Part 1 | The Impact of Vietnam
Lyndon Johnson and the Antiwar Opposition

Charles DeBenedetti

FOR AMERICANS, the Vietnam War was most extraordinary in that it was not so much a fight against enemies abroad as it was an internal struggle over their own national identity. Vietnam in American history meant—and still means—a struggle among Americans over the nature of their interests, their values, and the very meaning of their country and their purpose. If ethnocentric, this understanding of the war is consistent with the fact that the Vietnam question in the United States turned recurrently around three realities: first, Vietnam existed as a vital American national interest because—and as long as—Washington policy makers said that it was; second, the nature and the cost of the U.S. commitment in Vietnam were always arguable issues in the United States after 1963; and, third, the domestic debate over Vietnam embraced more a cluster of historical, geopolitical, and moral symbols than any question of America's literal survival. Americans argued about Vietnam in historical terms drawn from the meaning of Munich and Korea, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Nuremberg war-crimes trials. They argued in geopolitical terms about the meaning of dominoes, enclaves, and wars of national liberation. And most of all, they argued in moral terms over the significance of Vietnam to perceptions of American perseverance and reliability and to substantive matters of correct policy formation, the proportion between ends and means, and the proper bounds of individual conscience, democratic debate, and official accountability. For ten years, Americans waged over Vietnam a war by metaphor for the sake of symbols of meaning to themselves. They saw Vietnam as a "proving ground," a "showcase," an "experiment," and, most especially, a "test" of what the American people could and should do. They believed that the real stakes in the war centered upon the question, as Dean Rusk once put it, of "what kind of people we are."1

From beginning to end, Lyndon Johnson tried to steer the United States down what he conceived to be a middle course of involvement in Vietnam. Claiming an inherited national commitment, the president sought to maintain an anti-Communist regime in Saigon at the same time as he shunted aside demands either to carry the war beyond Vietnam or to undertake military de-escalation and early peace
negotiations. Inevitably, Johnson's course produced domestic discon­tent. On the Right, a powerful constellation of critics urged the presi­dent to unleash the U.S. military to conduct more massive bombing campaigns throughout Indochina, a blockade of North Vietnam, an invasion of the North, and, if necessary, war against China and Russia. On the Left, a less powerful but surprisingly vocal combination of critics called for decreased U.S. military involvement and a greater effort toward a negotiated peace, if not immediate U.S. withdrawal, on the grounds that the American intervention was morally unjustifiable, corrupting of American democracy, and grossly disproportionate in cost to the peoples of Indochina and to America's broader security interests. This was the antiwar opposition. Too diverse and fractious to sustain an ongoing movement, antiwar critics improvised an opposition that involved an unusually broad range of disaffected citizens on two levels of action. They made up a political force that questioned the workability and morality of U.S. policy; and they galvanized a cultural rebellion that joined dissatisfied blacks, women, students, and undifferentiated others in attacking the assumptions and priorities of Cold War life in the United States. The purpose of this paper is to review the origin, dimensions, and workings of this opposition and then to consider how Lyndon Johnson and his admin­istration tried to come to terms with it during the course of the president's struggle to vindicate the value of the U.S. intervention and to emphasize the unbreakability of his determination to prevail in Vietnam.

I

The antiwar opposition was a multilayered, many-sided phenomenon that originated in dissent against Washington's deepening involvement in Vietnam from 1962 to 1964, crystallized in protest against the initiation of the U.S. air war against North Vietnam in 1965, and proliferated with the escalation over the next four years of U.S. involvement in ground combat. Politically informed and highly articulate, this opposition began first among tiny bases of policy dissent seeded throughout American public life. One base existed among such disdissent members of the nation's policy-shaping elite as jour­nalist Walter Lippmann and Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman J. William Fulbright. European in their orientation and conservative in temperament, these elite critics believed that the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was marginal to our true security interests, subversive of improved Soviet-American relations, and needlessly pro-
vocative to China. They favored multilateral negotiations toward the neutralization of all Indochina, a more modest enunciation of claimed U.S. commitments in Asia, and a strengthened American naval presence in the Western Pacific. Fundamentally, they saw Vietnam as irrelevant to America; and they tried to change U.S. policy by winning the president to their ways by means of their words and influence.

A second base of antiwar opposition gathered across a broad range of internationalists, liberals, and pacifists who were ordinarily identified as Adlai E. Stevenson Democrats, eastern establishment Republicans, or Democratic Socialists in the style of Norman M. Thomas. Some, such as the Catholic Worker’s Dorothy Day, were religious pacifists who were committed in conscience to the ways of active nonviolence. Others, such as the editor Norman Cousins, were well-known advocates of a strengthened United Nations. Many, such as the pediatrician Benjamin M. Spock and the housewife Dagmar Wilson, were concerned citizens who had first participated through such new-fashioned organizations as SANE (National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) and Women Strike for Peace in more recent public-policy debates over a treaty to ban atmospheric nuclear tests and over the possibilities of a Soviet-American détente.2 Terrified by the Cuban missile crisis and then encouraged by the 1963 Partial Test-ban Treaty, this collection of peace liberals had rallied to support Lyndon Johnson against the anti-Communist crusade of Barry M. Goldwater in 1964 and had looked, with Johnson’s victory, toward a real improvement in cold-war tensions. Instead they got Vietnam. Outraged by the initiation of Johnson’s war against North Vietnam, this mélange of housewives, businessmen, intellectuals, clergy, and students condemned the U.S. military escalation for having diverted the country from America’s preeminent interest in eased cold-war tensions and in progress toward real disarmament. Peace liberals generally accepted the president’s claim that the United States had both a national commitment and a moral right to intervene in Vietnamese affairs. But they wanted the president to subordinate American military power to social and political attempts that would effect a reformed pluralist South Vietnam that could successfully negotiate its own peace with the Communists. Fundamentally, they saw Vietnam as a distraction from America’s larger interests in détente and disarmament; they tried to change U.S. policy by lobbying, letter writing, and demonstrating until Washington would see the rightness of their way.

A third base of antiwar opposition collected about a tiny but influential band of war resisters who looked to A. J. Muste and groups such as the War Resisters for direction in their personal commitment
to overturn the war system and to promote social justice. Steeped in an individualistic ethic of nonviolent civil disobedience, war resisters such as the Catholic priests Philip and Daniel Berrigan saw no essential moral difference between the American and the Soviet power states; they assailed great-power interventionism in the Third World for containing the necessary advance there of revolutionary social change. Convinced that the United States had no moral right to intervene in Vietnamese life, they ignored demands for negotiations and called instead for an immediate American withdrawal from Vietnam. Fundamentally, they saw Vietnam as a crime and a sin; and they tried—as political moralists who believed that means determined the ends—to change U.S. policy by inspiring a revolution in national values through nonviolent acts of resistance and through disruption that would turn people away from war and toward the pursuit of justice.³

A fourth base of antiwar opposition centered about a radical Left that gained force at the beginning of the 1960s with the spreading southern civil-rights movement, increased student dissidence, and deepening impatience with the cost at home and abroad of continuing the cold war. In large measure, this renascent Left operated organizationally through Old Left sectarian Marxist groupings such as the pro-Soviet Communist party, the pro-Peking Progressive Labor party, the Trotskyist Socialist Workers party, and their various youth affiliates. In practice, however, the rising Left was identified with more eclectic action-oriented inventions of the New Left, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society, which combined a propensity for nonviolent direct action with a commitment to free the American people from racism and corporate bureaucratization for the sake of genuine participatory democracy. Advocates of radical domestic change who supported revolutionary Third-World socialist regimes such as Castro's Cuba, these leftists naturally attacked the U.S. involvement in Vietnam as an evasion of the need for domestic change and as a typical capitalistic attack upon impoverished colored peoples in rebellion. Fundamentally, they saw Vietnam as a mirror of American life; and they tried to change U.S. policy by fomenting, through local organizing, mass demonstrations, and the politics of provocation, a social revolution that would overturn the prevailing order of power and privilege in American life and, with it, the whole of the country's policy-making structure.⁴

Finally, beyond the active bases of antiwar discontent, there existed in the United States a sizable reservoir of unorganized but popular antiwar sentiment. Throughout the war years, public-opinion
pollsters reported consistently high levels of support for peace negotiations, the one demand that was supported by the broadest range of antiwar critics. In addition, a number of other factors—including the general expectation that the war only would end in a compromise settlement anyway, contempt for America's South Vietnamese allies, and confusion over the very purposes of the war—aggravated the popular dislike for the war in ways that provided a large working space for vigorous expressions of antiwar opposition. Yet the general tolerance for dissent that was bred by popular distaste for the war never suggested popular approval of antiwar activism. On the contrary, poll data repeatedly indicated that if anything was more unpopular than the war, it was antiwar protesters. Identified in the popular mind with discontented blacks and rowdy students, antiwar protesters were viewed as troublemaking deviants who took to the streets either because they were Communist dupes or because they simply wanted to let off steam. At worst, antiwar activists succeeded in provoking otherwise passive Americans into rallying in support of the president. At best, their efforts appeared irrelevant to the job of re-forming popular attitudes toward the war.

In the light of widespread popular contempt for antiwar protesters, it seems reasonable to wonder why the opposition was never overwhelmed in a wave of popular antagonism. Certainly Lyndon Johnson wondered. Partly, it appears, the very social diffuseness of the opposition allowed it to survive the broad and abiding popular resentment that it encountered. Despite the popular stereotypes of protesting hippie youths, public-opinion analysts determined that the most remarkable feature of antiwar disaffection was the way in which it spread so evenly throughout the American political and social order, with noticeable strength only among women and blacks. This democratic character of the dissent gave it a fluidity that frustrated antiwar activists in their attempts to organize a coherent mass opposition. Yet it also frustrated prowar nationalists in their attempts to single out and crush an identifiable opposition.

In a connected way, the irrepressibility of antiwar activism arose from the fact that it seethed with a greater popular rebellion against prevailing social codes and orthodoxies that caught up diverse people in protracted struggles over questions of rights and power in matters of race, sex, age, and class. From the local to the national level, Americans during the 1960s argued bitterly over such issues as welfare rights, dormitory regulations, equal employment opportunities, and beauty pageants. Inevitably, antiwar activists became identified in the popular mind with other demonstrating deviants in a development
that both strengthened and contained the force of their dissent. "Beards are beards. Marches are marches," wrote one reporter; and both beards and marches were detested by most of the population. Yet the very popular identification and detestation of deviant antiwar activists allowed them to swim with other social dissidents in a larger sea of "pluralistic intolerance." Because popular antagonism toward all deviants was sharp but diffuse, antiwar dissidents managed to avoid any devastating concentrated attack until significant chunks of elitist sentiment had turned against the war and had thus granted them fuller legitimacy and even protection.

In practice, members of the antiwar opposition manifested their differences with the administration's policies through tactics that ranged from individual letter writing to nationally coordinated mass protests. At first their efforts were mostly educational or attention-grabbing attempts to demonstrate the existence of other ways of resolving the American predicament in Indochina. In 1965, critics wrote protest letters, gathered at teach-ins, or joined in a few mass marches that were sponsored by young radicals in the Students for a Democratic Society or by older liberals in SANE. Some critics tried to communicate their horror with U.S. war policy more graphically. At least three pacifists immolated themselves in 1965 to demonstrate symbolic unity with Vietnamese Buddhist protest suicides. A number of American intellectuals, inspired by a similar action taken by French intellectuals during the Algerian War, circulated a public letter denouncing the U.S. war effort and pledging to withhold their support from that effort. Housewives and students in the San Francisco Bay area tried, by means of nonviolent direct action, to block the movement of troop trains to the Oakland Army Terminal. Bands of radical pacifists and war resisters organized well-publicized rituals to burn draft cards.

Early in 1966 the opposition's educational impetus received a powerful boost when Senator Fulbright led the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in a nationally televised inquiry into U.S. policy in Asia that broadcast the antiescalation sentiments of elitist policy critics such as George F. Kennan and retired army General James M. Gavin. The Fulbright hearings made dissent all the more legitimate and the public questioning of U.S. war policy all the more acceptable. Shortly afterwards, a New York-based coalition of antiwar activists collected in the Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, which poured fifty thousand people into a one-day street protest against administration policy and established a pattern of seasonal antiwar rallies in different cities from New York to the Bay area.
Meanwhile, on different college campuses, local antiwar dissidents worked to convert visceral antidraft resentment into antiwar activism; and young white radicals, who were being shoved out of the civil-rights movement by the exclusionary drive of black-power nationalism, pressed forward in their attempts to adapt the spirit of the country’s spreading ghetto uprisings to American universities and to antiwar dissent. Overwhelmingly, however, antiwar opponents persisted during 1966 in the ordinary work of education, witness, and conversion. They collected protest petitions, conducted public vigils in open expression of their concerns, and tried to encourage congressional antiwar critics, mostly in the liberal wing of the Democratic party.

Early in 1967, radicals within the antiwar opposition talked of moving “from protest to resistance,” while liberals worked to preserve the opposition’s tactical nonviolence and to prepare for the 1968 presidential election. Cheered by the rise of a white hippie counterculture, which gathered in defiance of all authority, and convinced that ghetto uprisings were producing a revolutionary black guerrilla movement in the United States, radical leftists such as David Dellinger and Jerry Rubin tried to rally individual resistance to the war in disruptive antidraft actions, campus sit-ins against corporate and military recruiters, and, in October, a climactic March on the Pentagon to Confront the Warmakers. Partly theatrics and partly a cri de coeur, the confrontation at the Pentagon between some thirty-five thousand protesters and some three thousand U.S. troops and marshals featured many speeches, more confusion, and some sporadic clashes between radical adventurers and baton-wielding officials. The Pentagon was saved. But the mood of the country became more sour, and fear of greater social convulsions became more palpable.

Distressed over intensifying domestic tensions, peace liberals struggled in their attempts to organize a political challenge to the president until early December, when Minnesota’s Senator Eugene McCarthy announced his intention to contest Johnson and his war policies in the Democratic presidential primaries. Aside from some speculation as to its relationship to Robert Kennedy’s intentions, McCarthy’s candidacy made little impression upon top party planners and pundits who were involved in serious thinking about the 1968 campaign. But it lent a new dimension—and a sharper polarity—to the country’s organized antiwar opposition. While peace liberals rushed to the senator’s support, radical activists denounced McCarthy’s candidacy as a trap and a diversion from the prior need for disruptive direct action in the streets. It was time, they said, for politics of deeds, not words. Angry and divided, antiwar dissidents thus raced
into the winter of 1968 with a sense of fresh hope that was swathed
in fear and desperation. After thirty months of struggle, they had won
neither concentrated popular sentiment nor significant partisan sup-
port to their side. But they had survived; and they did stand ready
to make and exploit new opportunities of the kind that came rushing
across the country with unexpected ferocity in 1968.¹⁰

II

Lyndon Johnson and other members of his administration con-
tended with the antiwar opposition in light of their conception of the
opposition, which derived, in turn, from their conception of the war.
For all practical purposes, these conceptions were defined by the presi-
dent, who approached the matter of war and peace in accordance with
a number of axioms drawn from his Texas upbringing and from a
generation of experience in national politics. First among these ax-
ioms was Johnson's faith in the American national mission to secure
world peace through military strength and demonstrated toughness.
An intense nationalist whose pride in his country bordered on
nativism, Johnson not only believed that the United States possessed
a redemptive mission in the world but also that individual Americans
drew the literal possibility for eternal life from the blessing of their
nationality. The "'only thing'" that an ordinary person has, he once
told Bill Moyers, "'that gives him immortality other than his belief—
he may be an atheist—is his citizenship.'" When "'you say I am an
American, you’re saying I’m as immortal as this Republic.'"¹¹

Most commonly, Johnson’s vision of peace through American na-
tional success expressed itself in his reverence for America's armed
forces and in his more personal commitment to stand tough. A mar-
tial Texan who took such pride in his own military service that he
always wore the emblem of his World War II Silver Star on his suit
lapel, the president believed that American military forces represented
the real instrument of peace in his time.¹² He was an ardent propo-
nent of the need for peace through superior armed strength; and in
a reciprocal way, he had a deep fear of showing any sign of irresolu-
tion or weakness. "If there was anything that Johnson feared during
his White House residence," wrote reporter Hugh Sidey, "'it was that
the historians might say he was not a brave leader.'" He worried in-
cessantly that if he did not lead his country to victory in Vietnam,
his country would be revealed as "'a coward. An unmanly man. A man without
a spine.'" If Johnson was sure of anything, it was that he was not "'go-
ing to go down in history as the first American President who lost a war." He would never be "an appeaser President."  

In Johnson's mind, American national pride, as manifested in military strength and personal toughness, was the historically proven prerequisite for international peace. As a New Deal loyalist during the 1930s, the president believed that Washington's prewar attempts at the diplomatic appeasement of nazism had only encouraged the totalitarian aggressors, postponed the coming of World War II, and made it more costly because of the delay. He was not about to let the history of the thirties begin again in Vietnam. "The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied," he once declared; "to withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next."  

Determined to stand tough on one battlefield, Johnson insisted that the United States must fight on in Vietnam, not only to repel totalitarian aggression but also to preclude any sign of weakness that might mistakenly tempt the aggressors into further adventures, rouse a wrathful America, and set off World War III.  

A second axiom that was basic to the president's thinking on questions of war and peace involved his fear of right-wing power in American politics and his own limited faith in popular democracy. As a Texas Democrat who had observed first-hand the sweep of McCarthyism, the crazed partisan quarrel over who had "lost" China, and the subsequent rise of the Sun Belt Right of Barry Goldwater, Johnson properly appreciated the power of right-wing forces in national politics, particularly in Congress and the Republican party. He had, conversely, little respect for the political effectiveness of the American Left. In fact, Johnson insisted throughout his presidency that any American failure in Vietnam would unleash a right-wing backlash that would destroy the Left and thereby any standing hopes for domestic reform in the United States. In part, his repeated warnings of the danger of right-wing frustration was a tactic designed to undercut left-wing antiwar sentiment. In part, too, however, Johnson believed it. He believed that American democracy was vulnerable to destructive divisions that were being worked by political extremists; and he believed that rightists overwhelmingly possessed the necessary means to do the job.  

In a related way, Johnson loved democracy with an intensity that was offset only by distrust in its good sense. The president felt real compassion for social underdogs and weaker people, whether at home or abroad; nevertheless, he felt an equally powerful skepticism toward the practical implications of popular rule. Remembering his early hero, Louisiana's Democratic Senator Huey P. Long, Johnson craved the
chance to do good for the sake of the little people. But with Huey still in mind, Johnson feared that uncontrolled democratic rule would produce the kind of demagoguery that would foment mob irrationality and the worst threats to orderly constitutional democracy. Johnson preferred to let America’s sleeping democracy lie. He did not, however, want it to lie too soundly. Convinced that the American people were vacillating between ethnocentric passivity and exploitable aggressiveness, the president feared that if left to its own instincts, American democracy would revert to the kind of dangerous isolationism that had misled the dictators and had brought on World War II. At the same time he worried that if excited too much, the democracy would become inflamed by right-wing nationalists in a neo-McCarthyite crusade that would wreck the Democratic party and the American system itself. He therefore intended, once more, to steer the middle course. He intended to fight a war for peace in Vietnam that would rouse the American people from their instinct for isolationism at the same time that he was containing any demagogic right-wing attempt to rally popular blood lust against domestic enemies. There were only three requirements for success in such an effort: the war would have to be short, victorious, and undisturbed by complaints from left-wing critics. 

Johnson’s fear of the Right and his distrust of democracy combined with his established success as a legislative operator to fashion the third axiom that governed his attitude toward the antiwar opposition: the belief that what happened in public life was the result of hidden scheming, elitist manipulation, or malevolent conspirators. As a man who had grown up in a political family and who had spent most of his life in legislative wrangling, Johnson had little reason to believe that political issues sprang fully clothed from the breast of the people. Shrewd and suspicious, he rather assumed that politics was the realm of shakers and movers, who operated through fronts, agents, and dupes. Temperamentally disinclined to consider the possibility of historical accident or ambiguity, Johnson could not believe that political events and developments took place without an identifiable [if well hidden] cause. Instead, he was prone toward suspecting that conspiratorial forces commonly worked their effects in everyday life; and his own working habits reinforced this mind set. As a Senate leader who understood that knowledge was power, Johnson had a notorious appetite for information relating to politicians’ private lives, which he used to good advantage; and he carried this habit into the White House for the same purposes. Hubert Humphrey once observed that Johnson was “‘a walking FBI,’” with a preference for
more salacious and salable gossip.\footnote{16} Politics, for this president, was a highly personal, ill-regulated arena of bartering and bashing that blended naked self-interest with loyalty to the larger system. It was no place—unless inspired by craven elitist factions or Communist manipulation and direction—for the serious questioning of life-and-death matters such as the war in Vietnam.

Johnson never developed any coherent understanding of the anti-war opposition. His attitudes and approaches toward critics of the administration were rather fragmented, inconsistent, and sometimes hallucinatory; and they varied in their expression according to precisely who was issuing the criticisms and, therefore, who, according to Johnson, was really behind the attack. Within his official family the president brooked no serious opposition to policies. Johnson accepted dissenting views among his advisers during the months prior to the Americanization of the war in summer 1965. But once U.S. air power and ground troops had been committed, he steam-rolled any internal expressions of doubt or disaffection. Undersecretary of State George Ball, a policy adviser who had distinguished himself during administration policy debates by his opposition to the Americanization of the war, tried quietly to advance his “heretical views within a limited circle” at the White House.\footnote{17} But publicly he avowed his loyalty to the president’s ways by attacking antiwar critics and by insisting that ‘‘the one thing we have to do is to win this damned war.’’\footnote{18}

While Johnson demanded loyalty within his administration, he felt and acted toward other expressions of opposition in a surprisingly wide variety of ways. Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield sent stacks of memoranda that were critical of administration policy to the White House; but his criticisms were customarily cast aside because he was personally withdrawn and politically inoffensive. Oregon’s Democratic Senator Wayne Morse freely excoriated the president for his Vietnam policies. Yet Johnson treated Morse as a high-minded maverick and worked comfortably with him on other matters of mutual interest. Senator Fulbright, however, presented a special case. A former Rhodes scholar who had meshed his cosmopolitan interests with the crude provincialism of Arkansas politics, Fulbright figured in Johnson’s eyes as the lead running dog on Capitol Hill for the dissident eastern establishment elite, which was centered around Walter Lippmann, the \textit{New York Times}, and the Georgetown crowd of diplomatic professionals. According to Johnson, these eastern upper-crust dissenters were chronic complainers who looked up to Europe in awe and down on Asia with racist contempt. Fixing his anger upon
Fulbright, the president dismissed him as Senator Halfbright, the "stud duck of the opposition," and a "frustrated old woman" who gossiped with the elite while voting in the Senate for the "sweatshop and racism." Johnson professed to expect nothing better from the country's foreign-policy establishment. Justly or not, the president believed that because of its prejudices against his southern birth and his mediocre schooling, the northeastern elite would never approve of him, his presidency, or his policies. They opposed him in Vietnam because they wanted him to lose.

Sometimes Johnson's resentment toward dissenters in the northeastern elite would spread into wholesale attacks upon the communications media. More commonly, however, the president's suspicions of antiwar media critics were limited to certain columnists, such as Joseph Kraft or Mary McGrory, who were identified as being sympathetic to Johnson's real bête noire and most feared antiwar critic, Robert F. Kennedy. Sniped at after 1966 by Kennedy loyalists such as Richard Goodwin and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and always anxious over latent pro-Kennedy sentiment within the Democratic party, the president showed acute apprehension after 1966 with the softly critical views of New York's junior senator (or, as he was commonly called around the White House, "The Little Shit"); and he deeply feared that Kennedy's emergence as an antiwar candidate would fracture the party and interfere with the administration's prosecution of a successful war effort.

Johnson expected criticism from members of the country's policy-shaping elite and from ambitious figures such as Robert Kennedy. The president did not expect, however, an irrepressible rash of antiwar street protests, and he was temperamentally unprepared to cope with the anger and frustrations that boiled through various public demonstrations, especially among radical college students. He resented antiwar street demonstrations mounted by older Americans, who should have known as well as he the history lessons of the 1930s. But he was amazingly tolerant of youthful protesters, partly because he attributed their opposition to ignorance born of generational differences and partly because of simple bafflement with their behavior. "The young people that my daughters bring around are not like that," he told one friend. "I just can't believe it." On one occasion the president asked national-security adviser Walt Rostow how one generation could simultaneously yield brave fighting marines and hippie protesters, and Rostow, characteristically enough, came up with a comforting answer: "If many of the dissidents actually were in Vietnam and faced the reality of the problem, they would change."
Mostly, however, Johnson accepted youth protest as an inexplicable fact of his presidential life. When the subject came up at the family dinner table, his brother remembered, “Lyndon would wearily nod his head and look away with a baffled expression in his eyes.”

Johnson's tolerance of youth protest was all the more remarkable in view of his fundamental hatred of open and serious dissent over policy. The president abhorred the public airing of disagreements over major policies. According to Senator Frank Church, Johnson's primary objection to the 1966 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Vietnam was that they were being conducted under media klieg lights that generated wide public attention. He could not “understand why Americans who dissent can't do their dissenting in private,” where they could be brushed off with kind words and claims to having superior intelligence information. “If all these people,” the president once said in reference to congressional and clerical dissidents, “wanted to help their President they would come in here and say to me privately what they are saying to the press” and would not broadcast their criticisms “through my intelligence bulletin via Peking, or Hanoi, or Moscow.” Periodically, Johnson’s fundamental loathing and suspicion of antiwar dissent erupted into wild charges that his critics were really active instruments of Communist subversion. In the gentler versions of these harangues, the president declared that his domestic enemies went on “‘jags’ which pretty much originate in the Communist world” and then “find their way to American dissidents.” On other occasions, his attacks would degenerate into fantastic conspiratorial claims that it was “‘the Russians who are behind the whole thing.’” Soviet agents were in “‘constant touch with anti-war senators,’” he confided at one White House meeting, and “‘think up things for the senators to say.’” Wasn’t it funny, he said to another listener, that the Soviet ambassador’s car was always in front of the home of New York Times columnist James Reston “‘the night before Reston delivered a blast on Vietnam?’” Johnson always claimed that he, the FBI, and the CIA knew what was “‘really going on.’” But his claims and charges only aggravated the concern, among attentive listeners, over his grip on reality and his capacity to deal with the real strength of the dissent.

In practice, Johnson's attempts to deal with the antiwar opposition changed between 1963 and 1969 from grudging tolerance to outright attacks and then to pained acceptance. In the process, the president's reaction to the opposition careened unpredictably between his proud contention, on the one side, that domestic dissent was the price of working democracy and his dark suggestions, on the other
side, that the opposition was a Communist plot. In the beginning, the president appeared patient and generous. During 1963 the Johnson White House politely dismissed expressions of opposition that were voiced by such elitist critics as Lippmann and such peace liberals as Norman Thomas, and it ignored altogether the few scattered street protests that were mounted by radical pacifists and leftists. In August 1964, shortly after the Tonkin Gulf raids, national-security adviser McGeorge Bundy warned the president of "mutterings around the edges" that the administration was not "doing as well as we should with the very first team of businessmen, bankers, et al." Otherwise, the administration did not expect any serious expressions of domestic opposition that could not be managed with the right combination of intimidation and moderation.

Early in 1965, after the inauguration of the U.S. air war against North Vietnam, the administration continued to treat its domestic critics more as a nuisance than as a serious factor in policy. The State Department dispatched a "truth team" to different university campuses to offset the criticisms that had been generated by different antiwar teach-ins; and it lent covert support, in "a major agit-prop effort," to a prowar citizens group called the American Friends of Vietnam, which was headed by Wesley Fishel, a former CIA station chief in Saigon and now a professor at Michigan State University. The State Department paid deference to prominent antiwar critics such as Walter Lippmann and Norman Cousins; and it politely met with petitioning pacifists whom White House aides privately dismissed as "very limp young men." Altogether, the administration played its response to the domestic opposition in a very low key. Expecting quick military success in Vietnam, the White House left the management of antiwar critics in 1965 to local prowar enthusiasts, such as New York State's VFW commander, Vincent DiMattina, who tried to make a citizen's arrest of a draft-card-burning pacifist, and to Connecticut's Democratic Senator Thomas Dodd, who led the Senate Internal Security Committee in arguing that the teach-in movement was manufactured in Moscow.

The president himself stood calmly above the fray, even though he privately champed at the bit for the chance to lash back at his critics. In the White House, he systematically strong-armed congressional skeptics with the renowned "Johnson treatment," nagging and cajoling them to withhold their criticisms for the sake of a united domestic front. In meetings with the press, he declined to describe his critics as appeasers, and he expressed doubt that domestic dissent was injuring the U.S. war effort. Instead, he defended dissent as one
of the values that America was fighting for in Vietnam; and he refused to comment on charges that insofar as the opposition hinted of domestic disunity and a fatal lack of will, it falsely encouraged Hanoi to resist and thereby prolonged the war. Privately, however, the president complained that he could not act upon his deeper suspicion that the opposition was, at least, a source of false encouragement to the North Vietnamese or, at most, a Communist plot. He said at a cabinet meeting in June, 1965:

"We are confronted with a dilemma, unquestionably, that is difficult to face up to, as a result of the extremes of McCarthyism and the extremes of Goldwaterism. The people have more or less put the Communist menace on the back burner. You immediately become a dangerous character or suspect if you express strong feelings about the system and some question about the activities of Communists as a result of these other two extremes.

I don't want us to get into that dangerous position. I love this system, and I don't want us to either be addicts of some other system or tools of some other system. The thing that troubles me more about our government than nearly anything else is that they will see a line from Peking, Hanoi and Moscow about a month ahead of the time I see it there. I see it being openly espoused by so-called devotees of our system. It is almost taken in text."

Yet, for all his doubts about the sources of the opposition, the president declined at first to attack his critics more frontal, and with good reason. For one thing, he did not want to incite the Right and to jeopardize domestic gains in civil rights in building the Great Society. For another, he wanted to "be careful not to get the country on an anti-communist binge because it would tear up what we had gained" with the Soviets in arms-control negotiations and in prospects for détente. It was "hard to wage a major war against one communist group without having the public oppose all communists." As it was, the president thought it was "amazing" that the American people were so willing to fight Communists in Vietnam without clamoring for war against Communists everywhere. Finally, Johnson did not want to lead a popular crusade against an antiwar opposition that was already the object of general scorn and contempt, for fear of inflaming domestic politics beyond his own management and control. Johnson aimed to fight and win at home and abroad on his own terms. Like his personalized handling of the war, in which he refused to allow
the Joint Chiefs of Staff full rein or even to establish a central directorate for strategic planning and operations, the president refused to attack his domestic critics with the kind of unrestrained force that might escape from his direction. He intended to lose control neither of the American position in Southeast Asia nor of American politics at home.

The American people in the meantime rallied impressively to support the war effort. Yet neither their numbers nor their enthusiasm slowed the growth of the war or the spread of antiwar opposition. Instead, the many illogical claims and unanswered questions that the White House raised during the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic and that it accentuated during the winter 1966 bombing pause over North Vietnam helped to broaden the “credibility gap” that dogged the president in his attempts to quiet dissent and to fashion a united domestic front behind his policies. Persisting attacks from elitist figures such as Fulbright, demonstrated antidraft resentment on different campuses, and popular apprehensions over a great war with China only aggravated suspicions about the wisdom of Johnson’s war and prompted the president into making more aggressive attacks on antiwar critics. In March, 1966, the president lambasted his critics as “Nervous Nellies” who were turning “on their leaders, and on their country, and on our own fighting men.”

He lent support to the popular suspicion that dissenters were actually prolonging and working to help the failing Communists to “victory on a silver platter in Southeast Asia.” Then he abruptly pulled back from the attack, urging only that his critics “do their dissenting in private” and declaiming: “I am not angry; I am not even sorrowful. I sometimes think of the words, ‘God forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”

Johnson’s zigzag approach toward the antiwar opposition during 1966 reflected differences within the administration over how to deal with White House critics. Some staff aides, such as Jack Valenti, wanted more aggressive attacks upon the diverse “doves, the [Yale University historian Staughton] Lynd-liners and the [New York] Times,” whose criticisms were “all of a piece.” “Slowly,” he warned the president, “but like lava pouring over a volcano, the flow is resistless—first, one concession then another, and then another, and as we adjust to each new position, the Lynd-liners go onto the next retreat point” until Fulbright and his allies picked up “the new line” and cut deeper into the American position. Other aides, however, feared that the opposition only indicated a problem that was far broader and more dangerous: namely, antiwar disaffection among “the
relatively well-informed internationalist middle class," who had been the "strongest supporters" of every major U.S. foreign-policy initiative since 1940 and who were not convinced of the wisdom of Vietnam. Indiscriminate attacks upon antiwar critics only aggravated the suspicion and uneasiness that was being felt among all those " 'suburban families with college-age kids' " who were " 'getting to be troubled about the war' " and who certainly did not like being called traitors.

In the eyes of public-opinion pollsters, 1967 was "the year of the hawk." Popular support for a larger U.S. military effort rose so sharply that at one point during the spring, one out of four Americans favored a nuclear attack upon North Vietnam if that were what would be necessary for victory. Popular resentment toward militant expressions of antiwar protest increased proportionately. Yet neither growing popular support for the war nor hostility toward its opponents cleared the way for Washington's success in Vietnam. On the contrary, for the Johnson administration, 1967 was the year of greatest challenge, with rampant domestic disorders, especially in the country's black ghettos, rising to new levels of destructiveness at the same time as some of the president's key policy advisers were coming to the conclusion that the United States might be tied down for another five to ten years of war in Vietnam. With domestic turmoil spreading and with the war mounting in cost with no end in sight, the Johnson administration decided to persist in its prevailing war strategy in Indochina at the same time as it was opening a broader attack upon its domestic critics while trying to contain any right-wing onslaught that would only aggravate the country's racial and political crises and complicate Washington's plans for protracted war. It was a high-risk strategy; but it was the only one that Johnson saw available to him if he were to win at home and abroad.

During the first half of the year the president continued his zigzag approach to the opposition, righteously affirming the importance of "responsible" democratic dissent at the same time as he was blasting his critics for encouraging the Communists and for undercutting the GIs in Vietnam. Even as he zigzagged, however, Johnson shifted his approach in a more repressive direction. In April, shortly after Martin Luther King had declared both his final break with Johnson and his plans to connect the civil-rights movement and the antiwar opposition, a White House aide declared that King "has thrown in with the commies" and insisted that "the Communist origins of this operation must be exposed, the leaders discredited and the flag-burners and draft-card burners jailed." Shortly after receiving a presidential summons to Washington, General William C. Westmoreland declared at
a press conference that the enemy was on the verge of defeat in the field and that it took hope of ultimate success only because of the carping of antiwar critics. White House aide Robert Kintner received Johnson's encouragement in asking Attorney General W. Ramsey Clark to prepare a report "that would show that there was common planning throughout the United States of public demonstrations, riots in colleges," and related disorders, a report that might be shared with friendly media allies such as the Washington Post's Benjamin C. Bradlee.44

During the second half of 1967 the administration launched its most serious attempt to subvert its domestic opposition and to rally popular sentiment behind its policies. The White House offensive advanced along several salients on two fronts. On the positive side, administration officials put together an interagency White House Vietnam Information Group, for the purpose of developing more favorable news coverage of the war. With the help of former Illinois Senator Paul H. Douglas, they also invented the prestigious Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam, which boasted former presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman as cochairmen and which purported to speak for the "silent center" of prowar American opinion.45 General Westmoreland returned once more under White House orders to tour the country, with hints that a victorious end to the war was within sight. And the president pressed his supporters to the attack on their critics. Gripped in the "sheer battering of emotions" in a White House that was nearly possessed by "a feeling of being under siege," Johnson told his cabinet that "it is time that this Administration stopped sitting back and taking it from the Vietnam critics." "Every day," he complained, "Senators attack us and return to the attack encouraged by our silence," while "professional agitators in our own party" were trying to wreck the party and others were spending "huge sums to set Labor against us . . . [and] set up Martin Luther King."46 "We have got a psychological war as well as a military war on our hands," the president declared, "'and the Communists are winning the psychological war with our help.'"47 All that was going to change.

On the negative front, the administration also moved more aggressively to discredit and disrupt the opposition. In August, two years after the FBI had first started to compile derogatory dossiers on different antiwar dissidents, the president instructed the director of the CIA, Richard Helms, to begin monitoring the opposition in a program of surveillance (and, later, disruption) that would become institutionalized shortly thereafter as Operation CHAOS. Although the agency
failed to document Johnson’s belief in the subversive sources of the opposition, the president privately advised a group of congressmen that a secret CIA report demonstrated irrefutably that the opposition was Communist controlled. Led by House minority leader Gerald R. Ford, the congressmen publicly urged the president to publish the CIA report. But the administration declined to release the document, and it dodged questions as to whether it really believed that the opposition was Communist manufactured. In the White House, however, the president made no secret of his suspicions of the hidden sources of increasingly disruptive antiwar activism. ‘I’m not going to let the Communists take this government and they’re doing it right now,’ he said to his foreign-policy advisers in early November, 1967. ‘I told the Attorney General that I am not going to let 200,000 of these people ruin everything for the 200 million Americans. I’ve got my belly full of seeing these people put on a Communist plane and shipped all over this country. I want someone to carefully look at who leaves this country, where they go, and why they are going, and if they’re going to Hanoi, how are we going to keep them from getting back into this country.’ Shortly thereafter, the Justice Department indicted Dr. Benjamin Spock and four other prominent protesters on charges of conspiring to counsel and abet the defiance of draft laws.

Convinced that “the principal battleground is in domestic opinion,” the president called together a number of eastern elitist figures, known as the Wise Men, who had first met in July, 1965, in order to counsel him on the effectiveness of U.S. war policy and on ways of rallying stronger popular support. A few, such as Robert D. Murphy, declared that the country really needed “a hate complex directed at Ho Chi Minh similar to Hitler.” Former Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson proposed a nationwide network of prowar committees. Although unable to agree on a common strategy for rallying domestic support, the assembled advisers did agree that “one of the few things that helps us right now is public distaste for the violent doves.” They also agreed that “the most serious single cause of domestic disquiet about the war” was in “the prospect of endless inconclusive fighting,” which continued to be the core of prevailing administration strategy and Washington’s only current hope of success. Unsure about how to rally popular support to a two-year-old policy of frustration, the Wise Men suggested that the president undertake two concurrent strategies. In the short run, they proposed that the administration seize the public-relations offensive by emphasizing U.S. military progress and the “light at the end of the tunnel” instead of the battles, deaths and danger.” For the long haul, they suggested that “the only effec-
tive way of changing public attitudes at home" was "a redirection of strategy and emphasis" in the war, which would "make it plain that we are over the hump" in Vietnam and would "establish a pattern of gradually decreasing cost that would be endurable for the Five or Ten Years in the long pull." Paradoxically, the Wise Men endorsed the prevailing administration war strategy; but they did not know how to win the domestic struggle over that strategy except by radically altering it.

With the Wise Men's support, the president pressed the administration's counteroffensive throughout the winter of 1967/68, making the case for U.S. military progress while blasting antiwar critics for their "storm trooper tactics" and for their craven willingness to "surrender." Public support for the president's position shot up impressively. Then, starting in late January, a triphammer series of incredible shocks—including the North Korean seizure of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo and the Communist Tet offensive in Vietnam—set off rocket fires of domestic anger and confusion. While U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were fighting hard to deal the Communists a costly military defeat, the political and psychological shocks of Tet, combined with the Pueblo humiliation, a gathering international economic crisis, the need for a tax increase to pay for the war without increasing inflation, the country's ongoing racial strife, and the onrush of presidential-year politics, had a shattering effect among both elitist policy shapers and the voting electorate. Early in March a rush of anti-administration resentment in New Hampshire handed Senator McCarthy 42 percent of the Democratic primary vote and a striking moral victory. Four days later, New York Senator Robert Kennedy, whom Johnson most feared as his rival on the antiwar Left, announced his entrance into the Democratic presidential sweepstakes. Along with the country's other major presidential candidates, both McCarthy and Kennedy disavowed the idea of unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. But for the first time in three years of war, two major political figures presented themselves as advocates of military de-escalation and of a more aggressive attempt at a negotiated peace. They made the opposition into an electable commodity.

In Washington the president reacted to the crush of wintertime shocks with an anger that was compounded by initial uncertainty over the scope and meaning of the disastrous turn of events. At first, Johnson feared that Tet and the seizure of the Pueblo indicated the start of a world-wide Communist offensive. As these fears slowly dissipated, however, he made clear his determination to stand tough for the sake of success in Vietnam; and he launched expanded attacks
upon his critics. While Secretary of State Dean Rusk scolded reporters by saying that "there gets to be a point when the question is whose side are you on," the president ripped away at "croakers and doubters" and warned that "a lot of people are really ready to surrender without knowing that they are following a party line." Public sentiment hardly indicated that. According to pollsters, public opinion at first reacted to the Tet offensive with a belligerent eagerness for fuller military action. Then it settled into a resigned mood of malleability, waiting for presidential management and direction.

In practical terms, the administration's attention during the waning days of the Tet offensive came to center on General Westmoreland's request for another 206,000 GIs for Vietnam. Confronted with a planned escalation of such magnitude, incoming Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford ordered an exhaustive review of U.S. policy and strategy. When the Pentagon could not convince him of the need for further escalation, Clifford and like-minded figures within the administration conducted an extended campaign to win the president over in opposition to the military request and in favor of some kind of unilateral bombing halt that might draw the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. To give fullest strength to his campaign, Clifford recalled the Wise Men to review the new situation. Pressed by the turn of events in the war, the suspension of public confidence, the need for a tax increase, and worries over the U.S. and international economies, the Wise Men, after prolonged deliberations, advised Johnson to place limits upon U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and to attempt a bombing halt in the hopes of opening negotiations and of bringing popular disaffection into more manageable proportions. "Unless we do something quick," declared Cyrus R. Vance, "the mood in this country may lead us to withdrawal." Johnson was so shocked by their advice that he first insisted that they had been misled by State Department briefers. Then he caved in to the collective wisdom. On March 31 the president announced that he was establishing a ceiling on the U.S. troop commitment while preparing the South Vietnamese to take over their own defense and that he was ordering a halt in bombing over most of North Vietnam in hopes of bringing Hanoi to the conference table. He also announced that he would refuse to seek his party's presidential renomination in the hope that his withdrawal from office might bring an end to the country's domestic divisions.

The president's address on March 31 brought the dreams of the antiwar opposition for a major change in policy as close to reality as they had been in three years. Yet, even as the North Vietnamese were
responding positively to Johnson's initiative, American life was shuddering through additional spasms of violent dislocation and disorder that shoved Vietnam to the background of national concerns. In early April, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in an attack that triggered massive uprisings in the ghetto. Two months later, Robert Kennedy was shot to death—a murder that also cut down the McCarthy campaign. Reeling under the impact of these tragic events, peace liberals stumbled into the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August, where they became caught up with antiwar radicals in riotous clashes with city police and state authorities. The conflict in Chicago proved to be the climax of a year that was marked by rising hopes and larger failures. Early in November, President Johnson announced a complete halt in bombing over North Vietnam and, a few days later, the commencement of four-sided peace talks in Paris in January. Shortly after Johnson's announcement, Richard M. Nixon squeaked through to a presidential victory on the strength of a narrow popular vote and upon the promise of ending the war in Vietnam. By the end of the year, leading figures within the country's antiwar opposition hobbled toward the sidelines of American life in a spirit that was both discouraged and cautiously hopeful. The war was far from over; yet their principal demands had either been effected or had been set in motion: the bombing of North Vietnam had been halted; formal peace negotiations were about to begin; and U.S. military de-escalation and disengagement had commenced. At the same time, Lyndon Johnson prepared to leave the White House feeling both dispirited and determinedly optimistic. Doggedly, Johnson reiterated his abiding opposition to a Communist success in Vietnam. Indeed, he declared, in his very last public pronouncement upon leaving Washington in January, 1969, that "an honorable peace is possible if we here at home remain steady."

In the end, strangely enough, Lyndon Johnson had both lost and won. He had lost the presidency to the worsening domestic divisions that had been caused by his commitment to an escalating American involvement in a war of attrition on mainland Asia. But he had won out in his determination to stand by the presidential commitment to the maintenance of an anti-Communist regime in South Vietnam. When he left the White House, major violence continued to tear across Indochina, and Richard Nixon came to power with every intention of salvaging the executive commitment in Saigon. Yet the antiwar opposition stood quiescent and confused, while many critics started, for the first time, seriously to confront—as Johnson always warned that they must do eventually—the full logic of their position. They
began to realize that their earlier demand for negotiations begged the question of what was to be negotiated. Slowly they came to the conclusion that the fundamental point of the negotiations was America's earliest possible—if not immediate—withdrawal from Vietnam. But that meant a naked acknowledgment of failure; and it took the opposition another eighteen months to accept the enormity of that realization and to act from it.

III

In history books, the debate over the relationship between the Johnson administration and the antiwar opposition began early in the 1970s, long before the end of U.S. intervention. Inevitably, the early onset of this debate tended to obscure the fact that both the nature of the U.S. war effort and of the antiwar opposition were changing, even as both were continuing to course through the Nixon-Ford presidencies. Basically, however, the lines of historiographical debate had been set down even before Lyndon Johnson's death in January, 1973; they tended to crystallize, predictably enough, around arguments as to whether the opposition had been a benign or a malignant force in recent American history.

For the makers and executors of U.S. policy, the opposition was plainly a most damaging development. According to the memoirs of Johnson and his associates, the antiwar opposition subverted national morale and self-confidence, hindered the proper application of American power, and encouraged the Communists to hold out for a collapse on the American home front that would allow them to gain the kind of victory that U.S. fighting forces had denied them on the battlefield. Antiwar dissidents had helped to deliver "a self-inflicted wound" upon America on its way toward victory, declared General Maxwell D. Taylor. "Every war critic capable of producing a headline contributed, in proportion to his eminence, some comfort if not aid to the enemy." Lyndon Johnson ventured that "there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that this dissension prolonged the war, prevented a peaceful settlement on reasonable terms, encouraged our enemies, disheartened our friends, and weakened us as a nation." Even the vaunted White House dove George Ball had little use for open expressions of antiwar opposition. How could anyone "publicly attack the war without giving aid and comfort to the enemy?" he asked in his autobiography. For his part, he was "repelled by the hysteria and crudity" of antiwar activists and "disgusted" by the protests of "fatuous intellectuals" and "muddle-headed instructors."
Writing with a sense of even sharper moral urgency, other proad-
ministration partisans have assailed the antiwar opposition for hav-
ing eroded America's moral fiber and the country's necessary self-
confidence in the rightful deployment of its global power. Centering
their resentment on American liberals, engaged intellectuals such as
Norman Podhoretz and Robert Scalapino have attacked the naîveté
and cynicism that allowed so many Americans "to side with the
enemy with complete impunity" in a war that was fundamentally
right for the United States. Podhoretz, especially, criticizes the
Johnson White House for having allowed antiwar dissidents to
dominate "the moral field" and for failing, because of its desire to
fight the war on "the political cheap," to make the moral cause that
might have neutralized or overcome the arguments of the antiwar
movement. Some former antiwar activists have joined in these at-
tacks. The sociologist Peter Berger, an early leader of Clergy and Laity
Concerned about Vietnam, has condemned "the hatred of America"
that he has decided was "intrinsic" to the opposition and that con-
tributed to "a widespread malaise" about America and "a broad-scale
attack on the whole of American power." The antiwar opposition
causé America, in the minds of these moralists, to lose its way; and
its work and legacy would best be purged through "a reaffirmation
of American patriotism" and reinvested faith in the moral superiori-
ty of American power.

From another direction, a number of writers view the antiwar op-
position as a positive force in recent history that helped to allow the
future of Vietnam to be determined among the Vietnamese and that
worked in America to set limits "to what governments can do and
to what men must bear." Many of the defenders of the antiwar op-
position were formerly active in its operation; most lend it value ac-
cording to their particular political perspective. Antiwar socialists such
as James O'Brien and Fred Halstead, for instance, have applauded the
opposition as an exercise in political radicalization and popular em-
powerment. Populists such as Paul Joseph similarly value the opposi-
tion as a democratic exhibition of the fact that "people do make
history." The radical pacifist David Dellinger sees the opposition
as an example of what ordinary people can do through the force of
conscience and mass civil disobedience. The liberal Peter Marin
praises the opposition for having injected moral vigor into a society
that was all too accustomed to acquiescence bred out of conformity.
Antiwar activism helped to make the 1960s, wrote Marin, "a decade
of genuine moral heroism, serious moral speech," and intense inner
debates over "the most serious questions human beings can face, those
pertaining to obedience and rebellion, others' lives and deaths, the pull of conflicting allegiances, and the nature and cost of moral life. It helped to cleanse a country that felt dirty without knowing why.

Strangely, however, defenders of the antiwar opposition are not as confident as its critics are in characterizing it as a success. Some sympathizers think that the opposition, by its very nature as a moral-intellectual protest, were "condemned to powerlessness." "The dissenters really did not have a chance," thinks Leslie Gelb. "Given the force of consensus in American history and the politics of foreign policy, they were bound to be losers." Most defenders of the opposition, however, contend that it was "a partial success" in the way that it aggravated popular war-weariness, challenged the ruling mystique of anticommunism, opened the way for emerging elitist dissenters, and served to constrain Washington's interest in intensifying or expanding the war. The opposition did not stop the war, writes Thomas Powers; but it did create "the necessary conditions" that moved the Johnson administration "to recognize the failure" of its war policies and to cast about for other means of dealing with Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson won the war at home over the question of whether to continue the U.S. struggle in Vietnam. As a result of the force of the antiwar opposition, however, he failed to establish in the war a cause that would justify its escalating cost in Vietnam or America.

In the quarrel over the role of antiwar activism during the Johnson years, both critics and defenders of the antiwar opposition look with special interest on the role of the news media in shaping attitudes toward the war and on the dissidents. According to proadministration partisans, the media, both for institutional and for ideological reasons, played a decisive role in magnifying the opposition and in turning popular opinion against the U.S. war effort. In the best documented expression of these suspicions, Peter Braestrup has argued that for several reasons, American journalists mistakenly portrayed the Communist military disaster at Tet as a defeat for the United States and consequently changed the very "‘climate' of public debate" in favor of elitist antiwar dissidents. Braestrup concedes that no hard evidence exists that might connect the media misconstruction of Tet with increasing popular antiwar sentiment. But he contends that "unmistakable reflections" of the negative media coverage cast a shadow upon the elitist policy debate in favor of antiwar critics and precipitated Johnson's decision to restrict the U.S. commitment.

Almost reciprocally, writers who are sympathetic to the antiwar opposition complain that the media distorted the nature of citizen dissent. Daniel C. Hallin has demonstrated how television network...
news consistently misportrayed the country's complex antiwar opposition as a deviant social force. In a provocative study of the interrelationship between the media and of the rise and fall of the SDS, former SDS leader Todd Gitlin has detailed how the media used different "framing devices" to portray radical antiwar activists as politically marginal, numerically trivial, torn by internal dissension, and provocative of right-wing extremism. The SDS grew significantly under the glow of media attention. Its members, however, preferred communication through media to strong internal organization; as the war continued and as the media kept demanding newer and more outrageous expressions of protest, SDS activists rushed through internal arguments toward ever-more-militant tactics that substituted the cult of the deed for the organization of a movement for change. The SDS came to life under the lights of media attention, and it died in the same way.

From all indications, the issue of media influences will long affect any attempts to assay the significance of the antiwar opposition during the United States-Vietnamese War. Yet, in the end, any considered assessment of the role of the opposition rests upon the way in which we address two interconnected questions: Was it the war or a Communist success that posed the greater danger to Vietnamese life? and Was it the war or the dissent that posed the greater danger to life and democracy in the United States? However these questions are answered, they must be considered once more in the light of the essentially symbolic place of Vietnam in recent American life and politics. Vietnam was a real place, with real people, real problems, and real importance. But in American eyes it was essentially a bloody backdrop against which people argued about American interests, identity, and purposes. An antiwar opposition formed and functioned in the United States because the United States-Vietnamese War provoked among Americans a struggle over the values and ends of their country. "The war was never worth fighting for Vietnam alone," Theodore Draper has written, "it always had to be subsidiary to a larger purpose." For Americans that purpose was the meaning of their own country. And that is why they fought—and continue to fight—over the matter of Vietnam: so that they might recover from it some worth for America.

Notes


20. Robert Sherrill, *The Accidental President* [New York: Grossman, 1967], p. 12. "Johnson's paranoia used to get on my nerves," remembered presidential aid John Roche. "There was not a sparrow fell from a tree but what he was convinced that was the intervention of a Kennedy. . . . The trouble is, he was right on a number of cases, and I was wrong" (John Roche, oral history interview, tape 1, p. 60, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library—cited hereafter as LBJL).


22. Walt Rostow to the President, July 13, 1968, White House central files, country file: Vietnam, box 233, LBJL.


24. Frank Church oral history interview, p. 27, LBJL.


29. McGeorge Bundy, memorandum for the President, Aug. 24, 1964, National Security file, aides files, McGeorge Bundy, memoranda for the President, box 1, LBJL.


31. Donald Rapa and Chester Cooper memorandum to Mr. Bundy, Aug. 9, 1965, ibid.


35. Memorandum for the record, p. 4, meeting notes file, box 2, folder: Feb. 2, 1968, meeting with China experts, LBJL.


37. Ibid., p. 684.

38. Ibid., p. 693.


43. John Roche memorandum for the President, Apr. 5, 1967, confidential file, name file, box 5, folder: Ki; and Roche, memorandum for the President, Apr. 18, 1967, aides files, Marvin Watson, box 19, LBJL.

44. Robert E. Kintner memorandum for the Attorney General, May 19, 1967, confidential file, HU 4, box 57, LBJL.

45. Paul Douglas to John Roche, Aug. 21, 1967, confidential file, country file: Vietnam, box 72, LBJL.


48. Charles DeBenedetti, "A CIA Analysis of the Anti-War Movement:

49. Jim Jones notes of luncheon meeting with Rusk et al., Meeting notes file, box 2, folder: Nov. 4, 1967, LBJL.


53. Ibid., p. 4.

54. Jim Jones notes of meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Nov. 2, 1967, p. 3.


