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**Two Giants, One War: Johnson's and Nixon's Relationships with  
the Media during the Vietnam War (1964-1972)**

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### **Abstract**

The Vietnam War was one of America's longest wars, and it was also one of the most complex wars the United States had been involved in. While the battle was waging in Vietnam, people at home were, for the first time, able to see the military in action. Television news was fast becoming one of the nation's leading ways to gather news information, and this created the idea that the press helped lose the war in Vietnam. While the impact of journalism during Vietnam is heavily contested, the viewpoints from Johnson's and Nixon's administrations regarding the press are very clear. Negative relationships between the press and both Johnson and Nixon brought forth the "credibility gap" between the media and the government. The relations between the government and the press during Vietnam would thereafter impact the way wars were reported.

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*“We got reaction from the White House on a lot of things. Many nights the president himself would be on the phone. Other nights people from the White House staff would call and say, ‘You know, there’re some people around here who think...’ You knew who ‘the people’ around there were!”*

-Walter Cronkite<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

As the United States entered the Vietnam War, journalism in the United States was entering a new medium. Networks began running thirty-minute evening news programs daily. This allowed the Vietnam War to enter the homes of people all over the United States via television. This newer medium outlet for news brought varying opinions from those in government positions. The Vietnam War was fought under two presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. Those two presidents had their own views of journalists reporting the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup>

This paper aims to look at the relationships between Johnson and the media<sup>3</sup>, as well as Nixon and the media. What were Johnson and Nixon saying about the media (as it pertained to Vietnam)? The two administrations will then be compared to one another. These viewpoints have been gathered from reading many transcripts of telephone conversations while both Johnson and Nixon were in the White House (about 1964-1972). Contextual information is provided through the use of *New York Times* articles and broadcast footage of the Vietnam War. Background information about certain events during the Vietnam War will be provided as it pertains to the information presented. Since journalism had been able to advance so much in a short period of time, some background information about the importance of journalism will also be provided. While both Johnson and Nixon held similar negative views of journalism during the Vietnam

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Cronkite, printed in *Reporting America at War: an Oral History*, ed. Michelle Ferrari, (New York: Goodhue Pictures, Inc., 2003), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>3</sup> The media or the press refers to both print journalism (newspapers) and broadcast journalism (television news coverage).

War, they expressed their views very differently, and these negative views would have a lasting impact on the way journalists were able to report wars for many years following the Vietnam War. Johnson's and Nixon's negative relationship with the media would create a credibility gap, which is the term used to describe the growing inconsistencies between what the presidents and military officials were saying in regards to America's involvement in Vietnam and what the media was reporting about Vietnam. Johnson remained fairly optimistic about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the media tended to agree, until the Tet Offensive in 1968. Nixon stressed the importance of getting Americans out of Vietnam, but leaks to the press and other plans would bring forth questions from the media.

### **The Changing Role of Journalism during the Vietnam War**

The United States Constitution states in its First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.<sup>4</sup>

The United States Constitution guaranteed the right to freedom of the press and freedom of speech. This meant that the United States government cannot deny these freedoms, and as a result journalists were able to express what is really happening, even if it had negative connotations about the government. The media by the twentieth century were primarily privately owned, large and profitable. This allows the media to be economically free from party press financial support (as was the case with nineteenth century media).<sup>5</sup>

World Wars I and II created a shift in journalism toward a more objective reporting style. The more objective journalism became, the more legitimate it became as well. Journalists should

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Constitution, amend. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"*, 64.

be able to stay neutral of political commitments, present the facts, not pass judgment, and provide unbiased representation of political stories. Although many journalists strive towards objectivity, there are still cases where journalists are required to make a decision about the newsworthiness of the story they are telling. For journalists during the Vietnam War, many looked at the importance of the Cold War in deciding what facts would be presented to the public.<sup>6</sup>

With advances in technologies, journalism found a whole new stage on television. In the 1960s, many households across the country had television sets, and there had been a growing trend of people getting their news from television as opposed to papers. Whether or not this new medium changed the outlook of the Vietnam War for the United States was a highly contested debate. A number of authors have written about the Vietnam War, and many who have touched on the media's involvement and importance in the war.

Some historians argued that the media in Vietnam had negative impact during the war. Guenter Lewy's book *America in Vietnam*, is an example of one of these viewpoints. He examined the Vietnam War as a whole, but took a brief, yet strong, stance on the involvement of the media. He saw the media as taking advantage of Vietnam veterans to provide interesting stories that would gain publicity. He argued that people in the media didn't use enough discretion or research when reporting the stories of some of the Vietnam Veterans. His views of the media portrayal of Vietnam were negative.<sup>7</sup>

Some historians argued that the content of what the media was portraying in the news and what was being discussed by major officials of the war created the dissenting public opinion in later years of the war. George C. Herring's book, *America's Longest War*, provided information

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<sup>6</sup> Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"*

<sup>7</sup> Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 323.

on the Vietnam War as a whole, but he touched on the impact of journalism during the war. Herring said that in regard to the war being televised, it might have decreased positive public opinion for the war. Prior to Tet Offensive, the war, as portrayed on television, wasn't as graphic as what was portrayed post-Tet. During the years leading up to the Tet Offensive in 1968, television news was either neutral or in favor of the government's actions in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive provided Americans with an up close view of battle inside the cities. Herring argued that this shift in what was being seen on television news combined with Johnson's overwhelmingly positive view points of the war in 1967 led to greater dissenting public opinion of the Vietnam War.<sup>8</sup>

A third approach to the media in the Vietnam War is a moderate stance that examined the overall impact of the media in Vietnam. Daniel Hallin's book, *The "Uncensored War,"* discussed media involvement in the Vietnam War. Throughout the book, Hallin addressed both the major points of view (liberal and conservative). When addressing the different viewpoints of the media's involvement in the war, Hallin looked at what is called the "mirror analogy." He argued that this analogy helped provide journalists with the ability to be considered a "fourth branch of government." Journalists have been considered the "watchdog" of America, and Hallin argued that this was still holding true during the Vietnam War. Throughout the book, Hallin used specific examples from both print and broadcast journalist to make his argument. Rather than arguing whether or not the media helped lose the war for the United States, Hallin looked toward the impact of the media on American soil.

From the research presented in this paper, the author argues that journalists during the Vietnam War were reporting what they were seeing, and what they believed to be important

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<sup>8</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 2002), 243-44.

information for the American population, although it didn't always agree with what the government was saying in regards to the war. The media would take on the role as "watchdog" of the United States during the Vietnam War. The impact of journalism during the Vietnam War would forever impact the role of journalism during wartime in the United States. As viewpoints of the media's involvement in the Vietnam War are continually contested today, the viewpoints of the media during the war were equally contested.

### **President Lyndon B. Johnson: Background**

In November 1963, following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson (Democrat) was sworn in as the next United States President. Johnson was a man familiar with Washington. Starting in 1937, he had spent six terms in the House of Representatives, and was elected to the Senate in 1948. By 1953, Johnson was the Minority Leader in the Senate, and the next year he became the Majority leader. When 1960 rolled around, Johnson joined John F. Kennedy as his Vice President.<sup>9</sup>

When Johnson took over as President in 1963, he was faced with the unclear politics of what to do in Vietnam. It was said that both Kennedy and Johnson didn't want to become trapped in these politics of South Vietnam. Johnson had not paid much attention to the issues in Vietnam until his 1964 presidential campaign. Johnson took a hard stance against his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater<sup>10</sup>. With a brash television ad, which depicted a little girl picking petals off a daisy until she has no more petals to pick followed by overtones of nuclear warfare,

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<sup>9</sup> "Lyndon B. Johnson," *About the White House: Presidents*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/lyndonbjohnson> (accessed November 20, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the wars for Vietnam*, (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1995), xi-xii.



Johnson was able to invoke the American population and won the election of 1964 with 61% of the vote<sup>11</sup>.

Johnson would have a term filled with accomplishments and hardships. He had made progresses in education aid, disease awareness, Medicare, urban renewal, conservation, war on poverty, and others. His accomplishments were overshadowed by two crises, one on a more national level, and the other on an international level. Johnson was faced with troubles of riots in ghettos despite his efforts and influence against segregation laws. He also was looking towards an end of the fighting in Vietnam. Beginning in early 1968, Johnson faced harsh criticisms about the war from the press. After the Tet Offensive in January 1968, which was declared a “victory” for the United States, televised accounts of the war showed harsh battle being waged in Vietnam. Johnson, in the previous year, had shared optimistic viewpoints of the fighting in Vietnam, but this optimism did not carry over to the press.<sup>12</sup> By March 1968, clouds of controversy loomed over the Vietnam War. The efforts he had made seemed overshadowed by the negative aspects of his administration. It was shortly after bombing in North Vietnam was limited that he withdrew his candidacy for re-election.<sup>13</sup>

### **Johnson and the Press: 1964**

At the beginning of his presidential career, Johnson knew what he had to do to keep a working relationship with the media. He knew that he couldn’t banter like John F. Kennedy was able to or evade reporters as Franklin Delano Roosevelt could, but he knew that he was going to need the press to become known as the “unmoved mover.” Johnson would complain about “leaks” that had gotten into the press’s hands, but he enjoyed when it appeared that the press had

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<sup>11</sup> "LBJ Library and Museum - Daisy Spot." Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library & Museum. <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/media/daisyspot/> (accessed November 29, 2011)

<sup>12</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 191.

<sup>13</sup> "Lyndon B. Johnson," *About the White House*

guessed wrong about situations. In a press conference in 1964, Johnson addressed the press and heeded a warning, “When you crawl out on a limb, you always have to find another one to crawl back on.”<sup>14</sup> Here, what Johnson was conveying to the press was to be careful of what is assumed through the leaks that they received, and to remember that if they do use that information, they are also responsible for the consequences of that information.

In 1964, Johnson was having trouble with the press regarding leaks about the situation in Vietnam. The United Press International (UPI) and some other news outlets printed stories about North Vietnamese troops moving into South Vietnam. In a telephone conversation between Johnson and McGeorge Bundy on July 14, 1964, Johnson expressed concern about who the “high-level military spokesman” that was talking to the news editors:

**“President Johnson:** “The spokesman said it would be a week before he would be able to say whether there had been any invasion.”

**Bundy:** I know it.

**President Johnson:** One place he says “an invasion,” and then it said it would be a week before he knows what he’s talking about, and the third place he ought to keep his mouth shut. We’ve got a convention and election going on and it’s not up to the military to go to talking. Just tell him to submit his report to the Secretary of Defense and we’ll issue them here, unless it’s [Maxwell D.] Taylor himself.”<sup>15</sup>

The conversation presented Johnson with a disapproving attitude that the press was able to get a hold of this information, but his main issue was that someone in the military had given up this information. Johnson hoped to have Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara or Bundy speak with those military officials in Vietnam and to tell those officials to stop giving out

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson and McGeorge Bundy, transcribed telephone conversation, July 14, 1964, in “Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson,” ed. by David G. Coleman, Kent B. Germany, Guian A. McKee, and Marc J. Selverstone, University of Virginia Press <http://presidentialrecordings.rotunda.upress.virginia.edu> (accessed November 15, 2011).

interviews regarding “how much trouble we’re in and how all the North Vietnamese are moving in.”<sup>16</sup>

On July 20, 1964, Johnson had a phone conversation with Dean Rusk, portions of which concerned press stories about action being taken in Vietnam. Johnson expressed concern for what his “people” were saying about Vietnam. He wanted any questions regarding Vietnam to be answered with, “We haven’t got any comment.” He thought that keeping the talk about Vietnam “contingency plans” to a minimum would help keep things quieted down. Johnson referred to one of his men who said, “We had a contingency plan but nothing immediate.” Johnson saw this as only provoking discussion regarding the topic. Johnson added, “I’d tell those damn newspapers that are hounding me to death, I’d just say, I have nothing further to add to what’s already been said.”<sup>17</sup>

In early August 1964, Johnson again faced some problems concerning press leaks. The Gulf of Tonkin incident would become one of the escalating points for the United States fighting in Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin incident was a complicated situation involving United States Naval destroyers that reported an attack by the North Vietnamese forces.<sup>18</sup> On August 4, 1964, Johnson held a phone conference with George Reedy, Claude Desautels and McGeorge Bundy regarding information being leaked to the press.

[To George Reedy in his office]

**“President Johnson:** Aren’t you afraid of that?

**George Reedy:** Not too much, sir. All the focus is in here, right here.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson and Dean Rusk, transcribed telephone conversation, July 20, 1964, in “Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson.”

<sup>18</sup> On August 2, 1964 the destroyer *Maddox* reported it had been attacked by North Vietnamese forces. The situation escalated, and ended up involving the destroyer *Turner Joy* as well. The destroyer had been gathering information. No losses to American ships occurred at this time. Later, it would come out that the events in early August 1964 had been mistaken, and the ships had never actually been under attack. For more information see Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 33-34.

**President Johnson:** No, it's not. The AP and UP<sup>19</sup> are standing outside the doors now, because one of them told me a moment ago he was...And AP was telling them that they had a report in the Pentagon that two destroyers have been sunk. So it's not focused in here at all."<sup>20</sup>

This excerpt from the telephone conversation had Johnson concerned that the Associated Press (AP) and UPI were already nearby and waiting to ask questions regarding a meeting that Johnson had called with Congress. The conversation continues with Desautels providing a list of names of who could have given the leaked information. In the mentioned newswire that had been given out by the AP, attribution to the comments in the story are given to "Congressional sources." Here all Johnson had wanted was to hold a meeting with the members of Congress without the press finding out about it, but because there had been more leaks, the press was there and waiting.

Later that same day, August 4, 1964, Johnson had a telephone conversation with Robert McNamara regarding the Gulf of Tonkin. In this conversation, McNamara made suggestions to Johnson about making a statement about what was happening in the Gulf of Tonkin. What was interesting in this conversation was the discussion of what time to make the statement, and would it have time to be run on the news that same night and again the following morning. The statement<sup>21</sup> was a broad response to what had happened in the seas off the coast of Vietnam. He mentioned how the United States planned to retaliate these attacks. Johnson was reluctant to give the statement, but McNamara requested it:

**"President Johnson:** I just, uh, I guess we could hold it till [the] eleven o'clock news. I don't know. We don't have to make it, do we?

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<sup>19</sup> AP stands for Associated Press. UP stands for United Press International. Both are news wire services.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson and George Reedy, Claude Desautels and McGeorge Bundy, transcribed telephone conversation, August 4, 1964, in "Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson."

<sup>21</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Report on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident," speech, Washington D. C., August 4, 1964. Transcript available at University of Virginia: Miller Center, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3998> (accessed November 16, 2011).

**Secretary McNamara:** Oh, I think, uh, I think you need to make some kind of statement at this time. Because tomorrow morning will be too late. Something will have to be on the news tomorrow morning. It ought to come from you.”<sup>22</sup>

Johnson and McNamara would then agree to make the statement around 10:30 PM so that it would make the eleven o’clock news. This conversation gave another glimpse at the importance of the news media in getting the message across to the public. With careful planning, McNamara and Johnson were able to get the statement on television, as retaliatory attacks on the North Vietnamese would launch.<sup>23</sup>

An article in the *New York Times* reported the attacks of the Gulf of Tonkin. The article, written by Arnold Lubasch, gave the American public a recounting of the attacks that had been made on the U.S. destroyers. Lubasch also provided what the North Vietnamese had said about the attacks. Lubasch reported that the North Vietnamese (“Reds” as he named them in the article) believed that these attacks had been “fabricated.” Attribution throughout the story is given to “government officials” and “the Pentagon,” with very few actual names being attributed. This article, however, appeared objective in that it just provided information about the Gulf of Tonkin.<sup>24</sup>

A newsreel from Universal Studios from 1964 began with a voiceover about what had happened in the Gulf of Tonkin with images of the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* destroyers. An excerpt of Johnson’s address to the nation about “peace and security” in Southeast Asia was edited into the newsreel, including video of South Vietnamese civilians. The newsreel ends with an excerpt from the United States Ambassador Adlai Stevenson reported the attacks to the

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<sup>22</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert McNamara, transcribed telephone conversation, August 4, 1964. “LBJ Tapes on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident,” The National Security Archive, Washington D.C.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm> (accessed September 10, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Johnson to McNamara, Transcribed telephone conversation, August 4, 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold Lubasch, “Reds Driven Off: Two Torpedo Vessels Believed Sunk in Gulf of Tonkin, *New York Times*, August 5, 1964, archived at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed November 29, 2011).

United Nations Security Council, assuring that “we [United States] are in Southeast Asia to help our friends and preserve our own opportunity to be free of imported terror...” This newsreel provided a glimpse into 1964’s Gulf of Tonkin and was shown before movies in theaters at the time.<sup>25</sup>

On Wednesday, November 4, 1964, in the wake of winning the presidential election, Johnson talked with Edwin L. Weisl Sr.<sup>26</sup> about what journalists had been saying about him despite his victory. Throughout the conversation, Johnson pleaded with Weisl to help him get a “propaganda machine” and favorable words about Johnson out in the press.

**“President Johnson:** ...Now Red Mueller<sup>27</sup> started this story that they’re just voting against Goldwater and they didn’t like either one of us. And that Johnson didn’t have any rapport, and he didn’t have any style, and he was a buffoon, and he was full of corn...[I’m] the greatest candidate that he’s [Richard Daley]<sup>28</sup> ever seen...I think you’ve got to quote him, because that’s what he told me a dozen times...And somebody’s got to try to get the [New York] Times to give us a little approach, because the first thing they’re going to do is going to try to make a Warren Harding out of us on account of Baker and Jenkins.”<sup>29</sup>

Throughout this conversation, Johnson continued to pick out examples of the press being anti-Johnson. He argued that Goldwater got better news than he did throughout the election. Throughout the conversation, Weisl assured Johnson that they had some press on their side, and that he would do what he could to get more positive press for Johnson. Johnson’s apparent frustration with the press in this conversation was well received by Weisl, as he tried to provide some positive feedback for his friend, and elected president.

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<sup>25</sup> *Universal Newsreels 1964: Part 11*, prod. by Universal, 3 min., 1964, archived at [www.aparchive.com](http://www.aparchive.com) (accessed December 1, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Edwin Weisl Sr. was a New York attorney at the time, and friend of Johnson.

<sup>27</sup> Merrill “Red” Mueller of NBC.

<sup>28</sup> 48<sup>th</sup> Mayor of Chicago.

<sup>29</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to Edwin Weisl Sr. Transcribed telephone conversation, November 4, 1964, in ed. Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson’s Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 120.

Johnson was elected to the presidency in 1964, and he had complicated decisions to make about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Leaks to the press and press portrayal of Johnson started to create a negative view on the media (from Johnson's point of view). Reports regarding the Gulf of Tonkin appeared to be objective, but some expressed concerns of the United States becoming more and more involved with Vietnam.

### **Johnson and the Press: 1965-1966**

1964 had given Johnson trouble with the press, but it was only the beginning for Johnson. What had been insinuating remarks about the press began to turn into blatantly dismissing the press as unable to provide a clear picture of what Johnson hoped to accomplish. In March of 1965, an NBC report by Robert Goralski was given about new bombing strategies in North Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> Goralski presented to the nation that these new bombings were just a way to get the North Vietnamese to the "bargaining table."

Johnson was displeased with this report not only because it had the potential to damage his political strategies in Vietnam, but also it could make NBC "irresponsible" in his eyes for running such a story. In his March 5, 1965 telephone conversation with McGeorge Bundy, Bundy refers to Goralski as a "very naïve reporter and runs awful hard for a headline." Johnson also expressed concerns about how many Marines he should send to Vietnam, and this would become a topic throughout the next few conversations recorded by the president.<sup>31</sup>

Yet again in 1965, leaks to the press had Johnson concerned. In a phone conversation with Robert McNamara, Johnson told McNamara that news reports were out in the *Washington Star* about a private meeting between himself and three others. Johnson is led to believe that either one of the other three in the meeting or their associates had leaked this information to the

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<sup>30</sup> Referring to Operation Rolling Thunder.

<sup>31</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to McGeorge Bundy, transcribed telephone conversation, March 5, 1965, in Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, 204-205.

press. The meeting regarded Vietnam policy, and it spawned the headline “Embassy Retaliation Ruled Out/Johnson Bars Direct Reprisal for Bombing,” in the *Washing Star*. Johnson expressed his concern for sharing information with anyone within his administration. McNamara responded by saying, “But we’ve got a leaky government, I guess, try as we will to tighten up.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1966, Johnson expressed that (in regards to Vietnam) “the road ahead is going to be difficult...But I have not the slightest doubt that the courage and the dedication and the good sense of the wise American people will ultimately prevail.”<sup>33</sup> Following a Democratic Party dinner in Chicago, Johnson and Richard Daley had a telephone conversation in which they discussed media responses from the dinner. Daley told Johnson that despite some of the reports, he wanted to assure Johnson that “we’re 100 percent in your programs and in everything else.”<sup>34</sup>

Television network coverage was beginning to change in 1966, with additional coverage of the Vietnam War being reported weekly. In February 1966, the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) stated they would have a half hour program each Saturday night devoted to the Vietnam War. President of ABC, Elmer W. Lower said that the show would give viewers the “latest word from the front and from Washington” as well as other affected areas. NBC executive Vice President, William R. McAndrew, announced a similar plan for a special program all dedicated to Vietnam coverage. Fred W. Friendly, president of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), at the time, announced that there were “new projects in the work” for CBS.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to Robert McNamara, transcribed telephone conversation, March 31, 1965, in Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, 263.

<sup>33</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at a Democratic Party Dinner in Chicago,” 17, May 1966, *Public Papers of the President: Lyndon B. Johnson: 1966*, archived via “The American President Project,” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=27602#axzz1h0hESk5q> (accessed December 1, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to Richard Daley, transcribed telephone conversation, June 15, 1966. “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net/transcript/johnson](http://www.whitehousetapes.net/transcript/johnson) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Val Adams, “Networks to Add Coverage of War: ABC Saturday Program to be All-Vietnam Hereafter,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1966, archived at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)



Throughout the telephone conversations available from 1966, Johnson expressed various doubts about the press. A number of these conversations about what the press was saying and how the press was able to get the information were in regards to popularity polls for the president, as well as other foreign relations besides Vietnam. No conversations were available for 1967 in regards to Vietnam and the press, but 1968 would open with a whole new need for concern following the Tet Offensive.

### **Johnson and the Press: 1968**

1968 would be a tumultuous year for Johnson in regards to Vietnam. During what was supposed to be a ceasefire in respect of the Tet Holiday, the North Vietnamese and its allies attacked South Vietnamese troops and its allies. Although reports to the White House had been coming in about the destruction and the attacks on different cities throughout South Vietnam, General Westmoreland called the situation “well in hand” with many casualties to the enemy forces. As Westmoreland called the situation well, television film crews were showing the American public images of stunned civilians and soldiers in what looked to be a mess of rubble and carnage. The Tet Offensive would change the American’s view of Johnson, and ultimately destroyed any possibility for Johnson to have a role in creating peace between North and South Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

The Tet Offensive produced a number of questions from the press. Figures and discussions about what had happened during Tet tended to vary depending on who was giving the speech. By looking at these various versions of the story of Tet, the press began to question which account was right. Headlines proved that the press was concerned with the information that was given to the public. One image etched in the history of the United States in Vietnam was the photo of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, South Vietnam’s Chief of National Police, pointing a

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<sup>36</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 418-19.

gun point blank at a captured Viet Cong officer, just seconds before he pulled the trigger. This image was also presented in video form on the NBC show Huntley-Brinkley Report. Though the image was edited slightly, for reasons of gore, the image brought to mind laws of war and raised more questions for the press.<sup>37</sup>

CBS video footage of the 1968 Tet Offensive showed gruesome attacks from both sides. Walter Cronkite had said that, “It [Tet] changed how people looked at the war, and in doing so it changed the war itself.” Images shown across the hundreds of thousands of television sets throughout the United States would create different opinions about the war. The video footage showed dead bodies being carried by U.S. Marines across the demolished streets of Saigon, Khe Sanh and Hue. In an excerpt of a report from Saigon, images of wounded civilians in a hospital were shown. In Khe Sanh, Marines were shown building barricades with sandbags and fighting to protect their base. Planes dropping bombs flew across the television screen. Troops that were interviewed on the reports expressed best wishes to their family back home and their concern for the well-being of themselves and other American soldiers. The footage showed the overwhelming destruction of once classic, beautiful cities. Hue was reduced to ruin. Saigon lay burned and battered. Bodies lay strewn across the streets of Saigon, both United States military personnel and North Vietnamese forces. These images, combined with the optimistic reports from military officials and Johnson created a shift in the press to become more critical of what the U.S. officials were saying about Vietnam.<sup>38</sup>

An editorial article in the *New York Times* published February 8, 1968, called out the Johnson Administration for being optimistic that the Tet Offensive proved to be more damaging

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<sup>37</sup> William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 112-113.

<sup>38</sup> *Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite, Volume 2*, prod. and dir. By CBS, 4.5 hours, Marathon Music and Video, 2003, DVD.

for the North Vietnamese troops and their allies. The author of the article pointed out that while a proper government may have been restored in the cities that had been attacked, there were still significant amounts of fighting in the streets. The author argued that stalemate seemed to be the only way out of the mess that the United States was in after the Tet Offensive.<sup>39</sup>

The Tet Offensive had a significant effect on the way the Johnson administration dealt with the press. Westmoreland would continue to give the press information, but would remain low-key and avoid over-enthusiastic optimism.<sup>40</sup> By March of 1968, Johnson was looking towards taking steps to limit the United States involvement in Vietnam. In his address to the nation on March 31, 1968, Johnson referred to an offer he had made for ending the bombings of North Vietnam in exchange for an agreement to meet for peace negotiations. In his address he said:

Tonight, I renew the offer I made last August--to stop the bombardment of North Vietnam. We ask that talks begin promptly, that they be serious talks on the substance of peace. We assume that during those talks Hanoi will not take advantage of our restraint. We are prepared to move immediately toward peace through negotiations.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the address, Johnson assured the nation that the United States involvement had been to “help the nations of Southeast Asia become independent and stand alone, self-sustaining, as members of a great world community—at peace with themselves, and at peace with all others.” It was during this nationally broadcast address that Johnson also announced he would not seek reelection<sup>42</sup>. A month prior to this, Walter Cronkite had come back from his time observing and reporting from Vietnam. On his CBS nightly news program, Cronkite told his

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<sup>39</sup> Editorial, “After the Tet Offensive,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1968, archived at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>40</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 127.

<sup>41</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not to Seek Re-election,” March 31, 1968, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69*. Volume I, entry 170, pp. 469-476. (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1970).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

viewers of his time in Vietnam that, “We are mired in a stalemate...To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past.”<sup>43</sup> It is said that after Cronkite’s report, Johnson immediately turned off the television and said, “Well, if I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America,”<sup>44</sup> thus bringing the end to the possibility for a second term for Johnson.

Johnson blamed the press for his decreased popularity in 1968 among the public, rather than looking at his own policies. Blame was placed on Cronkite for saying that the Tet Offensive showed the weakness of Johnson’s policies towards Vietnam. Johnson’s relationship with the press changed between 1964-1968, although the relationship between the two was never the best. In the early years of his presidency, his concern was mainly towards the leaks of information to the press regarding Vietnam. As the years progressed, and especially in 1968, Johnson’s media concern shifted to its portrayal of his administration in the wake of Tet.<sup>45</sup>

### **President Richard M. Nixon: Background**

Richard M. Nixon’s political career took him on a whirlwind ascent within ten years. In 1946, he had won a congressional race, and he went on to win a Senate seat in 1950. Nixon was Vice President under Dwight D. Eisenhower from 1952-1960. After Kennedy defeated Nixon in the 1960 presidential race, followed by the 1962 California governor election loss, Nixon held onto his political ties, but withdrew from the spotlight until he won the presidential election in 1968.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005) 30.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Cronkite, printed in *Reporting America at War: an Oral History*, ed. Michelle Ferrari, (New York: Goodhue Pictures, Inc., 2003), 27.

<sup>45</sup> LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2008).

While he had been out of the political arena, Nixon formed his own views about the Vietnam War, which would set up his platform for the 1968 election. He took a stance against the Democratic Party, which he argued were “soft on communism.” The result of the Tet Offensive and Nixon’s strong stance on the Vietnam War combined to give Nixon the chance to be the obvious front-runner in the Republican Party, and he would win the 1968 election. His first goal as President was for reconciliation. He had inherited the Vietnam War from the Johnson administration, and he had hoped for a resolution to the war. Nixon’s stance for the Vietnam War was through his policy of “Vietnamization.” This policy would slowly withdraw American troops by first training the South Vietnamese army. It was with this policy that Nixon assured the American population that US involvement in Vietnam would see a beginning to the end.<sup>47</sup> In his first term as president, Nixon was able to make advances in revenue sharing; he ended the draft, created new laws about crime and an environmental program.<sup>48</sup>

By 1972, Nixon was able to gain achievements in foreign relations for the United States. He made trips to Beijing and Moscow, and was able to create smoother relationships with both respective countries. Nixon would win his reelection by a landslide. In 1973, he was able to get an agreement with North Vietnam regarding the removal of troops. It wasn’t all positive for Nixon, however, when details of the Watergate surfaced, and Nixon was facing impeachment, he resigned in 1974.<sup>49</sup>

Nixon was a man who believed “what an individual does is irrelevant to his ability to lead; the whole point is *how* he does it.”<sup>50</sup> Nixon didn’t think of himself as similar to his predecessors, Johnson and Kennedy. He wanted to create a persona about himself while

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<sup>47</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 434.

<sup>48</sup> LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet*, 11-15.

<sup>49</sup> “Richard M. Nixon,” *About the White House: Presidents*, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 1.

president that required those closest to his administration to create an air of mystery about Nixon.<sup>51</sup> Though much can be said about Nixon and the media through the Watergate scandal, focus for Nixon's media relationship will be on the years 1969-1972.<sup>52</sup>

### **Nixon and the Press 1969-1970**

Going into his presidency, Nixon held his own beliefs of how to deal with the press. He recognized the television news medium as a very important tool for his presidency. He knew that from very early on, television would provide the best outlet for him to reach his constituents. Nixon had decided that he was "brilliant" on television following his 1952 "Checkers Speech." Even after the 1960 presidential debate, Nixon had felt that he could deliver to a televised audience. In his mind, Nixon had focused too much on what he was going to say, and not enough on what he looked like during the debate. By 1968, when he would finally reach the White House, Nixon was well aware of the importance of television. Nixon followed what the press was saying about him in regards to the Vietnam War. He was especially concerned with what the television news was saying about him and his policies. If he didn't like what the reporter had to say, he would have a strong opinion about that person, but because Nixon believed that the television news was so pertinent in getting his policy across, he often used it as a way to directly speak to the nation. He felt that by doing this, he was avoiding journalists who would "filter his ideas to the public."<sup>53</sup>

In a memo from Nixon to Dr. Henry Kissinger<sup>54</sup>, Nixon mentioned the news summaries he had been reading regarding the Paris Peace talks. The news summaries were reporting that the

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<sup>51</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 3-4.

<sup>52</sup> As it pertains to the Vietnam War.

<sup>53</sup> Chester Pach, "'Our Worst Enemy Seems to be the Press': TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969-1973, *Diplomatic History* (June 2010), 556.

<sup>54</sup> Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

negotiations were at a standstill. Nixon told Kissinger to get in touch with Henry Cabot Lodge<sup>55</sup> to assure him that he shouldn't be discouraged by the coverage that was being presented, but he should make press statements that remind the public that peace negotiations can take a very long time. Nixon also believed that Lodge presented himself very well on television, and that he should make more use of it:

"You might read this to Lodge when you talk to him on the phone and indicate to him that he should find every opportunity to say something on TV which reaches the United States—forget what the Europeans, particularly Parisians, may see or write. He should aim everything he says toward the United States indicating that the going is hard and that he does not hold out any false optimism, but that he is convinced that the negotiations will succeed, and that he is getting every possible encouragement from RN<sup>56</sup>.”<sup>57</sup>

Here, Nixon advised Lodge to use the television medium to better present his statements. This could be seen as Nixon attempting to have others around him trying to avoid the press by going directly through to the nation via television.

A *New York Times* article from April, 1969, discussed the Paris Peace Talks being at a standstill. The article referred to Nixon as saying that chances for peace had “significantly improved” since he had taken office. The reports out of Paris indicated that no direct communication had been made between South Vietnamese officials and North Vietnamese officials. The article also referred to progress being made in undisclosed secret contacts between the United States and North Vietnamese allies. The article provided the position the United States took on the peace negotiations, which according to Nixon, had shifted from the stance that American troops would be withdrawn if North Vietnamese troops were withdrawn at the same

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<sup>55</sup> Head of the U.S. delegation in the peace talks from January 1969–November 1969.

<sup>56</sup> RN is Richard Nixon.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Nixon to Henry Kissinger, February 1, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976: Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–1970*, document 16 (Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments> (accessed December 2, 2011)).

time. The stance, at this point, allowed the North Vietnamese to leave troops in place while the United States pulled out a few troops. The negotiations had been at a standstill for a month at this point, and there was hope that a stance such as this would help break the standstill. This article was a valuable piece of information regarding the Paris Peace Talks that had been so vital for Nixon (as he had proposed that peace was his main objective in his inaugural address).<sup>58</sup>

Nixon's secret weapon against the press, especially television news, was his Vice-President, Spiro Agnew. With hints of sending the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to the television networks for investigations and relying on the press to pass the news to each other, Nixon was able to show his stance on press relations.<sup>59</sup> Nixon was sharp with his words concerning journalists during his time in office. In April 1970, he ordered U.S. ground troops into Cambodia. It was his belief that by doing this, it would guarantee the withdrawal of more troops. Nixon was displeased with the press coverage of the operation. He accused journalists of having a "biased viewpoint" and that he "doesn't pay any attention to their views."<sup>60</sup>

A 1970 *New York Times* article's headline read: "Cambodia Incursion by US Appears to Unite Foe." The article was published two months after the Cambodia invasions began. The article reads, "...The course of the war in Southeast Asia appears vastly more complicated and uncertain than before the incursion began." This article said that Communist forces throughout Cambodia were on the offensive in attempt to extend the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Despite the Communist forces working closer together with China throughout Cambodia, the article also cited advantages for the United States and its allies. It said that the United States and South

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<sup>58</sup> Hedrick Smith, "Paris Peace Talks Said to be Stalled," *New York Times*, April 24, 1969, archived via [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed December 10, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 175.

<sup>60</sup> As quoted in Pach, "Our Worst Enemy...", 558. The statement that he "doesn't pay any attention to their views" is clearly a move by Nixon to try to anger the press. Of course Nixon paid attention to their views, he had someone brief the newscasts and newspapers every day for his own knowledge. The happenings in the media greatly interested Nixon and played a role in his view of the press.



Vietnamese troops were able to capture about 30 to 40 percent of the enemy's stored supplies. When the article was written, 419,000 American soldiers were still stationed in Vietnam, and Nixon had promised that by the spring of 1971, only 260,000 American soldiers would still be in South Vietnam. This article gave the public a look into the Cambodian invasion two months after it had started. The article's overtone was of negative impact of the United States involvement in Cambodia, but it also provided a glimmer of hope with minor advantages being cited. Though the article had not spoken of disapproval of Nixon, it did shed negative light on one of Nixon's biggest decisions of 1970 (in regards to Vietnam).<sup>61</sup>

1969 and 1970 were pivotal years for Nixon because they had been the first years of his presidency, and his attempts toward peace in Vietnam were received positively, with the exception of the Cambodian invasion. Nixon's view of the press was clear from the start; the press was the enemy, and Nixon was well aware of what the press was saying about him and his policies.

### **Nixon and the Press: 1971 and the Pentagon Papers**

1971 would prove to be a big year between the press and Nixon. Problems arose with major information leaks to the press, as well as concern over what was being said in the media. In February, 1971, a report from ABC said that a dead US soldier, dressed in a South Vietnamese uniform, was taken to Laos in a helicopter. In a diary entry from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Thomas Moorer, concern for the president was expressed regarding the aforementioned report. The diary entry recounts a telephone conversation with Kissinger regarding Nixon's handling of the press. Kissinger had told Moorer that Nixon forbid American television and print reporters from riding on American and South Vietnamese helicopters. Moorer was told that

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<sup>61</sup> James P. Sterba, "Cambodia Incursion by U.S. Appears to Unite Foes," *New York Times*, June 29, 1970, archived via [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

Nixon felt there was nothing to gain from “having reporters and news men running loose in the battle zone sending back all these gory pictures of people being wounded.”<sup>62</sup>

Later that month, CBS ran a special broadcast called *The Selling of the Pentagon*. Aired on February 23, 1971, *The Selling of the Pentagon* was a look into the increasing cost to taxpayers of public relations by the U.S. military in order to shape public opinion in favor of the military. The documentary was based on Senator J. William Fulbright’s book, *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*, and the documentary’s producers were well aware of its controversial subject. CBS received phone calls within the first twenty minutes of the broadcast regarding its content. It was alleged that “skillful” editing had taken place to take interviewees words out of context, making it seem like they had said something they had not intended to say. The *New York Times* ran an article about the broadcast, calling the broadcast “relatively tame journalism.” The article discussed how *The Selling of the Pentagon* would have been received differently had it been printed in the newspaper. The author of the article argued that because print journalism had been around much longer than its televised counterpart, print journalism’s First Amendment Rights were held in tact. The article said that, “Government officials are likely to think more than twice before jumping into battle with the print media.” This showed that there was a print journalism view of the broadcast journalism, as though broadcast journalism wasn’t yet legitimized. The difference between broadcast journalism and print journalism was that the FCC, a government agency, controlled television news. So in a sense it was the government that decided who could broadcast and what could be broadcast. It was in this light that the author

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Moorer, Diary Entry, February 12, 1971 in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976: Volume VII, Vietnam July 1970- January 1972*, Document 127. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State. <http://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76v07/pdf/frus1969-76v07.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2011).

argued the importance of establishing First Amendment Rights in television.<sup>63</sup> The article also mentioned the “credibility gap” and that it:

...Has long been with us, and evidently is not yet quite ready to fade from the scene. It hasn't however, sprung full-blown from the head of a paranoid journalist. There is much more substance than shadow in its appearance.

The importance of this being said in early 1971 was that both print and broadcast journalism were aware of the critical views from the President and his administration, but it was in the interest of the American public that journalists continue to report on these controversial topics.<sup>64</sup>

On April 17, 1971, Nixon presented a televised speech regarding Southeast Asia and specifically Vietnam. Following the speech, Nixon received many phone calls congratulating him on his presentation and informing him that it had been “one of his best speeches.” The topic of many of these conversations was about the “ad-lib” ending that Nixon chose to close the speech with. Nixon put his speech papers aside and told the story of a Marine Sgt who lost his life saving his fellow Marines. The Marines’ son was present at the speech, providing an emotional effect for the president’s speech. In a telephone conversation with Dr. Henry Kissinger, Kissinger told Nixon that his speech was wonderful and had also questioned if Nixon had watched the commentary on the speech provided by the network news officials:

**“Kissinger:** This one was really movingly delivered. And I don't know whether you saw the commentary afterwards.

**President Nixon:** Of course, I don't look at the commentary. I don't care what the bastards say.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *The Selling of the Pentagon* would eventually become a milestone for television journalism in regards to First Amendment Rights.

<sup>64</sup> John J. O'Connor, “Suppose ‘The Selling of the Pentagon’ had been a Newspaper Article,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1971, archived at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed December 10, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Dr. Henry Kissinger, transcribed telephone conversation, April 7, 1971 “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

Later in the conversation, Nixon suggests that the press may have remained positive following his speech because “they’re probably afraid [Spiro] Agnew will jump them.”<sup>66</sup> Agnew had taken a strong stance against what the press said about the president and his policies. Agnew became one of the more outspoken members of Nixon’s administration against the press with his continued warnings against them. On the same evening, Nixon received a call from his Vice-President Spiro Agnew. Again comments were made of how wonderfully the president presented his information. Agnew also asked Nixon if he had seen what the analysis of his speech was on the television news, specifically CBS.

**“President Nixon:** [laughing] I hope you didn't look at it. Oh, you did. I bet you did. Don't do it! Don't look at those goddamn television programs.

**Agnew:** I just want to see whether they're getting any religion, Mr. President.

**President Nixon:** Ah, they won't get any religion. [Agnew laughs] But, anyway, I appreciate the fact that you'd kick those bastards in the butt.

**Agnew:** But honestly, I think this will be of tremendous assistance and—

**President Nixon:** It wasn't too bad on CBS, then, huh?”<sup>67</sup>

Agnew had told Nixon that CBS had said that he “met or exceeded every one of [his] commitments.” With all the positive feedback coming back to Nixon, he remained cynical about expecting a turn around from the press. Both Agnew and Nixon expressed surprise that CBS had emphasized “the truth” about what the president had said. While Agnew said that CBS provided a positive analysis of the speech, Nixon told him, “Don’t get your hopes up. The next one will be negative.”<sup>68</sup>

An April 15, 1971 telephone conversation between Nixon and Kissinger discussed a meeting Kissinger had with *Newsweek*. Basically, Kissinger was sent to *Newsweek* to discuss

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<sup>66</sup> Nixon to Kissinger, transcribed telephone conversation, April 7, 1971 “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> Richard M. Nixon, Transcribed telephone conversation with Spiro Agnew, April 7, 1971, “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

their articles regarding Vietnam. Nixon was hoping that their coverage of Vietnam would become more balanced. Kissinger reported back to Nixon that the head of the international section of the paper was “practically a pacifist,” but balanced news would be found in the national section of *Newsweek*. Kissinger also told Nixon “Vietnam has disappeared from the front page,” (in respects to *Newsweek*). Nixon enjoyed hearing this news as he laughed and mentioned that they were “overreacting.”<sup>69</sup>

In June 1971, the press would hit Nixon hard when confidential information regarding the United States involvement in Vietnam was leaked to the press. The documents released were called *The Pentagon Papers*, and they were originally published in the *New York Times*. The papers provided information about policies and decision-making during the Johnson administration. As soon as this information was received by the Nixon administration, they moved as quickly as they could to stop the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*. The *Pentagon Papers* were the second major leak to the press within four months.<sup>70</sup>

On June 13, 1971, an article headlined: “Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement” by Neil Sheehan appeared in the *New York Times*. This article was complete with three pages of documented material from the *Pentagon Papers*. The article started with the findings that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was far deeper than most Americans were aware. Information in the study linked findings to the Truman administration, Eisenhower administration, Kennedy administration and Johnson administration to deeper involvement in Vietnam than what was expected. Sheehan said that the interest in Vietnam began with the containment of Communism and shifted toward the “defense of power, influence and prestige of the United States.” By making the *Pentagon Papers* public, the *New York Times*

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<sup>69</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Kissinger, transcribed telephone conversation, April 15, 1971, “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 259.

reporters involved were, in Nixon's eyes, instilling more uncertainty in the American population. The importance of the *Pentagon Papers* would impact what and how reporters could express in the news. This was a good example of the "credibility gap" that had begun during the Johnson administration.<sup>71</sup>

The *New York Times* publication of a portion of the *Pentagon Papers* created an influx of phone calls to the White House. In a conversation with Kissinger regarding the matter, Nixon called what the *New York Times* did as well as the party responsible for the leak, "unconscionable." Despite the initial negatives attached to this information being linked, Kissinger argued that it could help their cause because the *Pentagon Papers* showed how, as Kissinger put it, "It just shows massive mismanagement of how we got there. And it pins it all on Kennedy and Johnson."<sup>72</sup>

The day after the *Pentagon Papers* were first published in the *New York Times*, Nixon received a call from John Ehrlichman regarding legal action against the *New York Times*. Nixon didn't want the *New York Times* to be prosecuted exactly, but he did want "...to prosecute the goddamn pricks that gave it to them."<sup>73</sup> In another conversation, John Mitchell talked with Nixon and told him that not following through with legal action would make the government appear "foolish." By this point, Nixon was on board for prosecuting the *New York Times*, "Well look, look, as far as the *Times* is concerned, hell, they're our enemies. I think we just ought to do it."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Neil Sheehan, "Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement," *New York Times*, June 13, 1971, archived via [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>72</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Dr. Henry Kissinger, transcribed telephone conversation, June 13, 1971, "Presidential Recordings Program," [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>73</sup> Richard M. Nixon to John Ehrlichman, transcribed telephone conversation, June 14, 1971, "Presidential Recordings Program," [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>74</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Kissinger and John Mitchell, Transcribed telephone conversation, June 14, 1971, "Presidential Recordings Program," [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

It seemed the more he talked about it, the more fired up he got. Nixon was on a roll bashing the *New York Times*, agreeing with comments that they were “unpatriotic” and that the “freedom of the press is not the freedom to destroy the integrity of the government.” In this situation, Nixon had hoped that other news organizations would step in and point out that the papers focus on Vietnam decisions during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.<sup>75</sup> By June 16, news of the stories was being broadcast on television, as well as discussed in other newspapers. Nixon talked with Ron Ziegler, White House Press Secretary, about how the news media handled the topic. Ziegler told Nixon that CBS had done an effective job by having Maxwell Taylor on the news show, but ABC and NBC “blurred” the topic. Ziegler told Nixon that ABC correspondent, Howard K. Smith thought that the *New York Times* was acting irresponsibly by printing the information in the *Pentagon Papers*. Nixon said he was fine with that sort of response, but overall his concern was that the press should be emphasizing that it wasn’t his administration that had developed the contents of the *Pentagon Papers*.<sup>76</sup>

In another conversation with Charles Colson, Nixon offered a new idea to put forth to the press about the *Pentagon Papers*. Nixon wanted to get the phrase, “The *Times* is guilty of ...knowingly publishing stolen goods,” out to the public. Nixon was looking to do whatever he could to make sure it was clear that the *Pentagon Papers* involved the Johnson-Kennedy administration as well. By getting the phrase “knowingly stolen goods” out to the public, Nixon was hoping to help “focus the blur” of information so that his public opinion numbers would remain unscathed.<sup>77</sup> For Nixon, taking action against the *New York Times* was to preserve a

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<sup>75</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Charles Colson, transcribed telephone conversation, June 15, 1971, “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Ronald Ziegler, Transcribed telephone conversation with, June 16, 1971, “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Richard M. Nixon to Charles Colson, Transcribed telephone conversation, June 17, 1971, “Presidential Recordings Program,” [www.whitehousetapes.net](http://www.whitehousetapes.net) (accessed November 29, 2011).

principle. Nixon thought if he hadn't acted against the *New York Times*, "every disgruntled bureaucrat in the government" would think they could leak information and get away with it.<sup>78</sup>

Nixon's press relations in 1971 took a major hit with the different leaks and reports being shown either in newspapers or on television. While the *Pentagon Papers* were a major leak of information, Nixon's administration remained optimistic that they wouldn't affect public opinion of Nixon too much. They argued that the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* could put the blame on previous administrations, giving a deeper understanding to how twisted the United States Involvement in Vietnam truly was.

### **Nixon and the Press: 1972**

In April 1972, the U.S. troops in Vietnam found themselves among some of the heaviest fighting since the Tet Offensive. On April 2, 1972, the North Vietnamese manned an offensive below the demilitarized zone. As reported in the *New York Times*, American military officials had a new attitude towards the situation, "It's a South Vietnamese operation now and we're going to leave it to them." It was reported that some U.S. officials were anxious to discuss the South Vietnamese defeats for fear that it would give Communists forces more propaganda. An apathetic view of the advances of the North Vietnamese troops appeared abundant among the "military officials" questioned in the article. This disinterest was also felt around the United States, as the war became longer, although American troops were being withdrawn.<sup>79</sup>

A conversation between Kissinger and Nixon on April 3, 1972 expressed concern not only about the press and its views on Vietnam, but military personnel as well:

**Nixon:** I noticed this morning, it says Abrams considers the situation is grim, which he, of course, shouldn't say.

**Kissinger:** Of course. I've asked him to—

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 509

<sup>79</sup> Fox Butterfield, "U.S. Aides in Saigon Calm in Face of North's Drive," *New York Times*, April 3, 1972, archived via [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed December 9, 2011).



**Nixon:** And—and, of course, the press is using the terms they did in Laos—rout, disarray, and so forth, and so forth. I don't think it's that bad, but nevertheless I don't know.

**Kissinger:** I think—

**Nixon:** The GIs, they say, are voicing opposition to the war. And Abrams—and Abrams, or MACV, is saying that ARVN was taken by surprise. Now, for Christ's sakes, we're in charge of the goddamned intelligence out there. We can't—the military can't cop out on this one, Henry.<sup>80</sup>

Nixon's concern was growing about the opinion of Vietnam. He could sense that Americans were growing tired of hearing about the Vietnam War. Nixon wanted to withdraw the troops from Vietnam, but risked unraveling any headway made in Vietnam at the same time.

Essentially, Nixon was left with to wonder whether or not “Vietnamization” was successful.

By late November 1972, leaks to the press would again become a growing concern for the Nixon administration. In the minutes from a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting from November 28, 1972, the Summary of Conclusions read: “It was agreed that-- There are to be no more leaks on any matter relating to the peace agreement or post-cease fire arrangements.” Kissinger had made the point during the meeting to address the leaks to the press. His concern with these leaks was that they could be detrimental to their plans for peace. He said that the North Vietnamese knew what they were doing, and they had begun reading the *New York Times*. Kissinger said that the reporters were using information that they were getting from somewhere and the only possibility is that someone in the government was leaking this information. “There have been high-level leaks, either in Saigon or here, I don't know which, but I'm afraid the damage has been done. We'll be lucky if we can keep any civilians in Vietnam.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Richard M. Nixon and Dr. Henry Kissinger, transcribed conversation, April 3, 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VIII, Vietnam January 1972- October 1972*, Document 50, Office of the Historian Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, <http://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76v08/pdf/frus1969-76v08.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2011).

<sup>81</sup> Special Actions Group Meeting Notes regarding Indochina, November 28, 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume IX, Vietnam October 1972-January 1973*, Document 112, Office of the Historian Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, <http://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76v09/pdf/frus1969-76v09.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2011).

An article by Fox Butterfield in the *New York Times* discussed the plan for the US to keep American civilians in Vietnam after military personnel were withdrawn. A US military spokesman had said that keeping should Americans be kept in Vietnam, it wouldn't violate any peace agreements made with the North Vietnamese. The spokesman added, "It might upset the Paris negotiations...and it's just not in the national interest to have these things known."<sup>82</sup> This article could possibly be the sort of information that Kissinger was referring to in the aforementioned meeting. This information was easy for the North Vietnamese to get their hands on, and they could use it to create additional provisions for peace agreements.

The press and Nixon had butted heads from the moment Nixon arrived in the White House. Leaks to the press and public image of Nixon's policies had the most impact on the way Nixon view the press. Perhaps Nixon was correct in saying that in Vietnam, "our worst enemy seems to be the press."<sup>83</sup>

### **Conclusion: Two Giants vs. The Press**

When looking at all the conversations Johnson had with different members of his administration, it was clear to see that his views of the media were negative. He knew going into his presidency that he would have to react differently than some of his predecessors were able to. Johnson had been greatly concerned with leaks to the media. Nixon had considerably similar problems while he was in office regarding leaks to the media and concern for public opinion. He viewed the press negatively. He was very vocal in his telephone conversations about how he viewed the media, depending on who it was or what was being said.

Both Johnson and Nixon faced their own hardships during their terms as President during the Vietnam War. It seemed that their shared hardship was also the press. Both Presidents

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<sup>82</sup> Fox Butterfield, "U.S. to Keep Many Civilians in Vietnam," *New York Times*, November 27, 1972, archived via [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed December 10, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> As quoted in Pach, "Our Worst Enemy Seems...", 556.

expressed disappointment in the press, especially regarding leaks of information. They both shared a view that it's unnerving to know that people in the government could leak information to the press with complete disregard for secrecy. Both Nixon and Johnson would express the need for secrecy about some aspects of the war when talking to certain people.

Although Johnson and Nixon had very different terms as Presidents of the United States of America, they shared very negative viewpoints of the press. Walter Cronkite argued that part of the reason Vietnam War reporting had been so different was because this had been a different kind of war for both the military and the press. Without an actual headquarters to cover, as had been the case in World War II, reporters were out in the jungle with the troops and were able to show the nation that Vietnam was a “pretty messed-up war.”<sup>84</sup>

First during Johnson's administration, and then in Nixon's, there was talk about a “credibility gap.” This gap was the idea that what the government was saying was not always being portrayed that way in the press. A good example of this was after the optimistic reports from Vietnam in 1967, the Tet Offensive occurred and the credibility of Johnson and other higher-ups in the government and military was being questioned.<sup>85</sup> This same idea was seen during the Nixon administration, after leaks came out to through the press. Interestingly, Vice President Spiro Agnew used the term against the press saying that a “widening credibility gap...exists between the national news media and the American people.” This was said in hopes to change the focus from Nixon's own credibility gap.<sup>86</sup>

It's difficult to say whether the press had direct relation with the loss in the Vietnam War, but the efforts of the press and the negative views from Johnson and Nixon provided future

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<sup>84</sup> Walter Cronkite, printed in *Reporting America at War: an Oral History*, ed. Michelle Ferrari, (New York: Goodhue Pictures, Inc., 2003), 29.

<sup>85</sup> Hallin, *The “Uncensored War,”* 213.

<sup>86</sup> Pach, “Our Worst Enemy...”, 560.

Presidents to forego using the press on the front lines with troops. I think that this was in part to a fear that the media had lost the war in Vietnam. That the American public can't handle seeing the images from the warfront and continue to be positive about wartime could also be a fear of the press. I think that the effects of the press in Vietnam will forever loom over wartime reporting, and the openly negative views by Johnson and Nixon during the Vietnam War fed into this, forever changing war reporting in the United States.

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