Foreign Policy and the Fourth Estate:

Vietnam and the Creation of the "Liberal" Media, 1954-2003

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Introduction

> The American people are strongly in support not only of the troops, but of these objectives. And of course, that is a very important point because it is my hope that when this is over we will have kicked, for once and for all, the so-called Vietnam syndrome. And the country's pulling together, unlike any time – in this kind of situation – any time since World War II. And that's a good thing for our country. And that sends a strong signal for the future that we're credible, we're committed to peace, we're committed to justice, and we are determined to fulfill our obligations in trying to bring about a more peaceful world order.[1]
>
> -President George H.W. Bush. February 17, 1991.

> I made a comment right here at this podium the other day about shedding the divisions that incurred from the Vietnam War. And I want to repeat and say… it's long overdue. It is long overdue that we kicked the Vietnam syndrome… and that this nation was divided and we weren't as grateful as we should be.[2]
>
> -President George H.W. Bush March 4, 1991.

The legacy of the Vietnam War weighed heavily on President George H.W. Bush during preparation for the Persian Gulf War. Having lived through the tumultuous and polarizing Vietnam era, Bush feared leading the nation into a potentially divisive military campaign. The ghost of Vietnam still haunted the American public as well, as the country continued its post-Vietnam resistance to prolonged and costly military involvements. The Bush administration confronted the Vietnam situation head-on and launched a public relations campaign to gin up support for the war by ensuring the nation that American involvement in the Persian Gulf "would not be another Vietnam."[3] After the incredibly efficient and decisive American victory in the Gulf, Bush proudly stated that America had kicked

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[1] President George H.W. Bush's comments to reporters Kennebunkport, Maine, February 17, 1991. www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu.

[2] President George H.W. Bush's remarks to Veterans Service Organizations, March 4, 1991. www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu.

[3] Evan Thomas "No Vietnam: The Lessons of Southeast Asia Shape the President's Strategy in the Gulf," *Newsweek*, December 10, 1990, 24-31. Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion On U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 147.

"the Vietnam syndrome."

The term "Vietnam syndrome" emerged in the aftermath of the war, used to describe the American people's reluctance to support any potentially open-ended or prolonged military engagement. Post-Vietnam presidents argued that this "syndrome" handicapped their ability to conduct foreign policy and prevented or restricted necessary military intervention in foreign nations. President Bush's statements after the Gulf War emphasized the lingering affects of Vietnam on the government and the people. His pleasure in the popular support for the "troops" and the military's "objectives," as well as their commitment to "justice," and determination "to fulfill [America's] obligations," subtly referred to beliefs and myths about specific American groups and institutions that emerged after the war. Bush's emphasis on support stemmed from the belief that the anti-war movement and the public's failure to support the war's anti-communist objectives led to an American defeat in Vietnam. This understanding accompanied the assumption that the press had assisted in the nation's ignominious withdrawal. This "liberal" media conspiracy accused the press of deliberately undermining the war effort in Southeast Asia. Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon cultivated and perpetuated this myth during their presidencies, and it has since developed into "conventional wisdom" in parts of the American society. This understanding of the press in Vietnam is flawed; a media conspiracy aimed at ending the military operations in Southeast Asia never existed

Chapter one chronicles the press coverage of American involvement in Vietnam beginning with John F. Kennedy's administration and continuing through

the 1968 Tet offensive at the end of Johnson's presidency. For most of Kennedy's presidency, the press and the public paid relatively little attention to the situation in Southeast Asia, and still viewed the Soviet Union as the biggest threat to American security. The media presence in Vietnam did increase during Kennedy's presidency, and the augmentation of journalists directly correlated to the larger presence of U.S. forces. The overwhelming percentage of reports from this period were positive and supported American efforts to combat communism in the region. The press criticism that did appear in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* under Kennedy focused on the corruption of President Ngo Diem's Saigon regime and the inefficiencies or lack of initiative from South Vietnam's army.

The second part of the chapter focuses on media coverage during the Johnson administration, and the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* interpretation and depiction of major events, changes, events, and decisions in the war- Gulf of Tonkin, Pleiku bombing, escalation, Operation Rolling Thunder 52, the anti-war movements, the Tet Offensive. The press was predominantly positive on American involvement in Vietnam during Johnson's first years in office, but media criticism increased toward the end of 1966. Johnson deliberately misled the public and the press on American progress in Vietnam both to protect his "Great Society" programs and to keep public opinion from causing America's first loss to communism. The president's continued dishonesty led to an increased number of contradictory reports, and the press reflected his decline in credibility. Johnson's deceptive policies came to light when the North Vietnamese launched a massive and well-organized offensive during the Tet holiday, and revealed that the press and the

public had been manipulated and misled by the Johnson administration. With proof that American forces were trapped in a bloody and costly stalemate, the press became more vocal in its opposition to the Vietnam War. This opposition arose from Johnson's unwillingness to address the situation honestly, not from an antagonistic media determined to undermine the war effort.

The second chapter concentrates on the emergence of the myth of a "liberal" media hostile towards the Vietnam War and its influence on American's understanding of the war. The first part of the chapter focuses on the Johnson administration's relationship with the press and the way he laid the foundation for the liberal media conspiracy. As the war progressed, Johnson became more vocal in his criticisms and accusations against the news establishment. He also concluded that his southern heritage caused journalists to attempt to undermine his authority. In conversations and interviews with reporters, Johnson attacked the press for its interpretation of the war, its personal bias against the president, and its role in weakening public support for the war.

The second part of chapter two describes the way Nixon cultivated and spread the notion of a liberal media conspiracy by expanding on Johnson's criticism. Nixon, who despised the elitist establishment he associated with the press, actively attempted to undermine the media. Speeches by Nixon and Vice President Spiro T. Agnew directly challenged and criticized news establishments. Nixon perpetuated this myth by appealing to the conservative counter-establishment that emerged during his presidency. Nixon referred to this diverse group as "Middle America," and encouraged the idea that an elitist group of liberal journalists actively was

attempting to undermine the war effort that resonated within the conservative counter-establishment.

Chapter three describes the way presidents' foreign policy and handling of the press during military conflicts changed after Vietnam. After the Vietnam War, the government and the military severely limited journalists' movement during combat operations. The government hindered correspondents' ability to enter areas of hostility and subjected their reports to censorship. The government's strategy for controlling the media during military involvements changed after Vietnam, but in every case the government almost eliminated opportunities for the press to influence the public. The shadow of Vietnam also influenced foreign policy under presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. After Vietnam, the public had a limited tolerance for costly wars with heavy casualties, and the nation's fear of a second Vietnam significantly limited presidents' ability to intervene militarily in foreign nations. Personal accounts from presidents and their staffs indicate how much they took the "Vietnam syndrome" into account while formulating military strategy, and focusing on public opinion

Chapter I: Media Coverage of Vietnam:

Searching For The Hostile "Liberal" Press, 1961-1968

> Reporting from Vietnam varied in quality, but some was false. Reporters and cameramen once went into a deserted village being used as a Marine training base. One reporter gave a Marine a cigarette lighter and asked, "why don't you light that thatched roof?" He did. That footage went all over the country with the story "Marines torch local village."[1]
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> -Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, 1961-1969

> The war in Vietnam is ritualistically described as "the most divisive" in our history, but that was not the case when it began. Virtually the entire country was aboard at the start, most especially the leading organs of the Eastern Liberal Press. … Today our government, with broad support from the "media" and substantial public and political approval, is propagating a similar view of the Middle East and our interests there.[2]
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> -Richard Harwood, *The Washington Post*, September 2, 1990.

American defeat in Vietnam continued to haunt the nation long after American withdrawal. Since 1973, when the Paris Accords produced what President Richard Nixon euphemistically called "peace with honor," American presidents have been reluctant to commit American forces to potentially long-term military engagements for fear of leading America into a second Vietnam. The public too has grown hostile to large-scale commitments of American forces, and attaining public support for foreign military involvement has become a necessity for policy makers. The increased presidential emphasis on ensuring public support and avoiding pitfalls that could potentially prolong American involvement emerged in

[1] Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Norton, 1990), 571.
[2] Richard Harwood, "War-or Folly-in the Gulf?" *Washington Post* September 2, 1990, B6.

the aftermath of Vietnam. Equally important, policymakers' insistence on managing public access to information about military operations reflected a widespread, if historically inaccurate, belief that during the Vietnam conflict a hostile media deliberately undermined public support for the war and forced the American government to withdraw. For many, this myth has helped to explain how a tiny, underdeveloped Asian nation could bring the United States to its knees. Both the American public and government searched for evidence to explain the defeat, and the press provided them with an easily identifiable scapegoat. The media's critics, largely members of the growing conservative counter-establishment of the 1960's and 1970's, attacked the news organizations for inaccurate reports on American progress in Vietnam and accused the press of intentionally trying to erode public support. In their attacks on the media, these opponents pointed to incidents of flawed reporting, especially during the 1968 Tet offensive, and overly critical reports.

It has become commonplace to blame a "liberal press" for turning American opinion against the war effort and undermining the mission in Southeast Asia, but the press did not play an adversarial roll toward American objectives in Vietnam and adopted a critical stance on the war only as a result of President Lyndon Johnson's dishonest and misleading policies. Convinced of the necessity of preventing the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, eager to maintain public support for Vietnam, and perhaps more important for his domestic initiatives, Johnson provided the press and the public with inaccurate reports on American progress throughout his time in office. This strategy was successful as Johnson

slowly committed the U.S. military to a large-scale war thousands of miles from home, and convinced the nation that an American victory was close at hand. Johnson's "selling" of the war eventually backfired as years of fighting with full American military commitment failed to defeat the enemy. Equally important, Johnson's dishonesty weakened his credibility with the public and the press. Despite growing concerns and criticism of the veracity of the Johnson administration's reports, the media largely refrained from condemning the war in Vietnam until early 1968 when the Tet offensive provided the nation evidence of Johnson's duplicity. North Vietnam's ability to launch a massive attack contradicted Johnson's claims that a weakened enemy was close to surrender. As the war progressed, Johnson's deception and dishonesty resulted in an increased numbers of skeptical and critical media reports on Vietnam. The press eventually attacked the Johnson administration and the war in Vietnam openly, and the criticism arose from Johnson's failure to communicate accurately American progress in the war and the realization that American forces could not defeat the North Vietnamese. Indeed, throughout much of the conflict, the press reported almost exclusively on the basis of information provided by official government and military sources and limited criticism until evidence of the administration's mendacity confirmed longstanding suspicions that Johnson had deliberately and dishonestly led the nation into a bloody, costly stalemate.

Part I: Escalation of Press Coverage under Kennedy

The United States did not commit a significant number of troops to Vietnam until 1965. In the absence of direct military involvement in Vietnam, the American press invested little human and financial resources to the country. In 1960 and 1961, the American press included some coverage of events in Vietnam, and routinely covered the increasing opposition to President Ngo Diem's government and intensified Communist aggression. President John F. Kennedy's reluctance to speak on the issue, however, and his administration's release of misleading information helped to limit the media's focus on Vietnam in the first years of his presidency.[3] Other, seemingly more significant, international events in 1961 pushed Southeast Asia off the front pages. Not surprisingly, given the dramas unfolding in Cuba, Berlin, and Laos, Vietnam received scant attention in the national press.

In 1960, the relatively small scale of American involvement in Southeast Asia caused the public and the press to pay only limited attention to the situation in Vietnam; however, the increase in American commitment and the instability of South Vietnam's government and army resulted in more media coverage. As early as 1962, the Associated Press, United Press International, and the *New York Times* had established permanent bureaus in Saigon. Other newspapers, magazines, and television networks quickly followed suit.[4] Many American reporters were in the country to cover the increasingly passionate protests against the Diem Regime. Buddhist led opposition to the Diem government intensified American focus on Vietnam in May 1963. Angered by religious restrictions, Buddhist monks organized

[3] Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1986), 30-31.
[4] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and The Vietnam War* (New York: Norton, 1993), 81-82.

large protests and hunger strikes in South Vietnam's major cities, and international criticism arose from Diem's repressive response to the movement. Newspapers printed pictures of monks immolating themselves, and caused the Kennedy administration to question their support for Diem.[5] The widening of the American commitment to Vietnam, the ineffectiveness of South Vietnam's military and civilian leaders, and the Buddhist crisis led to increased coverage of Vietnam during 1962 and 1963.[6] Even so, the situation in Southeast Asia remained a relatively insignificant issue for American newspapers, as a vast majority of Americans viewed Vietnam as a small part of the global struggle against communism.

In general, news reports from Vietnam during Kennedy's presidency remained largely positive and focused on combat between South Vietnamese forces and communist rebels, or on American advisors and military personnel. Even more critical pieces tended to refrain from questioning America's ideology or approach in Vietnam and focused instead on the ineptitude and corruption of America's Vietnamese allies. Reports routinely exposed Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) failures. In April 1962, for example, *New York Times* correspondent Homer Bigart commented on the ARVN's strategic and tactical mistakes in confronting the Viet Cong:[7]

> But as usual the main enemy force got away. The Government troops failed to exploit the Viet Cong state of shock. They bunched up and dawdled in drainage ditches and under the shade of coconut trees until an American advisor cried out in exasperation, "Let's move the thing

[5] Herring, *America's Longest War,* 114-115.
[6] Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, 61-62.
[7] Communist insurgents in South Vietnam referred to themselves as the National Liberation Front, but Americans called them Viet Cong and used it in a derogatory manner.

forward.[8]

Typical of the few "pessimistic" reports during this period, Bigart attacked the inefficiency of the ARVN, emphasized the lack of motivation and commitment of South Vietnam's army, and highlighted the mounting dissatisfaction among American military personnel about the ARVN's lack of initiative. Later in the year, *Times* reporter Jacques Nevard observed that "political apathy or even hostility" toward Diem's regime "continues to be the Communists' biggest asset." Nevard also commented that few Americans stationed in Vietnam believed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's claim "that the Vietnamese are beginning to hit the Viet Cong where it hurts."[9] The press also reported that many American officers had complained of the "misuse" of American trained forces and denounced Diem's policies that were "so split and confused that military operations against the Communist Viet Cong guerrillas bordered on chaotic."[10] For the most part, however, the press avoided criticizing the American presence in Vietnam, but attacked the unpopularity of Saigon's government and the incompetency of the ARVN.

Between 1960 and 1963, the press in Vietnam mirrored American forces' frustration with their Vietnamese, but refrained from criticizing or questioning the policies of the American military and government. When Johnson inherited the White House and the War in Vietnam after Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, he adopted a policy of deceiving the press and the public about American progress in Vietnam. This strategy continued throughout his presidency, ultimately

[8] Homer Bigart, *New York Times,* April 9, 1963.
[9] Jacques Nevard, *New York Times,* July 29, 1962.
[10] Bem Price, "South Vietnam Is Fouled Up, Officers Say," *Washington Post,* July 8, 1962, A1.

widening the president's "credibility gap" and perhaps even sinking his political career.

Part II: Johnson vs. The Press

In the spring of 1964, the situation in Vietnam still received only a moderate amount of attention in the media and only sporadically appeared on the front pages.[11] Johnson fully believed in the necessity of combating Communist forces in Vietnam, but he also did his best to distract the public from the situation that country. His reasons were largely political.[12] Facing extreme hawk Barry Goldwater in the upcoming 1964 election, Johnson tried to downplay the issue of Vietnam to avoid appearing weak on Communism.[13] In 1949, Johnson witnessed the Republican Party's attacks on the Truman administration after the fall of China to Communism, and he viewed the "loss" of Vietnam as a potentially similar foreign affairs failure.[14] Additionally, he feared that the situation in Southeast Asia might distract Congress from his "Great Society" reforms, and cost him political support for his already controversial Civil Rights agenda.[15] Johnson delayed committing large numbers of combat forces until after his decisive victory in the 1964 election, and the limited direct American involvement in combat reduced both the coverage and the debate over Vietnam. The press remained largely supportive of Johnson's

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[11] Hallin, *Uncensored War,* 60.
[12] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1998), 278-279
[13] *Ibid, 143.*
[14] Herring, *America's Longest War,* 136.
[15] Hallin*, Uncensored War, 242.*

handling of the Vietnam situation during this period, and in general continued to back the president's widening of the war.

Johnson mostly delayed making decisions on Vietnam until after the election, but he did use the alleged North Vietnamese attacks on two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2 and 4, 1964, to justify widening the scope of the war through retaliatory air strikes, and to secure Congress's approval for the future prosecution of the war.[16] On August 2, while gathering intelligence of the coast of Vietnam, the American destroyer *USS Maddox* briefly exchanged fire with North Vietnamese patrol boats. Two nights later, reports of an enemy attack came from both the *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy.* Despite poor weather conditions and unreliable sonar and radar readings, the two American destroyers opened fired on perceived enemy targets and military officials began preparing for retaliatory airstrikes.[17]

The press, Congress, and the public viewed the events as a direct attack on the American flag and supported the president's vigorous reaction to the North Vietnamese aggression. On August 5, the *New York Times* ran four front-page articles on the attacks and included the full text from Johnson's address the previous evening. The columns described the events, American retaliation, and senior officials' reactions to the attacks. In the aftermath of the first major assault on American forces, the articles reflected favorably on Johnson's handling of the

[16] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 278-279.
[17] Herring, *America's Longest War,* 142-143.

situation and described it as "the only thing one can do under the circumstances."[18] The articles, relied only on "official" reports and sources, never criticized Johnson's reaction to the events and only briefly mentioned Hanoi's claim that the "attack on United States ships was a fabrication."[19] Days after the attacks occurred, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave Johnson the authority to conduct military operations in Southeast Asia without a formal declaration of war.

Johnson's control over the flow of information resulted in overwhelming support for his actions. Had the press known of the administration's plans to escalate the war, or the shady circumstances in which the alleged attacks occurred, the response might not have been as resoundingly positive. At this point, however, Americans generally trusted their President and supported him in a time of crisis. After the retaliatory air strikes ended in the following days, reporting on American involvement in Vietnam largely faded from the headlines, but future policy in Southeast Asia continued to be debated in the months leading up to the 1964 election.[20] In an attempt to isolate Goldwater as an extremist, Johnson emphasized his handling of the Gulf of Tonkin attacks and his opposition to further escalation of the war during his campaign. He simultaneously attacked Goldwater's aggressively hawkish policies for widening American involvement in Vietnam.[21] Despite publically stating his unwillingness to escalate American involvement in Southeast Asia, Johnson had already concluded that a Communist defeat could be attained only

[18] Tom Wicker, "Forces Enlarged," *New York Times* August 6, 1964, 2.
[19] Arnold Lumbasch, "Reds Driven Off: Two Torpedo Vessels Believed Sunk in Gulf of Tonkin," *New York Times,* August 8, 1964, 1.
[20] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 145.
[21] Dallek, *Flawed Giant,* 154-155

through increasing American commitment, and the administration began to search for an opportunity to widen the war.

In the weeks and months that followed the Gulf of Tonkin incident, members of the Johnson administration decided that an American victory in Vietnam could be achieved only through a dramatic escalation of the war. Little information on the decision reached the media, and Johnson and other officials publically insisted that no change in policy would occur. Communist soldiers infiltrated South Vietnam through the Ho Chi Minh trail with relative ease, and Johnson's military advisors believed that bombing North Vietnamese targets would hinder their access to South Vietnam.[22]

On February 7, 1965, a Viet Cong attack on a U.S. military base in Pleiku killed eight and wounded more than 100 American soldiers. The assault on Pleiku handed the Johnson administration the opportunity to augment direct American involvement and allowed the retaliatory air strikes that ensued to evolve into sustained bombings of Communist targets.[23]

The press initially backed the president's actions. Some journalists, however, expressed skepticism about the new strategy. *Times* reporter Charles Mohr, for example, raised concerns about official statements about the size of the assault and concluded that "the attack was not especially intense." He also wondered why there

[22] Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 80-81.
[23] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York: Norton, 1993), 131.

were aircraft carriers "in the South China Sea near the Vietnamese coast."[24] "Positive" reports vastly outnumbered articles like Mohr's, but editorials afforded insight into questions being raised by journalists behind the scenes and signaled a growing distrust between the press and the president.[25]

In the weeks that followed the Pleiku attacks, the president remained uncharacteristically silent about the bombings and the escalation of the war. This "eerie silence" led to increased speculation among reporters that eventually found its way into the headlines.[26] In February, the *Times* ran headline stories entitled, "Johnson is Silent," "U.S. is Considering A Troop Increase in South Vietnam," "Johnson Pressed On Vietnam," and "Johnson Decision On Vietnam Stand Is Reported Near."[27] At the end of the month, Johnson broke his silence and announced the Pentagon's intentions to continue bombing North Vietnamese targets and to deploy ground forces in Vietnam, media speculation faded and journalists went back to reporting the official line. The increased level of conjecture during the "eerie silence" emphasized the press's willingness to deviate from standard journalistic routines when it only had limited information. The abandonment of skepticism after Johnson addressed the press demonstrated the news establishment's overall support for the American cause in Vietnam and its reluctance to criticize Johnson's policies directly.

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[24] Charles Mohr, "Questions on Air Strike," *New York Times,* 14.
[25] Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 83.
[26] *Ibid,* 83-83.
[27] *New York Times* February 1965, 1.

As American commitment increased, keeping Vietnam out of the news proved impossible and Johnson adopted a policy of providing the press a continuous, if not always accurate, flow of information on American progress. Because of Johnson's tendency to mislead the media and the public, press coverage of American policy in Vietnam remained largely positive throughout 1964 and 1965. Johnson's relationship with the press benefited from his Great Society programs, which included the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Act of 1965, and education and healthcare reforms. These advancements initially helped him avoid criticism from the media and the public, and he maintained an approval rating of approximately 75 percent throughout the first half of 1964.[28]

During the several months following the "eerie silence," the Johnson administration substantially increased the number of American ground forces in Vietnam, but the escalation occurred bit by bit. The piecemeal release of information, coupled with a public relations campaign designed to increase popular support for escalation, distracted the media from the deployments. The offensive defended America's growing commitment in Vietnam, and simultaneously discredited North Vietnam with empty talks of peace, negotiations, and economic aid.[29] Official statements often made the front-page and received a great deal of praise from journalists. In July, Johnson escalated American involvement even further when he announced the immediate deployment of an additional 50,000 Americans, with more deployments to follow. Unlike the bombing that escalated

[28] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 236-237, 84.
[29] Hallin, *Uncensored War,* 92-93.

quickly and sparked controversy, the ground war developed over time, and allowed Johnson to commit American forces to a ground war with little public or Congressional debate.[30]

Public support for Johnson's handling of the war remained high during and after the troop increase of 1965, and the press reflected this general approval.[31] Johnson's strategy of providing the press ambiguous or false information about American policy and actions in Vietnam helped maintain public support for the war; at the end of 1965, however, criticism of official inaccuracies surfaced more regularly in the media.[32] In November, the *New York Times* ran Mohr's article "War and Misinformation," which disputed official accounts of combat engagements and raised serious questions about official body counts. Mohr emphasized the "pressure for body-count figures," and concluded that senior officials had provided an inaccurate picture of American progress.[33]

Other news establishments echoed similar concern about official ambiguity and manipulation of facts and statistics.[34] Unofficial reports in Vietnam contradicted statements made by government and military leaders on future policy and American soldiers' involvement in combat. These disagreements only widened the credibility gap. During the escalation of 1965 and 1966, newspapers began to report more frequently on Congressional criticisms of Johnson's policies and to pay

[30] Hallin, *Uncensored War,* 100-101.
[31] William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army, 1988), 181-182.
[32] *Ibid,* 213.
[33] Charles Mohr, "War and Misfortunes," *New York Times,* November 26, 1965, 14.
[34] *Public Affairs,* 214-215.

some attention to the emerging anti-war movement, but these stories appeared relatively infrequently and were usually consigned to the back pages.[35] Typical of the media's coverage of the war at this point, the front-page articles dealt almost exclusively with information provided by official sources. Critical or skeptical reports like Mohr's remained off the front-page, and optimistic or neutral accounts continued to dominate the coverage of Vietnam. In general, the press still reported favorably on the situation in Vietnam and continued to support Johnson and American involvement; criticism of the president's dishonesty did become more vocal and occurred more frequently as the human and financial costs increased.

Johnson approved a temporary freeze on air strikes in December 1965 to attract public support. Some journalists recognized the insincerity of the pause, but the media as well as the public largely supported the decision and the strategy temporarily succeeded in boosting domestic morale and limiting negative reports in the media.[36] The optimism did not last long. Opposition to the Vietnam War mounted throughout 1966, and a growing number of Congressmen and academics called for withdrawal or a dramatic change in policy. Anti-war activists became more vocal and held rallies and protests on college campuses and in front of government facilities around the country. Despite intensified criticism, polling showed that a majority of the American people still supported the war and favored

[35] Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 118.
[36] *Ibid,* 117-118.

continued or increased effort to achieve victory, but support for involvement in Vietnam did decline.[37]

By the end of 1966, skepticism about the Johnson administration's honesty mounted. The anti-war movement intensified, and inconsistent reports from the government and the military produced greater criticism. In December, the military launched a new bombing campaign that targeted Communist sites within a ten-mile radius of Hanoi.[38] These attacks-part of Operation Rolling Thunder 52-reversed previous decisions to limit air operations against targets in North Vietnam, and American officials attempted to control the amount of press coverage the offensive received. North Vietnamese and Soviet claims of civilian deaths caused a flurry of media attention, and journalists began to demand answers from officials. The press focused less on civilian casualties, and criticized the Johnson administration's tendency to provide misleading and ambiguous reports, as well as its pattern of escalating the war without providing accurate information to the public.[39] The press's criticism did not focus on the tactics or the necessity of the air operations, but rather on the White House's failure to provide reporters with reliable information.[40]

Some columnists, Congressmen, and factions of the American public called for immediate withdrawal by the end of 1966, but most still believed that victory

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[37] Hammond, *Public Affairs,* 263-264.
[38] *Ibid,* 272.
[39] *Ibid,* 273-274.
[40] Domestic strife in 1967 further divided the nation and increased discontent for Johnson. Increased domestic opposition to the Vietnam War, urban riots, rising crime rates, racial tensions, and economic uncertainty all contributed to the growing frustration within the American public.

could be achieved by altering strategy in some fashion. This belief in America's power and ideology limited the ability of the press to criticize American involvement in the war or to raise doubts about the possibility of an American victory; as Johnson's credibility declined and American casualties increased in 1967, however, the media and the public became more vocal in their opposition to the war.

Public support for the war decreased dramatically in 1967, and the media mirrored this decline. Increased resistance to the draft, a proposed 10 percent income tax surcharge to help fund the war, and social tensions all added to the frustration of the American public.[41] The media reported the growing discontent for America's involvement in Vietnam more frequently during 1967. News agencies reported on a wider range of criticisms of the war, and these stories appeared on the front pages with more regularity. The growing war-weariness and the rising financial and human costs changed both the frequency and the content of these criticisms. Opponents of the war no longer harped on military strategies or the corruption of South Vietnam's government.[42] Instead, critics began to raise questions about the morality of the war, the number of civilian casualties, and the rising American death toll.

On May 25, 1967, the *Washington Post* printed a front-page article on war crimes committed by Americans, "Viet War Torture Usual, Levy Trial Witness

[41] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 211.
[42] *Ibid,* 206-207.

Says."[43] A *Times'* article on April 21, "Toll of Civilians Rising In Vietnam," concentrated on the increase in civilian deaths in South Vietnam, and blamed allied forces for approximately half of the casualties.[44] The media also provided more exposure to the varying facets of the anti-war movement in 1967. A *Times* article on November 19 described the Young Democrats request for an "unconditional halt of the bombing in North Vietnam," and the *Washington Post* reported on protests outside of the White House in May, 1967.[45] [46] The increased press criticism of the War throughout 1967 revealed growing skepticism of the Johnson administration's optimistic portrayal of the war and American progress. By the beginning of 1968, the press had not abandoned support for the war effort, but the claims of progress, the growing anti-war movement, and Johnson's refusal to admit that American forces were stuck in a stalemate caused further suspicion in the press and the public. For many, the Tet Offensive of late January 1968 confirmed long-held suspicions about Johnson's reports of American military success in Vietnam. American involvement in a military quagmire became increasingly obvious.

Part III: And Then The Roof Caved In, The Tet Offensive and Johnson's Dishonesty

In the early morning of January 30, 1968, Communist forces broke the New Year truce and launched a massive coordinated attack on the cities of South Vietnam. The offensive, which took place during the Tet holiday cease-fire, caught

[43] "Viet War Torture Usual, Levy Trial Witness Says," *Washington Post,* May, 25, 1967, 1.
[44] Jonathan Randal, "Toll of Civilians Rising In Vietnam," *New York Times,* April 24, 1967, 1.
[45] "Young Democrats Ask Bombing Halt," *New York Times,* November 11, 1967, 1.
[46] "The Face of Protest: 9 Barred At White House Gates," *Washington Post,* May 19, 1965, 1.

American and South Vietnamese forces off guard, but they recovered, repelled the North Vietnamese, and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.[47] The Tet Offensive resulted in a military failure for the North, which sustained extensive losses, but Tet was a psychological defeat for the American forces. Press reports at the onset of the offensive exaggerated the success of the Communist assault, and violent video footage on American television networks furthered the idea of an American defeat.[48] Although ARVN and American forces scored a decisive victory during Tet, the media did a poor job of acknowledging the Allied success, which worsened the American psychological defeat.

The coverage of the Tet Offensive was one of the press's biggest failures in Vietnam, but the flawed reports did not sway the public's support for the war. After the initial confusion, the press generally depicted the aftermath of the Tet Offensive accurately. On February 2, the *New York Times* ran two front-page articles that describe the outcome of the attacks positively and accurately. Max Frankel, for example, discussed Johnson's response to the offensive in "A Resolute Stand,"[49] and a headline read "Enemy Toll Soars: Offensive is Running "Out Of Steam" Says Westmoreland."[50]

The administration was right when it charged that public opinion did shift in the wake of Tet. But it was widespread recognition of the White House's misleading reports on the enemy's imminent defeat, not the press's failures, that helped turn to

[47] Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City: Da Capo, 1984), 116-117.
[48] *Ibid,* 158-159.
[49] Max Frankel, "A Resolute Stand," *New York Times,* February 2, 1968, 1.
[50] Charles Mohr, "Enemy Toll Soars," *New York Times,* February 2, 1968, 1.

the public against the war. Johnson's credibility had begun to decline as early as 1966, and the Tet Offensive only confirmed public suspicions that something had gone wrong in Vietnam. The January 1968 attacks provided the final blow to Johnson's already suspect credibility, and his popularity plummeted. Editorial opinion matched but did not necessarily produce this shift in public opinion. In an editorial on February 2, for example, *New York Times* reporter James Reston expressed his frustration with the military's claims that moral was low within the Communist ranks and refused to believe Westmoreland's assessment that the Tet Offensive represented the enemy's "last gasp."[51] Public support for the war never recovered, and the administration began to reexamine its policy in Vietnam. Critics cite the inaccurate reporting during Tet as the crucial evidence in the case against the media. Closer examination suggests that these inaccuracies most likely had a minimal effect on a public that had long been suspicious of the president and the war.

For years, critics of the Vietnam-era press have argued that an antagonistic liberal media launched a crusade to discredit the war effort in Vietnam. The media supposedly harbored anti-American sentiments and purposely eroded public support for the democratic cause in Southeast Asia. In reality, the press accurately depicted the situation in Vietnam hurt only occasionally by isolated incidents of bias or inaccuracy. The hostile image associated with the media was created by the deceptive policies of presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. The press reported

[51] James Reston "Washington: North Vietnam's Strategy of Terror," *New York Times,* February 2, 1968, 34.

the false or inaccurate information they provided. The unique nature of the Vietnam War, combined with the media's distrust for President Johnson led journalists to take a more critical look at American policy and involvement in Vietnam. The media's critics point to this opposition as proof of the existence of a hostile liberal media, but this liberal bias never existed. Indeed, the next chapter will show that the liberal media was the product of a deliberate campaign launched by the Johnson and Nixon administrations to discredit the news establishment

Chapter II:

Creating the Liberal Media Conspiracy

The end of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency left the public confused and disturbed about America's domestic and foreign affairs. The Tet offensive seemed to prove the resilience of Communist North Vietnam, and gave lie to official reports that an American victory was close at hand. At home, unrest produced by racial tensions, the anti-war movement, and rising crime further polarized the nation. Much of the American public demanded political change.[1] Richard M. Nixon, a man who was nothing if not a political opportunist, sensed opportunity in the collapse of the Democratic Party and the postwar "liberal consensus." Nixon benefited from the emerging conservative counter-establishment that started to take form during his presidency. Nixon was the champion of this "silent majority," the spokesman for a collection of diverse groups united by a shared resentment of the liberal policies of the 1960's. In concert with the emerging conservative counter-establishment, Nixon set the terms for conservative ideology and politics in the coming years. The idea of deliberately branding the "liberal" media as opponents of America's aims in Vietnam was at the center of Nixon's political thought.[2]

Nixon's attacks on the press helped cultivate the belief in a liberal media conspiracy. Nixon did help to popularize hatred of the "liberal press," but he

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[1] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 7-8.
[2] Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 426-427

exploited a foundation laid by the Johnson White House. Determined to defeat Communist forces in Vietnam, Johnson had become increasingly frustrated by the press, which he believed limited his actions and options by undermining public support for the war. The Nixon administration expanded and perfected this strategy, but it did not invent it.

The publication of classified materials, reports about the Cam Ne killings (1965), the Tet Offensive (1968), the secret bombings of Cambodia (1969), and the release of the Pentagon Papers (1971), heightened attacks on the press and provided ammunition for both Johnson and Nixon against the press. Nixon and Johnson did not dislike the press only when it was careless. Indeed, even in the best of times, both men regarded the press with suspicion and hostility. The two men dealt differently with the news establishment. Johnson usually kept his dislike for the media "in house," and attempted to flood the press with information; Nixon, on the other hand, rarely interacted with the press and attempted to undermine journalists' reputations by accusing them "ulterior motives." The presidents' relationship with the press played a large role in producing the common misconception that the media's biased reporting created the war-weariness that led to American withdrawal.

Part I: "That Bitch of a War": Lyndon Johnson, the Press and Vietnam, 1965-1968

President Johnson's ability to control the information the press received about Vietnam, and the generally positive support for his domestic programs

created relatively harmonious relations between 1963 and the end of 1965. When the president's attempts to "sell" the war to the American public began to fail, however, the media became more critical of his prosecution of the war. This shift occurred gradually during his time in office and stemmed from his unwillingness to reevaluate American policy in Vietnam and his reluctance to give the public or the Congress a realistic appraisal of the American position in Vietnam. Johnson kept his disdain for the press largely secret during the first half of his presidency, but later countered the media's growing criticism with public attacks of his own towards the end of his term.

The president's hostility to the press was hardly a surprise to anyone who knew him. Journalists and politicians were familiar with Johnson's controlling and egotistical personality, and his need to control everyone around him.[3] Vice President Hubert Humphrey recalled Johnson forcing a journalist to accompany them to the president's ranch in Texas despite her protests that "she had no luggage, that she was flying back to Washington, and that she simply couldn't go."[4] This attitude may explain the president's unwillingness to withdraw from Southeast Asia, even after some advisors including Humphrey strongly encouraged him to end the war.[5] Johnson's stubborn and controlling attitude shaped his policy in Vietnam, as he refused to accept Communist defeat.

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[3] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 186.
[4] Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 305.
[5] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002) 214-215.

Press attacks on Johnson's policies and honesty appeared throughout his presidency, but these reports became politically disastrous only after the Tet offensive contradicted his "optimistic" assessments. Press criticism increased during the years leading up to Tet, the product of reports contradicting Johnson's claims of American progress. Critics became more vocal and more numerous after the January 1968 offensive.[6] As his credibility sank and press coverage became more critical, Johnson began to lash out at the news establishment. In a 1967 interview, the president accused the press of deliberately undermining the war effort, claiming that "NBC and the *New York Times* are committed to an editorial policy of making us surrender."[7] Johnson's public attacks on the press continued for the rest of his presidency.

Johnson initially obfuscated about the war and its costs to protect his domestic agenda. He wanted to focus on building what he called the "Great Society" and waging an "unconditional war on poverty."[8] Aware of the consequences escalation in Vietnam could have on his social programs, the president downplayed American involvement in Southeast Asia to the press and delayed the commitment of ground forces. He took immense pride in his Great Society programs and worried about Vietnam's potential effects on his domestic policies. The first session of the 89th Congress in October 1965 secured the passing of Johnson's first and most important reform proposal of the Great Society.[9] With his domestic legislation in

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[6] Schulman, *The Seventies,* 186.
[7] Lyndon B. Johnson press conference. Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1989), 183.
[8] Lyndon Johnson, "Greet Society Speech," Ann Arbor Michigan, May 22, 1964.
[9] Dallek, *Flawed Giant, 278-279.*

place, Johnson shifted his focus toward increasing American involvement in Vietnam. Although widening the war could potentially have retarded the president's ability to pass or fund future domestic reforms, Johnson believed that losing the Great Society was "not so terrible as the thought of being responsible for America's losing a war to the Communists."[10]

Determined not to lose a war to the Communists, Johnson allowed Vietnam to take center stage at the end of 1965. Deterioration in his relationship with the press accompanied his shift in focus. To insure support for the war, the administration launched an unacknowledged public relations campaign to increase support for the war and discredit anti-war forces. Johnson concentrated on Congress, the public, and the media. Support for the war and his policies for waging it remained high, but the administration nonetheless recognized the importance of positive reports in the press. Members of Johnson's staff recruited sympathetic journalists to write supportive articles and encouraged influential citizens to defend the war in newspaper advertisements and letters to the editor.[11] CBS's decision to air a report in early August on the burning of Cam Ne by U.S. Marines threatened America's prestige and sparked an "outraged reaction… from the White House.[12]

The Cam Ne story was a nightmare for the Johnson administration. On August 3, 1965, CBS correspondent Morley Safer filmed U.S. Marines setting fire to the village of Cam Ne. The black-and-white footage showed soldiers set thatched huts on fire while elderly Vietnamese peasants begged Marines to save their

[10] Conversation between Lyndon Johnson and author Doris Kearns. Dallek, *Flawed Giant,* 278.
[11] Dallek, *Flawed Giant,* 286.
[12] Morley Safer, *Flashbacks: On Returning To Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1990), 94.

homes.[13] The report focused on Vietnamese losses, did not mention U.S. casualties, and enraged President Johnson. In a middle-of-the-night phone call to CBS President Frank Stanton, Johnson complained that Safer had "shat on the American flag," and threatened to "go public" with information regarding Safer's "Communist ties."[14] Despite Johnson's accusations, CBS confirmed Safer's account and aired the report a second time on August 6.[15]

Johnson's handling of the Cam Ne incident revealed his obsession with controlling the flow of information, his fear of losing public support for the war, and his disdain for the press. During the conversation with Stanton, Johnson questioned Safer's Canadian citizenship and accused the reporter of harboring Communist sentiments.[16] Johnson strove to provide the press with only the information he wanted it to have. Information that might damage the public's support for the war frightened him. The Cam Ne incident provided the Johnson administration and others with an example of perceived media bias. Despite the accuracy of Safer's report, a majority of the American people still supported the war, and an even larger percentage backed the military. In response to the report, CBS received a flood of public letters and phone calls criticizing its portrayal of American soldiers.[17] Johnson, Nixon, and other media critics used Cam Ne and other incidents as proof

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[13] William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing, 1988), 186-187.
[14] Safer, *Flashbacks,* 94.
[15] Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 132.
[16] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 286.
[17] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York: Norton, 1993), 145.

that journalists often depicted the American military in a negative light to undermine the war effort.

In 1966 and 1967, the mounting human and financial cost caused a significant drop in support for both Johnson and his handling the war. The instability of the South Vietnamese government and the seemingly open-endedness of the American commitment intensified divisions inside the United States, which the press reflected in its reporting.[18] Johnson interpreted negative reports on the progress of the war and the divided home front as direct attacks on his foreign policy. As the anti-war movement gained momentum, and the flow of negative news from Vietnam continued, Johnson began to denounce the media.[19] In late 1967, Johnson expressed his suspicions of the media's intentions for Vietnam and claimed that some Americans "fail to see the enemy as the enemy."[20] Johnson condemned the press for its "pessimistic" depiction of the war and became more outspoken in his assertions that a media conspiracy aimed to sap the public's will to fight and bring about an early withdrawal from Vietnam.[21] As 1967 came to a close, Johnson had convinced himself that the liberal media was determined to end his political career and turn the public against the war, and accused the *New York Times* and NBC of playing "a leading part in prejudicing people against" him.[22]

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[18] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 365.
[19] Joseph A. Califano Jr., *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 168.
[20] Conversation between Lyndon Johnson and author Doris Kearns. . Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War,* 183.
[21] Dallek, *Flawed Giant,* 366-367
[22] Lyndon B. Johnson press interview, September 9, 1967. Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War,* 183.

Johnson's handling of the press during 1966 and 1967 highlights an emerging attitude toward the media that would be carried over into the next administration. Johnson distrusted the media and viewed every critical article as a personal offense and an attempt to hinder American advancement in Vietnam. Johnson believed that pessimistic reports on Vietnam would destroy the public's will to fight, and attempted to combat the flow of negative accounts by withholding information from the press and by furnishing misleading details. As more stories contradicted his version of the war, the public began to doubt the honesty of the president and his staff.[23] The widening credibility gap forced journalists to seek additional sources. Members of the media achieved a more realistic assessment of the situation in Vietnam, but Johnson and other critics of the media labeled these reports false and biased, and accused the journalists responsible of being un-American or Communist.

The Tet Offensive of early 1968 profoundly altered the relationship between the Johnson White House and the press corps. On January 30, 1968, North Vietnam launched a massive, coordinated attack on South Vietnam. In the chaotic aftermath of the attacks, Johnson had little opportunity to correct the press's mistakes. He focused on alleviating American unrest and simultaneously conducting the day-to-day operations of the war, the president refrained from immediately attacking the media for their initial flawed and inaccurate reports; however, three years later Johnson condemned the press for its "emotional and exaggerated reporting of the Tet offensive." Johnson later attacked journalists who:

[23] Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson,* 172-173.

> … seemed to be in competition as to who could provide the most lurid and depressing accounts. Columnists unsympathetic to American involvement in South-East Asia jumped on the bandwagon."[24]

The president continued to believe that the press was determined to undermine the war effort. Three years later, in his memoirs, Johnson still insisted that the media reported inaccurately on events in Vietnam. Although most of Johnson's criticisms of the press came in private conversations, his now public condemnations gave credence to the emerging narrative- endorsed and perpetuated by the Nixon administration and the nascent conservative counter-establishment- that the "liberal media" had deliberately eroded public support for the war and helped cause America's defeat in Vietnam.

Two months after the Tet Offensive, President Johnson announced that he would neither seek nor accept his party's nomination for president. Several issues influenced Johnson's conclusion, but Vietnam clearly weighed heavily on the president's conscience and shaped his decision to withdraw from the race.[25] In an interview during his last few days in office he expressed his distaste for the media. Johnson accused the press of bias and resentment "toward anyone who comes from my area."[26] Johnson's public indictments of the media revealed his frustration with the press, but also began a policy of direct and unquestionable criticism that the Nixon administration quickly adopted.

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[24] Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: HEC, 1971), 384.
[25] Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson,* 253.
[26] Helen Thomas interview of Lyndon Johnson, 11/22/1968. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 592-593.

Part II: Nixon's Nattering Nabobs of Negativism: The Myth of the "Liberal Media Comes of Age, 1968-1974.

The relationship between the press and the president deteriorated dramatically during Johnson's presidency. Hope of repairing that relationship proved short lived, when the Nixon administration immediately went on the offensive. Richard Nixon held a burning resentment for "the establishment," the northeastern Ivy League elite. The media, Nixon believed, acted as a cheerleader for this establishment by favoring the "candidate of the party of their choice."[27,28] Nixon's animosity for the privileged few included the press and festered throughout his political career and grew more intense even as he moved closer to the center of power. Indeed, Nixon entered the White House determined to destroy this establishment.[29]

Unlike Johnson who frequently held press conferences and private meetings with journalists, Nixon avoided the White House press corps. Even before he took office, Nixon established the standard by eschewing the traditional press conference in favor of giving a televised report to announce his cabinet members.[30] This calculated decision sent a clear message about the way he would treat journalists. Almost as soon as he took office, Nixon combined public attacks on "media bias"

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[27] Joseph C. Spear, *Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 83.
[28] After narrowly losing in the 1960 presidential election, Nixon attempted to reenter politics in 1962 by running for governor of California. In the aftermath of his defeat, Nixon lashed out against the press, despite being endorsed by a majority of California's newspapers. In a news conference on the night of the election, an embittered Nixon censured the press for taking "an opportunity to attack" him, and told those in attendance that they "won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference (Spear, *Presidents and the Press,* 54-55).
[29] Schulman, *The Seventies,* 24.
[30] Louis W. Leibovich, *Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press: A Historical Retrospective* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 2.

with secretive surveillance on journalists and news organizations designed to manipulate and discredit the liberal media. Nixon expanded on his predecessor's criticisms and developed new and more aggressive tactics for dealing with the media.

In office, Nixon and members of his administration devised a three-pronged strategy for dealing with the media. They avoided press conferences, addressed the public in televised speeches, ignored the White House press corps, and intimidated the media through verbal attacks.[31] The Nixon administration's condemnation of specific news agencies and the media as a whole helped to create the myth of a liberal media conspiracy. Nixon put Vice President Spiro T. Agnew in charge of the war on the media, and the Vice President delivered speeches in 1969 and 1970 in which he openly berated the liberal media for bias and inaccurate reporting, especially in their coverage of Nixon and the Vietnam War.[32]

Chiding journalists as "nattering nabobs of negativism," Agnew appealed to the conservative "hardhats," "forgotten Americans," and "the middle Americans" ignored by the "elite" media.[33] Agnew continued his assault on the liberal press shortly after Nixon addressed the nation on Vietnam in November 1969. In what has become known as the "Silent Majority speech, Nixon called for national unity to achieve peace in Vietnam on American terms. Nixon emphasized his desire for the nation to "be united for peace," and "united against defeat." Nixon ended the speech

[31] *Ibid*, 5.
[32] *Ibid*, 7-8.
[33] Spiro T. Agnew Speech in San Diego CA, 5/27/70. Schulman, *The Seventies,* 200-201.

by asking for the support of "the great- silent- majority of my fellow Americans."[34] Dissatisfied with journalists' reaction to the address, Agnew lambasted the press for subjecting Nixon to "instant analysis and querulous criticism." The Vice President also attacked journalists for manipulating public opinion so that an "audience of seventy million Americans… was inherited by a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed… their hostility to what [Nixon] had to say."[35] Agnew's attacks marked the first time in modern American history that a Vice President had publicly criticized specific news agencies, journalists, and all of journalism.[36] Agnew forced the public to pay closer attention to Nixon's accusations, and perpetuated the myth of the antagonistic liberal media.

Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech and Agnew's 1969 campaign against the media coincided with the emergence of a national conservative counter-establishment. Housed in new or revived think tanks, policy and opinion journals and editorial boards, this new counter-establishment shared resentment toward the liberal policies of the 1960's and indicted the news media for its liberal bias.[37] The Nixon administration's attacks on the press resonated with the members of this emerging New Right that shared his belief that the press was far too friendly to the anti-war movement.[38] The leaking of information on the secret bombings of Cambodia in May, 1969, and the release of the Pentagon Papers in July 1971

[34] Nixon's National Address on November 3, 1969. Perlstein, *Nixonland,* 433-435.
[35] Spiro T. Agnew Speech in Des Moines, November 13, 1969. Perlstein, *Nixonland,* 438.
[36] Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 190.
[37] Schulman, *The Seventies*, 200.
[38] Liebovich, *Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press*, 14.

especially infuriated Nixon. He used the two incidents to attack the press for printing information that could jeopardize national security, and reinforced the idea that the liberal media was conspiring to foil America's efforts in Vietnam.

In March 1969, Nixon had approved the bombing of targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail inside neighboring Cambodia. Without the approval or even the knowledge of Congress, the president directed the Air Force to fly thousands of bombing missions over Cambodia over the next fifteen months.[39] Two months later, the *New York Times* ran a small and largely overlooked article on the bombings. Initially, Nixon refrained from publicly confronting the press and opted instead to launch a public relations campaign to shore up support for his strategy, which pledged to withdraw 25,000 combat troops from Vietnam and to achieve peace in the region.[40] Nixon's policy raised his approval ratings and encouraged the nation to overlook the Cambodia bombings. That strategy only postponed the outrage.

Nixon abstained from attacking the media, and opted instead to lie and to violate the law. Overly concerned with preventing any leak of information, Nixon ordered wiretaps in the homes of journalists involved in the story, and members of his staff whom he suspected of divulging information.[41] The Cambodia story was not the first time Nixon ordered illegal wiretaps, but his willingness to take extreme measures emphasized his obsession with curbing criticism by the press. Nixon's determination to thwart leaks to the media by any means later influenced his strategy for dealing with the release of the Pentagon Papers.

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[39] Perlstein, *Nixonland,* 362.
[40] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 276-277.
[41] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 373-374.

The bombing of Cambodia continued for almost a year, but not until April 30, 1970, did Nixon officially acknowledge that the raids had taken place. He also announced the temporary commitment of ground forces to Cambodia.[42] This new and unexpected expansion of the fighting reignited the anti-war movement. Demonstrations erupted on college campuses across the country. Some of the protests turned violent; shootings at Kent State University and Jackson State College led to the deaths of six students.[43] Nixon's commitment of American forces to Cambodia undercut public support for the war, harmed the president's already difficult relationship with the Democratic Congress, and marked an important change in the president's relationship with the media. From the Johnson administration, Nixon had inherited a suspicious press; his public attacks on journalists and news organizations had made things worse. The release of information on the operations in Cambodia confirmed the media's distrust of the Nixon White House. Like the Tet Offensive, the Cambodian campaign emphasized the president's dishonesty and verified previously held suspicions about "Tricky Dick."

In June 1971, leaked information again put Nixon at odds with the media, when the *New York Times* released the first installment of an extensive series on the secret history of governmental and military decisions about American involvement in Vietnam.[44] The documents- popularly known as the Pentagon Papers- chronicled the history of presidential lies, obfuscations, and mistakes in Vietnam. Nixon first

[42] Liebovich, *Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press*, 25.
[43] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 294.
[44] Mark Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson and the Rise of Washington's Scandal Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Grioux, 2010), 149-150.

tried to ignore the story, but soon launched a furious attack on the *New York Times*.[45] In an attempt to undermine the influence wielded by the *Times* and to punish those responsible for the release of the documents, the administration secured a court injunction to halt publication on the grounds that it would harm national security. Before the Supreme Court hearing, Nixon instructed the Attorney General to do as much damage as possible on the *Time's.*[46] Two weeks later, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the *New York Times*, and the publication of the Pentagon Papers continued.

After the Court's decision, Nixon formed a secret police force later known as the "plumbers" to prevent further leaks of information to the press. The plumbers used illegal means to spy on individuals suspected of providing the press with information.[47] Nixon's actions showed the extreme measures he was prepared to take to curb critical press coverage, and sowed the seeds of his own political ruin. The Nixon White House claimed that the information in the Pentagon Papers threatened national security and attempted to use the courts to censor a news agency, an unprecedented violation of the First Amendment. Equally important, the president also encouraged his Attorney General to use the Court as a forum to discredit the media. The creation of the plumbers highlighted Nixon's increased willingness to violate personal liberties and commit crimes to avoid negative press. The release of the Pentagon Papers was the cause of one of Nixon's last major

[45] Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 209.
[46] Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press*, 150-151.
[47] *Ibid,* 152-153.

confrontations with the media on Vietnam, and his reaction proved he was determined to undermine and discredit the press by any means necessary.

The years that Johnson and Nixon spent in the White House took the relationship between the press and the executive branch to new lows. Even though he was convinced of the importance of preventing South Vietnam from falling to the Communists, Johnson attempted to increase American commitment in Southeast Asia slowly, in order to maintain support on the home front- or at least to minimize dissent. To achieve his goals, he often lied or deliberately misled the press about American progress. Motivated by a lifetime of personal resentments, intent on building a "new American Majority," and determined to leave Vietnam with American prestige intact, Nixon shut himself off from the media and launched an aggressive campaign to discredit the press, which he viewed as an enemy. Both strategies created tension between the president and the press, but it also spread the misguided belief that the media actively opposed the war in Vietnam and sought to undermine American efforts. The credibility gap created by Johnson's dishonestly led to the suspicion that an adversarial press had pitted itself against governmental policy in Vietnam and attempted to influence public opinion to oppose the war. Nixon's attacks on journalists and news agencies brought the issue to the American public. The "liberal media" was more apparent than real, but in the decades following the conclusion of the War, the myth helped to form not only Americans' relationship with the press, but also to shape American intervention abroad in the future.

Chapter III:
Moving On? Vietnam, War Reporting and American Foreign Policy

> The Suriname challenge, insignificant in its own right and nearly ignored by the media, put us face-to-face with a continuing problem. the Vietnam War had left one indisputable legacy: massive press, public, and congressional anxiety that the United States- at all costs- avoid getting mired in "another Vietnam." News items datelined from central America or the Caribbean raised the alarm that this or that country of the region was about to become the next quagmire.
>
> -George Shultz, Secretary of State 1982-1989[1]

American defeat in Vietnam sent shockwaves through the American government, military, media, and public, and left the nation uncertain of its position in the world. The withdrawal from Southeast Asia weakened America's prestige and created a sense of fear of potentially prolonged military engagements. Later presidents did their best to avoid becoming trapped in another military quagmire. Eager to avoid a second Vietnam, they evaded or limited involvement in foreign hostilities and devised strategies to prevent long-term military entanglements. Presidents in the post-Vietnam era also found it increasingly difficult to gain public and congressional support for a major foreign ground war. This "Vietnam syndrome" influenced both the public and the government's willingness to conduct foreign military operations, as Americans remembered the lessons learned from Vietnam. The reputation of the media likewise suffered; many Americans blamed the press for hindering or losing the war in Vietnam- an idea that soon became "conventional wisdom." Elected officials, particularly in the executive branch, altered their management of the media during armed conflicts. Determined to

[1] George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 294.

prevent journalists from affecting the outcome of military operations as they had supposedly done in Vietnam, government and military officials adopted restrictive policies designed to minimize the media's access to armed conflicts involving Americans. Presidential administrations from Ford to Obama attempted to take the lessons learned from Vietnam and apply them when planning or conducting foreign military operations; unfortunately, as time progressed, American presidents remembered the wrong lessons. The necessity of controlling the media and conducting secret operations has lasted from Vietnam, while the need for honesty and avoiding open-ended wars has clearly been forgotten.

Part 1:

Night and Day: Reporting On War After Vietnam

Journalists in Vietnam benefited from a unique set of circumstances that afforded them almost unprecedented freedom in their coverage of the war. Johnson sought to assert control over military operations through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, but because he had never obtained a formal declaration of war, he was unable to impose and enforce, military censorship. Without wartime restrictions on the press, journalists enjoyed a great degree of freedom in their reporting. Instead of direct military oversight, officials imposed a set of guidelines designed to ensure the security of American forces and strategy.[2] Few other limitations constricted journalists' ability to report on day-to-day military and political developments. Later presidents argued that this freedom allowed reporters to distort the reality of

[2] Judith Raine Baroody, *Media Access and the Military*: *The Case of the Gulf War* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), 54.

the war, and in the aftermath of Vietnam, both White House and military officials accepted this belief and drastically reduced their ability to report freely.

Correspondents also benefited from the ease of transportation both in and out of Vietnam. Commercial flights carried journalists to Southeast Asia and the reports back to the United States.[3] The media's uninhibited movement within the country provided for extensive and in-depth coverage. Much of the fighting occurred close to Saigon, allowing reporters access to combat areas before returning for the five o'clock press briefings in the capitol.[4] In more remote areas, the military transported journalists to the war zone. Helicopters ferried journalists to hostile engagements where they filmed the fighting and submitted firsthand accounts of the events.[5] Officials in charge of later American military operations curtailed the media's freedom of movement, limited journalists' exposure to violence, and decreased their opportunities to investigate military mistakes or scandals. The press reported events and developments with few restrictions, but later administrations correlated this openness with the large number of "negative" reports, which demoralized the American people and sapped their will to fight. In military engagements that followed Vietnam, the government adopted policies to limit the media's influence by censoring their reports, decreasing popular exposure to graphic images, and controlling the movement of journalists.

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[3] *Ibid,* 54.
[4] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press in the Vietnam War* (New York: Norton, 1993), 132-133.
[5] Baroody, *Media Access and the Military,* 54.

American governmental and military officials implemented the most repressive policy for controlling the media in the first American invasion of the post-Vietnam era. In October 1983, a violent coup on the Caribbean island of Grenada replaced a moderate government with a left-wing regime friendly to Communist Cuba. Because it was so close to home, President Ronald Reagan branded the tiny island a threat to national security and approved the use of force to eliminate the so-called Communist threat.[6] The invasion began on October 25, 1983, and required only four days of military operations for American forces to secure the island. Emphasizing the importance of a furtive and swift assault, the Reagan administration adopted an unprecedented strategy of completely denying all information to the press until after the attack began. Once reporters learned of the invasion, government and military officials prevented them access to the island until American had forces completed their mission. On the third day of operations, the *New York Times* remarked, "President Reagan said through a spokesman," that officials would admit reporters after "American military commanders determined that conditions were safe." In the absence of official access, reporters had to rely on "ham radio operators and Radio Havana."[7] Unlike Vietnam, where the military rarely restricted the press's movement, war correspondents in Grenada could not even enter the nation in conflict.

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[6] Miles Hudson & John Stanier, *War and the Media: A Random Searchlight* (New York: NYU, 1998), 190-191.

[7] Phil Gailey, "U.S. Bars Coverage of Grenada Action; News Groups Protest," *New York Times* October 27, 1983, 1.

One group of journalists did manage to reach Grenada before being escorted off the island by American forces.[8] Critical of Reagan's media policy, the *Washington Post* demanded to know "why [these correspondents] could not be put in contact with their offices or allowed to file dispatches from aboard the ship."[9] The removal of "rogue" journalists and the media blackout highlighted the administration's concern- a concern shared by the military command- about negative coverage of combat. After American forces secured the island and combat was all but over, military officials finally allowed journalists to enter Grenada. Reagan's announcement of a decisive victory over a Communist regime and the news of the terrorist attack on Marine barracks in Lebanon overshadowed critical reports from the press.[10] The decision to exclude the press from the operations in Grenada prevented critical or conflicting reports from reaching the American people, but the policy sparked scathing criticism from the media. On October 28, *New York Times* columnist Bernard Weinraub complained that "the Reagan administration's restrictions on reporting" blocked "crucial information on military activity… from reaching the press and public."[11] An editorial speculated "that the facts on the ground would not support the reasons… for invasion," and that "Mr. Reagan was afraid that public support… would wither."[12] The journalistic condemnation of the blackout forced the Reagan administration and future

[8] John R. MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the 1991 Gulf War* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 141.
[9] "U.S. Troops Remove Four Reporters," *Washington Post* October 28, 1983.
[10] Hudson & Stanier, *War and the Media,* 200-201.
[11] Bernard Weinraub, "U.S. Press Curbs: The Unanswered Questions." *New York Times* October, 10 1963, 1.
[12] Anthony Lewis, "Abroad At Home: What Was He Hiding?" *New York Times,* 31 October 1963, 19.

presidents to reevaluate the proper level of media control during military engagements.

In response to these attacks, Reagan established a special committee and instructed it to establish a more open and fair system for journalists reporting on American combat. The commission formed the National Media Pool, which consisted of a rotating group of Pentagon correspondents who would be informed before the public of future American engagements. Later administrations adopted the pooling system, which limited the number of journalists in the war zone and allowed more effective government censorship of reports. The Reagan administration's handling of the media during Grenada emphasized policymakers' lasting distrust of the press after Vietnam. The severity of Reagan's policy came under scrutiny and forced the government to reduce its control over war correspondents, but the determination to avoid another quagmire continued to shape foreign policy.

In December 1989, President George H.W. Bush ordered American forces into Panama to reinstate a government acceptable to the United States and depose the country's dictator, Manuel Noriega. The 24,000 soldiers made the invasion the largest military engagement since Vietnam.[13] The Bush administration adopted the pooling system, reduced journalists' exposure to the military operations, and limited the combat they observed. As in Grenada, the White House emphasized the importance of secrecy and delayed informing the press pool of the invasion until

[13] Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent As Hero and Myth-Maker From The Crimea To Iraq* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004), 485.

shortly before the attack. The government provided the correspondents transportation to Panama, but the plane arrived five hours "after most of the fighting had ended."[14] This strategy prevented journalists from observing and capturing violence on film, which reduced the possibility of a negative reaction from the American public. Further impediments caused the journalists to arrive at the site of the heaviest fighting only after American forces had secured the area. Press briefings offered reporters little useful information and some members of the press pool openly complained. One disgruntled reporter grumbled that the war correspondents "waited in the middle of an invasion, watching CNN and listening to some guy tell us when the Panama Canal was built."[15] Military and government officials censored the material journalists wrote or recorded and prevented the information from reaching America for days.[16]

By hindering and delaying the press during the fighting in Panama, the Bush administration curbed the journalists' ability to report on American deaths and military mistakes, and eliminated the possibility of graphic images reaching the American public. Military officials' lethargic response to the pool's requests to view the combat prevented images of violence, American casualties, or damaged U.S. equipment from reaching the American people. The Bush administration's approach to the media in Panama eliminated criticism and domestic backlash, but it also ignited further criticism of the government's overbearing and restrictive policies for controlling the press. This toned down version of the Grenada blackout

[14] Alex Jones, "Fighting in Panama: The Press; Editors Say Journalists Were Kept From Action," *Washington Post* December 12, 1989, 1.
[15] Kevin Merida, *Washington Post* January 7, 1990, B2.
[16] Hudson & Stanier, *War and the Media,* 206.

still marginalized war correspondents in Panama. The suspicion of the media's intentions continued to influence the government's handling of journalists two decades after Vietnam combat had ended.

The government's handling of the Persian Gulf in the early 1990's was much the same. President Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi military's invasion of neighboring Kuwait on August 2, 1990, triggered an immediate American response. Bush condemned Iraq's actions and gave Hussein until January 15 to withdraw. While waiting for Iraq's response, Bush deployed U.S. forces to neighboring Saudi Arabia to prevent further Iraqi invasions.[17] As Bush pushed for diplomatic solutions, he also readied the military for a large-scale war. Understanding the importance of public support, the administration emphasized the importance of confronting Iraqi aggression with military force, and a majority of both the public and the media supported military intervention in the Persian Gulf. As it became clear that Iraq would not retreat and the U.S. moved closer to war, the administration prepared a strategy for controlling journalists during the military offensive.[18]

Hoping to limit their mobility and exposure, the Pentagon and the Bush administration prevented reporters from accompanying the first American troops, and the Defense Department delayed the issuance of visas to journalists. Bush cited military security as the reason for the initial media restrictions, and believed that the operation benefited from U.S. forces' ability to "be moved with not too much

[17] Knightley, *The First Casualty,* 486-488.
[18] Hudson & Stanier, *War and the Media,* 222-223.

advance warning to [Iraq]."[19] When Saddam Hussein refused to remove his army from Kuwait, the U.S. led coalition launched an attack on the invaders. The Pentagon initiated a pooling system before the onset of the military campaign. The few journalists admitted to the pool accompanied U.S. troops to predetermined areas of action and their reports were subject to military censorship. In the presence of a potentially prolonged war, the military's control over what journalists observed and reported limited the damage the media could do. Despite fears of a determined and battle-hardened Iraqi army, the coalition forces quickly expelled Hussein's military from Kuwait. The Air Force decimated enemy targets, scattered the Iraqi military and greatly reduced opposition to American ground forces.[20] The Gulf War's limited violence and unexpected brevity reduced journalists' reporting. A majority of the fighting occurred in the sky and ground forces faced relatively minor resistance. The government's control over the press in the Gulf War again triggered a backlash from the news establishment. Journalists resented the government's continuing policy of limiting their ability to report honestly and fully on military operations in the aftermath of Vietnam.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, shook and united America, and both the public and the press called for military action against the men responsible. Afghanistan's willingness to harbor Osama bin Laden and members of al-Qaeda encouraged the people to overwhelmingly support an American invasion. The reliance on American Special Forces and Air Force, and the quick collapse of the

[19] Statement made by President Bush to the press. Knightley, *The First Casualty,* 489.
[20] Knightley, *The First Casualty,* 498.

Taliban resulted in a minimal amount of combat coverage; however, the media quickly found fault in President George W. Bush's antiterrorism legislation, the Patriot Act.[21] The *New York Times* called the Patriot Act a "travesty of justice," and the *Washington Post* believed Bush's policies were "overreaching."[22] Stories of torture or other inhumane acts emerged during America's early involvement in Afghanistan, but the invasion of Iraq quickly overshadowed the War on Terror in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon and the Bush administration devised a successful strategy for controlling the media during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The approach, "embedding," limited press criticism, but appeared to be free of military and government management.[23] The strategy involved placing journalists in specific military units for a defined period of time. The correspondents became a part of the units, and accompanied the soldiers everywhere they went. Embedding achieved the desired goal, allowing correspondents to form camaraderie with their unit and made them reluctant to issue negative reports.[24] Journalists seemed free of the control that had crippled military coverage in the post-Vietnam era, but in fact embedding encouraged correspondents to report favorably on the military in Iraq.

Part II:

The Shadow of Vietnam and the Limits of American Military Intervention

[21] John Byrne Cooke, *Reporting The War: Freedom of the Press from the American Revolution to the War on Terror* (New York: Palgrave MaCmillan, 2007), 191-192.
[22] "A Travesty of Justice," *New York Times,* November 16, 2001. "Going Too Far," *Washington Post,* December 20, 2005. Cooke, *Reporting the War,* 192, 203.
[23] Knightely, *The First Casualty,* 530-531.
[24] *Ibid,* 531-532

In its post-Vietnam military engagements, the American government drastically reduced journalists' exposure to combat and censored their reporting to limit the media's influence over public opinion. The "Vietnam syndrome" also shaped foreign military involvement. The shadow of Vietnam forced policy makers to take popular opinion into account before authorizing armed intervention in foreign countries and further emphasized the importance of establishing tangible objectives and limited durations.[25] The fear of drawing American forces into another quagmire and the concern for public opinion greatly influenced decision making under Presidents Carter, Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. New policies developed after America's failure in Southeast Asia, as the "Vietnam syndrome" shaped and influenced U.S. military decisions for decades.

North Vietnam's victory damaged America's international prestige and represented a crucial failure in the United States' crusade against communism. The Vietnam War sparked bitter domestic divisions and left an emotionally damaged public unwilling to support military involvements. Still locked in a global power struggle with the Soviet Union, this uncertainty prevented the U.S. from opposing attacks on friendly countries, especially during the Carter administration. Reagan took a more aggressive stance during his time in office, but public opinion and the "Vietnam syndrome" also hindered his administration's ability to intervene in several countries threatened by the spread of Communism.[26]

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[25] Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 150.
[26] *Ibid*, 150.

The Vietnam War, political scandals, assassinations, and economic uncertainty of the past decade shaped Carter's policies and outlook when he entered the White House. Convinced of the public's unwillingness to endure further military conflict, Carter adopted a foreign policy that emphasized openness, international cooperation, human rights, and avoidance of military intervention.[27] Carter believed that the American people had been disillusioned by "the national defeat suffered in Vietnam," and strove to avoid another prolonged military conflict.[28] Public support for a prolonged war in the immediate aftermath of Vietnam would have been difficult to generate, and Carter's determination to avoid another military debacle controlled his international strategy and resulted in inaction. Highlighting his concerns with the effects of Vietnam and the fight against Communism, Carter criticized Johnson and Nixon's handling of the war in a 1977 speech as "the best example of intellectual and moral poverty," and argued that containment "could not last forever unchanged."[29] Overly fearful of the lasting consequences of Vietnam, Carter ruled out military involvement and adopted a foreign policy that failed to confront direct and indirect attempts by the Soviet Union to spread Communism.[30]

Carter believed the atrocities, violence and corruption that marred America's involvement in Vietnam weakened the nation's international prestige and violated American principles. He emphasized the "decency in [American] values," and

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[27] Richard A. Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus: American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991), 95-96.
[28] Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bentam Books, 1982), 125.
[29] Jimmy Carter, "Address at the Commencement Exercise at the University of Notre Dame," May 22, 1977.
[30] Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus,* 108.

focused on human rights in his foreign policy.[31,32] After the scandals of the Johnson and Nixon administrations, Carter argued that dedication to human rights would help the people regain trust in their government and reestablish America's commitment to peace and justice in the world.[33] Events in 1978 and 1979 highlighted Carter's unwillingness to assist pro-American regimes in the developing world. Carter's failure to prevent the overthrow of a pro-American government in Nicaragua and oppose the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan seemed to provide evidence of America's diminishing military power. Reagan entered the White House in 1981 determined to reestablish U.S. dominance and resume the fight against Communism that Carter had "abandoned." Despite his optimism and attempts to stress the importance of his military objectives to Congress and the nation, the "Vietnam syndrome" and public opinion continued to shape and influence U.S. foreign policy under Reagan. Abandoning the détente approach to U.S. and Soviet relations, Reagan adopted a more confrontational stance towards Communism, which became known as the "Reagan Doctrine."[34,35] But, even in the more bellicose Reagan years, the shadow of Vietnam remained a powerful influence.

The Reagan administration believed this strategy would elevate American prestige after Vietnam by combating Soviet encroachments on other continents. The doctrine involved aiding anticommunist insurgencies opposed to Marxist

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[31] Carter, *Keeping Faith,* 141.
[32] Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus*, 93.
[33] *Ibid,* 95-96.
[34] James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 1.
[35] Détente was a period of eased tension between the United States and Soviet Russia that began in 1971. Military agreements were made between the two countries during the détente period, which ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

control. Reagan provided varying amounts of assistance to rebels in Nicaragua, Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, and Afghanistan during the implementation of this "Doctrine."[36] Reagan's anti-détente policy incorporated some lessons learned from Vietnam, while ignoring others. Reagan subscribed to the post-Vietnam idea that secrecy and control of the press dictated the success of military operations, but he also failed to question the mistakes of the government and the military that led to the stalemate in Vietnam. Despite his dogged opposition to the Soviet Union and his determination to eradicate Communism from the Free World, public opinion and the lingering "Vietnam syndrome" influenced his foreign policy, and limited or prevented military intervention. Nowhere was this more clear than the way the administration dealt with Nicaragua.

In July 1979, a rebel force allied with Cuba and the Soviet Union overthrew the pro-American Nicaraguan government. Both during his campaign and in office, Reagan made the removal of Communism from Central America a pillar of his foreign policy and attempted throughout his two terms in office to increase American aid and military support.[37] To solidify public support for the Nicaraguan Contras, he emphasized the necessity of direct involvement in Nicaragua, but the president's inability to create support for these goals limited his options. Determined to remove Communism from Central America, Reagan could not understand how "a majority of the Congress or the country is prepared to stand by passively while the people of Central America are delivered to totalitarianism,"

[36] Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 4.
[37] Dean Baker, *The United States Since 1980* (New York: Cambridge University, 2007), 84-85.

while simultaneously leaving America "vulnerable to new dangers."[38] The "Vietnam syndrome" quickly eliminated the possibility of direct assistance in Nicaragua, and the public's concern for gradual escalation restricted the amount of military and economic aid approved by Congress.[39] Nicaragua, the "Vietnam syndrome" served as a positive check on Reagan's aggressive military aims, as American involvement would have been costly, deadly, and unnecessary. Reagan's attempt to provide direct support for anti-Communist forces in Central America eventually ended in failure. The public and Congress's continued reluctance to support extended military involvements in foreign countries accentuated the reach and omnipresence of the Vietnam shadow during Reagan's Presidency. In Over a decade after America's final withdrawal from Southeast Asia a majority of the public continued to distrust their government's motivation for military involvement in foreign countries, and resisted becoming entangled in costly wars caused by an overly aggressive government.

Reagan adopted a strategy of indirectly or secretly supporting anti-Communist forces in developing countries. After discovering that the Reagan administration was secretly funding Nicaraguan contras, Congress passed the Boland Amendments, which prevented any American intelligence agency from providing contras with military or financial assistance.[40] Despite these restrictions, members of the Reagan administration continued to conduct secretive operations, and illegally attempted to sell guns to Iran, in what became known as the Iran-

[38] Ronald Reagan, April 27, 1983 speech to Congress
[39] Richard Sobel, *The Imbact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 138.
[40] Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: Harper, 2009), 212.

Contra Affair. This ploy developed into an arms-for-hostage deal, and was eventually leaked to the press.[41] The secret policy and the media scandal that emerged highlighted the lessons that Reagan adopted from Vietnam. Instead of avoiding military conflict, or analyzing the necessity and feasibility of military operations, the Reagan administration decided to use deceptive and secretive policies to achieve their desired goals.

Reagan's first direct involvement in foreign military affairs occurred in 1982 when he deployed a peacekeeping force of 800 Marines to war-torn Lebanon.[42] Reagan hoped the presence of American soldiers would force Syrian and Palestinian forces to withdraw, affording the Lebanese government much needed time to stabilize. Despite initial optimism for the peacekeeping mission, a bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in April 1983 killed seventeen Americans.[43] Instead of withdrawing from the region, Reagan responded by increasing the number of Marines in Beirut. The president ignored his advisors' concerns for the Marines' safety and requests to end American involvement in Lebanon. Only days after Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger pressed Reagan to withdraw, a terrorist attack on a Marine barrack killed 241 men.[44] Before the attack, Americans paid relatively little attention to the U.S. presence in Lebanon, but the tragic murder of

[41] *Ibid, 224.*
[42] Hudson & Stanier, *War and the Media*, 189
[43] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 410
[44] Hudson & Stanier, *War and the Media,* 190.

American Marines led the public and members of Congress to call for immediate withdrawal.[45]

Although most likely not deliberate, the successful invasion of Grenada within hours of the Beirut attack blunted the criticism towards Reagan and afforded the president time to make a decision on the future course of action. Reagan determined that a stable Lebanon was vital to U.S. interests in the region and decided to push for continued military involvement. Almost all of Reagan's staff vehemently opposed this decision and argued for the immediate abandonment of American objectives in Beirut, as some feared Lebanon could develop into a second Vietnam.[46] Regarding Lebanon, Secretary of State George Shultz recalled that Reagan "was worried by what he called the "Vietnam problem," the reluctance of the United States to use its troops again in tough spots."[47] With mounting Congressional and public opposition, and further complications in Lebanon, Reagan eventually conceded.[48] Typical of post-Vietnam U.S. military involvement, any sign of a potential long-term engagement caused immediate opposition from sizeable portions of the government and the public.

The post-Vietnam era marked an important transitional period for American power and prestige, as the nation attempted to recover from the traumatic experiences of the 1960's and early 1970's. Despite progress, the consequences of the war in Vietnam continued to influence ideology, decisions, and policy for

[45] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan,* 441-445.
[46] *Ibid,* 449-450
[47] Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph,* 106.
[48] Cannon, *President Reagan, I450-451.*

decades. The media's controversial role in the outcome of the Vietnam War caused later presidents to drastically alter the freedom and exposure of war correspondents. Several strategies were employed during American military operations, but all of the policies drastically curbed journalists' ability to freely report on the events. The government and the military's control over the press evolved after Vietnam from complete exclusion in Grenada to immersion in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Whatever the strategy, the Pentagon and the White House maintained a large degree of control over the press's influence on the ground. The Vietnam War also affected presidential foreign policy, as public opinion and the fear of entering a second Vietnam shaped policy making. Reagan's chief of staff James Baker accredited the secrecy of the Grenada invasion to the "Vietnam syndrome," and stated that because of "[the Vietnam syndrome] we didn't let anyone know what we were doing, including Congressional leaders."[49] Reagan's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger also acknowledged Vietnam's influence on foreign policy in Central and South America and believed that "people had been so badly burned in Vietnam [that they] didn't want any part of any kind of aggressive war, assertive foreign policy."[50] George H.W. Bush also feared the lingering affects of Vietnam during the final stages of preparation for the Gulf War, and feared that the invasion could be "worse than Vietnam."[51] Presidents after Vietnam were acutely aware of the political consequences of leading the nation into an open-ended military conflict

[49] Baker interview June 19, 2004. Bernard von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 76-77.
[50] Weinberger interview, June 23, 2004. Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties,* 76.
[51] George Bush & Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 408.

without popular support. The "Vietnam syndrome" influenced and altered the foreign policy and limited presidents' ability to militarily intervene in foreign nations, but it did not prevent them from repeating the mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan, as some of the memories and lessons of Vietnam faded.

Epilogue:

Lessons From Vietnam

When George C. Herring republished his fourth edition of *America's Longest War* in 2002, the Vietnam War was still the longest period of direct military involvement in American history. If Herring issued a fifth edition today, the title would no longer be accurate. American ground forces have been conducting military operations in Afghanistan since 2001, and although the Obama White House has taken steps in the direction of withdrawal, American soldiers still remain actively engaged in combat. President George W. Bush's long-term involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan seems to represent the end of the "Vietnam syndrome." The American government and the people learned several lessons in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War. Some of these lessons are still followed today; others have been abandoned. Unfortunately, some of the lessons forgotten were the most important, while the ones remembered deal mostly with secrecy and control.

Fear of becoming trapped in a second Vietnam kept the public, Congress, and the president from entering into an open-ended war for almost three decades after America's withdrawal from Southeast Asia. Vietnam temporarily taught the United States not to enter into a ground war in Asia, a lesson that President Bush ignored when he invaded Afghanistan in 2001. The issuance of a military draft during the Vietnam War enraged the American public and further isolated the people from their government. Fortunately, every post-Vietnam president has managed to avoid

reinstating the draft. The lesson most adhered to from Vietnam, however, seems to be strict control of the press during wartime.

Subscribing to the belief that the media contributed to American defeat in Southeast Asia, presidents since Vietnam have struggled to manage the press when conducting military operations. In every post-Vietnam military engagement, the government and the Pentagon have employed new strategies for controlling war correspondents and the information that reached the general public. These strategies have evolved over time to address flaws, failures, and complaints from journalists. The George W. Bush administration perfected the system of controlling the media, while it simultaneously ignored the most important lesson from Vietnam by entering into two open-ended ground wars. In Afghanistan, the press was unable to cover or observe most of the fighting due to the Coalition's reliance on Special Forces and Air Force operations; however, the Bush administration truly mastered media management in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Pentagon established a system for wartime coverage called "embedding," where correspondents would cover the war by being placed in a military unit. This strategy gave journalists the impression that they were accurately covering the war, as they were exposed to much of the military operations; however, embedding forced the correspondents to develop a feeling of camaraderie with their military unit and few negative reports arose. The American government and military obsessively sought an effective strategy for controlling the media after Vietnam, and the success of the embedding system seems to have paid off; unfortunately, the Vietnam War taught policymakers that the media had to be managed during military operations. Unlike other lessons from

Vietnam, the necessity for controlling the press has not been forgotten, and the strategy continues to evolve and become more effective.

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