

Public Sentiment Against The Conflict In Vietnam

The involvement of the United States in Vietnam was, by far, one of the most unpopular conflicts in modern American history. Early public opinion was that the conflict in Vietnam was a colossal mistake for the United States and that the decisions by American policymakers consistently held errors in judgment and was influenced by wrong information. This popular belief fuelled a popular anti-war movement among many young Americans who thought that the economic and human cost was too high to be arbitrarily pursuing violence in a third world country. The government chose to escalate military participation in the conflict in Vietnam in order to preserve its credibility as a superpower, to maintain the balance of power within Asia, and to neutralize threats to national security. While these reasons may have been widely accepted by the American public during prior wars and used to promote popular support; however the anti-Vietnam sentiment was largely caused by an information gap between the government, the press, and the public.

Through the course of this paper, I will analyze different domestic and international events that occurred in the 1950s to the 1970s and their affect on the decision making process of American policymakers during the conflict in Vietnam. I will also analyze newspaper articles from the New York Times during the conflict era and compare their content to the information declassified in the relevant volumes of the Foreign Relations of the United States; a volume series published by the State Department and contains declassified records of foreign policy decisions from 1861 to 2001.

Credence as a Superpower: Was the United States Losing Power or Influence Internationally?

The defense of South Vietnam from its northern counterpart rapidly became one of the most expensive undertakings in modern American's diplomatic history. At its height, the Vietnam conflict cost the American government approximately sixty-six million dollars per day and the lives of over 500,000 soldiers. The "biggest damned mess" that the Vietnam conflict had quickly become was highlighted by the growing strength of the National Liberation Force for South Vietnam (NLF), the willingness of South Vietnamese leaders to negotiate with their counterparts in the North, and the Tet Offensive. As a result of these humiliating outcomes, the policymakers of United States increased its military participation in Vietnam to help maintain its credibility as a world power. In order to assist with this goal, the government of the United States purposely withheld information from the American public to maintain the air of invisibility. As a consequence of this information gap, the American public believed their country was involved in an unjustified conflict and favored the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.

From the onset of the conflict in Vietnam, the struggle was an uphill battle for the American military on the ground and for American policymakers at home. Despite

American intervention in the conflict or perhaps because of it, the North Vietnamese military and the NLF gained a stronger foothold into South Vietnam by the late 1960s. By 1966, the NLF controlled approximately forty percent of the rural land in South Vietnam and seen an approximate two hundred percent increase in its membership. According to a Telegram from the Vietnam Embassy to the Department of State on June 6, 1965, the "ARVN forces....are already experiencing difficulty in coping with this increased VC capability" because of high desertion rates, battle losses, and the fact that "...four ARVN battalions have been rendered ineffective by VC action in the I and II Corps zones." This telegram shows real logistical problems in the South Vietnamese fight against the Viet Cong; however in a news article in the New York Times on June 19, 1964, entitled "Harkins Optimistic On War in Vietnam", illustrates a dramatically different picture. General Harkins of the United States military is quoted as saying that the South Vietnamese government "...is in a far better position' to counter the guerillas." Due to the extent of this misinformation, many of the American public wondered why their government was helping a insignificant, third world country. If the South Vietnamese government is better equipped to hang the communist insertion than the United States, why was the American government sending America's youth off to die?

In addition to the growing power of the NLF in South Vietnam, the public was unaware that many American policymakers feared that Nguyen Khanh, the Prime Minister of Vietnam during the latter half of the conflict, "...might open negotiations with Hanoi and the NLF." In a Telegram to from the Embassy to Vietnam to the United States State Department on January 7, 1965, the embassy official states that a Buddhist victory would facilitate the formation of a South Vietnamese government with socialist tendencies, which would be "...adverse to US interests." The establishment of a communist-friendly regime under Khanh would be a humiliating defeat for the United States government because the coup that placed General Khanh in power received tacit US support. In contrast to the internal communications within the government, on September 4, 1965 in the New York Times, Peter Grose reported that the government of Khanh was "...taking as its ultimate goal a full representative constitution government..." and was working with the Johnson administration to bring democratic reforms, like freedom of the press, to South Vietnam. The difference in the information given to the American public and the United States government helped to fuel discontent among young Americans who did not know that the balance of communism and democracy in Vietnam was in danger. To them, the government was fighting a war which could be adequately fought by our democratic partners in South Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive, which was a series of crucial battles in Vietnam during 1968, became the biggest symbol of miscommunication between the Johnson Administration and the American public and caused a credibility gap. On January 17, 1968 in his annual address to Congress at the State of the Union, Johnson claimed that progress was being made in Vietnam and that democracy was gaining an upper hand because three elections had been held, the persons elected by popular vote assumed their positions without incident, and that the enemy had been defeated in battles consistently.

Thirteen days later, the US Embassy in Siagon was attacked. As a result, approximately 1,000 Americans and 45,000 NLF members had died. After the Tet Offensive, many Americans felt deceived and many critics contested the assertion that we were winning the Vietnam conflict. Many came to the conclusion that the conflict in Vietnam was, at best, a stalemate and few could justify the sudden cost. The lack of transparency between the American government and the media in regards to our actions in Vietnam prior to 1968 provoked many Americans to contest our involvement.

The cost of South Vietnam was viewed as too expensive for many Americans. The “biggest damned mess” cost many American lives, a lot of American tax dollars, and much of America’s reputation as a superpower. This is best highlighted by the growing strength of the National Liberation Force for South Vietnam (NLF), the willingness of South Vietnamese leaders to negotiate with their counterparts in the North, and the Tet Offensive. As a result of these embarrassing events, the American policymakers pursued policy to increase its military participation in Vietnam to help maintain its credibility as a world power. In order to assist with maintaining the illusion of power, the government of the United States purposely withheld information from the American public which caused the American public to believe that their country was involved in an unjustified conflict and favored the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.

Balance of Power in Asia: Was Communism Winning?

Balance of power politics is the theory when the international distribution of power is at equilibrium and no one power is able to dominate another. In the Theory of International Politics, Kenneth Waltz argues that bipolarity in the international system is better for the whole because it promotes security and stability on the international stage. However, it is undeniable that the United States was losing the war on communism in Asia. Within fifty short years, there were three major conflicts between democratic and communist entities in Asia: the fall of the Chinese nationalistic government to communist forces, the conflict in Korea, and the conflict in Vietnam. This was subsequently followed by a sharp rise in the power of the Chinese as a communist entity. Many policymakers of the United States favored the escalation of American military intervention in Vietnam in order to balance the power asserted by the Chinese in East Asia. The Chinese policy of “wars of liberation” and the subsequent support provided to the communist North Vietnam are just two examples of how the Chinese asserted its dominance during the Cold War Era. However, Americans were vastly unaware of the power displaced by the Chinese. The failure of the American government to adequately inform the press and the general public about the severity of the threat posed by the People’s Republic of China contributed to resistance to American assistance in South Vietnam.

Compared to the Soviet Union, the Mao government of China was a more aggressive power with its eye focused firmly on Southeast Asia. Under China’s policy of “wars of liberation”, communist China was bound to instigate and support conflict between communist and democratic countries. With successful wars of liberation, the communist revolution would spread faster. The Vietnam conflict served as the perfect example of a

“better brand” of Communism and communist revolution. “If the Communist Chinese...were to take over South Vietnam, it would be interpreted as a vindication of the fanatic Chinese methods over that of the Soviets. It would also be regarded in the free world as reflecting a general lack of ability or lack of will power by the United States to prevent Communist aggression.” This general awareness of the danger posed by the Chinese is noted Undersecretary of State in an undated, unpublished paper where he strongly advises against the military involvement of China due to the possible international repercussions it could have on the Cold War. Despite the significance attributed to Chinese involvement in the Vietnam conflict by the United States government, there are relatively few articles published about Chinese involvement. In addition, many of the articles downplay Chinese intervention as a regional conflict. This is emphasized effectively by the lack of international perspective and the lack of examples of global consequence seen in an article in The New York Times, entitled SEATO’s Most Urgent Problem. Due to this deficiency in reporting, many Americans were confused why their government was “...attempting to spread its ‘war of aggression’ from South Vietnam to North Vietnam. The lack of emphasis of the conflict in Vietnam as a Cold War conflict caused misunderstandings among the American public who were unaware of the possible policies implications that a military loss in Vietnam could cause. Therefore, many were outright against American interference.

In the scheme of balance of power politics, a victory in Asia against communism would be extremely beneficial to the United States who was rapidly losing ground to its communist counterparts. Within thirty years, there were two major conflicts between democratic and communist entities in Asia would result in nonvictories for democracy: the fall of the Chinese nationalistic government to communist forces and the conflict in Korea. Therefore the American government felt like it needed to be “tough on communism” and escalated the military intervention in Vietnam in order to balance the power asserted by the Chinese. This assertion of power is highlighted by the Chinese policy of “wars of liberation” and the subsequent support provided to the communist North Vietnam. However, Americans were vastly unaware of the threat posed by the Chinese and were more worried about the possibility of Soviet intervention and a reoccurrence of a nuclear crisis. The failure of the American government to adequately inform the press and the general public about the severity of the threat posed by the People’s Republic of China contributed to the resistance to American assistance in South Vietnam.

US National Security and the Problem of the Domino Theory

A theory that is closely related to balance of power politics is the domino theory, a guiding foreign policy principle based on the childhood game. According to the domino theory, if a single country falls to communism then its surrounding neighbors will also fall. The domino theory was a deciding factor in America’s intervention into the many of the Cold War conflicts, like Korea and eventually Vietnam. Despite the significance of this theory, there were great misunderstandings between the American public, the American press, and the American government about how this policy operated and if

the domino theory accurately predicted whether or not a country would fall to communism. This lack of communication between the American government and the American people about the level of communist activity in neighboring conflict countries led many to believe that we were wasting our time and resources in Vietnam.

While the concept of the domino theory is easy to grasp and may appear too oversimplified to be effectively used in a complex field like diplomatic relations, the adherence to the domino theory is self-evident in many of the declassified documents found in the Foreign Relations of the United States archive. In an undated and unpublished paper written by the Undersecretary of State, George Ball, four countries are identified as having increased communist activity throughout the conflict in Vietnam and are assumed to be more susceptible to a successful communist coup: Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Indonesia. It should be noted that all of these countries neighbor Vietnam. The increase in communist activities in the neighboring countries of Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Indonesia helped to justify the domino theory and the military escalation in Vietnam in the minds of American policymakers. However, the notable rise in communist insurgencies was never reported to the public. Therefore, many Americans believed that the domino theory was not accurate. In a newspaper article found in the New York Times entitled, "Who's Afraid of the Domino Theory?" Donald Zagoria analyzes the different components of the domino theory in respect to publicly accessible information about the conflict in Vietnam. With this incomplete information, Zagoria concludes that "Although the domino theory may have had relevance to a world in which Communism was monolithic, it is no longer even remotely a satisfactory guide to American policy." By looking at this article and the lack of information in comparison to what was revealed in the Foreign Relation of the United States archive, it is easy to understand why the American public was dissatisfied with the our involvement in Vietnam.

The domino theory was controversial foreign policy, yet it was a deciding factor in America's intervention into the many of the Cold War conflicts, like Korea and eventually Vietnam. Much of the controversy surrounding this theory was due to a lack of transparency of American dealings in East Asia and how the domino theory accurately predicted the rise of communist activity in Vietnam's neighboring countries.

Conclusion:

The conflict in Vietnam resulted in a public relations disaster for the United States. In contrast to the other Cold War conflicts, early public opinion of Vietnam was that the conflict was a colossal mistake for the United States and that the decisions by American policymakers consisting held errors in judgment and was influenced by wrong information. This belief is further reinforced by the dissenting views held by the war "doves" of the time who thought that the economic and human cost of the war was too high. Nevertheless, the government of the United States choose to escalate militarily in the conflict in Vietnam in order to preserve it credibility as a superpower, to maintain the balance of power within Asia, and to neutralize threats to national security. While these

reasons may have polled favorably with Americans in previous Cold War conflicts, the conflict in Vietnam was largely disfavored by the American public due to a large information gap between the United States government and the media.