Vietnam War Song Project (VWSP):

The Vietnam Anti-War Movement and the Opinion Polls

The anti-war movement and mass public opinion on the home front played an important part in the political debate on Vietnam. The protest movement were particularly vocal and added domestic pressure on the Nixon administration. It developed early on in the conflict, picking up momentum from late 1964, and building a large base on college campuses, with connections to broader pressure groups such as the Free Speech Movement which grew out of the University of California in October 1964 over the rights of students to politically organise on campus, and the Students for a Democratic Society - formed in the early 1960s, this group ran the "March Against the War in Vietnam" demonstrations in Washington D.C. on 17 April 1965 and 27 November 1965, the latter attended by around 20,000-25,000 people.[1]

Later, specific groups developed to protest the war, such as National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam which organised demonstrations from 1967-1968 (for example, the "March on the Pentagon"), the Draft Resistance, and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (created in 1967).[2] The main groups and leadership of the movement called for a US unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam, were morally opposed to war in general, and strongly criticised the US bombing campaigns in Indo-China and the use of napalm. Some sections of the movement focussed their opposition on the draft system.[3] Between January and June 1968, during the presidential race, there were approximately 221 major demonstrations on 101 colleges and universities, according to the National Student Association, and by the end of the year it rose to around 800 demonstrations.[4] A large demonstration took place outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, with police and protesters clashing, viewed by millions on television. All of these protests received a large amount of press coverage.[5]

Two events particularly put pressure on Nixon. The first, the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam (15 October 1969 and 15 November 1969), attracted a few million protesters, significantly larger than the demonstrations in the mid-1960s and with a broader base than the usual campus protest.[6] The second, the Kent State demonstration on 4 May 1970, formed a part of the surge of campus protest against the expansion of the war into Cambodia. The Ohio State National Guard killed four students. This in turn caused more

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1 Free Speech Movement (FSM) Archives [online]: http://www.fsm-a.org/. "Student group proposes major protest against Vietnam policy", The New York Times, 14 June 1965, 16. "Throng of 20,000 Marches in Protest of Vietnam War", The Washington Post, 28 November 1965, A1.

2 "Anti-war Group Schedules March , 'Confrontation' at Pentagon, Oct. 21", The Washington Post, 30 September 1967, A17.

3 Burning draft cards often took place at the early demonstrations. President Johnson subsequently prohibited the destruction of draft cards in an amendment to the Universal Military Training and Service Act in August 1965. The arrest of David O'Brien in 1966 for burning his draft card led to a Supreme Court Case on the First Amendment. See David Paul O'Brien v. USA, US Court of Appeals, Cases and Opinions [online], http://cases.justia.com/us-court-of appeals/F2/376/538/29199/

4 "Student survey shows 38,911 stage 221 protests", The New York Times, 27 August 1968, 33.

5 "Guard is called up to protest Chicago during Convention", The New York Times, 21 August 1968, 1. "Police Battle Demonstrators in Streets; Hundreds Injured", The New York Times, 29 August 1968, 1. David Farber, Chicago '68 (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

6 "How Moratorium Grew Into Nationwide Protest", The New York Times, 12 October 1969, E1.

demonstrations against the Kent State "Massacre".[7] This all created the image of an administration under siege. Nixon responded to the shootings by establishing the President's Commission on Campus Unrest (the "Scranton Commission") in June 1970 which investigated the Kent State killings and student activism from 1965 and collected extensive information.[8]

The movement spread into the cultural field, with hundreds of folk and popular protest (or "topical") songs released, documentary films made, and books written against the war, for example Norman Mailer's portrayal of the 1967 "March on the Pentagon" in his 1968 novel The Armies of the Night.[9] Within three weeks of the Kent State shooting the super-group Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young had recorded the song "Ohio", composed by Neil Young, reaching the top end of the US charts, which attacked the president: "Tin soldiers and Nixon's coming; Four dead in Ohio".[10] But it is rarely mentioned that many more "patriotic songs" appeared than "protest songs" which supported the war effort, particularly in the country music genre.[11]

Despite all the well attended anti-war demonstrations, throughout most of the conflict the protest movement were actually a minority and mass public opinion supported presidential policy. Many public opinion polls were conducted during the war by commercial pollsters, newspapers, and academics.[12] In the

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7 See the one sided leaflet/poster , 28 x 22 cm, "Undeclared War Abroad and on the Home Front: Stay in the streets and demonstrate, Monday 18, 4.30 p.m., Times Square North-47th Street" (New York: Youth Against War and Fascism, 1970), New York Historical Society. Also see the poster "Protest the Kent State Massacre", NYU Archives Collection [online]: http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/collections/exhibits/arch/1970/1970-2.html

8 President's Commission on Campus Unrest. The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970). Also known as the Scranton Commission Report. See the index of the report online at: http://www.lexisnexis.com/documents/academic/upa_cis/10616_PresCommCampusUnrestPt1.pdf
Nixon, The Memoirs, 455-457.

9 Norman Mailer, Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History (New York: New American Library, 1968). For a filmography see Linda Dittmar & Gene Michaud, From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 350-372. For literature see Peter McInerney, "'Straight' and 'Secret' History in Vietnam War Literature", Contemporary Literature, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1981, 187-204.

10 CSN&Y, "Ohio / Find the Cost of Freedom" (Atlantic 2740; 7" Vinyl; 45rpm; USA issue; June 1970).

11 "The Vietnam Conflict Spawning Heavy Barrage of Disk Tunes", Billboard Magazine, 4 June 1966, 1 & 10. James Perone, Songs of the Vietnam Conflict (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001). Lee Andresen, Battle Notes...Music of the Vietnam War (Superior, WI: Savage Press, 2003). David James, "The Vietnam War and American Music" in John Carlos Rowe & Rick Berg (Editors), The Vietnam War and American Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 227-254. Justin Brummer, *Vietnam War Song Project* [online]: https://rateyourmusic.com/list/JBrummer/vietnam_war_song_project/

12 Sidney Verba, Richard Brody, Edwin Parker, Norman Nie, Nelson Polsby, Paul Ekman, & Gordan Black, "Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam", The American Political Science Review, Vol. 61, No. 2, 1967, 317-333. Nelson Polsby, "Political Science and the Press: Notes on Coverage of a Public Opinion Survey on the Vietnam War", The Western Political Quarterly, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1969, 47-60. Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Is War a Mistake?, The Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1970, 134-150. Sidney Verba & Richard Brody, "Participation, Policy Preferences, and the War in Vietnam", The Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1970, 325-332. John Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam", The American Poltical Science Review, Vol. 65, No. 2, 1971, 358-375. Howard Schuman, "Two Sources of Antiwar Sentiment in America", The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 78, No. 3, 1972, 513-536. William Lunch & Peter Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam", The Western Political Quarterly, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1979, 21-44.

liberal-democratic electoral systems of the UK and US public opinion usually played a prominent role in policy making. Policy makers often sought to avoid unpopular policies, and thus the election cycle is an important factor. In the diplomatic field, references to public opinion often meant public opinion according to the opinion polls, and these polls were frequently tracked and discussed under Heath and Nixon. Specific problems arise from analysing opinion polls, such the clash between long term trends and short term fluctuations, the wording of questions, the representativeness of people questioned, the historical and social context of the polls, and the methods of measurements. Nevertheless, the law makers frequently used the polls in the policy making process as navigational and therefore they are an important factor in diplomatic and political history.[13]

The conventional view on the relationship between foreign affairs and the opinion polls is that public opinion tends to follow government policy.[14] However, the change in US domestic opinion on the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973 challenged this assumption. Yet while the anti-war movement were able to claim that they played an important role in changing public, presidential, and Congressional policy, Nixon argued that the "silent majority" of the US public supported his strategy for ending the war.

The two central types of questions, the "mistake" question and the "policy alternative" question, need to be analysed. The best information available on the mistake issue, conducted by Gallup between 1965 and 1971, posed the question "in view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" The results, as seen in table 3, column B, below, showed a steady decrease in the number of people who thought that the US did not make a mistake and an increase in the number of people who thought that the conflict was a mistake. This correlated with the increase in troop numbers and the number of combat deaths in Vietnam, as displayed in columns C and D. In August 1965 61% answered "no" when there were just over 60,000 troops in Vietnam and the years casualty toll remained under 2,000. By May 1971 only 28% responded "no", a huge change. By this time, over 40,000 US troops had been killed. This therefore suggested a lack of support for the war effort and increasing public disenchantment from 1965-1971.

But the "mistake" poll did not reveal their opinions on presidential policy i.e. if there should be escalation or withdrawal. In fact, the "policy alternative" polls showed that throughout 1967 while the US public began to think that the war may have been a mistake, they actually supported President Johnson's policy of escalation, in what one opinion poll analyst called the "year of the hawk".[15] In February 1967, the Washington Post recorded that 43% supported escalation while only 6% supported an American withdrawal.[16] Gallup also reported similar findings in the New York Times in November 1967.[17]

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13 Robert Shepherd, Public Opinion and European Integration (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1975), 1-21.

14 Lunch & Sperlich, "American Public Opinion", 22. John Rielly (Editor), American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, 1975), 9.

15 Lunch & Sperlich, "American Public Opinion", 30.

16 Conducted by Louis Harris. See "81% Feel US Faces Long War: Public Opinion on Vietnam Policy", Washington Post, 16 May 1967, A8.

17 Conducted by Gallup. See "A Gallup Poll Finds 59% of Americans Would Continue War", New York Times, 11 November 1967, 3. Also see "Americans on the War Divided, Glum, Unwilling to Quit", Time Magazine, 31 October 1969.

Table 3: Vietnam War Opinion Polls, US Troops Levels, and US Combat Deaths[18]

Column A	Column B			Column C		Column D
Year	Do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam? (%)			Number of US troops in Vietnam		Number of US combat deaths in Vietnam
	Month	**"No"**	**"Yes"**	**30 June**	**31 Dec**	
1965	August	61	24	59,900	184,300	1,863
1966	November	51	31	267,500	385,300	6,143
1967	July	48	41	448,800	485,600	11,153
1968	August	35	53	534,700	536,100	16,592
1969	October	32	58	538,700	475,200	11,616
1970	May	36	56	414,900	334,600	6,081
1971	May	28	_	239,200	156,800	2,357
1972	_	_	_	47,000	24,200	641

The major change came between November 1968 and September 1970, during which time public support for withdrawal from Vietnam increased from 19% to 55%, which thus converged with the high level of people who believed that the war was a mistake.[19] This increased further; in May 1971 Gallup recorded 68% support for withdrawal and then 73% in April 1972.[20] But this also matched presidential policy, as Nixon had already announced and begun withdrawing from Vietnam. Nixon's joint highest job approval rating, at 67%, came just after his 3 November 1969 speech on his Vietnam policy, right in the middle of the anti-war Moratorium in Washington D.C, which indicated that the public favoured his gradual approach to ending the war, rather than an immediate, unilateral withdrawal called for by large parts of the anti-war movement.[21]

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18 The polls, originally published in the Gallup Opinion Index, were asked between 2 to 4 times a year between November 1964 and May 1971 and they appeared in Erskine, "The Polls: Is War a Mistake?", 134-150 & Lunch & Sperlich, "American Public Opinion", 25 & Mueller, "Trends of Popular Support", 363. US troop levels listed in George Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, 4thEdition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 182. The number of US combat deaths are taken from "Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War", The National Archives [online], http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html

19 Lunch & Sperlich, "American Public Opinion", 31.

20 Ibid., 28.

21 "Presidential Approval Ratings: Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends", Gallup [online]: http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx
Support for Nixon's policy was also confirmed in a TIME-Louis Harris poll which showed that while four-fifths of the nation were "fed up and tired of the war", more than half supported Nixon's pace of troop withdrawals. See "Americans on the War Divided, Glum, Unwilling to Quit", Time Magazine, 31 October 1969.

So what happened in public opinion and did it influence public policy? Two strands were at work. Firstly, the US public developed informed positions on the Vietnam War from 1964 until the withdrawal. During the 1964 presidential campaign two-thirds of Americans said they paid little or no attention to Vietnam, but by the 1968 presidential election Vietnam had been discussed widely in all circles.[22] This trend increased with the publication of the Pentagon Papers, a top-secret study on the history of US involvement in Vietnam, commissioned by the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1967, and leaked to the New York Times and other newspapers by Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg in 1971. Thus, during the Nixon administration people knew the issues and formed views on the war independently from presidential policy. This, along with the opinion polls illustrates an important difference between the anti-war movement and mass public opinion against the war; the majority of the protest movement were opposed to war in principle and had moral objections to the use of American military power right from the beginning of the conflict. But mass public opinion eventually supported withdrawal because of the military failures.[23]

Secondly, by the 1968 presidential election race elite views on the war had changed. Important opinion makers from Nixon to Robert Kennedy had called for an end to the war, and thus it was no longer unpatriotic or controversial to support the anti-war movement or withdrawal from Vietnam.[24] Essentially, both public opinion influenced policy makers and the elite influenced public opinion.[25]

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22 Lunch & Sperlich, "American Public Opinion", 22. Benjamin Page & Richard Brody, "Policy Voting and the Electoral Process: The Vietnam War Issue", The American Political Science Review, Vol. 66, No. 3, 1972, 979-995.

23 Schuman, "Two Sources of Antiwar Sentiment", 513.

24 "Nixon Vows to End War with a New Leadership", New York Times, 6 March 1968, 1. "Kennedy Asserts US Cannot Win", New York Times, 9 February 1968, 1. "Rockefeller Gives Four-Stage Plan to End the War", New York Times, 14 July 1968, 1. "Mansfield Pushes For a Prompt Peace", New York Times, 24 August 1968, 3. "Humphrey Favors a Cease-Fire Now'", New York Times, 23 June 1968, 1.

25 Telephone conversation (Telecon); Kissinger to Nixon; 12 October 1970; Box 7, File 2; Kissinger Telecons: Chronological File; NPM; NPL. Nixon, The Memoirs, 403.