

LBJ, LBJ, How Many Kids Did You Ignore Today?

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Abstract

The actual effectiveness of the American anti-war movement from 1964-68 and its attempts to sway the policy of President Johnson's administration on the topic of the Vietnam War is debatable. While popular myth has exaggerated the role of protestors in stopping the war, the movement failed to alter state policy on the war in any serious fashion. The anti-war movement could not develop a universal policy of their aims, differing from a gradual exit from Vietnam to a complete anarchist overthrow of the American system, and as such were unable to lobby the government effectively. Within the war itself, however, the Johnson administration and the United States Military encountered a stronger stimulus to reconsider their involvement: the inability to adapt to a guerilla war, the immense man power and resources required to ensure victory, and ultimately the communist Tet offensive of 1968 pushing American forces back. When President Johnson did seek to negotiate with North Vietnam at the end of his term, it was because America had simply failed to beat the Vietcong.

The anti-war movement has a tendency to be portrayed as the American public directly changing the government's policy during the Vietnam War, whether in a negative or positive sense. It is not uncommon to hear the right wing of the political spectrum claim that the dissenters are the reason America lost in Vietnam, letting down the troops and bolstering the will of the communists to fight on; the contemporary turn of phrase is "You're either behind our troops, or in front of them," indicating that criticism of the military and its actions was practically a crime, and that loyalty and obedience to the commander-in-chief must be stressed and acknowledged. On the flip side of the coin, active members of the anti-war movement liked to hype their own effects in standing up to the government, fighting for their rights, and forcing the President's hand, be it in Lyndon B. Johnson refusing re-nomination for the national election in 1968, or simply for the war ending at all. This is certainly the opinion of professional protestor Fred Halstead. In his memoirs of the protests of the 1960s, Halstead believed the anti-war-war movement was the result of an elitist government not paying heed to the desires of its people, necessitating the need for an active citizenry to openly question authorities. The imagery of protesters, signs, marches, and the hand sign of two fingers held up in a V to indicate peace are ingrained into the popular myth of the sixties. These images have almost overtaken certain realities regarding the anti-war movement, specifically during President Johnson's administration. Neither stabbing the President directly in the back, nor forcing a change in policy, the anti-war movement and its activists arguably had very little direct effect upon the president, his administration, or how it handled the war in Vietnam. That is not to say the movement was completely impotent; anti-war activists played some part in Lyndon Johnson's life and times. While the anti-war movement from 1964-68 did have some indirect effect upon the administration, the true scope of its direct effect is limited.

It should be recognized that neither President Johnson nor his administration singularly instigated the war in Vietnam. America had a history of involvement in Vietnam; in World War II the

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American army assisted in ousting the Japanese occupation. Once the Vietminh adopted communism within a Cold War world, however, the reaction of Presidents to the emerging third-world nation was less than hospitable. President Eisenhower recognized that if Vietnam were to fall to communism, other nations would likely follow in its wake--hardly the preferred outcome from a capitalist point of view. In response to the French loss of its former colony, and in a direct snubbing of the Geneva Accords settling the issue, Eisenhower and his supporters established an American-backed capitalist regime in South Vietnam under the puppet leader of Ngo Dinh Diem.¹ Furthermore, the planned elections designed to reunite the country in 1956 never took place, while America continued to practically single-handedly fund a renewed Southern Army to protect the state it had created.² Essentially, the Eisenhower administration set the stage for the Vietnam war by creating a regime to challenge the North, denying the chance for the country to be united, pouring its own resources into arming the Southern state, and, when it became clear that there was no real legitimacy to Diem's reign, propping the Southern Vietnamese by itself. This all created an ingrained financial and political commitment for America within Southeast Asia. With its emphasis on military action and putting a foot down on communist expansion, the Kennedy administration expanded American involvement within Vietnam, upping the American presence to 1400 men in 1961.³ Prior to Johnson even accepting the mantle of President after Kennedy's assassination, the stage was set for a full-blown war within Vietnam.

Significantly, dissent with the war was not limited to Johnson. Within the Kennedy administration, Senators Mansfield and Morse questioned the wisdom of engaging in an Asian land war, as did several other prominent intellectuals.⁴ Kennedy himself had some level of recognition that the faux regime created in South Vietnam was faulty at best, authorizing a CIA assisted coup to oust Diem.⁵ Secretary of State for Economic Affairs George Ball warned that "success in creating a legitimate government in South Vietnam was highly unlikely."⁶ Yet Kennedy was not the one to be treated to chants of "JFK, JFK, how many kids did you kill today?" To quote Sandra Scanlon:

One lasting consequence of the Vietnam War, however, was the impact it had on Johnson's legacy. Despite his substantial efforts to achieve civil rights and to reform the systems of health care, education, and welfare in the US, the Vietnam War continues to overshadow his presidency...⁷

The war, in spite of the previous President's prelude to it, became in popular culture the Johnson administration's war. It is here that the anti-war movement had its greatest effect on the President: it made Lyndon Johnson into the symbol of American involvement in Vietnam. Public appearances of Johnson were sure to be greeted by anti-war protest of some kind.⁸ Indeed, when, in the future, Johnson declined the Democratic nomination in 1968, there was some concern in the anti-war movement that they wouldn't have a target to heckle at the convention.⁹ Anti-war demonstrator

¹ David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 126.

² *Ibid.*, 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴ Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 83-84.

⁵ Sandra Scanlon, "That Bitch of a War: Lyndon B. Johnson and Vietnam." *History Ireland*, Vol. 16 Issue 3, 2008. 45.

⁶ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 131

⁷ Scanlon, "That Bitch of a War," 46.

⁸ Fred Halstead, *Out now! : A participant's account of the American movement against the Vietnam War* (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 199.

⁹ Halstead, *Out Now*, 405.

James Bevel stated: “We are going to give LBJ one month to stop murdering those folks in Vietnam.”¹⁰ As the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, he would personally harbour the responsibility of Vietnam and whatever occurred within it, even if he was on the other side of the world, sitting behind a desk.

A possible reasoning of this trend was that the war was intentionally escalated by Johnson. After the apparent attack on US ships by Vietnamese torpedo boats within the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, Johnson was presented with the opportunity to retaliate in force against North Vietnam.¹¹ Furthermore, with only a few notable exceptions such as Ball, Senators Ernest Gruening and Wayne Morse, the measure to escalate the war in Vietnam was passed with great enthusiasm by the House of Representatives.¹² No matter who had gotten the United States into Vietnam in the first place, it was President Johnson who had given the go-ahead to begin the ground fighting in earnest.

If this, then, is the anti-war movement view of Johnson, it should be recognized what Johnson and the administration thought of the anti-war movement. It can be assumed that Johnson did not care for the dissension. He believed the demonstrators were a direct attack against the troops stationed in Vietnam; “how can an American Senator or an American newspaperman or an American student tie the hands of our fellow American military men?”¹³ Protests on the grounds that the war was racial and genocidal undercut the ideology of the Great Society plan, especially considering Johnson had used the Great Society ideals (that of bringing up the oppressed and putting them on equal economic and living conditions footing with white Americans) in his legitimizing of intervention to South Vietnamese.¹⁴ The dissenters were thus viewed as unpatriotic in acting against the president and the military.¹⁵

At the very least, the anti-war movement had succeeded in at least getting Johnson to acknowledge both them and dissent. Public polls after the 1965 Gulf of Tonkin resolution was “backed by 85 percent of the polled population, and public approval of [Johnson's] handling of the Vietnam issue had risen from 42 to 72 percent.”¹⁶ Also, as David Farber observes, there was a tendency in history that, in times of war, “the American people flocked to their commander-in-chief.”¹⁷ As evidenced by the shock expressed over American criticism of governmental decision, a mentality had developed which believed there was no dissent, or at least, critics of the Vietnam decision were a minority.

Furthermore, even within the world of politics, there was no real party that could be considered dovish (that is, opposed the war altogether). In fact, in the elections of 1964, Johnson's Democratic party were seen as the moderate choice against Barry Goldwater's Republican party which favoured expanding the war.¹⁸ Republicans sought the make Vietnam an issue in the public eye, claiming that Johnson would lose Vietnam to communism like America had lost Cuba and China.¹⁹ Even in planning for its anti-war demonstration, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) did not call for complete and unconditional withdrawal from Vietnam to avoid alienating potential supporters in

¹⁰ Halstead, *Out Now*, 287.

¹¹ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 98.

¹² Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 137.

¹³ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 119.

¹⁴ Randall Woods, “The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam.” *Diplomatic History* 31, 1 (2007), 15.

¹⁵ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 137.

¹⁸ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 99.

¹⁹ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 135.

congress.²⁰ As some NATO partners started to question the escalation in the war, Johnson made a speech on April 7, 1965, emphasizing America was helping the South Vietnamese develop “Peace Without Conquest.” The speech smoothed over NATO concerns, and quelled yet another political source of dissent against the war.²¹ With the doves of America almost entirely shut out from politics and the public eye, any success the anti-war movement and the dissidents had in self-assertion and gaining recognition would be an improvement from where they started.

On April 17, 1965, a ‘Students for Democratic Society’ (SDS) sponsored anti-war march on Washington produced something along the lines of 20,000 people in participation. According to Fred Halstead, the main effect of the march was “to show that Johnson didn’t have the consensus he claimed on the war.”²² It was the first large-scale and organized anti-war demonstration within America, and, giving credence to Halstead’s claim, likely an eye-opener for the administration. In spite of the cohesion, the effect of the demonstration is debatable. Johnson himself was not present to witness the march, being at his ranch in Texas at the time.²³ No political official accepted the petition written up by the SDS leaders when they presented it to the Capitol.²⁴ In response to the protest, counter-dissenters increased their vocal support for Johnson and his handling of the war.²⁵

Soon after the march on Washington, the anti-war movement resumed another form of protest: Teach-Ins. These seminars were designed to educate students and any other listeners on what exactly was happening in Vietnam. Though many Teach-Ins occurred around the country, its biggest episode took place on May 15, 1965, in Berkeley. Denying any influence from the government to set the agenda for the debate,²⁶ those who spoke at the debate criticized and questioned American involvement in Vietnam. This was a sign of dissent among the educated and elite of American society, not just the bead-wearing hippies. The Teach-Ins can be considered a sign that dissention for the Vietnam war was not limited to one particular section of the country, but rather, was beginning to spread, or at least become more vocal.

The response of the Johnson administration to the Teach-Ins and the March on Washington seems to undercut any imagery of forward progress for the movement. Vice President Hubert Humphrey believed the acts to be “feeble, futile, and unnecessary.”²⁷ By the end of April, 1965, Johnson approved a further twenty thousand troops to Vietnam with the intention of changing the military goal from not just defence, but a seek-and-destroy offense against the Vietcong.²⁸ The dove-supporters within the Democratic party were either unwilling to get on the bad side of Johnson,²⁹ or simply did not care for the activists, not wanting to be, as George Ball put it, “a hero of the yippies.”³⁰ Shortly after the Berkley Teach In, the *Times* stated that “The Vietniks are not going to be able to talk the US out of Vietnam. They tried their best last spring... [and] President Johnson simply

²⁰ Melvin Small, *Covering dissent: the media and the anti-Vietnam War movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 35.

²¹ Dror Yuravlivker, “Peace Without Conquest: Lyndon Johnson’s Speech of April 7, 1965.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, 3 (2006), 458.

²² Hasstead, *Out Now*, 41.

²³ Halstead, *Out Now*, 41.

²⁴ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁶ Halstead, *Out Now*, 54.

²⁷ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 56.

²⁸ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 113.

²⁹ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 56.

³⁰ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 113.

stepped up the US effort.”³¹ In spite of students’ and intellectuals’ dissent, the government policy for Vietnam did not change and the war continued. Furthermore, the activists themselves questioned the immediate effect of their protests. The SDS, integral in actually getting these protests off the ground, did not express any desire in making its agenda one of strictly anti-war, thereby denying the movement any real central leadership.³² After Johnson increased the troop presence in Vietnam, some movement leaders saw the Teach Ins were pointless in actually influencing decision-making, consequently discontinuing the practice.³³ Given the overall lack of change within the system, and a feeling of futility on the outside, the major anti-war movements of 1965 do not appear to have had any great power in stopping the war.

The lack of cohesion on the issue may be a possible reason for dissenters’ ineffectiveness; this discord would plague the movement until its very end. There was always a mix of those who simply wanted American involvement in Vietnam to cease, and those who wanted to overthrow the entire political system. Some, like Staughton Lynd, did not want to disrupt all of American democracy, but wanted the immediate dismissal of the Johnson administration.³⁴ Some, like James Bevel, advocated mass civil disobedience on a national scale.³⁵ However, in spite of rhetorical disagreements, dissenters were united in a desire to see the war in Vietnam end. DeBenedetti points out anti-war movements believed the war was, “morally wrong, imprudent and unfeasible, counterproductive to national interests in regional and international stability, and anti-ethical to American ideals.”³⁶ The problem remained about which argument was placed over another in discussions of management of the dissension movement. Moreover, even though the essence of agreement was there, a failure to agree on the end goal hindered the coherence of anti-war dissidence, something which figure prominently into the March on the Pentagon in 1967.

Though the anti-war movement receives, and often accepts, a great deal of the credit for the failure of the American war effort in Vietnam, the war ‘back home’ was hardly the only problem that encumbered the army. Even from the beginning, there were concerns within the administration regarding their chances of winning; General Earle Wheeler, in looking at the hypothetical numbers, deduced that something along the lines of one million American troops would be required if they ever hoped to truly defeat the Vietcong.³⁷ The war was counter to what the American army had been trained and experienced in; during World War II and Korea, there was at least the knowledge as to where the enemy was and what his movements were. In Vietnam, the Vietcong adopted classical guerrilla warfare tactics, relying on sniping, booby traps, and hit-and-run attacks, disappearing almost as quickly as they arrived. General Maxwell Taylor pointed out as early as 1965 that there was no legitimate way to distinguish the enemy from a civilian, thereby making the “Search and Destroy” strategy all the more difficult (how could you destroy what you could not find?).³⁸ By 1966, within the administration, there were concerns over whether continued bombing of North Vietnam was having the desired effect. Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, one of the main advocates of the bombing campaign, had started what would become a life-time of second-guessing his opinions on whether or not the war could be won.³⁹ Johnson’s appeals to NATO for reinforcements from other

³¹ Halstead, *Out Now*, 91.

³² *Ibid.*, 63.

³³ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 124

³⁴ Halstead, *Out Now*, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

³⁶ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 91.

³⁷ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 142.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 144

³⁹ Fredrik Logeval, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Mar2004, Vol. 34 Issue 1. 105.

countries were shot down; the British declared the war a “lost cause,” and France, having already spent a significant amount of time and money within Vietnam, were also disinclined to help.⁴⁰ With the exception of aid from New Zealand and Australia, and to a lesser extent Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan, the United States was to go it alone in Vietnam, presenting further problems. Committed to keep a standing force within Germany lest the Soviets attack Europe, the United States Army was never able to concentrate solely within Vietnam. In fact, with such heavy investment already put into Vietnam, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield believed “the United States was militarily overcommitted across the globe.”⁴¹ Neglecting the ideology claiming the war would be a cakewalk for American forces, as suggested by General Westmoreland, the army found itself with 30,610 dead GIs by 1968.⁴² What is important to recognize here, then, is that there were practical reasons within the war itself that heightening the anxiety of the administration. The anti-war movement and its rallies were not, as it is sometimes portrayed, the singular crack in Johnson's armour.

Of course, if the administration recognized these issues with the war, could it not be argued that they did agree with the movement, even if they did not realize it? A fair point, and one with merit, especially since that any movement made by the dissenters in garnering Johnson's attention was a step up from where they started in 1964. And they had succeeded in getting inside Johnson's head; the President was almost obsessive in scanning the *Times* and *Washington Post* for news about dissension.⁴³ He began to believe there was a “liberal bias” against him within the media, which is ironic considering most major media outlets were on his side than the Vietniks.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most major turnaround in his perceptions of the anti-war movement is that, in spite of his initial tolerance of the protests, Johnson eventually used the FBI and CIA to monitor the dissenters and try to discredit them.⁴⁵

Lest this latter point be held in too much reverence as a triumph of the movement, however, it might be worth noting Johnson's real fear was communists manipulated, funded, or in some way influenced the movement.⁴⁶ Be it through the waving of Vietcong flags that some radicals partook in, or the talk of overthrowing the capitalist system, there was more concern that the anti-war movement would aid North Vietnam from within America, rather than end the administration's war. Secretary of State Rusk asserted that the main source of dissent was communist sympathy, and General Westmoreland believed that the dissenters were merely an arm of Hanoi within the United States.⁴⁷ The director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, expressed the anti-war movement, and those involved in it, to be “a minority, for the most part composed of halfway citizens who are neither morally, mentally, nor emotionally mature.”⁴⁸ The anti-war movement was indeed recognized as organic, and even a threat; but the overall meaning of its protests and its goals (that of changing the administration's policy in Vietnam, or even just pursuing peace) was lost on Johnson. The administration still did not recognize what the movement truly stood for, and in this failure,

⁴⁰ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 145.

⁴¹ Jonathan Colman and J.J. Widen. "The Johnson Administration and the Recruitment of Allies in Vietnam: 1964-1968." *History*, Oct 2009, Vol. 94 Issue 316. 488.

⁴² Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 146.

⁴³ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁵ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 177.

⁴⁸ Halstead, *Out Now*, 90.

remained deaf to what dissenters truly wanted. They were a threat to the President, but for different reasons than those intended.

The March on the Pentagon of October 21-22, 1967, may mark the greatest showing of the anti-war movement's inefficacy. The protest was to move in on Washington, DC, and the Pentagon, peacefully, in an attempt to demonstrate their dissidence at the very door of the decision makers. In order to maintain legitimacy, the March leaders had discussed with city officials what they could and could not do on the Pentagon grounds, as well as where they were allowed to go without incurring any federal wrath. This generally agreed-upon sentiment was undermined almost immediately by radicals like Dave Dellinger, who had decided prior to the logistics being worked out that they would pursue "civil disobedience and 'confrontation' at the Pentagon."⁴⁹ As such, once the March began, the intended peaceful demonstration was upset by the radicals and hard-line members of the counter culture, who went out of their way to disrupt the rules worked out by the organizing committee. With varying acts of "disobedience," from fornicating on the Pentagon lawn to harassing the guards to throwing things, those who went to the Pentagon intending to be arrested generally succeeded in doing so. These acts naturally attracted more attention from the media coverage of the event than the peaceful protestors; so when the military moved out to lift the "siege" on the evening of the 21, resulting in a great deal of violence, the public at large was not too upset at the police brutality. By the morning, the few remaining protestors wound up leaving the grounds. The Pentagon, as DeBendetti wryly notices, was "intact and unlevitated," in spite of the counter-culture rhetoric.⁵⁰

One failure the Pentagon March indicates within the anti-war movement was its lack of cohesive decision making regarding what measures it would take and what was acceptable. There were far too many factions and interest groups to make any singular effort en masse a possibility. The March was billed as peaceful, yet was impossible to enforce upon those participating, save will power of the individual. The movement was confused as to what its goal was, namely due to the sheer number of opinions on the subject. Some people were simply "tired of marching"⁵¹ and sought to increase the volume of their actions through more physical means. Unfortunately for the peaceful anti-war movement, the radicals got their press clippings and influenced the public. The media focused most of their attention on the protests on the violence and indecencies, ignoring the actual speeches regarding the anti-war policy at the beginning of the March,⁵² and effectively misrepresenting the movement by failing to inform the public (and, as mentioned before, the government) as to their aims and goals. Robert Kennedy, who was opposed to the Vietnam war, commented that the violence discredited the anti-war movement, and entrenched within the Republican opposition leader Goldwater that dissent was communist inspired and ill-conceived.⁵³ The anti-war movement was even further alienated from the policy makers, making it even more unlikely that President Johnson would heed the dissidents' words. Interestingly, Johnson's lagging poll approval numbers jumped 20% in approval of his managing of the war.⁵⁴

Also, in an almost obvious yet paradoxically oft ignored fact, America's involvement in the Vietnam War did not end after the Pentagon March, nor immediately after the Tet offensive, nor even after Johnson left office. The war continued through President Richard Nixon's term into 1975, though

⁴⁹ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 71.

⁵⁰ DeBendetti, *An American Ordeal*, 198.

⁵¹ Halstead, *Out Now*, 146.

⁵² Small, *Covering Dissent*, 79.

⁵³ DeBendetti, *An American Ordeal*, 198.

⁵⁴ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 84.

direct military involvement would end by 1973. Through marches, disobedience, slogans, and rallies, the anti-war movement in America had not stopped the war at all. Even marching directly to the doorstep of the American war machine and showing visible discontent with the policy had not made the President or his administration any more inclined to end the war. Johnson, after the Pentagon March, stated, "I told the Attorney General that I am not going to let 200,000 of these people ruin everything for the 200 million Americans;"⁵⁵ these are hardly the words of someone who was taking the anti-war movement's message seriously. The anti-war movement, at least in Johnson's presidency, was having no direct affect in having its voice heard.

Indirectly, however, the movement was far more influential. Ironically, the anti-war movement by and large having failed to win the support of the public or influence the administration, President Johnson and his government succeeded in shooting itself in the foot regardless of pressure groups. They had made great efforts via the media to tell the American public that the war was being won, and in Westmoreland's infamous words, there being "light at the end of the tunnel." The fact that the National Liberation Front was able to not only surprise American and South Vietnamese forces with an offensive on the Lunar New Year (Tet), but able to seize every major city that the American army laid claim to came as a great shock to Americans and the media. This news was contrary to everything that they had been told about Vietnam. As more background checks and investigations started to take place, as well as photographed imagery of the atrocities occurring during the Tet offensive, what Johnson had said in 1965 regarding "Peace without conquest," and furthering the ideals of the Great Society plan became more ludicrous in conception.

It was at this moment that the anti-war movements' concentrated effort to make Johnson the symbol of Vietnam came into its own. Although Senator Gene McCarthy had thrown his hat into the ring for the Democratic Party leadership nomination on a dove platform, it was largely assumed that Johnson would still be the Democratic candidate for the 1968 federal elections.⁵⁶ When McCarthy succeeded in winning a margin of 42% of the popular votes in the New Hampshire primary,⁵⁷ it shook preconceptions that Johnson was the unquestioned leader of the Democrats, as well as the interior faith in his war effort. Seeing the opening, Senator Robert Kennedy, also using a dove platform, saw fit to announce his intent to run for the Democratic leadership. The pacifists and anti-war activists, who had been without any political voice back in 1965, now had leverage within the party they had been fighting against for nearly five years. The emergence of two other candidates spelled more trouble for Johnson; if he were to try and win the nomination, Halstead observes, that would mean he would have to campaign.⁵⁸ After the disaster of the Tet offensive, the media having turned against him (or, at least, had become far more critical in their editorials on the war than prior to Tet),⁵⁹ being pitted against the charismatic-dove Robert Kennedy made trying to maintain Johnson as the head of the party a political suicide for the Democrats. He was the symbol of the war, and with the news reel footage of suspected communists shot point blank in the temple replacing tirades about the need for war to protect democracy, keeping Johnson at the head of the ship was not really an option. In this, the anti-war movement can take a great deal of credit. Though they had failed to stop Johnson, or the war in Vietnam, they made the war a key political issue. The change from the 1964 election, where the choice was between the expansion of the war effort or nuking Vietnam altogether, is paramount. Having been shut out by Washington when the

⁵⁵ DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 204.

⁵⁶ Halstead, *Out Now*, 382.

⁵⁷ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 214.

⁵⁸ Halstead, *Out Now*, 383.

⁵⁹ Small, *Covering Dissent*, 12.

movement began marked a definite improvement in dove activity within the United States; even though neither McCarthy or Kennedy were as radical on the topic as some would like⁶⁰, at least dissent had finally reached the higher echelons of the government.

Within the administrations' inner circle, the writing was on the wall. Johnson finally disregarded Westmoreland's troop requests. The new Secretary of Defence, Clark Clifford, declared the, "American military strategy was bankrupt."⁶¹ McNamara had long since declared his bombing strategy of North Vietnam to be faulty,⁶² and told the President before he resigned that although the Vietcong were technically defeated in the Tet offensive, "they remain[ed] a substantial force."⁶³ In general, there was a sentiment that negotiations with Hanoi were now America's best option in Vietnam, a sentiment which would have been nigh on mutiny when Johnson first took office. The administration recognized its handling of the war had not been as competent as it might have been. With his health worsening and his party disintegrating around him, President Johnson, on March 31, 1968, told the nation that he would seek negotiation with Hanoi, and would not accept re-nomination for the Democrats. The face of the war was effectively out. The war itself would be far less accommodating.

Lest one be inclined to indebted the anti-war movement as the main source of inspiration making Johnsons' government see the error of its ways, reasons as to why the war was lost vary within the administration. McNamara believed they had simply misread the situation in Vietnam entirely, viewing "the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience. we saw in them a thirst for -- and a determination to fight for -- freedom and democracy."⁶⁴ He takes the blame for the war going awry on his and the administration's shoulders, rather than giving it to the dissenters. The war, in essence, lost the war, and would have done so with out without the demonstrations at home.

The most poignant example of the limited reach which the anti-war movement had on the administration can be seen in Johnson himself. Interviewed in 1972, the former President believed that he hadn't been forceful *enough*; if he had "held firm in 1968 (the bombing of North Vietnam), the war would have been concluded by [then]."⁶⁵ The problem was one of leaving the enemy standing, a radical move away from the more moderate platform Johnson had preached when the war began. The President still did not feel the same discontent with the war that the dissenters did; the anti-war movement never really succeeded in permeating Johnson's opinions of Vietnam.

Even with Lyndon Johnson, the hated symbol of the Vietnam War gone, the anti-war dissenters had little to crow about. Neither Robert Kennedy nor Gene McCarthy, the two dove candidates, won the Democratic nomination. That title went to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who wound up losing anyways to the Republican Richard Nixon. The long awaited intrusion of anti-war dissent into federal politics was short lived. Nixon, in turn, developed another bombing plan for Vietnam. The war continued, and would keep continuing whether Johnson was there or not. The anti-war movement had not stopped the war which the Johnson administration had expanded. At the end of 1968, the situation had not changed, save a switch of Presidents. In light of maintenance of status quo, to say the anti-war movement during the Johnson era had any great affect on the governments'

⁶⁰ DeBendetti, *An American Ordeal*, 212.

⁶¹ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 215.

⁶² DeBendetti, *An American Ordeal*, 203.

⁶³ Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 215.

⁶⁴ Margaret MacMillan. *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008), pg. 159

⁶⁵ John M. Carland. "War, Politics, Diplomacy, and the Presidency: Off the Record Comments by Lyndon B. Johnson in Retirement." *Journal of Military History*, Oct 2008, Vol. 72 Issue 4, 1260.

handling of the Vietnam war is questionable. At best they had some indirect effects on Johnson's legacy and his chances of re-election. But the administrative assessment of the problems of Vietnam derived from the situation itself, and the problems with the war proper, not from the demonstrations or the protests. The Tet offensive and the surprising of the military had a greater immediate effect than the Pentagon March. Regardless of whether the political right wanted to blame the dissenters for disrupting Johnson's term, or whether the political left wanted to accept such accusations, the Johnson administration encountered little real hindrance from the anti-war movement while it was in office.

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