Vietnam, the Johnson Administration and the Role of Domestic Public Opinion

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Introduction

Lyndon Johnson was a president sensitive to criticism and highly aware of the fragility of public approval. He believed the Vietnam issue represented an especial threat to his domestic agenda and personal legacy.\(^1\) It is therefore unsurprising that public opinion should at times have significantly impacted the Johnson Administration’s course of action in Vietnam; such is the historical consensus.\(^2\) The specifics of that interplay are more difficult to ascertain, in part due to the strategic non-disclosure which characterized the formation and execution of Vietnam policy in the Johnson White House. In a climate where public opinion was a force to be carefully monitored and manipulated, its perceived importance ensured that the complete range of factors influencing Vietnam decisions was seldom fully disclosed\(^3\); for the most part, Americans could only speculate as to the impact their changing opinions effected upon foreign policy. Even within the administration, the secrecy and informality of Johnson’s decision-making process left many in the dark as to exact nature of, and reasoning behind, shifts in America’s commitment in Vietnam.

Given this pervasive atmosphere of concealment, examining public opinion’s reference in the documentary evidence left by those directly central to shaping America’s Vietnam policy can better illuminate its role. Johnson and his key advisors’ perception and treatment of public opinion provide insight into the extent to which changing public views influenced their decisions. The Johnson Administration’s perceived public opinion, furthermore, can be valuably contrasted against that registered by more nominally objective barometers, including Harris and Gallup polls; such comparison addresses whether, when public opinion did factor into the discussions over Vietnam, it did so as an accurate reflector of majority sentiment. This investigation explores when and how public opinion influenced the administration’s course of action.

A substantial body of material exists concerning the expansion of America’s involvement in Vietnam, and especially the Johnson Administration’s actions and escalations. Larry Berman’s *Planning a Tragedy* and Lyndon Johnson’s *War* cogently narrate America’s deepening commitment, elucidating Johnson’s failures and resultant loss of credibility in the public mind.\(^4\) George Herring covers similar ground, providing a valuable account of Johnson’s managerial shortcomings and restrictive decision-making apparatus in his *LBJ and Vietnam.*\(^5\)

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Brian VanDeMark’s *Into the Quagmire* focuses more specifically on the domestic circumstances which informed Johnson’s course of action in Vietnam, asserting that concern for the fate of his Great Society, should Vietnam become a divisive public issue, significantly influenced Johnson’s policy choices. David Barrett’s *Uncertain Warriors* is also a useful resource, affording a fuller understanding of the dynamics behind decision-making in the Johnson White House. These texts provide background essential to the successful interpretation of public opinion’s role within the larger political and administrative landscape.

Little published historical scholarship comprehensively examines the overarching influences of public opinion during the Johnson years, but much has been published on the nature and impact of the anti-war movement and increasing public dissent. Several of these works contribute importantly to an understanding of administration-perceived public opinion. Tom Wells’ *The War Within*, which chronicles the peace movement, includes material specifically addressing the impact of dissent on public opinion and government ability to prosecute the war. Melvin Small also explores this topic; his *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* and *Covering Dissent* discloses the complexities of the relationship between the administration, the media, and those against the war.

The State Department’s *Foreign Relations Series* includes several volumes of primary documents directly pertaining to Vietnam and the Johnson Administration. The declassified *Confidential File of the Johnson Administration* supplements this resource with documentary evidence left by more informal White House decision-making and strategizing. The memoirs of Lyndon Johnson, as well as those of Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk, present a valuable, if necessarily biased, supplement to administration papers, especially with regards the underpinning assumptions influencing their decisions. The *Congressional Record*, as well as records documenting the hearings and sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, evince the nature of public opinion and dissent perceived at the legislative level. Finally, the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research’s iPoll Databank contains an extensive archive of polls conducted during the Johnson era, including all relevant Vietnam polling by Gallup, Harris, and the Opinion Research Corporation.

Melvyn Small makes the important point, in his *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, that public opinion “is what government officials thought it was, whether or not their notions conformed to the neat flow charts created by the scholars.” If Johnson believed the editorials of *The Washington Post* to be a solid indication of the public mind, then, in terms of their impact upon his Vietnam policy, they essentially were. This investigation will examine whether a significant divergence existed between the Johnson Administration’s understanding of Vietnam public opinion and public opinion as reflected purely through opinion polling. It will argue that, despite Johnson’s popularly perceived non-responsiveness to declining support levels, the President was indeed aware of his deteriorating consensus. Though preoccupied with gauging the public mood, his administration predominantly responded to public opinion concerns with public relations rather than actual alterations in policy direction. Johnson believed this approach advisable in order to prevent minority dissent from deleteriously impacting majority support. The ill advisedness of Johnson’s public relations
response may have been among his tragic failures in Vietnam, but a fundamental misinterpretation of public opinion realities demonstrably was not.

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Administration Measures of Public Opinion

The Johnson Administration’s decision-making apparatus registered public sentiment through a wide array of means. Though far from the administration’s sole gauge of public opinion, polling played a central role among utilized measurements, in part due to its perceived comprehensiveness and relative lack of bias. In addition to the data regularly collected by Gallup, Harris, and other independent polling organizations, the Johnson Administration frequently hired pollsters to perform private polling, often on a state-by-state basis. Johnson and his advisors hoped these outcomes, intended to supplement White House knowledge with enhanced specificity of detail, might also yield more administration-favourable results. As the administration fully recognized, polling data did not provide objective and incontrovertible statements of public mood; a multitude of forces could manipulate and influence polled results. Such issues of influencibility notwithstanding, Johnson and his advisors still approached polling as a key indicator of public sentiment.

The White House also treated opinion expressed in telegrams and received mail seriously. Letters of course represented no non-biased sampling of public mood; unsurprisingly, individuals writing to their president often expressed strong opinions, tending to take extremist positions with greater frequency than poll-indicated public opinion. Taken en masse, however, the shifting sentiments of written opinion might represent a valuable presidential tool, and it was through this lens that Johnson interpreted them. Indeed Johnson placed great importance on the approval or disapproval voiced by his mail, especially when executing significant policy changes. Despite its informality and potential for bias, mail tallies often provided Johnson with critical confirmation or challenge, sometimes driving him to doubt the validity of polled opinion.

Expressed Media views were too among the indicators registered by and influential upon the White House, though not treated as objective barometers of the public mind. Unlike the Nixon Administration, Johnson had no formalized system of media-monitoring, in part because he insisted on personally reviewing *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, which he considered to be the two most significant pieces of national media, and forming first-hand opinions on their contents prior to debriefing by his staff. Such informality of procedure makes it more difficult to measure the precise extent of media opinion’s impact upon Johnson, but media coverage was unquestionably treated as an issue of grave importance. Columns, news reports, TV specials, and other multi-media were understood to be significant as both influencers and indicators of national opinion.

The administration situated all measures of public opinion in this dual role of indicator and influencer. A piece of critical journalism or a poll indicating
decreased approval ratings might, by detracting from a climate of national consensus, further damage the administration’s public approval. This interpretation informed the Johnson White House’s implicit philosophy of public opinion as public relations, the belief that opinion should be managed and controlled rather than directly responded to. Though public opinion did impact the course of action chosen by Johnson throughout his tenure in office, he viewed it as a highly malleable entity. Negative press coverage, and even unfavourable polling data, often inspired renewed efforts to shore public opinion through public relations campaigns, not reassessment of policy direction or execution. This strategy’s use was especially pronounced in Johnson’s approach to Vietnam.

The Gulf of Tonkin: Securing a Consensus

Southeast Asia was not one of Johnson’s central concerns as he ascended to the presidency, nor did he wish it to become one. A troubled commitment to Vietnam was part of the legacy inherited from his predecessor, which Johnson accepted only with serious misgivings. Though he acknowledged the necessity of continuing the Vietnam policies adopted by Kennedy, Vietnam’s potential to induce domestic division and dissent distressed Johnson. After voicing this anxiety at his first presidential debriefing with Vietnam advisors, particularly his concern regarding Congressional agitation for withdrawal and popular displeasure at Diem’s overthrow, Johnson declared that he wanted the execution of policy cleaned up, with “no more divisions of opinion, no more bickering.” He would not, he made clear, tolerate any dissenting attitudes which might further damage the fragile consensus erected around the nation’s Vietnam policy.

Johnson strongly advocated a consensus climate, rather than allowing public anti-administration dissent, throughout his time in office. While Johnson was determining future policy, he allowed debate between those within his coterie of primary advisors, including their challenge of accepted Vietnam assumptions and policy direction. Much of this discussion and decision-making took place informally, most notably at “Tuesday Lunches,” a series of regular meetings between Johnson and his trusted advisors. Once the president had decided upon a course of action, however, he required all to unwaveringly support it, regardless of any previously voiced reservations. Those who neglected to fall in line, or persistently dissented too strongly, found themselves removed from the president’s unofficial policy-formation process, for to publicly criticize the nation’s Vietnam policy was to threateningly undermine the public support inimical to its success.

Johnson strove to minimize the entire subject of Vietnam in the months prior to the summer of 1964. As he articulated to his Joint Chiefs of Staff, he feared that circumstance might intrude and force him to choose between the escalation of American involvement and the fall of South Vietnam to communism, with potentially damaging consequences for the upcoming election. Johnson, however, evinced greater concern with the political ramifications of withdrawal than of escalation throughout 1964. Senator Mansfield attempted to convince his president that “another Korea” and “another China” would be equivalently undesirable outcomes, but Johnson’s words and actions indicated that he
continued to consider any alternative preferable to bearing the public opinion burden of having “lost” Vietnam. Instead, with the likelihood of future escalation already in mind, Johnson took pains to remove withdrawal from the list of feasible options in the public mind, even going to some lengths to demand that de Gaulle make a public statement clarifying that he did not believe neutralization a feasible option in Vietnam. Public relations management, not earnest policy reassessment and review, was the reigning order of the day.

Johnson’s early approach to Vietnam was very much in line with public sentiment, as indicated by contemporary opinion polling. Americans were resoundingly against national withdrawal from Southeast Asia, with only 15% of those polled in the weeks before Tonkin recommending that the US “get out of the area altogether;” a plurality of respondents urged that America “press for an all out victory.” Equally tellingly, monthly Gallup polls indicated that until August 1964 a majority of Americans had given no or very little attention to “the happenings in South Vietnam.” Though the public exhibited a clear preference for escalation over withdrawal, most had little knowledge or interest in the subject. High percentages of respondents answered “don’t know” or “not sure” to questions regarding the future direction of Johnson’s Southeast Asia policy. Relatively unconstrained by public opinion, Johnson was thus able to postpone taking decisive action in Vietnam, instead devoting his own and Congressional attention to his expansive domestic agenda, especially the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Pre-Tonkin polling suggested that the public would be unlikely to impinge upon Congressional or Presidential desire to widen the conflict, and indeed would strongly favour escalation should circumstances appear to require it. Consequentially, Johnson and his advisors did not preoccupy themselves with public opinion in the context of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution’s introduction and passage. Awaiting and debating the arrival of precipitous foreign and Congressional conditions, the administration believed public backing for Vietnam escalation would materialize when required. And, as expected, the resolution and concomitant expansion of the conflict did induce a “rally round the flag” effect, with support rising for both the war and Johnson’s management of it. Public approval of Johnson’s Vietnam conduct helped him to achieve a landslide victory over Goldwater, with 49% of poll respondents declaring that the handling of Vietnam had a “great deal” of impact on their final candidate selection, and 49% believing Johnson, to Goldwater’s 15%, better able to handle it “if things get worse” in Vietnam. Press coverage, too, was solidly behind the President. Surrounded by indicators of widespread national support, the Johnson Administration was sufficiently confident of sustaining positive public opinion, at least in the short-term, that it seldom mentioned the subject in strategic calculations. Position papers of 1964 rarely address the potential constraint of American options by the threat of dwindling popular support.

**Operation Rolling Thunder: Addressing Burgeoning Dissent**

Public opinion seemed united behind the administration’s response to the Gulf of Tonkin, with the Tonkin Resolution overtly mandating further escalation when
and if the President deemed it necessary. As Johnson prepared to institute the sustained bombing campaigns he believed critical to success in Vietnam, he sought confirmation of a continuing public consensus behind administration escalation. Covertly commissioned Harris polls conducted in January and February of 1965 provided the needed substantiation; Americans wanted their government to help save South Vietnam. Johnson thus began Operation Rolling Thunder, content that public opinion validated his pre-determined preferred course of action. This treatment of public polling, as a means of confirming consensus rather than exploring the range and nuance of the national mind, would continue to inform Johnson’s Vietnam strategy in the years to come, allowing him to ignore burgeoning indicators of increasingly serious domestic dissent.

Dissent against Operation Rolling Thunder began to emerge almost immediately after its March 2nd inception. National newspapers questioned the advisability of sustained bombing, and on the Senate floor George McGovern criticized the administration’s failure to concurrently pursue both escalation and peace in Vietnam. If poll opinion supported the air campaign, he cogently noted, opinion was still stronger in support of a peace initiative. McGovern’s censure contained a valid administration critique; Johnson had ignored those poll-expressed preferences of the American public, which were not easily integrated into his escalation strategy. He had, moreover, not made any significant efforts to mobilize bombing support, giving the March escalation a “soft-sell,” in an attempt to prevent Vietnam from distracting the national attention away from his domestic causes. Johnson hoped that Rolling Thunder would bring rapid resolution to the problem of Vietnam, ultimately obviating the need for its incursion into the national debate.

As dissenters continued to express public apprehensions over the direction of America’s Vietnam policy, and the military situation in South Vietnam grew no better, Johnson began to recognize that bombing would not provide a sufficiently “quick fix” to preclude the stabilization of public opinion. Given the expanding military commitment, Johnson cautioned his Security Council, “It is unlikely that present political actions will meet the situation.” The President then proceeded to detail a number of steps the administration must take to curtail and combat “domestic opponents.” The bulk of Johnson’s ideas maintained a striking emphasis on improving public relations, not public opinion. “Cranking up” the “propaganda effort,” would undoubtedly have resultant impacts on domestic opinion, but by attacking negative press the administration indicated a preference for approaching Vietnam public opinion not as a statistic to be passively measured, but as a force to be actively controlled.

Johnson’s April 7th speech at Johns Hopkins University was the administration’s most direct attempt to meet this new public opinion threat. His address both outlined America’s goals in Vietnam and asserted a willingness to pursue them by all available means, including negotiation. Vocal dissent had not changed Johnson’s peace policy (he continued to have little confidence in negotiation’s actual productive potential), but presenting it to the nation significantly impacted the administration’s public perception. White House constituent mail, which consistently tended to be less supportive of Johnson on Vietnam, abruptly
reversed flow-bias following the speech, moving from 5:1 against to 4:1 in favour of US policy. Public approval appeared renewedly secure.

The President, however, remained distressed by even demonstrably non-representative Vietnam dissent. Part of this preoccupation stemmed from Johnson’s personal awareness of public opinion’s volatility, and especial susceptibility to influence by media forces. If those opposed to the administration collected significant press coverage, or even came to include important media figures, dissent might perniciously damage public opinion consensus. Anxious to prevent such an outcome, Johnson repeatedly queried his advisors whether the administration was “losing the propaganda war” and exhorted McNamara and Rusk to do everything possible towards securing support.

Even if Johnson was able to retain poll support, he and his advisors feared the deleterious international impacts of continuing domestic division. Should North Vietnam, observing press critiques, teach-ins, and other highly visible evidence of dissent, come to the conclusion that public opinion would soon force the US to withdraw, their willingness to reach a settlement could be gravely inhibited. From this perspective the true realities of public opinion and domestic pressure were immaterial. Expressions of internationally observable opposition to American Vietnam policy grew during 1965, and with them the depth of the administration’s concern over their foreign influence. When questioned by an Executive Session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June of 1965, Rusk definitively affirmed that Hanoi did expect dissenting public opinion to undermine America in Vietnam. This belief’s precise damage to American objectives was less clearly evident, but it did further motivate Johnson in his continuing endeavour to maximize consensus and minimize dissent.

Johnson believed that his Vietnam policy was coming under especial attack by America’s intellectual elite. Polling data lent some support to this conclusion; education-level did have a positive correlation with disapproval for Johnson’s handling of the war. These high-status Americans, however, were also most likely to reject both escalation and withdrawal, endorsing continued support for the current level of military involvement in Vietnam. But if the bulk of the nation’s intellectuals were perhaps not the threat Johnson perceived them to be, their command of both resources and respect could allow those who did dissent to wield disproportionate power over the public mind. For this reason Johnson went to great lengths to cultivate the support of prominent intellectuals, as for example his provision of a preview copy of his Johns Hopkins address to renowned political columnist Walter Lippmann.

Anti-Vietnam activities on college campuses were also a subject of particular Presidential concern. Protests and dissent were concentrated almost exclusively at a few dozen of the nation’s most elite institutions, as Johnson’s advisors frequently reminded him; polls indicated that most of America’s youth supported their President, in fact disproportionately so. Yet knowledge of their statistical insignificance did not curb Johnson’s distress at the existence and activities of student dissenters. Instead he responded with further public relations, establishing
“Target: College Campuses” in an attempt to disabuse students of their ignorant and invalid assumptions regarding Vietnam.51

This perceived influx of domestic criticism, largely concentrated within the sectors of society Johnson was most personally inclined to respect and respond to, impelled Johnson to couch future Vietnam policies in terms least likely to provoke heightened dissent. The administration pointedly downplayed the bombing escalations of 1965, and Johnson rejected McNamara’s suggestion that a task force be created to explain the widening conflict to America.52 While minimizing debate in order to keep consensus, Johnson concomitantly attempted to pacify his critics through the use of bombing pauses.53 Pauses were ostensibly intended to indicate American readiness for ceasefire and negotiation in the hopes of drawing a North Vietnamese response, but also helped to assure domestic opinion that the administration was making every effort to pursue peace. Johnson agreed to pauses, not anticipating that they would bring results, in the hopes that “if our effort failed, it might at least correct some wishful thinking at home and abroad.”54 Even bombing halts became the beleaguered president’s public relations tool.

Incendies of highly visible anti-Vietnam dissent continued throughout 1965, and Johnson’s received mail rapidly restabilized around its former anti-Presidential bias. Interpreting this information, Johnson concluded that his mobilization speeches and other pro-war “propaganda” had had little positive impact on public opinion.55 Polled opinion did not substantiate this conclusion. Public mobilization behind escalation led to rising war-support levels as Johnson expanded American involvement, especially in the second half of 1965.56 Pro-withdrawal sentiment characterized only a minority, oscillating between 12 and 35%, of poll respondents throughout the period.57 Most Americans supported bombing and escalation as the best means of achieving victory. The protests of dissenters, moreover, may have had an unintended reverse impact on polled public opinion; witnessing their President under attack motivated many to give him their reflexive support.58 Harris-conducted surveys support this conclusion: in December 1965 a majority of respondents affirmed the right of dissenters to peacefully demonstrate against Vietnam59 but, when informed that demonstrators believed the war to be morally wrong, only 14% of those polled agreed that this was their primary motivation. Instead, 34% said protestors were “just demonstrating against something,” 26% that they were a tool of the communists, and 14% labelled them draft avoiders.60 Dissent was being popularly dismissed, and serving to reinforce rather than undermine consensus. Polls, however, did contain one potentially ominous Vietnam indicator; the fraction of the public with “no opinion” on administration policy dropped considerably.61 Though this increasingly informed public continued to support Johnson in Vietnam, their heightened awareness of the issue would make the future shaping of public opinion through public relations a difficult and strategic task.

**Escalation and the Deterioration of Consensus**

Escalation failed to bring the anticipated victory, and as the war dragged on through 1966 and 1967, Johnson’s supportive consensus began to crumble.62
Polled support for the administration declined slowly but steadily after the first months of 1966. By mid-1967 scarcely more than 25% of Americans approved of Johnson’s handling of the war. This gradual diminution of public support was consistent with Americans’ historically limited tolerance for war; indeed, the analysis of public opinion historian John E. Mueller has shown that Vietnam’s public opinion trajectory correlated quite closely with that of the Korean War. In both cases mounting casualties and expanding troop commitment drove an increasing percentage of Americans to consider the nation’s entrance into the conflict as a mistake. Polling data sustains the conclusion that Johnson and his advisors fatally and foolishly miscalculated domestic popular “patience” with overseas military involvement.

The increasingly perceived “legitimization” of dissent further contributed to the deterioration of popular consensus. At first public opinion considered the administration’s domestic Vietnam opponents to be unpatriotic troublemakers. As respected and influential Americans began to question Vietnam involvement, disapproving of Johnson’s policy achieved greater mainstream validity. Evidence of consensus-breaks in high places, such as the televised Vietnam Senate hearings of February 1966, made the public more willing to doubt the advisability of the administration’s chosen course; congressional and intellectual dissent impacted the public, just as Johnson had originally anticipated and feared.

Johnson knew, and had known since before instituting escalation, that public opinion might eventually restrict his options in Vietnam. Though in the short-term a “middle course” seemed most likely to minimize dissent, in the long-term pressure for decisive action might build and force a final choice between escalation and withdrawal. Frequent indicators of virulent pro-withdrawal dissent notwithstanding, throughout 1966 and 1967 the administration continued to consider pressure from the right, pushing escalation, to be the more menacing face of this dual threat. The Korean experience, in which the President’s most significant attack had come from right-wing foes, unquestionably informed this evaluation. Mail opinion lent additional credibility to this analysis, indicating the presence of pro-escalation sentiment left largely unarticulated in polls.

Escalations pressure, moreover, was a multi-faceted threat to Johnson’s tenuous Vietnam consensus. When America’s military involvement in Vietnam had initially expanded, the President tried to minimize its significance, in order not to distract the nation from his domestic agenda. As the conflict escalated, and military needs increased, several of Johnson’s advisors urged him to inform the public more completely; if Vietnam were presented as a serious and important national priority, the nation could be mobilized around a successful prosecution of the conflict. Mobilization and escalation, however, would require diverting both attention and funds from Johnson’s Great Society. LBJ wanted both “guns and butter,” and so instead he chose to under-sell Vietnam, crafting a fragile consensus behind a limited-war strategy. If pro-escalation voices convinced the public that a greater commitment was necessary in Vietnam, it would not only destroy his consensus, but imperil everything he had built his consensus in order to achieve. Escalation and withdrawal, therefore, both represented unacceptable outcomes and at least equal menaces.
The political alignment of Vietnam sentiment complicated Johnson’s position. Though both Republicans and Democrats widely dissented against administration Vietnam policy, Republican disapproval was more likely to be Hawkish in nature, and Democratic criticism tended more towards an antiwar, pro-withdrawal stance. Dovish dissent thus represented a greater direct threat to Johnson’s consensus of popular and particularly Congressional support; it internally weakened Democratic cohesion, leaving Johnson and his party vulnerable to Hawkish Republican attack. If Johnson left peace protests un-combated, let alone acting in response to their demands, the Hawks might unleash their dormant strength against his administration.

The belief that right as well as left-wing opponents must be prevented from damaging the consensus importantly influenced Johnson’s response to declining public approval and burgeoning domestic dissent. Real policy changes would be undesirably destabilizing to fragile public support, particularly any move towards de-escalation. In this context, the administration had little alternative but to meet public opinion with public relations; as involvement in Vietnam deepened, it increasingly did.

**Administration Public Opinion Management**

The expanding effort to “manage” Vietnam public opinion encompassed a diverse array of strategies, conducted with varying degrees of secrecy and for the most part meeting with only limited success. One central tenet of Johnson’s approach was the mobilization of domestic allies to strenuously propone administration policy; he encouraged cabinet members to “increase [their] participation” through vocal administration support, and provided with enumerated “themes” to expand upon when discussing Vietnam. Presidential advisors devoted considerable attention to the construction of defensive arguments for use in speeches and other public appearances. Some critiques of Vietnam, including that of the illustrious Senator Fulbright, met with significant administration attention; staffers composed and revised numerous drafts of Johnson’s 3-page reply to the Senator’s critical “Arrogance of Power” letter. The White House fully exploited their public affairs resources in the pursuit of both offensive and defensive Vietnam PR strategies.

Press treatment of Vietnam was central in the administration’s endeavour to maximize positive publicity. A majority of press coverage had initially supported Johnson’s escalation, but the balance shifted precipitously early in the conflict; McNamara estimates that press opinion turned against the war in November of 1965. In conveying its administration disapproval, press coverage tended towards a left-leaning, pro-Dove bias which Johnson believed not statistically representative. Because of this bias, Johnson alleged, the public had greater awareness of pro-withdrawal sentiment than of equally if less visibly present pro-escalation agitation. Johnson did not wish to make policy changes in response to a peace prejudice he considered unreflective of public opinion, but it would increasingly imperil his consensus if left un-addressed.
Fearful lest press negativity become a critical determinant of public opinion, or give Hanoi the mistaken impression that it had become so, Johnson demanded that concentrated attention be given to its control and influence. The administration attempted neutralization indirectly, by urging TV stations to broadcast administration press conferences and other informational events. Often extensively debriefed on press attitudes prior to such conferences, Johnson’s representatives and advisors strove to direct media attention towards more administration-favourable points. Johnson also applied direct pressure on influential members of the news media, meeting with prominent columnists in order to correct their “pugnacious thinking” and resultant negative publicity. On issues deemed to have critical public relations import, such as the demonstrable pursuit of fair elections in South Vietnam, the administration restricted the number of allowed observers, and pointedly limited their access to press influence. Attempts to manage press influence were extensive and multi-directional; Johnson considered their threat to public opinion both genuine and profound.

Public polls were part of the Media’s Vietnam material, their content and coverage a significant influencer of public opinion. Johnson celebrated positive poll results for their public relations potential as well as their indications of increased policy support. Hearing that the mass of their fellow Americans supported the President might help secure the continued approval of those wavering, and evidence of popular approval could induce the Media to furnish more supportive portrayals. Johnson successfully prevailed upon pollster Harris to release positive statistics at opportune times in order to achieve maximum effect. His administration also privately commissioned state polls, in the hopes of finding greater support, and local polls in order to show local government officials “the wisdom of supporting the president.” Poll opinion lost much of its former pretence of objectivity; for the Johnson Administration “opinion research was an active force, and no longer a detached and neutral measurement.”

Impacts of Administration Public Relations

It is impossible to calculate the precise public opinion impact of the administration’s Vietnam public relations. Support levels continued their unremitting downward slide, but would perhaps have descended more rapidly in the absence of Johnson’s efforts. Public relations medicine, however, soon proved to carry with it a crippling side effect. A groundswell of government mistrust began to develop; Americans did not believe they were receiving the whole truth on Vietnam. The Senate indicated the sincerity of their concern over the emerging “credibility gap” in August 1966, the Foreign Relations Committee conducting hearings on the issue. According to witness testimony an Opinion Research Corporation poll for CBS had recently found that a troubling 67% of Americans believed their government “only sometimes tells the truth about Vietnam.” Senators expressed the desire that the government combat this statistic, and dissuade the public of the belief that the administration artificially “managed” Vietnam news.
Vietnam news was managed, and attempts to convince the public otherwise represented yet another “management” endeavour. Awareness of this new public opinion concern did motivate the President to more publicly articulate actions and policy changes; “mak[ing] our case” before the nation served the dual purpose of challenging domestic opposition and closing the credibility gap. But news management continued, and public relations only intensified as domestic dissent continued to escalate. Instead, Johnson pressed his government to present a more united public face, not “wash[ing] any more dirty linen in public.”

By the closing months of 1967 Johnson found himself stymied by declining public support. Few Americans approved his handling of the conflict, with opinion balanced on whether Americanization had itself been a mistake. Press coverage was dishearteningly negative, especially editorial and opinion pieces in the news organs Johnson believed most significant. Public relations wasn’t enough, and the bombing halted his advisors had touted to combat domestic opposition had repeatedly failed to further peace or consensus. Meeting with McNamara and Rusk following a weekend of anti-war demonstrations, a frustrated Johnson asserted that: “We’ve got to do something about public opinion.” “We must show the American people we have tried and failed after going the very last mile” (in the pursuit of peace). He did not indicate how the administration could feasibly accomplish this; he did not know. Though profoundly discouraged by the public opinion problem, Johnson still sought to respond through public relations. By all measures Americans were turning against Johnson’s war, the administration never seriously discussed taking the Dove option, nor was the Hawk’s desire for massive escalation given more than passing consideration.

**Tet and Post-Tet Public Opinion**

The Tet offensive, launched on January 30th, 1968, profoundly impacted national public opinion. In the opening days of the offensive Johnson advisor Walt Rostow argued that the campaign’s military outcome would ultimately dictate public opinion, declaring that “If the war goes well, the American people are with us. If the war goes badly, they are against us.” But national opinion on Vietnam, as Johnson knew well, was a complex force subject to influences extending far beyond the battlefield. The ability of the enemy to conduct a massive incursion into US-controlled territory impelled many Americans to question the administration’s portrayal of progress. While Johnson’s military leadership insisted that all lost territory had been rapidly reacquired, and the final outcome definitively favourable, Americans had been witness to the well-publicized losses of Tet, and saw a national defeat. At first, polled opinion reacted by turning Hawkish, with 58% of Gallup respondents self-identifying as such in the closing days of February. As the initial press for massive retaliation faded, opinion gradually returned to its former even division between Hawks and Doves. More enduring was the belief that America and her allies were “standing still” in Vietnam. A disheartening 57% of polled Americans disapproved of Johnson’s Vietnam conduct; a 49% plurality labelled entrance into the conflict a mistake. Little remained of Johnson’s desired consensus climate.
To some extent, post-Tet polling statistics simply reflected the continuation of the support decline which had characterized poll opinion since 1966. Approval and mistake percentages responded to Tet, but the changes were not themselves considerable, though they did shift administration support into the status of a minority viewpoint. Johnson, however, became further preoccupied with the “problem” of public opinion. His increased concern had a logical foundation: media coverage of Tet had been negative, expansive, and presumably highly influential to malleable public perceptions of military and strategic affairs. Networks began to air a new round of Congressional hearings on Vietnam, and dissent appeared legitimised more than ever before; Prominent CBS anchor Walter Cronkite reported that the conflict had reached a stalemate. Mounting evidence indicated an America both deeply divided and dissatisfied.

Dean Rusk asserts that the President identified within this hostile climate a “grass-roots” shift in public opinion; independent of the “college kids and liberal elites,” the core of America had turned against the war. Though the administration continued to rebut domestic criticism, especially growing public distress over the perceived credibility gap, Johnson and his advisors began to see their public opinion problem as a serious constraint on future Vietnam policy. On March 26th Johnson met with the “Wise Men,” a collection of the advisors he most respected, in order to gauge their opinion on the changes in domestic circumstances. Though they did not come to a consensus on whether the “homefront” had already been lost, but a majority of Johnson’s trusted men agreed that “we can no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left,” the time public opinion would allow. The perception that public disapproval would retard the successful conclusion of the war effort contributed to the President’s March 31st policy shift. Johnson lists public opinion as one of the four factors leading him to announce a de-escalating bombing halt, wondering, if Tet so gravely influenced his Wise Men, “what must the average citizen in the country be thinking?” Divided Vietnam opinion, and its myriad impacts in the domestic sphere, also influenced Johnson in his concurrently proclaimed, though more privately made, decision not to seek re-election. Public opinion had finally outstripped the troubled President’s many attempts to meet problems with public relations.

Johnson continued to monitor public opinion and strive towards unity throughout the remainder of his presidency. In the final months before the election the President became increasingly focused on achieving a positive outcome from the Paris peace talks; if Johnson’s successor could bring the peace that he himself could not, it would be the undoing of his administration’s Vietnam legacy. Johnson monitored the talks assiduously, and orchestrated the careful management of propaganda surrounding them. Furthermore, though deeply ambivalent concerning the candidacy of his vice-president, Johnson even announced a bombing halt as a last-ditch attempt to produce peace, an “October Surprise” which, had it proved successful, might have catapulted Humphrey into the Presidency while serving to secure Johnson’s historical reputation. Johnson remained highly aware of public opinion; the administration continued to collect poll opinion, and the President received mail statistic reports following significant speeches. Johnson also gave consideration to informal and non-statistical measures of public sentiment; special assistant to the president Robert E. Kinter even reported his personal campaign-related observations garnered from chatting.
with members of the public during his regular commute between Washington and New York. Indeed continuity, rather than change, characterized the administration’s approach to public opinion during these concluding months. The frustrations and trials of Johnson’s Vietnam experience might have taught valuable lessons on the importance of being both aware of and responsive to indicators of shifting opinion, but there is little evidence that he and his advisors absorbed such a conclusion. And Richard Nixon, observing the dissent which stymied Johnson in Vietnam, approached the conflict with greater readiness to comprehensively utilize information management, secrecy, and other strategic means of effective public opinion control.

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Conclusion

Was Johnson’s Vietnam decision-making overly influenced by the press? Certainly some of his advisors thought so. At the critical post-Tet Wise Men meeting, General Maxwell Taylor suggested to the President that “we are all victims of our environment,” and his might be leading him to perceive a situation more negative than the reality. A significant minority of Johnson’s men believed he had taken biased coverage in the Times and Post too much to heart. By March of 1968, however, the wreck of Johnson’s consensus could be plainly witnessed in public polls as well as elite editorials. As McNamara had predicted, the deterioration of public support did finally necessitate a choice between the extremes of escalation and withdrawal.

A more cogent argument could be made that Johnson ignored popular approval’s slow downward spiral for too long, using what measures he could find to convince himself of continuing public support and striving through public relations to influence all other measures to fall in line. Johnson, however, was demonstrably aware of negative public opinion. Though he carried only favourable poll reports in his pocket, advertising his success, he read all the reports, positive and negative. Indeed he often had extreme reactions to negative media attention, ranting to his advisors and using the famed “Johnson Treatment” to bully media figures who gave him bad publicity. Johnson consistently neglected to respond to indicators of unfavourable public opinion through concrete policy change, but his unresponsiveness was intentional rather than uninformed. Believing himself under serious pressure from both the left and right, Johnson was fatally trapped between the Scylla of escalation and the Charybdis of withdrawal. To embrace either path would invite domestic attack, break his consensus, and imperil the nation’s achievement of “guns and butter.”

In retrospective analysis public relations was not the miracle dissent-management tool Johnson wished it to be. Any short-term success only made its long-term failure, and the corresponding exposure of the perceived “credibility gap,” all the more spectacular. But, short of actual policy change, Johnson’s alternatives were limited. Americans’ support for war was bound to decline, and if controlling
opinion influencers could slow that decline, it at least bought the administration, and the military, more time to achieve its goals.

Since all public opinion met with administration management, until management became an insufficient primary response, it is difficult to determine whether Johnson reacted to specific indicators in a statistically appropriate manner. Though he acknowledged indicators, he immediately concerned himself with their potential implications as influencers. He did not demand that Harris alter his polling schedule because he naively believed a few days difference would find Americans truly more supportive, but because press reporting of the statistic would have its own real impact on future support-levels. Johnson’s awareness of poll-data’s ease of influencibility, despite its supposed objectivity, likely made him regard it less seriously as a true indicator of public opinion. Polled approval and mistake levels, however, did not definitively turn against the President until after Tet. Once disapproval and dissent thus became statistically significant, the administration acted, changing policy. Nondisclosure, public relations, and information management notwithstanding, Johnson was ultimately (somewhat) responsive to the indicator value of polled public opinion. Perhaps this represents the one marginal success of his Vietnam policy.


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