4-2021

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Recommended Citation

Hasson, Willow (2021) "A Failure Masked as a Succeeding War Effort: The Vietnam War," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2021.110106

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol11/iss1/6>

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A Failure Masked as a Succeeding War Effort:

The Vietnam War

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The conflict between the United States and North Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 showcases a failure of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. government and media put American exceptionalism ahead of reality and became tangled in an inescapable war. Focusing on the time during and around the spring and summer of 1965, when the U.S. government escalated the conflict into an undeclared war, the government was not transparent with the American public. The Johnson administration projected this conflict as a Cold War example that could be set for Southeast Asia and thus protect the world from communism. The press covered this conflict through an idealistic lens that supported and did not sufficiently question the president's continuation of the war. Meanwhile, a large portion of the South Vietnamese population, which the U.S. aimed to "protect," was part of the Viet Cong insurgency (also known as the National Liberation Front) that was behind the Northern Communist agenda and used guerilla warfare to wear down the U.S. military as U.S. bombs failed to yield a surrender. The American public was aware of the costs of war, but unaware of the failures of the war effort. The media fueled patriotism and then reported on how the majority of Americans supported the

misunderstood war in a cycle of misinformation. Behind closed doors, U.S. policymakers were well aware of how victory was elusive. Despite this knowledge, the government kept the weakness of South Vietnam and the uncertainty of the war effort quiet in the hope that the U.S. would suddenly overcome its challenges as the hegemon that it was assumed to be. A focused lens on the spring and summer of 1965 characterizes the conflict in Vietnam as a failure of diplomacy and military strategy that was covered up by the government and then misrepresented by the media as a war that was deserving of the public's support: all because the U.S. government saw communism in Northern Vietnam as a threat to American exceptionalism.

The conflict in Vietnam leading up until U.S. entry could have been viewed as a post-colonial Civil War within Vietnam. Instead, because the U.S. government viewed Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh forces as communists and not nationalists, the American government and media characterized the Vietnamese struggle as a critical Cold War issue of communism versus democracy. The U.S. wanted a new liberal order after World War II that included smaller countries like Vietnam because future economic prosperity and hegemony "would depend on creating an integrated world market."¹ Essentially, for the U.S. to gain and maintain power, communism could not be permitted to rise in any nation and risk challenging the American economy and political model. The U.S. officials also believed that governments worldwide would doubt the credibility of American commitments and that enemies would be emboldened to foment insurgencies elsewhere if the U.S. stopped backing South Vietnam or conceded to a negotiation.² To stop the spread of communism, the U.S. government escalated its forces and

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¹ Robert Buzzanco, "International Capitalism and Communism Collide with Vietnamese Nationalism," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations: Since 1914, III*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), 422.

² Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73.

used the press to ensure that the American public would back U.S. intervention—no matter how bleak the war’s outlook became.

On July 28, 1965, President Johnson gave a press conference about the conflict in Vietnam and emphasized how the U.S. needed to be a part of the struggle that would affect the world.³ The day after, on July 29, the newspaper *The Sun* published an article, titled “War in Vietnam,” that emphasized Johnson’s points to the public by printing that winning the war would be “of vital importance to South Vietnam, to North Vietnam, to the United States, to Communist China, to the Soviet Union and to other powers.”⁴ This is a clear example of the press working *for* the U.S. government instead of working to *check* the government’s actions. There is no discourse present in the article, just a rallying of support for military involvement. The article emphasizes its biased message by saying that the president, and thus the war as a whole, deserve public support.⁵ The rhetoric of the president and the press resonated with the American people, who wanted to believe that American exceptionalism was enduring and that the U.S. was fighting for a noble cause. A poll taken by *The Washington Post* before the spring and summer of escalation, in December of 1965, found that seventy-one percent of Americans surveyed were in favor of continuing the fighting in Vietnam until the U.S. could negotiate a settlement on its own terms.⁶ A majority of the U.S. public, at the beginning of the war, paid attention to and backed

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³ “War in Vietnam.” *The Sun* (1837-1994), Jul 29, 1965, Proquest: Historical Newspapers, accessed November 25, 2019, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/539721980?accountid=11243>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Louis Harris, “Administration Backed on Tactics in Viet-Nam: Bombing Hanoi Blockading North Viet-Nam Ports Key Viet-Nam Policies,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Sep 13, 1965, Proquest: Historical Newspapers. Accessed November 20, 2019, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/142349800?accountid=11243>.

U.S. actions because the U.S. effort was portrayed as noble by the government and by the press, which did not question the morals of the conflict.

At the outset of U.S. military escalation, the cycle of media support encouraging public support of the war and government was facilitated and encouraged by the U.S. government. An article published by *The New York Times* on Jul 30, 1965, titled “Praise in South Vietnam,” stated that the political and religious factions in Saigon “praised President Johnson’s announcement of an increase of 50,000 troops to the United States force in Vietnam” and that the majority of Southern Vietnamese wanted an American build-up in their region.⁷ The American press made American soldiers seem like liberators who were welcomed by the Southern Vietnamese. The truth was that the Southern Vietnamese government was so unstable that the U.S. considered backing a coup on multiple occasions because no regime was supported by a majority of the Vietnamese public or religious factions.⁸ According to a formerly classified telegram from the Commander in Chief to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the government was well aware by August 23, 1965, that there was a large insurgency presence of the Viet Cong in the South that was working with the Northern Vietnamese forces from Hanoi to force out the American military.⁹ Thus, a large part of the Southern Vietnamese population war in support of the Northern communist forces over U.S. forces. Another clear mark of secrecy within the U.S.

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⁷ “Praise in South Vietnam,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file), Jul 30, 1965, special to *The New York Times*, Proquest: Historical Newspapers, accessed November 24, 2019, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/116941804?accountid=11243>.

⁸ Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, telegram, Washington, January 4, 1965, 6:48 p.m. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, II, Vietnam, January–June 1965* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 4, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v02/d4>.

⁹ Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, telegram, Honolulu, August 23, 1965, 2:30 p.m. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, III, Vietnam, June–December 1965* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 125, accessed November 23, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d125>.

government over the instability in Southern Vietnam was the secret telegram sent from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam on January 4, 1965, that discussed supporting a coup to overtake the unpopular regime, but American officials feared confrontation with a new military government that might have an anti-U.S. bias and “lend encouragement to the anti-American manifestations already evident in Buddhist and certain student groups.”¹⁰ This telegram directly counters the press coverage that the Southern Vietnamese had a stable government and that the whole population wanted to be aided by American liberators. The aforementioned New York Times article from Jul 30, 1965, also reported that the Buddhist leadership in Saigon “appeared to welcome the report of the United States troop increase” even though the official spokesman had declined to make a statement.¹¹ The press wanted all groups in Southern Vietnam, including the Buddhists who were persecuted by the US-supported regime, to seem as though they were in favor of U.S. military actions. In reality, a declassified telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State from August 17, 1965, states that, in an interview by The Hong Kong Far Eastern Economic Review interview, the Buddhist leader Tri Quang denounced the government and General Thieu in particular, whom the U.S. was supporting.¹² Quang was even quoted as saying that he and “the people” were against the government and hoped that the war could be stopped as soon as possible by a cease-fire or “by

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¹⁰ Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, telegram, Washington, January 4, 1965, 6:48 p.m. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, II, Vietnam, January–June 1965* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 4, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v02/d4>.

¹¹ “Praise in South Vietnam.”

¹² Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, telegram, Saigon, August 17, 1965. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, III, Vietnam, June–December 1965* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 121, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d121>.

any negotiations which would have the peoples' support" and that Vietnam could rely on itself and "certainly on no outsider."¹³ Thus, the rhetoric that all the Southern Vietnamese wanted the U.S. to continue fighting for a full victory and keep General Thieu in power was a lie by the U.S. government that the press perpetrated—whether consciously or unconsciously.

Some journalists reported on U.S. casualties and mixed reviews about the war, but for the most part, the press remained on the jingoist government's side of the conflict throughout 1965. Even in June of 1966, a year after the aforementioned escalation of troops, a *New York Times* article printed the interview of a North Vietnamese captain who had deserted his forces; he was interviewed to make the war effort appear victorious and thus garner American public support which was "key to victory."¹⁴ The former captain was reported as saying that he is just one of many people who think the United States, the South Vietnamese and the South Korean, Australian and New Zealand allies were "clearly winning" and that "hardly anyone in Vietnam" argues that the United States is losing.¹⁵ The article then gives the statistic that "about 57,000 Vietcong guerrillas and North Vietnamese army regulars have been killed in action and counted on the battlefield since Jan 1, 1965" to prove that the U.S. is already winning the war and that all the war effort needs is more time to win as long as the U.S. public opinion stays behind the war effort.¹⁶ This article brings the responsibility of the war to its readers and even uses a false claim

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¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Charles Mohr, "Many in Vietnam Say Opinion in U.S. Is Key to Victory: G.I.'s Tend to Feel They Can Win the War If Permitted to Remain Long Enough Following Is the First of Three Articles Appraising the Military Situation in South Vietnam by the Chief Correspondent of the New York Times in Saigon: Vietnam Victory Linked to Opinion," *New York Times* (1923-Current file), Jun 27, 1966, Proquest: Historical Newspapers, accessed November 20, 2019, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/117248536?accountid=11243>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

that “statistically, the war has been won several times already”¹⁷ which ignores the fact that no matter how many enemy soldiers were killed, the Northern Vietnam forces remained resilient. Before, during, and after the escalation of U.S. forces in the summer of 1965, the U.S. government consistently hid the knowledge that the war was leaning towards disaster to preserve public opinion because domestic support was crucial to the war effort.

The Johnson administration saw the sentiments of the American public as the key to success through the continuation of the war. This assumption meant that the government used all of its power to ensure a positive media-image of the war—even though this meant misinformation and secrecy. Johnson’s fear of the public turning against him even affected his war policy. Johnson initiated a “limited war strategy of graduated pressure” through sustained bombing programs, like “Operation Rolling Thunder” (initiated in March of 1965), in the place of an all-out war because he perceived that U.S. citizens would not want to see strategic airpower blow the enemy “out of the water.”¹⁸ Thus, the war effort was slow and government officials lied about the failure of their war plans. In April of 1965, amidst the first anti-war march on Washington in which more than fifteen thousand protesters attended,¹⁹ Johnson attempted to appease the public by consciously misleading the American people and Congress.²⁰ The administration downplayed the escalation by explaining the bombing of North Vietnam simply as retaliation for communist attacks in the South; Johnson also never announced the switch to sustained strikes, which “committed the United States to a major war without ever forthrightly

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thomas G. Paterson et al., *American Foreign Relations: A History, Volume 2: Since 1895*, 8th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 372.

¹⁹ Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 93.

²⁰ Thomas G. Paterson et al., *American Foreign Relations*, 371.

saying so.”²¹ Initially, the press was continuously reporting the war as an effort that would become a future total victory. However, the public and press were unaware of how dire the situation in Vietnam had become for the U.S. in the spring and summer of 1965.

In a top-secret paper written by Under Secretary of State George W. Ball to United States National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, who would report to Johnson, on July 1, 1965, Ball made it apparent that the U.S. and Southern Vietnamese forces were losing the war.²² This document was later leaked by *The New York Times* under the Pentagon Papers which proved that the Johnson administration had knowingly lied to the public to draw support for the failing war.²³ Ball wrote to Bundy in the telegram that “[n]o one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force them to the conference table on our terms no matter how many hundred thousand white foreign (US) troops we deploy.”²⁴ The document then continues to contradict the media’s portrayal of a war effort that just needed more time and support by stating that “[n]o one has demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war . . . in jungle terrain in the midst of a population that refuses cooperation to the white forces” citing examples of failures like “[t]he B-52 raid that failed to hit the Viet Cong who had obviously been tipped off,” which proves that the Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam were undermining U.S. military attempts.²⁵ Ball then attempts to make Bundy and Johnson consider abandoning the conflict

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²¹ Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 93.

²² Ball, George W. “A Compromise Solution for South Viet-nam.” *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1964–1968, III, Vietnam, June–December 1965, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 40. Top Secret, Sent by Under Secretary of State Ball to McGeorge Bundy on July 1, 1965, Washington, undated. Also printed in *The Pentagon Papers: New York Times Edition*, pp. 449–454. Accessed November 25, 2019. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d40>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

completely for negotiations because “the war is vastly unpopular,” the American role in the conflict is “perceptibly eroding the respect and confidence with which other nations regard [the US],” and because further involvement is not essential to the defense of freedom in the Cold War.”²⁶ When the media reported on battles won by the US, public opinion polls that supported the war, and interviews by government officials who made victory sound simple, the press was missing the truth behind the government's story.

Eventually, the slow progress of the war could not stay ahead of the public opinion which changed from supportive to dissenting. The anti-war movement grew as it crossed lines of identity and melded into a national unstructured movement that eventually pushed the U.S. government to recede.²⁷ Later, the media changed and reflected the negative public opinion instead of the government's false positivity, like the article “Major Vietnam Offensives Fail to Catch up With . . .” from *The Sun* published on Jan 12, 1966, which focused on how two major United States drives and separate operations by Vietnamese troops “failed to flush the Viet Cong from the jungles” and characterized these events as failed attempts without including that the war effort would prevail.²⁸ Even in the Senate, elite “doves” like Senator William Fulbright decried the war effort as arrogance on the American side.²⁹ Fulbright wrote, in a Congressional Record in May of 1966, that by continuing the war the U.S. was giving up an “opportunity to set an

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²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Thomas G. Paterson et al., *American Foreign Relations*, 375.

²⁸ “Major Vietnam Offensives Fail to Catch up With.” *The Sun (1837-1994)*, Jan 12, 1966, Proquest: Historical Newspapers, accessed November 25, 2019, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/539612513?accountid=11243>.

²⁹ William J. Fulbright, “Senator J. William Fulbright Decries the ‘Arrogance of Power,’ 1966,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations: Since 1914, III*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), 418.

example of generous understanding . . . with China, of practical cooperation for peace . . . with Russia . . . of material helpfulness without moral presumption in our relations with the developing nations, [and] of abstention from the temptations of hegemony . . .”³⁰ The war was unwinnable, and this fact was eventually impossible to hide. “In the end, no American strategy could have reversed the outcome in Vietnam, because the Viet Cong and its North Vietnamese allies had committed to total war” and was prepared to sustain casualties far beyond American estimates.³¹ Also, even though the media made the Saigon government seem stable, Diem was hated for his persecution of the Buddhists and no government after Diem was assassinated was credible enough to create a lasting success at war.³² The American government viewed its forces as invincible, and this made the U.S. government continue to keep forces in Vietnam up until 1973,³³ despite the anti-American sentiment in South Vietnam and the public outcry at home. Ultimately, the failures of the war were kept secret and the Johnson administration continued the war because of the enduring American agenda of hegemony and the need to assert power.

Truly, the U.S. government stayed involved in the unwinnable Vietnam War even when the press and public had turned against the war because of the lasting theory of American exceptionalism. The U.S. government continued the war and lied to its public because it could not face the reality that a small country like North Vietnam could force out the great American hegemon and victor of WWII. This hegemonic status made government officials feel that the U.S. had a “special right to exert power in the world” and that any source of communism that

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³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Robert K. Brigham, “An Unwinnable War,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations: Since 1914, III*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), 444.

³² Ibid.

³³ Thomas G. Paterson et al., *American Foreign Relations*, 393.

threatened this power should be crushed to ensure that America would remain the superior “destined beacon of liberty” that it was perceived to be.³⁴ Overall, the government hid proof that American soldiers were not wanted, that the Southern Vietnamese government was unstable and unpopular, and that the war was failing through only-positive press conferences and secrecy, and the media followed suit in its idealistic reports of success, manipulated interviews, and polls that encouraged support in order to continue the war to prove American exceptionalism to mask the reality that U.S. Foreign policy had failed.

About the author

Willow Hasson is a junior at George Washington University with a declared major in political science. She is also pursuing a minor in international affairs and another minor in journalism and mass communication. She hopes to someday work in public policy to better the lives of others through government action. She has always retained an interest in history as it informs all current and future policies.

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³⁴ Walter L. Hixson, “Culture, National Identity, and the ‘Myth of America,’” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations: Since 1914, III*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), 10.

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