers, especially of elected officials such as the President. During the Korean intervention, U.S. policymakers saw a dramatic shift in the attitudes of the public, which would serve as a stepping-stone into the war in Vietnam. In July 1953, negotiations came to a truce, and prisoners were released and

29 ibid.
30 ibid.
troops brought home. Not only did this signify the end of American intervention in Korea, it also marked a shift in public opinion. Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of the Korean War, despite the major troop losses and perceived unsuccessfulness, was that Americans moved away from isolationist policies and toward more U.S. intervention. In fact, in a poll conducted in February 1953, several months before a truce was reached, seventy-three percent of Americans supported the U.S. taking an active role in world affairs, the highest level of support seen since 1945.31

It came as no surprise then that despite the fallacies of the Korean War, many Americans initially supported the Vietnam War. But the Vietnam War was especially unique for a number of reasons as a direct result of public opinion. First, the ability of pollsters to gather information and make accurate calculations became much easier as researchers began to understand the nature of polling and the usefulness of accepting the methodological constraints of polling. In addition, policymakers became aware of the changes in polling methods and reliability of polls, and incorporated those factors into their decision-making. Second, researchers developed more complex theories of how decision-makers used public opinion, and how different groups within the public had varied influences on the formulation of policy. Third, as time progressed and troops remained in Vietnam, the nature of public opinion changed, which may or may not have led to a change in the way policy-makers responded to the public. Finally, the perceived roles and powers of specific policy-makers (i.e., the president) in juxtaposition to other elected officials (i.e., congressional leaders) was different than during previous foreign

policy initiatives, which centered the decision-making process to one specific branch of
government and made the ability to measure the impact of public opinion much easier.

As Brandice Canes-Wrone writes,

Research in American political development suggests that since the twentieth
century it is the President, not Congress, who has the advantage in capturing the
public’s attention. According to this literature, the president metamorphosed from
an office in which policy operations centered on relations with other elites into
one in which public appeals, opinion polls, and other plebiscitary activities
became a routine and significant component of the operations.\textsuperscript{32}

She goes on to write that the public’s focus on the president is the result of a number of
factors, including “…technological advances in mass communications, particular radio
and television; developments in transportation; the advent of scientific polling of public
opinion; the declining strength of political parties; and the growth of president
primaries.”\textsuperscript{33} These factors will become crucial in the later analysis of the war.

The Force of Public Opinion

Several theories on public opinion suggest that there is a measurable effect on
decision-makers, even at the highest level of policymaking. Richard Sobel describes the
main theory that will be used here in his book \textit{The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S.}
\textit{Foreign Policy Since Vietnam}. Sobel argues that public opinion constrains foreign
policy, but does not actually set policy. Instead, Sobel argues that the public sets
parameters in which foreign policy makers are given the ability to operate. He also
claims that the Vietnam War was a catalyst in causing the public to reassess the limits in
which foreign policymakers had permission to operate.\textsuperscript{34} His analysis argues that
“multiple and consistent references” to the “constraining nature of public opinion” by a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Brandice Canes-Wrone, \textit{Who leads whom?} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13.
\item \textsuperscript{33} ibid., 13.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Sobel, "The impact of public opinion on U.S. foreign policy since Vietnam,"
number of sources demonstrates that officials did pay attention to public opinion and that the public was able to, in some sense, shape foreign policy during foreign interventions by constraining behavior.\textsuperscript{35} In developing the theoretical basis for his study, Sobel asserts that foreign policy should be influenced by public opinion. Sobel does not quantify the role the public should play, but he does state that, beginning with the Vietnam War, the attitudes of the public about the role of the United States in the international system have changed, and therefore the role of public opinion has been increasing since Vietnam.

Sobel’s theory is based off of the “system of dikes” theory as proposed by V.O. Key, and this theory is therefore critical to understand for the purpose of this analysis. Key argues in his book \textit{Public Opinion and American Democracy} that it is crucial that all governments concern themselves with the opinion of the public. He writes that it is the views of the people that are the underpinnings for moral and ethical consideration in the formulation of policy, and is generally based on broad topics and not narrow interests. Key also argues that the public opinion is a two-way flow of information, and that each party tries to influence the other. Because of the prominence of the presidency, Key argues that this figure commands most of the media coverage and is seen as not only an individual actor but also the leader of the administration. He also argues that if the president fails to create a positive image in the media and the eye of the public, it puts the administration in jeopardy of not being able to implement policies.

Key argues that the masses do not directly influence decision-making on a day-to-day basis on a majority of the issues at hand. Key writes

\textsuperscript{35} ibid.
Government may be regarded as operating within a context of public opinion that conditions its actions. That context is not a rigid matrix that fixes a precise form for government action. Nor is it unchangeable. It consists of opinions irregularly distributed among the people and of varying intensity, of attitudes of differing convertibility into votes, and of sentiments not always readily capable of appraisal. Yet that context, as it is perceived by those responsible for action, conditions many of the acts of those who must make what we may call “opinion-related decisions.”

The “context of public opinion that conditions its actions” is what makes up the theory of, as Sobel describes, “a system of dikes.” In this theory, decisions flow through a system of channels. These channels are the restraints that the public has put on policy makers, and as long as the policy makers choose an option within these parameters, the public is generally supportive. Most decisions are made without regard to public opinion when decision makers believe that the mass public is either unaware or inattentive. When the public is aware of the decision at hand, the president is cautious to try and act within the perimeters established by the public (sometimes these are moral and ethical considerations, and sometimes they are historically-based).

The role of the public – be it the media, interest groups, or the mass public – is not easily quantified, but the theoretical implications of its effect on war actions and outcomes brings it to the forefront of concern for foreign policy officials, especially the president. But does public opinion shape foreign policy and the decisions made by the president and other leading foreign policy officials? Or does the president, who is regarded as being responsible for foreign policy decisions, cause public opinion to change without consideration? While the research presented here focuses on whether public opinion shapes the decisions of public officials, there is no suggestion that the

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36 Key, “Public opinion and American democracy,” 423.
37 ibid.
impact is linear. Instead, as decision-makers take actions, the public reflects on that action. The public takes the information already provided to them and adds to that information, and then decides whether or not their opinion changes or remains unaltered. Social scientists may disagree on the extent to which the public actually considers specific actions taken, but there is little question that the public formulates its opinion based on, at least in part, the action of decision-makers and the information provided to them. This suggests that the influence of public opinion may be iterative instead of linear; in other words, the public formulates their opinions based on the behavior of policy-makers, who may in turn use the opinions of the public to make future decisions.

The following model is the model that I use to understand the relationship between the president, the media, and the public in the proceeding chapters.

\[ \text{The President} \]

\[ \text{The Media} \]

\[ \text{The People} \]

*Figure 1. The Flow of Information in the Policymaking Process.*
This model demonstrates that the relationship between each actor is interdependent and does not operate separate from the other two. The people are influenced by what they see in media, and thus formulate opinions about the president and his actions. This information flows to the president, who decides how to use it. The president also receives information from the media, who often conduct polls or perform other tests to measure opinion. Based on the president’s response, the media may choose which information to provide to the public. In addition, the media may be influenced to report items that they feel will be most interesting to the public. I will use this model to understand how public opinion factored into decision-making during the Vietnam War. I will try to determine what influence, if any, both the media and the public had on the president’s decisions.
CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION

Collective opinions tend to be relatively stable and unchanging over time, and when leaders provide the public with the essential information, people will have a sensible response based on personal underlying beliefs and values.\(^{38}\) But, if public opinion is changed (or in some cases, left unaffected) by the actions of decision-makers, do policy-makers base their decisions, at least in part, on how they believe the public will respond? Has this always been the case, or did the president’s stance on public opinion change based on who was in office? Most importantly, did public opinion have an effect on the decision-making of the presidents in office during the Vietnam War? This chapter will focus on core theories of public opinion and its effects on foreign policy. It will address general theories on how presidents are affected by the public, as well as theories that are believed to explain specifically how presidents were influenced by public opinion during the Vietnam War. It will also take an in-depth look at why the president is the central focus of this argument and the powers assigned to the president in foreign policy. It will also define terms and actors that will be crucial for the analysis. The relationship between the president and each of the actors will be further explored.

The Formulation of Foreign Policy

It is rarely the president who makes foreign policy decisions by himself. As Roger Hilsman argues, policymaking is not only complex, but sometimes done without a commonly agreed upon preferred outcome. Hilsman argues that policy is often “the sum of a congeries of separate or only vaguely related actions. On other occasions, it is an

uneasy, even internally inconsistent compromise among competing goals or an incompatible mixture of alternative means for achieving a single goal.”

However, regardless of how the decision is made, the president is often the one who takes the blame for failures and the congratulations for successes in the eyes of the public. Richard Neustadt claims that the president’s office has become the focal point for policy, and people tend to make judgments about policy that are based on images “far removed from reality.” But, on what authority does the president actually create or support foreign policy? In order to understand how the president factors public opinion into foreign policy decision-making, it is first imperative to understand the kind of power that the executive branch has, and how these powers are put to use in foreign policy.

The executive branch was not originally intended to hold a tremendous amount of power. The Founders were concerned about the idea of a powerful executive heading up the perceived limited government, which was created to protect individual rights and liberties. The presidency is not elected directly by the people; instead it is selected by the Electoral College, which is meant to represent the people’s choices. The Founders created this indirect method because they did not trust the people to elect a leader who would create stability, or worse, attempt to overthrow the government altogether and create a more authoritarian regime. In terms of the public’s ability to influence the presidency, Madison believed that policymakers would be protected from the day-to-day fluctuations because the large size of the population would make it hard to gather a

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40 Richard E. Neustadt, "Leader or clerk?" in Readings in the Politics of United States Foreign Policy (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 12.
majority of people with a particular position stance. The executive branch was created to be governed independently (although not it was not left unrestrained due to the system of checks and balances maintained by the other two branches of government), and because of this, the Founders saw the potential disagreement between the president and Congress as inevitable. 

Adding to this conflict is Congress’s “right to know” and the president’s “need for secrecy.”

The president has both explicit and implicit powers assigned in the Constitution in regards to the ability to make and influence foreign policy. According to Article Two Section Two of the United States Constitution,

The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States; he may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices, and he shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment. He shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties provided two thirds of the Senators present concur…

Although treaties have to be ratified by Congress, the president has unlimited power to make executive agreements, which do not require ratification by the Senate. The president also has the power to reinterpret and terminate these agreements, and, thus far, has been able to terminate treaties. In times of unrest or political instability (periods in which national security is at risk but Congress has not declared war), the legislature has tried to exercise control and restraint of the executive, but because of the nature of

international policymaking, the executive has been able to maintain a great deal of power. Only Congress has the power to declare war. However, once war has been declared, the president as Commander in Chief of the military has virtually unlimited power. During the Vietnam War, the president had the power to “regulate, requisition, and purchase a wide range of materials and products, to prohibit exports, to license trade, to censor internal communications, to regulate enemy aliens in the United States, and to seize and operate the railroads.”

There have been many instances in which the power of the presidency has not been as clear-cut as written in the Constitution. The president and Congress have long struggled over who should have control over foreign policy affairs; however, it has been the president who has served as the “dominant role” in national security policy, especially during times of crisis. And the Vietnam War was one of the many times where the president’s power to make policy – specifically foreign policy – was fluctuating and not necessarily explicit. For example, on August 7th, 1964, Congress passed the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.” This resolution gave President Johnson a “blank check” for the war following an incident in which two American destroyers were attacked over a two-day period. The resolution, which passed unanimously in the House and almost unanimously in the Senate, was accurately described as an unofficial declaration of war.

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44 ibid.
45 ibid.
46 Westheider, "The Vietnam war," 217.
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave the power to subdue the threat to the U.S. in Vietnam by all means necessary.

    The military is another area in which the president has the ability to control foreign affairs. Although Congress has the power to declare war, the president has control over the military, and as Andrew Polsky argues, the expansion of the military since World War II has allowed the president to take military action as he sees fit, rendering Congress’s ability to declare war practically purposeless. As Polsky argues, the Framers designed the chain of command so that the final say in regard to military practices would remain with the president, and would exist with virtually no checks and balances. In addition, under Article Four, the ability to “repel attacks” against the U.S. is not delegated to any particular branch of government, but given the nature of the president’s relationship to the military, implicitly falls into the hands of the executive. This means that the president determines what is considered a threat. The post-World War II period is significant because it was the first time in American history that the size of the military was not greatly reduced after the war. The power to regulate the size of the military lies in the hands of the legislature, and by maintaining wartime-size troops and resources, the president has more tools available to use for other foreign affairs without needing to go through Congress.48

    Although there was no constitutional amendment or any other legal act that expressly gave the president expanded power, there were other pieces of legislation that gave the president more power after WWII. The National Security Act of 1947 created the Department of Defense (under civilian leadership), the National Security Council, and

the Central Intelligence Agency. In addition to the establishment of new agencies, the post-WWII period was a time of great expansion in the already existing bureaucracy, which gave the president even more resources to use in foreign policymaking. The National Security Agency was originally created to give the president an outlet to create and coordinate foreign policy. As James Nathan and James Oliver write, the administrations during the Vietnam War – specifically Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson – through the expansion of the bureaucracy and the creation of the National Security Agency saw a “trend toward the centralization of decision making processes in the White House.”

There have been instances in which Congress has asserted authority over the presidency; this has been done mainly in indirect methods that are also not explicit in the Constitution. Parties and interest groups have played a role in controlling the executive as well. Any nominations to a foreign policy agency must be confirmed by the Congress. Congress’s main power lies in the budget. Because Congress has control over the budget, any cuts in military or defense funding have the ability to cripple any actions recommended or desired by the president. This too became an issue during the Vietnam War, though mainly after the Johnson administration, as Congress finally attempted to end the war by cutting funding during the Nixon administration.

50 Nathan and Oliver, "Foreign policy making and the American political system," 323.
51 ibid., 31.
The President and Elections

Several studies have suggested that foreign affairs have had little influence over presidential and congressional elections, regardless of the current situation, and therefore presidents have generally felt uncompelled to pay attention to public opinion in most circumstances.\(^{53}\) American politicians claim that they construct programs largely ignorant of public opinion, and rarely feel constrained by the public or potential election consequences when voting on foreign policy issues.\(^{54}\) Not only is this significant for public opinion research, it also raises serious questions of issue accountability. Since voters do not make choices based on issues, understanding what they do base their decisions on becomes a central part of understanding how decisions are made. Election studies are complex, and presently lack a consensus to many questions, including how foreign policy affects electoral choices. Generally, scholars argue that foreign policy issues take a backseat to domestic issues in an election, which may or may not be altered when the country is in a state of war. Many scholars have suggested that foreign affairs play only a minor role in the decision-making of voters.\(^{55}\) Election studies conducted have indicated to some that constituents do little issue-based voting unless they sense that policy-makers fail to respond when they do take a particular issue stance. Because of this, officeholders will pay attention to public opinion in order to not alienate voters.\(^{56}\)

This theory is often referred to as “electoral retribution”, and suggests that voters reward


\(^{55}\) Small, "Influencing the decision makers: the Vietnam experience," 185-198.

\(^{56}\) Holsti, "Public opinion and American foreign policy,"
or punish incumbent candidates based on foreign policy successes and failures. According to the theory, decision-makers try to anticipate voters’ reactions and therefore do give significant weight to public opinion.\textsuperscript{57} Another theory is the “rally around the President” theory, which suggests that the president’s support increases no matter what he does – whether it increases the war or increases negotiation – as long as he is doing something.\textsuperscript{58} Although this explains temporary fluctuations in public opinion, it lacks any long-term explanatory quality. It has also been suggested that elections only gauge retrospective evaluations of foreign policy and are virtually impossible to judge when there is no incumbent candidate, therefore making this expression of personal opinion relatively useless.\textsuperscript{59}

Understanding Key Terms

There are several key terms that need to be defined and considered before proceeding with this analysis. Firstly, it is important to define what is meant by the term “public opinion.” The term public opinion can refer to a variety of opinions, but, as V.O. Key wrote, public opinion stated simply is “nothing more that ‘those opinions by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed.’”\textsuperscript{60} This is the definition of public opinion that with further explanation will be used to analyze policymaking during the Vietnam War. Public opinion is distinguishable from other communications because it is the interaction of the “public” with the “government.” More specifically, it is the passage of opinion from the public to the government. Other types of communication include the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Sidney Verba et al., "Public opinion and the war in Vietnam," \textit{The American Political Science Review} 61, no. 2 (1967): 317-333.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Holsti, "Public opinion and American foreign policy,"
\item \textsuperscript{60} Hilsman, Gaughran, and Weitsman, "The politics of policy making in defense and foreign affairs," 369.
\end{itemize}
discussions that occur between policymakers, among governments, and from the
government to the people. There is also the distinction between the opinions of people
as individuals versus the opinion of people as a whole. For the purposes of understanding
how foreign policy is affected by opinion, the opinion of the people as a whole is part of
the definition used for this analysis. By setting the definition of public opinion as being
the opinion of one or more individuals, it becomes possible to understand how the
different actors within public opinion affect decision-making both directly and indirectly
instead of trying to analyze how particular people directly influenced policy.

Sources of Public Opinion

Secondly, it is important to identify the key actors in discussions of public
opinion. Hans Speier argues that public opinion consisted of opinions expressed by men
outside the government who believed that their say should be considered when
formulating foreign policy. However, the actual makeup of public opinion is much
more complicated, as it is formulated by different groups of people, and these groups
have varying abilities to affect decision-makers. These actors are most commonly
divided into five different categories: elites, interest groups, the media, elected
representatives, and the mass public. Elites are considered to be those closest to the
president and the most influential in the decision making process. The members of this
group also include other high-ranking policy makers, who both suggest policy and
oversee its implementation. As Herbert McClosky writes, these people are involved with

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62 ibid.
politics to a higher than usual degree and are well-educated in general politics as well as the specifically in the issue at hand.\textsuperscript{64} John Zaller argues that it is the small group of elites – which includes politicians, journalists, some activists, higher-level government officials, and policy specialists – who are the most devoted to some aspect of the decision in question (or in this case, most devoted to issues of foreign policy), and because of this the group in which both the president and general public rely on for information.\textsuperscript{65} V.O. Key goes so far as to suggest that the survival of a democracy is not dependent on public opinion as a whole, but instead it is ultimately dependent on this group of the “aristocratic strain” that are set apart from the mass public and use their political influence and knowledge to create and influence opinion.\textsuperscript{66}

Often, these are the actors who are able to have a great impact on foreign policy, and this group often contains policymakers themselves. Interest groups, including the elites, are considered to be fairly close to the president and other elected officials, and they are considered transmitters of information for a larger group of the population. According to studies conducted by Philip Powlick, twenty seven percent of foreign policymakers considered interest groups a source of public opinion.\textsuperscript{67} In addition, over ninety percent of those interviewed believed that it was essential to stay informed of the groups most relevant and influential to their particular interest areas.\textsuperscript{68} Estimates indicate that there are over 100,000 known interest groups, and many more groups that act

\textsuperscript{65} Zaller, "The nature and origins of mass opinion," 367.
\textsuperscript{66} Dreyer and Rosenbaum, "Political opinion and behavior: essays and studies," 581.
\textsuperscript{67} Powlick, "The sources of public opinion for American foreign policy officials," 433.
\textsuperscript{68} ibid.: 434.
similarly to interest groups (in lobbying and affecting policy, although it may not be the primary mission). 69 There are several different types of interest groups, including economic interest groups, professional associations, class groups, minority groups, and single-issue groups. 70 For some obvious and not-so obvious reasons, interest groups mainly focus on domestic issues, and in terms of foreign policy, tend to focus on economic issues such as tariffs and trading quotas. 71 However, in times of political unrest or instability in foreign politics, interest groups may consider foreign issues a priority. They may also band together towards advancing a common cause, even if it does not seem to fit in with their primary efforts. Political action committees are the financial arm of interest groups, and have the ability to raise and donate money for either a specific cause or for candidates who support the position of their interest group. 72 Interest groups, by nature, also have a better ability to provide specific and technical research to policymakers in hopes of advancing their cause than the average citizen. While the study of interest groups often focuses on the ability of groups to influence Congress, they also undoubtedly affect presidential decision-making both directly and indirectly.

The news and other types of media are also considered transmitters of information, as information flows to both the public and to policymakers, although it is not always considered a completely accurate reflection of popular opinion. Newspaper, radio, and television have made information available to a wide audience, as well as to

70 Nathan and Oliver, "Foreign policy making and the American political system," 323.
71 Hilsman, Grughran, and Weitsman, "The politics of policy making in defense and foreign affairs," 369.
72 ibid.
policymakers. According to Powlick, almost half of the policymakers interviewed (see above) admitted that the media provided a representation of public opinion. Many also argued that the media was, in fact, well-informed and articulate about issues.73

Television played a great role in the Vietnam War because it was the first major international dispute to be visible to large audiences. In addition, films, flyers, newsletters, and other pieces of literature reach people on a large scale.

The Vietnam War was the first to be considered a “televised” war.74 By 1957 over 78 percent of the United States households owned a television while in 1953 only 44 percent of households owned one set.75 One study on public conducted with National Security Council officials and members of the State Department indicated that media was the most popular source of information, with forty-eight percent of decision-makers citing it, despite skepticism regarding one of the media’s most frequently used tools: polls.76 In addition to having access to the information provided by the government to the press and reports from journalists, Americans were also exposed for the first time to the anti-war protests and demonstrations, which were conducted on an unprecedented level during the war.77 The Vietnam War was distinctive in that there were major demonstrations to protest the war, especially in the later years. It has been argued that the effect of these demonstrations was minimal on both policy and the public. However, further research indicates that they were a factor in decision-making. The relationship

75 Canes-Wrone, "Who leads whom?" 214.
between the media and policymakers, especially the president, is difficult to describe because it is unclear whether the president influences the media or vice versa. Presidents have often tried to control the flow of information to the press because they are aware of the tremendous influence that the media can have on the general public.

The last and most common source of public opinion is the mass public. This includes individuals who engage in demonstrations, write letters and emails, make phone calls and other attempts to contact elected officials, and public opinion polls.\textsuperscript{78} Public opinion polls have gained popularity among researchers despite some major flaws that make them unappealing to the president and other key decision-makers. Because polls are the most controversial source of public opinion yet still consistently used to gauge sentiments toward the president and decisions made in wartime, they deserve special attention. As Michael Margolis states public opinion polls serve a simple purpose: “to link what the people said they wanted directly to public policy decisions.”\textsuperscript{79} Many presidents have denied using public opinion polls, but there is evidence that while they may not employ popular strategies, they do pay attention to the polls. The study described earlier indicated that thirty-nine percent of decision-makers cited the mass public as a source of opinion, despite skepticism regarding polls. More evidence of this will be provided as an analysis of presidents during the two case studies, but for now there are generalizations that can be made across all presidencies.

\textsuperscript{78} Powlick, "The sources of public opinion for American foreign policy officials," 427-451.
The President and the Media

The relationship between the media and the executive is extremely complex. On one hand, the president relies on the media to indicate the opinion of the people about a variety of issues, both foreign and domestic. On the other hand, the president relies on a good relationship with the media to build his relationship and image with the mass public. The media has become a forum for which information can be disseminated and then opinions can be collected. Presidents take extreme steps to carefully calculate strategies to deal specifically with the media. The public relies on these decision makers to provide information to them on a variety of issues on which they have no previous knowledge, and this relationship provides the president an opportunity to highlight information that will make his policies seem favorable to the public. In addition, particular sets of the public (mainly elites and interest groups) can persuade other sets of the public (the media and the general public) to a particular mindset by providing one-sided information.80

Because of the importance of the continuous relationship between the media and president, I will look at whether presidents made specific references to the public in newspapers and on television. In addition, when available, I will look at the relationship between presidents and the press, including whether the president had close ties to those in the media and whether the president tried to frame stories in the media or contain what reporters could tell the public. I will also look at presidential policies when available to determine whether or not there were changes in media policy when the president wanted

80 Jon W. Western, Selling intervention and war: the presidency, the media, and the American public, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 294.
to increase public support. By looking at these relationships, it will indicate whether the
presidents felt threatened by the media and whether or not they believed public opinion to
be important.

The President and the Public

The second relationship that I will look is the relationship between the general
public and the president. This relationship is manifested in many interactions, but the
main interaction used here is the response to polls. There were consistent polling
questions asked throughout the war, including the approval of the president (in general
terms), the approval of the president’s handling of foreign policy, and the approval of the
president’s handling of the war. In addition, I believe that certain presidents also looked
at the approval ratings of the war itself to gauge public opinion of their administrations.
Therefore, all of these will be considered, and I will be looking for instances in which the
public voiced opinions related to a specific issue and the president took notice of that
opinion. In addition, especially during the second half of the Johnson administration, I
will look at how overall opinions of the war shifted and how Johnson reacted to this shift.
I will also look for instances in which the president mentioned the attitudes of the public,
because I believe that these references highlight that the president was paying attention to
the public. I would argue that this attention causes the public to have an effect on
policymaking, even if the final decision is not one that the public favored.
CHAPTER 3: THE VIETNAM WAR, PRESIDENT KENNEDY, AND PRESIDENT JOHNSON

The purpose of the proceeding chapters is to look for evidence that the three presidents used public opinion to formulate policy during the Vietnam War. Through an analysis of historical documents, speeches, and interviews, the analysis will look at whether or not the three presidents felt constrained by public opinion in their policymaking regarding the Vietnam War. It will focus specifically on the administrations of President Kennedy, President Johnson, and President Nixon for two reasons. First of all, it was during the Kennedy administration when the mass public became aware of American involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Secondly, it was during the Johnson administration when the opinion of the people shifted from being largely supportive to largely unsupportive, and President Nixon inherited this growing unpopularity. The next two chapters will divide the war into two periods. Chapter Three will look the first part of the war under President Kennedy and President Johnson. Chapter Four will look at the second part of the war under President Nixon.

The United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War started in relative silence to the American people. Originally a conflict between the Vietnamese and the French – France being the colonial leader of much of Indochina - the United States only involved itself from a distance. In September 1951, the Truman administration signed an agreement to provide direct military aid to South Vietnam, and although this marked the beginning of the direct American involvement, it would not be until the Kennedy administration that the public would become widely aware of the situation in Vietnam.
Although the public was unaware of the situation in Vietnam for several years, it is important to understand how and why the Kennedy administration proceeded in creating its Vietnam policy, as well as how and why the public gradually became aware of American policy in Vietnam. In the two years after the agreement made by the Truman administration to provide direct military assistance, President Dwight Eisenhower signed an agreement to provide $785 million in aid to the South Vietnamese. The following year, 1954, Eisenhower introduced Americans to the idea of the “domino theory” in an attempt to garner support for the government under Dien Bien Phu.  

According to Eisenhower, the fall of Vietnam to communism would be a problem for several reasons. First of all, the communist control of Vietnam would give the impression that the Soviet Union had an ideological advantage in the Cold War. Secondly, and most importantly when defending U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, was the idea that if Vietnam were to fall under the rule of communism, so would Cambodia, Laos, and the rest of Southeast Asia. These developments would give the Soviets (and the Chinese) the advantage of having several more states ruled by communism and willing to defend their government’s ideology.

While Eisenhower’s argument was aimed at the American people, most of the speeches and announcements were targeted toward at Vietnam than at the U.S. public. The Eisenhower administration did not make much of an attempt to hide American involvement in Vietnam, but also did not do much in the early years of the administration to advertise its policies. In addition to instantly recognizing the new Vietnamese government in October 1955, the United States sent letters and financial support to the

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81 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 454.
new government before it was established (in an attempt to ensure that Diem is elected), and when Diem visited in May 1957 Eisenhower publicly expressed his unwavering support. In April 1959, just one year before the end of his term, Eisenhower made a speech in which he reiterated some of the same ideas that he presented in his “domino theory” speech – that the United States had interests in South Vietnam staying out of the control of communism. This speech, along with another given by Premier Khrushchev in which he emphasized the Soviet Union’s support of those attempting national liberation (including North Vietnam), would shape the Kennedy administration’s decision to support the South Vietnamese.

The Kennedy Administration and Early Intervention in Vietnam

According to Paul Hammond, Kennedy’s rise to the presidency was much different than Eisenhower’s, especially in terms of foreign policy. Hammond writes

Kennedy was young and partisan, and his popular majority over Nixon was tiny; Eisenhower had been a national hero who enjoyed a wide extra partisan confidence before his nomination, and his electoral victory was a landslide. But though Kennedy lacked political status, he was favored by circumstances and by his own purposes. Both permitted him to use foreign policy as an opportunity. At just forty-three years old, many people saw Kennedy as athletic, composed, outgoing, and even younger than his age. Kennedy took office in 1960 with a long family reputation of leadership and success. And because he was young and outgoing, the

\[82\] ibid.
\[83\] ibid.
administration was determined to set a reputation of energy, vigor, and style. In his previous experiences, Kennedy has built a good working relationship with the press, and that relationship carried over into the presidency. Kennedy, encouraged by his press secretary Pierre Salinger, regularly held scheduled live interviews and press conferences. Just as Kennedy’s good sense of humor, charm, and handsome looks had assisted him in the televised debates during the election, these features once again won over many people in both the press and the public. In addition, Kennedy preferred to speak in front of large audiences as opposed to small audiences. But Kennedy’s critics perceived his young age as a sign of his inexperience. Also, the fact that Kennedy was Catholic and not Protestant led many to be critical of his policies and skeptical of his ability to handle the presidency. In addition, Kennedy had won the general election with a narrow margin of less than 12,000 votes, and lacked an overwhelming support by Congress.

As mentioned by Hammond, Kennedy had the ability to build his reputation with his foreign policy – especially in his management of the situation in Vietnam. Although the speeches by Eisenhower about the “domino theory” and the spread of communism had caught the attention of some, Vietnam was seen as a “minor” issue. Many people remained unaware of the extent of U.S. intervention and the commitments that Eisenhower and Kennedy had made. Kennedy was known to be enthralled with international relations, and in the 1950s when his desire to seek the presidency became top priority, Kennedy realized that he needed to have a strong domestic plan in order to

87 ibid.
win the support of the public and pursue foreign policy objectives. To do so, Kennedy sought to bring new programs to the forefront of the domestic agenda similar to those proposed by FDR in New Deal legislation.89

American Intervention in Laos

However, the relationship between the United States and Laos is cited as the turning point that brought attention to U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.90 President Kennedy, upon assuming office, was hesitant to involve the U.S. in Indochina for fear of spreading American military ability across too any states. Kennedy looked to Eisenhower for advice about how to handle Laos. Although Eisenhower had been careful in his relationship with Laos, he advocated to Kennedy that he deal with Laos immediately or else the government would collapse and would start the “domino.”91 Laos had been established during the division of Indochina after they declared independence in 1954 from France, their colonial occupier. Laos’s first leader, Prince Souvanna, supported the communist movement in Laos much to the dismay of the Eisenhower administration, and when he was removed from office in 1958, the administration was quick to support a pro-Western Phoumi Sananikone. However, because the communist movement had gained a great deal of support within Laos, it led to a great instability in the Laotian government and Eisenhower believed it crucial to intervene.92 In 1959, Sananikone was overthrown in a coup and replaced by a pro-American general, Phoumi Nosavan.

89 ibid.
92 ibid.
As much as the United States had become involved in the attempted pro-Western stabilization of Laos, the Soviet Union had also become involved in the region, and as the instability continued, both countries became more invested in the region. Eventually, Kong Le (who favored neutrality and the communist group Pathet Lao) overthrew Phoumi, and when Kennedy came into office in 1960, Le was in power and the perceived threat of the spread of communism was high. Kennedy worked diligently on trying to resolve the conflict in Laos in his first year of office, and in the spring of 1961 he introduced the situation in Laos to the American people for the first time during a television broadcast.

Although President Kennedy had looked to President Eisenhower for advice on how to handle the situation in Laos upon assuming office, Kennedy had also taken office with the intention to pursue a different course of action in foreign affairs. Kennedy sought to eliminate the broad policy statements as made by the Eisenhower administration, instead relying on small groups to make specific assertions about each area of the world, particularly ones where a crisis was imminent and the United States had interests – such as Southeast Asia. However, the Bay of Pigs crisis also occurred in the same time frame as the conflict in Laos, and this led Kennedy to seek a diplomatic and no military end to the Laotian crisis. In addition, Kennedy used the situation in Laos to express his agenda of neutrality to the American people. In a March press conference, Kennedy told the American people that he continued to seek an independent and neutral Laos. In addition, the New York Times ran a story that claimed that Kennedy, along with

93 ibid.
94 ibid.
Secretary of State Dean Rusk, supported the Laotian government in its fight against communist takeover.\textsuperscript{96} Eventually, multiparty talks led to the neutralization of Laos in the summer of 1962.

And although the U.S. had become quite preoccupied with the Soviets during the first two years of the Kennedy administration, the series of events in Laos brought attention to military action in Laos, Cambodia, and especially Vietnam. The failure of the Kennedy administration to commit troops to Laos was suggested by some to make the U.S. look weak and unwilling to commit troops to other areas of interest, including Vietnam.\textsuperscript{97} Many believed that Vietnam was a good place for the United States to demonstrate their commitment to preventing the spread of communism, and as the Cold War continued on, some of Kennedy’s advisers began advocating for a much stronger effort in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{98} But Kennedy remained cautious and hesitant to commit any kind of combat troops to Vietnam for fear that committing to Vietnam might hamper commitments elsewhere.

The Battle at Ap Bac

The beginning of 1963 marked a turning point for the American commitment in Vietnam as well as a turning point to the public’s attention to Vietnam. On January 2, 1963, shortly after a report given by Mike Mansfield – a colleague of Kennedy – that suggested that the war between the North and South was going terribly and the Diem was corrupt and terribly unstable, the battle at Ap Bac occurred. This battle became a signal to

\textsuperscript{96} ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} ibid.
the U.S. that more aggressive military action was needed. The battle had begun when the South Vietnamese had intercepted radio transmissions from North Vietnamese (Vietcong) forces just west of the Dinh Tuong province in the hamlets of Tan Thoi. However, despite having the upper hand in knowing the general location of the Vietcong, the North Vietnamese had also gained knowledge of a pending attack by the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and was able to easily defeat the ARVN while suffering only minor losses. The United States had provided air support to the ARVN through the use of helicopters, and in the course of the battle, three U.S. military advisors were killed.

The Joint Chiefs, when reporting to President Kennedy shortly after the battle, claimed that there were only minor losses to both the ARVN and the U.S. despite the press reports. However, the press saw the battle much differently, and the battle drew a great deal of attention in the United States. Stories by *Time* and *Newsweek* claimed that both the South Vietnamese and the U.S. had performed poorly. Four months later – after a newspaper strike – David Halberstam, a reporter for the *New York Times*, published a four-part series in which he criticized U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. In the last of the four articles, Halberstam wrote that contrary to popular belief, the communists were in control of the southernmost part of the Mekong Delta, which was later confirmed by *Time*.

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101 ibid.
Following the critical analysis of the battle at Ap Bac, President Kennedy began to grow concerned about the situation in Vietnam. He began to question his military advisers and took notice of the growing tension between the Americans and the Vietnamese. In addition, he confided to advisers close to him that he wanted to withdraw from Vietnam, and thought that in order to run for reelection, he would have to have a phased plan of withdraw from all advisers from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{102} However, Kennedy remained relatively silent about his fears in Vietnam and continued the same course of action that he had introduced with the end of the crisis in Laos. It was not until the fall of 1963 that Kennedy began to reassess his strategy toward dealing with Diem and the South Vietnamese government.

Kennedy, Vietnam, and the Media

On September 2, 1963, President Kennedy was interviewed by Walter Cronkite on the \textit{CBS News} in the first half-hour broadcast of the program. Kennedy answered questions about civil rights, unemployment, the nuclear test-ban treaty, a possible opponent for the upcoming election, and finally, the involvement in Vietnam. It was the longest statement that the president had made to date about the American involvement, and he basically declared to the viewers that the leader of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, was incapable of successfully defeating the Vietcong, and without U.S. assistance, South Vietnam was certain to fall into the hands of the communists. However, just as he had stated two years previously, Kennedy refused to commit to fighting with or for the ARVN and would only provide assistance because South Vietnam was not regarded as a

\textsuperscript{102} Herring, "LBJ and Vietnam," 227.
vital interest to the U.S.  Shortly after Kennedy’s interview, on November 1, 1963, Diem was overthrown in an American supported coup d’état led by General Tran Van Don and General Duong Van Minh, and General Minh took control of the South Vietnamese government. However, before any real action could be implemented between Minh and Kennedy, a tragedy struck the American people. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and on that same day, former Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the thirty-sixth President of the United States.

It has been noted that throughout his administration, President Kennedy was hesitant to give the situation in Vietnam any more thought than necessary, as he often seemed to resent becoming involved in Vietnam at all. Kennedy assigned much of the decision-making tasks to his advisers, however, they failed to create effective policies for Vietnam. According to an account by the then Assistant Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric,

The President seemed to me to be at times rather irked or distracted as having to focus his attention on Vietnam, as opposed to the problems of the Atlantic Alliance; the relations with the Soviet Union; and this kind of competitive contest with Khrushchev – which fascinated him, and occupied a good deal of his thinking and time.

Kennedy’s desire to stay out of Laos was well known among both the advisers and the public. With the Bay of Pigs incident, Kennedy had become more leery of both his

advisers and any proposal for direct U.S. intervention. So when he became aware of the situation in Laos, he looked at the plans for involvement as unorganized and extremely risky. Staying out of the region also painted a picture to the public of inaction, at least to those who were aware of the crisis in Laos. As John Newman writes,

> The picture of a President pitted against his military advisers is an unpleasant one, for a commander-in-chief must have confidence in the generals under him and rely on their professional judgments if the national security mechanism is to operate correctly or at all. Unfortunately for the American policy in Vietnam, this mechanism broke down completely at the very time when crucial advice and decisions were necessary.\(^{105}\)

Although in the last two years of his presidency Kennedy would attempt to use Vietnam to rebuild the damage to his image cause by earlier embarrassments (such as the Bay of Pigs), he was hesitant to draw too much attention to American intervention and the drastic increase in (non-combat) troops. By the end of 1961, there were an estimated 3,200 advisors in the battle areas of Southeast Asia, and by the end of 1962 that number had grown to around 9,000.\(^{106}\)

Perhaps because of the widespread dissent among administrative officials, or perhaps because Kennedy wanted to keep troops out of Southeast Asia, the public remained largely unaware of the situation in Vietnam. Some critics have argued that the administration purposely kept the situation from the public. Regardless, Kennedy did not have to deal with the dissenting public that both Johnson and Nixon would face in the following years.

\(^{105}\) ibid.

\(^{106}\) Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
Lyndon Johnson Assumes the Presidency

Just two days after being sworn in as president, Johnson reaffirmed the support of the U.S. for the new government of South Vietnam as led by General Minh. However, there were several factors that were seen as obstacles to the new Johnson administration, and would need to be defeated in order to deal with the problem of Vietnam. Kennedy had been known as an activist in foreign policy, and Johnson was perceived as having a much different desired strategy in managing world affairs. In addition, Kennedy had left an ever-growing list of domestic policies that were in the process of being created and implemented, and Johnson, who had been so heavily influenced by the New Deal policies of FDR, hoped to continue and expand those policies and programs. But, undoubtedly, one of the biggest obstacles Johnson faced was Vietnam. And, fortunately for Johnson, he was able to calm the fears of the American people so much so that he received high levels of support in his first few years of his presidency. Johnson knew that the key to winning the support of the public was to establish himself as an active leader who knew the importance of working with Congress, and acknowledging their powers.

The Fly on the Wall

President Johnson was the first president to ever tape his telephone conversations from the beginning of his administration, and these tapes later became available. Within the thousands of transcripts appeared direct evidence that Johnson was very aware of

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107 ibid.
110 ibid.
public opinion of the war from the beginning. Johnson knew at the beginning of his administration that the people were probably not going to be supportive of military intervention in Vietnam, but felt that if the “domino theory” was emphasized, people would come around to his policies. In addition, in several conversations, Johnson indicated that he feared the war would become too political and would be manipulated against him by his Republican counterparts.111 In conversations with both Senator Richard Russell (D-GA) and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Johnson expressed his reservations about the war – not necessarily because he felt that the U.S. would lose, but because he was worried about selling the war to the people without looking too hawkish.

In these recorded conversations, Johnson was often somewhat undecided on the true benefits of fighting the war. On one hand, he felt as though not pursuing the war would lead the Republicans and the people to turn against him in the very early stages of his administration. He was just beginning to push boundaries with both Congress and the people, and he felt as though the war could be very politically damaging. Several early conversations also indicated that Johnson often discussed the perceptions of his actions with other advisors. In a conversation with U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, Johnson and Stevenson discuss whether or not strikes against the North Vietnamese would be perceived as too aggressive and that Johnson himself would be seen as a war monger.112

This is just one of the many examples that indicate that Johnson was expressing his

concern about the public to those around him and perhaps factoring it into his decision-making.

Johnson also indicated in many of these transcripts that he was very concerned about the press. In a conversation with Walt Rostow in early 1964, Johnson expressed concerns over the different leads that reporters had been sending to them and threatening to make public. Johnson also warned against Rostow or any other adviser close to Johnson speaking to the public. Johnson claimed that they had no ability to do so because the administration had not entirely determined what the best course of action was, knowing that any kind of dissent within the government would also lead to dissent within the public and the media. Johnson directly instructed Rostow not to speak to the press.113

Johnson, the Public, and the Media

Johnson was particularly sensitive to the media throughout his presidential career. Compared to former President Kennedy, Johnson was less accessible to the press and often had trouble communicating with them. While he tried to portray his policies with a favorable image, his sometimes blunt and abrasive personality caused the press to see him as manipulative.114 Several additional factors also hindered Johnson and his ability to appeal to the press, including the legacy of Kennedy’s activist policy, Johnson’s domestic agenda (which continued to grow during his four years in office), and Johnson’s style of foreign relations.115 Because of these factors, a “credibility gap” developed

between Johnson and a few journalists, such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, who questioned the reliability of the information being provided by policy officials.\footnote{Herring, "LBJ and Vietnam," 227.}

Unlike Kennedy, the importance of public opinion to President Johnson was evident shortly after he assumed the presidency. Johnson knew that the quicker he acted, the more likely the public would be to support his actions. In addition, Johnson saw public opinion as a “strategic resource,” and went so far as to assign the responsibility of reading the polls to aides, as he felt this was a useful source in gauging the attitudes of the public. In terms of Vietnam, Johnson saw the U.S. as having a responsibility to carry out its mission in Vietnam because it had been the U.S., which had been partially responsible for the overthrow of Diem and the resulting instability. In addition, Johnson saw the spread of communism as threatening to the stability of the international system and to American security.\footnote{Westheider, "The Vietnam war," 217.} Within months, Johnson had accumulated a sixty-one percent approval rating in his handling of foreign affairs, and only fourteen percent did not approve of his foreign policy record.\footnote{Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.}

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident and Escalation of the War

The events that would transpire over the first week of August 1964 would draw even more support for Johnson’s policies regarding Vietnam. On 2 August, a U.S. destroyer, the USS Maddox, was patrolling off the coast of the Vietcong dominated area when it was attacked by torpedoes fired from three North Vietnamese patrol boats. Just two nights before, South Vietnamese patrol boats had been patrolling the same area under...
the direction of OPLAN 34-A, a covert operation designed by the CIA in an attempt to harass the North Vietnamese troops along the coast. The *Maddox*, which had been conducting electronic surveillance at the time of the attack, was able to escape the attack and heavily damage one of the patrol boats while also inflicting damage on the other two. The following night, South Vietnamese patrol boats attacked radar installations in the same area on the scheduled OPLAN 34-A route.

On 4 August, the *Maddox*, along with another destroyer, the USS *Turner Joy*, reported that it was again attacked by the North Vietnamese while on patrol. Although there was no official confirmation of the attacks (it was later determined that there had not been an attack, and that sonar and radar operators had likely picked up signals from the poor weather conditions or not actually picked up signals but due to a heightened state of alert perceived that they were under attack), Johnson took quick measures to ensure that the North Vietnamese were attacked in a proportional response.119

This response won a tremendous amount of support for Johnson and his Vietnam policies from both the public and Congress. According to the Louis Harris poll, his approval rating shot from forty-two percent to seventy percent, and he was able to translate his success at handling the Gulf of Tonkin resolution into an electoral landslide in November.120 Johnson easily defeated Barry Goldwater with the highest percentage of the popular vote in U.S. history.121 In addition to drastically increasing his support in the polls and with the public, the Gulf of Tonkin incident helped to pass a resolution in Congress that gave virtually unlimited power to President Johnson to proceed with any

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119 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
121 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion,"
course of action as he saw fit in Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which passed by a margin of 88-2 in the Senate and unanimously in the House, gave Johnson the power to use military force in Vietnam, something he had long been pushing Congress to allow, even though he argued that he had no intention of using it. On 1 November, 1964, just two days before the general election, the Vietcong attacked an air force base in South Vietnam and five U.S. soldiers were killed. This marked a change in the strategy of the Vietcong because it was the first direct attack on a U.S. military installation. This would also mark a change in the strategy of the Johnson administration and an eventual shift in public support for Johnson’s policies.

Johnson: Building Public Support

During the first two years of his presidency, Johnson took several steps to establish his policies dealing with public opinion and maintaining public support. He implemented an operation, “Maximum Candor,” which was designed to give journalists a specific set of guidelines in reporting on the war. Johnson argued that this was necessary to protect sensitive information from being leaked and causing a threat to national security. Johnson and other policymakers also hoped that it would force journalists to provide a more balanced and unbiased report of the war. However, evidence provided in the later years of the Johnson administration clearly demonstrated that the information provided by the administration was often false or misleading in an effort to emphasize that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was successfully helping the South Vietnamese.

124 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
Johnson also sought to minimize debate because he felt that it was politically and militarily dangerous. The administration also had to deal with the “credibility gap” and the breakdown of the Cold War alliance between the executive and the press.\textsuperscript{126}

The beginning of 1965 was off to a rough start compared to the previous years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. There were approximately 23,000 Americans serving in Vietnam, and the U.S. had suffered almost 1,300 casualties.\textsuperscript{127} However, Johnson still had the overwhelming support of the people, and that support led him to develop two different policies on Vietnam – one that he presented to the public and one that he only discussed with his closest advisers. As his private policies eventually permeated the public, Johnson felt more and more compelled to tell people what he believed they wanted to hear in order to maintain the support of the public.\textsuperscript{128} Johnson desired to uphold his overwhelming support, so he worked carefully to craft his message to the people. Johnson argued to the public that he was pursuing the same policy as the two administrations before him, and that the U.S.’s main interest in South Vietnam was protecting it from the aggression of the Vietcong. According to David Kaiser, some of the more prominent administration officials, such as Robert McNamara, were instructed to delay any announcements regarding future troop deployments or future plans regarding Vietnam.\textsuperscript{129}

Johnson continued to maintain a high level of support in the first part of the year. The polling information for the first few months indicated that Johnson maintained a

\textsuperscript{126} Herring, "LBJ and Vietnam," 227.
\textsuperscript{127} Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
\textsuperscript{128} Kaiser, "American tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the origins of the Vietnam war," 566.
\textsuperscript{129} ibid.
relatively high (and stable) level of support for the administration and approval of job performance. As mentioned earlier, Gallup polls suggested that Johnson’s job approval maintained between a sixty and eighty percent approval rating. Walter Cronkite, after visiting Vietnam, publicly and enthusiastically expressed his support for the administrations policies toward Vietnam. In addition, Johnson had close ties to the presidents of two major television stations – Frank Stanton of CBS and Robert Kintner of NBC – and this allowed Johnson to have the ability to share the perspectives that he thought would be most favorable to the public. However, the support of the people and the press would begin to change as the Johnson administration continued to pursue an aggressive strategy in Vietnam, and this would change the course of both policy and the ultimate outcome of the war.

Shifting Public Support

The events during the early months of 1965 would mark a turning point in the war in terms of the attitudes of the public in the later half of 1965. In February, President Johnson launched a bombing offensive over North Vietnam, and on March 2, over one hundred U.S. warplanes struck a North Vietnamese ammunition depot at Xombang. The U.S. hoped that by targeting the ammunition dump, the supply to the Vietcong in the south. The operation used a tremendous amount of firing power on the part of the U.S. but brought very little success. The North Vietnamese were so loosely organized and the terrain of the jungle canopy made it difficult for the U.S. to identify targets, and President

130 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
131 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
133 Westheider, "the Vietnam war," 217.
Johnson kept a tight rein on acceptable targets in Vietnam. The CIA argued that the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail - the route that the North Vietnamese used most frequently to send supplies to its southern allies - would not be successful at significantly damaging the Vietcong’s support in the south.\footnote{ibid.}

Johnson had hoped that the bombing campaign would serve several purposes. In addition to cutting off an immense amount of supplies traveling between North and South, and seriously damaging the ability of the Vietcong to engage, Johnson also hoped that success with Operation Rolling Thunder would bring support for his domestic programs as part of his Great Society.\footnote{William Appleman Williams, \textit{America in Vietnam :a documentary history}, 1sted. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1985), 345.} However, a lack of success and a need for continual bombing would serve as a catalyst into what would cause Johnson to slowly start losing support for his Vietnam policies eventually lead to a dramatic change in public opinion.

The month of July 1965 was a turning point for the war due to a series of decisions implemented by the Johnson administration. The draft calls were raised to 35,000 per month and Johnson sent in an addition 50,000 support troops with the option to send in even more as necessary. The air war was North Vietnam is also expanded, and these decisions are later decided to be the beginning of the U.S. war in Indochina that...
would last over the next eight years.\textsuperscript{136} However, despite his overwhelming support in the 1964 election and months immediately proceeding, Johnson wanted his plans for escalation to remain out of the view of both Congress and the public, because he believed that doing so would not only garner criticism and debate, but would also challenge the people’s willingness to support his administration without question.

Despite these attempts, the public did become increasingly aware of the escalation, and as criticisms of the administration surfaced, Johnson began to factor public opinion into his decision making processes both in how to handle the war and how to present it to the public.\textsuperscript{137} In May, in response to a recent bombing pause, Johnson said to his advisors, “My judgment is [that] the public has never wanted us to stop the bombing…we don’t want to do it too long else we lose our base of support.”\textsuperscript{138} The media began to pick up on both the growing criticisms of the public as well, and also began to express concern over the escalation in Vietnam despite the administration’s attempts to hide their strategy. Incoming White House mail, which Johnson had paid close attention to since the beginning of his time in office, saw a drastic increase in the number of letters against bombing campaigns. Print media began to follow the lead of the \textit{New York Times} in warning of the danger of “lives lost, blood split and treasure wasted, of fighting a war on a jungle front 7000 miles from home.”\textsuperscript{139} By the end of the

\textsuperscript{136} Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
\textsuperscript{137} Small, "Influencing the decision makers: the Vietnam experience," 185-198.
\textsuperscript{138} Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
\textsuperscript{139} Herring, "LBJ and Vietnam," 227.
year, Johnson would declare to his advisers that “the weakest chink in our armor is public opinion.”

The second half of 1965 saw several strategies aimed at creating aggressive policies, collecting public opinion, and creating policies that looked appealing to the public (despite what the policies in practice might been seen as unfavorable). While the public began to engage in critical debates of the war, the administration was organizing into a much more centered debate forum in which Johnson could receive input from his closest advisers. Johnson relied on several groups with different strengths and backgrounds. One of these debate groups became known as the “Tuesday Lunch Cabinet.” The Tuesday Lunch Cabinet was a group of advisers (the actual makeup of the group varied over the course of the meetings) that met on a weekly basis to discuss Vietnam and sometimes other foreign policy issues. David Humphrey writes about the Tuesday group: “During February and March of 1966 Johnson periodically held lengthy sessions in the cabinet room with a ‘Vietnam Group’ which ranged in size from eight to seventeen advisers – this at a time when the President’s circle of Vietnam advisers had supposedly narrowed to four or five principals.” Although this group was purely advisory, as time progressed Johnson was accused of cutting himself off from even his closest advisers outside these advisory groups.

140 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162
142 ibid.
Wavering Public Opinion

In addition to creating these small advisory groups to build both strategies for Vietnam and strategies to deal with the public, Johnson also felt that it was imperative to try to and counter any appearance of dissent. Johnson not only knew the importance of having support for the public, he also knew the importance of portraying a united country in the media and press so as not to indicate weakness to the North Vietnamese. The administration created programs such as “Target: College Campuses” to spread the agenda of the Johnson administration. The program used the “best young troops” to act as a spokesperson for the administration on college campuses, and the administration would frequently bring both students and professors to Washington to “conferences” on Vietnam.143

As dissent by the public became more visible, the president became more fearful of a continual loss of support for policies and continued to strive to create public presentations of information that he believed would bring back support for the war. In addition to the effect that the growing dissent was having on the president, it was also becoming evident that Johnson’s advisers were also feeling the pressure from the public. According to some reports, this effect began to influence the policy recommendations given to the president. “Notes of a National Security Council meeting in February, 1965, for example, indicate (press secretary) Bill Moyers’s support for a retaliatory bombing strike ‘to meet the demands of domestic opinion requirements.’”144

144 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
However, this wavering support of the public may not have been as carefully studied as necessary to understand exactly what the people wanted. In 1965, the public was beginning to doubt and criticize the handling of the war; however, very few people favored a significant change in actual policy at the time.\textsuperscript{145} The war had escalated at an unprecedented level by the end of 1965, and estimates indicated that there were about 184,000 troops in Vietnam. In addition to an increase in the number and type (as mentioned earlier, the first combat troops had been sent in earlier in the year) of troops seen in 1965, the year also marked a tremendous increase in the number of soldiers killed or wounded in action. Altogether, about 6,600 troops were killed or wounded in the year, and this would play a role in the growing dissent over the next year.\textsuperscript{146}

The following year would bring to light even more critiques of Johnson’s strategy in Vietnam. Although the air raids conducted by the U.S. were able to inflict a substantial amount of damage to the North Vietnamese, the Vietcong were unwilling to discuss a peace settlement under the conditions outlined by the U.S..\textsuperscript{147} In addition, the U.S. had been largely unsuccessful in preventing the flow of resources to the North Vietnamese via the Ho Chi Minh trail, and the bombing campaigns were becoming very costly because of the number of planes that were lost during the strikes.\textsuperscript{148} Back at home, an ever-growing number of people began participating in demonstrations, protests, sit-ins, and other forms of protest, and the media began to be more critical in its assessment of whether or not the U.S. was winning the war.

\textsuperscript{146} Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
\textsuperscript{148} ibid.
Initial Evidence of Wavering Support

Elected officials and high ranking members of the administration were starting to become concerned with the management of the war, and some begin to speak out on the issue. One of the most prominent figures that would speak out was Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AK), who at the time was serving as the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In February, Fulbright began holding hearings on television about the war, and allowed dissenters to express their concern.\textsuperscript{149} In March, the Department of State claimed that the American intervention in Vietnam was legal under international law, the UN Charter, and the Constitution in an attempt to counter the questions raised by the Fulbright hearings and other noticeable dissenters.\textsuperscript{150} In addition, upon receiving it as a suggestion in late 1965, Johnson made several attempts to step up his attempts to sell the war. To counter the claims being made by Senator Fulbright, Johnson recruited Senator Thomas Dodd (D-CT) to come up with material to counter the claims being made by Fulbright, and was assisted by leading decision-makers such as McGeorge Bundy.\textsuperscript{151} According to one source, even former President Eisenhower was asked to weigh in on the mishandling of the war, as the Republicans thought that Eisenhower’s input may strengthen the ability of the Republicans to push their own agenda. Eisenhower, perhaps because he knew the necessity of maintaining a united front to the media and the Vietnamese, told Johnson that he refused to speak out on the behalf of the party. In a television conversation, Eisenhower told Johnson, “They want me to say publicly how to

\textsuperscript{149} Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
\textsuperscript{150} ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Small, "Johnson, Nixon, and the doves," 319.
win the war. I won’t do it. I won’t divide the United States when it needs unity…I wish you to know how annoying all of this is to me.”152

Shifts in Public Opinion

The effect of the growing dissent over the war on President Johnson became evident early in the year as well. Although the change in opinion was gradual at first, the Johnson administration attributed the slow shift as a result of poor communication skills. They argued that the reason people were beginning to be critical of Johnson was because the administration was not properly articulating his strategy to the public.153 To counter the growing dissent, Johnson began making speeches on college campuses aimed at defending his strategy to both hawks and doves.154 In addition, Johnson launched several initiatives aimed at better articulating the administration’s goals to a wider audience. One of these initiatives was the Committee for an Effective and Durable Peace in Asia. The bipartisan group, headed by Arthur Dean and backed by influential decision makers such as Dean Acheson, Robert Murphy, Douglas Dillon, David Packard, Whitney North Seymour, Walter Annenberg, John McCloy, Roswell Gilpatric, and David Rockefeller, set out to express their approval for the Johnson administration and counter claims made by those opposed to the war by taking out ads in newspapers and signing a proclamation of support.155

Polls throughout the year monitored the gradual change in public opinion, and Johnson paid careful attention to this change. Polls conducted in late 1965 indicated that

152 Barrett, "Uncertain warriors :Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam advisers," 279.
153 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
154 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
seventy percent of people believed that the war in Vietnam was getting worse, compared to the six percent who believed it was getting better.\textsuperscript{156} Gallup polls in May indicated that the president’s approval rating had dropped below fifty percent for the first time.\textsuperscript{157} Some people also began to question the relationship between the governments of the U.S. and South Vietnam. Only seventeen percent of those polled in June 1966 believed that the United States would prevail in the war and come out of Vietnam with a victory, and the majority believed that the war would end in a compromise.\textsuperscript{158} And by October 1966, Johnson’s approval ratings had fallen to forty-four percent in the Gallup poll.\textsuperscript{159}

As mentioned earlier, Johnson had instructed his staff to pay close attention to the polls as well as incoming indications of opinion (such as mail), and as dissent grew, Johnson made very little attempt to hide the fact that he was paying attention to the fact that the tide of public opinion was changing. In March, while flying with a number of diplomatic figures including an ambassador to Latin America, Johnson showed the information provided to him about the growing number of critical letters that the White House and begun to receive.\textsuperscript{160} In addition, the growing number of dissenters started to permeate the press, and the media became even more important to the Johnson administration.

The media coverage of the Vietnam War also began to change in 1966. Although the media had generally been friendly to the Johnson administration because many

\textsuperscript{157} Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
\textsuperscript{159} Towle, "out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
\textsuperscript{160} Barrett, "Uncertain warriors :Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam advisers," 279.
television executives had close ties with Johnson, the ability to run pro-war television campaigns became inevitably harder as the attitudes of the mass public began to change. In August, Johnson commented on the changing media coverage and claimed that the administration was getting “bad things” from the press when they covered events such as the protests.\textsuperscript{161} On August 5, CBS aired a documentary that would reveal events occurring in Vietnam that the administration had tried to keep out of the public eye, and at times had denied that they ever took place. The following morning, Johnson called Frank Stanton (the president of CBS who had been a close friend and ally at the beginning of the war) and stated “Frank, are you trying to [f...] me? Frank, this is your president and yesterday your boys shat on the American flag.”\textsuperscript{162} Exchanges like the one between Johnson and Stanton started to become more frequent, and Johnson was often seen as trying to “bully” the press. Instead of wholeheartedly taking the side of Johnson, many television executives aired programs that, while supporting Johnson on several policies, also expressed criticism, and this was believed that this expression of criticism gave more legitimacy to the dovish critiques of the administration’s war policies. Johnson also took the attacks on his administration and Vietnam policy as a personal attack. He was extremely worried that negative press coverage would portray an image of weakness to the Vietcong, and would highlight the weaknesses of the administration’s strategy.

By the end of 1966, there were 350,000 troops in Vietnam, an increase from 184,000 at the beginning of the year. Over 5,000 troops had been killed in action, and

\textsuperscript{161} Small, "Johnson, Nixon, and the doves,” 319.
\textsuperscript{162} ibid.
almost 31,000 had been wounded. The Vietnam War, especially in the previous year, had easily become the dominant event in the affairs of both the United States and the international community.\textsuperscript{163} And, as the last two years of the Johnson administration would demonstrate, the U.S. would continue to struggle in their attempt to improve their position in both the war itself and the eyes of the public. In terms of the war, it had become clear that American troops were not making progress, in part because of the restrictions put on leaders by the president. In addition, the reputation of Johnson in the eyes of the public was being dominated by the war, and failures in the war were beginning to translate into a failure of Johnson to lead the people to victory while serving their best interests domestically and internationally.\textsuperscript{164}

The opinions of the public about American intervention in Vietnam continued to shift from overwhelming support to growing dissent in 1967. Military officials continued to request increases in both troop levels and resources, and the administration continued to constrain the military so as to guide strategy in a manner that would be both successful and favorable to the public. According to Robert Buzzanco, many American officers had not wanted to intervene in Vietnam, but once the intervention became a reality, had hoped and believed that the administration would give the military unlimited resources and an unrestrained ability to take action as necessary.\textsuperscript{165} But Johnson was interested in maintaining public support, and to do so push his Great Society program and allocated resources to domestic programs that could have been used for the war in an order to

\textsuperscript{163} Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
\textsuperscript{165} ibid.
remain favorable to the public. Buzzanco writes, “The ‘rules’ – the political factors involved in developing military policy – may not have been changing so much as becoming more critical...The president wanted a timely end to the conflict without spiraling escalation and at the least cost to his political concerns.”

The second half of 1967 was especially turbulent for Johnson. By July, a Gallup poll indicated that fifty-two percent of people disapproved of Johnson’s war policy, while fifty-six percent of those polled believed that America was facing a stalemate in Vietnam. In addition, several events took place and were detrimental to the war effort. In late July, race riots took place in Detroit, and in October a massive antiwar march took place at the Pentagon. Johnson’s approval ratings fell below forty percent for the first time in August, and would remain at an all-time low through October.

The Anti-War Movement

The year was also a marking point for antiwar movements and demonstrations. This was certainly not the first year that the administration had to deal with protestors, however, the continual growth in size and the surprising aggressive nature of some protests led both the administration and the media to pay careful attention to these events. However, according to polls conducted throughout the war (and especially in 1967) indicated that the demonstrations were not having the intended effect on the mass public. In fact, a majority of individuals disliked the anti-war movement, and some even felt more compelled to support Johnson because of the protestors. The polls, which included

166 ibid.
167 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
168 Towle, "Out of touch: the presidency and public opinion," 162.
questions to gage the position stances of people on the war, found that significant changes in public opinion were usually the result of war related events or casualties and overall duration of the war and not the result of demonstrations. In addition, polling responses on approval of American involvement in Vietnam, job approval of the president, and approval of the president’s handling of the war indicated that Americans did not respond to anti-war demonstrations. However, the protests continued and were constantly being monitored by the media and, subsequently, President Johnson. Protests drew in as many as 50,000 participants and continued to escalate throughout October 1967.

Johnson, who had been extremely aware of public opinions and changes in attitudes about his presidency from the beginning, took steps that would serve dual purposes. Not only was Johnson looking for an efficient and satisfactory way out of Vietnam, he was also looking to try to gain back some of the support for the war that he had at the beginning of his administration. One of the steps that Johnson took at the end of 1967 was to bring home General William Westmoreland, who served as the commander of the United States Military Assistance Command (MACV), and used him to demonstrate to the people that America was winning the war.

Westmoreland, in his four years as commander of military operations in Vietnam, had frequently argued that the U.S. was not doing all it could to win the war because the administration did not always approve his requests for increases in troops and materials.
In a speech delivered on November 21, Westmoreland ended his strategic outline with this:

We are making progress. We know you want an honorable and early transition to the fourth and last phase. So do your sons and so do I. It lies within our grasp – the enemy’s hopes are bankrupt. With your support we will give you a success that will impact not only on South Vietnam but on every emerging nation in the world.\(^{171}\)

Not only did both Johnson and Westmoreland hope to use this rhetoric to regain the support of the people and give them hope that the war would end with success, they also used this speech and other speeches by Westmoreland to attempt to win back the media. Westmoreland, who had made several trips back to the states during his tenure in attempts to rally support, believed wholeheartedly that shortcomings and failures during the war were due to negative coverage by the media. George Moss writes in a later reflection on the war, “General [William C.] Westmoreland and others, including journalist Robert Elegant, have insisted that America lost a war in Vietnam that it could have one. They have blamed the defeat on the mass media, particularly the television networks, for tuning American public against the war and eventually forcing a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam…”\(^ {172}\)

The Tet Offensive

Johnson’s attempts to improve the opinion of the public in the last two years of his administration would prove unsuccessful, as 1968 would become even more turbulent that the preceding year. At the beginning of the year, there was an estimated 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, and the war had cost the U.S. approximately $21 billion in 1967.


\(^{172}\) ibid.
alone. In addition, almost 9,400 troops had been killed and action and almost 100,000
wounded.\textsuperscript{173} Johnson had hesitated early in the year about informing Congress and the
public about the state of affairs in Vietnam for fear that any news of a serious offensive
would draw in more criticism of the management of the war.\textsuperscript{174} However, the Tet
offensive would drastically change the mindset of the public, as Johnson’s attempts to
veil the incident led the press to portray it as an absolutely shocking disaster. Johnson
had just addressed the country with his State of the Union speech in which he described
the situation in Vietnam as “hopeful,” and the shocking failure of the U.S. during the Tet
offensive made Johnson feel as though his rhetoric had been perceived as “foolish.”\textsuperscript{175}

At a time when the polls indicated that a majority of the public did not think
Johnson was handling the war properly, Johnson’s administration was punished even
more severely because of Tet. By March, the disapproval rating of the war had risen
from forty-seven to sixty-three percent, and Johnson’s overall approval rating had
dropped once again as well.\textsuperscript{176}

The polls were not the only indication that support for the war continued to
decline. In a special about the Tet offensive, Walter Cronkite spoke passionately about a
need for an immediate change in the course of action if the United States were to be
successful in Vietnam. Johnson saw the erosion of the support of Cronkite as very
damaging to his campaign for support, as Cronkite had remained a centrist up until the
events of early 1968. This broadcast would eventually be linked to Johnson’s decision

\textsuperscript{173} Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
\textsuperscript{174} Barrett, "Uncertain warriors :Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam advisers," 279.
\textsuperscript{175} ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} ibid.
not to run for re-election, as he announced his intentions only nineteen days after the broadcast aired.\textsuperscript{177} Although the media continued to cover the war, it did so in a very critical and sometimes distorted manner, and this led the administration to think once again about changing the course of action.

The president collected information from the polls, the media, Congress, and his advisers, and seriously began to consider a de-escalation of the war.\textsuperscript{178} While some of Johnson’s advisers, such as Walt Rostow, General Earle Wheeler, and Abe Fortas encouraged the president to continue his escalation of the war, other influential decision makers such as Dean Rusk, Hubert Humphrey, and McGeorge Bundy argued to the president that an escalation of the war was not a viable option and urged the president to consider alternatives. The divide even within his own advisory groups served as an indicator to Johnson that the opinions of the war had changed drastically and that the U.S. must reconsider its actions.\textsuperscript{179}

In March, Johnson reconvenes a group known as the “wise men” – a small group of Johnson’s most trusted advisers and discusses with them the military’s request for an increase in troops, and the group advises Johnson to deny the request and seek some kind of peace agreement in Vietnam. And on 31 March, under the advice of his administration, Johnson announces a unilateral halt of all of the bombing over parts of North Vietnam, as well as his decision not to run for reelection. Three weeks later, secretary of state Clark Clifford announced that in addition to the bombing halt, the

\textsuperscript{177} Rollins, "The Vietnam war: perceptions through literature, film, and television," 419-432.
\textsuperscript{178} Barrett, "Uncertain warriors: Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam advisers," 279.
\textsuperscript{179} ibid.
military would start to hand over responsibility for more of the combat to the GVN.  

The decision to put more responsibility on the South Vietnamese would be labeled “Vietnamization” by the Nixon administration, and the April announcement marked the beginning of the efforts to withdrawal from the war.  

Finally, at the end of October 1968, just days before the election, Johnson announced that Operation Rolling Thunder was finished and informs the American people of the decision to completely stop the bombing of all of North Vietnam.

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180 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.  
182 Moss, "Vietnam, an American ordeal," 511.
CHAPTER 4: RICHARD NIXON, VIETNAMIZATION, AND PEACE WITH HONOR

On 5 November, Richard M. Nixon was elected president, and immediately inherited the problem of Vietnam. Nixon had run his campaign on the platform that he would bring the war to an end as quickly as possible. He also campaigned on the idea that the Vietnamization of the war was the best course of action. Nixon, much like Johnson, was very sensitive to public opinion and criticism, and even in the early years of his administration became easily agitated over minor criticism despite high ratings in the polls.\(^\text{183}\) Nixon entered office with a strategy to take away the people’s attention to specific foreign-policy issues and instead build a relationship with the public that would encourage them to trust Nixon and defer to him on questions of foreign policy. He strove to build an image of intelligence and competency in order to gain the public’s confidence.\(^\text{184}\) In polls conducted in the early months of the Nixon administration, the president was supported by a majority. According to a Gallup poll published in February 1969, fifty-nine percent supported Nixon’s conduct\(^\text{185}\), and in a poll conducted later in the year, seventy percent supported Nixon’s strategy of Vietnamization.\(^\text{186}\)

Public Opinion and the Anti-War Demonstrations

Although Nixon enjoyed a relatively high level of support upon entering office, the anti-war protests and demonstrations continued to grow both in number and in size. On 15 October, the largest antiwar demonstrations in American history took place at a number of sites across the country, and one month later, over 250,000 people came to...
Washington, DC to protest the war. This would be the largest single demonstration over the duration of the war, yet Nixon was able to rebound from the criticism of protesters. On 3 November (between the two large demonstrations), Nixon delivered a speech to defend his war policies and immediately receives overwhelming support from both Congress and the general public.\textsuperscript{187}

Nixon enjoyed a high level of support throughout 1969, but this support quickly turned to concern and disenchantment about the idea that the U.S. could win the war in 1970. By the end of 1969, the U.S. still had almost 480,000 troops in Vietnam working with the GVN, which had amassed about 900,000 troops of its own. There were still a high number of casualties and troops wounded, and 1970 would be the first year that the wavering morale and discipline of the troops would become evident to both the administration and the public. By April, Nixon’s support for Vietnamization had decreased from seventy percent to forty-eight percent. In addition, the protests continued and in some instances became more aggressive. Hundreds of colleges and universities shut their doors in May as a response to the protestors and incidents of aggressive behaviors (for example, the firing on protestors at Kent State). In the middle weeks of May, students protesting the attacks on the students at Kent State and the continued participation of the U.S. in Indochina draw the attention of not only the press and the administration but also of the general public. In New York City, for example, construction workers attacked protestors on Wall Street.

\textsuperscript{187} ibid.
Declining Legislative Support and the Repeal of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

May 1970 was a turning point in the war in terms of the legislative agenda as well. In June, the Senate passed a resolution almost unanimously that repealed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Although President Nixon argued that the legal basis for the war was not in the resolution but instead in the constitutional authority of the presidency. However, from this point Nixon would be forced to pursue a gradual de-escalation of the war while negotiating with the North Vietnamese. In June 1972, President Nixon announced that no more draftees would be sent into Vietnam, and after winning the election in a landslide victory, began to pursue the withdrawal of all forces from Vietnam while negotiating with the Vietcong for the release of POWs. The final de-escalation was referred to by Nixon as an attempt to bring “peace with honor” to the United States and to begin to rebuild the public’s trust of the foreign policy agendas of the president.\(^{188}\)

Nixon, the Pentagon Papers, and More Transcripts

One of the most notable events during the Nixon administration was the leaking of a secret document prepared at the request of Robert McNamara about the history of the Vietnam War to the *New York Times* in 1971. Nixon, who had been operating in the Vietnam War with much secrecy, was outraged by the leak and tried to take the editors of the paper all the way to the Supreme Court to prevent further excerpts from being published. Nixon had long enjoyed working in secret and feared that any additional information from the documents would cause the American people to believe that both

\(^{188}\) ibid.
Johnson and Nixon had operated without the full support of other foreign policymakers and had blindly pursued an over-ambitious strategy in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{189}

Nixon, like Johnson, began keeping records of every conversation taking place both in his offices and over the phones, which would lead to eventual Watergate scandal and Nixon’s resignation during his second term in office. According to multiple transcripts, Nixon was not only concerned about the leaked Pentagon Papers because he would look over-eager, but also because he felt that in the eyes of the people, his ability to control his administration and run the country would be undermined.\textsuperscript{190} The same transcripts also indicated that the president was very concerned about establishing his credibility, much like Johnson. There are also several conversations between Nixon and his top officials in which Nixon stressed his ratings in the polls.

During his time in office, Nixon had developed a rivalry with Henry Kissinger, and their contempt for one another is evident in the actions taken by Nixon. Because he was extremely worried about appearing weak and undermined, Nixon took to ensuring that Kissinger would not leak information to the media without being caught. Nixon tapped his phones and monitored his calls and conversations carefully. Although the Watergate scandal would eventually lead to the demise of the Nixon administration, it provided solid evidence that Nixon was very aware of the public and felt extremely compelled to control and restrain his administration as well as create policies to gain support from the public.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Although there is substantial evidence to suggest that two of the three presidents paid close attention to the war, there is little to support the theory proposed by Sobel and Key that all three presidents during the Vietnam War felt compelled to create policy within a certain set of guidelines as set by public opinion. First of all, there is very little evidence in the literature to suggest that each president held a consistent view of the importance of public opinion throughout their term. For example, Johnson was often known to refer to polls to gauge public opinion. However, as time progressed and popular support began to decrease, Johnson would often claim that the polls were inaccurate or not truly representative of the people. In addition, both Johnson and other leading members of the administration claimed that declines in public opinion polls were not a result of a change in public opinion but instead an inability of the administration to effectively articulate its goals to the public. President Nixon used public opinion polls much like Johnson, and kept track of all incoming indicators of popular support and dissent. According to one account, “Johnson and Nixon, at least, behaved in irrational and unscientific ways when it came to interpreting the drift of public opinion in the country. One day they might be impressed with a demonstration, another day they might dismiss it as meaningless or communist-organized. They paid careful attention to particular columnists not just because they were supposedly influential but also because they wanted to read nice things about themselves.”  

191 Small, "Influencing the decision makers: the Vietnam experience," 196.
careful records of incoming mail addressed to the White House administration, and the State and Defense Departments, on the Vietnam issue.\textsuperscript{192}

\begin{center}
President Kennedy
\end{center}

Kennedy tended to make very little reference to public opinion. Instead, Kennedy mainly focused his attention to his predecessors and advisers for information about how to proceed in Vietnam. The Kennedy administration was the first “televised” administration, and with Kennedy’s eloquence at speaking and rhetorical skills, the media expected his administration to hold frequent conferences and press events. However, Kennedy’s press secretary, Pierre Salinger, believed that Kennedy would not be able to retain public attention with frequent television appearances and adjusted Kennedy’s press policies. Instead of appearing in television prime time, Kennedy would hold press conferences in the middle afternoon, and spoke less frequently than presidents before him.\textsuperscript{193}

Kennedy tried to keep the situation in Vietnam as far isolated from his domestic policy agenda as he could, and as the third chapter indicates, seemed almost resentful that he had inherited the problem of Vietnam at all. Kennedy’s other foreign policy initiatives and failures took precedent in the public eye over the situation in Vietnam, perhaps because no combat troops had yet been assigned to the region. In addition, the Kennedy administration was prematurely ended, and the public had only become vaguely aware of the situation in Vietnam in the two years leading up to the president’s assassination.

\textsuperscript{192} ibid.: 192 .
President Johnson and President Nixon

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the public was unlikely to have specific policy stances during the war. Instead, the public had formulated ideals about both the policy and eventual outcome of the war, and trusted in decision-makers such as the president to take the necessary steps to ensure victory in Vietnam. When the public began to realize that the war was not progressing in a manner favorable to U.S. interests, and that the decisions made by the president were costing more to the people than the perceived worth of winning, the public became disenfranchised with the war and began to voice their concern and dissent.

Demonstrations were a huge part of the Vietnam War, and were seen as an opportunity to express opinions and change foreign policy to those who participated. However, the evidence presented earlier suggests that while presidents did pay attention to the protests, very rarely did they feel compelled to act as a result. Especially at the beginning of the war (or at least public awareness of U.S. intervention), the demonstrators represented a small minority of the opinion, and the press was reluctant to pay attention to dissenters for a variety of reasons. As the war finally de-escalated and troops were withdrawn from Vietnam, the public was left with an image of the war which took place amidst of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations.194 But that is not to say that the public was influenced by the demonstrations, or that presidents felt that the demonstrators represented the people as a whole.

Presidents Johnson and Nixon were arguably much more concerned about the opinion of the public throughout the course of the war. Both presidents felt that they

needed to maintain a certain level of public support in order to send a strong message to
the North Vietnamese. They were both compelled to take drastic actions such as tapping
phone lines and carefully monitoring any kind of incoming or outgoing information.
Johnson and Nixon often stressed about the opinion of the media, because they felt as
though this was one of the most influential sources of information for the people.
According to Melvin Small, Lyndon Johnson was known to have called network
presidents and made foul-mouthed threats to them demanding better treatment for his
policies. Richard Nixon, according to Small, organized a more formal attack of
intimidation that was responsible in good measure for declining coverage of antiwar
activities in 1971 and 1972. Small writes:

Any media coverage of dissidence is recognized by officials as important, not
only because it might lead to the contagion of others but also because they fear
that the ‘enemy’ does not understand the American system and sometimes
misinterprets the comments of one senator or the activities of 100,000 marchers in
New York as reflecting general lack of support for the president’s policies. Thus,
when the media cover the movement or otherwise serve as a platform for protest,
they undoubtedly affect foreign policy indirectly since the American government
constructs its own policies convinced that the enemy is influenced by what it
picks up on nightly television newscasts. In addition, the public was greatly influenced by the media, and studies have suggested
that changes in public opinion were more likely to be related to the changes in reporting
by the media and not by the demonstrations.

Of the three presidents studied here, Lyndon Johnson was arguably the one most
affected by the public. Almost any dissent regarding his policies was believed to be a
personal attack on his ability to lead the war, and he did little to cover the fact that he at

196 ibid.: 190.
least considered what the public thought when deciding major issues regarding the war, such as the decision to send in combat troops. Johnson’s presidency was unique compared to the other two in that he enjoyed almost equal periods of support and dissent. The first two and a half years of the Johnson administration (including the period in which he served as a result of Kennedy’s assassination) enjoyed a tremendous amount of support for both Johnson and his foreign policy regarding Vietnam. The second half of the Johnson presidency, however, saw a large organization of dissenters engaging in attempts to influence the policymaking process. However, despite much criticism, Johnson increased the commitment to Vietnam, and ended up paying a high political price for doing so. Although the previous chapters suggest that Johnson put heavy restrictions on the military, there is no evidence to suggest that these restraints were the direct result of public opinion.

In addition to no noticeable pattern in the behaviors of the three presidents over the course of the war, there are other problems with applying the theories to this case study. First of all, there is no clear definition of how the system of dikes is communicated to the president, meaning that any opinions expressed by the people are subject to presidential interpretation. Unlike laws, which are upheld by the judiciary, the public has no way to give pre-determined conditions under which they will support the president in war. The president is free to interpret opinions as he chooses, so even if one could argue that presidents are constrained, the extent to which one felt restrained would vary from person to person. Secondly, as demonstrated in the first two chapters, presidents have often questioned the validity of public opinion because the public is
usually consider unqualified to make decisions about specific policies. Because of the sensitive nature of information and the high level of knowledge necessary to understand foreign politics, the public cannot decisively select policies that they feel to be inadequate. Thirdly, the very parsimonious theory described by Sobel fails to take into account particular characteristics of the individual. Because the focus is on one particular actor’s ability to make decisions, the personality traits of the individual could have a drastic effect on the policymaking process. Sobel and Key have tried to generalize the behavior of all presidents under particular conditions (in times of conflict or war), they fail to take into account the fact those personality traits or other behavioral factors may influence the perception of the role of the public.

Sobel and Key do make some important and interesting observations that may hold true under a particular set of conditions. In the first chapter, a definition of each of the different types of influence groups was given. If the theories provided are applied to all of these groups collectively, they are not likely to be supported by the evidence. However, on the other hand, certain groups may have the ability to constrain (or at least heavily influence) presidential decision-making. Elites, for example, tend to hold a tremendous amount of influence over presidents. Just as presidents rely on information provided to them by a number of actors, they also rely on the expertise of a select group of individuals when dealing with foreign affairs. In addition, some elites have the power to make decisions that pertain to foreign policy, so coordination and cooperation between
certain advisers and the president is essential. Interest groups also have the ability to permeate the inner circle of advisers to relay their information and opinions to the president. The media and the mass public, however, are not as easily represented in this model of communication, as it is often difficult for the media to (1) understand the conditions under which decisions are considered, and (2) convey their beliefs about policy-making to the president. The willingness of the president to listen and heed to the suggestions of the public does not seem to follow any particular pattern in this case; however, behavioral studies or further analyses may eventually find conditions under which all presidents behave in a similar way. However, until suggested otherwise, the theories of Sobel and Key are not able to be universally applied to decision-making during the Vietnam War.
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