

Melvin Small

Public Opinion on Foreign Policy: The View from the Johnson and Nixon White Houses¹

Som en første fase i en undersøgelse af, hvilken indflydelse protestbevægelserne mod krigen i Vietnam havde på præsidenterne Lyndon Johnson og Richard Nixon, drøfter artiklen, hvorledes de to præsidenter og deres nærmeste rådgivere forholdt sig til opinionen i udenrigspolitiske spørgsmål. Det vises, at de fremherskende opfattelser i den akademiske litteratur om opinionens rolle i den udenrigspolitiske beslutningsproces ikke er dækkende. Artiklen, der blandt andet bygger på interviews med centralt placerede præsidentielle rådgivere, konkluderer, at præsidenterne ikke formede deres opfattelse af opinionen på grundlag af eksplicitte forestillinger om påvirkningskanaler og repræsentativitet eller systematisk indsamlede data, men på grundlag af tilfældige informationer og intuitive vurderinger.

Working on a study of the impact of the American antiwar movement on Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, I found it first necessary to determine how both presidents and their inner circles dealt with public opinion on international issues in general. This is a complex question, which, as we shall see, cannot be answered through recourse to any of the many academic models of the way opinion *should* affect the president.² Perhaps it can never be answered satisfactorily since it means getting inside the heads of the main players in the White House drama to discover their perceptions and assumptions. Yet the question is too important to ignore. It is central to understanding how individual citizens and organized groups, the media, the bureaucracy, and Congress influence foreign policy decision making through their perceived expressions of public opinion.

How does the president use public opinion polls? How is presidential mail evaluated? What newspapers and journalists are important under what circumstances? How do the policy preferences of friends and family affect opinion analysis? The answers to such questions may be different for each president and even for different periods during individual presidencies. Nevertheless, in examining what Johnson and Nixon considered as public opinion on foreign policy, we may be able to generalize about the issue for recent American history.

A Complicated Problem

In his pathbreaking monograph published in 1961, James N. Rosenau suggested factors that one must examine in order to determine how public opinion and foreign policy interact in the United States.³ Because of the complexity of the problem, he found it necessary to present three strata of the public, sixteen kinds of opinion makers, and ten channels of communication that he felt could some day become the components of a formal model.

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several decades, despite the considerable scholarly attention paid to his problem. Our lack of progress may be attributable to the challenging nature of the issue. Indeed, when I was turned down for several grants to support my project on the antiwar movement, evaluators noted that while I had posed a significant problem, they thought it was impossible for me to solve it. I could understand, if not approve of, their caution.

Historians, especially, are rightfully leery of examining any issue before the archives are open and before time has past to allow one to gain perspective. In the case of Johnson who left the presidency over fifteen years ago, although a good deal of material is available in his presidential library in Austin, Texas, much in the foreign area remains classified. As for Nixon, who resigned over a decade ago, few written documents or tapes have been released to the public, in part because of the former president's continuing series of lawsuits. It is true that most of the main actors, including both presidents, have written their memoirs, but these are no substitute for the paper trail left within the modern executive bureaucracy.

George Reedy, one of Johnson's press secretaries, is even suspicious of the value of that paper trail. In the first place, he emphasizes the complex nature of the mind of Lyndon Johnson, so complex that he doubted whether the president himself knew why he was behaving the way he did. Moreover, the memos available in the Johnson Library offer little indication of their impact on the president since he rarely responded to them. According to Reedy, one could only be certain that a comment was noted when it appeared in a sentence or two in one of the president's speeches or press conferences.⁴ Of course, Johnson was always careful to initial everything that he read.⁵

One advantage of studying something so recent as the United States during the nineteen sixties is the availability of sources for interviews. In fact, the major difficulty interviewing people in 1984 is not only that some key figures have died, but that the memories of the living are already beginning to fade. Thus, the more specific questions – did X say such and such at the July 21, 1965 meeting? – cannot always be answered through the interview process. It is interesting to note that most of the major presidential archives now try to complete their oral histories within a few years after the end of the administration.

The recency of the subject to be analyzed is only part of the problem. Suppose, for example, the subject was the isolationists' impact on Franklin Roosevelt in 1940 rather than the antiwar movement's impact on Richard Nixon in 1970? Most likely, historians and political scientists would still maintain that the assessment of impact or influence, though important, is ultimately impossible, even with the mountains of documentation available for 1940.

One reason for this pessimism relates to the reluctance of decision makers to explain their foreign policies in terms of public pressures, unless they are looking for scapegoats. Whether one examines the documentation behind decisions to go to war, to increase troop levels, or to begin or stop bombing, the emphasis publicly is upon strategic concerns and the president's concept of national security. Clark Clifford, for one, who was called in by President Johnson to reassess the Vietnam policy in early 1968, claims that he rarely factored opinion into his deliberations – he was concerned with military questions.⁶ Similarly, the reports of

national security advisors McGeorge Bundy and Walt W. Rostow during the Vietnam War rarely included discussions of public opinion.

When I asked Rostow whether my impression was correct that he, even more than his predecessor, rarely wrote about opinion when discussing options in Vietnam, he agreed and asserted that he did not feel that it was his task to concern himself unduly with opinion when he was charged with analyzing national security affairs. On the other hand, both McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk emphasize the importance of opinion to them. Bundy remembers many long conversations with President Johnson about opinion, especially during the first part of 1965. Rusk explains that foreign policy makers are like airline pilots, checking a variety of factors before take-off, with opinion always an important factor.⁷ Yet a careful analysis of their formal memoranda and policy papers suggests that in print, at least, opinion was a negligible factor in most cases.

In their public statements, members of the executive branch, including the president, often talk about support as shown in opinion polls and how their adversaries should know that the American people stand behind their president. In private, it appears that to admit discussing or even to discuss the impact of public opinion on a foreign policy would be to abnegate their sworn responsibility to maintain national security, insulated from the vagaries of uninformed and emotional currents of opinion. It seems indecorous for presidents to raise the issue of the public, and thus politics and elections, when it comes to considering life and death questions in which only they and their aides allegedly have the information and expertise to make an informed judgement. They would agree with Edmund Burke who told his constituents that

"I know you chose me, in my place, along with others, to be a pillar of state, and not a weathercock on the top of the edifice, exalted for my levity and versatility and of no use but to indicate the shiftings of every fashionable gale."⁸

Such noble sentiments may be related to the fact that in the United States, at least, elections have rarely involved foreign policy issues.⁹ Whether one considers the so-called League of Nations election of 1920 or the "mad bomber" election of 1964, foreign policy issues in presidential elections have turned out to be only marginally important. An excellent example in the period in question is the 1968 contest. Although the Vietnam War was obviously a dominant public issue that fall, most voters were unable to exercise either hawkish or dovish options when they came to choose between Nixon and Humphrey.¹⁰

It is possible, of course, that the public is always there in the minds of the decision makers as the ultimate determiner of the boundaries within which they must operate. Since they have internalized the conception of what the public will bear, there is no need to discuss it. For example, when occasionally toying with the idea of a tactical nuclear threat to North Vietnam, it was unnecessary for the inner decision making circle to mention the probable public shock at such a demarche.

This argument weakens when we look at the historical record. The parameters

for action allegedly established by the public can be shifted over time through the impact of events as well as "educational" campaigns led by the president. In 1943, the thought of stationing American troops permanently in postwar Europe seemed preposterous. The boys would have to come home post haste at war's end. Faced with the onrushing Cold War, the American public accepted this unprecedented policy only three years after Roosevelt had conveyed to Stalin the strongly isolationist preferences of his constituents.

It is true that presidents have occasionally explained a major policy in terms of public pressure. Most famous may have been William McKinley's decision to retain the Philippines, at decision he attributed to divine guidance and strong popular sentiment he discovered on a speaking tour. As with other tributes to the power of the people, historians have taken this one with a grain of salt as they pointed to the strategic and economic considerations that went into McKinley's decision to make the United States a colonial power.

More generally, the identification of motives for any individual act is always a tricky business. Officials, as well as ordinary people, are not always able to explain with confidence why they behaved in a certain manner. The problem is compounded by leaders who often try to justify their programs in memoirs written many years after the events. The slippery nature of the evidence for motivation available on paper strengthens the argument for the efficacy of working in this area even before all the documents have been released.

There are mitigating factors that make the search for the impact of opinion on the decision makers somewhat easier in the cases of Johnson and Nixon. Above all, the number of participants in the making of foreign policy was quite small. Both men, especially on international issues, relied on only a few advisers who met in intimate settings where, alas, few notes were taken, although Nixon's tape recorders were rolling constantly.

By 1966, Johnson had come virtually to ignore the National Security Council, which, ironically, had been established because the Cabinet was too unwieldy a body for foreign policy deliberations. Instead, the president relied upon the Tuesday Lunch group that usually included, in addition to the president, the secretaries of state and defense, the director of the CIA, the chair of the joint chiefs, the president's assistant for national security affairs, and the press secretary. Despite its semi-institutionalized status, the Tuesday Lunch was more informal than it seemed because few notes or minutes were taken.¹¹

A comparable, even less formal arrangement obtained under the Nixon administration with the president, his national security adviser, and sometimes the chief of the White House staff discussing most of the major policy initiatives in the intimacy of the Oval Office. Most likely, there were even fewer meetings on foreign policy matters under Nixon than under Johnson, in which the president was directly involved. Presidential counselor Bryce Harlow paints a picture of a president spending inordinate amounts of time by himself, away from the White House in the Executive Office Building, where, alone, surrounded by briefing papers, he contemplated the hard decisions. Nixon speechwriter and adviser Ray Price reports similarly that his boss preferred memos to meetings with individuals.¹²

One reason for this centralization had to do with the greater efficiency of small groups. No less important, however, was the fact that both presidents, like many before and after them, were obsessed with the leaks that poured out of the larger Cabinet and National Security Council sessions. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William Bundy feels that once a group becomes larger than thirty, it is impossible to keep a secret in Washington. Dean Rusk was delighted with the Tuesday Lunch arrangement because the handful of participants could debate openly without fear of finding their often frank statements in the media the next day.¹³

Undoubtedly, the more people involved in the decision making, the more likely the leaks, especially from members of the competing foreign policy bureaucracies trying to protect their turfs and reputations. In both administrations, the presidents were troubled by the inordinate amount of time spent by officials in the departments of state and defense, as well as by the national security council staff, bad mouthing one another to the Washington press.¹⁴

The fewer the chief advisers of the president and the more narrow the decision-making settings, the easier the task for the scholar. Although the bureaucracies continued to turn out long memoranda at all levels that were dutifully shuffled up a few levels, and the deputy and assistant secretaries held constant coordinating meetings, much of this activity had little bearing on what went on inside Johnson and Nixon's tight little groups. Of course, the secretaries of state and defense, for example, might have been exposed to some of these materials and they ultimately influenced the president. Nonetheless, the historian of this era should be wary of attributing too much importance to the mountains of paper emanating from the vast bureaucracies. One is reminded of the World War II historiographical problem when revisionist historians, looking for evidence of American anti-communist policies, found scores of such memos from assistant and deputy secretaries and desk people in the State Department. The problem was that Franklin Roosevelt cared little for their advice and chose to rely upon his own intuition, ambassadors, and private advisors.

So circumscribed were the decision making groups under Johnson that some senior staffers complained that they rarely knew what was going on, even though they were charged with producing background reports that assumed full knowledge of American policy.¹⁵ During the Nixon years, a scandal erupted when it was discovered that a military aide to national security adviser Henry Kissinger was leaking documents to the joint chiefs because even they did not know what was going on in American foreign policy.¹⁶

Aware of the criticism concerning the insular small groups making policy, both presidents tried to give the impression that they were open to all sorts of views from all sorts of people. One of the most celebrated such cases was the large interdepartmental meeting of July 21 and 22, 1965, when Johnson decided to escalate dramatically the American ground commitment in Vietnam. Assistant Secretary of State George Ball's famous dissent was most likely leaked to the press to give the impression that not only did Johnson listen to conflicting views but that the decision was not made until everyone had his or her say. George Reedy disagrees with this interpretation suggesting that Johnson had already

made up his mind and that he was a master at informally "scripting" meetings to make them look spontaneous and significant to the participants.¹⁷

Social Science and the Real World

Clearly, one encounters many problems in attempting to determine how Presidents Johnson and Nixon were affected by opinion on their Vietnam policies. One probably should not begin a study of this issue with the formal, social scientific models of opinion formation and submission that have been developed by academics. In conversations with government officials, I was struck by one common theme – public opinion is what we thought it was, whether or not it conformed to the neat flow charts created by the scholars. That is, even though presidents seemingly do not "understand" how public opinion works in American society, if they label some expression of opinion as an important reflection of *public* opinion, then it is in terms of impact on American policy. And that is all that should matter to the scholar.

On occasion, presidents' impressions may indeed reflect the state of the sociological art, even if they do not know it. Johnson, for one, was very worried about intellectual dissent, even when the public opinion polls were favorable to him. When I asked George Reedy whether the president felt that way because of the role intellectuals play in forming opinion and that though small in numbers, they can ultimately be very influential, Reedy responded negatively. Johnson most likely never thought about why the intellectuals were important; he just knew they were.¹⁸

Most politicians believe they can intuit public opinion, with or without data provided by pollsters. There is evidence that people do become leaders in small groups in part because they are best able to understand what members of that group desire.¹⁹

Harry S. Truman prided himself on his ability to sense public opinion irrespective of what the media and polls reflected. In 1948, at least, he was right while the experts had egg on their faces.²⁰ And this is not just an American phenomenon. When I asked Jens Otto Krag, the late prime ministers of Denmark, how he gauged opinion in his own country on a foreign policy issue, he responded that he read several morning newspapers, called a few trusted friends, and then relied upon the sensitive antennae he had developed over the years. Naturally he turned to the polls as well, if he had time, but at bottom, the handful of informal, and maybe even unrepresentative, sources were the most important to him. Krag was one of the most successful Danish politicians since 1945.

Similarly, when I asked another of Johnson's press secretaries, George Christian, how he reacted to reading a newspaper petition with 5,000 college professors as signatories, he responded that he thought such evidence of dissent to be important. When I tried to talk him out of its importance, or at least how his administration could have developed a rationale for ignoring that type of opinion, he refused to accept my approach, an approach which devolved from the most sophisticated theories of academia.

Even more astounding in this vein is Dean Rusk's contention that the elite

media and intelligentsia do not necessarily have a strong influence on foreign policy issues with the rest of the population. According to the very experienced American statesman, when his "country cousins" in Georgia turned against the Vietnam War in the spring of 1968, they made up their minds virtually independent of currents of opinion emanating from the East Coast literary and journalistic establishment. And thus, from his perspective, on this issue at least, Dean Rusk denies the hallowed academic two-step-flow of information theory.²¹

The more I talked to such people, the more I became convinced that academic experts who write about public opinion and foreign policy are, for the most part, stereotypical ivory-towered philosophers, insensitive to the real world. Or to put it another way, presidents and their advisors deal with public opinion in an amazingly idiosyncratic, unsystematic fashion that makes a mockery of the models that pervade the scholarly literature.

Both Bryce Harlow and Jack Valenti emphasized that their respective bosses were ultimately human beings who were quite capable of behaving irrationally and unpragmatically.²² Nixon might allow one lone picketer in Lafayette Park to arouse him to a frenzy while Johnson's day could be ruined because of one word in a report from an Associated Press correspondent.

Sources of Opinion in the Oval Office

Given the problems inherent in this issue area, it is probably easiest only to enumerate potential sources for opinion and how they were used by Johnson and Nixon. It is futile, for the nonce, to weigh the relative significance of each of them. Further, we will eschew an analysis of how opinion is made – we are only interested in how public opinion arrives in the Oval Office and is perceived by the decision makers.

The most obvious and "scientific" source for opinion is the public opinion poll.²³ In recent years, the most important of these have been those that ask the same question – Are you satisfied with the president's handling of foreign relations? Was it a mistake to become involved in Vietnam? – at periodic intervals. Johnson, as most everyone knew, literally carried supportive polls in his pockets.²⁴ Nixon and his advisers were even more keen observers of the polls.²⁵

There are polls and there are polls. One White House aide felt that the most important ones were those that were featured in newspapers or on television because they created opinion in their own right.²⁶ If the CBS/New York Times poll announced that 50 per cent of those polled were opposed to further escalation, another 10 per cent of the population might join with the majority that has sanctioned, for them, a critical attitude toward the war. Thus, a week after the poll had been published, the 50 per cent might have become 60 per cent because of the poll itself. At the same time, published polls during the Vietnam period had an effect in Hanoi as well.

Most of the time, the polls are too insensitive and gross an instrument for the president to employ to gauge reactions to one or another foreign policy initiative. For one thing, polls are often outdated by the time they reach the decision-maker's desk.²⁷ Any poll on Soviet-American relations taken during the week

before the Korean airliner incident would be worthless the minute the news of the tragedy hit the air waves.

In addition, in most periods, Americans tend to support the presidents' foreign policies in greater numbers than their domestic policies.²⁸ This virtual knee-jerk support may be a product of insecurity relating to the public's lack of knowledge in this complex and usually remote area.²⁹ Moreover, presidents can make their approval rating rise merely by doing something in the foreign policy sphere, the most famous case being the rise in John F. Kennedy's popularity after he publicly accepted the blame for the Bay of Pigs fiasco.³⁰

Another potentially quantifiable and scientific source for general opinion is mail, telephone calls, and telegrams sent to the White House and executive departments.³¹ This can be something of a two-way street with calls and telegrams generated by party officials to demonstrate to the rest of the nation that people support the president's policy.³² In most cases, however, the correspondence and communication to the White House is spontaneous. Depending upon the administration and the issue, departments keep records of this expression of opinion that is forwarded to the president.³³

After the Johnson administration first began bombing North Vietnam in the aftermath of the attack on Pleiku on February 7, 1965, over 1500 telegrams were received by the White House. According to McGeorge Bundy, this represented a medium to heavy flow with the negatives outnumbering the positives at a 12-1 ratio. Bundy evinced concern about these telegrams, especially when compared to the Gulf of Tonkin attack of the previous year when the negative ratio was only 2-1.³⁴

Or again, looking at the mail flow over a weekend period in early April of 1965, national security council aide Chester Cooper counted 580 letters against and only 96 for the Vietnam policy. A worried Cooper noted, the letters did not look like they were part of an organized campaign and were "judicious and reasoned". The White House became more confident several days later when the mail on the president's Johns Hopkins University speech came in at a positive ratio of 4-1.³⁵

It seems surprising that 700 letters over a weekend in a population of 200 million could have an impact on the White House, but they apparently do.³⁶ It may be that a certain number of letters expressing a certain distribution of opinion becomes the norm and that when the number fluctuates or the opinion becomes skewed, the mail is considered potentially reflective of attitudes in the nation at large. In their more rational moments, White House officials do recognize the unscientific nature of the mail flow they monitor. One aide who told Bundy that telegrams were running 14-1 against the president while the polls gave him a 76 per cent approval rating, commented, "It goes to show something about telegrams to the White House."³⁷

Such skepticism about the meaning of White House mail should have been reinforced by the fact that people tend to write more frequently to their political friends than to their political enemies.³⁸ We also know that letter writers during the Vietnam period tended toward the hawkish side of the argument while demonstrators were more likely to be dovish.³⁹ Other scientific analyses of the meaning of the mail were available to the White House operatives. However, when the

president asks about the mail count or even asks to see a letter or two, the mail becomes an important indicator of opinion to him, an indicator that may have an effect on a policy decision.⁴⁰

When we leave the polls and the mail (and, of course, election returns), the presidents' sources for public opinion become more unquantifiable and unsystematic. They are no less important, however, and in the case of the decision makers' acquaintances, friends, and family, they may be all important. The intimates to whom a president and his staff talk regularly, over the breakfast, conference, or cocktail table, both offer their own ideas about public opinion and reflect elite opinion. One can imagine, for example, Richard Nixon asking his daughter, Julie, what her classmates at Smith would think of such and such a policy, as well as what she thought of it.

It is true that both presidents seemed to surround themselves with sycophantic types. Or perhaps, their forceful personalities and oversensitivity to criticism created sycophants out of previously strong-willed individuals. In any event, the presidents' intimates often found themselves in the position of telling them what they thought they wanted to hear. All the same, it is apparent that those intimates themselves were affected by family and friends, especially on the Vietnam War issue. Most important, the intimates were central to the opinion presenting process, explaining to the president what was going on "out there". William Bundy remembers the way that wives of officials often confronted harsh criticism on Vietnam policy from friends because those friends found it easier to open up to the spouse. George Reedy recalled the role of his own wife, as well as the wives of other high officials, who fell off the Vietnam bandwagon early and told their husbands so in no uncertain terms. Bryce Harlow remembers an informal discussion with a group of his son's high school friends, none of whom was prepared to accept a draft call. The mother of Nixon's secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, as well as Laird's son, the children of Gerald Ford, John Ehrlichman, Spiro Agnew, and Robert McNamara, among other, brought to their important relatives a feeling for the antiwar sentiment abroad in the land.⁴¹

The same goes for social contacts in Washington and New York.⁴² From 1966 onward, in both parties and in many different social circles, more and more of the friends of the decision makers became critical of Vietnam policies, and until they became too strident, were able to relay that criticism to the Oval Office. George Christian felt that when influentials like Dean Acheson and Mathew Ridgeway privately and informally began to express displeasure with the way things were going in Southeast Asia, the president took notice.⁴³ In a study of the weapons industry during the period, one scholar discovered that friends and family were very important in affecting scientists' attitudes toward government policy, ultimately figuring prominently in their decision to leave war-related research.⁴⁴

Congress is still another source of public opinion for the president.⁴⁵ Indeed, opinions from the Hill are often taken as surrogates for public opinion by White House staffers. Undoubtedly, publicly expressed opinion from prominent congressional leaders can affect opinion, as was probably the case with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's televised hearings in January of 1966.⁴⁶

In general, however, congressional opinion is more a reflector than a shaper of

public opinion as congressmen are loath to move out in advance of their constituents on an important issue. Bryce Harlow, for one, feels that Congress is a "superb mirror" of public opinion.⁴⁷ Complicating matters is the suggestion that legislators and their constituents are least congruent on their opinions on foreign policy issues.⁴⁸

In the case of Lyndon Johnson in particular, congressional opinion on foreign affairs was especially salient when the former master of the Senate discovered that colleagues in his own party began to oppose his foreign policy. Although he discounted the opinions of his old friend, Senator J. William Fulbright after the fall of 1965, he continued to listen to the views of Senator Mike Mansfield who met often with him.⁴⁹ Congressional opinion, as reflected informally, as well as in hearings, can ultimately be converted into legislation, as was the case after 1969.⁵⁰

A final source of opinion for the president is the media through which elite, congressional, and public opinion is reported and influenced. Bernard C. Cohen sees the media playing four roles – presenter of opinion, critic of government, policy advocate, and even policy maker.⁵¹ It is the first role, presenter of opinion, upon which we will concentrate here, never losing sight of the fact that all four are interrelated.

As has been often said, the media may not be able to tell people what to think but they can tell them what to think about.⁵² To some degree, the White House determines the news budgets of the electronic and print media through their own actions, well timed news releases, and even intimidation. President Johnson's staged media event, the Honolulu Conference of 1966, took the limelight away from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Vietnam held during the same period.⁵³ Later, the threats of Spiro Agnew produced a virtual blackout of television coverage for the massive Mobilization protest of November 13, 1969.⁵⁴ The media are not always manipulable as was the case with the New York Times series by Harrison Salisbury on the bombing of Hanoi in December of 1966, as well as the same paper's publication of the Pentagon Papers.

Some media may be more influential than others as sources of public opinion on foreign issues. Perhaps because electronic media are supposed to be objective, opinions expressed in newspapers tend to be those most noticed by the White House.⁵⁵ It may be that electronic media, from the White House view, are important in affecting opinion, while newspapers and magazines are important in reflecting opinion.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* play a central role in the political life of the capital.⁵⁶ For members of the bureaucracy and especially Congress, those two papers, which are required morning reading for conscientious officials, not only present opinions but also information unavailable to those not at the center of power. For those making the decisions, the two papers represent a daily scorecard. They desire the approval of the *Times* and the *Post*. Lyndon Johnson wanted Walter Lippmann to say nice things about his Vietnam policy, because of his ego as well as because of the fact that everyone else who counted read his column.⁵⁷ Richard Nixon, who did not expect much from the newspapers, nevertheless was distressed when they did not give him more credit for the way he was extricating the United States from Vietnam.⁵⁸

Presidents often confuse the opinions they see in the *Times* and *Post*, as well as among the Washington press corps, with public opinion. From time to time, their aides try to place a Reston or Lippmann column in perspective, to point out that the polls and 95 per cent of the newspapers are supportive, but they usually fail to convince the president to ignore the criticism.⁵⁹ In part, Johnson and Nixon became "Washington types" who placed inordinate emphasis on the two major elite dailies, just like everyone else who is anyone in the capital.⁶⁰

In Washington, at the least, the *Times* and the *Post* have an influence far greater than their national circulations might indicate in that opinions presented in their pages have a disproportionate impact on leaders who read them each day.⁶¹ And this is not the entire story. Washington journalists interact daily with Washington officials. Not all of their influence comes from specific words presented in their columns. George Reedy talks of news people engaging in a "continuing dialogue" with policy makers. Thus, a few words at dinner concerning bombing in Vietnam from the publisher of the *Washington Post* to an assistant secretary of state are likely to be reported to the president within a day or two and might have as much impact as a published editorial or even a memorandum from a national security advisor.⁶²

The Flow of Opinion of Foreign Policy

Presidents Johnson and Nixon received opinion from the polls, correspondence, friends and acquaintances, Congress, and the media. Each day they were exposed to a plethora of formal reports and informal observations concerning polls, mail flows, print and electronic journalism, congressional activities, and comments from intimates, all of which constituted the flow of perceived public opinion into the Oval Office. Clearly, in a conventional sense, only the polls and the mail flow are sources of *public* opinion. Yet, as has been noted, presidents tend to see public opinion reflected in the other sources as well.

In both presidencies, no systematic attempt was made to coordinate the flow of public opinion nor were any specific aides responsible for its monitoring.⁶³ It is unlikely that Jack Valenti or H.R. Haldeman, upon telling the president what the *Times* had to say that morning, also informed him that it was not public opinion but only opinion expressed publicly in a newspaper. On any day, the president and his advisors might be impressed by a poll result, or a comment by a television anchorperson, or a phone call from Clark Clifford or Thomas Dewey, or an idea from a Georgetown professor in an undersecretary's carpool, or a letter selected at random from the mail sack, or any combination of the above. What was noted and taken seriously as meaningful public opinion depended upon the mood in the Oval Office and the sort of opinion for which the president was looking.⁶⁴ Sometimes a "scientifically" sound datum became important; most of the time the public opinion that counted would not impress an academic analyst.

Presented schematically in Figure 1, in its simplest form, is the flow of public opinion on foreign policy to the president.⁶⁵ If only the real world was so simple and uncluttered as depicted in the figure, with the five main sources *directly* conveying public opinions to the White House.

Figure 1. The President's Source for Public Opinion on Foreign Policy

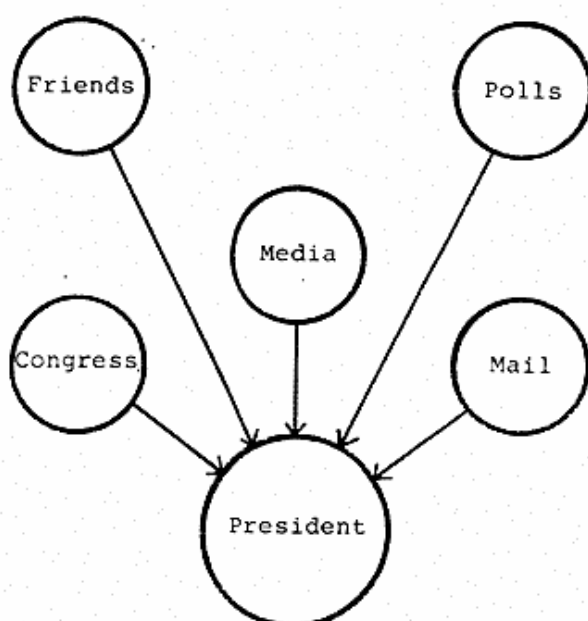
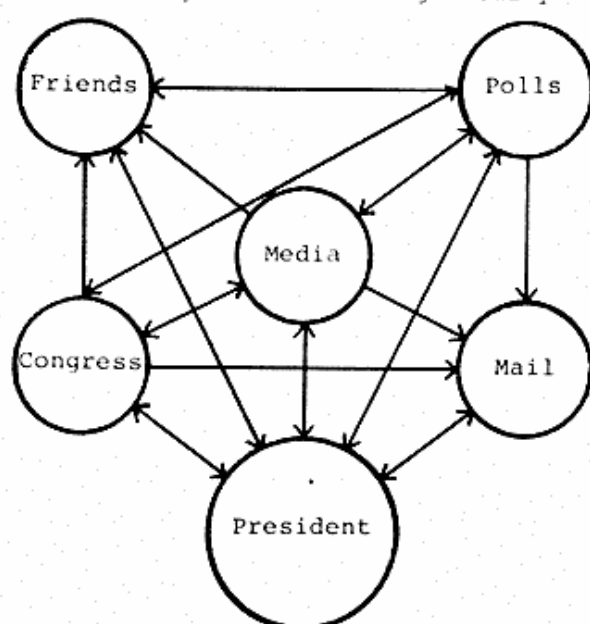


Figure 2, a decidedly cluttered diagram, represents much more accurately the ways alleged public opinion comes to the president. In the first place, the presidents do not passively receive spontaneously developed public opinion. They play a part in modling that opinion through their public and private statements to the media, to friends, and to Congress, as well as in their role as national agenda setter. After all, there would be little expressed opinion on the decision to bomb North Vietnam until that bombing started.

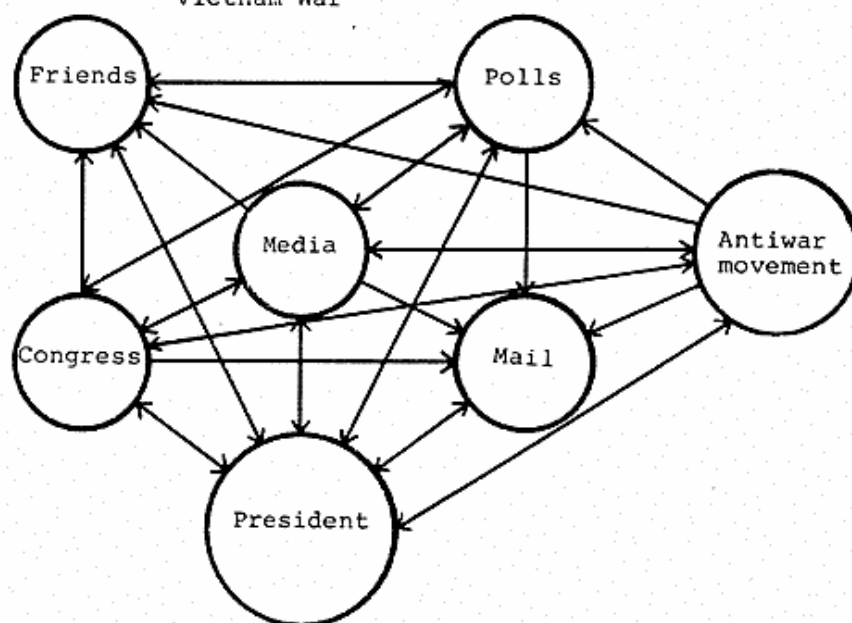
Moreover, almost all of the sources for opinon influence one another. Thus, congressional opinion influences the opinions of presidential family and friends, the media, the mail flow, and the polls, while it is influenced by the media and the polls. Presidential family and friends are influenced by opinions picked up in the polls, the media, and Congress. The media influenced the other four sources and is influenced by Congress. Public opinions in the polls influence the opinions of the other sources and are influenced by the media and Congress. Finally, the mail flow to the White House is influenced by the polls, the media, and Congress.

Figure 2. Influences on and Reflections of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy



During times of public debate, such as the Vietnam period, a sixth source for opinion may emerge as depicted in Figure 3.⁶⁶ The opinions expressed by the antiwar movement influence opinions reflected by all of the other sources and were influenced, in turn, by the media, the president, and Congress. To place the ideas represented in Figure 2 and Figure 3 in another perspective, public opinions directly presented by one of the six sources may appear to the president filtered through almost any of the other sources. Thus, the president might learn about congressional reflections of public opinion from the media, from the antiwar movement, from friends and family, or from the *New York Times*.

Figure 3. Influences on and Reflections of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy During the Vietnam War



Figures 2 and 3 suggest the chaotic nature of the way putatively public opinion on foreign policy is perceived by presidents in the modern era. It is irrelevant to point out that some of the things that they consider to be public opinion are not. Complicating matters further is the fact, as we have seen, that presidents and their advisors rarely devote public attention to the impact of their foreign policies on public opinion and vice versa.

Where does this leave the scholar interested in tracing the role of American public opinion in the making of foreign policy? Once having determined what sorts of public opinion attracted the attention of a president (no simple task), and perhaps, his initial personal response to that praise or criticism, the scholar must then examine the policy initiative in question, and make an informed judgement, based upon circumstantial evidence, about the impact of opinion on the initiative. This is a most unscientific procedure, to say the least. But given the nature of the available evidence, and the likelihood that opinion is generally a background or even a subconscious variable in foreign policy decision making, the prudent scholar can do little more. No wonder we have not come very far in understanding this important issue area in American politics.

1. The author is indebted to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies for financial support for his project. He is indebted also to his colleagues at the Institut for Statskundskab, Aarhus University, for their many suggestions during his stay there in the fall of 1983.

2. The best treatment of the subject is Bernard C. Cohen's *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy*, Boston, 1973. Cohen's analysis is based upon interviews with State Department officials during the 1960's.

3. James N. Rosenau, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, New York, 1961, pp. 97-98.
4. George Reedy, interview, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, January 25, 1984. See also Eric A. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, New York, 1969, p. 490.
5. Jack Valenti, interview, Washington, February 10, 1984.
6. Clark Clifford, interview, Washington, February 8, 1984. Supporting Clifford's views was George Christian, Johnson's press secretary from 1967 through 1969. George Christian, interview, Austin, Texas, May 18, 1983.
7. Rostow, interview, Austin, Texas, May 20, 1983; McGeorge Bundy, interview, New York, March 9, 1984; Dean Rusk, interview, Athens, Georgia, February 23, 1984.
8. Quoted in Barry B. Hughes, *The Domestic Context of American Foreign Policy*, San Francisco, 1978, p. 4.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-96.
10. Benjamin I. Page and Richard Brody, "Policy Voting and the Electoral Process: The Vietnam War Issue", *American Political Science Review*, LXVI, September 1972, p. 994.
11. Winston Lord, interview, New York, March 8, 1984. For the famous meeting system, see David C. Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment", *Diplomatic History*, VIII, Winter, 1984, pp. 81-101; and Henry F. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet: Deliberation and Decision on Peace and War under Lyndon B. Johnson*, Englewood Cliffs, 1970. George Reedy, for one, thinks too much has been made of the Tuesday Lunch. He suggests that its members were meeting even before it became institutionalized and that the president, criticized for having a chaotic bureaucratic style, publicized the lunch so that the media would think that the White House was well organized. Reedy, interview.
12. Bryce Harlow, interview, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1984; Ray Price, interview, New York, March 9, 1984.
13. I.M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucracies and Foreign Policy*, Princeton, 1974, p. 111; William P. Bundy, unpublished history of the Vietnam War, Chapter 26, p. 24; Rusk, interview; Bromley E. Smith, oral history, July 29, 1969, 26, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (hereafter LBJL), Austin, Texas.
14. Dean Rusk pinpointed one of the problems in this area in recent years as the growth of the National Security Council bureaucracy. Rusk, interview. At the highest levels, the Johnson administration, especially the secretaries of state and defense and the national security advisors, got along much better with less backbiting than their counterparts in the Nixon administration as the many memoirs from the latter administration reveal.
15. Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam*, New York, 1979, pp. 414-415; Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, New York, 1969, p. 53; Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House", pp. 93-94; Smith, oral history, pp. 24-25.
16. For an account of the Radford affair, see Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, New York, 1983, pp. 465-474.
17. Reedy interview. Ball himself is not so certain that Johnson scripted the meeting or that his mind was made up ahead of time. George Ball, interview, Trenton, New Jersey, March 5, 1984; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: A Memoir*, New York, Norton, 1982, pp. 400-402. Jack Valenti and Harry McPherson agree with Ball, Valenti, interview; Harry McPherson, interview, Washington, D.C., February 9, 1984.
18. Reedy, interview.
19. Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*, Glencoe, 1955, pp. 102-103.
20. Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs, II*, Garden City, 1956, pp. 219-220.
21. Christian, Rusk, interviews.
22. Harlow, Valenti, interviews. With Johnson in particular, sources stressed his incredible sensitivity to criticism. Christian, Reedy, interviews; Douglas Cater, telephone interview, February 8, 1984.
23. See Michael Wheeler, *Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics: The Manipulation of Public Opinion in America*, New York, 1976, Chapter 7, for a general discussion in this area.
24. Leo Bogart, *Silent Politics: Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion*, New York, 1972, p. 4.
25. Louis Harris, *The Anguish of Change*, New York, 1974, p. 17. Bryce Harlow remembers H.R. Haldeman, especially, as an inveterate poll taker. Harlow, interview.

26. Christian, interview.
27. Daniel Z. Henkin, interview, Washington, D.C., February 9, 1984; Rusk, Price, interviews.
28. Hughes, *The Domestic Context of American Foreign Policy*, pp. 108-110; William Caspary, "The Mood Theory: A Study of Public Opinion and Foreign Policy", in Dan Nimmo and Charles M. Bonjean (eds.), *Political Attitudes and Public Opinion*, New York, 1972, pp. 439-454.
29. Don D. Smith, "Dark Areas of Ignorance Revisited; Current Knowledge about Asian Affairs", in Nimmo and Bonjean (eds.), *Political Attitudes and Public Opinion*, pp. 267-272.
30. Philip E. Converse and Howard Schuman, "Silent Majorities and the Vietnam War", *Scientific American*, 222, June 1970, 21; John F. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, New York, 1973, pp. 71-74.
31. Hughes, *The Domestic Context of American Foreign Policy*, pp. 101-102.
32. Bogart, *Silent Politics*, p. 53.
33. See, for example, the weekly counts sent from the Defense Department to Lyndon Johnson by Joseph Califano in WH 5-1, White House Central Files, (hereafter WHCF), LBJL. The State Department stopped counting such letters in 1966. Cohen, *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy*, p. 69.
34. Bundy to Johnson, February 9, 1965, Box 13, National Security Council Country File, Vietnam, LBJL.
35. Cooper to McGeorge Bundy, April 6, 1965, Box 16, *ibid.*, Cooper, memo, April 13, 1965, *ibid.* Dean Rusk reports that he was impressed with well written, literate letters that were not part of some organized campaign. Rusk, interview. Presidential advisors Eric Goldman and John P. Roche also took mail seriously. Eric Goldman, interview, Princeton, New Jersey, March 5, 1984; John P. Roche, interview, Medford, Massachusetts, March 12, 1984.
36. It is more understandable that mail to a congressman's office, from a much smaller population, might serve as a useful reflector of district opinion. Hughes, *The Domestic Context of American Foreign Policy*, p. 101.
37. Gordon Chase to Bundy, February 16, 1965, Box 13, National Security Council Country File, Vietnam, LBJL. See also Larry Levinson to Califano, February 12, 1966, Box 9, WH 5-1, WHCF, LBJL.
38. Bogart, *Silent Politics*, pp. 53-54.
39. According to one poll, two and one half percent of the respondents reported sending a letter to a politician while one percent said they had taken part in a demonstration. Milton J. Rosenberg, Sidney Verba, and Philip E. Converse, *Vietnam and the Silent Majority: A Dove's Guide*, New York, 1970, pp. 33-34, 31.
40. For example, on one occasion, Johnson requested a sample critical letter from a serviceman in order to obtain a feel for such sentiments. Juanita Roberts to Paul Popple, April 5, 1967, Box 10, WH 5-1, WHCF, LBJL.
41. George Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency*, New York, 1970, pp. 86-87, 95-96; William P. Bundy, interview, New York, February 6, 1984; Reedy; Henkin; Harlow, interviews; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, 1979, pp. 300, 513; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Boston, 1982, pp. 93-94; Gerald R. Ford, *A time to Heal*, New York, 1979, p. 83; Curt Smith, *Long Time Gone: The Years of Turmoil Remembered*, South Bend, 1982, p. 217.
42. Herbert Klein, *Making It Perfectly Clear*, Garden City, 1980, p. 338; Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger*, London, 1974, p. 28.
43. Christian, interview.
44. Jeffrey Schevitz, *The Weaponmakers: Personal and Professional Crisis During the Vietnam War*, Cambridge, Mass., 1979. See also Cohen, *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy*, p. 80.
45. Michael P. Rosenberg sees congressional doves affecting opinion, affecting politics, and influencing the executive. "Congress and the Vietnam War: A Study of the Critics of the War in 1967 and 1968", Ph.D. dissertation, New School for Social Research, 1973, pp. 10-16.

46. Eugene McCarthy, *The Year of the People*, Garden City, 1969, p. 254.
47. Harlow, interview. Dean Rusk also employed talks with Congress people to gauge opinion. Rusk, interview. See also Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, p. 403.
48. Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, "Constituency Influence in Congress", Nimmo and Bonjean (eds.), *Political Attitudes and Public Opinion*, pp. 543-561. The classic Miller and Stokes article may be outdated in terms of recent congressional behavior.
49. Reedy, interview; J. William Fulbright, interview, Washington, D.C. February 7, 1984.
50. How Congress responded to dove pressure is revealed in Paul Burstein and William Freudenberg, "Changing Public Policy: The Impact of Public Opinion, Antiwar Demonstrations, and War Costs on Senate Voting in Vietnam Motions", *American Journal of Sociology*, 84, July 1978, pp. 99-122.
51. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 38-47. See also Smith, oral history, p. 5 and Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency*, pp. 99-18.
52. David L. Altheide, *Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events*, Beverly Hills, 1976, p. 173.
53. Valenti, interview. Chester Cooper, oral history, July 17, 1969, pp. 10-11. LBJL.
54. James Aronson, *Deadline for the Media: Today's Challenges to Press, TV and Radio*, Indianapolis, 1972; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Berkely, 1980, p. 218.
55. Two notable exceptions are Morley Safaer's 1965 report from Vietnam that featured the famous Zippo lighter incident and Walter Cronkite's editorial remarks in 1968 following the Tet offensive.
56. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, pp. 134-36; Cater; Reedy; Valenti; Rusk; interviews. Beyond Washington, Charles Kadushin reports that 98 percent of his sample of American intellectuals read the *Times*. Kadushin, *The American Intellectual Elite*, Boston, 1974, p. 137.
57. Note the instructions on how to flatter Lippmann in McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, March 15, 1965, Box 3, Vol. 9, National Security Council Aides File, LBJL.
58. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 298.
59. Harlow; Reedy; Valenti, interviews. Naturally, the elite journalists can have an impact around the world. See W. Averill Harriman, February 24, 1966, p. 3, Meeting Notes, LBJL, who reported that the *New York Times* and Walter Lippmann had contributed to America's allies beginning to question her will. McGeorge Bundy also stresses the significance of the *Times* as a reputed American paper of record read carefully in all foreign capitals. Bundy, interview.
60. Reedy, interview. Johnson was capable of recognizing that the *Times* was not always the same as public opinion. Cabinet Notes, July 15, 1966, p. 3, LBJL.
61. As Henry Adams wrote over 60 years ago, "The difference is slight, to the influence of an author, whether he is read by five hundred readers, or by five thousand: if he can select the five hundred, he reaches the five hundred thousand". *The Education of Henry Adams*, Boston, 1918, p. 259.
62. Reedy, interview.
63. Douglas Cater suggests that if an apparatus was set up to handle opinion, and especially, dissent in a sophisticated manner, it might look to outsiders like a counter-propaganda agency. Cater, interview.
64. Johnson, for example, convinced that the early mass demonstrations were organized, non-spontaneous actions of subversives, could easily ignore that type of manifestation of opinion. Christian, interview.
65. Other reflections of domestic opinion, although not public opinion as perceived by the president, would come from lobbies and interest groups and the official bureaucracies. Dean Rusk, for example, paid attention to resolutions that emanated from important national organizations that reflected accurately the sentiments of the organizations' memberships. Rusk, interview.
66. Despite presidential attempts to belittle the antiwar movement as not representing public opinion, it was carefully monitored, especially after 1966. Bogart, *Silent Politics*, p. 48.