

Policy Process and the Vietnam War

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America's involvement in Vietnam between 1950 and 1975 has had lasting effects on our country's consciousness. The failure to defeat communism and save South Vietnam is one that has been discussed and critiqued both during the conflict and since the end of our involvement there. By all but few accounts, our involvement in Vietnam was a failure, plagued with mistakes and tragedies. We paid a heavy price for our attempts, a price that pales to the ones paid by the Vietnamese. Prolific discourses have been written on the subject of the Vietnam War, from a variety of political positions and points of view. An understanding of American foreign policy in Vietnam and why it failed can be aided by taking a look at the policy making process in Washington itself. The process by which American presidents make decisions, the ways of thinking and dynamics of decision making groups and the pressures involved in advising and aiding decision makers can directly contribute to the success or failure of a policy. The context in which options are placed, how dissent is handled and how policy makers react to policy failures are also worth examining. Analysts of United States' (US) policy in Vietnam often overlook the effect of these dynamics. However the flaws in the process and the nature of the bureaucracy can have a direct effect on the failure or success of policy.

The Vietnam War, in many ways was a tragedy. As a historical subject, it is one in which hindsight and analysis does not necessarily offer answers and alternative solutions. One analyst of the war describes it as "over-determined".¹ The conflict contained more complications than can ever be addressed completely in any given discourse. The origins of the conflict were far-reaching and our involvement was innocuous and slow in its beginnings and once begun, difficult to end. Looking at the decision making process, one can begin to see that the process itself was counter to the implementation of any real solution to the crisis, if such a thing ever existed.

The premise of this discussion is that policy in Vietnam failed. Its failure was due in some part to the process and mistakes of decision makers. This discussion will attempt to combine the views and theories of three critics of the Vietnam War policy in an attempt

¹ Averch, H. (2002). The Rhetoric of War, Language, Argument, and Policy During the Vietnam War. New York: University Press of America, pg. 1

to achieve a deeper analysis of some of its critical flaws and failures. Using primarily Johnson's bombing policy beginning in 1965 along with other aspects of the war, the discussion will attempt to illustrate some flaws in the policy process.

Irving Janis wrote about his theory of small group processing in 1972 and 1982. His theories formed the basis of continuing research on the dynamics of decision making, specifically in foreign policy by American administrations.² James Thomson worked in Washington from 1961-1966 under Kennedy and Johnson as an East Asia specialist at the State Department and the White House. His analysis is based on his observations and experiences in Washington. Unlike the other two, Thomson is not a theorist writing in hindsight. His analysis was written for The Atlantic Monthly in 1968, while the war was still underway.³ His observations are quite illuminating and worth considering when studying failures of our policy. Harvey Averch began his study of Vietnam policy in 1968 after the Tet offensive. Averch did systems analysis, intelligence work in Vietnam while working for the Rand Corporation. His job was to analyze data collected in the field to provide the government with an analysis of the war effort. His book, The Rhetoric of War, published in 2002 is the result of a renewed interest by Averch in the policy processes that led to the Vietnam War.⁴

Janis coined the term *groupthink* in 1972 and defined it as a pathology of small group dynamics and decision processing. *Groupthink* is the pressure of small groups to achieve consensus under crisis and includes the lessening of mental efficiency, the tendency to neglect the testing of hypothesis, or to consider evidence that a policy has a strong chance of failing and the dampening of moral judgment. Janis has cited Johnson's 1965 decision to escalate the war as evidence of the flaws of *groupthink*.⁵ The concept of *groupthink* has become standard in textbooks on subjects such as sociology, political science and psychology. In John Rourke's textbook, International Politics on the World

² Stern, E. K., t'Hart, P. & Sundelius, B. (Eds). (1997). Beyond Groupthink. Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making. University of Michigan Press.

³ Thomson, J. C. Jr. (1968). The Atlantic Monthly. (From: Sevy, G. (Ed). (1989) The America Experience in Vietnam. A Reader. London: University of Oklahoma Press.)

⁴ see Averch

⁵ see Stern et al.

Stage, he discusses ways of analyzing political policy and *groupthink* is covered.

According to Rourke *groupthink* occurs when there is a lack of discordant information and views, a result of a homogenous group. Proponents of the theory of *groupthink* propose that the American political system, with short-term presidencies and presidential cabinets, containing like-minded and commonly politically orientated people, encourages the pathology of *groupthink*. There exists a lack of dissent and a suppressing of any information that might endanger consensus. Such dynamics results in limited policy choices and the tendency to make decisions in increments or not make them at all. This incrementalism was described by former National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski when he compared foreign policy to an “aircraft carrier. You simply don’t send it into an 180° turn. At most you move it a few degrees to port or starboard.”⁶ Another product of *groupthink* is the likelihood of decision-makers, when faced with opposing choices to choose the lowest-common denominator policy, the least objectionable policy with the least amount of direct consequences. This is not always the best policy and the consequences of such decisions are often far-reaching and long term. Throughout the period of American foreign policy in Vietnam, incrementalism is apparent. If this is a symptom of *groupthink* than as a pathology of decision making it endangers a leaders ability to devise bold, drastic, creative and far-reaching policy.

Kennedy was especially prone to deter or avoid decision-making and then only to take small steps.⁷ In 1961, Kennedy was presented with two clear-cut options for his policy in Vietnam. General Maxwell Taylor and Kennedy’s advisor, Walter Rostow returned from a fact-finding tour of Vietnam with a pessimistic report of the situation. They advised that Kennedy immediately send in money, materials and men under the guise of flood relief. Avrel Harriman, warned Kennedy of the dangers of sending in men and putting American prestige on the line, considering the chaotic situation and the absence of any clear goals or ways of exiting, once the commitment had been made.

⁶ This quote and information in this and the following paragraph are from this source: Rourke, J. T. (1999). International Politics on the World Stage. 7th ed. New York: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill. pg. 116.

⁷ The source for all historical information about the Vietnam War is from: Herring, G. C. (1986). America’s Longest War, The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Harriman advised a negotiated settlement and removal of US from the conflict. Kennedy chose a middle-of the road approach, choosing an incremental supplement of the US advisors, the lowest denominator of the choices. Kennedy was paradoxically distracted from Vietnam by other events, the outcomes of which placed more and more importance on the outcome of our involvement in Vietnam. It is here that we see both national and personal credibility playing a role in decision-making and a lack of clear problem solving process or clear objectives and plans for success.

While *groupthink* is a useful theory that has obvious applications to Vietnam policy it does not fully explain failures in policy process. After all, small groups in crisis do not always create bad policy. *Groupthink* is difficult to research, to qualify, observe or prevent. In addition, policy failures occurred when consensus was not reached and discordant views were present and heard. *Groupthink* alone does not fully explain the failure of policy-making for the Vietnam crisis.

A more in-depth analysis of the failures of Vietnam policy is explored by Averch. In his book he takes an interesting approach to dissecting policy. Where theories from Janis and others are vague and applicable to a variety of group decision-making situations, Averch is detailed in his analysis and concentrates his discourse on the war in Vietnam. He divides decision-makers into three categories, civilian decision-makers, the military and the doves, radical and moderate.⁸ For each category he develops a model of decision-making, a set of propositions from which decision-makers are working. (See Appendix for full outline of Averch's models)⁹ Averch uses the scientific model of a theory as a guide. Where scientific models are based on empirical evidence, and observable data, Averch's models lay out premises, assumptions and ideologies. The propositions of his models are based on values. Where empirical evidence might cause a change in the acceptance of a scientific model (the world is round, not flat) it does little to

⁸ Averch's models for doves are excluded in this discussion in the interest of focus and length. They are, however worth looking at and add to the depth of the discussion.

⁹ The source of the Appendix and of all discussions on models, noted by the use of *DM* or *MM* and all discussion naming Averch is from the following:
Averch, H. (2002) The Rhetoric of War, Language, Argument, and Policy During the Vietnam War. New York: University Press of America.

change the decision-maker's model. Averch defines the ideas that predicated the decisions made for Vietnam.

One of Averch's most illuminating conclusions is that the civilian decision-makers and the military were working from somewhat different models, which put them at odds with each other and made their decisions counter-productive. The other major conclusion he makes is that decision-makers clung to the propositions of their models like religious faith. Even when circumstances of history and observable cause and effect showed that their premises were flawed, they did not abandon them, change them or change the model. Instead they found other justifications within the model and changed their rhetoric to fit the new justification while continuing with the same policy and actions. Because the model is based on values, it is difficult to change. Like modern religious fundamentalists who search for the ruins of Noah's arc, decision-makers cannot let go of the political motivations for beginning foreign policy in Vietnam, even when they become questionable. Just as a fundamentalist can lose sight of the true meaning behind the story of Noah's Arc, in his search for proof of it, decision-makers can lose sight of the consequences of their policies and the real needs of those whom the policy affects, in their fervor to be right. It is only after a series of shocks that the propositions of the model are questioned.¹⁰

Of course, these models of thinking were not consciously laid out. Johnson didn't have a list of propositions in his desk to which he referred. It's understood that Averch devised his list of propositions, post-history, with clear hindsight. However, his models are accurate reflections of the premises from which policy-makers were working and are useful tools in examining the decision making process and where it is flawed. The models illuminate the dangers of clinging to rhetorical justifications when those justifications cease to be logical or true. The danger is greater when the model stretches down the bureaucratic chain and sideways to government officials, conditioning the reports that come from the field and from experts up to the decision-makers. While each proposition of each model cannot be thoroughly examined here, a close look at some of the propositions in the civilian decision maker's model and the military model can be helpful

¹⁰ *ibid.*

in examining American foreign policy in Vietnam. This analysis taken with Janis's and Thomson's provides a useful look at the flaws of policy making during the Vietnam era.

One of the civilian decision-maker's (DM) propositions deals with the post-nuclear world of limited wars. Since all out war could mean total destruction or mass killing, wars, by moral and humane necessity, must be limited to non-nuclear methods. DM 7 states the theory of signaling, that the enemy will understand the US input of resources and manpower, as a sign of US will and commitment to defeat communist aggression.¹¹ With this assumption, countries like the US use the movement of troops, limited bombing, input of money etc, to show the enemy our will and prove that we will prevail if aggression continues. The goal of signaling is the perception by the enemy of our intended meaning, not military victory. The problem with signaling is that the enemy may not recognize and interpret our signals the way we want them to. Signaling only works when both sides agree on the meaning of the signal. The enemy is not necessarily working from the same proposition, especially when the enemy is not an industrialized society with nuclear weapons of its own. In addition, displaying our will does not diminish the will of the enemy. In Vietnam, US signaling with gradually escalated, limited bombing simply gave the North Vietnamese time to recuperate and regroup. In addition, it provided the North with something to rally the people against, as the US slowly bombed more and more of their country.¹²

In 1965, Johnson wanted to use air strikes against the North as a signal to the North of US resolve, a method of getting Hanoi to the negotiating table, a morale boost to the South Vietnamese and a way of stopping the North's ability to infiltrate into the South. Johnson's advisors disagreed on the level the bombing should take. The Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated a quick, massive strike to achieve the objectives. The State Department cautioned against such aggression and advocated limited, gradually escalating air raids, in accordance with limited war theory. Intelligence reports warned that bombing the North may not have any impact of the war in the South.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² see Herring.

George Ball, a former ambassador to the French and long-time critic of Vietnam War policy, warned that bombing would not stop infiltration, could provoke a massive response by the North and would begin a spiral of unlimited commitment, from which the US would not be able to get out. He told Johnson in a much quoted phrase, “Once on the tiger’s back we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.”¹³ Ball had seen firsthand what became of the French in Indochina. He recognized the complexity of the situation there. For him, the risk of a French-like fate was greater than any minimal gains achieved by bombing. Looking at the model, Ball didn’t accept the possible cost of DM1-5, which placed high value on fighting communism. These propositions contain no quantitative measure of acceptable costs of the fight of communism. For Johnson and his advisors, DM1-5 dictated that the risks of escalation were worth taking.

In February of 1965, ROLLING THUNDER, the bombing campaign in North Vietnam began. It had little strategic or military objectives. Once begun, it became justification for future escalation. While the US continued to bomb the North, the North was still able to send troops to the South to fight and control the South Vietnamese. Even after it was obvious that signaling by use of limited bombing was not bringing Hanoi to the negotiating table, Johnson did not abandon the proposition. He continued with his policy.¹⁴

By April, the bombing was not producing the results hoped for, except for one. North Vietnam’s prime minister sent a message to Washington that he was willing to begin negotiations with the US. In the wording of his appeal, he included the phrase, “in accordance with the program of the National Liberation Front.” This phrase was interpreted as resolve of the North Vietnamese to turn South Vietnam into a communist state. Though the purpose of signaling was said to be negotiations, DM1-5 won out again. The prime minister’s overtures were dismissed. The bombing campaign continued with no substantial results.

The military model (MM) accepts DM7, however it adds MM10, which states that the volume of military resources given to the military and applied to the enemy should be

¹³ *ibid.*, pg. 125

¹⁴ *ibid.*

enough to counter any response by the enemy. The discordance between the models is seen with the alternate plans of the Joint Chiefs and State in planning a bombing campaign. With limited bombing used as a signal, the North was still able to infiltrate the South and the bombing was not achieving any real military objectives. In MM11, the military conditions it's acceptance of signaling by adding that it can only work if it is applied with sufficient pressure and without pause. Problems arise when the civilian decision-makers and the military are not working from the same model, specifically when the policy fails. For the military, failure does not mean a change in the model, since they can always claim that enough was not done, that they were not allowed sufficient resources or control to achieve the objectives. The civilians, too can use this justification. When four weeks of bombing didn't work, the policy-makers did not question or change the policy but simply claimed that enough was not done, that the signal was too vague. Another four weeks should do it, then another six weeks etc...¹⁵

Working from the propositions one can also see why Westmoreland continued to ask for more and more troops and for reductions in target limits. For him, according to MM12, 12.1, 12.2 and especially MM13.1, the goal of the military is to defeat the enemy using as much resources as is necessary, no more and no less.¹⁶ To Westmoreland, requests for troops was logical and within the framework of the military model. Any failures of military actions were failures of the civilian decision makers, not the military. For the civilians, the continuing requests for troops were met with shock and dismay. They were hoping to use bombing as an alternative to troops. Yet, the bombing campaign itself required additional forces to protect the bases. The need for additional troops meant that DM7 was wrong, that signaling was not working. If US resources, aid and advisors were not achieving a stable government, were not winning the popularity of the people and were not providing stability and security than DM 7,8, 10 and 11's validity are all in question. If they are incorrect, then the model is flawed. A new model must be adopted. As Rourke teaches, the small group in crisis makes decisions in increments and avoids

¹⁵ see Averch.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

decisions whenever possible.¹⁷ Westmoreland's requests for troops were usually answered with middle of the road compromises.¹⁸ As Averch argues, models are not changed easily. The failure of signaling was not enough to change the policy of the civilian decision-makers.

Wishful thinking, as Thomson writes,¹⁹ is another reason why re-evaluation was not made. Just as decision makers clung to their assumptions, they clung to the hope that their policies would work because the alternative was too difficult to contemplate. Thomson writes about the late, 1964 decision to bomb the North. When he expressed his concerns to a fellow advisor about the wisdom of the policy he was dismissed and told that a neutralist government would take over and ask us to leave before the campaign could be implemented. When pressed about what policy would be adopted if six weeks of bombing did not bring the North to the negotiating table, the advisor responded by advocating four more weeks of bombing. Thomson describes this as "good men, misled"²⁰ by narrow thinking. After many months of bombing in 1965 and 1966, officials continued to cling to the faith that bombing would end the war because, "It simply can't go on."²¹ But it did go on and no one had alternatives and no one abandoned the basic premises from which the policy was established.

In defense of Johnson's bombing policy it should be noted that he was limited by his fear of bringing China or the Soviet Union into the war. (DM 13) He was confident that continuous limited bombing would prevent a wider war. However his alternative to the military's suggestion of unlimited heavy bombing was not working and he failed to devise a new strategy based on that failure.

¹⁷ see Rourke.

¹⁸ see Herring.

¹⁹ All references to ideas of Thomson's are from the following source:
Thomson, J. C. Jr. (1968) The Atlantic Monthly (From: Sevy, G. (Ed). (1989) The America Experience in Vietnam. A Reader. London: University of Oklahoma Press).

²⁰ *ibid.*, pg. 44

²¹ *ibid.*, pg. 44

Another reason for the continuation of the bombing policy was what Thomson calls the problem of *oversell*.²² The air raids required justification to Congress and the public. Johnson and his aides said that air raids on the North would be effective, would bring Hanoi to the negotiating table and would save American lives and allow the US to leave Vietnam. The selling of our policy in Vietnam was especially difficult since our objectives were not clear and our ally, so corrupt. In addition, Johnson had failed to rally the country around the cause of the war. As we became more heavily involved, he had to defend his policies. The sell was difficult and was a process of rhetorical escalation. When evidence showed that bombing was not going to lead to a settlement with Hanoi, the rhetoric itself became the justification. Bombing was necessary because we said it was. Personal and national reputations were now on the line. Once begun, it was politically impossible to stop.²³

A related issue is the problem of *human ego investment*. Thomson observes that men who participate in civilian decision making in the upper levels of government have a personal stake in its outcome and perhaps, more importantly, to the perception of the policy being *right* or *wrong*. Admitting that a policy was wrong or has failed takes great personal strength and courage in the executive political culture. Thomson writes about difficulty of influencing policy makers:

*“It might be have been possible to dissuade a man of strong self-confidence at an early stage of the [process of a] decision; but it is infinitely harder at later stages since a change of mind [sic] usually involves implicit or explicit repudiation of a chain of previous decisions.”*²⁴

For Averch this is due to a clinging of the model when it has failed. To admit that a policy is wrong takes an abandonment of incorrect assumptions, assumptions that are based on long-held values. For Johnson, pride and ego-investment were certainly a deterrent to a change in policy. Johnson stated that he would not be the first president to

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.* & see Herring.

²⁴ see Thomson., pg. 46

lose a war. This is not a logical reason to continue a policy. It would have taken tremendous courage to change his policy based on its failure or accept a policy of withdrawal, not only because of the real consequences to the Vietnamese, which were certainly serious, but also because of the personal cost to Johnson and his perceived place in history. While it is true that each president involved in the Vietnam crises was concerned with the costs to US credibility, it is also true that their own personal reputations and the irrational clinging to premises that were flawed also played a role in the policy they advocated.

While the DM's model was flawed and the adherence to it caused mistakes in policy, so too was the military model (MM). Not only did the model provide for the continuous excuse that not enough force was used, MM13.2, stating the war as one of attrition proved to be a major flaw in the conduct of the war.²⁵ The strategy of attrition conditions victory with the elimination of more enemy troops than can be replaced. Westmoreland, a traditionalist, believed that the US, with its superior training, technology and weaponry could easily achieve this goal. He was wrong. He underestimated the enemy's ability to replace its losses with the continuous flow of more and more men from North Vietnam and its will to continue fighting, despite the heavy losses. The failure to achieve attrition meant a continual request for more and more troops. Even when it was clear that attrition was not working Westmoreland did not abandon the proposition. He did not change his strategy. He simply claimed it had not been carried out with enough force.²⁶

In addition, MM13.5 stated that the better trained US forces (as opposed to the South Vietnamese army) would carry out the attrition strategy. This meant that US soldiers were given the goal of killing as many Vietcong as possible through search and destroy tactics, measured by body counts. When your quantitative measurement is a count of dead bodies and when civilians are often collaborating and aiding the very enemy who is trying to kill you, the result is a mentality which limits a soldiers ability to distinguish enemy from civilian and encourages mistakes at best and atrocities at worst. While much

²⁵ see Averch.

²⁶ see Herring.

has been written in argument against the fact, it seems obviously clear that attrition had a demoralizing and desensitizing affect on US soldiers in the field. When your goal is a high body count and it often doesn't matter who the body is, it affects your behavior and the necessary psychological justifications for that behavior. In addition to simply not working, attrition led many in the US and around the world to question the morality of US actions in Vietnam. This was a major issue for the anti-war movement. Again, despite the fact that attrition wasn't working in Vietnam, it was continued until 1968 when Abrams took over control of US forces in Vietnam, changing to a policy of territory control and security.²⁷

Thomson takes the critique of our military policy in Vietnam a step further. Thomson proposes that our military strategy was carried out in part because of the *bureaucratic detachment* of Washington officials and because the enemy was Asian. He calls this *cryptoracism*²⁸ and attributes it to the western notion that Asians have a different attitude toward life, a fatalism or willingness to sacrifice their lives. There were so many Asians and the North Vietnamese seemed to be able to replace them so easily and so quickly no matter how many we killed. Thomson proposes that a subliminal condition of our military policy was the belief that Asians, Asian peasants, communist Asians, especially, were different from US citizens living in the free democracy of a civilized country. While this critique may be dismissed as a radical, leftist exaggeration, history can easily illustrate that Western Anglo Saxons are not incapable of such characterizations or actions based on them. Colonization, the treatment of the Chinese in the American West, the internment of the Japanese and the mass murdering of Native Americans are but a few examples of Thomson's cryptoracism. Thomson asks, would we have had the same policy (bombing and attrition) if the Vietnamese had been white, had been more like us. It is important to face the possibility that we are capable of such evils as we engage in a war in Iraq and Afghanistan, places with cultures and religions very different from our own. The US must always be aware of the dangers of characterizing foreign civilian deaths as less important than the deaths of US soldiers and citizens.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pg. 45

²⁸ see Thomson., pg. 46

Policy-makers should remain on guard against the possibility that such subliminal characterizations can affect the policy we chose and implement.

Where the MM and DM are the same is where they cover Cold War propositions. The first five propositions of both models accept the premise that communism must be fought, that it is a zero-sum game. The domino theory is accepted. The idea of sunk cost, that once the US puts forth effort to resist communism in another country, the cost of disengaging is high, is accepted by both. These propositions were strong guiding forces behind our involvement in Vietnam from the beginning. It is the stubborn loyalty to these propositions that, more than any other kept every president from choosing or developing an exit strategy in Vietnam. The MM takes the proposition a step further by stating that fighting communism everywhere is always in America's national interest.²⁹ This was challenged by the press and the public as the war wore on year after year. In addition, US self-perception as the city on the hill, the beacon of democracy whose just cause was to fight for, spread and defend democracy everywhere was a driving force in our foreign policy.³⁰ We believed that we could prevail anywhere, even where others had not, for we were just in our cause. For Kennedy this was paramount as it was for Eisenhower, Johnson and Nixon. These propositions of the decision-making models are the strongest and most dearly held onto.

What if it could have been shown or proven that communism was not as big a threat as we thought it was, as some argued was proven by the split between China and the Soviet Union? What if Ho Chi Minh really was a true nationalist who would have accepted anyone's help and influence? What if the fall of South Vietnam could have been shown to be inevitable early in our involvement? What Averch argues is that even if any of these things could have been proven, the decision makers were so committed to the model from which they were working that they would have chosen the same path. Evidence contrary to the model's propositions was not sufficient reason for the model to be abandoned. Even when it became more and more evident that the cost of the war was

²⁹ see Averch.

³⁰ Baritz, L (1985) *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam.*, William Morrow & Co., pp. 25-30, 33-34, 37-38, 41-46. (from: (From: Sevy, G. (Ed). (1989) *The America Experience in Vietnam, A Reader.* London: University of Oklahoma Press).

beyond the goals of containment and preservation of credibility, the war continued and the price continued to be paid. The model did not account for the price of our goals being too high. Once it was accepted and once it was stated, the cold-war containment ideology was infallible. Once we said that Vietnam was a fight against communism, that is was of crucial strategical significance, that keeping it out of the hands of communist was essential to the peace and security of American citizens, no empirical evidence or change in circumstances could change the blind adherence to the doctrine and to policies justified by the doctrine. By placing Vietnam in the context of the bigger struggle against communism, policy-makers ignored the internal dynamics and complications of Vietnam, which ultimately made it extremely difficult for the US to succeed there. When the true nature of the internal struggle was realized, the policy and goals were not changed. Even as our efforts and support of corrupt governments contradicted our broader goals and became hypocritical to our rhetorical justifications for being there, the model was not changed.

The issues discussed thus far are only a few of those that can be explored when considering the flaws of the decision making process of foreign policy in the Vietnam War. Certainly they only touch on the depth of complexity of this issue. The handling of dissent is another aspect of the policy process that requires examination. With so many misconceptions, flawed assumptions and mistaken policies, were there not people within presidential administrations, advisors and experts who could foresee and warn against the actions and policies chosen? The answer is a firm, yes. Vietnam War history is filled with prophecies of events that played themselves out with remarkable accuracy. In each administration dissent existed and was voiced. With so many dissenters giving such accurate predictions, how did the Vietnam tragedy occur? Why weren't their warnings heeded and how did policy makers treat these dissenters? The obvious answer to the question is, hindsight is 20/20. While we can read statements, warning of large numbers of troops needed to defeat the insurgency and impending quagmire and the potential for stalemate at best, we cannot go back in time and force policymakers to see that these predictions were correct and should be heeded. After all, how many other predictions, warnings and suggestions have been made, dismissed and not proven correct? General McArthur wanted to use nuclear bombs on China during the Korean War. Many were

against US involvement in WWII. People warned Clinton that Bosnia could be another Vietnam. There was no shortage of dissenters against the revolutionaries waging war on England in America. It is easy to criticize policy makers who ignore dissenters, who are proven by history to be correct. Despite the inherent difficulty in such a criticism it is worthwhile to examine how dissent was handled by administrations, especially Johnson's, during the policy period involving Vietnam.

Janis attributes the lack of attention or existence of dissent to the homogeneity of American presidential administrations. The surrounding oneself of like-minded people does not encourage an adversarial climate in which discordant views are expressed with vigor. In addition small groups have a propensity to reach consensus under crisis.³¹ Thomson elaborates on Janis's theories based on his own observations. His conclusions are enlightening and serve as a warning against the ease with which people in the high echelons of political office discount the opinions, ideas and suggestions of educated men whose ideas are sound and valid.

Part of the handling of dissent is what Thomson calls the *banishment of expertise*. Upper level officials involved in high-level, sensitive issues are generally not experts on such things as Vietnamese culture and history. However, as the sensitivity of the decisions and issues is raised, the more closed the process becomes, the higher it rises in the bureaucracy and the less informed experts are as to the nature of the situation being discussed and the less informed decision-makers are of the context in which their decisions will take place. Thomson writes, "The frantic skimming of briefing papers in the back seats of limousines is no substitute of the presence of specialists".³² This is especially true when the experts or the people observing the situation in the field become pessimistic. Policy-makers need to feel that the problems are solvable, that their policies are working. They look for "can-do"³³ people who provide workable, politically acceptable solutions, not dismal pictures, no matter how realistic they are.

³¹ see Stern et al.

³² See Thomson., pg. 40

³³ *ibid.*, pg. 40

This is related to Thomson's definition of an official's *effectiveness*. Government officials are trained to be effective within the bureaucracy. To lose one's effectiveness is to endanger one's job. To the dissenter, the dilemma becomes to speak out and possibly lose the position or hold back and maintain one's position and ability to speak out later. For the dissenter it's a quagmire. He must decide when and where to fight battles, choosing at times not to fight. Subsequently, policy choices are limited. Again, Thomson phrases it astutely when he writes:

*"The inclination to remain silent or to acquiesce in the presence of great men, to live to fight another day, to give in on this issue so that you can be 'effective' on later issues, is overwhelming."*³⁴

For those who were allowed to speak and were allowed into the rooms of high-level decision-making, another method of neutralization was used. In the Johnson administration, dissenters such as George Ball were *domesticated*, as Thomson calls it. Through this method those who spoke courageously in opposition were neutralized by subtle dynamics of the group and the relationship between proponent and dissenter. The dissenter, for fear of losing his effectiveness played a role in his own domestication. As long as he stayed in the group, as opposed to resigning in protest and speaking out, he maintained the illusion that he was having an affect on policy but he was also contributing to his own neutralization. As long as he continued to speak out within the group, he pacified his own conscious. Johnson's conscious was equally pacified by hearing him out. He could then proceed with sometimes, predetermined actions, satisfied and justified that he had listened to and considered the dissenter's opinions.³⁵ However, the truth was, consciously or not, Johnson did not take the dissent seriously. For all the reasons already discussed, he could not or would not turn the aircraft carrier of his policy 180° in any direction. As Johnson continued to escalate the war, he periodically invited Ball in to speak his peace. Ball did and could rest assured that he had fought the good fight. Everyone could rest easier, knowing that they had allowed dissent a voice before making

³⁴ *ibid.*, pg. 41

³⁵ *ibid.*, pg. 40

crucial decisions. They could not be accused of keeping dissenters out of the loop. Acrimony was avoided and the policy was continued.

Averch argues that beyond the treatment of individual dissenters was the determination to cling to the established decision making model. As long as the dissenters went against the propositions of the model, or questioned the values on which the model was based, their advice would not be heeded as that would mean an abandonment of the model, an admission to being wrong and a complete restructuring and re-evaluation of policy.

Averch claims that certain shocks in succession led to an eventual abandonment of the model by some civilian decision-makers. The failure of attrition, despite high body counts, caused civilian decision-makers to question MM13 as well as DM12, which assumes the military's ability to fight guerilla wars effectively. The Tet offensive of 1968 was another shock to the models. The ability of the enemy to infiltrate the South and organize such a massive offensive caused several propositions to be brought into question. Was bombing the North decreasing the enemy's ability to infiltrate? Was the war of attrition leading to victory? The fact that Tet could occur caused a shock and questioning of both the decision-makers and the military's model of thinking. In addition, the press's coverage of Tet caused the public to react in shock and protest. The morality and justification of the war was questioned, as was our ability to achieve our objectives. The models did not include propositions that dealt with a dissenting public. That dissent played its own role in the dismemberment of the models. Even before Tet, McNamara, one of the strongest supporters of war policy, began to question the model as the cost of clinging to its propositions, DM 1-5 rose and the conduct of the war concerned him.³⁶

In March of 1968, Johnson gathered his advisors, who had up until now, been faithful to all the propositions of the model and the continuation of US policy in Vietnam. His advisors had been given a briefing of the situation in Vietnam. Johnson asked for their advice. They suggested that he cease the bombing, and vigorously seek a diplomatic, political solution, as the military one was failing. The context of this news for Johnson was the forty percent vote received by Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary.

³⁶ see Averch.

Johnson did not abandon the model. He did not re-evaluate the premises of his decisions, based on their failures. His model was in shambles. His solution was to quit. He announced his intention not to run for re-election and left the mess for the next administration. Herring suggests that this was a change in tactic for Johnson, who clung to the hope that his policies could still prevail. Johnson was suffering from tremendous emotional and physical distress after years of stubborn clinging to failing policy. He chose to leave, not to change the policy. The next president, like each before him was convinced that he could achieve success where all others had not.³⁷

While Averch's models of decision-making are intriguing and demonstrative, his prescriptions for correcting the flaws of decision-making models are problematic. His suggestions assume that policy makers are consciously aware of the models and can devote considerable time and intellectual study to the models, testing them for fallacies and correcting them. As he states, models are based on values. Values don't change based on their logic or fallacies. His most useful suggestion is that high-level decision-makers be skeptical. To be skeptical is not to be cynical or suspicious but to be open to all information, to all options and to all possible solutions. A skeptic is open to recognizing, admitting and correcting failures. A skeptic does not cling to flawed values or assumptions but works instead from empirical evidence and observable cause and effect. A skeptic can have basic human values of right and wrong, yet avoid clinging to values that lead to policies that have consequences that are in direct opposition to those values.

People speak and write about the lessons of Vietnam in many contexts. There are so many to learn; yet we still can't agree on what they are. For the policy process they are many. Foreign policy directed towards a country in crisis and turmoil should take into account the country's history, culture and needs. Experts on these subjects should always be consulted and included. The needs of the client state, as Vietnam has been referred to, should be weighed against our ability to provide those needs at a reasonable cost to ourselves and the citizens of the client. Placing the needs of one country within the overall power plays and ideological crusades of larger states places the needs of the country in

³⁷ see Herring.

jeopardy and limits our ability to achieve success in our goals there. Vietnam should not have been a pawn in the Cold War.

Individuals making policy should have the courage to make decisions based on the principles of problem solving, on evidence and expert advice, decisions devoid of considerations for personal and political consequences, especially when policy is war. The courage to do what is right, not just what is justified, expedient or possible was absent in the men making policy for Vietnam. When the lives of thousands of people are at stake, one person's place in history or political career should be inconsequential.

Perceptions as goals are not concrete goals. Flawed policy for Vietnam was often the result of considerations of perception. Our commitment would be perceived by the South as proof of our will and would boost their morale and result in action favorable to our goals. Our commitment and bombing would be perceived by the North as proof of our will and they would quit and negotiate on our terms. If we failed, if we did not act, it would have been perceived as weakness. These were the justifications for our actions in Vietnam. Lind dedicates an entire book to the notion that the perception of our strength by the world was the only just cause we ever needed to attempt victory in Vietnam.³⁸ This argument is not only absurd but also offensive. The death toll for Americans in Vietnam was 58,000. For the Vietnamese, it has been estimated as high as 2 million.³⁹ It is reprehensible to suggest that this price was worth paying if it maintained the perception of US strength. The foreign policy of the US must always be conscious of the consequences of our actions for the people who are directly affected by them as well as for its own citizens. Observable evidence, first hand experience and expertise should be the measure of the success or failure of our actions, not the assumed present or future perceptions of others.

Today, the US finds itself once again at war. Political analysts have revived discussions about the lessons of Vietnam as they critique our current administration's actions in Iraq. Comparisons are being drawn from the developing post-war Iraq situation to the

³⁸ Lind, M., (1999) Vietnam: The Necessary War. New York: The Free Press

³⁹ see Herring.

quagmire that Vietnam became.⁴⁰ Certainly the two conflicts have major differences. While our involvement in Vietnam began with only the goal of aiding and advising and slowly escalated into full-fledged war, the Iraq War was the result of a deliberate, pre-emptive strike against the government of Iraq. We do not have to worry about provoking any superpowers such as China or the Soviet Union into this conflict.

Similarities between the two do exist, especially in the policy process. Critics write about pre-war planning and Thomson's *wishful thinking*, *banishment of expertise* and handling of dissent are apparent in the current policy process. If Vietnam policy was made with DM propositions in mind, so too is Iraq policy. Instead of the fight against communism they are now about the fight against terrorism. Again, the cost of that fight is not quantified. As long as the administration can reasonably argue that terrorism is being fought, they can justify almost anything. Just as those dissenting against the fight of communism were dismissed as being weak or overly cautious, now the danger exists for the dismissal of those against the fight of terrorism on the same grounds. As the costs in human lives and civil liberties rise, so too will the dissent against our crusade against terrorism.

We also see, today the change in rhetorical justifications, as the original justifications for war are being questioned. *Weapons of mass destruction* was the phrase heard often at the beginning of the Iraq War. It was Bush's main justification to the country for his policy of pre-emptive war in Iraq. As proof of their existence eludes US forces and investigators, the evils of Sadaam Hussein's regime and the liberation of Iraq from tyranny has replaced the existence of weapons of mass destruction as the prime justification for the initial action and the continuing involvement. In addition, like the rhetoric of the Vietnam era, the rhetoric of the Iraq War itself becomes the justification for continued involvement. Bush said that we had to go into Iraq, so the action will continue to be justified. *Human ego investment* and the *problems of oversell* exist today as they did in 1968.

It is doubtful that Iraq will become another Vietnam. Hopefully, no sovereign state or nation will ever have another Vietnam War. The dangers inherent in the US foreign

⁴⁰ Rieff, D., (2003) Blueprint for a Mess How the Bush administration's prewar planners bungled postwar Iraq. printed in The New York Times Magazine. New York: New York Times

policy process still exist. Of the perceived lessons of Vietnam, the flaws in decision-making, war planning and small group dynamics should not be overlooked. Today's leaders can learn a great deal from the mistakes of yesterday's leaders. If this administration can be willing to make bold policy changes when existing ones fail, if it will be willing to admit bad policy, to consider all options, to include dissent and expertise in the process and to place the political and personal needs of its leaders secondary to what is right and necessary for the people of Iraq, then our current involvement has a chance of succeeding. If this administration, instead clings to premises and assumptions that are not true or prove to be flawed, if decision-makers use pride and perceptions as their motives, if dissent and pessimistic reports are dismissed while *wishful thinking* is employed and if the military strategy in Iraq is incapable of defeating the current insurgency and adjusting its methods to the reality of the changing situations, then the war in Iraq can easily slide into a terrible quagmire from which disengagement will be impossible.

Americans had the will to fight aggression in World War II and continued to maintain that will well into our involvement in Vietnam. Americans will not long tolerate what they consider unacceptable costs, in human lives, in the integrity of our motives and in the compromising of our own rights and the rights of others around the world. Today we have tremendous will to fight terrorism. We will maintain that will and determination unless the costs to ourselves and others, becomes too high. Once Americans have determined that the price is too high, we will abandon the premises for our crusade and insist that policy makers do the same.

Appendix

Summarized from: Averch, H. (2002) The Rhetoric of War, Language, Argument, and Policy During the Vietnam War. New York: University Press of America

The Civilian Decision-Makers' Model (DM)

A: United States Values and Interests

DM1: The Cold War is a zero-sum game. Any gain of control or influence by the communists is a loss for the United States.

DM2: Domino proposition: The probability of additional communist gains rises after even a single gain.

DM3: Other nation's desire, ability and motivation to resist communism is conditional upon US help with that resistance. If the US does not help, countries will be easier targets for communist control.

DM4: Sunk cost: Once an effort has been put forth to resist communism in another country, the cost of disengaging from the current level of action or from further action is directly proportional to the size of the current effort. This is measured by projections of domestic political difficulties and reactions by allies and adversaries to US disengagement.

DM5: If an ally is unable to contain communist aggression, the US must attempt to defeat that aggression.

B: How Insurgency Conflicts Work Politically

DM6: Successful communist insurgencies require support from a communist nation. Unless external inputs are prevented, US forces will achieve a stalemate at best.

- DM7: The enemy will recognize that increased US input of resources equals increased will and commitment to defeat the enemy. This is the premise behind signaling in a post-nuclear, limited war era.
- DM8: The competence and morale of a US ally is directly proportional to the amount of resources put into the ally's country in US attempts to help the ally defeat communism.
- DM9: Both military force and political effort are necessary to defeat insurgency, applied in some unspecified mix. Either alone cannot suffice.
- DM10: Popular support can only be won by applying first, security against terrorism, second, western-style efficiency and political democracy; third, economic and social reform, with the third being difficult to achieve and politically destabilizing.
- DM11: The behavior of an ally's government towards its people can be changed by changing its political institutions and civilian and military bureaucracies.
- DM11 Converse: But do not rock the boat in which you have elected to sail.

C: How Insurgency Conflicts Work Militarily

- DM12: The US military is capable of developing or has developed effective strategy and force structure for conducting military operations in both conventional and insurgent environments and can control the signal content of these operations.
- DM13: The effective way to achieve compliance by an adversary to US-preferred behavior is through the gradual use of military force, escalated to a point which is short of the level that might bring China or the Soviet Union into the conflict.

D: How Policy Is Made

- DM14: Incrementalism: Policy is made and changed incrementally. Changes in direction will be gradual and difficult to achieve. If decisions do not have to be made, they should not be made.

The Military Model (MM)

A: United States Values and Interests

MM1 = DM1: The Cold War is a zero-sum game. Any gain of control or influence by the communists is a loss for the United States.

MM2 = DM2: Domino proposition: The probability of additional communist gains rises after even a single gain.

Alternate MM2: Countries near communist controlled states are in particularly high danger of becoming dominated by communist aggressors.

MM3 = DM3: Other nation's desire, ability and motivation to resist communism is conditional upon US help with that resistance. If the US does not help, countries will be easier targets for communist control.

MM3.1 *corollary*: Confronting and resisting communism everywhere is within American national interests.

MM4 = DM4: Sunk cost: Once an effort has been put forth to resist communism in another country, the cost of disengaging from the current level of action or from further action is directly proportional to the size of the current effort. This is measured by projections of domestic political difficulties and reactions by allies and adversaries to US disengagement.

MM5 = DM5: If an ally is unable to contain communist aggression, the US must attempt to defeat that aggression.

B: How Insurgency Conflicts Work Politically

MM6 = DM6: Successful communist insurgencies require support from a communist nation. Unless external inputs are prevented, US forces will achieve a stalemate at best.

MM7 = DM7: The enemy will recognize that increased US input of resources equals increased will and commitment to defeat the enemy. This is the premise behind signaling in a post-nuclear, limited war era.

MM8 = DM8: The competence and morale of a US ally is directly proportional to the amount of resources put into the ally's country in US attempts to help the ally defeat communism.

MM9 = DM9: Both military force and political effort are necessary to defeat insurgency, applied in some unspecified mix. Either alone cannot suffice.

C: How Insurgency Conflicts Work Militarily

MM10: The volume of military resources applied directly to defeating or destroying an opposing force should be large enough to cover the worst possible response of the opposing force.

MM11: Using military force as a coercive signaling device only works when applied without pause and in great quantity.

MM12: If civilians decide to go to war and are informed of the possible responses by the adversary then the civilians should supply the military with enough resources to adequately respond to the worst possible response of the adversary and the military should be in charge of allocating those resources.

MM12.1 *Corollary*: Major field commanders should have a major voice in determining force levels.

MM12.2 *Corollary*: Major field commanders should always have operational control of forces.

MM13: The US military is capable of developing or has developed effective strategy and force structure for conducting military operations in both conventional and insurgent environments and can control the signal content of these operations.

MM13.1 The military's objectives is the destruction of the enemy's forces.

MM13.2 In guerrilla warfare, destruction means attrition. Attrition will adversely affect the enemy's will and ability to continue a conflict.

MM13.3 The strategic offensive should be carried out by rigorously trained troops.

MM13.4 Those forces lacking training, mobility, and firepower should be used for area control, population control, and attempts to win public support.

MM13.5 American forces will be dominant in carrying out an attrition strategy.

MM14: Air power will cut off the supply of personnel and resources from a supporting communist nation.

MM14.1 The quantity and intensity of air power is inversely proportional to the amount of casualties suffered by the US and its allied forces.

D: How Policy Is Made:

MM15: Within the constraints imposed by civilian decision-makers, military plans and operations should be ranked according to their expected military effectiveness. The most effective should be chosen without regard to how incremental they are.

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