

Governmental Failure to Prepare American Culture for Vietnam

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The Vietnam War is often remembered as a shameful chapter in American history. Marked in schools in history classes as an unpopular war among the American people with domestic protests moving against involvement in Vietnam, and the fact that despite being a leading global power, the US had failed to subjugate a small faraway Asian nation with a far inferior resourced military, all added to the shame. After the shock of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the US government pulled its forces out despite prior conceptions of the offensive's assured victory. Due to the US government's poor communication with the American public, the government failed to substantially bolster the American people's support for the war despite their attempts, and this especially contributed to the decrease of war hawk culture of belligerence following the Tet Offensive.

Following the Gulf of Tonkin incident where it was claimed that US destroyers were attacked by the North Vietnamese in August 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution as a result in that same month in order to "...promote the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia" allowing the president, "...to take all necessary steps... to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."¹ This opened the way for greater and more direct American military involvement in Vietnam in the following years to come. To get a general idea of the

¹"Transcript of Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964)," Our Documents, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=98&page=transcript>.

Vietnam War's popularity since this informal declaration of war that was the resolution, Gallup provides a chart recording American opinion on the war through three options: "yes it was a mistake", "no it was not" and "no opinion". In August 1965, it was reported that 24% of Americans were against the war, and 61% thought that yes, the war was the right decision. The next year, in November 1966, the numbers shifted, with 32% thinking the war was a mistake, with 51% still believing the war was not. In December 1967, the year before the Tet Offensive, 45% now thought Vietnam was a mistake, with the remaining 46% of the population thinking otherwise. To sum it up, from 1965-1967, beliefs Vietnam was erroneous rose 30% while sentiments believing otherwise sank 15%.² With regard to this overall downward trend in American confidence in the war over the years prior to the Tet Offensive, the US government then attempted to sway the public's outlook on the conflict.

In a congressional address five days after JFK's assassination in 1963, President Johnson stated the following of his ideas of what America was, and what his goals were for the country.

We have shown that we can also be a formidable foe to those who reject the path of peace and those who seek to impose upon us or our allies the yoke of tyranny. This Nation will keep its commitments from South Viet-Name to West Berlin...let all the world know and none misunderstand that I rededicate this Government to the unswerving support of the United Nations, to the honorable and determined execution of our commitments to our allies...³

² Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam." Gallup, May 24, 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx>.

³ Lyndon Johnson, "Lady Bird Johnson: LBJ Addresses Congress after President Kennedy's Assassination," PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, n.d. https://www.pbs.org/ladybird/epicenter/epicenter_doc_speech.html.

Presenting his beliefs and his foreign agenda for the United States, LBJ established that America was there to defend their ideals all around the globe. In South Vietnam, a half decade before the Tet Offensive, he further established that it was America's duty to support the South Vietnamese while maintaining a powerful influence in the Asian sphere. However, despite the confidence in his initial address, according to David Shipley in his *Public Relations Review*, Johnson shrouded Vietnam in secrecy for sixteen months after becoming president.⁴ In the beginning, he seldom talked of Vietnam, and the American public was largely ignorant of what was progressing on the other side of the world. This disconnect would create greater shock in the future as more truth slowly crept out to the public as the war ballooned in scale and ferocity.

In the following 1964 presidential election, LBJ was elected into office in a landslide with the expectation that he'd bring peace to Vietnam. His campaign had framed his opponent, Barry Goldwater, as a man who might escalate the US into nuclear war, with a famous LBJ campaign ad showing America being nuked, alluding to Goldwater's previous comments of proposing to tactically use nukes in Vietnam.⁵ Instead of peace, it was later in 1965 that the situation with South Vietnam worsened, with their capital in political chaos and deeply entrenched in corruption while losing to the North militarily. Consequently, Operation Rolling Thunder was executed, bombing the North Vietnamese, as well the first US combat troops being deploying in March, escalating US involvement.

With this turn of events, a new wave of anti-Vietnam sentiment rolled over. Escalation was not what the American people wanted, nor what they voted for when they elected Johnson. In response to the escalation, newspapers nationwide "called on the administration to rule out

⁴ David Stiles Shipley, "Sacrifice, Victimization, and Mismanagement of Issues: LBJ's Vietnam Crisis," *Public Relations Review* 18, no. 3 (1992): 275.

⁵ Michael Levy, "United States Presidential Election of 1964," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, inc. <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1964>.

escalation and seek a negotiated exit from the war in early 1965, including the New York Times, Washington Post, St. Louis Post-Dispatch.”⁶ Serious major news organizations began to publish anti-war media against Johnson’s decisions. Not only were the newspapers speaking against Johnson now, “university students began to protest escalation through all-night teach-ins about the history of Vietnam and American involvement there, often billed as a forum for debate but skewed toward the anti-administration side. Yet precisely because such protests were vocal and one-sided, Johnson tended to ignore the opprobrium from the left.”⁷ Johnson, in response to the college protests and anti-war actions even said, “George, don’t pay any attention to what those little shits on the campuses do. The great beast is the reactionary elements in the country.”⁸ LBJ, despite all the criticism, and all his efforts to try and sweep Vietnam under the rug, still underestimated just how powerful and long-lasting anti-war public opinion could be, and its potential impact on his future foreign policy decisions.

However, the criticism began to reach a boiling point, and it became impossible to ignore. In April, 1965, LBJ gave his famous speech at John Hopkins University, “Peace Without Conquest.” It is here that it is the first time LBJ goes into depth talking about Vietnam.⁹ This speech was an opportunity for Johnson to clarify and strengthen the reason why America was in Vietnam, and why the people should continue to support the war. Specifically targeting the college demographic in this speech - who had proven especially rowdy in resisting Johnson’s pro-war agenda - LBJ comments on their concerns: “Vietnam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise,

⁶ Dror Yuravlivker, “‘Peace without Conquest’: Lyndon Johnson’s Speech of April 7, 1965,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2006): 465, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.02557.x>.

⁷ Yuravlivker, “Peace without Conquest,” 465.

⁸ Yuravlivker, “Peace without Conquest,” 465.

⁹ PRX. *Epilog: “I Shall Not Seek....”* Accessed May 3, 2021, <https://beta.prx.org/stories/269514>.

have ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil. Why must we take this painful road?"¹⁰

Subsequently, Johnson states that it is America's duty to support the South Vietnamese in their independence as presidents before him have done, and to not fulfill the pledge made to defend South Vietnam's independence would be a dishonor and an "unforgivable wrong." and "To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next." Johnson feared for the greater global reputation of America to back up its words substantially, and in an allusion to the famous Domino Theory, also eyed the present war as a barrier against future containment-style conflicts. Beyond just focusing on the combative aspect of the war and America's role in securing peace globally, Johnson also tossed in this offer to Vietnam, "...I would hope tonight that the Secretary-General of the United Nations could use the prestige of his great office...to initiate...a plan for cooperation in increased development. For our part, I will ask Congress to join in a billion-dollar American investment in this effort as soon as it is underway."¹¹ So within this speech, not only has Johnson emphasized the importance of staying and fighting in Vietnam as part of America's word to uphold former promises and prevent future wars by waging one in Vietnam as a stemming strategy, but also doing so in a more peaceful and non-militaristic way through offers of heavy economic investment.

This fresh approach by LBJ was made so that it both satiated somewhat the war hawks who wished for a greater military effort in Vietnam which the speech justified and backed, but it also helped in soothing the fears of those of the American people who were scared of escalation, whose fears of how to handle Vietnam were addressed through Johnson's proposed aid plan in joint with the UN. Approximately 60 million people in America listened to this speech, and with such a public effort by Johnson to try and appeal to the American people to back the Vietnam

¹⁰ "Peace Without Conquest," Teaching American History, Accessed May 3, 2021, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/address-at-johns-hopkins-university-peace-without-conquest/>.

¹¹ Teaching American History, "Peace Without Conquest."

War and reestablish what it was America was fighting for, and what the goals were, with so many ears perked to listen to him, it was quite a successful speech. White House mail received afterward turned more positive reflecting the general people's approval of Johnson's reasoning, and newspapers all over the nation became more positive as well. For one instance in a lead editorial of the New York Times (of which this paper was usually a vocal critic of Johnson), "President Johnson last night projected an American policy on Vietnam in which the country can take pride," and from the *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, "Many newspapers published the full text of the address and added editorials praising Johnson's courage and reason in delivering a 'masterful presentation of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia' and included both the 'Sword and the Olive Branch,'" this alluding back to the John Hopkins speech that both satiated war hawks and those nervous of escalation.¹² Following LBJ's address, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reinstated funding for the war, \$115 million, which they had just revoked just before Johnson's speech. Eventually, though, North Vietnam rejected the propositions made by Johnson in the speech for economic development in Vietnam. The reactionary emotion to the speech passed, the war grinded on, and Americans were once again embroiled in how to properly deal with Vietnam, while Johnson kept up a pace of gradually escalating the war bit by bit. LBJ had gotten his positive support temporarily after his speech, but his attempt of selling peace, while advertising war, still had not solved the public's issue with Vietnam.

As the war rumbled on, the government still attempted to make best of their military efforts to the press. According to *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, MACV, or Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, created to assist the South Vietnamese, would, "...announce casualties by number once a week...but would describe losses for particular

¹² Yuravlivker, "Peace without Conquest," 465.

engagement only as light, moderate, or heavy.”¹³ However, it became more difficult to classify deaths in this way as lists of the dead increased in size, and since MAC used the three terms in relation to “total military force involved” the three terms were able to be used as whatever MAC wanted. In another instance of informational muddling, following an air raid conducted, the Department of Defense claimed that “...the raid had destroyed 2,500 pounds of enemy rice, a large communications center, and from 20 to 30 buildings,”¹⁴ but despite claims of the mission’s success, “...the attack had done little actual damage to the enemy, a fact readily apparent to any diligent reporter...reporters discounted all of those claims and concluded that the Johnson administration was trying to hide the failure of its raid behind another public relations ploy.”¹⁵ Even Cronkite, a CBS News anchor deemed the most trusted man in America at the time, “...charged that the Pentagon was ‘attempting to put the best possible light on what...appeared to be a mission that failed.’”¹⁶ The US government was attempting to constrict information that reporters could get their hands on, and the back and forth between government claims and that of reporters steadily decreased trust of both reporters, and as such, the public in government action in Vietnam due to the cloudy seeming nature of the military claimed “truths”. It’s hard to keep faith in a war effort when information of how it’s progressing is being constantly conflicted by what’s supposed to be reliable sources by both one's own government, and trustworthy news sources whose claims clash head on head.

Building further distrust, there was an interview with Adlai Stevenson, US Ambassador to the UN, who revealed that the US had during 1964 rejected North Vietnamese offers of

¹³ William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: the Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1988), 178.

¹⁴ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 174

¹⁵ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 174

¹⁶ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 175

peace talks twice.¹⁷ Though the State Department tried to play it down, stating it was “on the basis of the total evidence available to us we did not believe...North Vietnam was prepared for serious peace talks,”¹⁸ of which this statement was proving reporters' beliefs that the US government was not being honest of the status of the war. In an attempt to lessen the constant negative press coverage, the usual MACV briefing team was replaced with officers that were friendly with the press. Later, captured enemy documents were declassified and released to the press to give info to reporters that, “...either revealed enemy failures or admitted by word or inference that the war was going poorly for the Communists.”¹⁹ Such evidence was released to the press to further bolster the war effort, at a pace the government had more control and comfort in dispensing, while satiating eager reporters.

Besides reporting in Vietnam, the government also moved to counter dissenting views at universities, which were frequent sites of mass domestic protests against the war. According to the *American Experience* from PBS, “Since the first wave of teach-ins hit campuses, the American government had been working to get its side of the story out at universities. For example, it supported the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), a pro-administration group that held a rally in June 1965.”²⁰ According to a New York Times article covering the death of the AFV’s former chairman, Wesley L. Fishel, Fishel, “...sought to rally support for the United States government’s military buildup in Vietnam.”²¹ The AFV was originally created to help privately lobby and bolster American support for former South Vietnamese leader, Diem, and to promote him as a man committed to social and economic reform and someone who was

¹⁷ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 215

¹⁸ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 215

¹⁹ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 235.

²⁰ “Protests and Backlash,” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-student-antiwar-protests-and-backlash/>.

²¹ “Wesley L. Fishel, a Professor, Dies; Leading Advocate of Vietnam War,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1977.

driven to defeat communist influence. However, following Diem's overthrow, the AFV then shifted its support to the new government of South Vietnam. As the Johnson administration attempted to change minds about the war, presidential aides created a program named, "Target: College Campuses", and this program according to, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* would be, "...dispatching some of their 'best young troops' to speak at universities and bringing professors and student leaders to Washington for seminars. The President authorized the Democratic National Committee to mobilize through the Young Democrats a cadre of student leaders to speak out in defense of U.S. policy."²² In relation of this program with the AFV, "Administration officials helped raise private funds to support AFV activities and encouraged the group to conduct rallies to counter the teach-ins and release publications defending U.S. policy."²³ However despite all these attempts to sway public opinion in colleges, the protests showed no signs of stopping, and anti-war sentiment still continued to build, with the AFV in particular being unable to match the success or the numbers of their rival anti-war groups, proving the government's ineffectiveness to dispense pro-war sentiment among the American public.

When the Tet Offensive finally occurred, it was the final twist of the knife for the Johnson administration in conducting the war. The surprise attack shocked many Americans, who despite the contradictions between the press and official government statements, still thought the Viet Cong were not as major a threat as they had perceived to justify an offensive of such a large scale. After all, General Westmoreland, an American commander in Vietnam, was just comforting the American people that the enemy was only able to launch attacks of small types of ambushes around the further areas of South Vietnam. He had previously declared,

²² George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam a Different Kind of War*, (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1996), 126.

²³ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 126.

“With 1968, a new phase is now starting. We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view.”²⁴ Johnson stated, regarding the war on the USS Enterprise, that there would be, “not many more nights”²⁵ - and US military officials framed enemy fighting efficiency as declining and their morale sinking. Much of the press had still supported the basic war effort in Vietnam and as such, so did the American public, until Tet.

With Tet, the North Vietnamese had shifted tactics from guerilla, to conventional warfare. When they broke through the walls of the two-and-a-half-million-dollar US Embassy complex in Saigon, it was a shocking image for many Americans even though the Embassy itself was not taken. The Viet Cong in the bigger picture, were able to attack at once five cities, thirty-six provincial capitals, sixty-four district capitals, and fifty hamlets. Many Americans were taken off guard that this attack could even happen to this size.²⁶ The North Vietnamese had failed to meaningfully achieve most of their objectives, with many cities being retaken after initial capture as well, and the offensive failing to encourage rebellion among the South Vietnamese as had previously hoped. The US and RSV had about 700 casualties, while the North Vietnamese had about 10,000 dead, with many of their undercover agents being killed while taking part in the offensive, or driven out of their villages in the aftermath of the attack.²⁷ Despite the military strategic win for the US, the attack was a complete psychological victory for the North Vietnamese.

The attack was contrary to what US government officials were assuring the public, that the end was nearing, and the enemy was weakening, and America would come out on top. The news, and as a result, the public, would not share such a view. Mike Wallace, a CBS

²⁴ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 140.

²⁵ Don Oberdorfer, “TET: Who Won?” Smithsonian Institution, November 1, 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tet-who-won-99179501/>.

²⁶ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 344.

²⁷ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 349.

correspondent, stated that the offensive “demolished the myth” that the US and RSV’s military controlled South Vietnam.²⁸ According to Barry Zorthian, an American diplomat with Vietnam,

LBJ never seemed to feel the confidence of the American public. He wasn’t sure of his public posture, and therefore, he wasn’t sure he could call on the American public to take on a war, deliberately, and consciously...and suddenly you turn around and we’ve got half a million people out there, and more on the way...and 200,000 more troops, we were gonna hit 700,000, and that’s what I think Walter Cronkite reacted to...there was no end to it.²⁹

And what Zorthian alluded to regarding Cronkite was his report in February following Tet stating this, “It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy...”³⁰ Eight weeks after Tet, Johnson announced he would not be seeking, nor accepting a nomination of his party to be president, due to the public backlash from Tet. By the time LBJ left with peace talks in Vietnam underway, he had about a 50% approval rating, and his successor, Richard Nixon, would run on the campaign promise to bring peace with honor while pursuing the goal of Vietnamization, slowly having the South Vietnamese pick up more and more military responsibility while the US withdrew.³¹ Gallup reports on Dec 12, 1967,

²⁸ Hammond, *Public Affairs*, 345.

²⁹ “S1 Ep 6 LBJ’s War - The Shock of Tet,” in *LBJ and the Great Society*, podcast, 24:19, <https://beta.prx.org/stories/269513>.

³⁰ *CBS News - Walter Cronkite’s Report from Vietnam - 1968-02-27*. YouTube, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Toy2wFBkmg>.

³¹ David Coleman, “LBJ’s Presidential Approval Ratings, 1963-1969,” Research, August 5, 2014, <https://historyinpieces.com/research/lbj-presidential-approval-ratings>.

pre-Tet Offensive, 45% of Americans believed Vietnam was a mistake. After the Offensive, and after LBJ rejected any notion of running for president, the number updated to 48% by April that same year, and by 1973 under Nixon, that number had risen to 60%.³² Regarding the AFV following Tet, under Nixon's administration, this organization's publication and ascendancy rates were decreasing, and the organization faced financial struggles and encountered an uninterested public unwilling to take interest in them.³³ The American public, especially college kids, were just not interested in perpetual war.

Perhaps the Vietnam War might've gone differently if LBJ's administration was more clear about the state of the war to the public. However, this was not the case. The US government was unable to tame anti-war sentiment and culture due to their own failures. At many turns, the government tried to shield the ears of the public from news of Vietnam. It misled the public about the war's progression, gave divided messages about how the government would resolve the war, and advertised Vietnam as a sure win before the outbreak of Tet, which the public perceived as anything but a success. LBJ attempted to downplay the situation in Vietnam initially as he kept a low profile on its status, later attempting to satiate the American public with military and diplomatic solutions, which failed, as he continually also failed to anticipate the power of a growing anti-war movement. When the problem of Vietnam grew too large to ignore, brought out by and large by the American public through their own concerns and protests, LBJ was forced to take a more public stance and attempt to shore up support while addressing the war in seriousness through his speech at John Hopkins. It temporarily boosted domestic support shortly in a reactionary sense but failed to bring about any substantial progress

³² Saad, "Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam."

³³ Sandra Scanlon, *The pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 215.

in advancing a meaningful end to the conflict, and as such its effectiveness on the public was short, and lacked the might needed to instill lasting public confidence in staying in Vietnam. It had a divided message, selling both peace and war to the public, and the public too would be divided accordingly. The government did try to conceal the severity of the war, trying to counter college protests through organizations such as the aforementioned AFV, but this was largely ineffective as government-backed efforts could never compete in popularity with their college anti-war counterparts. As for reporters, the government attempted to satiate their desire for knowledge to an agreeable degree, but it was quickly discovered that journalist media would conflict greatly with official government accounts, helping to simmer suspicion of government deceit in both the press and public. The government often perpetuated the belief that the US was winning the war, and that the end was nearing. It had advertised these claims especially prior to the Tet Offensive, and the government's inability to properly get journalists to see the war from their point of view when the offensive did occur, as well as the government's failure to set up a seemingly truthful account of how the war was really going, backfired tremendously with Tet. The conflict revealed to the American public that in contrast to their original beliefs, the situation in Vietnam was much worse than what the government had tried to frame it as. As such, it led to a further decline in Vietnam War support after Tet and beyond 1968, despite the fact that the offensive was a smashing military victory for the US.

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